



SPATIAL DIFFERENCES IN THE FORMATION OF LOCAL INITIATIVES FOR THE PRESERVATION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE SITES IN RURAL AREAS AND SMALL TOWNS OF THE KALININGRAD REGION

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Abstract: Kaliningrad region is a unique region of the Russian Federation. For Russians, it is mainly known as the “gateway to Europe,” and for Europeans, the territory of former Eastern Prussia is the most culturally close part of Russia. Nowadays, the region’s rural eastern municipalities face typical challenges in the central part of Russia’s processes, such as depopulation, decaying infrastructure, and job losses. This part of the region also suffered from becoming a borderland after 1991. Nevertheless, these territories have a diverse architectural heritage of the German period, which can be a resource for economic development, but this heritage has been actively destroyed in recent decades. Modern studies show that emerging tourist destinations can boost peripheral rural areas. And cultural heritage plays a key role in it. In the Kaliningrad region, Russians’ complex relationship with the “alien” German heritage became more complicated because of the use of historical buildings. However, the interest in such heritage has grown in recent years, and restoration projects have increased. New owners of restored sites now interact with nearby villages and towns, providing new income sources for residents. This research examines the territorial differentiation of heritage restoration and reuse. It is based on interviews carried out in five rural municipalities and the database from the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, supplemented by open sources. It analyzes spatial patterns, profiles local restoration actors, factors influencing differentiation (location, institutions, protected status of buildings), and similar features of successful practices in the field of functional use of historical buildings. Findings reveal the idea that restoration undergoes the following cycles: state participation rises during crises with the traditional forms of usage of historical buildings; during periods of economic growth, the diversity of residents and uses increases. Restoration geography depends mainly on the availability of financial support and training opportunities for potential residents, less on location (except peripheries). The presence of a protected status significantly reduces the attractiveness of the object’s further use. The most successful examples are the area communities of restoration actors. Interacting with each other and forming a common policy makes the territory more attractive. Their actions can also help to increase the tourist flow and stimulate the restoration of new buildings in neighboring territories.

Keywords: cultural heritage sites; rural tourism; local initiatives; rural community development

1. Introduction

Any territory develops thanks to resources and factors that distinguish it from other territories. Often, territories develop under the influence of natural factors: oil reserves, differential rent,

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but accumulated potential plays a much more significant role: human capital, agglomeration effect, as well as cultural heritage—a layer of culture created by previous generations that characterizes the territory. Cultural heritage distinguishes a territory from others, makes it unique, helps to create of goods with higher added value, and attracts tourists and new residents. Thanks to this resource, many peripheral rural areas of the world are developing.

But often the opposite happens—the territory becomes impoverished, degrades, resources are depleted, and factors are not realized. This trend is especially noticeable in the peripheral rural areas of Russia, where depopulation and economic degradation reinforce each other, and cultural heritage is rapidly disappearing. Two problems are developing in parallel: 1) rural areas are degrading, unable to realize the potential accumulated over centuries, 2) the “potential” itself, the Russian cultural layer, is thinning and being destroyed. The further we go, the more acute the question becomes about the possibilities of preserving and using architectural monuments on the periphery, where fewer and fewer residents remain and economic activity is conducted less intensively. One of the solutions of this problem can be the development of “conscious” rural tourism. Studies of post-agrarian transformations in rural areas show that the emergence of new tourist destinations can become the basis for growing prosperity in peripheral rural areas (Drobnjaković et al., 2022; Terzić & Petrevska, 2021).

These trends are also manifested in the Kaliningrad region, which stands out with a number of unique features for Russia:

- compact territory and exclave position of the region relative to Russia,
- the cultural heritage of the region is foreign to the local population (mostly created by Germans), and
- high level of tourism development (especially on the Baltic Sea coast).

All this makes the Kaliningrad region an ideal case for studying the adaptation of architectural heritage for the needs of new rural areas, including the development of rural tourism. In the post-Soviet period, the historical real estate of the Kaliningrad region is actively changing the nature of its use. From the point of view of economic geography, this process can be characterized as a transformation of place functions, where a place is understood as a building, a single object that has both characteristics of economic and geographical position and specific characteristics (age, status, number of floors, architectural features, and “path dependence”—the influence of previous functions). The function of a place is the role that a territorial system performs within a higher-order system (Baburin et al., 2018). The number of places performing a certain function depends on the volume of demand for it from larger territorial systems and on the spatial capacity of the performed function. Place functions can be determined both economically (industrial areas, recreational areas) and culturally (for example, areas with a religious function). In this study, cultural heritage sites (CHS) are perceived as a category of spatial objects—places with a similar characteristic of “value” and a set of different external and internal characteristics. The transformation of the functions of these objects is a marker of large-scale socio-economic transformations that have occurred in the Kaliningrad region in the post-Soviet period.

This study examines the processes occurring with the architectural heritage of rural areas and small towns—all municipalities of the region are analyzed, except for the largest city in the region—Kaliningrad. Thus, cultural monuments with the best economic and geographical position are excluded from the object of study, and more attention is paid to other geographical



factors: the institutional factor, the natural factor, the “path dependence” of the use of CHS. The focus of this research relates it to a number of works devoted to the analysis of transformations of peripheral rural areas under the influence of rural tourism (Cano et al., 2013; García-Delgado et al., 2020). These studies focus on the sociological and historical aspects of transformations. This study operates more with the concept of “place” as a historical building.

The basis of this study is the author’s database of CHS in the Kaliningrad region, which was created according to the data from the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation (2024). Such information as location, age, status, description, time of registration was supplemented by the authors with the information about the current state and use of monuments. It was collected both during field trips and with the help of online aggregators of attractions. The second database was a series of expert interviews with the people involved in the preservation and restoration of CHS. As the part of the field research, 15 interviews were conducted in five municipal districts. These interviews made it possible to describe correctly the ongoing transformations of place functions.

Local initiatives can be understood as a form of cooperation between local authorities and the population, which allow to solve socially important tasks with benefits for the local community. Scientific articles analyze various goals of this cooperation, but in our case, there are rather different forms of full or partial restoration, as well as conservation of CHS: rural estates, temples (Protestant, Catholic churches), and medieval castles.

In search of an answer to the question of why CHS are working actively with in the Kaliningrad region, one can turn to the concept of a specific “Kaliningrad” regional identity. Sometimes in search of its components of which Russian scientists come to contradictory conclusions (Starchenko et al., 2024; Vendina et al., 2021). Although the answer unlikely consists of one component, we can assert that the Kaliningrad region has maintained a positive migration balance for decades, despite a series of economic crises and serious changes in the cultural landscape after 1945 (Levchenkov, 2016). The German heritage and the architecture exotic for most Russians should be also included.

2. The specifics of the architectural heritage of the Kaliningrad region

For further analysis of transformations, it is necessary to characterize the architectural heritage features of the Kaliningrad region in details. The architectural heritage consists of 426 CHS listed in the register of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation (2024; Kaliningrad is excluded). The earliest of them appeared in the 12th century. Religious buildings such as churches and chapels (112), residential houses (72), and defensive structures (52 objects) predominate numerically. This structure perfectly characterizes the historical place of East Prussia as a frontier, a zone of colonization and Christianization, a bastion protecting German states from the east. In current realities, both due to the changes in border configurations and the destruction of traditional lifestyles, defensive and religious structures often lose their functions. The question of their further use is quite acute.

Practically all recognized architectural heritage of the Kaliningrad region consists of pre-war monuments created in Eastern Prussia. The few exceptions are Second World War memorials and modernist monuments in Kaliningrad. As it is shown in Figure 1, the geography of heritage retains the pre-war configuration of the territory: on the periphery of Eastern Prussia along the border with Lithuania (and in the past of the Russian Empire), there

is the least development (density of CHS). At the same time, along the border with Poland, the density of monuments is higher: these are central, not border areas of the former Eastern Prussia, the southern part of which was transferred to Poland as a result of Second World War. The highest density of monuments is achieved in the west of the region: in Kaliningrad and on the Sambian Peninsula, where cities—military, commercial, and resort centers—have historically concentrated. But an area around the old centers of Prussia is also noticeable: Chernyakhovsk (former Insterburg) and Gusev (Gumbinnen).

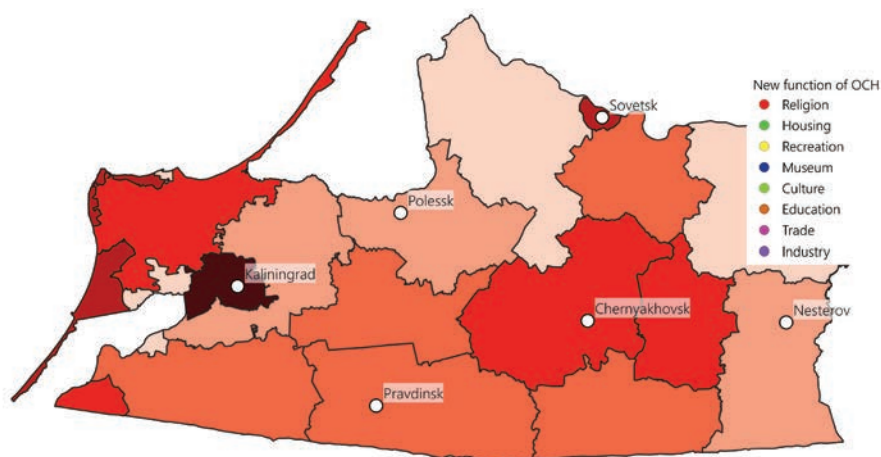


Figure 1. The density of architectural monuments included in the register of CHS in the Kaliningrad region by the authors.

The most significant feature of the architectural heritage is its foreignness to the local population. In 1945, the territory inhabited by Germans since the 12th–14th centuries was transferred to the USSR and populated by people from Belarus, Ukraine, and the Volga region. As a result, those who created the cultural heritage and those who used it after 1945 turned out to be not just different people, but people who, as a result of Second World War, were extremely hostile to each other. The attitude towards architectural heritage from the population and especially from the authorities has always been ambiguous. It can be judged by the dynamics of registering of cultural heritage monuments. Throughout the Soviet period, the heritage of the Kaliningrad region was practically not registered. There are both objective and subjective reasons for it: on the one hand, the lack of information complicated the process of studying future CHS, on the other hand, the value of “foreign” heritage was questionable, as the German past was tried not to be advertised. In the 1990s, as a result of the activities of different people such as local and art historians the situation was changed. Moreover, in the 2000s, when the number of registered CHS was declining throughout the country, in Kaliningrad, the number of CHS grew very intensively.



3. Dynamics of perception of the German heritage in the Kaliningrad region

Figure 2 presents a scheme of changing of the value of architectural heritage in the Kaliningrad region, which was based on interviews with heritage experts: activists, representatives of the tourism business, and local historians. Two types of value were conditionally distinguished: symbolic (the value of the object as a phenomenon showing a certain culture, history of the place, etc.) and utilitarian (the ability of the building to satisfy the population's demands for its use). The first type of value is largely determined by people's interest in history and culture, the second—by the level of rural economic development from the point of view of the demand for historical real estate and the condition of buildings (a destroyed building has a much lower utilitarian value than a preserved one) and the quality of the supply of historical buildings as well.

After Second World War, the Kaliningrad region became the part of the RSFSR and was populated by people from different parts of the USSR. Many migrants came from the western regions devastated by the war, as well as from the Volga region (for example, Chuvashia and Mordovia). Former military personnel who fought on this land and saw it with their own eyes served as guides and agitators. Due to the change in population, the attitude towards cultural heritage has always been ambiguous: it was considered foreign and therefore had no value. Moreover, in the first decades, the practice of deliberate destruction of buildings by new residents was widespread: there were rumors about the return of these lands to the friendly GDR, and people didn't want to give them back. A big problem for any researchers was the complete lack of information about the monuments: all archives of Königsberg were taken to Germany, and therefore it was impossible to carry out restoration or even learn about the original owner, type of use, date of construction. The local population also could not know anything about the places where they lived (even German names of settlements were known only to a few enthusiasts). And the few Germans who did not leave hid their origin and rarely contacted researchers. Until the 1980s, the symbolic value of most objects (except some remains of old Königsberg) was hardly perceived.

As a result of Second World War, the region's economy was undermined, many historical buildings were destroyed and damaged. It could not help affecting their utilitarian value. The complete change of population led to the fact that many buildings were not in demand and were destroyed. Their functions were changed to others that stimulated their rapid destruction (especially religious objects). Nevertheless, the utilitarian value of many buildings (especially in the case of industrial and residential) was quite high. It began to decline only towards the end of the Soviet era due to the rare and poor-quality repairs of buildings.

The situation began to change during Perestroika and dramatically transformed with the opening of borders and the collapse of the USSR: a stream of "nostalgic tourists" rushed to the Kaliningrad region—Germans who left in their early years came to look at the houses where they spent in their childhood. They actively interacted with local residents, told about old settlements, houses and villages; some of them began to help with money in restoring buildings, others searched for archival information and sent it to Russia. In interaction with them, the first wave of Kaliningrad activists appeared, believing that it was necessary to "restore the Eastern Prussia" in all its glory. They were both Kaliningrad residents and residents of villages who, due to privatization, became owners of old houses. As a result, the earliest heritage restoration projects began to form. Some of them were supported by

charitable foundations from various European countries. Experience in working with foundations, the ability to compose, and win grants are the key conditions for the current successful development of the Kaliningrad region. Besides, various confessional communities such as the Russian Orthodox Church and Protestant and Catholic communities participated in the restoration of religious objects. The symbolic value of heritage has grown significantly.

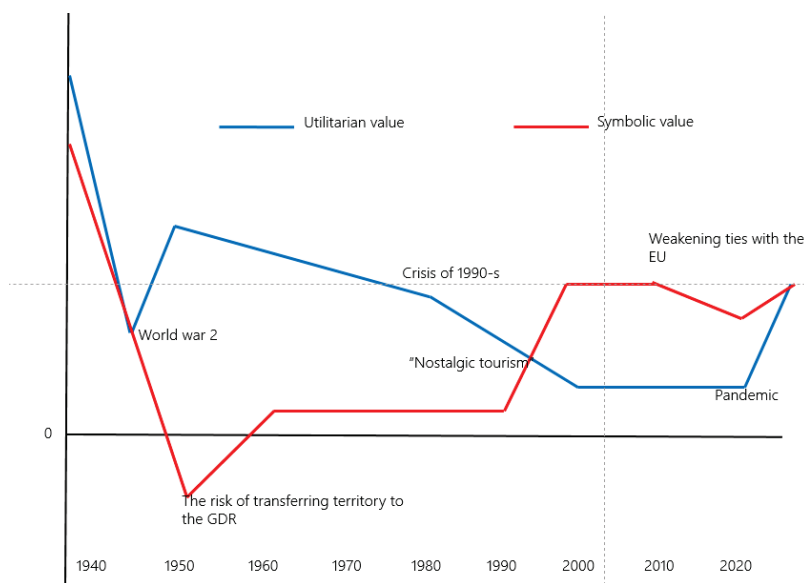


Figure 2. The dynamics of the value of architectural heritage in the Kaliningrad region by the authors.

At the same time, poverty, social stratification, degradation of social infrastructure, and mass departure of rural residents to cities caused even more active destruction of architectural objects in rural areas. The utilitarian value of objects decreased due to declining demand for them, they were actively destroyed, dismantled for bricks. Neither activists nor foreign foundations could fix this, and therefore by the end of the 2000s, the intensity of activists' activities began to decrease.

Activists also began to lose support from local authorities due to the political duality of the architectural heritage of the Kaliningrad region, because for many people German heritage remained alien, the question of its preservation and protection was not as unambiguous as in native Russian regions. By the mid-2000s, religious revival also ended, new projects of converting churches into temples disappeared. The end of this stage can be considered as the transfer of all churches and castles from state ownership to the Russian Orthodox Church in 2011. It put an end to the possibility of restoring castle structures and deprived activists of their motivation for further work (Bakhtin, 2014). After 2014, the work of most foreign foundations in Russia was also terminated, which limited the possibilities for restoring cultural objects.

Open borders changed the lifestyle of Kaliningrad residents: weekend excursion trips to European Union (EU) countries, especially to Poland, became fashionable among them. A large tourist market was formed, many companies earned money on rural tourism in its



various forms. At the same time, in the Kaliningrad region, there were neither interesting projects nor a desire to create them: they only drove people to the coast and mainly tourists from "Big Russia", not Kaliningrad residents. In 2013, it was based on the union of an organizer of hikes to Lake Vishtynetsky and a participant of an EU grant for forming rural tourism projects in the Polessky district. The first tour operator creating programs in the east of the Kaliningrad region called Hobbitour was created. It was this company that supported some of the early projects in the field of rural tourism (for example, the German Waldwinkel school or the Vyshtynetsky Ecological and Historical Museum). Nevertheless, until 2020, it was the only one company in this segment.

Everything changed in 2020 when due to the closure of borders. Kaliningrad residents, accustomed to trips, began to explore the territory of the region out of boredom. Immediately after it, a construction boom began in the region: people started renting churches and castles belonging to the Russian Orthodox church. They also bought old estates, houses in rural areas, and even horse barns. The number of currently implemented notable projects in rural areas was more than 30, which was a very significant number for such a small region. Unlike the 1990s, when the symbolic value of objects grew while their utilitarian value decreased, the current situation was characterized by an increase in the utilitarian value of objects, because they could pay off within the framework of rural tourism development. At the same time, the symbolic value of objects couldn't but grow by 2020, a second wave of heritage activists was forming, the key center of which is the volunteer movement "Ruin Keepers". Vasily Plitin, the founder of the movement, describes out the difference between activists of the 2020s and activists of the 1990s: heritage protection was now not nostalgia for a past that cannot be returned, but a process of adapting and carefully using heritage for the benefit of people living in the region.

However, such a wave of interest in heritage and rural tourism raises doubts about the future prospects of this process: any political and economic change can lead to the curtailment of many projects due to their excessive number. Nevertheless, the positive aspects are more significant: investments are coming to rural areas, jobs are being created in construction and service sectors in the depressed east of the region, and finally, Kaliningrad residents are learning about unique objects located within an hour's drive by car.

4. The specifics of the use of CHS

Let's consider the specifics of transformations in the functions of historical real estate depending on their key characteristics: age, primary function, geographical location, and protection status. Let's start with an analysis of the age structure (Figure 3). The territory of the Eastern Prussia began to be developed by the crusaders in the 12th–13th centuries. At this time, the earliest castle-fortresses and churches were founded, which due to their height and strong walls were also often used as defensive structures. These structures formed the primary framework of the cultural heritage of the Kaliningrad region. Due to changes in borders and the development of fortification, some of these objects lost their functions even before 1945. They are still in a ruined state. Among the 14th-century structures, there is the highest percentage of abandoned buildings. For a number of reasons a new function cannot be found immediately for churches and peripheral castles. The main ones are peripheral location and large areas of objects. Most investors are unable to restore them. It is also

necessary to take into account the role of the Russian Orthodox Church, because most of the objects are under its management and cannot be sold to other private individuals. As a result, they cannot be restored under the current policy of the Church. Finally, it must be also taken into consideration that in the Soviet period, most of these buildings were used in the most harmful areas for CHS: as granaries, production facilities, and prisons. It affected their condition, resulting in much larger investments needed for their restoration.

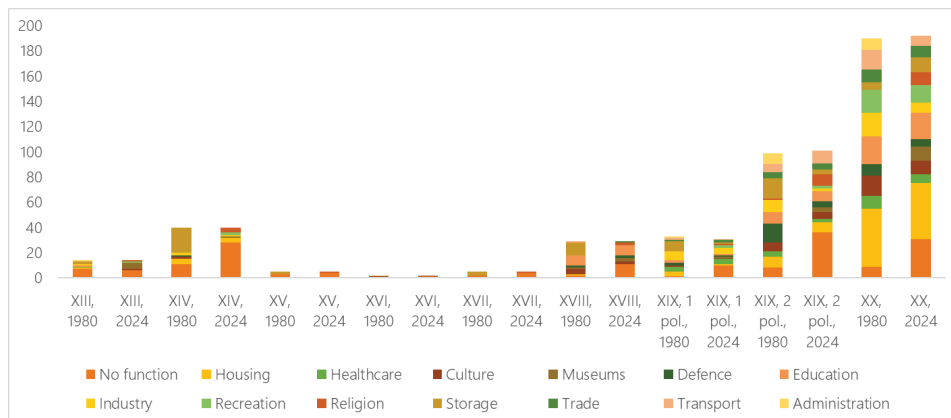


Figure 3. Transformation of CHS' functions depending on the period of construction by the authors.

The 15th–17th centuries are characterized by a small number of monuments. It is not easy to analyse them quantitatively. The largest number of monuments dates back to the 19th and early 20th centuries. It was during that time that most of the civil architecture of the region had been built. The 20th century stands out with the smallest share of abandoned objects: this is primarily explained by lower investments in the use and restoration of these buildings. Most often they are provided with water supply, electricity, and other communications, and are in better condition. It should also be taken into account that buildings of that period are more often located near the coast and large cities. Urbanization and emerging tourism made their position more adapted for modern use.

After 1945, most historical buildings in the region received new functions. The geographical location of buildings and their structural features played a role in the choice: water towers and military objects most often retained their function, while other types (for example, churches) completely changed their function. The chosen function led to the destruction of the building to varying degrees. This peculiar "path dependence effect" still affects the modern use of CHS. As a whole in 1980 (Figure 4), the share of abandoned buildings in the region was small (less than 10%). Almost all abandoned buildings are churches and defensive structures built before the mid-19th century had become morally obsolete. Many objects were used in accordance with their original function as housing, educational, defensive, transport, and economic objects. The most heterogeneous were groups with the original function of management and security, trade, and religion. The first two groups were mainly concentrated in cities, where buildings more often changed their functions and acquired new ones under the influence of many intracity processes. Religious buildings were most often used in agriculture as warehouses,

granaries, and workshops, but urban churches were used as cultural institutions. It is necessary to note separately the critically low number of museums (only one outside Kaliningrad). Such low values are determined by the specific attitude to German heritage and the lack of reliable historical information about the territory of the Eastern Prussia.

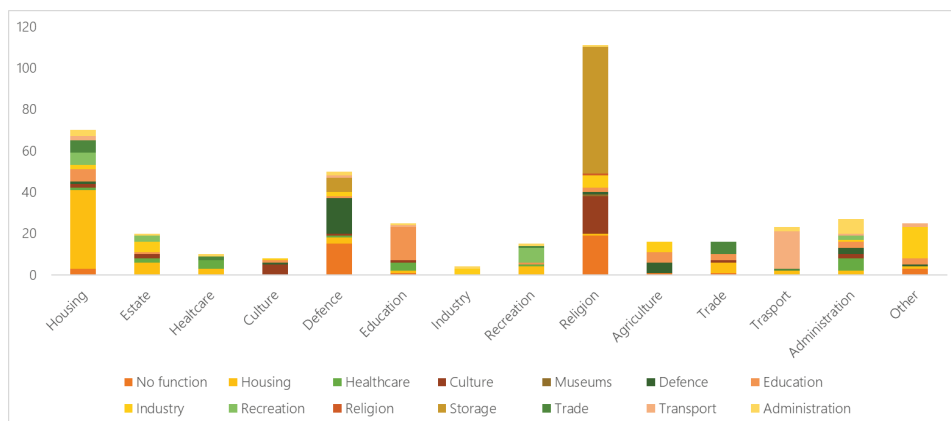


Figure 4. The functions of using CHS in 1980 according to the initial use by the authors.

Comparing the current situation with 1980, it can be noticed that different types of monuments reacted differently to the transformations that occurred in the region. Unexpectedly, the most affected type of monuments were religious buildings. More than 50% of them currently have no function. This situation is explained by a significant degree of depreciation of their resource as a result of economic activity, on the one hand, and the fact that these objects are most evenly distributed throughout the region and on the periphery cannot acquire new functions due to the general degradation of rural areas. At the same time, more than 30 religious buildings restored their original function. They account for more than 30% of all restored buildings in the region. A significant increase in the number of abandoned buildings fell on shrinking state sectors such as agriculture, production, and defense. The crisis of the 1990s and the reduction in the role of the state in the economy led to a decrease in demand and degradation of historical buildings.

The number of abandoned buildings in the region steadily grew from 1980 to 2019. However, since 2020, an opposite trend has been observed. The number of restored CHS exceeded the number of annually abandoned ones. In 2024, the number of abandoned buildings returned to the level of 2010, although it continues to exceed significantly the level of 1990. At the same time, the process has significant spatial differentiation (Figure 5). Three groups of districts can be distinguished:

- those in which from 2015 to 2024 the number of abandoned CHS continued to grow (the Bagrationovsky, Nemansky, Svetlogorsky districts),
- the growth in the number of abandoned CHS was replaced by stagnation (the Baltiysky, Gvardeysky, Pravdinsky, Chernyakhovsky, Gusevsky, Nesterovsky districts), and
- the growth in the number of abandoned CHS was replaced by a decrease (the Zelenogradsky, Guryevsky, Polesky districts).

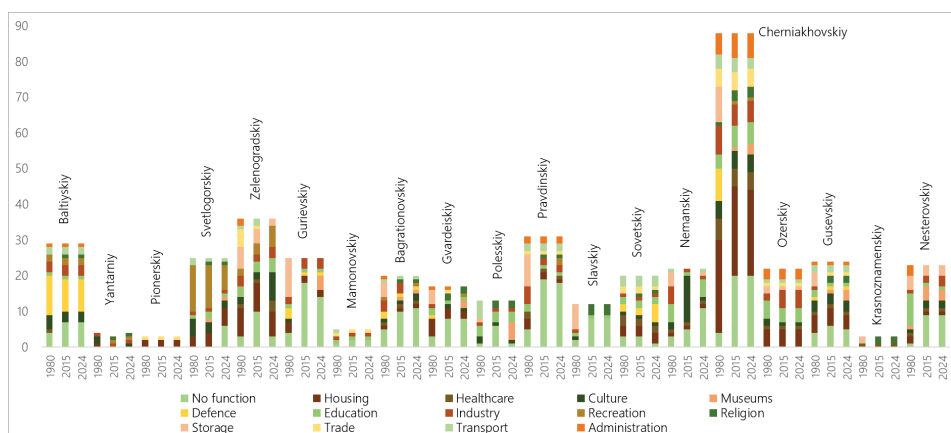


Figure 5. Transformation of CHS functions by districts of the Kaliningrad region by the authors.

In general, a center-periphery pattern is noticeable: Zelenogradsky and Guryevsky districts, adjacent to Kaliningrad, are developing much more successfully than the peripheral Nemansky or Chernyakhovsky. However, significant deviations from such a distribution are noticeable. They are mainly explained by institutional factors: successful examples of Polessky and Nesterovsky districts, the degradation of Svetlogorsky district are primarily explained by the quality of management and staff training. Among the towns (Figure 8), over 44 years, the most successful were Zelenogradsk (one of the most creative resort cities in Russia) and Gusev (the second most important administrative center of the Eastern Prussia). In the development of these two towns additional resources were invested.

Finally, the protection status plays a large role in the preservation of the monument. Within the framework of the Russian system of cultural monument protection, there is a hierarchy of statuses: the most valuable objects have the status of federal monuments, less significant ones the regional one. In addition, the region can approve lists of monuments of local significance. There are quite few monuments of federal significance. The state pays them more attention. For the allocation of monuments of local significance, an active local community interested in it is often important. Regional monuments in most regions of Russia are abandoned most often. There is neither support from the federal government nor participation of the local community. Over 44 years of observations, the number of abandoned monuments of regional significance increased three times (from 27 to 83), local—also three times (from 15 to 48). As for 2024, all federal monuments have a function or are being reconstructed. In the structure of monuments of the Kaliningrad region, federal CHS occupy a smaller share. Most of them are located in the residential quarters of Chernyakhovsk, forming a single ensemble. Most of the problematic objects (churches, castles, rural estates) have the status of regional monuments.

5. The processes of destruction and restoration of CHS

Let's examine in details the dynamics of loss (Figure 6) and change (Figure 7) of functions in historical buildings. We can identify four periods:



- Late Soviet (1980–1989). As a result of long-term exploitation and lack of quality repairs, buildings fall into disrepair. This is especially true for rural heritage, where CHS are used most inefficiently. Over 10 years, 20 buildings lost their function, while three changed their function.
- Post-Soviet (1990–1994). There is a sharp transformation of the economy and society. In five years, 45 buildings lose their functions. Most of this is due to the destruction of collective farms in rural areas. At the same time, there is a religious revival: 14 objects become temples of different confessions. The first museums also appear, while the history of the Eastern Prussia ceases to be such a taboo topic.
- Russian (1995–2019). This period is characterized by a peculiar balance of restoration and destruction: the number of destroyed objects steadily slightly exceeds the number of restored ones. Geographically, the region is divided into two parts: east and west. The eastern part is depopulating and degrading to a greater extent, while the western one is gradually developing due to tourism and migration inflow. Gradually, due to tourism development, among the restored objects, the share of churches decreases, and the share of museums increases, but the share of historic hotels remains insignificant.
- New (2020–present). The closure of borders due to the pandemic, and then the sharp increase in the cost of outbound tourism due to sanctions, led to the development of domestic tourism, including rural tourism. Kaliningrad residents, accustomed to weekend tourism, began to look for vacation spots within the region. This sharply increased the attractiveness of historical real estate for business. As a result, a race began for CHS in relatively good condition. The greatest interest is in country estates and rural churches. The former are being bought (Lugowen, Gryzoza Hutor), the latter are being rented from the Russian Orthodox Church (Allenburg Church, Gerdauen Church). Castles are too expensive for most actors, and therefore are not yet used. However, they also attract interest from large federal-scale investors: projects have already been launched to restore four castles in different parts of the region. In the last five years, more objects have been restored than in the previous 20 ones. At the same time, transformations have affected the entire territory of the region: in the last five years, not a single CHS has been abandoned. It is also unusual that among the restored objects there are no churches, but a significant share is occupied by recreation and trade facilities.

At the same time, the territories that had built rural tourism support structures even before 2020 are benefiting the most from the current situation. The leaders are the Polesk, Nesterov, and Pravdinsk districts (Figure 8).

The Pravdinsk district, in turn, has become popular among visiting businessmen. The governor of the region paid attention to the township of Zheleznodorozhny, and many Kaliningrad residents appreciated the uniqueness of this territory. Some of them began to buy real estates in the area to serve the growing tourist flow. However, the participation of the local population in these projects is minimized.

In the Polesk district (the most successful among the three), the basis for rural tourism was created as a part of the international grant "Sparks of Hope for Russian Villages". It taught local residents how to run their own businesses in rural tourism. After the grant ended, a group of its participants united in the "Resource Center for Rural Tourism". They advertise each other's products and stimulate further tourism development in the district.

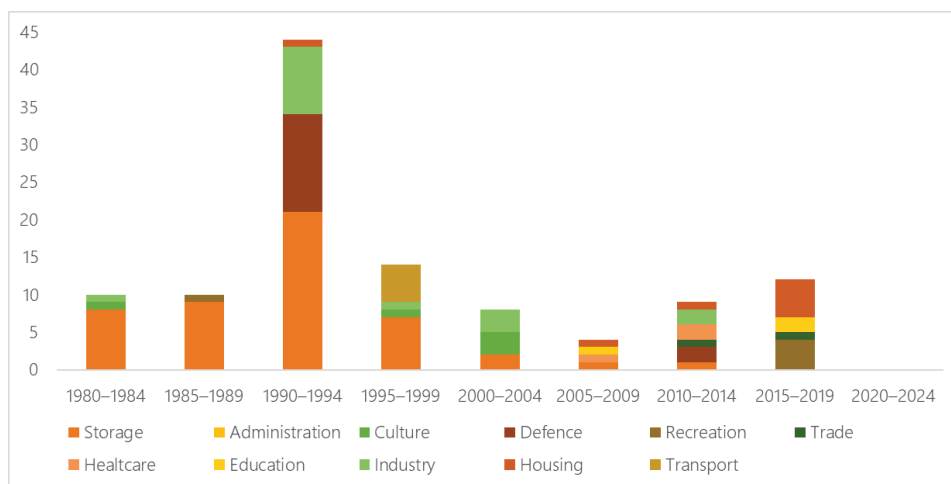


Figure 6. Dynamics of loss of functions by buildings based on their last function by authors.

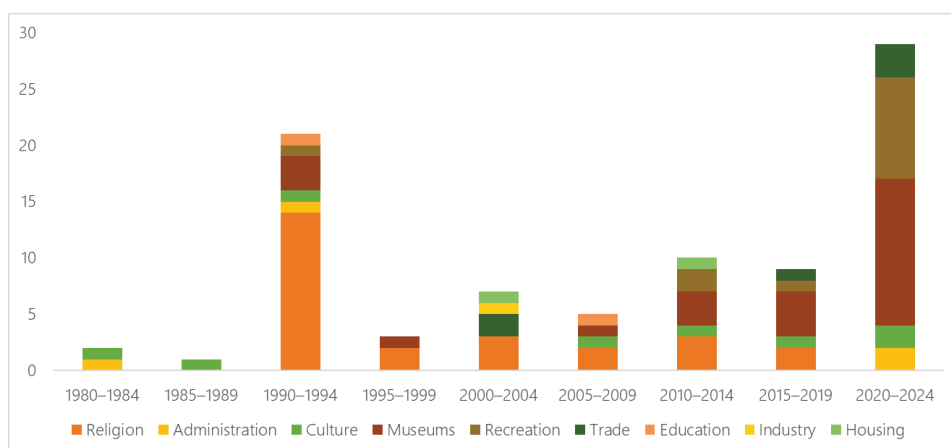


Figure 7. Dynamics of the restoration of CHS objects, taking into account the use of the results of the restoration by the authors.

Finally, the third significant district is Nesterov. The most active zone of tourism development has become its southern part called the Romintenskaya Pushcha [Rominten Forest]. There, with the efforts of two people and one private museum, they managed to unite local residents around the idea of developing rural tourism. They help them to implement their plans. In addition, the private museum acts as a coordinator of local residents' activities, advertises them, and forms a brand for a fairly large area situated on the Vyshtynets Upland.

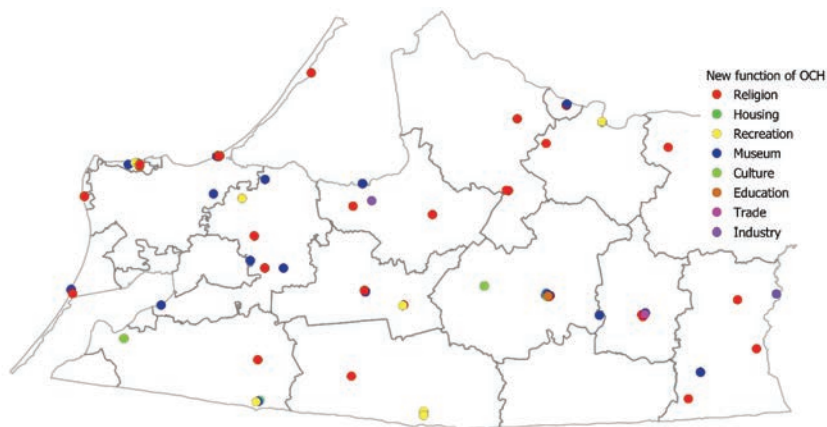


Figure 8. Geography of restored CHS facilities in rural areas of the Kaliningrad region by the authors.

Comparing these three districts, we can come to several conclusions:

- For the development of tourism in rural areas, an external impulse is needed: the interest of a high-ranking person, a grant programme, or the appearance of a talented coordinator.
- The involvement of local residents turns out to be higher with a softer, “horizontal” approach to tourism development, when rural residents are not offered the role of observers, but the one of creators.
- To be able to implement their projects, rural residents need skills and resources. That is why the Polesk district turns out to be the most productive. They not only communicated with local residents, identifying the most active among them, but also provided financial support, taught them the most productive ways to implement their projects.

6. The portraits of the actors of restoration of CHS

The question about the actors involved in the restoration of CHS has a particular interest. Who are these people? Where did they come from? What makes them undertake the challenging commitments of leasing a half-destroyed rural church without a dome or a wing of a Teutonic Order castle in a remote village? In July 2023, we conducted 13 in-depth interviews with restoration actors, most of whom were “pioneers” in the municipalities that now attract tourist groups from outside the region. We supplemented these biographical interviews with the participant observation of the lives of the sites restored by our respondents and identified some common features in the socio-psychological “profiles” of our interlocutors (Table 1).

The most common trait among all respondents is their tendency to transform the original functions of the CHS. Thus, the wing of a Teutonic castle may become a workshop for making props, and a city mill building starts to transform into a hotel. When choosing a new function, the renters of cultural sites are guided by a subjective, sometimes fantastical perception of the site (one of the phrases we often heard was: “I saw it and realized that it was my dream”). At the same time, the new owners of the CHS often try to play up the historical past of their site, opening small museums, collecting old German photographs, tiles from excavations, and other thematic items. Some sort of sacred knowledge about the pre-war function of the sites becomes a matter of personal pride.



Table 1. Comparison of similar features of actors in the restoration of CHS by the authors

A characteristic feature	Number of eligible respondents/ total number of respondents
Rethinking the functions of objects	12/13
Grant management skills	11/13
Participation in the life of the local community	10/13
Kaliningrad as the place of birth or temporary residence	9/13
Age from 35–40 years	9/13
European grant programmes	6/13
The beginning of the restoration in the 1990s (early 2000s)	5/13

Another widely spread feature is the ability to work skillfully with all available support measures: regional, federal, and foreign grants (until the latter were available). The high rate of restoration of sites relies on these individuals' education, understanding of support mechanisms, and "soft skills" that help them to create sustainable social networks between municipalities, exchange best practices, and promote each other's projects. Last summer, we witnessed one of our respondents, with whom we were conducting an interview, negotiating a joint event with someone from another municipality, where we only planned to arrive a day later. Many projects from the 1990s (early 2000s) are connected with European (German, Dutch, etc.) grant programmes or private individuals who often gave the green light for restoration on a barter condition ("We help you re-roof the rural estate, and you organize a children's camp").

It's interesting to know, that in the Kaliningrad region many actors of local initiatives are more loyal to the local community and are more willing to establish connections (in particular, hiring local residents) than their counterparts in other regions of Russia. In the Voskresensky district of the Nizhny Novgorod region, we observed a clear division between local residents and the "new rurals"—migrants from cities (Krutov et al., 2024). This opposition caused misunderstandings even at a household level ("they milk the cow at the wrong time"); perhaps the absence of this divide between incoming activists and rural residents in the Kaliningrad region is related to a smaller distance and a shared past among the inhabitants of this "region of migrants".

Another fairly common feature is the path of actors to the restoration site through Kaliningrad as a place of birth, study, or temporary residence. It is not surprising for those who, having arrived in the Kaliningrad region from outside, first chose the regional center (the most convenient place to live) and then began to explore the attractions in peripheral areas. However, we also encountered cases where residents of small rural settlements, having spent several years in Kaliningrad, did not stay there or return, but moved to other rural settlements. In some cases, respondents explained their atypical move by the uniqueness of the area or the presence of an old German site for sale. Nevertheless, the internal ethnography of the process of choosing a restoration site is still not entirely clear.

For example, one of our respondents, a renter of a wing of the 13th-century Waldau Castle, explained her desire to take on this challenging site as a "midlife crisis" and a search for the meaning of life when the goals postulated by society ("family-career-children") have already been achieved, but there is still a need to move forward. Our interlocutor believes that her example of working with the castle, which "pushes you to learn new professions", is nothing more than a way to avoid internal conflict and help the next generations understand what needs to be done. Similar motivation appeared more than once in our interviews: Table 1 shows a skew in the age of respondents toward mature and older working-age adults.



However, a new wave of interest in preserving CHS that began in 2020, largely thanks to the movement “Ruin Keepers”, paints another portrait of the actors. These are residents of Kaliningrad of all ages who come to rural areas alone, with friends, or with families for volunteer clean-ups at ruined churches to improve the territory and conserve the sites in the spirit of European “ruin aesthetics”. This option for maintaining CHS does not require as serious investments as restoring unique sites but allows to form of a broader social network and the preserve typical sites as unusual walking areas in villages, creating a kind of “open-air historical parks”.

7. Conclusion

The functions of places are transformed under the influence of changes in higher-order territorial systems. The more radical the transformations within the system, the sharper the changes in functions become, and the greater the risk of a complete loss of functions. Peripheral areas, characterized by low human capital and low labor productivity, adapt the worst. Over the last 80 years, the Kaliningrad region has experienced a significant number of sharp transformations: the complete change of population in 1945–1947, the collapse of the planned economy in 1991, rural depopulation, changes in the configuration of borders, and their closure due to the pandemic. As a result, the rural areas have lost not only many functions but also the resources needed for further development. These resources now need to be somehow attracted from outside, which is possible either through long-term economic growth of the entire region or due to reduced competition for these resources. The latter is what happened in the region in the 2020s when almost all tourist locations outside the region were closed. This created a demand for recreation and led to the restoration of CHS on the region's periphery. Meanwhile, human resources and financial means are attracted either from Kaliningrad or other parts of the country: local communities are not so often involved in the restoration activities of CHS. This creates additional risks for the development of new functions of the place (as they are somewhat antagonistic to the locations of deployment). The most successful cases of CHS restoration are earlier stories from the Polessky and Nesterovsky districts, where territorial development actors primarily worked with local residents and gave them the opportunity to realize their own dreams and needs using the resources available in the area. It is precisely these systems that have more prospects for further development and evolutionary adaptation. However, at the moment in Russia, they are more the exception than the rule.

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