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Integration of small and medium-sized enterprises into cross-border cooperation as a factor of regional development

Antonina A. Kulapova¹, Diana Yu. Boboshko²

1 Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), Moscow, Russia. aakulapova@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0829-3549>

2 National University of Science and Technology MISIS, Moscow, Russia. boboshko.dy@misis.ru, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3418-2976>

Abstract. Border regions are often characterized by peripheral social and economic situation. This is applicable to Russia's Far East and Northeast of the People's Republic of China. Cross-border economic cooperation between these two regions when combined with a policy prioritizing small and medium-sized enterprises can foster economic development of the region and raise its attractiveness for population and investment. As for now, Chinese border provinces of Heilongjiang and Jilin have advanced as for the role of SME in the economy, yet this growth is hardly related to their border position or cooperation with Russia. Thus, in order to take the advantage of the vicinity specific measures should be taken by both countries on state, regional and mostly important local level with an emphasis on SME and on facilitation of cross-border activities.

Key words: cross-border cooperation, small businesses, medium businesses, Sino-Russian relations, border regions, regional development, China's Northeast, Far East.

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Научная статья

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Интеграция малого и среднего бизнеса в трансграничное сотрудничество как фактор развития регионов

Антонина Александровна Кулапова³, Диана Юрьевна Бобошко⁴

3 Московский государственный институт международных отношений (университет) МИД России. Москва, Россия. aakulapova@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0829-3549>

4 Национальный исследовательский технологический университет МИСИС. Москва, Россия. boboshko.dy@misis.ru, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3418-2976>

Аннотация. Приграничные регионы зачастую характеризуются периферийным социально-экономическим положением. Это применимо к Дальнему Востоку России и северо-востоку Китая. Экономическое сотрудничество между этими регионами, особенно в сочетании с политикой стимулирования малого и среднего бизнеса, может способствовать экономическому развитию регионов и повышению их привлекательности для населения и инвестиций. На данный момент приграничные провинции Китая Хэйлунцзян и Цзилинь добились прогресса в роли МСП в экономике, однако этот рост едва ли связан с их приграничным положением или сотрудничеством с Россией. Таким образом, для того чтобы воспользоваться преимуществами соседства, обоим государствам необходимо принимать конкретные меры на государственном, региональном и, самое главное, локальном уровнях с акцентом на поддержку МСП и облегчение трансграничного ведения хозяйства.

Ключевые слова: трансграничное сотрудничество, малые предприятия, средние предприятия, российско-китайские отношения, приграничные регионы, региональное развитие, северо-восток Китая, Дальний Восток.

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Introduction

Border regions are often characterized by a "peripheral" social and economic situation, especially if they are located at a significant distance from the capital or economic center of the country. This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that borders serve as barriers, since one of their functions is to provide for national security. However, borders also have a contact function, thus they might become links between the people and economies of neighboring countries as a whole and between border regions in particular [Cross-border cooperation...2021]. Increasing engagement in cross-border cooperation leads to economic growth and potentially helps to overcome peripheral status that border regions tend to possess. Small and medium-sized enterprises play a crucial role in this process since they are flexible, adapt easily to changing environment and serve as platforms for innovation implementation and foster economic development, employment creation and improvement of the urban environment [Network Integration... 2024].

Today, in Russia, this way of overcoming socio-economic backwardness is particularly relevant for the federal subjects of the Far Eastern Federal District [Vilenskiy 2021]. Their remote location in respect to the European part of Russia has complicated settlement, control and development of the Far East throughout history. Despite the strategic importance of the region for the country, it is still unclear which mechanisms should be implemented to achieve its efficient economic development [Lee 2024]. The current role of SME in the border regions of the Far East and the neighboring Chinese provinces, as well as existing and potential measures to support SMEs and cross-border cooperation will be considered in this article. It is worth mentioning that the northeastern provinces of China and Russian Far Eastern federal subjects share a number of common social and economic problems. Although Northeast China is relatively close to the country's capital, Beijing, the area is still characterized by some peripheral features. China's leading economic centers are located way much to the south: Shanghai, at the mouth of the Yangtze River, and the Greater Bay Area in Guangdong Province, which includes such cities as Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Foshan, Dongguan, as well as the Hong Kong and Macao special administrative regions. The

northeastern provinces of China traditionally include Heilongjiang, Jilin, Liaoning and the eastern part of Inner Mongolia. In the future, only the provinces of Heilongjiang and Jilin will be considered, since they share a noticeable part of border with Russia, have similar structure of the economy and most actively engage in cross-border cooperation. These regions used to form China's industrial base and are still dominated by state-owned enterprises, mostly in the field of heavy industry. After the beginning of the Reform and opening-up policy in the late 1970s followed by the transition to market economy and rapid economic transformation of the 1990s, these provinces proved unable to switch quickly to more technology-intensive production, which resulted in unemployment, population outflow and other social problems, as well as loss of competitiveness compared to coastal regions. Russian Far Eastern regions also undergo a considerable population outflow and aging, fail to provide for sufficient infrastructure, and such sectors with low added value, as mineral resources extraction still play an important role in the economy [Degtyareva 2017].

Nevertheless, international experience shows that the outflow of population from old industrial regions can be stopped by restructuring and modernizing the economy, attracting new industries and developing a comfortable urban and social environment. One of the main centers of industrialization in Europe, the coal-rich Rhine-Ruhr region in Germany underwent a significant outflow of population in the 1960s and 1970s because mines were shutting down, yet the trend was reversed, over the past 10 years the population of the agglomeration has stabilized and an increase has become noticeable in large cities.

Methods and Materials

Government policy undoubtedly plays an important role in such an economic transition; however, it cannot be fully achieved without business, including small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) [Boboshko 2023]. SMEs are one of the key drivers of the transition to a post-industrial economy, implementation of innovations and employment creation, which can significantly improve the socio-economic situation of peripheral regions, including Russia's and China's regions taken as examples. Cross-border cooperation, in turn, further stimulates economic growth and increases the attractiveness of the region both for population and investors. Overall, SMEs play a huge role in

China's economy: there are 52 million small and medium-sized enterprises, which account for 60% of GDP, 50% of tax revenues, 70% of innovations, and 80% of urban employment, according to the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology. In addition, SMEs also contribute to China's transition to an economy with a high share of science-intensive and high-tech sectors [Boboshko 2024]. In the regions under consideration, programs to support innovative small enterprises are also being introduced. For example, in Heilongjiang province, the registry of small and medium-sized innovative enterprises is updated annually, as well as the list of scientific and technological SMEs, which can apply for tax deductions on R&D expenses.

It is worth noting that the official statistics of the PRC reflect only small and medium-sized enterprises engaged in industrial activities. Therefore, the data

on the number of SMEs provided hereafter pertain specifically to industrial small and medium-sized enterprises. Given that the main fields of activity for entities in border economic cooperation zones, in addition to trade, include woodworking, chemical industry, and light industry, the data on industrial SMEs can be used to assess the dynamics of SMEs in Heilongjiang and Jilin provinces in general and their spatial distribution across these regions.

Between 2020 and 2022, the provinces of Heilongjiang and Jilin saw an increase in the number of registered SMEs. The graph shows that small industrial enterprises are predominant in Heilongjiang province, while the number of micro-enterprises is showing the most active growth (+47%). The total number of SMEs increased by 19% (Figure 1).

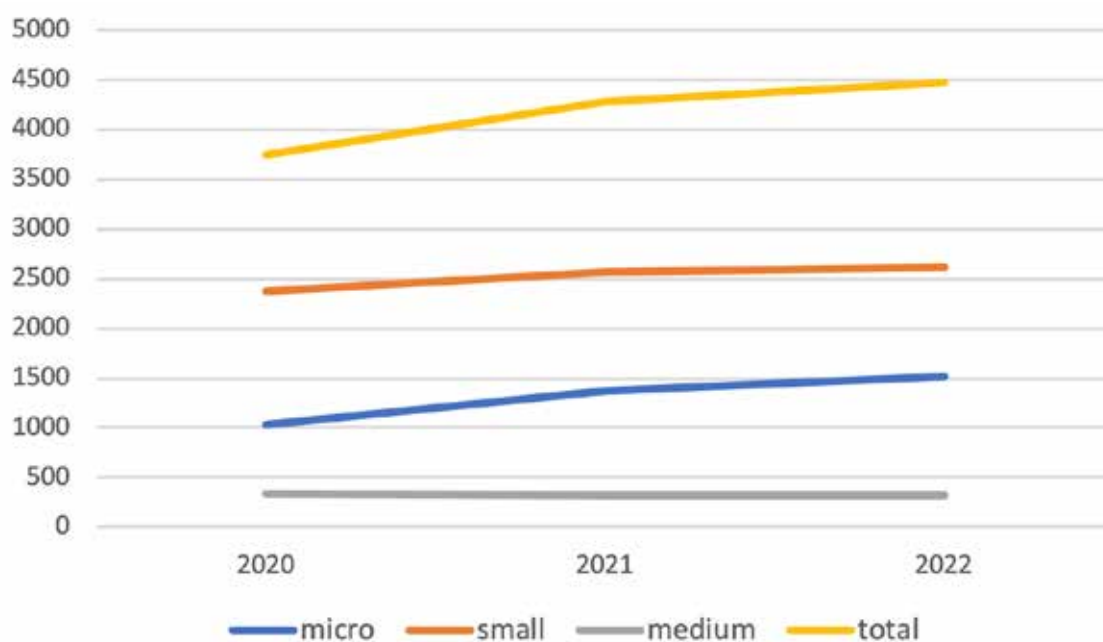


Fig. 1. Change in number of SMEs in Heilongjiang province, 2020–2022, %

Data source: Heilongjiang Bureau of Statistics. URL: <https://tjj.hlji.gov.cn> (accessed 12/16/2024).

The data for Jilin province turned out to be representative only for microenterprises and non-representative for small and medium-sized ones. According to official statistics, between 2021 and 2022, the number of small-sized enterprises increased from 68 to 2,225, while the number of medium-sized enterprises decreased from 2,011 to 360, which is most likely due to changes in the classification criteria of "small" or "medium"-sized enterprises (Table 1). The overall change in the number of small-sized and medium-sized enterprises together, however, resulted in a 24% increase, which

is comparable to the change in the number of SMEs across all three categories over the three years. Thus, it can be concluded that industrial small and medium business sector is developing steadily in the region. The case of categorization of SMEs in Jilin province is not unique. Classification criteria for SMEs differ not only between different countries but also within some countries. For example, in Hong Kong SAR and Macau SAR, the criteria for SMEs are considerably less elaborate compared to the complex system used in Mainland China, in which enterprises are classified into 17 categories based on the area of

activity [Kulapova 2024].

	2020	2021	2022	Change in number of SMEs, 2020–2022, %
micro	377	369	552	46,42
small	68	74	2225	3172,06
medium	1839	2011	360	–80,42
total	2284	2454	3137	37,35

Table 1. **Number of SMEs in Jilin province, 2020–2022 (representative values are highlighted in bold)**

Data source: Jilin Bureau of Statistics. URL: <http://tjj.jl.gov.cn> (accessed 12/16/2024).

Using data about the number of industrial SMEs in administrative-territorial units at the district level in Heilongjiang province (the second level of administrative-territorial division), it is also possible to draw conclusions about the spatial distribution of SMEs on a larger scale. The main question is whether there is a tendency for SMEs to concentrate near the border with Russia, or if the border remains a barrier, with cooperation between the two countries taking place at higher levels (federal, regional), rather than at the level of districts within a province.

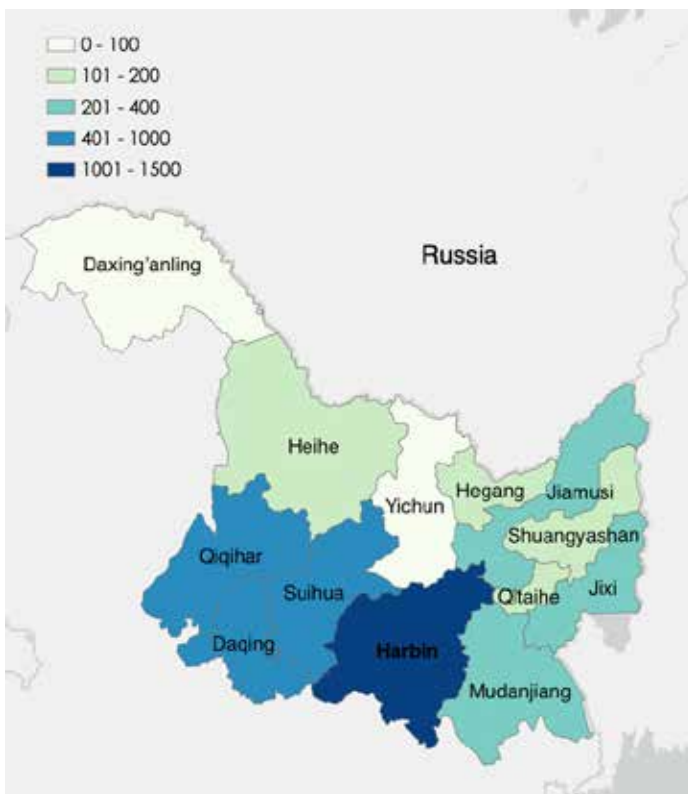


Fig. 2. The number of SMEs in urban districts of Heilongjiang province.

A map based on the Heilongjiang Statistical Yearbook 2023 clearly shows that there is no significant concentration of industrial SMEs near the

border (Figure 2). On the contrary, the urban districts with the highest number of small and medium-sized enterprises are located in the inner part of the province. Harbin, the sub-provincial city and capital of Heilongjiang province, ranks first in all SMEs categories (medium, small, and microenterprises) and surpasses the next urban district by SMEs number, Daqing, by nearly three times (Table 2). It is logical that Harbin, as the capital of the province and the largest city in the Northeast China region (Dongbei), has the most favorable conditions for business due to its higher level of socio-economic development and the presence of steady consumer demand.

Of the top five districts by total number of SMEs (excluding Harbin), only two are border districts—Jiamusi and Mudanjiang, ranking fifth and sixth respectively. The remaining six border districts ended up in the lower half of the list (Table 2).

	2020	2021	2022	Change in number of SMEs, 2020–2022, %
Harbin	1168	1392	1422	21,75
Daqing	479	527	526	9,81
Suihua	363	399	466	28,37
Qiqihar	343	392	405	18,1
Jiamusi	318	368	393	23,58
Mudanjiang	302	342	351	16,23
Jixi	205	224	244	19,02
Hegang	136	159	176	29,41
Shuangyashan	149	156	146	–2,01
Qitaihe	96	108	120	25
Heihe	114	121	112	–1,75
Daxing'anling	19	21	25	31,58
Yichun	62	68	23	–62,9

Table 2. **Dynamics of the Number of Industrial SMEs in Urban Districts of Heilongjiang Province, 2020–2022 (bold indicates urban districts bordering Russia)**

This table shows the dynamics of the number of industrial small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in urban districts of Heilongjiang Province from 2020 to 2022, along with the percentage change in the number of SMEs over this period. Districts bordering Russia are highlighted in bold.

Results

The analysis indicates that subregional cooperation remains underdeveloped, with borders and related settlements not serving as business nuclei, despite the existence of measures such as cross-border

free trade zones, which will be discussed further [Theoretical and methodological foundations... 2025, 162–188]. While large bilateral infrastructure projects are important for international relations and geopolitics, it is subregional cooperation, particularly when driven by small and medium-sized businesses, that can have a direct impact on the socio-economic situation of regions and lives of their residents. This can be achieved through job creation, an expanded range of services, strengthening of economic independence and subsequent more self-sufficient political decision-making.

On the other hand, the data suggests that internal measures to support SMEs in Northeast China are effective, as there is a noticeable increase in the number of SMEs. However, in Russia's Far East the number of SMEs and their role in the economy remain relatively small, in comparison to other parts of the country. The region maintains its role as an exporter of natural resources and focuses on large projects, such as the international transport corridors "Primorye-1" and "Primorye-2" [Kulapova 2024a].

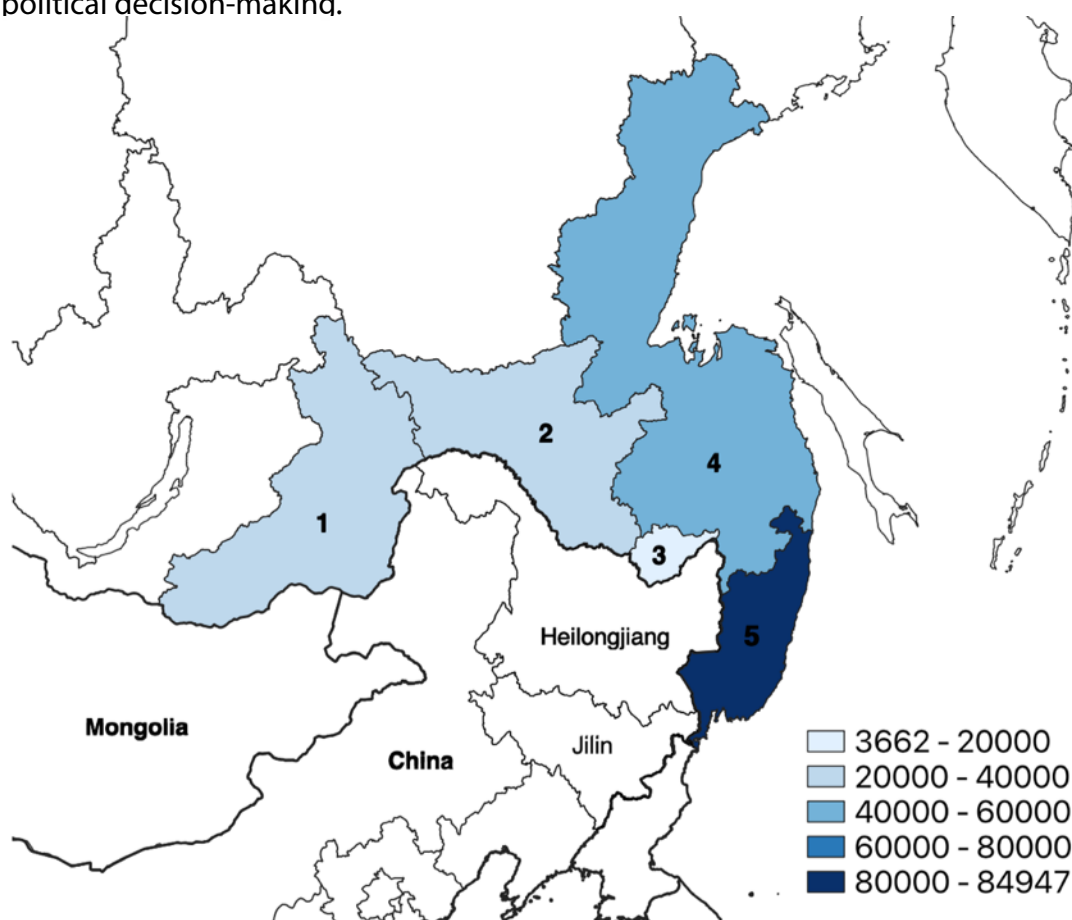


Fig. 3. The number of SMEs in border regions of Russia. 1 – Zabaykalsky Krai, 2 – Amur Oblast, 3 – Jewish Autonomous Oblast, 4 – Khabarovsk Krai, 5 – Primorsky Krai

Source: Unified Register of Small and Medium Enterprises. URL: <https://rmsp.nalog.ru/index.htm> (accessed 12/16/2024).

Large-scale logistics projects, such as international transport corridors "Primorye-1" and "Primorye-2" can involve SMEs both by cooperating with them and through creation of necessary infrastructure (railways, border crossings, etc.); however, a more efficient way to achieve visible results in cross-border interaction in short run is to encourage tourism and retail. Different types of economic zones with wide ranges of privileges as for taxation, rent and export tariffs have been introduced and could help reach this goal.

In China five types of special economic zones can be established:

- special economic zones;
- zones focused on high-tech development;
- zones focused on attracting industrial enterprises;
- duty-free trade zones;
- border economic cooperation zones (BECZs).

Four out of 17 border economic cooperation zones are located at the border with Russia. Compared to other types of SEZs in China, BECZs have smaller

areas and are less economically significant at the national level [Loy 2023]. However, at the regional level, they help boost export of locally produced goods and strengthen neighborly relations. Currently, the following BECZs are functioning:

- Heihe (Heilongjiang) — Blagoveshchensk (Amur Oblast);
- Suifenhe (Heilongjiang) — Pogranichny (Primorsky Krai);
- Manchuria (Heilongjiang) — Zabaykalsk (Zabaykalsky Krai);
- Hunchun (Jilin) — Zarubino (Primorsky Krai).

Most BECZs consist of multiple components (industrial parks, industrial processing zones, logistics zones). The most developed zone for trade and tourism is the China-Russia Trade and Tourism Zone in Manchuria, but the predominant industries in all BECZs are woodworking, petrochemicals (based on raw materials imported from Russia), light industry (clothing, footwear, household appliances – exported from China to Russia), and logistics [Kostunina 2011].

It is important to note that BECZs are entirely located on Chinese territory, and essentially they are a unilateral measure to promote cooperation. The next step to maximize the positive effects of cross-border cooperation should be the creation of similar zones on the Russian side and their subsequent integration into cross-border free trade zones.

Under Russian legislation four types of special economic zones (SEZ) can be established:

- industrial production zones;
- technology and innovation zones;
- tourism and recreational zones;
- port zones.

Currently, there are no special economic zones in the Russian Far East, although some of the existing types of SEZs could meet the needs of the border regions (tourism and recreation or port logistics). Therefore, in order to make the most of China's border economic cooperation zones and strengthen neighborly relations, reciprocal steps from Russia are necessary. Such steps could possibly include.

1. Establishing symmetrical special economic

zones of tourism-recreational or other types.

2. Implementing advanced development zones with VAT exemptions for export goods, as well as relaxation of migration rules.
3. Creating a new category of border SEZs with preferences aimed at trade, tourism, export-oriented production, and technology exchange.

These measures will help attract small and medium-sized enterprises—key drivers of regional economic development—closer to the border.

Conclusion

Cross-border cooperation and the development of small and medium-sized enterprises are both effective tools used to improve socio-economic situation of a region; furthermore, they compliment each other. Creation of infrastructure for cross-border trade, including online platforms for businesses, and simplification of customs and administrative procedures for suppliers and citizens will lead to the development of retail trade and tourism—the most characteristic activities for SMEs in Russia. Additionally, the establishment of special economic zones symmetrical to China's border economic cooperation zones could spur the development of more SMEs involved in technology-intensive business, as industrial parks and manufacturing enterprises are already functioning within these zones [Kostunina 2011], offering opportunities for joint ventures and cooperation in science and technology. At the same time, the analysis has shown that cross-border cooperation remains limited, particularly at the subregional level.

While large interstate projects are aimed at strengthening strategic partnership and developing logistics infrastructure, it is essential to create such business climate in relation to them, so that small and medium-sized enterprises could benefit from the new infrastructure as well. These enterprises are key to job creation, providing services that enhance the quality of life and making settlements more attractive to residents, thus preventing further outflow of population.

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Information about the authors:

Kulapova Antonina A. — bachelor student, AuthorID (RSCI) 1221807. Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), 76 Prospekt Vernadskogo, Moscow, 1194546 Russia; **Boboshko Diana Yu.** — Candidate of Economics, associated professor, AuthorID (RSCI) 767221, SPIN-код: 6810-3215. National University of Science and Technology MISIS, 4/1 Leninskiy Prospekt, Moscow, 119049, Russia.

Информация об авторах:

Кулапова Антонина Александровна — студент. РИНЦ AuthorID: 1221807. Федеральное государственное автономное образовательное учреждение высшего образования «Московский государственный институт международных отношений (университет) Министерства иностранных дел Российской Федерации» (МГИМО МИД России), Проспект Вернадского 76, Москва, 119454, Россия; **Бобошко Диана Юрьевна** — кандидат экономических наук, доцент, доцент кафедры экономики. Федеральное государственное автономное образовательное учреждение высшего образования «Национальный исследовательский технологический университет "МИСИС"», Ленинский проспект, 4/1, Москва, 117049, Россия.

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