

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE KALININGRAD REGION

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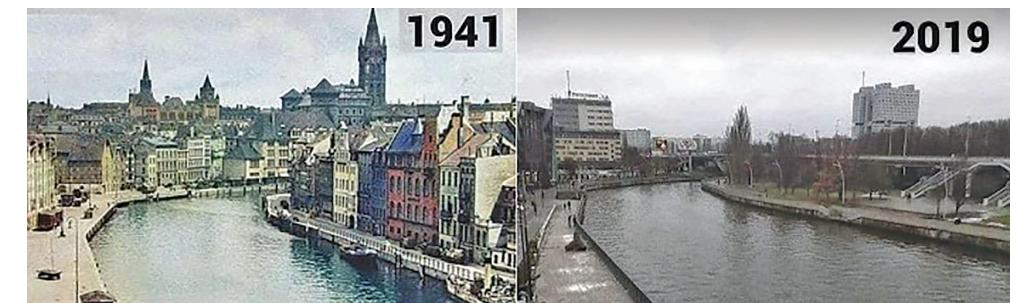
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This article presents a brief but informative examination of the Kaliningrad region in order to find out the mysteries of a geographical territory that belongs to Northern Europe, but currently represents Russia's only European trophy after winning the Second World War. The paper contains general elements, as well as data that may seem new, through which the geography and history of the region are analysed in the first part. After understanding the natural state and the secular heritage of this territory, we will portray the policies of the Russian Federation imposed on its exclave, determine whether Kaliningrad is an important commercial actor on the international stage and investigate the evolution of the population from an ethnic, cultural and religious point of view. All these elements described previously represent an essential body of knowledge in our attempt to ultimately determine the importance of the Kaliningrad Oblast as a first-line geopolitical bastion in the eternal East-West confrontation in Europe.

Keywords: exclave; Königsberg; Baltic Rim; NATO; Russian Federation; Intermarium;

INTRODUCTION

From the very beginning, it is necessary to make a clear distinction between the city of Kaliningrad and the Kaliningrad region. The city has a purely historical value, being known by the scholars especially under the name Königsberg, the place where Prussian kings and then German emperors were crowned. Currently, instead of the Prussian city, we have Kaliningrad. It is a city rebuilt after World War II by the Soviets on the ruins of the king's mountain¹, it is the administrative centre and the largest city of the region (bearing the same name). It is also the second largest city in the North-Western Federal District of Russia (after St. Petersburg), the third largest city in the Baltic region and the seventh largest city on the Baltic Sea.



Picture no. 1: Königsberg then and Kaliningrad now
(http://www.castlesofpoland.com/prusy/krol_po131_en.htm, <https://ro.depositphotos.com/300702724/stock-photo-kaliningrad-russia-august-24-2019.html>, retrieved on 15 September 2022).

The history and geography of the city will be debated in the first chapter of this article. It is very important to discover "What was Königsberg?" in order to understand what Kaliningrad will become, and it is also essential to understand the ambiguous geography of the Russian oblast in order to foreshadow the geopolitical problems that may soon arise in the 21th century. Kaliningrad Oblast is the westernmost oblast of Russia and represents an exclave, that means that between Kaliningrad territory and the territory of the country it belongs to there are other countries that separate them. This gives a special importance to this region and makes any analysis much more interesting. In the second chapter, we will expose

¹ In German language, Königsberg translates as King's Mountain.

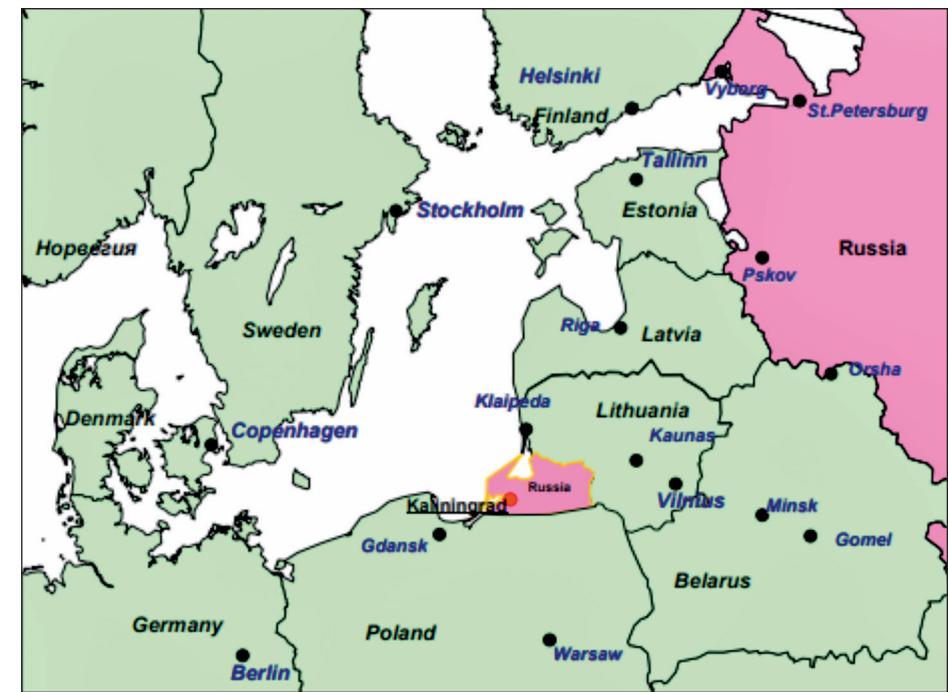
some generalities regarding the society that lives within the borders of this oblast. We will approach the analysis of the population from a demographic, cultural and anthropological point of view in order to give us a brief idea of the customs of the inhabitants, their lifestyle and even their belonging to the *russkiy mir* or the European community. Later, we will find out how rich the Kaliningrad region is, what it sells and buys. We will try to detect the main aspects of economic and commercial nature in order to understand why the existence of this exclave depends to a large extent on the European neighbours or on the subsidies received from the Kremlin. Kaliningrad Oblast is one of the smallest subjects of the Russian Federation, but it is far from insignificant. For the Russians, this region can have both a strategic-military importance through which they can launch their armed forces towards central and northern Europe, but it is also the most injurious Russian territory in the event of an all-in Russia-European Union/NATO war.

HISTORICAL-GEOGRAPHICAL LANDMARKS

Kaliningrad is located at a straight distance of about 277 km from Warsaw, 527 km from Berlin, 525 km from Copenhagen, 535 km from Stockholm, 659 km from Prague, 1,000 km from Baia Mare and 1,100 km from Moscow. Although, politically, Kaliningrad is an exclave of the Russian Federation, geographically the region seems more like an enclave of the European Union. This characteristic makes this oblast one of the most important and priceless Russian federal topics on the chessboard of European geopolitics.

The Kaliningrad region stretches over 15,100 km², comparable to half of Belgium's territory. From the westernmost point of the oblast to the most Eastern one there are 205 km, and from North to South there are only 108 km. The landscape of the territory is similar to that of the Baltic states, except for the multitude of lakes. The only remarkable lake in the Kaliningrad region is Vistytis, at the crossroads with the borders of Poland and Lithuania. The Mazurian Lakes District stretches on 290 km in the Northeastern part of Poland and includes over 2,000 lakes, including Lake Vistytis. The most common landforms are low hills, plains and marshy areas, and 20% of the oblast's surface is covered by oak, pine, spruce and beech forests. An interesting aspect from a geopolitical point of view is the Suwalki Corridor. It measures 90 km long (between Belarus and Kaliningrad), 60 km wide and is the main route between the exclave and the mainland. Professor J.R. Deni highlights his own memory of the area in his last visit near the Suwalki corridor: "Driving through

the area last October while on a research trip to NATO units, I found it a wide-open rural region, predominantly characterised by rolling farmland interspersed with forests and small villages. Much of it is ideal terrain for tracked vehicles like tanks, given the very limited roadways and the gentle hills" (Deni, 2022).



Picture no. 2: Kalinigrad in Europe (Vinokurov, 2007, p. 1)

Infrastructure is modest throughout the region. The only infrastructure links between Central Europe and the Baltic States are two motorways (one with two lanes in one direction, the other with one lane in one direction) and one railway. Poles can take the train to Lithuania only once at the end of the week. The lack of adequate infrastructure makes it impossible for NATO to respond quickly in the event of a Russian incursion to "liberate" and "protect" Russian minorities in the Baltic countries. From the desire to reduce the gaps with the Western part of the continent and to increase the interconnectivity of the East with Western Europe, the *The 3 Seas Initiative* was born. This political platform brings under the same umbrella 12 E.U. states from Central and Southeastern Europe, countries that had a similar historic destiny (except Austria) being at the crossroads of empires and thus incapable of sustainable development. The main objectives of this regional

sub-union are: economic growth, infrastructure development, increased level of digitisation, joint energy projects. Development of the *Intermarium* region and the increase in European and regional initiatives led to the exclusion of Kaliningrad and the transformation of the oblast into a grey area. “*Media analysts and scholars alike tend to view the Kaliningrad region as “double periphery”, since it is excluded from a major modernisation processes both in the European integration zone and in the Russian Federation*” (Sebentsov, Zotova, 2013, p. 81). The Suwalki Corridor and the Kaliningrad enclave remain the “*Achilles tendon*” of the North Atlantic Alliance. In the future, this area can become hotter than the Wider Black Sea Region today, where there are multiple frozen conflicts. “*The Suwalki corridor (also known as the Suwalki Gap) separates the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad on the Baltic Sea from Belarus, now host to thousands of Russian troops and soon home to permanently stationed Russian forces, including advanced fighter jets and nuclear weapons. It is also the only way to get by road or rail from Poland and Central Europe to the Baltic states — arguably NATO’s most exposed members*” (Deni, 2022). However, we can look at the problem from both directions. It is as complicated for Russia to safely evacuate its civilians from Kaliningrad, as it would be for NATO to protect the Baltic states in the event of a Russian *Blitzkrieg*.

From a historical point of view, it is interesting to follow the sinuous and unpredictable transition from Königsberg to Kaliningrad. The city of Königsberg was founded around 1255 by the religious order of the Teutonic Knights who had begun their “*crusade*” to Christianise the natives of the Baltic area. In 1525, the duchy of Prussia was formed in the Western part of the former monastic state of the Teutonic Knights. Many consider this a consequence of the Reformation and the publication of Martin Luther’s 95 Theses. The Duchy of Prussia is considered the first Lutheran Protestant state with the majority of population speaking a Germanic dialect. The beginning of the 17th century comes with events that will radically change the course of European history. First, in 1618 the Prussian-Brandenburg Union was established because John Sigismund of Hohenzollern, Prince-Elector of Brandenburg, was also elected Duke of Prussia. After the Peace of Westphalia (1648), the new world order found the Holy Roman Empire weakened and France guided by Richelieu became the new hegemon of Europe. The French foreign policies and those of the Protestant countries understood the importance of diminishing the influence of Catholicism and the Habsburgs in European affairs, so the new European order wanted to give more importance to the Hohenzollerns

and Prussia. At the beginning of the 18th century, more precisely in 1709, the Duchy of Prussia-Brandenburg becomes a kingdom, and King Friedrich I moves the capital from Königsberg to Berlin. After the Napoleonic Wars, at the beginning of the 19th century, the German Confederation was created, believing that a union of German states could stop France from a new incursion to the eastern parts of the continent. In this confederation of German states, the main actors were the Austrian Empire and Prussia. Due to the strategies of Chancellor Bismarck and the technical and military superiority of the Prussian army, the German Empire was created in 1871, following two wars won by Prussia against Austria (1866) and France (1870).

The German Empire dissolved after losing World War I, and the new Weimar Republic was separated from the territory of East Prussia, which became an exclave, when the Free City of Danzig was established under the administration of the League of Nations. After losing World War II, Germany is permanently stripped of the geographical region of East Prussia. This territory was divided between Poland (the puppet state of the Soviet Union), Lithuania (a socialist republic integrated into the Soviet Union) and the Kaliningrad oblast (the region around the historic city of Königsberg) newly joined the Soviet Union. Since the end of World War II, attempts have been made to completely erase the history and identity of the Prussian city of Königsberg. The use of the German language and German names was banned and brutally punished by the Soviets. All streets and buildings have been renamed, and the city archives of Königsberg were either destroyed or moved to Moscow. The history of the city was rewritten and the Soviet monuments had a great relevance in this purpose. Most of the monuments erected in the Kaliningrad region outline the victorious image of the “*liberating*” Red Army. The end of World War II constitutes the beginning of the existence of the city of Kaliningrad. The name of the city, where Prussian kings and German emperors were previously crowned, is now given by a reliable comrade of Stalin, Mikhail Kalinin². German civilians were regarded by the Soviets as contaminated with the germs of fascism and, by 1948, they were all expelled from Kaliningrad to the German Democratic Republic. In 1945, there were about 5,000 ethnic Russians and members of the Red Army in Königsberg, but in 1948 almost half a million Russian speakers were already in Kaliningrad. Colonisation was carried out with people from the USSR, especially with Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Tatars, Georgians and Uzbeks.

² In old Slavonic language “*grad*” means “city”, so “Kalininograd” means “The city of Kalinin”.

HUMANIST ANALYSIS OF THE EXCLAVE

Sociological Generalities

Currently, the population of Kaliningrad is up to half a million inhabitants and the population of the entire oblast is almost one million inhabitants (78% settled in urban areas). According to the 2010 Russian census, the composition of the Kaliningrad region is as follows: 86.4% Russians, 3.7% Ukrainians, 3.6% Belarusians, 1.1% Lithuanians, 1% Armenians, 0.8% Germans, 0.5% Tatars, 0.4% Azerbaijanis, 0.3% Poles, 0.3% Uzbeks, 1.9% unspecified. We can notice the ethnic mixture bequeathed by the Soviet Union in the Baltic region, similar with the high percentage of ethnic Russians in each Baltic state or in each former Soviet Republic. The predominant religion in the oblast is Orthodox Christianity, but the percentage is quite small, about 31% of the population. *"Once a highly inter-mixed area with a population of Germans, Poles, Lithuanians and Jews, it was ethnically cleansed of most of its German population by Stalin. This was followed by a systematic campaign of russification which sought to erase all traces of German heritage"* (Wolff, 2022).

The *Intermarium* region is like a triangle-shaped territory that has its peaks in the Black, Baltic and Adriatic Seas. This region represents the boundary between the culture and civilisation of Western Europe and that of diversified and spicy Asia. This territory has been invaded from East to West and vice versa far too many times in history and the native peoples of this territory have not enjoyed a stable political situation or sustainable economic development because they were placed on the battlefield of the great empires. Wars and their consequences have consistently altered the ethnic and political structure of this territory. In 1867, at the beginning of the period of German supremacy over Europe, the city of Königsberg had just over 106,000 inhabitants of which about 98,000 were Protestants, and Catholics and Jews around 3,000 each. Before World War II (1939) in Königsberg there were almost 320,000 Protestants, 22,000 Catholics and only 2,000 Jews (most of them had already emigrated to the USA). The transformation of the Prussian city of Königsberg into the Soviet city of Kaliningrad represented one of the largest exoduses of civilian population in modern history and also meant one of the most violent campaigns of occupation. The denouement of the Second World War was catastrophic, 80% of the city of Königsberg was destroyed. East Prussia along with its capital was literally erased from the map. During the Potsdam Conference (17 July 1945), it was settled that Königsberg and East Prussia will be annexed to the Soviet Union. In October 1945, there were only 4,836 Soviet civilians in the Königsberg, then in February 1946 the number became 7,843. At the first

transport of people, on 23 August 1946, 11,000 families from the Soviet Union were brought in the region. On 1 February 1947, another 278,000 Soviet civilians came to Königsberg and the Germans began to be the minority. At the beginning of 1946, there were about 70,000 Germans in the former Prussian capital. In April 1946, the actual political incorporation of the Königsberg into the Soviet Union happened and its name was changed. The Germans were kept until 1948 mainly to help rebuild the region and to perform forced labour, especially in agriculture. On 11 October 1947, the displacement order of the Germans was signed. By the end of 1947, 30,000 Germans had been moved, and by the middle of 1948, about 102,000 Germans had been moved from the Eastern Prussia region. Only German specialists remained in the newly formed Russian oblast. In 1950, the population of Kaliningrad was about 300,000 people, of whom 77% were Russians, 9.4% Belarusians, 5.8% Ukrainians, 3.7% Lithuanians and 4% from other parts of the Soviet Union.

An interesting detail about the population of the Kaliningrad oblast is that the demographic balance is positive compared to the situation of neighbouring countries. The population of Poland in 2020 had the same value as in 1990, and the population of Lithuania in 2020 is only 2.7 million residents, compared to 3.7 million in 1990. Kaliningrad is the only territory in the area where the percentage of population has steadily increased, this being also due to the accession of the Baltic States and Poland to the European Union. *"As a result of positive net migration, since the 1990s, the population has been stable. However, life expectancy in the region is lower; there are no obvious shifts in the morality rate, which is indicative of a still high level of social pathology (alcoholism, drug abuse, spread of HIV, etc.)"* (Sebentsov, Zotova, 2013, p. 86). A case study³ was carried out on 675 students from three top universities located in cities bordering the Baltic Sea. The respondents – from Immanuel Kant Federal Baltic University, the University of Gdansk and the University of Klaipeda – concluded that the reason for the weak cross-border cooperation is caused by: the geopolitical orientations, the policies of the authorities and the stereotypes that have shaped public opinion throughout the decades. *"Kaliningrad students, as well as Russian population in general, are prone to pessimistic views on the prospects of the region: 55.6 % of IKBFU students believe that, in the near future, the situation in the region will remain the same or get worse. Only 34.6% of students share this viewpoint in Gdansk and 18% in Klaipeda."*

³ The survey was conducted by the research team of the Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University (under the supervision of G.M. Fedorov and E.S. Fidrya), Klaipeda University (Eduardas Spirajevas), and the University of Gdansk (J. Wendt) with the help of a questionnaire drawn up by V.A. Kolosov and O.I. Vendina in the framework of a project of the Russian Foundation for Basic Research (No 12-06-91052).

At the same time, Kaliningraders are more optimistic about their future than the regional prospects: 57.9 % are sure that they will be able to attain a better standard of living in a short-term perspective” (Sebentsov, Zotova, 2013, p. 87).

Political Generalities

According to the updated constitution, after the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, the Russian Federation consists of 85 federal subjects: 22 republics, 3 cities of federal importance, 9 krais, 46 oblasts, 4 autonomous okrugs and an autonomous oblast of the Jews. The separation of powers in the state is carried out as follows: President – the head of state and armed forces; Government – executive role, headed by the Prime Minister (the deputy head of state); Parliament/Federal Assembly – divided into *State Duma* (lower chamber) and *Federal Council* (upper chamber); Supreme Court – the supreme body that subordinates all the courts within the borders of the Russian Federation. In the last two decades, Russian politics has been totally subjugated by Vladimir Putin’s party *United Russia*. Currently, out of the 616 seats in Parliament, 466 seats are occupied by party members of *United Russia* – 324/450 seats in the State Duma and 142/166 seats in the Federal Council.

The Kaliningrad region has two deputies in the State Duma and two representatives in the Federal Council, all of whom are affiliated with the party *United Russia*. The political authority in the Kaliningrad belongs to the Legislative Assembly and the Governor – the head of the regional government. They are in charge of managing the budget and enforcing regional laws specific to the well-being of the indigenous people. Out of the 40 seats of the Legislative Assembly in the Kaliningrad region, party members of *United Russia* occupy 29 seats and members of the Communist Party occupy six seats.

The Kremlin’s main political objectives vis-à-vis the Kaliningrad region are: to reduce the region’s exclave towards Russia in conjunction with the postponement of the oblast’s cooperation with the European Union, to weaken the distinctive feeling of the citizens in the exclave towards those in the motherland and to maintain its social stability and predictability. Any phenomena that can cause the oblast to break from Russia are cut off from the root. “*Kremlin will be making efforts to maintain social stability, for example, through economic development, maintaining the residents’ ability to travel outside the oblast and continuing subsidizing the region*” (Wisniewska, Domanska, Strzelecki, Zochowski, 2016, p. 20). Russian propaganda is at a higher level in Kaliningrad than in other regions of the federation because the oblast is surrounded by NATO/EU states. Manipulation of elections and electoral fraud are active phenomena practices in Russia, and Kaliningrad is continuously subjected to such activities

in order not to come to power a nationalist party that wants independence and to transform the oblast into the 4th Baltic state, or the accession to power of a pro-European party. “*The election campaign in the oblast was almost unnoticed, which was proof of the attempt to discourage citizens from political activity. In effect of this, voter turnout was low – officially 44% (compared to 47.9% on the nationwide scale)*” (Ibid., p. 17). We can assume that Russian propaganda has achieved its goal. The annexation of the Crimean Peninsula was approved by about 88% of the residents of the oblast. However, the unfavourable economic situation of the citizens of Kaliningrad, compared to that of Poland or Lithuania, may create social unrest and political destabilisation. The largest uprising in Russia since the breakup of the Soviet Union was captured in Kaliningrad in early 2010, where it is estimated that about 12,000 people participated in peaceful demonstrations against Putin’s party. The Kremlin knows that the tranquillity in the oblast depends on the general well-being of the inhabitants and their habituation to the continuous state of militarisation. Currently, it is estimated that about 30% of the population of the Kaliningrad oblast is composed by members of the Russian army, representatives of the institutions of force and public officials together with their families. As you can see, the indigenous population is witnessing a strong influence from the military personnel.

Economic and Commercial Situation

The economy of the Kaliningrad region is characterised by a relatively small domestic market (about 1 million residents), insufficient investment (either from Russia or from European regional development initiatives) and a trade balance with an astounding deficit. In 2021, the Kaliningrad region made exports of \$ 2.4 billion and imported almost three times more. Compared to other regions of the Russian Federation, in 2021, Kaliningrad was ranked 4th out of 85 federal subjects in the absorption of imports and 35th out of 85th in the top exporting regions of Russia. An interesting thing if we consider that 4% of the total imports of the Russian Federation go to the Kaliningrad region, which has only 0.65% of the population of the entire federation. The main countries who are exporting to the Kaliningrad region are: South Korea (27.6%), China (9.7%), Slovakia (6.3%), Belarus (5.4%), Germany (5.5%), Poland (3.7%), the U.S. (5.6%), Paraguay (6.7%), Brazil (8.2%). The main imported products are: parts used in the transport industry (32%), vegetables (19%), machinery (10%), products of animal origin (6%) (OEC, 2022).

From the last decade of the 20th century to the end of the first decade of the third millennium, Kaliningrad went through an economic revival, thanks to:

1. Russia’s openness to global trade because of the dissolution of the Soviet Union;

2. The establishment of the Yantar Special Economic Zone in 1996; **3.** The enlargement of the European Union around the oblast and the agreeable economic agreements between the E.U. and Russia; **4.** Russia's entry into the World Trade Organization in 2012. “*The existing SEZ regime has played a crucial role in determining patterns of production and trade specialization. With 40% of total trade carried out with Russian mainland, 20-25% with the EU-15 states and about 20% with the new members of the Union (mostly with neighbouring, Poland and Lithuania), Kaliningrad specializes in trade with Russia's regions and with the European Union*” (Vinokurov, p. 22). With the coming to power of President Putin, the Yantar Special Economic Zone turned into an instrument that increased Kaliningrad's dependence on Moscow. Soon corruption grew and the oligarchs began to assimilate resources from the small domestic industry. Access to international companies was gradually restricted and the focus was on prioritising large enterprises rather than supporting small and medium-sized enterprises. “*On 1 April 2016, Kaliningrad's special economic zone (SEZ) privileges expire, meaning that it will lose its right to duty-free trade and will have to stand on its own two feet*” (Sukhankin, 2016). Foreign corporations started relocating in 2012 and turned to Belarus, Poland or Lithuania. The economic disaster for Kaliningrad had only just begun in 2012, then foreign investment withdrawn from the country and caused a serious deficit. The shortage of foreign capital was felt harshly in the pockets of the citizens of the oblast. “*Investments in the region have decreased for the fourth year in a row (by 10% annually on average), and the residents' real incomes have been falling since 2015 as well (by around 6%)*” (Wisniewska, Domanska, Strzelecki, Zochowski, 2016, p. 10). In addition to these aspects, there is also the fact that foreign investors are discouraged from investing in the Kaliningrad region because only a third of the small territory is accessible to civilians, for the obvious reasons of national security. Speaking about corruption, this is a perfect reflection of Russia's policy during the Putin period. The Russian economy is subordinated to the oligarchs. Key business people are obedient to the country's supreme leader and, in return, receive preferential contracts that turn them into billionaires at the expense of ordinary citizens. It is assumed that more than 80% of the Earth's amber⁴ resources are in the mines of the exclave. “*In 2015, the Kaliningrad Amber Factory (a mine) located in Yantarny extracted 313 tons of amber, and its income from sale reached 1.3 billion roubles (around US\$21 million). The estimated level of illegal production in Kaliningrad is currently around 150 tons annually*” (ibid., p. 12). The whole amber sector is controlled by the home company of the Russian Presidential Administration – Rostec.

⁴ In Russian language, 'Amber' translates as 'Yantar'.

Kaliningrad also possesses several gratifying factors that increase its importance at the geopolitical and commercial level. Kaliningrad is a very important region for China and the New Silk Road. At the end of 2020, the first train was launched on the route Xi'an-Kaliningrad and the trip lasted about 11 days (almost 7,000 km). The port of Kaliningrad paves the way for China to trade with Scandinavia. The port of Kaliningrad is the only port of the Russian Federation that remains thawed throughout the year. However, the port is a modest one, with a manual operating capacity of only 12.7 million tons annually. The Polish ports of Gdynia and Gdańsk have a capacity of 15 and 25 million tonnes respectively and the Lithuanian port of Klaipeda has a capacity of 40 million tonnes annually, all of them are in the Baltic Sea. In this case, the interest of the Kaliningrad region's developmental inhabitants does not coincide with Kremlin's policies. The increasing exclaveization felt by Kaliningrad, practically swallowed up by EU and NATO countries (especially after the accession of Sweden and Finland) is even more burdensome due to its dependence on volatile West-Russia relations. The relationship between Moscow and Kaliningrad is simple, money in exchange for loyalty. Compared to other regions of the Russian Federation, Kaliningrad strategic position on the Baltic Sea and belonging to European territory gives it some self-support and wellbeing. The disadvantage is that because of the status of an exclave, with the territory surrounded by countries of the European Union and far from the mother territory, European sanctions against the Russian Federation feel the worst by Kaliningrad. In addition, the provocative attitude of the Kremlin towards the sovereignty of the Baltic states (Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia) or regarding Poland may attract negative attitudes of the neighbours of Kaliningrad on the exclave. According to *Core and Periphery theory*⁵, sketched out by the economist John Friedmann who shows why certain regions are impacted economically, politically and culturally differently and why certain geographical areas are prosperous while others are struggling in subsistence, the Kaliningrad region is seen as an international development corridor. Friedman demonstrates how marginal (or peripheral) regions are forced to cooperate with neighbours in order to develop harmoniously.

⁵ This theory, patented by economist John Friedmann in 1963, explains how economic, military, political and cultural authority is imposed by the regional hegemon to the periphery of its “sphere of influence”.

THE WAR OF ARMS AND THE DIPLOMACY OF PEACE

Balance of Power in the Baltic Region

From a geopolitical point of view, for the Russian Federation each Baltic state has certain significant geostrategic characteristics, which history has demonstrated on numerous occasions. For example, Estonia was endowed with its geographical position at the entrance to the Gulf of Finland and in the proximity of St. Petersburg. Russia's control of this area reassures the Kremlin of a possible attack on the Northwest Federal District and protects the city of federal importance of St. Petersburg. During World War II, the Nazis carried out perhaps the bloodiest blockade in the history of the world. The Nazis decoupled the population of Leningrad from aid (military, medical, food, water etc.) for almost two and a half years, which caused the deaths of over a million residents of the city. The southern part of the Baltic Sea is intertwined with the Great European Plain, an area with a relief that has always facilitated military invasions. History has shown us on at least two previous occasions that the invasions of the West to the East are easily made by crossing the German-Polish Plain. When the Russians projected their military strategy for the Northwestern area and the Baltic Sea, the genocide produced by the Nazis of 1941-1944 and the Napoleon's conquest are imprinted in their minds and did not shy away from using all their force to achieve their geostrategic objectives. We are seeing that even today.

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Kaliningrad had all premises on becoming a success story compared to other regions of Russia. It was intended to be a binder of cooperation between Russia and Europe, and in some scenarios, it was regarded as a Russian Hong Kong on the Baltic Sea. *"In the 1990s and early 2000s, the units deployed there were neglected – as were the Armed Forces in general. The Baltic Sea had become something of a security policy backwater, leaving the Baltic Sea Fleet adrift searching for a raison d'être"* (Westerlund, 2017). At the end of the last decade of the 20th century, Russia was busy building the Nord Stream pipeline and with separatist movements in Chechnya. *"In 1997, Russia unilaterally reduced its land and naval units by 40 percent in its north-western region, contributing significantly to a more benign security environment among Baltic littoral states"* (Forsström, 2019, p. 732). In the first decade after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, NATO was just a simple warning, nothing concrete. The North Atlantic Alliance was seen as a direct threat to Russian security around 2010. Since then, in every updated military doctrine of the president, Vladimir Putin has seen NATO as the greatest threat to Russia's existence. The Kaliningrad region is rightly considered one of the three pillars of the security on the western flank of the Russian Federation.

Crimea-Armavir-Kaliningrad creates a large radar through which the Russian Federation is notified in a timely manner of any possible attack coming from Europe. *"In peace-time and crisis, Kaliningrad provides a forward position for intelligence collection and surveillance as well as a platform for strategic deterrence by military means"* (Westerlund, 2017).

The Russian Federation is divided into eight federal districts (not counting Crimea), and the Central Federal District, with its administrative seat in Moscow, and the north-western federal district (with its administrative seat in St. Petersburg) are under the protection of the Western Military District. The Western Military District, where Kaliningrad is located, is Russia's second smallest military district, geographically, but the first in importance because the main enemy of the Russians remained NATO. In the time of the Soviet Union, in place of the Western Military District was the Military District of Moscow, the Military District of Leningrad and that of Kaliningrad. *"Moscow (...) considers threats emanating from the west to be the most severe threats that can ultimately endanger the military security and thus the existence of the Russian state"* (Muzyka, 2021, p. 4). Russia's army is the 5th largest army in terms of active soldiers, about 1 million soldiers (after China, India, USA and North Korea; Romania is the 54th place in this top), but it is also the army with the most soldiers in reserve, about 2 million. In terms of budget, the Russian Army ranked in 2021 on the 5th place in the top of the countries that made expenditures in the military field. According to estimates (Russian Forces, p. 3), the Russian Federation has two armies of combined weapons in the Western Military District, the 20th in Voronezh (300 km from Kharkov) and the 6th in St. Petersburg and around 200 military units in this Military District. However, the combined 6th army of weapons is the weakest because any attempt to develop it could seem like a threat to the Baltic states and implicitly to NATO. Whether we are talking about NATO or national armies, the military presence in the Baltic countries is rather neutral than in balance. Estonia has allocated about \$770 million on defence in 2021 and has nearly 34,000 troops (active plus in reserve). Similar figures have Latvia, and Lithuania has as many as the two gathered. Interestingly, the sum of the population of Estonia (approx. 770,000) and Latvia (about 1.8 mil.) is almost equal to the population of Lithuania, approx. 2.7 million people. NATO personnel in the 3 Baltic states are around 4,500 troops. In the event of an all-out war, it seems that Russia has hegemony in the region. Or at least had it until the time of the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Since then, Sweden and Finland — two key players in Northern Europe and the Baltic Sea — have decided to integrate them under the umbrella of NATO's collective defence. The balance of power also seems to change

on the southern shore of the Baltic, right next to the Kaliningrad enclave. Poland, worried about Russia's constant violations of international law, will become the most powerful ground force in Europe. It is clear that we will see great changes in Southern and Eastern Europe, possibly regional initiatives will develop the area and hijack Western Europe economically and militarily. In this regard, it is also interesting to find out the denouement of the War in Ukraine, which currently lasts for just over 200 days. The Kaliningrad region is practically swallowed up by EU and NATO member states, and this is a good reason why Russia should not attack any Baltic state. The citizens of the enclave consider themselves Russians and were overwhelmingly sympathisers of the annexation of Crimea or the war in Ukraine.

"For Russia, however, Kaliningrad's main significance is military as an unsinkable aircraft carrier. As a military base, the region adds significantly to Russia's strategic depth and is a critical asset for Moscow in its anti-access area denial (A2AD) capabilities in the Baltic Sea, potentially undermining NATO's freedom of maneuver across the Baltic States and parts of Poland" (Wolff, 2022). Currently, the role of Kaliningrad is an instrument of coercion on regional actors who are within the range of nuclear weapons installed in the oblast or in the Western Military District. *"The Iskander missile system was first introduced to the region in 2016 and then upgraded in 2018, as part of a Russian strategy to counter NATO's deployment of an anti-ballistic missile defense shield in Europe"* (Ibid.). The Kaliningrad region is defended by the 11th Army Corps of the Coastal Fleet Defence Troops, air and anti-aircraft Defence Forces plus the Russian Fleet in the Baltic Sea. The most feared Russian capabilities in the 11th Army Corps are the BM-27 Hurricane and BM-30 Smerch self-propelled missile launchers that can fire 12 missiles in 38 seconds and cause destruction over an area of 67 hectares. In the 152nd Brigade located in Cheryakovsk (east of the oblast) there are Iskander missiles. Iskander short-range ballistic missiles are a versatile weapon that can carry nuclear warheads as its cargo. They are at the limit of the INF Treaty (Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty) and they are very tricky to intercept. Iskander missiles can attack a point at a maximum of 500 km and can be launched from both a terrestrial and a naval platform. The westernmost point they could attack in a dramatic escalation would be Berlin. Of all Russia's air and anti-air defence divisions, the best performing are in the Western Military District. *"One intrinsic feature of the Baltic States battlespace is the heavy presence of Russian army aviation assets, which include one regiment and one brigade. The reason behind such force prepositioning is the ground terrain around the Baltic States, which, because of its large number of lakes, rivers, and generally boggy terrain, does not favor maneuver warfare"* (Muzyka, 2021, p. 37).

The Russian Fleet from the Baltic Sea has two bases: in Kronstadt (it belongs to the port of St. Petersburg) and in Baltysk (Kaliningrad). The most feared weapons are the vertical launch systems of the Kalibr and Osnik anti-ship cruise missiles, both with a nuclear arsenal, both of them can reach targets at a distance of 1,000-2,000 km. Along with these, we also have the Iskander missiles, but also the Zircon hypersonic ones. Zircon missiles can reach a target at 1,000 km and have a speed of Mach 9 (11,000 km/hour), very difficult to intercept.

Military Diplomacy

In the Russian Military Doctrine of 2014, a new possible threat to their national security is specified – *"global strike against Russia"* (Forsström, 2019, p. 740). Russia is the largest country on the surface of the Earth, it shares land borders with 16 sovereign states and 2 maritime borders with the U.S.A. and Japan. Even though Russia has been a great power since the 18th century and now has the largest nuclear arsenal in the world, it still has to tie up certain military alliances in order to be able to defend its vast territory. The security environment of the beginning of the 21st century tends towards multipolarity and a state of militarization of the countries of the world is easily noted. Russia is trying to weave ties with its favorite regional states through joint military exercises and the export of raw materials and weapons at a great price. Some of the most important military exercises that Russia manages together with friendly states are: *Shchit Soyuza* (with Belarus), *Slavic Brotherhood* (Serbia+Belarus), *Vostok* (China+Mongolia), *Defenders of Friendship* (with Egypt), *Kavakaz* (Armenia, Belarus, China, Iran, Pakistan, Myanmar), *Tenter* (China, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, India, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan). But since the war in Ukraine began in 2022, a colder attitude of Russia's Asian and Caucasian allies was noted and these states are closing ties more and more with China. We already note that two sovereign states that Russia considers in *russkiy mir* have been attacked since the beginning of the 21st century (Ukraine and Georgia). It will not be long before tensions arise on all the borders of the Russian world, such as those between Armenia-Azerbaijan and Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan or like the pro-democracy demonstrations in Iran and Kazakhstan, and soon the multi-ethnic federation will succumb after 300 years characterised by the eternal desire for expansion.

Since the biggest threat to Russia is NATO, and the most likely theater of war will again be the old European continent, then I set out to analyze the evolution of the Zapad military exercise ("West" in Russian) in order to be able to make some assumed predictions on the hypothetical scenario that could occur in the hypostasis of invading NATO territory through the Baltic countries or Poland. *"Out of all the military districts, Russia's Western Military District (MD) fields the most robust,*

most numerous, and most capable fighting forces. Strengthening the western operational direction remains the priority for Moscow" (Muzyka & Consuling, 2021, p. 4). The militarization of the oblast has been on an upward slope for the past 20 years. This state is justified by the reforms of the Russian army in the region, by the newly transported military equipment in the oblast, by the increased availability characterised by the stationing of a large number of soldiers, the constancy of military exercises carried out in the oblast, the improvement of combat support and logistics.

Zapad 2021 was the largest military exercise executed in the western region of the country from where, the Russians believe, the greatest threat is coming: the West. This exercise was attended by soldiers from countries such as Russia, Belarus, India, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Mongolia, Kyrgyzstan and observers from China, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Myanmar, Uzbekistan. The Kremlin has been trying for many years to increase the interoperability of the Belarusian army with the Russian one, and also to accustom the Belarusians to the active presence of the Russian military on their territory. "The Zapad 2021 exercises will likely support Putin's efforts to establish a continuous Russian military presence in Belarus. Zapad 2021 will emphasize the logistical activities necessary to establish supply lines that could support a sustained Russian presence in Belarus" (Barros, 2021, p. 3). According to analysts, Russia and Belorussia have had joint military exercises almost monthly since August 2020. "During last year's Zapad military exercise, Russian and Belarusian troops reportedly practiced closing the Suwalki corridor by attacking from Belarus in the direction of Kaliningrad" (Deni, 2022).

CONCLUSIONS

Even though Kaliningrad is Russia's smallest federal subject, it can be compared to a very important chess piece when it comes to the match the Russians are waging against the West. The region has both military importance, but it can also represent a very great weakness of Russia because in an all-out war the residents of Kaliningrad would have no escape. For Russia's foreign policy, an armed Kaliningrad means dominating the Baltic states and perhaps even the entire sea, and internally the Kremlin wants to demonstrate its capacity, as a world power, to protect even this little enclave which is situated at more than a thousand km from Moscow and which is encircled by hostile powers.

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