Kaliningrad's difficult plight between Moscow and Europe

Ingmar Oldberg

Executive summary

This article examines the relationship of the Russian Kaliningrad exclave with the federal capital and with the neighbouring countries in three dimensions, the political, the economic and the military ones. It will be argued that Moscow's excessive demand for control meets some resistance from the region, whose population is in search of an identity adapted to its unique location and history. In the economic dimension, the small size and lacking resources of the region make it dependent both on federal support and trade with the neighbouring states, and it is therefore highly susceptible to sanctions and embargos. Finally, the region remains marked by its history as a military stronghold. Its military role has increased under the impact of growing tension between Russia and the West, especially as a result of the current war in Ukraine.

Kaliningrad's problems and difficult plight have thus been exacerbated in all three dimensions, which also impinges on the security of the whole Baltic Sea region. Developments in the region therefore deserve more attention among both the research communities and decision-makers.

About the author

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Keywords

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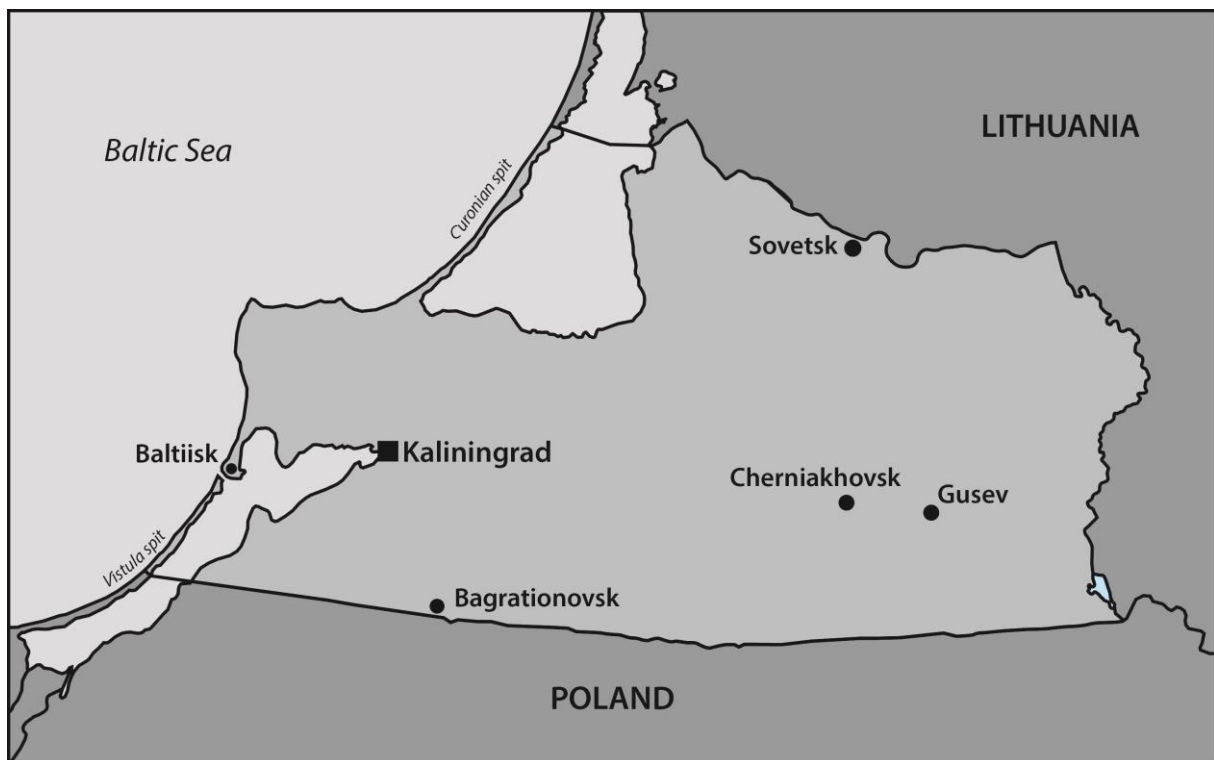
Introduction

The Russian region (*oblast*) of Kaliningrad is situated roughly at equal distances from Moscow and Brussels. Ever since it became an exclave wedged between Lithuania and Poland and cut off from the rest of Russia in 1991,[1] it has had problems with its relations to both the federal capital of Moscow and the surrounding NATO/EU countries. The region also reflects Russia's general problems and ambitions and has some specific features.

This article will analyse Kaliningrad's current relationship with Moscow and the neighbouring countries in three interlocking dimensions, the political, the economic and the military ones. It will be contended among other things that Moscow's excessive demand for control meets some resistance from the region, whose population is in search of an identity adapted to its unique location and history. In the economic dimension, the small size and lacking resources of the region make it dependent both on federal support and trade with the neighbouring states, and it is therefore most susceptible to sanctions and embargos. Finally, the region remains marked by its history as a military stronghold, and its military role has increased under the impact of growing tension between Russia and the West, especially as a result of the current war in Ukraine. This has thus exacerbated Kaliningrad's problems and difficult plight in all three dimensions, which also impinges on the security of the whole Baltic Sea region.

Political problems

The Kaliningrad region is an integral part of Russia, which is a federation only by name and where President Putin has concentrated all political power in his hands since 2000. The population of the region (about 950 000) is over 80 per cent ethnic Russian and generally support Putin's foreign policy, including the aggressive actions against Ukraine since 2014. As all over Russia 10 000 Kaliningraders rallied in mid-March to hail the conquest of Crimea (Voice of Russia, 18 March 2014). This of course impaired relations with neighbouring Poland and Lithuania, which belong to the strongest supporters of Ukraine in its standoff with Russia. When Ukrainian refugees arrived in the Kaliningrad region, the governor Nikolai Tsukanov accused young men among them of being activists sent out by Western secret services to create a new Maidan in Russia (Russland-Aktuell, 3 July 2014). In recent years the Russian leadership has increasingly promoted Russia´s national traditions and its independent great power status, and its belonging to Europe has been de-emphasized (Makarychev & Yatsyk 2014, p.12).

The Kaliningraders on the other hand, living as they are in the westernmost part of Russia and surrounded by EU states, are the most Europeanized Russian citizens, and show a higher degree of social activism, for example in the use of internet (Rogoza et al. 2012, pp. 29 f). In early 2010 uniquely large demonstrations against new transport taxes induced the incumbent President Dmitrii Medvedev to replace a governor appointed by Moscow with one from the region. According to local sources, the support for the annexation of Crimea was much lower in Kaliningrad than elsewhere in Russia (Rogoza 2014, p. 43; Ruin 2014, p.52 f). Russia's

historical claim to Crimea in principle opens the door for Germany to lay claim to its former East Prussia (Cichowlas, 6 June 2014, BT, 28 April 2014). [2]

Further, 60 per cent of the inhabitants hold international passports (Russian average 20-25 per cent), of whom 25 per cent have Schengen visas. [3] Only 18.5 per cent of the urban population has never been abroad; most people go to Poland and Lithuania and have contacts and favourable impressions from there, while fewer people go to 'Russia'(Rogoza 2014, p. 43). In order to change this, air tickets to Russia are subsidized and efforts are made to improve rail connections (Kaliningrad.ru, 16 Sept. 2014, Oldberg, 7 Dec 2011). Since 2002 there is an agreement between the EU and Russia allowing visa-free travel by rail across Lithuania from Russia to Kaliningrad with a so-called Facilitated Transit Document.

As most Kaliningraders nowadays have been born in the region, they have also started to form a special, regional identity with an interest in the German past of the region. The few German buildings that were not destroyed during the Second World War are restored, albeit partly as a means to attract tourists, and proposals have been made to replace Soviet names with old German ones (Misiunas 2006, pp. 16 ff; Holtom 2006, pp. 81 ff, Ruin 2014, p. 54 f). The idea of creating an independent state appeared in the 1990s and received about ten per cent of supporters in polls carried out in the early 2000s. But when the economic situation improved and foreign travel was facilitated, the majority supported the current status (Klemeshev et al. 2011, p. 25, Oldberg 2001, p. 61). Nowadays, when federal control and Russian nationalism is very strong, the most radical opposition may only demand a higher status in the federation and more powers.

Admonished by the regional authorities Russia has repeatedly called on the EU to liberalize the Schengen visa regime with regard to Kaliningrad's unique location. In 2011 an agreement was reached with Poland on a visa-free zone, covering the whole Kaliningrad region and the nearest Polish region including Gdansk. For travels farther into Poland Schengen visas are still necessary (The Economist, 8 Oct. 2013). The number of border crossings in 2013 grew from 2.5 to 6.2 million, most of them Poles who went to Kaliningrad (often several times a day) to buy excise goods like cigarettes, alcohol and gasoline. The number of air passengers increased by 10.5 % in 2013, of which only a fourth was discounted tickets to Russia (Batyk & Semenova 2014, 56).

However, Lithuania rejected the idea of creating a similar zone, because it would almost cover the whole country. Further, Moscow was reluctant to give special favours to the Kaliningrad region over other regions, and therefore mainly supported the agreement with Poland as a means to pave the way for visa freedom for the whole of Russia with the EU (Rogoza et al. 2012, 53). Further, Russia's aggression in Ukraine has disturbed relations with Poland and caused the EU to stop the negotiations on a new partnership agreement and visa facilitation with Russia, and the future of the visa-free zone is uncertain. Finally, the drastically impaired economic situation in Russia (see below) since mid-2014 has significantly reduced the number of Russian travelers to Poland (Batyk & Semenova 2014, p. 56).

Economic woes

While a coastal and enclave/exclave location often is an advantage among free economies (see Hong Kong), the Kaliningrad region has had a more mixed experience. When it became an exclave in 1991, it had virtually no economic links with other countries, and was wholly dependent on federal support. In order to promote trade and investments a free economic zone was established, which in 1996 became a *special* economic zone (SEZ). This meant customs-free import to and export from the region and tax-breaks for foreign investors, which boosted trade with the neighbouring states and disfavoured local production. However, since the region is a small market, most of the trade except consumer goods went on to or originated in Big Russia, and foreign investments remained well below the Russian average (Rogoza et al. 2012, pp. 23 f).

As a result of new rules in 2006, which limited the list of duty-free import goods, the number of foreign investors, most of whom are small or medium-size, decreased fourfold, while large, often state-owned Russian investors in energy and infrastructure projects were favoured in line with a Federal Target Programme. Foreign investors were also deterred by the rampant Russian bureaucracy and corruption (Ruin 2014, p.53). The regional budget in 2011 received about 60 per cent of its income from the federal budget, but when calculated per capita, the region is among the ten regions with the least federal support (Rogoza et al, 2012, pp. 10, 17 ff; Rogoza 2014, p.43). Even if the living standard has risen and Kaliningrad city looks very European with the highest number of cars next to Moscow, the gross regional product is about 36 per cent lower than the Russian average with high unemployment, low wages, high living costs and grave health and environmental problems (Rogoza et al 2012, pp. 24 ff, Rogoza 2014, p. 43).

Nowadays, the Kaliningrad region faces new economic challenges. Since Russia in 2012 joined the World Trade Organisation, the SEZ will expire in 2016 and foreign-made goods will be subject to customs fees and the value-added tax like all other regions. In May 2014 Prime Minister Medvedev went to Kaliningrad to discuss the problems, and promised to take supportive measures (Itar-Tass, 13 May 2014).

Furthermore, in reaction to the Russian interventions in Ukraine, the EU, the United States and other countries imposed sanctions on Russia in the financial, energy and military technology sectors and blacklisted dozens of decision-makers and companies. This together with sinking world market prices on oil, on which the Russian economy is totally dependent, has led to serious depreciation of the ruble (by about half its value in 2014), higher inflation and interest rates, capital flight, no more Western investment and negative GDP growth. This also affected the Kaliningrad region, which as noted depends on federal support and import from abroad.

Furthermore, Kaliningrad was harder hit than all other regions by the Russian response to the Western sanctions, namely the one-year embargo on imports of all kinds of foodstuff (except wines) from the EU and other states supporting the sanctions, including Poland and Lithuania.

Kaliningrad was very dependent on such imports, since its agricultural sector has been totally neglected since Soviet times. Foodstuff constitutes 15.8 per cent of the region's total import, and the EU states covered 34 per cent of the total food imports, for example 90 per cent of the meat consumption (Kaliningrad.ru, 19 Aug. 2014, Cohen 2014, p. 54). The embargo thus contributes to shortages, rising prices and stoppages in this sector. Thus, the fish processing plants, which had gone over to importing Norwegian salmon instead of relying on Russian fishing, have had to suspend their activity and lay people off (Rogoza 2014, p. 43). The stop for importing Lithuanian dairy products made related factories in the region go idle and led to local protests on the internet (Moscow Times, 10 Oct. 2014). [4]

The official Russian solution to the shortage is to rely on and expand domestic production, in other words import substitution. The Kaliningrad governor in August 2014 claimed that the region had enough apples and defiantly advised Polish producers to send them to children in the separatist Ukrainian regions of Luhansk and Donetsk (Itar-Tass, 26 Aug. 2014). Another solution for Kaliningrad and the rest of Russia was to import more foodstuffs from countries outside the black list such as Belarus, Serbia, Turkey and South America. However, Belarus also became a loophole for imports from the West, since it has a customs-free union with Russia, which caused a strife between these states. Norwegian salmon was for example relabeled "made in Belarus" (Russland-Aktuell, 9 Dec. 2014). Further, switching to domestic agricultural production in Russia takes time and requires investments, for instance in transport and storage, and the new suppliers unlike EU states demanded full prepayment (Vylegzhanina, 4 Sept. 2014). Even if the Kaliningraders to some extent may import foodstuff for private use though its border traffic agreement with Poland, the foodstuff embargo is thus adding to the general economic problems of Kaliningrad.

Energy issues

The Kaliningrad region also faces specific problems in the energy sector, which otherwise is Russia's greatest asset. It has very few energy resources save for a small oil field off the Kuronian Spit, which has been exploited since 2004. However, there is no refinery in the region, so the crude oil is exported, and the demand for petroleum products must be satisfied by imports from abroad or the rest of Russia, which raises the costs.

As for natural gas, which is mainly used for heating, this is imported from Russia by a pipeline though Lithuania and Belarus.[5] Since 1991 the region has received 80 per cent of its electricity via the networks of the Baltic states from nuclear plants in Russia proper (Rogoza et al 2012, pp. 18-20). In 2010 a second block of a gas-fuelled heat-and- power plant (TEC2) was finally opened.[6] The production of electricity in 2011 exceeded consumption by 50 per cent (Menkiszak 2013, p. 6). Nonetheless, Russia in 2009 decided to build a Baltic nuclear power plant (NPP) near Sovetsk on the Neman river. The plan was to sell electricity to Lithuania, a country which in 2008 had been forced by the EU to close down the NPP at Ignalina for security reasons, to Germany, which in 2012 resolved to decommission all its NPPs in ten years, as well as to Poland and other countries (Rogoza et al 2012, pp.40 f; Janeliunas 2009, pp. 198-202).

However, Lithuania has decided to decouple from the Soviet electric power network and join the European system (ENTSO-E), and connecting lines with Poland and Sweden are to be operational in 2015. This means that Kaliningrad will soon be cut off from the all-Russia system. Concerning the Baltic NPP, the Russian hopes of having it partly (49%) financed by foreign investors, chiefly German, and by foreign loans were soon deceived, and the prospects look even bleaker after the EU's financial sanctions on Russia. Furthermore, Germany showed little interest in buying energy from that kind of source, and Lithuania planned to build a new NPP in cooperation with other states or alone.[7] Also Poland and Belarus (with Russian assistance) intend to build NPPs. Cognizant of these problems, President Putin in May 2013 decided to stop the Kaliningrad project (Menkiszak 2013, pp. 1-4; Malmlöf 2012, pp. 98-100). It may be of some interest to add that the Kaliningrad elite initially opposed the project, because the decision had been taken suddenly and without consultations in the region (except the unpopular governor Boos). A public poll in the region in 2009 showed more resistance than support to the project, and an environmental movement emerged to oppose it and demand a referendum (Rogoza et al 2012, p. 39).

Military transit and military forces

In Soviet times Kaliningrad became one of the most militarized regions of the country with well over 100 000 troops and was totally closed for Western visitors. After Kaliningrad became an exclave, Russia in the 1990s demanded a corridor across Lithuania or Poland, and Russian radicals have since repeated the idea, the realization of which might cut off the Baltic states from the rest of NATO. Needless to say, Lithuania and Poland have rejected this idea as a serious security threat (Oldberg 1998, 7f; Goble, 12 June 2014).

Instead of a corridor, Russia in 1993 signed a transit agreement with Lithuania, according to which all military transports on land had to go by rail. Russia had to ask for permission every time, submit to inspections and pay high fees. On Lithuanian insistence the agreement has to be renewed every year, and often when problems arise with Russia, Lithuanian politicians call for more restrictions, which cause angry protests from Russia. For instance, after the Georgian war in 2008, when a Lithuanian opposition leader called for stopping all military transit across the country, Russian representatives retorted that in that case old weapons in Kaliningrad had to be destroyed on the spot, causing environmental problems, and that the planned withdrawal of tanks by sea would take several years (Oldberg 2009, pp. 353 f, 365; RT, 2 Oct 2013). The current increased tension between Russia and NATO, including Lithuania, now threatens to spill over also to the military transit issue.

Turning now to the military forces in the region, these were considerably reduced in the 1990s after the withdrawals of Russian troops from Central Europe was accomplished, and since then remained relatively stable. The number of soldiers is estimated at about 15 000 men but rises to 25 000 if other security personnel is included (Rogoza 2012, p. 13).[8] Despite the reduction this is more than the regular armed forces of the three Baltic states put together.

Considering its small size and population the region can thus still be characterized as highly militarized. Moreover, one third of the area still has restricted access, including a five-kilometer zone along the borders, most of the coastline and of the Vistula Lagoon, which hampers investments, traffic and tourism. The modern highway from Kaliningrad city to the airport and the sea resorts passes (unmarked) restricted zones, which has resulted in arrests of foreign visitors. The navy reserves the right to close the strait at Baltiisk, even if there is an agreement with Poland on traffic in the Vistula lagoon since 2009 (and also one with Lithuania concerning the Curonian lagoon) (Rogoza et al. 2012, pp. 12, 45 f). This has of course restricted civilian traffic and the development of the Polish and Lithuanian ports in the lagoons. There are plans to dig a canal across the Polish part of the Vistula spit, but this idea has been considered too expensive considering the potential gains (Bojarowicz 2013, pp. 141-153).

The region belongs to Russia's Western Military District, with Kaliningrad City as the headquarters of the Russian Baltic Fleet since 1956. Baltiisk is its main naval base with most of the warships.[9] These forces should be seen in conjunction with those in the rest of Russia (and Belarus), since reinforcements can easily be moved in. In recent years the naval forces have been reinforced and modernized. One, allegedly the world's largest, amphibious landing craft was taken into service after repair at the local shipyard Yantar in 2014 (Voice of Russia, 11 March 2014).

Further, there is an Air Force base with bombers in the region. Two airfields are being modernized and the runway of one is being prolonged so as to be able to receive any kind of aircraft, including Boeings and Airbuses (!), and an airfield for hydroplanes on the Baltic Spit is planned to be revived. In December 2011 a new early-warning missile defence radar station was made operational. In the following year, the air defence troops in the region, second in order only after Moscow, were equipped with S-400 Triumf missile systems with a range of 450 kilometers, thus covering much of Poland and the Baltic Sea including Gotland. The region also has storage facilities for tactical nuclear weapons at Baltiisk, which means that such weapons can easily be deployed there – if they are not there already (Global Security 2014, p. 2; Rogoza et al. 2012, p. 13).

Most concern among the Baltic Sea neighbours has been caused by the basing of Iskander ballistic missiles in the Kaliningrad region, because they have a range of over 500 km, high precision and are able to carry nuclear weapons. At least since 2007 Russia has threatened to deploy such missiles there as a response to US President George W. Bush's plans to build ballistic missile defence (BMD) bases in Poland and the Czech Republic against future threats from Iran. Russia saw the plans as actually targeting Russia. In 2008 President Medvedev announced a decision to carry out the deployment, when Poland in the wake of the Russian invasion of Georgia signed a deal with the United States on placing Patriot air defence missiles in Poland. The Kaliningrad governor Boos greeted this decision (Leijonhielm et al. 2008, p. 196, Oldberg 2009, p. 364.). Even though the new US president Barak Obama soon decided to move the planned missile bases to Romania and Bulgaria, no agreement was reached with Russia, and Medvedev in late 2011reiterated the decision (Akulov 2014, p. 2). In

late 2013 the Russian Defence Ministry confirmed media reports of deployment of Iskanders "near the Baltic states", affirming that this did not violate international agreements, and a defence official even declared that Iskanders had been stationed in the Kaliningrad region for 18 months. The German *Bild* newspaper reported about satellite images of at least ten missiles (RT, 16 Dec 2013; Roth 2013). Nevertheless, in December 2013 President Putin declared that the final decision concerning Kaliningrad had not been taken yet but Russia should not be provoked and that Iskander is not the only and not the most important weapon to defend Russia (President of Russia, 19 Dec. 2013, p. 5). Here he seemed to hint at nuclear weapons.

But in February 2014 the Chief of the General Staff stated that all Russian missile brigades would be armed with Iskander systems by 2020 (Akulov 2014, p. 2). After the Ukrainian conflict had broken out Russia tested Iskander systems during an exercise in the Western Military District (RIA, 2 June 2014). From this one may conclude that threats to deploy Iskanders were used as a means to gain concessions from the US/NATO. If the deployment of Iskander systems in the Kaliningrad region is not a fact already, it is only a matter of time, since the US BMD plans are likely to proceed due to the Ukrainian crisis. Kaliningrad has thus become a pawn in the strategic power game between Russia and the US/NATO.

Military activities

Due to its location and forces Kaliningrad further plays an important role in Russian military activities in the Baltic Sea region. Several military exercises have been held there without Western observers and been seen as threatening by the neighbouring countries. One example was part of the Zapad 2013 exercise, which involved about 70 000 men and included amphibious landing operations (Järvenpää 2014, p. 9).

When NATO intensified its presence and exercises in the Baltic Sea as a reaction to the Russian aggression against Ukraine in March 2014, also Russia increased its activities there. Several air incidents took place between Russian fighters and Swedish and American reconnaissance planes over international waters. Russian reconnaissance planes turned off transponders in March and December 2014, thus risking collision with civilian aircraft. Mock air attacks against Swedish and Danish territory took place in March 2013 and June 2014. A violation of Swedish airspace in September resulted in an official protest against Russia. In October 2014 Sweden carried out a major submarine hunt near Stockholm, of which Russia (despite denials) was strongly suspected in view of former events. The airspace of the three Baltic states and Finland was also repeatedly violated (Frear, Kulesa, Kerns, p. 2 ff; BT, 6 Aug, DN 9 Nov, 15 Dec 2014). Undoubtedly, Russian forces and bases in Kaliningrad were employed in many of these incidents and now play a prominent role in the military threat that the other Baltic Sea states perceive as emanating from Russia. As a result these states and NATO have taken measures to increase readiness and strengthen their forces in the region, which Russia in turn reacts against (Delfi, 8 Dec. 2014). Recently, the Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov averted that Russia would beef up its combat capabilities specifically in Crimea, the Arctic and Kaliningrad (Reuters, 13 Jan. 2015). A vicious circle of military

buildup is at hand. Kaliningrad emerges as the most serious remaining security problem on the Baltic Sea.

Concluding reflections

As also emphasized by the prominent Polish Kaliningrad expert Jadwiga Rogoza at the Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW) in Warsaw, the problem for Kaliningrad and other Russian regions is that Moscow's priority has been control and security rather welfare and development (Rogoza 2014). It may even be claimed that Moscow's grip on Kaliningrad is tighter than on any other region (Dutch 2013) due to its exclave location and the Russian principle of territorial integrity (except regarding the neighbouring ex-Soviet republics) in international law. Moscow apparently fears that a prosperous and Europe-integrated Kaliningrad will drift away from Russia proper. The current crisis in Russia's relations with the West as a result of its ambition and methods to keep control of Ukraine raises the issue whether Russia will continue to allow the Kaliningraders to have special travel favours vis-à-vis Poland, a staunch NATO member and a prominent EU nation. Further, judging from the increased military activity of the Russian armed forces in the Baltic Sea region since 2014 there is a certain risk that Moscow is returning Kaliningrad to its position as a militarized stronghold like in Soviet times, posing a threat to its neighbours and spurring military countermeasures from them (Rogoza 2014). The hopes of the Kaliningraders of becoming a Russian Hong Kong on the Baltic in the 1990s or a pilot region for Russia-EU cooperation in the 2000s have become extremely dim if they were ever realistic.

The current tension between Russia and the democratic West over Ukraine has thus exacerbated the difficult plight of the Kaliningrad region surrounded as it is by NATO and EU states. Further militarization of the region would negatively affect the security of the closest neighbours and the whole Baltic Sea region.

Endnotes

[1] Strictly speaking the region is a semi-exclave, because it has connections with Russia across the Baltic Sea, compare with Alaska-USA, Crimea-Russia.

[2] Three men raising a German flag in Kaliningrad on 11 March were arrested and faced long sentences (Coynash, 24 June 2014).

[3] In 2011 the Polish consulate issued almost 113 000 visas, over half of which were multi-entry, the Lithuanian one almost 83 000, and Germany 21 700 (Rogoza et al 2012, p. 65.)

[4] On several occasions before, for example in October 2013, Russia has stopped imports from Lithuania or sharpened controls on the border, for "sanitary reasons" in connection with political strifes, which has induced Lithuania to threaten with blocking transit across the country (Russland-Aktuell, 11 Oct. 2013; Zdanavicius 2014, p. 37).

[5] In 2004 this was interrupted by Moscow due to a conflict with Belarus over the gas price (Rogoza et al 2012, 19).

[6] The Gazprom monopoly dragged its feet, because it did not deem the project profitable considering the small market.

[7] However, this idea was rejected by a Lithuanian referendum in 2012.

[8] In 2007 the ground forces were estimated at 10 500, and the navy people at 18 000 (Oldberg 2009, p. 361).

[9] At present, the whole fleet has three diesel submarines, two destroyers, five frigates, 21 patrol ships, 15 mine warfare and 11 amphibious ships (IISS 2013, pp. 213, Vendil Pallin ed, 2012, p. 235; Oldberg 2009, pp. 355 f). There is also a naval infantry brigade with about 1100 men, which has since been used in Ukraine, an army brigade, an artillery and a missile brigade (Rogoza et al. 2012, pp. 12 f).

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