

# The Geopolitical Role of Kaliningrad Oblast & Suwałki Gap since the Invasion of Ukraine

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## Abstract

This publication focuses on the current status of Kaliningrad Oblast (KO) as a Russian territory surrounded by NATO and EU members, which has led Russia to strategically assert influence in the Baltic Sea Region through exporting energy, influencing trade, and attempting to enhance its diplomacy— particularly amid the strained Russia-West relations due to the invasion of Ukraine. Geopolitically, KO and the Suwałki Gap play a major role in security, strategic and economic concerns, while their mere presence demonstrates the potential for a full-scale invasion. The Suwałki Gap will remain vital for the NATO-EU Baltic states to reinforce collective defense and concerns of potential isolation, necessitating defense strategies in the region. The futures of Kaliningrad Oblast and the Suwałki Gap are intertwined, shaped by the ongoing war in Ukraine amidst uncertain NATO-Russia security policies.

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## I. Kaliningrad Oblast

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian Federation faced a significant transformation in its geopolitical landscape, including the emergence of independent states of Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania in the Baltic Sea Region (BSR). The status of Kaliningrad Oblast (KO) became particularly complex, as it became an isolated Russian territory surrounded by aspiring countries joining NATO and the European Union (EU). Since the end of WWII, Russia has sought to address the challenges posed by Kaliningrad's geographic isolation by attempting to formulate strategies to maintain influence in the BSR through the only year round ice-free port, access to energy and trade routes, as well as bilateral and multilateral cooperation channels. Since February 24th, 2022, the current relations between Russia and other European nations have been severely impacted by the former's full-scale

invasion of Ukraine. Since the continuous hybrid-warfare tactics in the past decade, KO holds strategic importance for Moscow due to its proximity to the European Union and (new) NATO member states in the Baltic Sea Region. As Kaliningrad Oblast hosts Russia's Baltic Fleet<sup>1</sup>, KO gives Russia a strong military presence in the Baltic Sea Region and the 2023 NATO addition of Finland. KO allows Russia to concentrate its naval capabilities in the Baltic Sea. Since Russia's Naval Doctrine<sup>2</sup> was last published in July 2022, Moscow makes it very clear that its ambition is to remain a naval powerhouse. Its naval capabilities and assets are continually changing, including modernization efforts and acquisitions, despite other circumstances such as the conflict in Ukraine. However, there are for naval fleet expansion as Russia (and the Soviet Union before) has had endless financial problems to develop a fleet of

<sup>1</sup> Steve Wills, *Kaliningrad: Impregnable Fortress or "Russian Alamo?"*, CAN

<sup>2</sup> Russia Matters, *Full text of the 2022 Russian Maritime Doctrine (in Russian)*, <https://www.russiamatters.org/russian-strategic-documents>

carriers for many decades, as carriers are quite an expensive investment. For instance Russia's only aircraft carrier, the "Admiral Kuznetsov" has had a long history of complications and setbacks.<sup>3</sup> This is especially vital for Moscow to remain a global naval power that it seeks to be, especially because NATO countries surround Kaliningrad. In September 2023, Ukraine had sent a missile attack on Moscow's Naval Headquarters in Crimea,<sup>4</sup> suggesting a troubled future for Russia's Navy. Geo-economically speaking, the Baltic Sea serves as a crucial transit route for Russia energy exports right by Kaliningrad Oblast, particularly for the Nord Stream pipelines. As Russia expands its investment in the energy infrastructure, the Nord Stream gas pipelines ensured the smooth flow of resources to Europe since 2012 until major leaks were found due to explosives<sup>5</sup> in September 2022, with no one

taking responsibility. But what does this mean for the EU? Even without the operation of the Nord Stream pipelines, the EU has had to find alternative pipelines since the beginning of the invasion. In May 2022, the EU launched the REPowerEU<sup>6</sup> to end its reliance on Russian fossil fuels by 2030. Unfortunately for the EU, European countries are still buying from Russia. Instead of oil, EU countries such as Spain, Belgium, France and among others, are buying Liquefied Nitrogen Gas (LNG) on quite a large scale— estimated to have bought 52% of all of Russia's LNG exports between January and July, a market share that exceeds the 49% mark of 2022 and 39% of 2021.<sup>7</sup> Since Since many EU countries are not able to utilize the Nord Stream pipelines anymore, Russia is also unable to make revenue from such gas exports either. Until September 2022, the Nord Stream pipelines had normally supplied the

<sup>3</sup> Gonzalo Orbaiceta, *Global Maritime Power? Russia's Navy faces an uncertain future*, Universidad de Navarra, Global Affairs

<sup>4</sup> Samya Kullab, Dasha Litvinova, *Ukraine launched a missile strike on Russia's Black Sea Fleet headquarters*

<sup>5</sup> Carole Nakhle, *What will Russia do without Nord*

<sup>6</sup> European Union, *REPower EU at a glance*, 2022

<sup>7</sup> Jorge Liboreiro, EU News, *EU purchases of Russian LNG up 40% compared to pre-war levels, new study finds*, 2023

European Union states with about 35% of all the gas they import from Russia.<sup>8</sup> Russia has sought to maintain political influence in the BSR through cooperation with regional organizations. It has engaged in various bilateral and multilateral initiatives, such as the Poland-Lithuania-Russia Cross Border Cooperation Program, to enhance ties with neighboring countries and address common challenges, such as cross-border travel, import/export traffic, etc. and then split into two bilateral programs<sup>9</sup> of Poland-Russia and Lithuania-Russia. For example, from 2014 to 2020, the Lithuania-Russia program has contributed millions of Euros in Lithuania to promote local culture and preservation of historical heritage, environmental protection, and climate change mitigation. These figures show strong commitment from participating countries to further the development of

cross-border cooperation, which overall has had a positive impact on the communities living across the borders of KO; it supports sustainable development on both sides to reduce differences in living standards and addresses common challenges.<sup>10</sup> The regional cooperations frameworks such as the Council of the Baltic Sea States and the Northern Dimension<sup>11</sup> were created to promote dialogue, stability, and economic cooperation. However, political tensions between Russia and European nations have at times hinder cooperation<sup>12</sup> and created divisions within the region as NATO's and EU's enlargements have raised concerns in Russia, perceiving them as encroachments on its traditional sphere of influence.<sup>13</sup> This side effect has led to increased geopolitical competition in the region. Russia's aggressive rhetoric and actions towards the BSR within the last ten years include the

<sup>8</sup> BBC News, *Nord Stream 1: How Russia is cutting gas supplies to Russia*, 2022

<sup>9</sup> European Union, European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) cross-border cooperation programmes, *Lithuania-Russia ENI CBC*, 2014

<sup>10</sup> The Diplomatic Service of the European Union, *Polish Russian cross-border cooperation continues*, 2018

<sup>11</sup> Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, *Northern Dimension*, 2009

<sup>12</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Relations with Russia*, 2023

<sup>13</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *NATO-Russia Relations: The Facts*

2007 cyberattacks on Estonia and the increasing number of cyberattacks on critical infrastructure. As the cyberattacks were largely distributed denial-of-service(DDoS) attacks, they overloaded Estonia's bandwidth and flooded their servers with junk traffic, rendering them inaccessible to the public.<sup>14</sup> Despite Estonia being a small country with just over 1.3 million people, it has a strong cyber defense infrastructure that ranks third best in the world<sup>15</sup> behind the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. With NATO's cyber base in Estonia, it acts as a tripwire, a safety precaution for the NATO countries in the BSR. Since the cyberattacks, the heightened concerns in Europe has led to the recent accession of Sweden and Finland into the NATO alliance, making the Baltic Sea into a NATO lake, surrounding the Russian Baltic Sea Fleet in Kaliningrad. The geopolitical role of Kaliningrad Oblast will most likely be

continuously utilized as a strong point for the Kremlin as Russian forces stationed in the KO would be able to attack energy supplies and critical infrastructure in the BSR. Interestingly, Russia's local oligarchs are not dedicated supporters of a glorious Russia—they are in it for the money.<sup>16</sup> The locals of KO depend on Moscow's financial support, but the invasion of Ukraine has restricted locals, limiting access to goods, services, etc. from EU countries. These restrictions ultimately hurt KO's local economy. Many locals living in KO believe the war has made a negative impact. Citizens indicate that their lives have become significantly diminished because of accessibility to foreign travel. The escalation of Russian aggression in Ukraine has greatly altered the daily lives of Kaliningraders.<sup>17</sup> Locals could once cross the border to Gdańsk to purchase goods at cheaper prices, so KO depends on local trade to keep its

<sup>14</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, *Estonian Denial of Service Incident*, 2007

<sup>15</sup> Invest in Estonia, *Global Cybersecurity Index: Estonia is the #1 cybersecurity country in the EU*, 2021

<sup>16</sup> Brian Michael Jenkins, *Consequences of the War in Ukraine: The Economic Fallout*, RAND Corporations, 2023

<sup>17</sup> Dominika Studzińska, *Kaliningrad as an isolated zone: the impact of the war in Ukraine on the daily life of the residents of the Kaliningrad region. An introduction to the discussion*, 2023

economy afloat with the suspensions of EU goods to and from KO.

## II. The Suwałki Gap

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The Suwałki Gap, a town just 40 miles wide in northeastern Poland, is politically, economically, and geographically significant as it connects the Baltic States, which are NATO and EU members, with the rest of NATO and the EU. It serves as a transit route for military reinforcements, supplies, and logistics in the event of a crisis or conflict in the region. NATO is able to quickly reinforce and support the Baltic states in case of a military threat and has prefaced its commitment to collective defense. As the Gap lies between the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad Oblast and Belarus, KO's proximity raises concerns of the possibility of isolating the Baltic States from NATO and the EU by cutting off the land connection. Unfortunately, the Suwałki Gap may be the weakest part of the NATO deterrence posture in the region because it

creates a choke point. If Moscow closes the Gap, then NATO would have to resupply Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania by air or sea only. Nevertheless, Moscow launching a significant attack on the Baltic nations would trigger the activation of Article 5 within the North Atlantic Treaty, potentially setting off a chain of events that the Kremlin could struggle to manage effectively in the BSR, which seems highly unlikely given the current state of the conflict in Ukraine. While this potential Russian attack on the Gap may worry military strategists on the NATO end, Kaliningrad Oblast faces a similar vulnerability to being isolated and blockaded by NATO, just as the Baltic States confront the risk posed by Russia in the Gap. KO cannot operate autonomously from Moscow to survive, heavily relying on the Kremlin for direction, stability, reinforcements, and resources. KO faces a major challenge as NATO forces heavily outnumber Russian soldiers. Since 2017, the

United States and its NATO partners have established a robust defense capability in response to a potential Russian attempt to block the region. With the uncertainty of changing security policies on both NATO and Russian ends, the fate of both Kaliningrad Oblast and Suwałki Gap will be unknown.

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