Kaliningrad Oblast 2024

Russia’s vessel of havoc on the Baltic Sea

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Russia's vessel of havoc on the Baltic Sea

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract 4

Introduction 5
Explanatory notes 7

Historical and geographical outline 9

Kaliningrad Oblast today 13
Politics 14
Economy and demographics 16
Military 23

Kaliningrad Oblast and Russia's neo-conservative narrative 25
The unwelcome pre-1945 past 26
A role model of officially defined Russianness 27
The Russia-wide perspective 28

The international environment of Kaliningrad Oblast 31
Before 2012: An open playing field? 32
2012-2020: A narrowing of perspectives, and increased central control 35
Run-up to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine; the Vistula Lagoon and the Suwalki Gap 38

The war in Ukraine: the role of Kaliningrad Oblast 41
Military participation 42
Relation to Crimea, Kherson, and areas of protracted conflict 43
Post-2022 transit issues: immediate future of road, rail and sea links 44

Kaliningrad Oblast and security in the Baltic Sea Region 47
Prigozhin's mutiny and its consequences 48
GUGI, sea- and air-denial activities 49
Kaliningrad Oblast and Bornholm 51

Conclusion 53

Notes 58

References 59

ABSTRACT

Kaliningrad Oblast was created as a war trophy and a symbol of Soviet victory over Nazi Germany in 1945/1946. For nearly seven decades, it played a strictly military role in Soviet and Russian foreign policy, mostly limited to its Baltic Sea surroundings. This changed when Vladimir Putin came back to the Kremlin for his third presidential term. With the annexation of Crimea, followed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the semi-exclave's visibility and importance in other geographical and topical areas increased significantly. It has become an inherent part of the so-called neo-conservative project pursued by the Russian federal authorities. In this optic, Russia wages a defensive war against the West and its decadent values, pulling all of its resources together and preparing for a long-term confrontation.

Kaliningrad Oblast, with seven centuries of non-Russian history, has become a showcase of this approach. It has also been put in the spotlight of this existential conflict as one of the most vulnerable regions, separated from mainland Russia by EU and NATO countries, entailing negative consequences.

This report provides an overview of the situation in the Oblast as of early 2024 in five key dimensions: (1) politics, economy and demographics; (2) the Russian neo-imperial narrative; (3) international environment; (4) Russia's invasion of Ukraine of 24 February 2022; (5) security developments in the Baltic Sea region with an impact on the dynamics of EU-Russia and NATO-Russia relations, and on Denmark.

Keywords: Kaliningrad Oblast, Russia, Russian Federation, NATO, EU, Baltic Sea Region, Denmark, Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine.

INTRODUCTION

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kaliningrad Oblast's role as a Cold War military hub became the subject of a complex mixture of policies whose composition depended on the current state of Russia-West relations, including EU and NATO enlargement and its consequences. Although the Russian Federation used its westernmost region to pursue selective modes of cooperation in times of rapprochement, the Oblast has recently become an object of belligerent and quasi-imperial rhetoric, relayed throughout Russia and exceeding the traditional hard-power dimension. The Kremlin has portrayed Kaliningrad Oblast as a battleground of civilisations, a place of special significance for the Russian collective memory, and a region constantly threatened by the West both militarily and economically.

These tendencies intensified after 24 February 2022. Kaliningrad Oblast has been an important supplier of soldiers and equipment for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It has also played a role in setting up administrative structures in the occupied and subsequently annexed regions of eastern and southern Ukraine. Never before in its post-Soviet history has the Oblast been so tightly connected with the Kremlin and so dependent on it in every possible sphere.

Today's Kaliningrad Oblast represents a security challenge to the countries in the southern Baltic Sea basin as a convenient tool for possible destabilising and destructive operations by Russia. These operations could target the energy security of Bornholm or the situation in Lithuania and north-eastern Poland, potentially disrupting the only land connection between the Baltic States and the rest of NATO and the European Union, as well as using military units deployed in the semi-exclave for sea- and air-denial practices from Gotland across Bornholm to the Danish Straits.

The combined effect of these developments is a potent restoration of the strategic role played by this south-east corner of the Baltic Sea at certain times in history, namely as a frontline position in the Teutonic Order's Prussian crusades in the thirteenth century, a zone of confrontation during the Napoleonic Wars, an outpost of the German Empire and the Third Reich, and a decisive battlefield at the end of Second World War. The understandings reached at Yalta and Potsdam gave the Soviet Union a large zone of control in the Baltic, and military dependence on Kaliningrad was not exclusive. Only since 1989-1991 – through German unification, independence of the three Baltic States and dissolution of the Warsaw Pact – has Kaliningrad reassumed its former profile as an exclave, no longer German but Russian. However, it was the accession of the Baltic States to NATO and the European Union in 2004, that exacerbated Russian feelings of encirclement and shaped the role the exclave plays today in concrete strategic terms, and in the political self-perception of the Russian leadership. The resulting postures of the Russian Federation raise a series of unprecedented questions – military, environmental, infrastructural and civil security-related – for its Baltic neighbours, Denmark among them. Kaliningrad Oblast has thus become an area that will require acute strategic attention in the years to come.

This report provides an overview of the situation in Kaliningrad Oblast as of early 2024. It focuses on five aspects:

- The region's political, economic and demographic situation, as well as its relations with Russia's federal centre.
- The Oblast's role in the neo-imperial narrative, which has dominated the identity discourse in Russia since Vladimir Putin resumed the presidency in 2012, sometimes referred to as the new conservative project.
- Changes in the Oblast's international environment, with particular emphasis on Russia's increasingly belligerent foreign policy over the last decade.
- The Oblast's participation in Russia's invasion of Ukraine of 24 February 2022.
- Consequences of the above-mentioned processes for security developments and possible cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region (BSR), with a particular emphasis on Denmark both as an individual actor and as a member of the European Union and NATO.

EXPLANATORY NOTES

In this report, I refer to Kaliningrad Oblast as a semi-exclave. The reason for this is its physical separation from the rest of the Russian Federation by Lithuania and Belarus. At the same time, it maintains maritime connection with the regions of Leningrad Oblast and St. Petersburg through the Baltic Sea. The 'semi'-element is especially important under current geopolitical circumstances. After 24 February 2022, the use of maritime routes to transport goods to and from Kaliningrad Oblast greatly increased as the European Union introduced sanctions limiting transit by rail across Lithuania. In fact, the insufficient number of ferries operating between Kaliningrad and St. Petersburg has contributed to the belligerent rhetoric of the Russian authorities towards Lithuania and, broadly speaking, the institutional West.

As for Kaliningrad Oblast itself, apart from using the term 'semi-exclave', I also refer to it as 'the Oblast' for short. For all other subdivisions of the Russian Federation within its 2013 borders, I use their full names to avoid confusion (Leningrad Oblast etc.). Whenever I mention Crimea, I mean the Russia-occupied peninsula of Ukraine, which consists of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the City of Sevastopol. I use the phrase 'Russia's invasion of Ukraine' or 'invasion of Ukraine' when referring to the Russian Army's attack on Ukraine launched on 24 February 2022.

The scarcity of reliable statistical data is a challenge for any analysis of regions or aspects of contemporary Russia. As the Centre for Eastern Studies has noted, 'The Russian Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat) frequently changes the methodology it uses, the way the data is presented and the frequency of publication, which has made it difficult or even impossible to compare the information it issues in the long run. Questions were also often raised about updates to the data which significantly altered previous readings, something Rosstat could not explain' (Wiśniewska 2023).

On a similar note, Kaliningrad Oblast has never featured as a sub-topic in Russian Studies. Most works focus on its role in Russia's hard security, the Baltic Sea Region and Central and Eastern Europe more generally. Kaliningrad Oblast-specific research going beyond that area is still scarce. This report seeks to narrow this gap by putting together information and data from a relatively large number of areas and examining their roles in so far as they have implications for security in the Baltic Sea Region. The limited availability of academic and analytical publications calls for a more extensive use of the information available in web portals, telegram channels and internet forums.

Poland-Russia and Lithuania-Russia crossings on Kaliningrad Oblast's border:

Poland

1. **Gronowo** - Mamonovo road crossing
2. **Grzechotki** – Mamonovo II road crossing
3. **Bezledy** – Bagrationovsk road crossing
4. **Gołdap** – Gusev road crossing
5. **Braniewo** – Mamonovo rail crossing
6. **Głomno** – Bagrationovsk rail crossing (not in operation)
7. **Skandawa** – Zheleznodorozhnyi rail crossing

Lithuania

8. **Nida** - Morskoye road crossing
9. **Panemunė** – Sovetsk road crossing
10. **Pagėgiai** – Sovetsk rail crossing
11. **Kybartai** – Chernyshevskoye road crossing
12. **Kybartai** – Nesterov rail crossing
13. **Ramoniškiai** – Pogranichnyi road crossing

HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL OUTLINE

Kaliningrad Oblast is the westernmost subject region of the Russian Federation. The Oblast borders Lithuania to the north and the east and Poland to the south and has a 205-km land border with both countries. It has relatively wide access to the Baltic Sea with a 140-km maritime border and shares two large basins with its neighbours: the Vistula Lagoon with Poland, and the Curonian Lagoon with Lithuania, with no direct access to the open sea in the case of the latter. The specifics of its location is directly illustrated by a few distance indicators: Moscow 1100 km, Warsaw 278 km, Bornholm 345 km, Copenhagen 575 km[1].

Kaliningrad Oblast consists of the northern part of the former German province of East Prussia except for the Klaipėda Area (German: *Memelland*), now part of Lithuania. The Potsdam Conference in August 1945 formalised the annexation of the province to compensate the Soviet Union for the damage inflicted by the Third Reich. Initially established as Königsberg Oblast, it was renamed Kaliningrad in 1946 to commemorate Mikhail Kalinin, nominal head of state of the Soviet Union from 1938 to 1946. East Prussia was subject to large-scale destruction and looting by the Red Army, both during and after the war. Approximately 80% of its material legacy was destroyed. Königsberg was severely damaged by British air raids in August 1944 and a two-month siege by the Soviet army. The remaining German population was resettled in the allied occupation zones in Germany until 1950 (Eaton 2023), being replaced mostly by ethnic Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians, with a certain number of Lithuanians, Poles and settlers from other parts of the Soviet Union (Kostyashov 2009).

The region was subject to intense propaganda revolving around the perceived threats of the Nazi legacy (Eaton 2023), Western espionage and security and defence concerns connected with the Cold War. Organised Sovietisation of the Oblast, however, only began in 1948. The Soviet government made its newly acquired region a hub for withdrawing troops immediately after the war, including the contingent that occupied Bornholm until April 1946. Kaliningrad also facilitated the transport of Soviet troops to and from what is today northeast Germany and northern Poland during the Cold War. The town of Baltiysk became the Soviet Union's southernmost ice-free harbour and headquarters of the Soviet Baltic Sea Fleet. The Oblast played a role in the Warsaw Pact's plans to capture the Danish Straits in the event of an East-West military confrontation. Because of its militarisation, access to the region was restricted not only to foreigners, but also to Soviet citizens. The first non-Soviet civilian yacht crossed the Strait of Pillau (Russian: *Балтийский пролив*), separating Kaliningrad harbour from the open sea, only in 1990. The following years were marked by limited cooperation attempts that Moscow agreed to while maintaining a strong military focus.

Main military facilities

1. **Baltysk**
   Baltysk Naval Base
   336th Ind. Naval Infantry Brigade
   313rd Dot.of Counteraction Underwater Diversinary Forces and Facilities

2. **Chkalovsk Air Base**
   132nd Composite Aviation Division
   4th Naval assault Aviation Reg.
   689th Fighter Regiment
   UAV Squadron

3. **Chernyakhovsk**
   152nd Missile brigade

4. **Donskoye**
   25th Coastal Missile Regiment

5. **Donskoye Air Base**
   396th Independent ASW Squadron
   125th Independent Helicopter Squadron

6. **Gusev**
   79th Motor Rifle Brigade
   11th Tank Regiment

7. **Gvardeysk**
   44th Air Defence Division
   183rd Air Defence Regiment
   69th Naval Engineering Regiment

8. **Kaliningrad**
   Baltic Fleet HQ
   11th Army Corps HQ
   7th Motor Rifle Regiment
   22nd Air Defence Regiment
   244th Artillery Brigade

9. **Khrabrovo**
   398th Independent Transport Squadron

10. **Kumachyovo**
    81st Radio-Technical Regiment

11. **Okunevo**
    328st EW Center

12. **Parusnoye**
    561st Naval reconnaissance Center

13. **Yantarny**
    841st EW Center

14. **Znamensk**
    1545th Air Defence Regiment

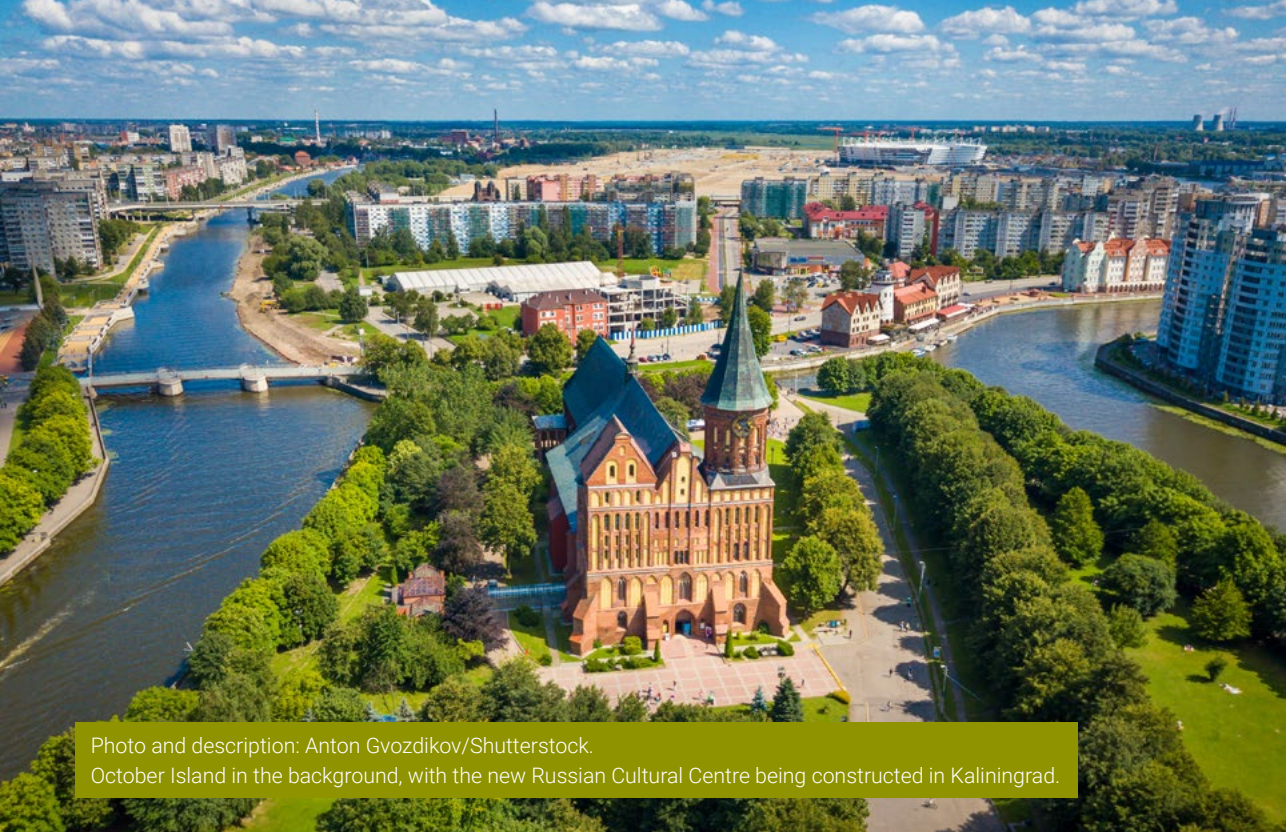


Photo and description: Anton Gvozdikov/Shutterstock.
October Island in the background, with the new Russian Cultural Centre being constructed in Kaliningrad.

KALININGRAD OBLAST TODAY

When the Soviet Union collapsed, the hopes were high for the future of the Oblast in terms of opening it up to foreign investments, creating a free trade zone, or even receiving a degree of autonomy from Moscow (Holtom 2003; Matochkin 2017). Today, however, after nearly two decades of centralisation policies to increase centralism and two years into the invasion of Ukraine, the region is more dependent on the federal centre than ever before in the history of post-Soviet Russia. A number of factors, listed below, have contributed to this state of affairs.

POLITICS

Since Vladimir Putin became president for the third time in 2012 and intensified the centralisation of the Russian government, the effective power enjoyed by the governors of the Russian regions has declined. The incumbent governor of Kaliningrad Oblast, Anton Alikhanov, in office since 2016, is a prime example of this tendency.[2] While his predecessor Nikolay Tsukanov was believed to represent the interests of regional clienteles more than those of the federal centre, Alikhanov has built his political career almost entirely on his family connections and full loyalty to the Kremlin (Vandenko 2017). Through his management of Kaliningrad Oblast, he has assumed the profile of a technocrat, seeking to advance his career in a Moscow-based institution and complete subordination to the federal authorities.

During Alikhanov's term in office, the regional government has turned into a structure that lacks independent policies and focuses on swiftly implementing instructions from the federal centre. By the same token, the regional Legislative Assembly, known as the Kaliningrad Duma until April 2022, has become a body with no actual influence on the region's political life. Its main task has been to represent different interest groups, often with connections to the main oligarchic factions in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and to introduce legislation to implement federal decisions. As of 2023, 29 out of the Assembly's 40 members represent the ruling, Kremlin-created United Russia party, often referred to as the 'party of power'. Many of them are entrepreneurs seeking to ensure that the region's legislation reflects their particular business interests, which often consist in carrying out services for the federal government.[3]

All local, regional and federal elections in the Oblast in the past decade have reduced the scope of political pluralism. In Kaliningrad city, opposition candidates have been denied running, been imprisoned on doubtful charges, such as tax evasion or corruption, or been given questionable election conditions. Solomon Ginzburg, who officially lost against a Kremlin-backed contender in the 2016 Duma elections by a very small margin, accused his rival of tinkering with polling station protocols. His accusations were rejected by a court ruling (RBC 2017).

Outside Kaliningrad city, use of the so-called 'administrative factor' to influence the electoral process is even more widespread. It takes the form of pressure put on the local constituency, as many jobs and social welfare are dependent on state institutions. It also involves favourable media coverage of Kremlin-backed candidates, access to financial resources and judicial preventive and repressive control. In the near-absence of independent media outlets, the state also wields

tight control over their everyday lives and political choices. The importance of this phenomenon is growing because of the deteriorating economic situation and the reduction in job opportunities. These factors translate into United Russia's and other Kremlin-backed candidates scoring as much as 80% of the votes cast and taking all the seats in local councils. In the latest local elections in September 2023, United Russia candidates won 19 out of 20 seats in Gusev and all the seats in Svetlogorsk (Rugrad 2023d-e).

As of early 2024, the actual potential for political protest or social upheaval in Kaliningrad Oblast is close to zero. The last major demonstrations took place in early 2021 when Aleksey Navalny was arrested and accused of corruption. They were limited to Kaliningrad city, gathered a few thousand participants (New Kaliningrad 2021) and were incomparable to the protests from 2009-2010. Most of the protesters were detained under the pretext of breaking anti-COVID measures. Local representatives of the Navalny organisation were arrested and/or forced to leave the country. In hindsight, the protests provided a useful pretext for the federal authorities to neutralize what was left of the democratic opposition in the run-up to the invasion of Ukraine a year later and to eliminate any potential for organising large-scale demonstrations against deteriorating living conditions.

The regional state apparatus was heavily mobilised before the March presidential election. Like other heads of regions, Anton Alikhanov was tasked with ensuring a high turnout and a high level of support for Vladimir Putin throughout Kaliningrad Oblast. Both elements were vital for the incumbent president, especially in the light of Prigozhin's mutiny in June 2023 and the prolonging of the war in Ukraine. The importance of securing a significant turnout in the semi-exclave became visible in mid-December when the Central Election Commission allowed online voting, as in 28 other regions, including the annexed Crimea and Sevastopol (Informatsionnyy byulleten' Izbiratel'noy komissii Kaliningradskoy oblasti 2023; TASS 2023). In the weeks after Putin's Kaliningrad election committee had convened, in late December 2023, regional media were reporting a high number of people signing support lists for the incumbent president. As a formally independent candidate, Putin needed to gather 300,000 of them from the public in at least 40 regions throughout the country (Morozov, Yarmolinskaya, Pototskiy 2024).

Ultimately, the support for Putin in Kaliningrad Oblast was lower than in Russia as a whole by 3 percentage points (85.44% vs. 88.48%) (Informatsionnyy byulleten' Izbiratel'noy komissii Kaliningradskoy oblasti. 2024b). The turnout was even lower (70.74% vs. 77.49%). Inhabitants of Kaliningrad city demonstrated low interest in the

election with less than 60% of those eligible for voting participating. Overall, it was the countryside that helped maintain a relatively high level of turnout, exceeding 80% in most counties (rayons). Another regional phenomenon was the relatively high support for Vladislav A. Davankov (5.86%) who was considered by many as an alternative protest candidate in the light of the authorities banning Boris B. Nadezhdin from running in the election (Informatsionnyy byulleten' Izbiratel'noy komissii Kaliningradskoy oblasti. 2024a). The results can be viewed as a proof that the regional authorities were unable to mobilise or force those living in Kaliningrad city to participate in a political show, designed to provide legitimacy to Vladimir Putin in new geopolitical circumstances. It was only thanks to the e-voting and the so-called administrative factor that Putin's results in the Oblast did not deviate from the countrywide ones in a significant way. In other words, although there is no potential for active protests against the authorities in the region, Kaliningraders still manage to express their discontent passively.

ECONOMY AND DEMOGRAPHICS

The early 1990s phantasmagoria of a Baltic Hong Kong or a special Kaliningrad economic zone never became a theme of federal policies. These were merely far-out attempts of regional politicians to follow Boris Yeltsin's appeal to Russia's federal subjects and the independent Russian regions to care for themselves in times of chaos and uncertainty. They never came to fruition due to a lack of resources and other challenges. At that point in time the Oblast was the main hub for Russian forces withdrawing from former East Germany and Poland, which was a more significant task for the federal authorities than dealing with the economic decline of the semi-exclave. Indeed, on average its economy was hit harder by the post-collapse shock than the rest of the country (Fedorov 2019). By 1998, its industrial production had shrunk by 84% compared to 1990 levels (Gareev 2013).

When the Soviet Union collapsed, Kaliningrad Oblast was separated from the rest of Russia by Lithuania, Poland and Belarus, and became a semi-exclave, with only maritime direct connections to mainland Russia. Contrasts started to build up as Lithuania and Poland proclaimed their Euro-Atlantic aspirations and began the process of fulfilling the requirements needed to join the two main Western institutions: the European Union (Copenhagen Criteria) and NATO (Partnership for Peace and, since 1999, Membership Action Plan). Secondly, the Oblast's cultural geography and non-Russian pre-war history made it a sensitive location for a country finding itself in a deep internal crisis. During the following decade some economic

recovery was achieved through small-scale entrepreneurship combined with the gradual easing of cross-border contacts, which allowed the semi-exclave to experience stronger average economic growth than the rest of the country (Fedorov 2019). Around 2014-2015, when Russia annexed Crimea and started the war in Donbas, Western sanctions made it increasingly difficult for Russian oligarchs to develop their foreign assets and investments further. As a consequence, competition emerged for control over the growth areas of regional economies. In Kaliningrad Oblast, this took the form of takeovers of successful small and medium businesses by means of state-sanctioned measures, such as tax and sanitary controls, often resulting in selected businessmen and their family members being detained (Yushina 2023).

With the announcement and adoption of National Projects of Russia in 2018, the federal authorities started channelling funds into significant infrastructural projects, such as the bridge across the Pregel estuary and a ferry terminal in Pionerskiy, where the Soviet transoceanic fleet used to have its base. Kaliningrad Oblast's economic life was further dominated by enterprises controlled by oligarchs closely related to the Kremlin. Informal sources point to such prominent figures as Sergey Chemezov and the Rottenberg brothers. One major investment recently announced, the Russian Baltic tourist resort, with more than ten thousand rooms, is estimated to have cost over 400 billion roubles (approximately four billion euros) (Delovoy Peterburg 2023b). This grand scale of investments and their growing costs, initially estimated at 100 billion roubles, indicates major involvement by Russian oligarchs who are increasingly being forced to redirect their attention to the Russian regions as international opportunities are now limited. It is also a way for the federal authorities to ensure the oligarchs' loyalty, as such investments are often financed through corruption, a phenomenon that has been observed for a number of years now (Domańska, Kardaś, Menkiszak, Kardaś et al. 2019).

The federal authorities have also attempted to transform Kaliningrad Oblast into an intermodal cargo hub and to engage it in China's One Belt One Road Initiative. The regional infrastructure in this field consists of two railway cargo terminals in Chernyakhovsk and Kaliningrad, which allow not only the speedy cross-handling of goods from the Russian 1520-mm gauge to the West European 1435-mm gauge to transport them further west via Poland, but also swift customs procedures. The Derzhinskaya-Novaya terminal in Kaliningrad could handle 450,000 containers a year (npktrans.ru 2019). The regional hubs also offered the use of Kaliningrad harbour, although its capacities were restricted by its inability to handle forty-feet equivalent units and a hull draught limited to 8.5 metres. Nevertheless, the One Belt

One Road initiative developed positively until 2020, mostly because the terminals on the Belarusian-Polish and Ukrainian-Slovak borders were operating at their full bandwidth and could not handle more cargo. Promoting Kaliningrad Oblast as a cargo hub came to a halt when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, followed by the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Kaliningrad was also given a role in repatriating the assets of Russian oligarchs. In 2018, the so-called SAA Special Administrative Area (SAA; Russian: *Специальный административный район*) was created at October Island, in the Pregolja river. Its aim has been to attract Russian-owned companies abroad to bring their assets back to Russia in return for favourable taxation schemes. It cannot be ruled out that the SAA is also a tool in ensuring the personal loyalty of its residents to the federal authorities. So far, the SAA has attracted companies belonging to Viktor Vekselberg (Renova Group) and Oleg Deripaska (Rusal). The process has accelerated since the invasion of Ukraine as a growing number of companies and their owners face the immediate or prospective consequences of Western sanctions. Such was the case for the VK Group (the Russian equivalent of Facebook), which migrated to the Kaliningrad offshore area in August 2023 (Rugrad 2023b). Most SAA residents were previously registered in places that were regarded as tax havens (the British Virgin Islands and Liechtenstein, among others). The SAA also seems to have been instrumental in tying companies in Ukrainian territories annexed by Russia to the Russian economy. In June 2023, a metallurgical company from the Russia-controlled part of the Donbas region joined the SAA (Rugrad 2023a).

Apart from Russian companies formally registered in the SAA, there are few large production plants located in the Oblast. One of them, Avtotor Holding, owns a car assembly plant outside Kaliningrad city and is the main regional taxpayer, assembling such brands as Hyundai and Kia. In 2022, however, the company suffered a major decline in production, amounting to 83% (Zabotina 2023), which was related mostly to the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the subsequent Western sanctions and European car companies withdrawing from the Russian market (Boston 2022). As a consequence, although in both 2020 and 2021 Avtotor ranked thirteenth among the biggest companies in northwestern Russia, it fell to number 35 in 2022. The company's managers are seeking to diversify production. In practical terms, this means increased cooperation with Chinese brands, which are gradually dominating the Russian automobile market. In November 2022, the company announced the launch of selected KAIYI, BAIC and SWM models (Kostin 2022). Initial plans included annual production of 100,000 vehicles to start in 2022, but they were quickly reduced by 30% (Budrina 2023) and postponed until 2023 (Finmarket 2022). It is doubtful

whether these promises have been kept as in 2023 the overall production of vehicles and trailers in the Oblast fell by 57.3% (Kaliningradstat 2024b). Already before the COVID-19 pandemic, regional authorities and businessmen had made attempts to attract Chinese investors. Back then, however, there was still a strong hope that these endeavours would come without any strings attached. This is not the case in 2024. The increasing Chinese presence in Russia's westernmost region is indicative of the state the country has found itself in. It is also a potential cause for concern for other actors in the Baltic Sea region.

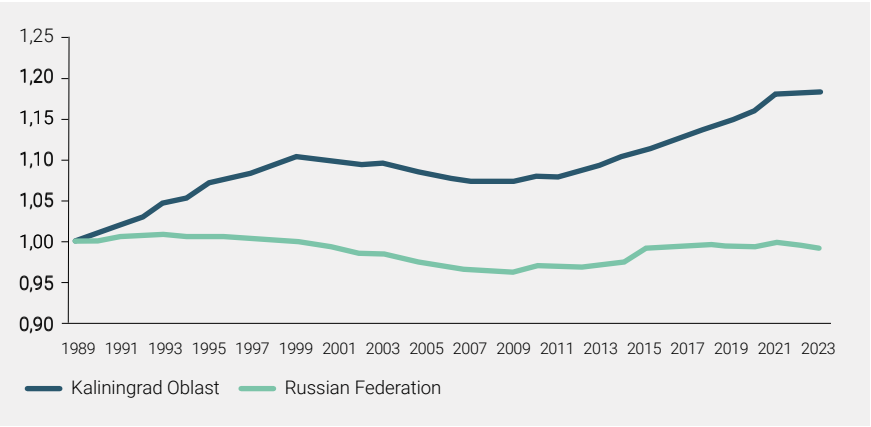
The problems experienced by Avtotor did not seem to affect another major regional holding, Sodruzhestvo, a major soybean- and grain-processing facility in the town of Svetly. In 2021, Sodruzhestvo launched a protein concentrate factory (Ezhegodnyy otchët 2022). It also owns a production facility in Kursk Oblast. Since Sodruzhestvo's main trade partners are non-EU and non-Western countries such as Brazil, it has more possibilities for cooperation without the risk of suffering from Western sanctions. Sodruzhestvo ranked fifteenth in the 2022 ranking mentioned above and might well increase its total output due to its Western competitors' limited possibilities for cooperation with Russia.

Overall, according to official data, in 2023 industrial production in Kaliningrad Oblast fell by 5.3% on a year-on-year basis. This contrasted the region with the rest of the country, which on average experienced a 3.5% growth (Kaliningradstat 2024a). What is more, the Oblast had already experienced a sharp decline in industrial production of 17.6% in 2022, as opposed to just 0.6% in Russia as a whole (Kaliningradstat). At the same time, the last months of 2023 indicated a gradual growth in production in the Oblast, which might be a sign of the negative trend being reversed (Kaliningradstat 2024a). However, it is unlikely that industrial production will revert to its pre-crisis level in the mid-term perspective. It is also important to note that the numbers for Russia as a whole might be misleading because of the growing role of military production (Luzin 2023). As there are no such major facilities in the Oblast, the decline in industrial production in the semi-exclave seems higher than in other parts of the country. Precisely for this reason, the situation in the Oblast's industry sector may in fact be indicative of the scope and size of the problems in this area country-wide.

Despite economic problems and the deteriorating demographic situation in the Russian Federation as a whole, Kaliningrad Oblast has been among the few Russian regions to enjoy steady population growth. The number of its inhabitants increased from under 900,000 in 1991 to one million in late 2018 (Zieliński 2020). There are

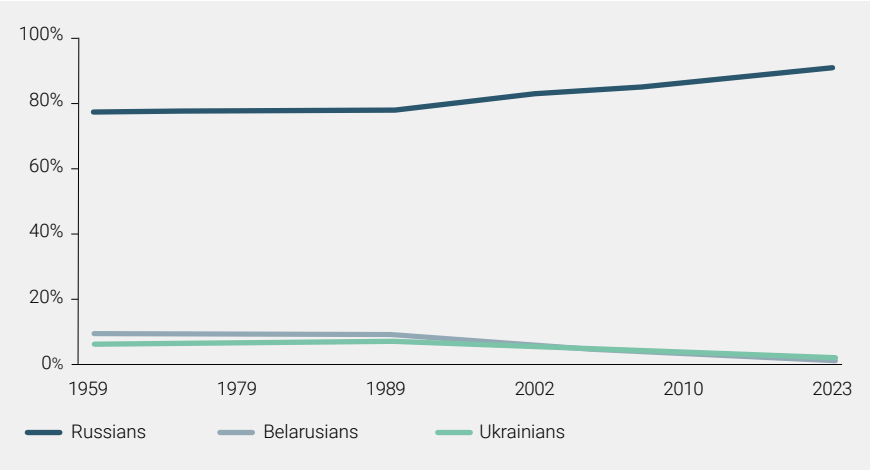
three main reasons for this phenomenon. First, Kaliningrad Oblast attracts Russians fleeing the harsh conditions of the Far North and Far East of the country. It offers a mild climate, good housing and transport infrastructure, recreational opportunities, and the proximity of European states. The latter played an important role until COVID-19 restrictions and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Second, the federal authorities have encouraged the immigration of ethnic Russians from the former

Figure 1. Population change in Russia and Kaliningrad Oblast compared to 1989 levels



Source: Russian federal and Kaliningrad Oblast regional statistical offices. Note that the post-2014 data for Russia include the population of the annexed regions of Ukraine.

Figure 2. Percentage of Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians living in Kaliningrad Oblast



Source: Rosstat. Note: the numbers are a percentage only of those who indicated their ethnicity.

Soviet republics, especially those that have embarked on nationalist or explicitly anti-Russian policies (cf. Górecki 2014 on Central Asia). The semi-exclave also became part of the 2006 Repatriation Programme, launched to slow down the depopulation of selected regions and unofficially to strengthen their ethnic Russian components by bringing ethnic Russians from other post-Soviet countries to Russia. In the case of Kaliningrad Oblast, the unspoken rationale was to prevent the increase of non-Slavic population groups, mostly those of Central Asian and North Caucasus origin. Since its introduction, over fifty thousand people from outside Russia have come to the Oblast and received Russian citizenship, visibly changing the ethnic composition of the region (Gontar' 2023). Third, Kaliningrad Oblast has historically been an attractive destination for active and retired military personnel. In Soviet times, soldiers deployed there valued its slightly different living conditions and social reality. Many of them were allowed to stay and bring their families with them after finishing their service.

Even official statistics show that Kaliningrad Oblast is becoming an increasingly ethnic Russian region. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russians made up approximately 80% of the Oblast's inhabitants, with another 15% of Belarusians and Ukrainians. Some settlers identified as Belarusian or Ukrainian only because they came from these parts of the Soviet Union. Thus, in post-Soviet Russia, a growing number of Russians might be explained not only in terms of natural assimilation and federal policies, such as the mentioned Repatriation Programme, but also by forced Russification and the fear of identifying as a non-ethnic Russian due to the geopolitical situation. While the number of Belarusians and Ukrainians decreased to 1-1.5% of the population, the percentage of those who did not indicate their ethnicity rose to 16.16% (Rosstat 2022).

The relatively positive demographic picture of Kaliningrad Oblast is not devoid of long-term challenges in terms of local population density. Most of the migratory movements of the last three decades have increased the population of Kaliningrad city and the coastal area of the Samland Peninsula. Moreover, significant segments of those officially registered in the central and eastern parts of the Oblast effectively work and live in its capital. Thus, 80-85% of the region's population lives on 20% of its territory. In addition, Kaliningrad attracts young people, which further widens the gap between the metropolitan area and the Oblast's peripheries (Kaliningradstat 2023). This creates a severe development imbalance and disadvantages for towns such as Chernyakhovsk, Gusev or Sovetsk and for their rural surroundings. The countermeasures introduced hitherto, such as the renovation of historic town centres and funds to develop agricultural production, have been grossly insufficient.

Kaliningrad Oblast authorities, much like their counterparts in other regions, have little to no political and economic incentives to strengthen their economic independence from the federal centre. For a number of years, the federal government has been altering the financial regulations by increasing the redistributive function of the federal budget, thus reducing the amount of taxes and other revenues being handled directly by the regions (Dynnikova, Kyobe, Slavov 2021). Since the regional governments have retained a degree of liberty in reallocating these funds, they do not want to put this financial leeway at risk through conflicts with the central authorities (Kvartiuk, Herzfeld 2020). In the case of Kaliningrad Oblast, this dilemma is more pronounced than usually in Russia because of the region's unique geographical position and the experience of a sharper economic downturn in 1990s (Fedorov 2019).

The volume of financial subsidies can therefore be indicative of the current state of relations between the federal centre and regional authorities, as well as revealing the relative importance of the exclave to Moscow. The Programme of Social-Economic Development of Kaliningrad Oblast is intended to mitigate the negative consequences of the region being separated from mainland Russia. It is a unique one region-only tool among all national-level programmes approved by the federal centre. As such, the Programme is officially portrayed as proving how much attention Moscow pays to the Oblast. In reality, however, it has been an instrument for making the semi-exclave more dependent on federal subsidies. In 2022, the Programme was downsized 2.5 times (Rugrad 2022). This tendency continues, as plans for 2024 indicate another decrease (Rugrad 2023f), caused by the increasing scope of the challenges posed by the war in Ukraine and the dwindling resources of the Russian federal budget. There is also the issue of the low transparency of the allocation of federal subsidies to the regional budget. In 2024, the default level of subsidies is set at a mere three billion roubles and is only intended to 'equalize budgetary security and […] to partially compensate for the increase in wages for public sector workers' (gov39.ru 2023). In reality, many more budgetary expenses include a federal component, often referred to as cross-budgetary transfers (gov39.ru 2023).

At the same time, some funds initially intended as part of the Development Programme will most likely be redirected to other areas, such as the Kaliningrad-Petersburg ferry connection and infrastructural investments. In critically important cases this will increase the amount of federal funds directed to the Oblast while changing the logic of their distribution. The main beneficiaries will be oligarch-controlled companies (construction, development, safety etc.), which in turn will only increase the region's dependence on the federal centre and Russia's politico-financial

elite. These gains will come at the expense of ordinary citizens, in areas that have long been neglected by the authorities, such as health care, especially cancer treatment.

MILITARY

For the Russian government, the military role of Kaliningrad Oblast remains central. Units deployed in the region and a high number of military facilities strengthen Russia's strategic position in the southern Baltic Sea Region, where Russia confronts NATO, the European Union and other regional and cross-regional groupings of the Western countries. The semi-exclave is key to carrying out A2/AD operations in the Baltic Sea Region (Tobias 2016), as it hosts the core component (Baltiysk) and the command centre (Kaliningrad) of the Russian Baltic Fleet, which also comprises ground and air forces[4] deployed in the interior, among others around the towns of Chernyakhovsk and Gusev.

Already before 24 February 2022, military exercises had intensified in non-coastal areas of the Oblast. Despite being portrayed as defensive they contained a strong offensive component. A belligerent narrative, developed by the regional media, often describes Lithuania as an unfriendly neighbour, completely dependent on the United States, thus justifying military exercises in the east of the Oblast. These exercises also served as preparation for participation in the invasion of Ukraine, where units based in Kaliningrad Oblast were deployed from the beginning of the war. Most of them, including the 11th Army Corps, based in the town of Gusev close to the Lithuanian border, fought around the city of Kharkiv and suffered considerable losses during the Ukrainian counteroffensive in the late summer of 2023. The identity of soldiers from Kaliningrad Oblast was confirmed by Ukrainian investigative journalists, Russian Telegram channels and the soldiers' families.

Overall, before the invasion, there were approximately 12,000 soldiers, 100 tanks, 400 combat vehicles, 90 self-propelled howitzers, multiple rocket launchers and 12 short-range ballistic missile systems deployed in Kaliningrad Oblast. According to different estimates, as much as 50% of the region's pre-war military personnel have left the Oblast to participate in military actions in Ukraine (Gramer, Detsch 2022). They were replaced by conscripts, mostly during the federal mobilisation campaign in September-October 2022. The war in Ukraine has thus had a direct impact on the number and quality of troops deployed in the semi-exclave.

Kaliningrad Oblast has been instrumental in Russia pressuring NATO members in the area of nuclear and ballistic missiles, especially Poland and Lithuania (Żochowski 2016). It also played a visible role in Moscow's policy towards Sweden before Stockholm applied for NATO membership. Unconfirmed reports suggest that the Iskander-M system was deployed in the semi-exclave as early as 2008, just two years after production started. In 2016, Estonian sources confirmed transportation of the missiles on a civilian ferry (ERR 2016). In 2018, Russian officials indicated that the deployment of Iskander missiles to Kaliningrad could have a longer-term, if not permanent character (Reuters 2022a). In August 2022, the Russian Defence Ministry confirmed that three MiG-31E fighters were deployed in the Oblast together with the Kinzhal hypersonic missiles (Reuters 2022b). The Kinzhal missiles (model Kh-47M2) are claimed to have an effective range of 1,500-2,000 kilometres and can be equipped with either nuclear or conventional warheads (csis.org 2022).

Kaliningrad Oblast has been instrumental in repeatedly violating the airspace of other countries by Russian military aircraft, especially Lithuania. It is also worth noting that the Kaliningrad-based units of the Main Directorate of Deep-Sea Research (GUGI; Russian: *Главное управление глубоководных исследований*) have the capacity to perform underwater sabotage. No decisive evidence in relation to the damage to the Nord Stream pipelines on 26 September 2022 had emerged before the release of this research paper, and its motives and circumstances are still an open question. However, it is a fact that the SS-750 vessel was spotted in the vicinity of the pipeline, not far from Bornholm. Based in Baltiysk, and officially a rescue ship, the SS-750 can deploy an on-board mini-submarine to target seabed infrastructure (Gjerding & Elkjær 2023).

Photo and description: Sputnik/Grigory Sysoyev Pool via REUTERS/Ritzau Scanpix.
Officials, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, watch a presentation dedicated to the cultural institutions' buildings construction in the city of Kaliningrad, Russia, January 25, 2024

KALININGRAD OBLAST AND RUSSIA'S NEO-CONSERVATIVE NARRATIVE

Over the last ten years of Russia's deepening confrontation with the West, Kaliningrad Oblast has risen to become one of the most important vehicles for forging and strengthening the official federal narrative on Russia's past and present. It revolves around Putin's so-called programme articles published at the turn of 2012, used in the ongoing political struggle at domestic and international levels with additional details and refinements introduced along the way.[5] In this narrative, the Russian semi-exclave plays a double role. Because of its non-Russian history, it showcases the struggle against the decadent, morally declining West and its political, cultural and social influence. Because of its separation from mainland Russia and its

exposure to unfriendly geopolitical surroundings, it is Russia in a nutshell, a sacred area constantly having to confront foreign interference. As a result, the Oblast has to be defended with both military and non-military means, such as strengthening the Russian cultural component and the ethnic Russian presence, and it must also be adequately prepared for an open conflict.

THE UNWELCOME PRE-1945 PAST

Since the 1980s, one of the distinctive elements of the social and cultural reality of Kaliningrad Oblast has been grassroots interest in the history of East Prussia. Significant segments of the population indulged in this escape during the painful period of perestroika and the post-collapse shock (Sezneva 2007). Gradually, the interest in local history evolved into a variety of tourist products, regional history books and spontaneous initiatives that underlined the slightly different hues of Kaliningraders' cultural identity compared to their compatriots in other parts of Russia. When Vladimir Putin was re-elected for a third term as president in 2012 and began reshaping the federal narrative about history and memory, such regional particularities appeared to be increasingly problematic. The historical and cultural reality of Kaliningrad Oblast as the northern part of East Prussia, dominated by Western influence from the late Middle Ages until 1945, had to be put aside.

Post-2012 policies have aimed at discouraging civil-society activity that was not sanctioned by the federal authorities. The grassroot movements and research projects that did not embrace the official interpretation of history were deprived of financing and criticised in the regional media. Any initiatives perceived as reminders of the German or other Western civilizational influence in the region were disregarded. Conversely, authorities in Moscow and St. Petersburg, assisted by Kaliningrad-based pro-Kremlin journalists, authors and academics, forged a comprehensive counter story about the semi-exclave's past, connecting it tightly with imperial Russian history and putting a specific spin on accounts of Russia's military victories down the centuries. The unofficial *spiritus movens* of this tendency is Roman Balashov, Deputy Plenipotentiary of the President in the Northwestern Federal District. He has expressed strongly his position on the need to promote the non-Western, imperial Russian, Soviet and Eastern Orthodox perspective of Kaliningrad Oblast's history on numerous occasions (EurAsia Daily 2022a).

A ROLE MODEL OF OFFICIALLY DEFINED RUSSIANNESS

In the Kremlin-approved narrative, Russia is presented as a stabilising, peace-seeking force which only intervenes when compelled by its enemies. By the same token, the acquirement of the northern part of East Prussia was an act of moral justice and a modest territorial compensation to the Soviet Union for having defeated the Third Reich. Another heavily exploited aspect of this war-oriented discourse has consisted in drawing parallels between Kaliningrad Oblast and Crimea. Both regions are exclaves, and both had to be fought for to become part of Russia. They share a maritime location, hosting Russia's Baltic and Black Sea Fleets respectively. Both are also allegedly threatened by Russia's adversaries – the so-called regime in Kyiv, pro-U.S. governments in Warsaw and Vilnius, and the institutional West.

This ultra-Russianness of Kaliningrad Oblast has become visible in a number of initiatives supported by the federal government. A movie called *Russian Prussia* (Russian: *Русская Пруссия*), presented in late 2019, is instructive and representative of this phenomenon in both the regional and country-wide contexts. Advertised as a historical documentary, it depicts the links between East Prussia and Russia across the centuries. It does so, however, by focusing on the Russian and Soviet military presence in the region and praises Russian participation in, for instance, saving the Prussian Hohenzollern dynasty from utter defeat in the mid-18th century and Europe from the terror of Napoleon in the early 19th century. The movie also underlines the righteousness of the Red Army and its commanders in 1944 and 1945, when East Prussia was conquered and most of its material legacy annihilated during military actions and shortly thereafter for ideological reasons. One can acquire a similar impression when visiting the Russia exhibition in Moscow, opened on November 4th (National Unity Day), 2023, where Kaliningrad is portrayed as an attractive tourist destination and as a source of pride for all Russians (Vesti Kaliningrad 2023).

The sensitivity of the issue of Kaliningrad Oblast's non-Russian history and the way that contemporary Russian authorities approach it was demonstrated by an internet prank on the part of Czech and Polish hackers. When Vladimir Putin announced the annexation of four Ukrainian regions after doubtful referendums organised by the occupation authorities in September 2022, a 'petition' was put forward to separate Kaliningrad Oblast from Russia and unite it with Czechia and Poland. Drawing on the traditional Czech sense of humour, it was argued that medieval Königsberg had been founded by the Czech king Premysl Otokar and that more than 100% of the inhabitants of the Oblast had voted for the change of borders. The Czechs altered

the names of the main cities and towns of the region, bringing to life, for instance, Benešov nad Baltem (instead of Baltiysk) and Zelenského-hrad (instead of Zelenogradsk) as depicted on the visitkralovec.cz website. All in all, *Königsberg is Czech* (Czech: *Královec je český*) or *Königsberg is ours* (Czech: *Královec je náš*) was meant as an initiative uncovering the absurdity of the referendum and its results and the brutality and illegality of Russia's actions in Ukraine, but it met with a serious and fierce reaction on the part of some Russian media outlets, who accused the authors of Russophobia and depicted the initiative as a sign of the re-birth of Nazism (EurAsia Daily 2022b).

THE RUSSIA-WIDE PERSPECTIVE

The propaganda effect of this approach lies in making a connection between the feeling of belonging to the Russian nation, which predominates among the Oblast's inhabitants, and the historically strong role of the Russian (Soviet) army, which is projected into the current international context. Since the annexation of Crimea, this narrative has extended beyond Kaliningrad Oblast. Well before the specific Kaliningrad-narrative was forged and refined, the siege of Königsberg by the Red Army in early 1945 was part of the national mythology of the Soviet Union, particularly its self-understanding as the main victor over Nazism and in the Second World War. It mutually reinforces tales of identity and belonging that can be shared with Russians living outside the Oblast. A reconstructed past is weaponized to prove the continuity of the danger to Russia stemming from its neighbours. For Russia, the besieged fortress of Russian Kaliningrad is a microcosm of the global context in which Russia is beleaguered by hostile forces wanting to deprive it of its access to the open sea (Cordes 2023).

The performative use of Kaliningrad's political and historical themes was further exposed in September 2022, when Vladimir Putin introduced a new school subject called *Talks about what is important* (Russian: *разговоры о важном*), since then largely replicated by the state-controlled media on a daily basis. During the Talks, high-school students familiarise themselves with the official take on current international developments and the history of Russia and its neighbours, as well as on traditional Russian values. The curriculum turns the subject into yet another propaganda tool, this time directly incorporated into the compulsory education system.[6] Putin launched this initiative at the newly established Museum Complex in Kaliningrad (Prezident Rossii 2022). According to the federal authorities, the Complex symbolises the undeniable links between the histories of Russia and of the Oblast.

In this way, the Russian identity of the region has been put to use for general political purposes and turned into a key component of federal memory policies. Recently it also took the form of a new school textbook, tackling the history of the Soviet Union and Russia since 1945, and co-authored by the President's counsellor, Vladimir Medinski, and MGIMO University's Rector, Anatoly Torkunov (Medinski, Torkunov 2023).

Photo and description: Tadeusz Ibrom/Shutterstock.
Aerial view at Warsaw downtown.

THE INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENT OF KALININGRAD OBLAST

The official narrative that external forces are threatening the stability of the Oblast has had a strong impact on the way the federal authorities perceive Russia's Baltic Sea neighbours since the first years of the millennium. By this token, Kaliningrad Oblast has become Russia in a nutshell: surrounded by hostile NATO and EU member states, exposed to foreign cultural, economic and military pressures, and being constantly dragged away from Mother Russia. In this respect, the decisive moment for Kaliningrad was the annexation of Crimea and the resulting deterioration in Russia-West relations.

BEFORE 2012: AN OPEN PLAYING FIELD?

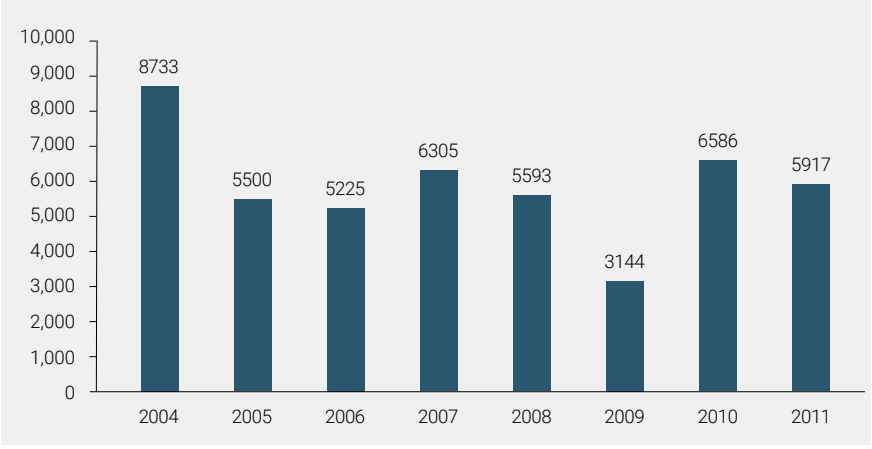
Throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s, however, Kaliningrad was not a sealed-off region to the extent it is today. Its then leaders showed determination in seeking opportunities for cooperation, and the Oblast interacted with its international environment in a diversified way. In May 1991, six months before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the port of Kaliningrad was opened to foreign vessels for the first time in its post-war history. Boris Yeltsin's representative and subsequently governor of the Oblast, Yuri Matochkin, lobbied to establish a free trade area or a free economic zone in the region Matochkin 2017). The Russian signature on the agreement on cross-border cooperation with Poland in 1992 and Russia's participation in forming the Council of the Baltic Sea States gave rise to hopes that the semi-exclave would be able to join in the emerging regional cooperation framework. Expectations in Kaliningrad, as well as in St. Petersburg, Novgorod, Pskov and Russian Karelia, were high also because Russian authorities saw the CBSS as an instrument of classic multilateral diplomacy, always viewed favourably in Moscow.

At the same time, the regional authorities never had a mandate to shape patterns of cooperation with external partners independently. From the beginning of this process, the federal authorities were reluctant to agree to embedding Kaliningrad Oblast in post-Cold War international cooperation. This was only possible on two conditions: federal control over the semi-exclave in all respects, and the obligation for any newly introduced cross-border initiative to tie the Oblast further to the rest of the country. This approach became the guiding principle in the establishment of the Special Economic Zone in 1996. It did not provide for incentives to attract investors to the Oblast, nor did it stimulate local industrial production. Instead, it served as a tool to bring foreign goods to Russia without paying customs duties. Most of the SEZ-related trade was controlled by criminal groups from Moscow and St. Petersburg, who turned Kaliningrad into a shadow economy governed by the corruption schemes that were typical of Russia in the early 1990s. Combined with the lack of visa requirements when travelling to Lithuania and Poland, the Oblast turned into a major smuggling hub (muzeumsg.strazgraniczna.pl), which was even envisaged in major Russian cinematic productions of the 1990s, such as *Bandit Petersburg.* Overall, during the first post-Soviet decade, the Oblast did not achieve substantial advantages in entrepreneurship or innovative technologies over other parts of the country (Ivanova et al. 2015).

The federal Russian authorities started involving Kaliningrad Oblast in their European foreign policy only after Vladimir Putin came to power. In 2005, he met French president Jacques Chirac and German chancellor Gerhard Schröder in the Oblast to celebrate the 750th anniversary of the founding of Königsberg (HSE.RU 2005). The unique geographical location and history of the Oblast were put to work to showcase Russia's goodwill. Putin underlined the European roots of Kaliningrad while downplaying the importance of its immediate neighbourhood. No invitations for the event were issued to the leaders of Lithuania or Poland. The suspected reason was the latter countries' accession to the European Union in 2004 and the introduction of visa regimes and railway transit schemes. Although it was clear that both were simply technical consequences of the accession process, the Russian authorities sought to portray Vilnius and to a lesser extent Warsaw as unfriendly partners.

As such, the early 2000s prepared the ground for the resurrection of encirclement fears despite adverse hard statistics. Lithuania became the object of a disinformation campaign, and pressure was put on the EU to ensure adequate rail links across Lithuania. After visas were introduced in 2003, they stopped neither the cross-border traffic nor the smuggling attempts. Instead, they demonstrated to Russians travelling to the enlarged EU that the Oblast's immediate neighbourhood was developing positively. EU membership provided a strong boost to Lithuania's and Poland's economic growth and helped their border regions overcome structural problems, such as unemployment and the low quality of infrastructure. In 2004, Lithuania also

Figure 3. Value of goods attempted to be smuggled from Kaliningrad Oblast to Poland (thousands of USD)

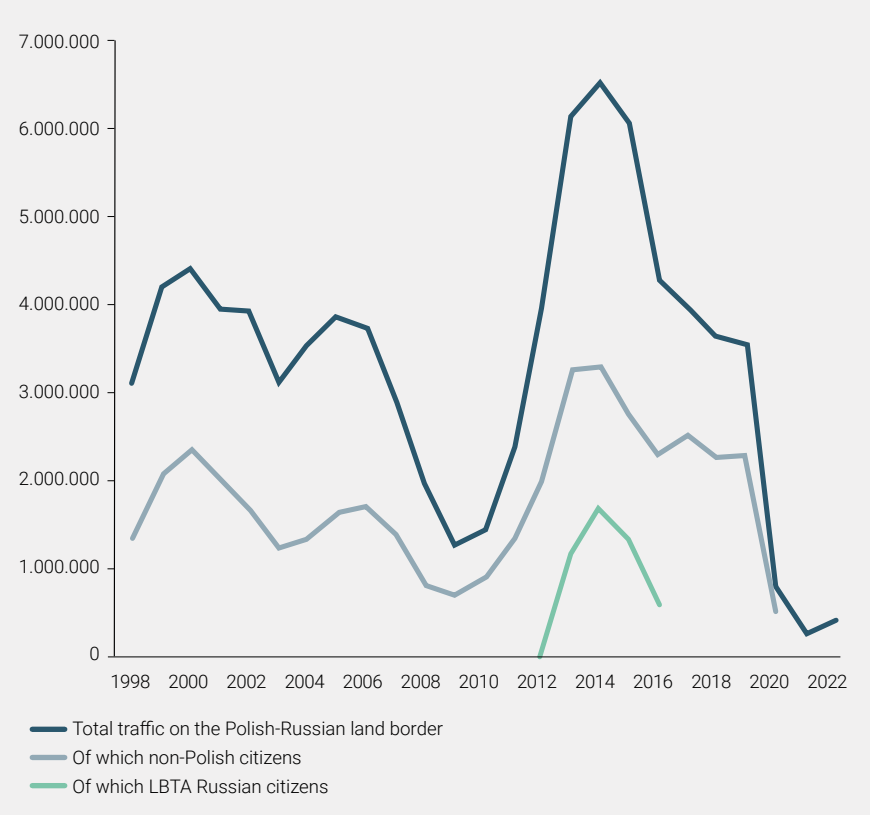


Source: Zieliński 2012.

became a member of NATO, which Poland had been since 1999. This meant that all the land borders of the Russian semi-exclave became frontiers of the two main Western institutions. While maintaining that Russia was open to cooperation, the federal authorities seized the opportunity to gradually tighten their grip on Kaliningrad, in line with centralisation efforts pursued in other parts of the country.

While the instrumentalisation of the Oblast in Russia's European policies was to remain constant from this point onwards, the magnitude of the local reactions to the deteriorating social and economic conditions forced the central authorities to address the situation in the following years. When tens of thousands of Kaliningraders took to the streets in 2009 and 2010 to protest against higher car-import duties and other taxes, governor Georgiy Boos was replaced by Nikolai Tsukanov (REGNUM.RU 2010), who promised more liberty in shaping the Oblast's international agenda, such

Figure 4. Number of crossings of the Polish-Russian border between 1998 and 2022



Source: The Polish Border Guard.

as cross-border cooperation. Readiness for a new opening also emerged among European capitals. In late 2011, Poland and Russia found themselves at a moment of selective rapprochement. Positive Russian signals were met with Polish interest in de-escalating tensions in their bilateral relations. On 1 September 2009, Vladimir Putin took part in the 70th anniversary commemorations of the Second World War in Gdańsk (Schwirtz 2009). Subsequently, the two parties, with the consent of the European Commission, signed the Local Border Traffic Agreement (LBTA) covering an unprecedented large area on both sides of border: almost a million residents on the Russian side (the entire Kaliningrad Oblast) and almost two million on the Polish side (EUR-Lex 2011). The LBTA allowed people to cross the border with a special permit, with no visa required for the first time since 1945. For Russians, the new visa was mostly used for shopping and tourism, whereas it gave Poles access to cheap car fuel and cigarettes.

Lithuania rejected suggestions to establish the LBTA within the 30-km border zone foreseen by EU and Schengen Zone regulations (Regulation 2006/1931), supposedly due to security concerns (Gumenyuk, Kuznetsova, Osmolovskaya 2016). At that time, Moscow was also portraying Lithuania as an unfriendly neighbour because of the Lithuanian government's plans to build a new Nuclear Power Plant at Visaginas. This was meant to replace the Soviet-technology Ignalina NPP, decommissioned in 2009. The Russian federal authorities again used Kaliningrad Oblast's location to torpedo these plans by putting forward a similar project that would make any other such investment in the region unviable. Rosatom and the Kaliningrad regional government agreed on constructing the Baltic NPP ten kilometres away from the town of Neman and the Lithuanian border. As the Oblast's actual power production from conventional sources exceeds its needs, the project sought to disrupt the initial Lithuanian plans and make Lithuania dependent on Russian energy. Incidentally, when Lithuania put the idea of a new nuclear power plant on hold in 2012, the works on the Baltic NPP were halted in 2013. The already constructed installations, mostly the foundations of buildings, were now meant to be left secure and ready for relaunching the project at any point in the future until 2024 (RIA Novosti 2019).

2012-2020: A NARROWING OF PERSPECTIVES, AND INCREASED CENTRAL CONTROL

The Russian federal authorities also needed the anti-foreign rhetoric to neutralise social upheaval in the Oblast. Kaliningrad was the scene of the most significant protests in Russia after the disputed 2011 parliamentary and regional elections,

as well as the 2012 presidential elections (Tepteev 2012). Moscow viewed them as a threat to national security and as a pretext for increasing the centralisation of decision-making process, persecuting opposition members and limiting civil liberties.

The process of increasing the semi-exclave's dependence on the federal centre happened in two ways. Moscow stripped the regional administration of its prerogatives and developed new subsidy programmes instead of keeping direct revenue streams to the regional budget. It also pursued new personnel policies by replacing local medium-tier and senior officials in regional agencies, security services and the judiciary with newcomers from other regions. The latter are less involved in regional schemes and, for career reasons, more inclined to pursue federal policies and interests.

The 2014 annexation of Crimea and the successive war in the Donbas increased these processes and gave them an international angle. As the tensions with Western countries grew, regional grassroot movements, journalists and academicians interested in the non-Russian pre-war past were accused of supporting the Oblast's Königsbergisation or Germanisation (Zieliński 2018). The cultural NGO German-Russian House, created in 1993, was forced to close at the turn of 2017 (Kostoglodov 2017), and Germany's Consulate General in Kaliningrad had to reduce its activity significantly.

The feeling of alienation was strengthened by actions taken by the Oblast's neighbours. On the eve of the Warsaw NATO Summit and the World Catholic Youth Days in Kraków, the Polish government had decided to suspend border crossings with Russia using LBTA permits, albeit without withdrawing from the agreement itself (archiwum.mswia.gov.pl 2016). After it happened, the LBTA concession was not revived. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed its dissatisfaction with this suspension as late as mid-2021 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia 2021). The LBTA was, during its short life, one of the few remaining soft-power instruments the EU could use with Russia, as it allowed Kaliningraders to travel to Poland, where they could not avoid seeing the scale of progress the Polish economy and society had achievedsince the country became an EU member.

Although tensions with the West were increasing, especially after the poisoning of Yulia and Sergey Skripal, Russia declared that it remained committed to keeping regional and local instruments of cooperation. Kaliningrad Oblast still participated in the Cross-Border Cooperation Programmes (CBCs), co-funded by the European

Union and the interested countries. Initially a trilateral tool between Lithuania, Poland and Russia, it was transformed into two separate programmes starting in 2014. It aimed at increasing local government, cultural, and educational collaboration. Over 63 million euros were allocated for the 2014-2020 Polish-Russian part, which was a substantial amount for the relatively underdeveloped and sparsely populated territories of the border area. The programmes also contributed to a higher degree of interaction between the local and regional government officials on both sides. The CBCs took a strong hit when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out and were suspended after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with projects being continued only on the EU side. The Euroregions shared their fate[7].

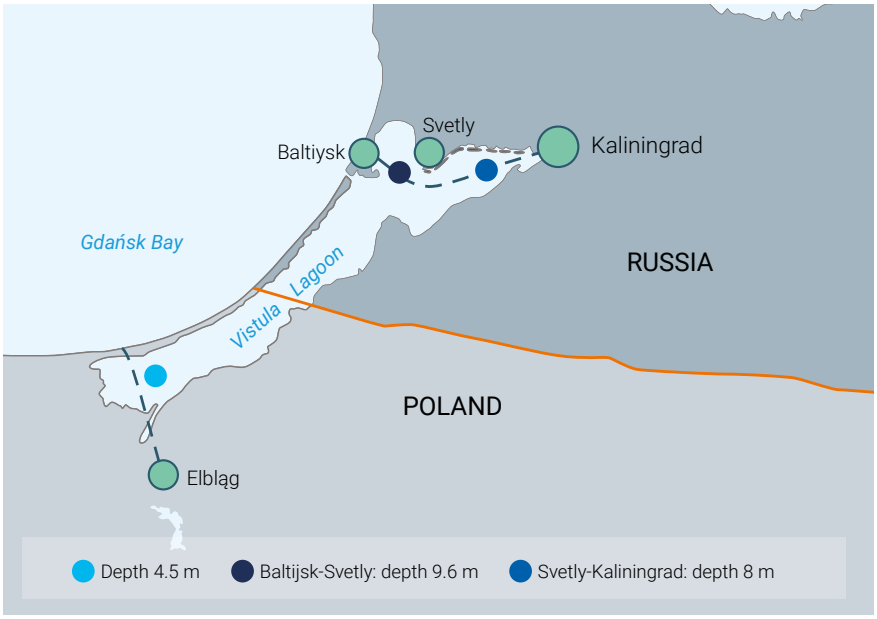
Russia again used Kaliningrad Oblast to alleviate tensions and engage in selective cooperation in mid-2019. Together with Vladivostok in the Far East, the semi-exclave became a pilot region for introducing free electronic visas for the citizens of over fifty states (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russian Federation). First used as fan passes during the 2018 FIFA World Cup, which was co-hosted by Kaliningrad, they aimed at stimulating tourism. The e-visas were a moderate success in the few months before the COVID-19 pandemic. Until the end of 2019, almost eighty thousand people applied to enter the Oblast, most of them from Lithuania (43%), Latvia (20%), Poland (16%) and Germany (13%) (New Kaliningrad 2020). These statistics demonstrate the importance of the immediate neighbourhood and the possibilities for developing cross-border tourism despite the limitations imposed by the federal authorities. The COVID-19 pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine made this project short-lived.

Concurrently, Kremlin-controlled media outlets got busy intensifying their use of the notion of the Oblast as a besieged fortress and as Russia in a nutshell (Zieliński 2018). In this instance, a well-established strand of Russian and Soviet conspiracy-thinking that the country is surrounded by visible and hidden enemies resonated more strongly in the Oblast after March 2020, as the region was almost entirely cut off from its neighbours due to anti-pandemic border-crossing restrictions. Country-specific regulations only allowed a small number of Russian citizens to apply for a visa, which caused a steep decline in border traffic with both Lithuania and Poland. Exploitation of the 'besieged fortress' syndrome thus continued to sustain the development of the official regime's anti-Western narrative both in Kaliningrad Oblast and in other parts of Russia.

RUN-UP TO THE 2022 INVASION OF UKRAINE; THE VISTULA LAGOON AND THE SUWALKI GAP

The weakening of real and potential anti-Kremlin movements in Kaliningrad Oblast, achieved between 2011 and 2020, paved the way for a complete pacification of political, social and cultural life in the semi-exclave. In early 2021, protests in support of Aleksey Navalny were brutally crushed.

In Kaliningrad Oblast, the two years between the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine led to a consolidation of the anti-Western and imperial Russian narrative that relied heavily on the 'besieged fortress' syndrome. The construction of the Vistula Spit Canal in Poland added further fuel to this fire. Inaugurated in September 2022, the Canal allows smaller craft to bypass the Strait of Pillau, the crossing of which Russian authorities regularly denied to for foreign vessels, despite international agreements, thus impairing cargo freight operations and tourism in the Vistula Lagoon (Bugajski 2008). Russian authorities criticised the project, raising its potentially negative environmental consequences and seeking support for this stance even at the European Commission. The federal authorities also present the Canal as an unfriendly investment by a country belonging to NATO, even though Russian military analysts admit that its military role is close to zero (Krishtal' 2019). Whereas the Canal cannot handle vessels of a maximum draught of more than four metres, the Vistula Lagoon is on average only 2.7 metres deep and is affected by constant fluctuations. Only the smallest patrol units of neighbouring countries could possibly operate in the basin.



Despite this posture, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was at the same time sending signals that it decisively supported the idea of cross-border cooperation, as repeated by Sergey Lavrov during his visit to Kaliningrad Oblast in August 2021 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia 2021). Although this stance could be interpreted as a local-level smokescreen before the invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, reliable journalist investigations suggest that Russian diplomacy was unaware of the preparations for invasion and was genuinely advocating the development of more extensive cross-border cooperation around Kaliningrad Oblast (Goryashko, Fokht, Samokhina 2023; BBC Russian Service 2023a; Sidorova 2023).

The main geostrategic role of the Oblast was emphasised by a growing number of military exercises in the region. They included both large-scale manoeuvres with the participation of forces from other parts of Russia and Belarus, such as the biennial Zapad and small-scale tactical operations involving different units of the Baltic Sea Fleet. Retrospectively, the Zapad-2021 exercises, carried out in mid-September 2021, can be seen as indicative of Russia's plans in relation to Ukraine (Clark, Barros 2021). Kaliningrad Oblast hosted the naval component of the exercises, whereas the land troops exercised at five training centres in Belarus (Wesolowsky 2021). Other military activities in the semi-exclave included the training of law enforcement and security services, denominated Groza-2021 (Budrina 2021).

Many of the manoeuvres in the Oblast fielded a significant number of land and airborne units, especially along the Lithuanian border, in line with Moscow's belligerent stance towards Vilnius in particular and NATO in general. Kaliningrad Oblast flanks the so-called Suwałki Gap, a 65-kilometre-long strip of land in north-eastern Poland providing the only land connection between the Baltic States and the rest of both NATO and the European Union (Veebel, Sliwa 2019). The resurgence of East-West tensions has evidently increased the strategic attention paid to this potential bottleneck. The volatility of the Suwałki Gap increased after the forged presidential election in Belarus in August 2020. Although Alyaksandr Lukashenka managed to crush the peaceful protests, he paid the price of increasing the influence of Russian security services over the situation in the country. Belarus effectively became part of Russia's Western Military District to the extent that it has indirectly participated in the invasion of Ukraine (Kłysiński, Żochowski 2023). These developments have led to increased references to the Suwałki Gap and, consequently, to Kaliningrad Oblast in Russia's anti-NATO rhetoric.

Photo and description: Zoonar GmbH / Alamy Stock Photo. Armed marines in dress uniform with machine guns on parade on annual Victory Day on May 9. 2018

THE WAR IN UKRAINE: THE ROLE OF KALININGRAD OBLAST

Another role of Kaliningrad Oblast, not linked to its specific strategic position alone, but also to its repository of manpower, and in particular of ground troops and civil servants with a security background, came into focus when Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The federal government promoted an extensive transfer of mid- and high-level military and civilian officials from the Oblast to the occupied regions of Ukraine, confirming that it perceives the semi-exclave's separation from mainland Russia to be on par with the military and other threats stemming from external actors.

MILITARY PARTICIPATION

The 11th Army Corps, based in Kaliningrad Oblast, took part in the invasion of Ukraine at the very beginning and was engaged in heavy fighting for over three months, suffering serious losses in operations outside Kharkiv in eastern Ukraine. On average, the number of casualties in this army corps was higher than for other Russian units in the area around Kharkiv (Axe 2022). Wide discrepancies regarding the registered numbers of Russian casualties, including figures for Kaliningrad-based troops, make it difficult to assess the impact of these losses on the local military presence in the home region. As of late 2023, the central military authorities were still engaged in the replacement, by conscription, of the Baltic Fleet's infantry units. The training of the conscripts will take at least six months and can hardly be expected to achieve the same combat potential as was available before the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

According to conservative estimates made by Mediazona and BBC's Russian Service, 487 soldiers from Kaliningrad Oblast died in Ukraine by 14 February 2024, against the total of 44,654 soldiers from the whole of Russia. These figures indicate that the relative losses suffered by soldiers from Kaliningrad Oblast are higher than in Russia on average, given the region's and Russia's respective populations. The authors themselves stress that the actual number of losses is significantly higher but can only be estimated by indirect means. For instance, inheritance cases in courts alone suggest at least 75,000 deaths (Zona.media 2024). Another potential indicator of the actual scale of losses is the cemetery in Medvedevka outside Kaliningrad, where its military area is being expanded at the cost of the civilian one. Controversies around these endeavours stirred up the Kaliningrad public opinion, causing the attention to the large number of fresh graves and the need for more space to surface already in mid-2023 (Markov 2023).

Beyond their participation in combat operations, the Oblast authorities, upon instruction from the federal government, have also made officers and administrators available for the purposes of policing and administering the occupied territories of Ukraine. One prominent example is Valeriy Buslov, allegedly responsible for applying harsh methods during his stint as commander in Balakliya, a town 80 kilometres southeast of Kharkiv, heavily affected by the Russian invasion.

RELATION TO CRIMEA, KHERSON, AND AREAS OF PROTRACTED CONFLICT

The involvement of Kaliningrad Oblast officials in Ukraine intensified after 24 February 2022, initially at the level of state media propaganda. An even more systemic role was assigned to the Oblast when Russia annexed the four south Ukrainian territories that it partly occupied, and the idea of partner or provident regions was born. Governor Anton Alikhanov came to Kherson in August 2022, officially to bring humanitarian aid and sign agreements with selected municipalities (Malysheva 2022). Alikhanov's deputy, Sergey Eliseev, was tasked with governing the Russia-annexed Kherson Oblast (RIA Novosti 2022a).

Incidentally, the participation of state officials from Kaliningrad Oblast in the war against Ukraine shed new light on the region's ties with Crimea, which had been growing in intensity ever since 2014, and post-Soviet areas affected by the so-called protracted conflicts. The transfer of personnel from Kaliningrad to Crimea has been particularly visible in the areas of law enforcement, the judiciary and the security services, mostly due to their expertise in administering areas with no direct land connection to other parts of Russia. Leonid Mikhailiuk, for instance, was the head of the FSB's regional departments in Vologda and Kaliningrad before he became Chief of the Russian Intelligence Services' Department in Crimea and Sevastopol (U.S. Department of Treasury 2021).

By the same token, Kaliningrad Oblast has become embedded in solidifying and institutionalising Russia's influence in Transnistria.[8] For many years, the Russian authorities have been handing out Russian passports to its inhabitants (Eberhardt 2011). As a result, the 98th single-member electoral district to the State Duma in Kaliningrad Oblast covers such people. Regional politicians occasionally travel to Transnistria during election campaigns and during their terms as members of the State Duma. One of the most active in this regard has been Nikolay Tsukanov (Novosti Pridnestrov'ya 2018). As a result, the Oblast has participated in exerting pressure on Moldova and, indirectly, on Ukraine. It has also played the role of an informal intermediary in dialogue between Moscow and Tiraspol.

POST-2022 TRANSIT ISSUES: IMMEDIATE FUTURE OF ROAD, RAIL AND SEA LINKS

For Moscow, the importance of securing the unimpeded overland transit of people and goods to and from Kaliningrad Oblast grew in the late 1990s as Lithuania's EU membership negotiations were gaining speed. Never, however, was the economic well-being of the Oblast a priority for the federal centre. For the EU, it was of fundamental importance that any measures for the future transit regime should safeguard the sovereignty of existing and future member states (EUR-Lex 2002). In late 2002, during the Danish EU presidency, the European Commission and Russia agreed on a set of rules allowing for a transit scheme and introducing the Facilitated Transit Document (FTD) and Facilitated Rail Transit Document (FRTD), which continue to be the basis for the system that is in place nowadays, despite the post-2022 limitations.

While the EU clearly sought to accommodate Russia's expectations during the negotiations, the transit question remained a way for the federal authorities to question Lithuania's credibility at the European stage by presenting it as an unreliable partner seeking to limit access to Russia's sovereign territory. For Lithuania, the transit scheme always represented a tangible threat, as Moscow could violate its rules by transporting weapons and dangerous materials by rail over Lithuanian territory. This concern grew after 2014, when the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas led to growing tensions between Russia and the West and to the introduction of sanctions.

The issue became even more sensitive after the invasion of Ukraine. The subsequent sanction packages further limited the scope of goods that could still be exported to Russia and/or conveyed by rail to Kaliningrad. Based on decisions made by the EU, in mid-June 2022 the Lithuanian authorities introduced restrictions on the transport of certain goods, mostly raw materials, from Russia and Belarus across Lithuania to Kaliningrad Oblast. According to Vilnius, Lithuania was merely implementing decisions made at the EU level (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania 2023). According to estimates shared by Anton Alikhanov in the late spring of 2022, roughly 50% of all products transported to the semi-exclave from mainland Russia became subject to these restrictions (BBC Russian Service 2022b). The fierce reactions of Russian officials subsequently led the EU to allow the transit of goods while obliging all member states to counter Russia's circumvention of sanctions (European Commission 2023a).

Controversies over the railway transit measures should be seen against the background of the longstanding structural challenges the Russian federal authorities have faced in supplying the Oblast. One main bottleneck has been the insufficient number of ferries operating between the ports of Kaliningrad and Ust-Luga in Leningrad Oblast. Before the invasion of Ukraine, there were only three units in operation, all rather obsolete and with limited capacities. They mostly transported construction materials, such as concrete, and fossil fuels to the semi-exclave (Budrina 2022b). Their importance grew along with the consecutive sanction packages introduced by the European Union, which limited the scope of goods that could be transported by rail across Lithuania. Already in 2018, federal railway subsidies were redirected to develop ferry capabilities. The effect of this, however, was negligible (Domańska, Kardaś, Menkiszak et al. 2019).

Another considerable challenge in securing the flow of critical products into the Oblast has been the prioritisation of military cargo. Using civilian ferries to transport dual-use goods and military equipment was already apparent in the 2000s. These tendencies have gained in strength since the beginning of the Ukraine war. Units deployed in the Oblast have received the bulk of petrol brought by rail when it was still possible and, later on, the ferries. As the consecutive sanctions packages made the former channel unavailable, Kaliningrad Oblast has experienced some fuel shortages, the first of which happened already in March 2022 (Bekshtreva 2022). In addition, ever since the beginning of the invasion, fuel prices have been increasing. Standard 92 octane petrol rose by 5% in 2022 and by 7.3% by November 2023 (year-on-year basis), while diesel oil rose by 8.8% in 2022 and by 11.6% by November 2023 (year-on-year basis) (Kaliningradstat 2023). Recent developments, such as successful Ukrainian attacks on Russian refineries and floods in the southern Ural are, have the potential of further impairing the availability of oil in the Oblast.

In July 2022, the newly adopted Russian Naval Doctrine declared strengthening the Kaliningrad–Ust-Luga/St. Petersburg ferries' cargo capacity as one of the country's priorities in the Baltic Sea (Kremlin.ru 2022). At present, however, their capacity is still insufficient to compensate for the reduction in rail transit. The regional authorities seem to have no clear understanding of how many and what types of new units the Oblast needs to compensate for the losses, partly because this problem has been neglected for many years. In March 2022, Governor Alikhanov declared that the region would need ten such vessels (Budrina 2022a), and a few months later he increased this number to twenty (Kalugina 2023). Whenever such estimates are made, it is unclear whether the ferries are supposed to cover all transit via Lithuania, or whether the additional units are only meant to provide extra bandwidth to the logistically easier and economically more viable railroad connection.

Photo and description: Forsvarsgalleriet. Gas leak North Stream 2

KALININGRAD OBLAST AND SECURITY IN THE BALTIC SEA REGION

While internally promoting the narrative of Kaliningrad Oblast as an ancestral part of Russia, now under siege by malevolent NATO forces, the Russian government has increasingly assigned a proper military role to the semi-exclave. It relies on an array of destabilizing capacities and preparations for special operations. The Oblast's instrumental role in this respect was envisaged in the 2022 Russian Naval Doctrine, in which it is mentioned only twice and only in the regional Baltic context: to ensure energy supplies and to maintain a stable ferry connection between the semi-exclave and the rest of Russia (Kremlin.ru 2022).

Some of the activities mentioned target the balance of collective security in the Baltic Sea Region by both increasing the presence of the Russian military in the Oblast and conducting one-off disruptive operations. The latter's scope and intensity depend on the federal centre's readiness to risk the further deterioration of Russia-West relations. As such developments continue and as Russia's strategic position in the Baltic is worsening, with Finland and Sweden as new NATO members, Moscow is likely to develop the offensive and destructive potential of Kaliningrad Oblast further in Russia's foreign and security policies.

PRIGOZHIN'S MUTINY AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Before the mutiny launched by Evgeny Prigozhin in the south of Russia in late June 2023, the Wagner Group was not heavily involved in Kaliningrad Oblast. It organised and participated in public events, such as car rallies supporting the so-called Special Military Operation in Ukraine and commemorating fallen Wagner mercenaries (Kaliningrad News 2023). The events of 23-24 June did not lead to any unrest in the Oblast. On June 24th, the regional authorities cancelled all public events until June 26th. During the mutiny, Anton Alikhanov appealed to those Wagner Group members who came from Kaliningrad Oblast to refrain from anti-government actions (Delovoy Peterburg 2023a). The authorities denied allegations that soldiers had been issued with firearms to quench any potential unrest (Malysheva 2023).

Following the agreement between Vladimir Putin and Evgeny Prigozhin, Wagner Group mercenaries were partly relocated to Belarus. Their main base became the camp near the town of Asipovichy (OSW's Russian Department 2023). Polish prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki announced that more than a hundred Wagner troops had been spotted near the city of Hrodna in the vicinity of the Suwałki Gap. According to Morawiecki, their goal was to further destabilise the Polish-Belarusian border by helping illegal migrants enter Poland (BBC Russian Service 2023). The Institute for the Study of War indicated the Gozhsky training ground, just a few kilometres from the Lithuanian-Belarusian and Polish-Belarusian border, as one of the locations where Wagner instructors were training Belarusian forces, thus underlining the vulnerability of the Suwałki Gap as the only land connection between the Baltic states and other NATO members. As of late 2023, a few hundred Wagner mercenaries were still stationed in Belarus (OSW's Russian Department 2023).

In the semi-exclave itself, there were no reports of major anti-Wagner actions by the Russian government, whether detentions or excessive searches. As the days immediately after the mutiny were marked with media reports on the scope of the Wagner Group's activities, presumably in order to discredit them, there was only one noticeable connection between the mercenaries and Kaliningrad Oblast. On June 27, approximately four billion roubles were found in St. Petersburg in a van belonging to Wagner. Earlier, the van had been transiting between Kaliningrad Oblast and the Baltic Sea Fleet base in Kronstadt (47news.ru 2023). This prompted allegations of Wagner involvement in fulfilling contracts for the military units stationed in the Oblast, especially in Baltiysk.

Prigozhin's mutiny led to significant changes in the balance of power between Russia's various security institutions. These changes have had a legal dimension which can potentially influence the situation in and the role of Kaliningrad Oblast if military mobilisation or martial law are introduced. According to new legislation passed in late July, the heads of Russian regions can create special armed units, referred to as specialised companies. Approved by the president and financed from both federal and regional budgets, their task will be to help maintain public order, protect the state border and fight foreign sabotage groups (Gorizontal'naya Rossiya 2023; OSW's Russian Department 2023). Although the main reason for this law seems to be the need for more control over the regions bordering Ukraine, it can also become an instrument in Kaliningrad Oblast. If the Russian leadership decides to escalate tensions with the West as a whole or with individual countries in the Baltic Sea Region, these dispositions will likely deepen the feeling of encirclement in the semi-exclave.

GUGI, SEA- AND AIR-DENIAL ACTIVITIES

The competent Russian agency in this field is the Main Directorate of Deep-Sea Research (GUGI). This Directorate is an independent branch of the federal Ministry of Defence and is not subject to a specific naval chain of command related to a Russian fleet. Located in St. Petersburg, the Directorate has strong ties with Kaliningrad Oblast. Both Kaliningrad and Baltiysk were main bases for Soviet fishing and exploratory expeditions to the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans.

Over the last decades, GUGI has commissioned the construction of deep-sea research vessels in the Kaliningrad-based Yantar shipyard, part of the state-controlled United Shipbuilding Corporation. In 2009-2015, it constructed and delivered the first Project 22010-class "oceanographic research vessel" Yantar. The vessel is believed to be an intelligence-collecting unit and has been spotted in various locations around the world, including in the Guantanamo Bay and in the vicinity of underwater telecommunication cables (Sanger, Schmitt 2015; globalsecurity.org). Two more units of this class, Almaz and Vice-Admiral Burilichev, are being commissioned and constructed. In August 2023, the 02670-class vessel Evgeny Gorigledzhan entered service. This is a substantially modernised MB-305 Warsaw Pact ship which is officially intended for carrying out rescue operations, exploration of the seabed and monitoring the oceans' environmental changes (Flot.com 2023). The vessel is also capable of conducting sabotage of underwater communication cables and pipelines, as well as planting explosives on the seabed.

GUGI also operates the Project 141C "Kashtan" SS-750 ship, stationed in Kaliningrad Oblast (cf. section on Bornholm). Overall, the Directorate's activities in the Baltic Sea and the North Atlantic Ocean have substantially increased over the last decade. They reflect the ambitious programme of increased military spending which gained speed after Vladimir Putin came back to occupy the presidential seat (Wilk 2012). The naval component of these changes has not been overly exposed by Russian officials not only because of its relatively small importance, but also because of the clandestine and disruptive nature of the tasks it has been supposed to carry out. By the same token, Kaliningrad Oblast has, willingly or unwillingly, taken up the role of hosting such capabilities without much publicity.

Over the last fifteen years, the Russian Baltic Fleet has expanded its non-naval components beyond conventional coastal units. It has been part of the efforts mentioned earlier to increase military spending significantly, resulting in, for instance, the deployment of ballistic missiles (Wilk 2016). Most of the modernisation efforts have been directed at strengthening ground troops grouped into the 11th Army Corps in the centre and the east of the Oblast, primarily deployed around the town of Gusev, and air force units. The latter use the aerodromes in Chkalovsk outside Kaliningrad and in Chernyakhovsk in the centre of the region, as well as the helicopter station in Donskoye on the Sambian Peninsula. Recently there have been allegations that parts of a missile system deployed in the Oblast were taken to southern Russia because of the increased efficiency of Ukrainian strikes using ATACMS systems (Sheldon 2023).

The aerial component of the Baltic Fleet has been extensively used in small-scale provocations around the Baltic Sea, usually brief airspace violations. In June 2021, the political message carried by the incident was evident, as a Russian strategic bomber and two fighters entered Lithuanian territory while the BALTOPS 2021 naval exercises were taking place (Warsaw Institute 2021).

KALININGRAD OBLAST AND BORNHOLM

The Russian aerial and naval presence around Bornholm has increased since the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in eastern Ukraine. The more recent activities, which are related to critical infrastructure and to environmental security, involves the SS-750 vessel. In September 2022 it was observed close to Danish territorial waters, approximately where the explosions on the Nord Stream gas pipeline took place on September 26, followed by three other explosions in the Danish and Swedish exclusive economic zones. The SS-750 can carry a mini-submarine capable of performing interventions on infrastructure on the seabed.

The September 2022 events triggered a major investigation by Danish, Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish journalists. The investigation provided proof that the Russian authorities had been using fishing boats and other civilian ships to perform surveillance and other intelligence gathering tasks in the North Sea and the Danish Straits (Pettersen et al. 2023). This pattern is also apparent in the southwest Baltic Sea basin, Bornholm being a strategic and sensitive location.

Russia seems to view Bornholm as an integrated element of a potential forward posture for NATO in the Baltic Sea. In May 2022, when the Defender-Europe exercises took place on the island, the Russian government protested, expressing concerns over the temporary deployment of the HIMARS missile systems (Forsvaret 2022), which put most of Kaliningrad Oblast within their reach (Bjerg 2022). It was argued that the agreement between the Danish and Soviet governments on the withdrawal of Soviet soldiers from Bornholm after the Second World War excluded the deployment of any foreign troops on the island (Marschner 2022).

The damage to the Nord Stream pipelines, regardless of who is responsible for it, increased attention to possible disruptive actions in the southwest Baltic Sea. The event likely affected marine mammals and fish within a 20 km radius (Sanderson et al. 2023). Also, the four explosions took place close to a site in the Bornholm Deep, where around 11,000 tons of chemical warfare agents and munitions were disposed

of in 1947. The total amount of chemical and conventional weapons deposited in the Baltic Sea is estimated at 300,000 tons (European Commission 2023b). On top of the strategic or tactical gains from the sabotage of underwater infrastructure, such as power grids or gas pipelines, the possible exploitation of the sea-dumped weapons for similar purposes is yet another factor in the security of the Baltic Sea Region.

CONCLUSION

The backdrop to the opening scenes of the 2008 major Russian war epic, *Admiral*, were the waters off the coast of East Prussian Königsberg. In 1916, a confrontation between an ageing Russian minelayer and a modern German capital ship resulted in the sinking of the latter, lured into a minefield. This significantly modified version of the fate of the actual armoured cruiser Friedrich Carl allows for the staging of an entire body of thought related to the restored Russian self: political and military self-confidence and a strong sense of pride relying on the continuity of Russian statehood from medieval Muscovy and the modern Russian Empire to the Soviet Union and the present-day Russian Federation.

The confrontational naval symbolism of *Admiral*, set in this south-eastern corner of the Baltic Sea, serves this metanarrative: the grand civilizational superiority of traditional Russian values, locked in a show-down with the institutional and cultural phenomena of decadent, open Europeanness and Western-ness. This symbolic construction is not without a basis in reality on the ground. Russia sees itself being suffocated by the 'Atlantic civilisation' as its European gateways to the World Ocean, the Danish and the Turkish Straits, belong to NATO member states. The importance of securing free access to the World Ocean was underlined in the 2022 Russian Naval Doctrine (Kremlin.ru 2022; especially clauses no. 6, 15, 22 and 53-56). According to Russian decision-makers, this 'Anaconda loop'[9] requires viewing Kaliningrad Oblast as a geopolitical tool in the struggle that began as far back as Ivan the Terrible's reign. This thinking has been shared by a number of Russian politicians and ideologists, including Alexander Dugin (cf. Dugin 1997). Seen from this perspective, the Oblast becomes the most significant remaining gain of the

Russian state since the Great Northern War and the establishment of St. Petersburg. Kaliningrad is as close to the core of NATO and EU territory as contemporary Russia can get.

In this sense, the Oblast is a blueprint for the way in which Russian elites perceive the West and its actions towards Russia and, perhaps, Eurasia. By the same token, the three decades of the post-Soviet Kaliningrad Oblast have had a significant impact on the political, economic and cultural geography of the Baltic Sea Region, today almost a NATO and EU pond. Tight interconnections among the countries of the region force them to take account of the security challenges posed by the two Russian coastal footholds: Kaliningrad and St. Petersburg.

Several aspects of the position of the semi-exclave under current international circumstances, including the railway, an umbilical cord through Lithuania, might suggest an analogy with Cold War Berlin on inverted premises. The development and temperature of East-West relations have had a direct impact on the perspectives, daily lives and possible roles of the semi-exclave since 1991. But unlike Berlin, the role of Kaliningrad has remained one-dimensional, narrowly subjected to decisions made at the federal centre. The Oblast has to remain predominantly a military base and assume an increasingly hostile posture towards both its immediate neighbours as individual countries and Western organisations as such. It is to be expected that the Oblast's participation in belligerent rhetoric against Lithuania and Poland could be extended to Denmark and Sweden, depending on the Russian government's desire to use Kaliningrad in its anti-NATO and anti-EU rhetoric.

Before being forced back into the reality of East-West tensions and becoming an auxiliary vessel in Russia's confrontational foreign policy towards the West, there had been a time for experiments in post-Soviet Kaliningrad. While Kaliningraders could seek their place under changed geopolitical circumstances and explore the region's non-Russian pre-war past, the federal government tasked itself with seeking new ways of managing a region which history and location make both unique and challenging. The narratives of belonging to Greater Russia, while feeling an increasing bond with the rich non-Russian history of East Prussia, created the potential for political and cultural tensions. The federal authorities resolved them after 2012 by forcing the semi-exclave back into the reality of hard security. Kaliningrad has become a place where the tendencies observed in the domestic and foreign policies of Russia appear with a sharper and more intense profile. It remains narrowly dependent on military developments, both in its direct vicinity and in the broader

Central, Eastern and Northern European contexts. Its main role is to constantly remind NATO and the European Union member states that the Baltic Sea is not just a slightly enlarged part of their inland waterways and that Russia still has the potential for disruption in the area.

The main analytical conclusion is that this one-dimensional role largely excludes perspectives for meaningful cooperation with neighbouring states regarding cross-border trade, cultural exchanges, common initiatives or selective joint security-related efforts over matters related to seabed explosives or energy infrastructure. Rather, it illustrates the intention of the Russian leadership to prioritize the nuisance value of the semi-exclave in the country's foreign policy. All indicators are thus pointing towards a further development of Kaliningrad Oblast as a predominantly negative and even disruptive factor in the Baltic Sea Region, with little prospect of change emerging in the foreseeable future.

At the present level of tensions, Russian activities will likely continue to weigh in on naval and aerial security in the southern Baltic Sea Region, in particular by (i) maintaining a feeling of insecurity in the Baltic states by testing neighbouring countries' military readiness and the military realities behind assumed NATO postures through provocations; (ii) generating problems and putting a political, economic or military price tag on Russian participation in finding relevant solutions; and (iii) demonstrating a readiness to threaten the integrity of existing and future infrastructure, be they related to transport, energy, data transmission, or the poids-du-passé, represented by the leftovers of Second World War conventional and chemical weapons (Berling et al. 2023).

With regard to a possible next-level escalation of the ongoing East-West confrontation, the politically and militarily delicate railway transit arrangements will immediately reclaim operational attention from both sides. This is where the sensitivity of the Suwałki Gap is likely to be exploited by the Russian federal authorities should it decide that it can put additional pressure on the Baltic States and Poland. This possibility also depends on the political situation in the other NATO and EU member states. If the upcoming elections in countries such as the United States, Germany or Belgium result in victory for populist forces advocating limiting the support for Ukraine and coming to terms with Russia, Moscow can decide to use the security dynamics in the south-eastern Baltic to pursue its greater geopolitical goals more decisively.

Kaliningrad Oblast is destined to remain a security issue for Denmark and for the other Nordic states. The islands of Bornholm and Gotland are the closest and most obvious potential targets for destabilizing or disruptive activities. The strategic and tactical importance of the semi-exclave for the federal authorities further increased in December 2023, when Sweden, Finland and Denmark signed bilateral Defence Cooperation Agreements with the United States. The agreements will lead to an unprecedented U.S. military presence in the Baltic Sea Region (Tarociński 2023).

While it is unlikely that such actions will be conducted in parallel with the ongoing military actions in Ukraine, the neighbouring countries of Denmark, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden will have to address the challenges emerging from Kaliningrad Oblast when the war draws to an end. As the further isolation of Russia at the European level remains a probable outcome, the federal centre will not allow Kaliningrad Oblast to conduct a semi-independent policy of cross-border engagement. The probable result is a more pronounced economic downturn than the Russian average, with dwindling industrial production and high prices for consumer goods. Kaliningraders are not less resilient to such phases than other Russians, and, in the short to medium term, will not seek to demonstrate their dissatisfaction in mass street protests. Thus, it remains a challenge for the regional leaders to ensure cohesion and solidarity with the authorities.

As a result, both the EU and NATO member states need to take into account the fact that the semi-exclave's dependence on Moscow appears greater than at any point in time in its post-1991 history. Beyond the effect of cultural isolation, this policy entails social and economic consequences with a direct impact on Kaliningraders, sending the Baltic Sea Region down a path of increasingly differentiated development. As a result, the nine rapidly integrating EU and NATO member states around the Baltic will be unable to take full advantage of their cooperation. In the long run, this absence of common goals poses serious questions in a number of areas, such as environmental protection, seabed explosives and the creation of inclusive transport corridors. Without Russian participation in the work of the Council of the Baltic States, its two northwestern coastal regions: Kaliningrad Oblast, with over a million inhabitants, and the St. Petersburg area, with more than five million, will remain substantial gaps in the otherwise successfully integrating Baltic Sea Region.

There is, perhaps, one additional area of the reality in Kaliningrad Oblast which should remain subject to close observation in the medium- to long-term perspectives. After Western automotive brands left Russia in 2022, one of the Oblast's main companies found itself on the brink of bankruptcy. It was the Chinese government

that prevented this from happening by locating the production of Chinese brands at Avtotor. Already before the COVID-19 pandemic, regional authorities and businessmen made attempts to attract their Chinese counterparts to invest in a special gambling zone or in joint infrastructural projects. Back then, however, there was still a strong hope that these endeavours would come without any strings attached. This is no longer the case in 2024. Increasing the Chinese presence in Russia's westernmost region is indicative of the state the country has found itself in. It is also a potential cause for concern for other actors in the Baltic Sea Region.

NOTES

1 Measured from Kaliningrad City

2 Alikhanov replaced Nikolay Tsukanov (in charge in 2010-2016) after a short interlude of rule by a security services officer, Evgeny Zinichev, who was believed to have belonged to Putin's close circle. Zinichev's role was to calm the situation down and wait for Alikhanov to turn thirty and be legally allowed to assume the post of governor.

3 These include the delivery of lucrative services for the military complex, which shows the scope of their connections with the federal centre. For instance, Evgeniy Morozov and his company Megapolis have been made responsible for the reconstruction and technical overhaul of the production and testing base for the thermocatalytic engines factory (Rugrad 2023c).

4 There are no separate airborne units in Kaliningrad Oblast, although various sources indicate the presence of an airborne component within the Baltic Sea Fleet. Moreover, the 76th Airborne Division from Pskov Oblast participates in drills together with units from the Oblast on a regular basis.

5 The articles authored by Putin were:

1. „Rossiya sosredotachivayetsya — vyzovy, na kotoryye my dolzhny otvetit'", Izvestiya, 16.01.2012.
2. „Rossiya: natsional'nyy vopros, Nezavisimaya gazeta", 23.01.2012.
3. „O nashikh ekonomicheskikh zadachakh", Vedomosti, 30.01.2012.
4. "Demokratiya i kachestvo gosudarstva", Kommersant", 06.02.2012.
5. "Stroitel'stvo spravedlivosti. Sotsial'naya politika dlya Rossii", Komsomol'skaya pravda, 13.02.2012.
6. "Byt' sil'nymi: garantii natsional'noy bezopasnosti dlya Rossii", Rossiyskaya gazeta, 20.02.2012.
7. "Rossiya i menyayushchiysya mir", Moskovskiye novosti, 27.02.2012.

6 All topics hitherto raised during the Talks can be found online: https://razgovor.edsoo.ru/.

7 Usually refers to a transnational co-operation structure between two (or more) contiguous territories located in different European countries. Euroregions represent a specific type of cross-border region.

8 A breakaway region of Moldova that is only recognised by two equally disputed territories, Abkhazia and South-Ossetia, and is heavily reliant on Russia's political and economic assistance.

9 Not to be confused with the Anaconda Plan, put forward by Winfield Scott at the beginning of the U.S. Civil War.

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