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## **The Kaliningrad region after February 2022: The shift of the region's role in shaping the security of the Baltic Sea basin**

### **Obwód kaliningradzki po lutym 2022 roku: zmiana roli regionu w kształtowaniu bezpieczeństwa basenu Morza Bałtyckiego**

#### **ABSTRACT:**

The Russian full-scale military aggression against Ukraine, initiated in February 2022, has significantly affected the security environment of Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltic Sea region, with the Kaliningrad region remaining a key element of Russian influence in this area. Even before 2022, Kaliningrad played an important military and political role as the base of the Russian Baltic Fleet. However, after 2014 – and especially following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine – its autonomy was gradually dismantled, the region lost its cross-border relations, and its strategic role shifted as its military assets were deployed in Ukraine and Sweden and Finland joined NATO. The aim of the article is to present the transformation of the Kaliningrad region's significance and role in Russian foreign and security policy towards the Baltic Sea basin after February 2022. The study applies methods of system analysis, comparative analysis, and factor analysis.

#### **KEYWORDS:**

*the Kaliningrad region, regional security, Baltic Sea basin*

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**STRESZCZENIE:**

Pełnoskalowa rosyjska agresja militarna przeciwko Ukrainie, rozpoczęta w lutym 2022 r., w znaczący sposób wpłynęła na środowisko bezpieczeństwa Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej oraz regionu Morza Bałtyckiego, przy czym obwód kaliningradzki pozostaje kluczowym elementem rosyjskich wpływów w tym obszarze. Jeszcze przed 2022 r. obwód kaliningradzki odgrywał istotną rolę polityczną i wojskową jako baza Floty Bałtyckiej Federacji Rosyjskiej. Jednak po 2014 r. – a szczególnie po pełnoskalowej inwazji na Ukrainę – jego autonomia była stopniowo demontowana, region utracił relacje transgraniczne, a jego strategiczna rola uległa zmianie w związku z zaangażowaniem znaczących zasobów wojskowych do działań na Ukrainie oraz przystąpieniem Szwecji i Finlandii do NATO. Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie transformacji znaczenia i roli obwodu kaliningradzkiego w rosyjskiej polityce zagranicznej i bezpieczeństwa wobec obszaru Morza Bałtyckiego po lutym 2022 r. W badaniu zastosowano metody analizy systemowej, analizy porównawczej oraz analizy czynnikowej.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:**

*obwód kaliningradzki, bezpieczeństwo regionalne, basen Morza Bałtyckiego*

**Introduction**

Russian full-scale military aggression against Ukraine, initiated in February 2022, has caused significant changes in the security of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltic Sea basin. A significant element of Russian influence on the Baltic Sea basin is the Kaliningrad region, an exclave (or semi-exclave) surrounded by the territories of Poland and Lithuania.

The Kaliningrad region was an important area of influence of the Russian Federation on the Baltic Sea basin even before February 2022. It was the region of deployment for a significant component of Russian land forces. It was also the headquarters of the Russian Baltic Fleet. Importantly, the Kaliningrad region had certain characteristic elements of the socio-political system, making it one of the specific subjects of the Russian Federation. This refers primarily to the specificity of the political system of the Kaliningrad region<sup>1</sup>. A characteristic element of the region was also, to some extent, its

<sup>1</sup> This is reflected in the specific role of the governors of the Kaliningrad region, the relatively lower support for the policies of the federal authorities, and the presence of political groups advocating for greater autonomy of the region.

independent contacts with entities from neighbouring Poland and Lithuania, which resulted from the semi-exclave location of the region. The identity of the inhabitants of the region was also unique. These factors meant that the Kaliningrad region – while playing an important role in the Russian national security system – simultaneously had certain attributes of informal autonomy.

This situation changed after 2014, when these attributes of autonomy were gradually taken away from the region. This was caused by the consolidation of power in Russia, resulting from the worsening situation in Ukraine and the related deterioration of Russia's relations with the West. A significant milestone was the Russian military aggression against Ukraine initiated in February 2022. On the one hand, it caused the end of the region's cross-border relations with neighbouring countries, and on the other, a change in the security architecture in the Baltic Sea basin caused by, among other events, the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO. Importantly, the significant military potential of the region was used in military operations in Ukraine, and the troops deployed in the Kaliningrad region were engaged in frontline operations. These factors caused an important shift in the role and significance of the region in Russian security policy in the Baltic Sea basin.

The aim of the article is, therefore, to present the process of changing the significance and role of the region in Russian foreign and security policy with regard to the Baltic Sea basin after February 2022. This change will be analysed in relation to three areas: 1) strengthening the influence of the federal authorities on socio-political processes in the Kaliningrad region, 2) changes in the Russian military strategy towards the Baltic Sea basin, and 3) changes in the economic conditions of the region's development. The research hypothesis is an assumption that after the start of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the federal authorities strengthened their influence on the social and political situation in the region, while isolating the region from contacts with external partners. The research methods used in this work are system analysis, comparative analysis, and factor analysis.

## **1. Social and political features of the Kaliningrad region**

The Kaliningrad region constitutes a unique socio-political construct shaped, firstly, by post-World War II population transfers, secondly, by endogenous social processes characteristic of the Soviet Union, and thirdly, by the

sociopolitical transformations following the dissolution of the USSR, particularly those stemming from the territorial isolation of the region from the mainland of the Russian Federation. The region's societal character, its ethnic composition, and the dynamics of its formation reflect both the historical trajectory of the area and its entrenched militarised identity.

Due to its peripheral geographical location and the aforementioned constraints on economic development, the Kaliningrad region exhibits a generally lower quality of life compared to other urban centres in the European part of the Russian Federation<sup>2</sup>. It is important to emphasise that the incomes of the region's population are lower than those of residents in the neighbouring regions of Poland and Lithuania. This discrepancy generates a significant asymmetry in the level of economic development across the border areas and simultaneously stimulates both legal and illicit cross-border trade<sup>3</sup>.

A distinctive feature of the contemporary society of the Kaliningrad region is its relatively ambiguous regional identity. This condition partially stems from the fact that the population is composed exclusively of post-World War II resettlers and their descendants<sup>4</sup>. Sociological studies conducted in the early 21st century pointed to the region's ambiguous identity, as well as the influence of external factors – such as the fluctuating quality of the Russian Federation's international relations, economic conditions, and the effectiveness of cross-border cooperation<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> See Регионы России. Социально-экономические показатели 2024. Статистический сборник, Федеральная Служба Государственной Статистики [Regiony Rossii. Sotsial'no-ekonomicheskie pokazateli 2024. Statisticheskii sbornik. Federal'naya Sluzhba Gosudarstvennoy Statistiki], Moscow 2024.

<sup>3</sup> K. Żęgota, *Obwód kaliningradzki Federacji Rosyjskiej a bezpieczeństwo międzynarodowe Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej. Między geopolityką a konstruktywizmem*, Poznań 2021, p. 188.

<sup>4</sup> *Стратегия развития Калининградской области: человеческое измерение. Результаты социологического исследования «Диагностика социально-экономического положения населения и оценка человеческих ресурсов Калининградской области»* [Strategiya razvitiya Kaliningradskoy oblasti: chelovecheskoye izmereniye. Rezul'taty sotsiologicheskogo issledovaniya "Diagnostika sotsial'no-ekonomicheskogo polozheniya naseleniya i otsenka chelovecheskikh resursov Kaliningradskoy oblasti"], Kaliningrad 2004, p. 2, <http://www.zircon.ru/russian/publication/1/050222.pdf> [7.06.2025]; И.В. Задорин, Регионы «рубежа»: территориальная идентичность и восприятие «особости», «Полития» 2018 [I.V. Zadorin, Regiony "rubezha": territorial'naya identichnost' i vospriyatiye "osobosti", "Politiya" 2018], no. 2 (89), p. 106.

<sup>5</sup> А.П. Клемешев, *Эксклавность в условиях глобализации. Избранные публикации* [A.P. Klemeshev, *Eksklavnost' v usloviyakh globalizatsii. Izbrannyye publikatsii*], Kaliningrad 2007, p. 223; М.В. Берендеев, «Кто мы?»: калининградцы в поисках собственной

The political reality of the Kaliningrad region is likewise exceptional. The regional political system is largely shaped by constitutional arrangements functioning at the federal level. According to the provisions of the Constitution of the Russian Federation, the Kaliningrad region holds the status of an administrative-territorial unit within the Northwestern Federal District, whose administrative centre is located in Saint Petersburg. The Constitution of the Russian Federation, along with federal legislation, serves as the principal framework regulating the structure of the national political system and state organisation<sup>6</sup>. As noted by scholars, the configuration of federal state authorities exerts a significant influence on both regional and interregional structures. Federal administrative bodies are represented at the level of federal subjects as well as within the federal districts. At the regional level, the structure of state authority comprises executive and legislative bodies, along with regional branches of the judiciary<sup>7</sup>.

The Governor of the Kaliningrad region serves as the principal regional authority, responsible for the enforcement of both regional and federal legislation. Additionally, the governor acts as the chief representative of the federal government within the region. The office is filled through direct popular elections for a five-year term, with the prerequisite of candidate approval by federal authorities<sup>8</sup>. It is noteworthy that the political and institutional

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идентичности, "Социологические Исследования" 2007 [M.V. Berendeyev, "Kto my?": *kaliningradtsy v poiskakh sobstvennoy identichnosti*, "Sotsiologicheskiye Issledovaniya" 2007], no. 4. Cf. M.J. Cordes, *Collective Memory in Post-Soviet Kaliningrad Oblast*, Routledge 2025.

<sup>6</sup> See Глава 3 Конституции Российской Федерации принятой всенародным голосованием 12.12.1993 г. (с учетом поправок, внесенных Законами РФ о поправках к Конституции РФ от 30.12.2008 N 6-ФКЗ, от 30.12.2008 N 7-ФКЗ, от 05.02.2014 N 2-ФКЗ, от 21.07.2014 N 11-ФКЗ) [Глава 3 Конституции Российской Федерации, принятой всенародным голосованием 12.12.1993 г. (с учетом поправок, внесенных Законами РФ о поправках к Конституции РФ от 30.12.2008 N 6-ФКЗ, от 30.12.2008 N 7-ФКЗ, от 05.02.2014 N 2-ФКЗ, от 21.07.2014 N 11-ФКЗ)], <http://www.constitution.ru/10003000/10003000-5.htm> [7.06.2025].

<sup>7</sup> W. Kotowicz, *Życie polityczne Obwodu Kaliningradzkiego Federacji Rosyjskiej. Stymulatory endogeniczne i egzogeniczne*, Toruń 2012, p. 114; K. Sawicki, *Obwód Kaliningradzki FR w ładzie międzynarodowym*, Toruń 2013, pp. 201–203.

<sup>8</sup> In 2004–2012, in accordance with the law in force at that time, the President of the Russian Federation elected governors of the subjects of the Russian Federation. The following governors were elected in this way: Georgy Boos (2005) and Nikolay Tsukanov (2010). In 2012, the general elections of governors were restored. See J. Rogoża, *Federacja bez federalizmu. Stosunki Moskwa – regiony*, "Prace OSW" 2014, no. 49, p. 14.

significance of the Governor within the political system of the Kaliningrad region has been increasing. Despite the formal reinstatement of direct gubernatorial elections, the federal authorities continue to exert decisive influence over the appointment process<sup>9</sup>. Within the framework of the Russian political system, a candidate demonstrating excessive independence from federal power structures is effectively disqualified from assuming the role of regional executive<sup>10</sup>. This dynamic indicates a growing influence of federal authorities over the administrative functioning of the Kaliningrad region.

A characteristic feature of the Kaliningrad region – especially before 2022 – was the evolution of its socio-political system between centralism and regionalism. Relations between Moscow and the Kaliningrad region were based on emphasising the inseparability of the region's political and economic ties with other areas of the Russian Federation. The basis of the federal authorities' attitude towards the Kaliningrad region is the statement that it is an integral and inseparable part of the Russian Federation. The dependence of the Kaliningrad region on the federal authorities is also sanctioned by the formal and legal location of the region in the workings of the political system of the Russian Federation and its own political system. Both the structure of the Constitution of the Russian Federation and other legal regulations at the federal and regional levels reduce the region's subjectivity in Russian domestic and foreign policy<sup>11</sup>. It should be added that the central authorities' concerns about separatist tendencies in the Kaliningrad region are not reflected in the real risk of the region separating from Russia<sup>12</sup>. Kaliningrad society supports the postulates of increasing the autonomy of the region to a limited extent, while opposing the efforts aimed at full sovereignty. The constantly developing contacts of the Kaliningrad region of the Russian

<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting that in the case of the Kaliningrad region, the successors of Nikolai Tsukanov (2010–2016) as Governor – Yevgeny Zinichev (acting in 2016), Anton Alikhanov (acting in 2016–2017, Governor in 2017–2024), and Alexey Bezprozvanykh (from 2024) – were first elected by the federal authorities to the positions of acting Governor of the Kaliningrad region and next elected in general election.

<sup>10</sup> J. Rogoża, A. Wierzbowska-Miazga, I. Wiśniewska, *Wyspa na uwięzi. Kaliningrad między Moskwą a UE*, "Prace OSW" 2012, no. 41, pp. 10–11.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>12</sup> C.S. Browning, P. Joenniemi, *Contending Discourses of Marginality: The Case of Kaliningrad*, "Geopolitics" 2004, vol. 9, no. 3, pp. 716–717.

Federation with foreign partners conducted on the basis of cross-border cooperation are a kind of surrogate for independence<sup>13</sup>.

## **2. The significance of the Kaliningrad region for Russian foreign and security policy**

The processes of reintegration of the post-Soviet space under the auspices of Russia observed over the last 30 years have been key factors affecting European security. They also shape the dynamics and character of international relations observed both in bilateral and multilateral relations, carried out on a regional scale. A significant role in these processes is played by the Kaliningrad region of the Russian Federation, the specificity of which results from both its geographical location and the nature and intensity of interactions with external entities. The Kaliningrad region has also played a significant role in Russia's foreign and security policy over the past 30 years. This is reflected in Russian strategic documents, military doctrines, as well as in the political activities of Russian leaders. It is worth mentioning that the Kaliningrad region is positioned in Russian strategic documents on foreign and security policy as one of the significant areas of Russian military presence in Central and Eastern Europe. In this context, the advantages of the geopolitical location of the exclave are emphasised, thanks to which it is possible to influence the Baltic Sea basin and the security of Poland and Lithuania.

On the other hand, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Kaliningrad region has initiated – due to its exclave or semi-exclave location – various political, economic, or cultural relations with entities from neighbouring countries, such as Poland and Lithuania, as well as other countries from the Baltic Sea basin (Sweden, Germany). In this way, regional authorities shaped autonomous – to some extent – relations with foreign entities<sup>14</sup>. This activity was intensified especially after the enlargement of the European Union in 2004, when the range of tools for cross-border cooperation of entities

<sup>13</sup> See W.T. Modzelewski, *Polska – Obwód Kaliningradzki FR. Polityczne uwarunkowania współpracy transgranicznej*, Olsztyn 2006; K. Żęgota, *Diaspora polska w Obwodzie Kaliningradzkim Federacji Rosyjskiej*, Toruń 2014, p. 85.

<sup>14</sup> See W.T. Modzelewski, *Paradyplomacja regionów. Studium województw Polski Wschodniej*, Olsztyn 2016.

from the Kaliningrad region with foreign partners was expanded<sup>15</sup>. As a result, in the 2004–2013 period, i.e., in the years of intensification of relations between Russia and the European Union, the Kaliningrad region became a laboratory in the European Union–Russia relations. This specific dualism of the importance of the Kaliningrad region of the Russian Federation for international relations and the international security of Central and Eastern Europe indicates the need to analyse the role of the region in shaping international security.

It is important to emphasise the importance of the region for the security not only of the Baltic Sea basin but also of Central and Eastern Europe<sup>16</sup>. As indicated by P. Aalto, S. Dalby, and V. Harle, an example of the occurrence of these phenomena is the Baltic Sea basin, which, after the end of the Cold War, became an area of cooperation and rivalry between Russia and the West<sup>17</sup>. Researchers also argue that geopolitical subjectivity is characteristic not only of states but also of non-state actors in international relations. At the same time, as S. Sukhankin points out, the geopolitical importance of areas such as the Kaliningrad region increases when we take into account that the Russian strategic perspective is based on the assumption that smaller-scale local conflicts can easily turn into regional, and even large-scale global military confrontation between the main players in international relations<sup>18</sup>. This is confirmed by the increase in the military potential of the Kaliningrad region observed after 2014.

In the systemic and political conditions of the Russian Federation, an important factor shaping the security policy is, on the one hand, the legal prerequisites for the competences and actions undertaken by state bodies, and on the other hand, the institutional and systemic conditions resulting from the division of tasks between individual state authorities and social

<sup>15</sup> K. Żęgota, D. Mironyuk, *Cross-border cooperation (CBC) between the Kaliningrad region of the Russian Federation and Polish neighboring regions in the years 1991–2020: A program approach*, "Athenaeum. Polish Political Science Studies" 2022, vol. 76, pp. 84–106.

<sup>16</sup> N. Sanchez, A. Wilder, *Assessing Kaliningrad's Geostrategic Role: The Russian Periphery and A Baltic Concern*, "Journal of Baltic Studies" 2011, vol. 42, no. 4, pp. 469–476.

<sup>17</sup> P. Aalto, S. Dalby, V. Harle, *The Critical Geopolitics of Northern Europe: Identity Politics Unlimited*, "Geopolitics" 2003, vol. 8, issue 1.

<sup>18</sup> S. Sukhankin, *From 'Bridge of Cooperation' to A2/AD 'Bubble': The Dangerous Transformation of Kaliningrad Oblast*, "The Journal of Slavic Military Studies" 2018, vol. 31, no. 1.



structures<sup>19</sup>. Russian foreign and security policy is derived from the provisions of strategic documents, which are the basis of the Russian national security system. The 2021 Russian National Security Strategy emphasises the importance of Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltic Sea basin for European security. The document is described as clearly anti-Western. On the one hand, criticism is expressed towards the Euro-Atlantic regional security system: in this context, NATO and the European Union are assessed as inefficient structures in solving key security challenges in Europe. At the same time, the North Atlantic space is perceived as a source of threats, especially in view of the expansion of NATO military infrastructure in the immediate vicinity of Russia's borders<sup>20</sup>. The importance of the Baltic Sea basin for European security was thus emphasised.

The Kaliningrad region is a part of the North-West Federal District and the Leningrad Military District of Russia. The region is characterised by a developed military infrastructure, based on a system of land, air, and naval military bases. A significant element of this infrastructure is the Russian Baltic Fleet, with naval bases in Baltiysk, Primorsk, and Kaliningrad<sup>21</sup>. Ground forces in the area of the Kaliningrad region include infantry, missile, artillery, and motor brigades stationed in Baltiysk, Kaliningrad, Gusev, and Chernyakhovsk. Major combat units of the air forces are located in air bases in Chkalovsk and Chernyakhovsk, and a helicopter regiment is located in Donskoye and Ljubino<sup>22</sup>.

The factors indicated in strategic documents related to the border location of the Kaliningrad region, the surroundings by the territories of the European Union and NATO member states, as well as the coastal location and the possibility of operating in the Baltic Sea basin make the region

<sup>19</sup> See B. Panek, *Polityka Federacji Rosyjskiej w regionie Europy, Azji i Pacyfiku*, Warsaw 2015, p. 94; M. Raś, *System bezpieczeństwa Federacji Rosyjskiej*, [in:] K.M. Księżopolski (ed.), *Problemy bezpieczeństwa wewnętrznego i bezpieczeństwa międzynarodowego*, Warsaw 2009, pp. 389–390.

<sup>20</sup> Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 02.07.2021 г. № 400 „О Стратегии национальной безопасности Российской Федерации” [Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii ot 02.07.2021 g. No. 400 “O Strategii natsional’noy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii”], <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/47046/page/1> [12.06.2025].

<sup>21</sup> A. Sakson, *Obwód Kaliningradzki a bezpieczeństwo Polski*, “Przegląd Strategiczny” 2014, no. 7, p. 114.

<sup>22</sup> M. Żyła, *Obwód Kaliningradzki w polityce bezpieczeństwa Federacji Rosyjskiej*, Warsaw 2018, pp. 150–157.

one of the more important areas for important elements of the territorial structure of the security system of the Russian Federation<sup>23</sup>. If we assume that – as is clear from the provisions of the above-mentioned strategic documents – one of the main goals of Russian foreign and security policy is both the reintegration of the post-Soviet area and the strengthening of its political and military presence in the Baltic and Black Sea basins, therefore, a natural consequence should be the elevation of the rank and significance of areas such as the Kaliningrad region in the aims of the development of the Russian security and defence system. The accompanying increase in political tension and rivalry between European and Euro-Atlantic integration on the one hand, and the reintegration of the post-Soviet area on the other, results in an increase in the military significance of the border regions of both areas of regional integration<sup>24</sup>.

### **3. A shift in the role of this semi-exclave in shaping the regional security of the Baltic Sea basin after February 2022**

After Russia's open military aggression against Ukraine in 2022, the geopolitical position of the Kaliningrad region has become significantly more isolated and strategically sensitive. Surrounded by NATO members Poland and Lithuania, the semi-exclave now faces heightened military surveillance and increased restrictions on transit and trade. Its role as a forward base for Russian military operations in Europe has intensified tensions in the region, leading to the militarisation of nearby borders. These developments have negatively impacted Kaliningrad's development prospects, limiting economic

<sup>23</sup> See A. Żebrowski, *Ewolucja położenia geostrategicznego Polski na przełomie XX i XXI wieku*, [in:] R. Kłaczyński, A. Jaeschke, A. Żebrowski (eds.), *Bezpieczeństwo RP. Historia – Ekonomia – Polityka. Studia z zakresu bezpieczeństwa państwa*, Cracow 2013, p. 111.

<sup>24</sup> J.R. Sielezin, *Bezpieczeństwo międzynarodowe i narodowe we współczesnej Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej. Kontekst rosyjski*, [in:] P. Grata, M. Delong (eds.), *Polityka bezpieczeństwa w wymiarze globalnym, europejskim i krajowym. Uwarunkowania – koncepcje – działania*, Rzeszów 2015, p. 158; A.И. Подберезкин (ed.), *Стратегическое прогнозирование и планирование внешней и оборонной политики: монография* [A.I. Podberезkin (ed.), *Strategicheskoye prognozirovaniye i planirovaniye vneshney i oboronnoy politiki: monografiya*], vol. 2, Moscow 2015, p. 102.

cooperation and increasing dependency on central Russian support amidst growing international sanctions.

Following the outbreak of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the political situation in the Kaliningrad region has significantly intensified. As a Russian semi-exclave bordering NATO member states, the region has come under heightened military and political scrutiny from federal authorities. Local governance has increasingly aligned with the Kremlin, particularly in areas related to security, information control, and the restriction of external influences. Consequently, regional policy has become focused on strengthening military infrastructure, supporting military-affiliated communities, and implementing propaganda initiatives consistent with the Kremlin's strategic narratives<sup>25</sup>.

As of September 2024, the position of Governor of Kaliningrad Oblast is held by Aleksey Besprozvannykh, who had previously served as acting governor since 15 May 2024, before being officially elected to a full term. His appointment and subsequent policy directions reflect the increasing influence of federal authorities in the region – both through personnel decisions and the consolidation of local administrative structures around Moscow's strategic goals<sup>26</sup>. Under Besprozvannykh's leadership, regional authorities have intensified the implementation of federal programs, enhanced security oversight, and expanded support for military-related projects. Moreover, the growing supervision of public space by federal structures and the tightening of control over local institutions have further reinforced Kaliningrad's political integration into the centralised governance model of the Russian Federation<sup>27</sup>.

The importance of the Kaliningrad region for European security after 2022 has also changed. The accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO has profoundly altered the security landscape of the Baltic Sea region,

<sup>25</sup> I. Topolski, *Military importance of the Kaliningrad Oblast*, "Athenaeum. Polish Political Science Studies" 2024, vol. 83, no. 3, pp. 164–167.

<sup>26</sup> *Putin Appoints 5 New Regional Governors*, The Moscow Times, 15 May 2024, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/05/15/putin-appoints-5-new-regional-governors-a85124> [17.06.2025]; A. Widera, *Nowy p.o. gubernator obwodu królewieckiego*, Czas Wschodni, 15 May 2024, [https://czaswschodni.pl/art/wiadomosci/nowy-po-gubernator-obwodu-krolewieckiego\\_0108fc24-6f99-4370-906a-6c14aa51caee](https://czaswschodni.pl/art/wiadomosci/nowy-po-gubernator-obwodu-krolewieckiego_0108fc24-6f99-4370-906a-6c14aa51caee) [17.06.2025].

<sup>27</sup> On the role of regional elites in strengthening federal authorities in Russia after 2022, see M. Bartosiewicz, *Regional elites in wartime Russia*, "OSW Commentary" 2025, no. 648.

significantly constraining the strategic manoeuvrability of the Kaliningrad region. As a militarised Russian semi-exclave, the Kaliningrad region has long functioned as a forward base for projecting Russian power in the Baltic Sea basin. However, with NATO now effectively encircling the Baltic Sea, Russia's military presence in Kaliningrad is increasingly contained and monitored. The integration of Swedish and Finnish defence infrastructure into NATO's command structure enhances the Alliance's capacity for rapid deployment and surveillance, thereby reducing the operational depth available to Russian forces<sup>28</sup>.

The Kaliningrad region plays an important role in Russian aggression in Ukraine for one more reason: a significant part of the military units stationed in the Kaliningrad region before February 2022 were engaged in fighting in Ukraine. The 11th Army Corps was involved in the fighting, including: 152nd Guards Missile Brigade, 244th Artillery Brigade or 18th Mechanised Division. Three motorised infantry regiments and the 11th Armoured Regiment took part in the fighting. Units from the Kaliningrad region were initially involved in fighting in Donbas, and then in the Kharkiv region. Importantly, these troops suffered significant losses. Marine units from Baltiysk also fought in the Kharkiv region. At the same time, according to Foreign Policy magazine, only "skeleton crews" were left in the units in the Kaliningrad region<sup>29</sup>.

The situation of the Kaliningrad region in Russia's military system has also changed. In 2023, Russia's authorities announced military reform, which represented a serious signal of preparedness for protracted warfare and heightened military readiness. The reform – emphasising growth in its defence industry, the creation of new strategic divisions and military districts, and the prioritisation of conventional and nuclear deterrence – underscores Moscow's intent to reinforce its capability for both extended operations in Ukraine and defence against perceived NATO threats. Reform was a substantive shift toward long-term mobilisation and structural militarisation. Key elements included the reintroduction of the Moscow and Leningrad Military Districts, growth in personnel targets, and emphasis on defence industrial capacity. The aim of the changes was to reform the Russian armed forces in

<sup>28</sup> I. Topolski, op. cit., p. 166.

<sup>29</sup> R. Gramer, J. Detsch, *Russia's Stripped Its Western Borders to Feed the Fight in Ukraine*, Foreign Policy, 28 September 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/09/28/russia-ukraine-war-nato-eastern-flank-military-kaliningrad-baltic-finland/> [23.06.2025].

the context of the challenges related to Russian military aggression against Ukraine. For the Kaliningrad region, these changes imply deeper integration into Russia's strategic planning as a forward-operating zone. This raises the region's military significance while intensifying its exposure to NATO countermeasures<sup>30</sup>.

Following the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the economic situation in the Kaliningrad region has markedly deteriorated. As a geographically isolated semi-exclave, Kaliningrad became increasingly vulnerable to external trade disruptions, particularly due to restrictions imposed by Lithuania on the transit of sanctioned goods via land routes<sup>31</sup>. These limitations have significantly constrained the flow of goods from mainland Russia, leading to logistical bottlenecks, shortages in specific product categories, and a noticeable rise in consumer prices. The region's dependency on federal subsidies and maritime supply routes has thus intensified<sup>32</sup>.

## Conclusions

The developments that have occurred in the Kaliningrad region following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 mark a decisive shift in the region's role within Russia's domestic structure as well as the region's significance for the security of the Baltic Sea basin. The region has undergone far-reaching transformations in its socio-political landscape, military function, and economic conditions – each of which reveals Moscow's broader

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<sup>30</sup> A.M. Dyer, *The Next Reform of Russia's Armed Forces: Is It a New Threat or Just for Appearances?*, "PISM Strategic File" 2023, no. 6(127).

<sup>31</sup> Sanctions and transport problems have a particularly pronounced impact on prices in the Kaliningrad region. Annual inflation in May 2022 was 17.4% (with food prices at over 18%), the highest in the Northwestern Federal District of the Russian Federation, and also above the national average. Until 2022, the region's residents have been coping with the problem of high prices by going shopping in Poland and Lithuania. See I. Wiśniewska, *Tranzyt do Kaliningradu – napięcia rosyjsko-litewskie*, OSW Analyses, 21 June 2022, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/node/30326> [23.06.2025].

<sup>32</sup> S. Sukhankin, *Russia's War in Ukraine and Kaliningrad's Final Farewell to the Gains of the Past*, <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-war-in-ukraine-and-kaliningrads-final-farewell-to-the-gains-of-the-past> [24.06.2025].

intentions and strategic recalibrations in the face of intensifying confrontation with the West.

First, the Kaliningrad region has become an emblematic case of the centralisation of political power within the Russian Federation. The earlier tendencies towards limited regional autonomy, particularly in the context of cross-border cooperation with neighbouring Poland and Lithuania, have been decisively reversed. The increasing dominance of federal institutions and narratives in the public sphere, alongside growing supervision by federal security services, has reduced the region's former political distinctiveness.

Second, significant shifts in Russia's military strategy have redefined the role of the Kaliningrad region in the security architecture of the Baltic Sea basin. Historically perceived as a strategic stronghold and forward base for Russian military operations, Kaliningrad has now become both a highly fortified and increasingly vulnerable enclave. The accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO has substantially altered the strategic equilibrium in the region, undermining Russia's freedom of manoeuvre and reinforcing the West's deterrence posture. In response, Moscow has undertaken a broad restructuring of its military command and force deployments, including the foundation of the Leningrad Military District and an increased emphasis on conventional and nuclear deterrence. The substantial redeployment of forces from Kaliningrad to the Ukrainian front – coupled with significant losses – has further reduced its immediate operational capacity, at least in the short term.

The third important conclusion is the fact that the economic foundations of the Kaliningrad region have weakened as a result of geopolitical isolation, war-induced sanctions, and deteriorating logistics. The exclave's dependence on land-based trade routes through Lithuania has made it especially vulnerable to restrictions on the transit of sanctioned goods. These constraints have resulted in supply disruptions, inflationary pressures, and greater reliance on maritime transportation and federal subsidies. The region's earlier potential as a bridge for Russia-EU economic interaction has thus largely dissipated, replaced by a model centred on defensive economic autarky and strategic provisioning from the federal core.

In conclusion, the Kaliningrad region has evolved from a peripheral outpost with quasi-autonomous characteristics into a strategically hardened, politically subordinated, and economically fragile component of the Russian Federation. This transformation is a direct consequence of Russia's aggressive

foreign policy posture and the ensuing confrontation with the Euro-Atlantic community. The shift in the region's role – from a point of regional cooperation and geopolitical experimentation to a fortified frontier in a polarised European security environment – underscores the broader trajectory of Russia's domestic consolidation and militarised strategic outlook.

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