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# **Kaliningrad in the Post-Crimea Russia. A Bastion or a Weak Link?**

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Sergey SUKHANKIN

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**Ifri**

27 rue de la Procession 75740 Paris Cedex 15—FRANCE

Tel.: +33 (0)1 40 61 60 00—Fax: +33 (0)1 40 61 60 60

Email: [accueil@ifri.org](mailto:accueil@ifri.org)

**Website:** [ifri.org](http://ifri.org)

# ***Russie.Nei.Visions***

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## **Author**

**Dr Sergey Sukhankin** is a Senior Fellow at the Jamestown Foundation, an Advisor at Gulf State Analytics (Washington, DC) and a Postdoctoral Fellow with North American and Arctic Defense and Security Network (Trent University, Canada). He received his PhD from the Autonomous University of Barcelona. His areas of interest include Kaliningrad and the Baltic Sea region, Russian information and cyber security, A2/AD and its interpretation in Russia, the Arctic region, and the development of Russian private military companies since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War. He is now increasingly focusing on geo-economic issues (the Northern Sea Route and oil/LNG projects) in the Arctic region. He has consulted or briefed with CSIS (Canada), DIA (USA) and the European Parliament. His project discussing the activities of Russian PMCs, “War by Other Means” (with Jamestown Foundation), informed the United Nations General Assembly report entitled “Use of Mercenaries as a Means of Violating Human Rights and Impeding the Exercise of the Right of Peoples to Self-Determination”. He is currently teaching in MacEwan School of Business in Edmonton (Canada).

# Abstract

Since 2014, Russia's policies toward Kaliningrad Oblast—its westernmost region located between Lithuania and Poland and physically cut off from Russia's main body—have undergone notable transformation. One crucial change was the inception of a policy aimed at remilitarization, which has led toward Kaliningrad's (re)emerging as Russia's military bastion in the west.

However different overall, this policy is to a certain extent reiterating Kaliningrad's path prior to 1991 and the dissolution of the USSR. On the other hand, because of the “sanctions war”, Moscow has tried to decrease Kaliningrad's strategic dependence on third countries in such critical and previously underdeveloped domains as transportation, energy and food security.

This paper explains the logic of Russia's behavior in pursuit of these costly and in many ways rather dangerous—in relation to the remilitarization approach—strategies. The research also strives to maintain a balanced view on successes achieved by Russia as well as its continuing weaknesses.

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# Introduction

Several geopolitical earthquakes that occurred in the 2010s—including the Syrian and Libyan civil wars, and the Ukrainian crisis—resulted in a debacle in political relations between Moscow and its Western counterparts that was unprecedented since the Soviet times. Legitimately or not, the current state of relations between Russia and the “collective West” is now frequently dubbed by leading experts and policymakers as the “Cold War 2.0”.<sup>1</sup> Irrespective of the definition, it is hard to disagree that many of the existential threats evident before 1991 are now becoming a viable reality once again. One of them is the virtually unrestricted military buildup on both sides that could, even unintentionally, lead to an international incident(s) and resulting military escalation. In the long list of negative trends and tendencies marking the worsening ties between Russia and the West, one case has a special symbolic meaning and long pre-1991 foundations: the situation around the rapidly militarizing Kaliningrad Oblast (KO).<sup>2</sup>

Kaliningrad, the Soviet war trophy (1945) and now one of the smallest subjects of the Russian Federation—its current population slightly exceeds one million inhabitants—is located in the eastern part of the Baltic Sea, sandwiched between Poland and Lithuania, both of which are European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members. The geographic location of the oblast (as well as its climatic nature as an ice-free port)—an undisputed advantage for trade, cultural exchange, economic cooperation and diplomatic-political dialogue between the EU and Russia—has become a nuisance, resulting in growing potential for conflict in the Baltic Sea Region (BSR).

This paper takes a multifaceted look at Kaliningrad oblast after 2014, with occasional detours into the past, when it was Russia’s strategic fortress on the Baltic, a symbol of the victorious Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) and a residue of former Soviet control over the eastern part of the BSR. The main goal of this research is to clarify the extent to which the post-2014 developments have transformed both Kaliningrad and the Kremlin’s perception of this tiny entity, physically detached from Russia’s main body yet strategically vital. To

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1. P. Wintour, L. Harding, J. Berger, “Cold War 2.0: How Russia and the West Reheated a Historic Struggle”, *The Guardian*, 24 October 2016, available at: [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com).  
2. In this paper, Kaliningrad Oblast (KO) will be referred to along with Kaliningrad.

underscore these points, this study will analyze Moscow's actions toward Kaliningrad through the lens of two key dimensions: a) policies in the realm of hard security and the restoration of KO's military potential and b) measures aimed at achieving autarchy in the strategic area—energy, food security and logistics—to decrease its dependence on neighboring (“adverse” in Russia's perception) countries in case of further aggravation between Russia and the West.<sup>3</sup>

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3. Iu. Gavrilov, “Otvetim NATO” [We will respond to NATO], *Rossijskaia Gazeta*, 31 May 2021, available at: [www.rg.ru](http://www.rg.ru).

# Eternal Hostage in Geopolitical Competition between Russia and Europe?

Kaliningrad (formerly Königsberg) became *de facto* part of the USSR after the military defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945. Following the imposition of Soviet control, Königsberg/Kaliningrad was left in limbo for some time. Dubbed as “Stalin’s unwanted child”, it remained of marginal importance to the Soviet political leadership until the late 1950s, when it became an integral part of the massive Soviet military buildup on the western flank.<sup>4</sup> During the Soviet period, the development of the oblast was influenced by three main factors:

- militarization, which transformed KO into one of the most heavily militarized spots in Europe, resulting in a severe deformation of the local economy, focused on serving military needs;<sup>5</sup>
- complete economic dependency on the “center” (Moscow) and full integration in the planned economy, shared by the Soviet satellites;
- strict control of information flow, the banning of foreign contacts and restriction of movement within the oblast, resulting in KO’s seclusion.<sup>6</sup>

This distorted development model was broken up by the post-1991 transformation that disrupted the existing supply-chain mechanisms, dealing a severe blow to local economy. On top of that, KO—whose people always felt special compared to the rest of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) for a variety of reasons, including the status of KO as a “maritime” region (many local

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4. Iu. Kostiashev, *Sekretnaia istoriia Kaliningradskoj oblasti. Oчерki 1945–1956* [The secret history of Kaliningrad Oblast. Sketches 1945–1956], Kaliningrad, Terra Baltica, 2009.

5. The oblast played the role of securing Soviet military domination in the region stretching from the Kola Peninsula to the Danish Straits. The overall number of Soviet troops present before 1991 was never revealed, and could only be speculated about. For more information see: K. Jensen, “The Baltic Sea in the Post-Cold War World”, *Naval War College Review*, XLVI(4), 1993, pp. 29-30.

6. Iu. Kostiashev, *Izgnanie Prusskogo dukha, Kak formirovalos’ istoricheskoe soznanie naseleniia Kaliningradskoj oblasti v poslevoennye gody* [Chasing away the spirit of Prussia. How did historical consciousness form in Kaliningrad in the post-war years?], Kaliningrad; Izd. KGU, 2003.



people were employed in sea-related activities) and greater access to foreign goods unavailable to most ordinary Soviet citizens—was hit hard by rapidly mushrooming social problems such as pervasive drug abuse, prostitution, skyrocketing poverty, and a soaring number of cases of HIV/AIDS that shook local morals and self-esteem.<sup>7</sup> As a result, KO slipped into becoming what was described by Western thinkers as the “double periphery”<sup>8</sup>—an entity almost utterly forgotten by Moscow and bypassed by the EU.<sup>9</sup>

The real changes for Kaliningrad occurred between 1999 and 2004, based on several landmark trends. First, Moscow gradually reassessed Kaliningrad’s military-political significance, best expressed in the first military-strategic exercises since 1981, Zapad-99.<sup>10</sup> Second, political transformations firmly integrated Kaliningrad in a centrally supervised administrative-political architecture. Third, Moscow initiated anti-western information campaigns and started portraying KO as Russia’s “besieged fortress” on the Baltic. Later, these trends would blossom, adding new qualities and sophistication.

However, by the mid-2000s it became obvious that the historical opportunity to transform Kaliningrad into a laboratory of cooperation between Russia and the EU had been forfeited. Mutual suspicion and distrust, Russia’s economic and military-political buoyancy and eastward enlargements by both the EU and NATO, combined with regional conflicts in Yugoslavia and Iraq, left virtually no room for dialogue, making Kaliningrad a “hostage” in the geopolitical competition between the great powers.<sup>11</sup>

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7. S. Sukhankin. “Kaliningrad in the ‘Mirror World’: From Soviet ‘Bastion’ to Russian ‘Fortress’”, CIDOB, 2016.

8. P. Joenniemi, J. Prawitz, “Kaliningrad: A Double Periphery?” In: *Kaliningrad: The European Amber Region*, London: Routledge, 1998.

9. The EU allocated economic support to Kaliningrad and tried to engage the oblast in the so-called “Euro Regions”, but did not want to trigger suspicion (given the acute separatism) in Moscow by deeper involvement in Kaliningrad affairs.

10. J. W. Kipp, “Russia’s Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons”, *Military Review*, No. 3, 2001, pp. 27-38.

11. R. Lopata, “Geopolitical Hostage: The Case of Kaliningrad Oblast of the Russian Federation”, *Lithuanian Annual Strategic Review*, Vol. 2, Issue 1, 2004.

# Military-Political Transformations: (Re)Creating the Bastion

For the first time in contemporary history, Moscow explicitly stated its interest in the oblast during one of the toughest times in its history, in December 1941, when the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin clearly articulated his strategic interest in acquiring “non-freezing ports on the Baltic”.<sup>12</sup> In many ways, this episode has a key meaning in understating Russia’s vision of Kaliningrad in its grand strategy in the Western theater.

## Strategic importance of Kaliningrad to Moscow

Russia’s current interest is hinged on four essential pillars: national prestige; the actual military-strategic importance of KO; fears (real and imaginary), and the informational/propagandist dimension.

First, the issue of prestige: despite being economically wracked and politically disintegrated in the 1990s, Moscow demonstrated its readiness to fight secessionist trends with an iron fist. Given contemporary realities, any such talk—perhaps even related to greater autonomy—is inconceivable. For Russia, the ability to maintain sovereignty over Kaliningrad—the only vestige of former Soviet power in the region and a living symbol of the victory over the Nazis—is a matter of reputation and national pride.

Secondly, concerning the military-strategic factor, Kaliningrad is a pivot—along with Kronstadt but, perhaps, offering greater advantages—that secures Russia’s presence and ability to influence developments in the Baltic Sea Region (BSR). Without control over the oblast, Russia would be marginalized, and, from a military point of view, in the case of escalation, the blocking of Kronstadt (by NATO forces) would not be an insurmountable challenge.

The third, “psychological” factor—fears, real and imaginary—logically stems from a combination of the above two aspects. The

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12. O. Rzhesheski, “Vizit A. Idena v Moskvu v dekabre 1941. Peregovory s I.V. Stalinyim I.V.M. Molotovym” [A. Iden’s visit to Moscow in December 1941. Negotiations with J. Stalin], *Novaia i novejshaia istoriia*, No. 2, 1994, pp. 91-95.

words, deeds and intentions—even disconnected from the real state of affairs—of foreign actors, perceived as indicating efforts to reduce Russia’s sovereignty over Kaliningrad, will be viewed in Moscow as a sign of the “creeping advance” of the West and irredentism. Any cause for worry—even if not directly pointed against Russia and/or erroneously construed by Moscow as such—will still be seen by Kremlin as a (covert) sign of aggression and determination to marginalize Russia.

The fourth, “information-propagandist” factor allows Moscow to use the “Kaliningrad card” as an important tool for domestic anti-Western mobilization and a pretext for information campaigns “proving” the West’s readiness to test a model of “hybrid war” against Russia on Kaliningrad. This trend became particularly visible after 2014, yet from an historical point of view its roots go well beyond the Russo-Western conflict over Ukraine.

## The pre-2014 interim

Prior to 1991, KO was an integral part of the Soviet military architecture facing NATO in the west.

After the dissolution of the USSR due to severe budget cuts, local military capabilities were seriously reduced, leading to sweeping demilitarization.<sup>13</sup> Yet, this demilitarization was not part of Kremlin’s well-thought strategic plan; rather, it was a collateral result of the economic collapse. At the same time, Moscow did undertake steps to lay the foundation for reconsidering KO’s military-political role, including, among others, the formation of the Kaliningrad Special Region (KOR) in 1994, as well as conducting the first strategic military exercises since 1981, Zapad-99, which alarmed neighboring states.

The interim between 2008 and 2013 witnessed the beginning of a qualitative transformation of Kaliningrad’s military capabilities, coupled with strengthening anti-Western rhetoric emanating from the very top of Russia’s political architecture that threatened to use KO as a tool in increasing confrontation with the West.<sup>14</sup> At this juncture, Russia’s main arguments boiled down to two concerns: first, the eastward “expansion” of NATO that brought foreign military infrastructure to the Russian national borders and continued “strangulation” of Kaliningrad because of Polish and Lithuanian

13. P. Wolffsen, A. Sergunin, *Kaliningrad: A Russian Exclave or a Pilot Region?*, Nizhny Novgorod: Nizhny Novgorod State Linguistic University Press, 2004, pp. 13-14.

14. “Vstrechi privedut k ‘priamym rezul’tatam” [Meeting will lead to “direct results”], *Vojenno Promyshlennij Kurier*, 27(293), 15 July 2009, available at: [www.vpk-news.ru](http://www.vpk-news.ru).

accession to the EU (2004).<sup>15</sup> As a result of the continued military buildup—which, however, could not have been launched by Russia in full due to the lack of solid pretext—by 2013, Kaliningrad had been turned into the “amber pistol at the temple of Europe”.<sup>16</sup> From a strictly military point of view, however, its capabilities were limited.

## The post-Crimea world order and its implications

Russia’s annexation of Crimea (March 2014) and intensification of military escalation in the Donbass, (un)officially supported by Moscow, resulted in a debacle in political relations between Russia and the West. The situation began to resemble Cold War moments in its most dangerous manifestations—aside, perhaps, from the Cuban missile crisis (1962) and some other episodes. KO became one of the theaters where the acuteness of disagreement between the two sides was best exemplified as, for the second time in its post-1945 history, it was turned into a military bastion, frequently referred to in the West as an Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) “bubble”.<sup>17</sup> While Russian military experts do not typically use this concept—preferring to rely on an “area of limited access” (*zona ogranichennogo dostupa*)—this does not change the essence of Russia’s logic in rebuilding Kaliningrad’s military potential.<sup>18</sup> From a military point of view, Russia’s efforts were premised on a determination to work out a set of measures aimed at reducing NATO’s offensive capabilities in case of potential military escalation in the BSR. Russia’s main concern is based on a scenario where NATO forces could rapidly overrun Kaliningrad’s defense. Of particular concern for the Russian side is the “initial period of war” concept, where an attacking party can inflict serious military damage through a surprise attack that involves massive use of the most up-to-date means of war. This aspect was clearly emphasized in an article by Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia Valery Gerasimov in 2016.<sup>19</sup>

Analysis of open Russian sources about the process of KO remilitarization shows its clear difference with the pre-1991 strategy, when Soviet actions were primarily about ensuring quantitative supremacy over NATO forces through amassing locally deployed

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15. This is the reason for Moscow’s lack of action, given Russia’s awareness of the subject as well as the general inevitability of Poland and Lithuania joining the EU.

16. V. Abramov, “Iantarnyj pistolet, on zhe mishen” [The amber pistol is the target], *Nezavisimaja Gazeta*, 14 November 2011, available at: [www.ng.ru](http://www.ng.ru).

17. S. Sukhankin, “David vs. Goliath: Kaliningrad Oblast as Russia’s A2/AD ‘Bubble’”, *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, 2019, 2(1), pp. 95-110.

18. D. Boltentkov, “Zakryt’ volnu: kak sredstva radioelektronnoj bor’by izmeniat silu flota” [To block the wave: How means of radio-electronic warfare will change sea power], *Izvestia*, 22 November 2020, available at: [www.iz.ru](http://www.iz.ru).

19. V. Gerasimov, “Po opytu Sirii” [Following the Syrian experience], *Voenna Promyshlennij Kur’er*, 9 March 2016, available at: [www.vpk-news.ru](http://www.vpk-news.ru).

forces. Today, the strategy is very different: instead of pouring in troops to achieve total conventional superiority (as used to be the case), Russia is boosting selected pillars aimed at withstanding an initial attack by NATO forces, limiting access to its territory, and, if necessary, disrupting the ability of a potential attacker to operate therein.<sup>20</sup> The role ascribed to the development of (counter)offensive capabilities is a lesser one compared to defensive capabilities. This approach directly stems from the changing nature of war, clearly showcased between 1999–2014 in the series of regional conflicts that escalated in the Balkans, Eastern Europe (Ukraine), North Africa and the Middle East. To emphasize this point, underscoring the key military transformations experienced by Kaliningrad, it makes sense to take a more detailed look at three key areas/pillars of military buildup, where Russia's efforts have been most pronounced.

First, proliferating capabilities in the realm of electronic warfare (EW): following the realities of contemporary warfare, Russia's efforts in this domain have been primarily concerned with:

- expanding intelligence-gathering and surveillance capabilities to pre-empt a surprise attack;
- preparing for anti-drone operations—one of the key priorities that emerged from experiences drawn from Syria and Libya, and especially the recent Karabakh conflict;
- increasing capabilities to disrupt adversarial command and control (C2) structures, given NATO's increasing reliance on new technologies and artificial intelligence (AI).

While it makes little sense to provide a description of each means of EW deployed in KO, some of them should be mentioned:

- Voronezh-DM UHF early-warning radar (deployed near Pionersky town);
- Sunflower-E short-range over-the-horizon surface-wave radar (deployed in 2019<sup>21</sup>), capable of detecting sea surface and air objects at a maximum distance of 500 kilometers—it can reportedly simultaneously detect, track and classify 300 sea and 100 aerial targets in automatic mode;<sup>22</sup>
- the Divnomorye mobile electronic warfare complex (deployed

20. S. Sukhankin, "From 'Bridge of Cooperation' to A2/AD 'Bubble': The Dangerous Transformation of Kaliningrad Oblast", *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 31, 2018, pp. 15-36.

21. "Na Dal'nem Vostoke i Baltike razvernuli RLS 'Podsolnukh'" [RLS "Podsolnukh" deployed on the Far East and Baltic], *Ria Novosti*, 30 October 2020, available at: [www.ria.ru](http://www.ria.ru).

22. It needs to be noted that its capabilities have been disputed by some Western writers. See: D. Axe, "Don't Believe the Hype: Russia's Sunflower Radar Can't Track Stealth Fighters", *National Interest*, 23 March 2020, available at: [www.nationalinterest.org](http://www.nationalinterest.org).

in 2020), one of the most up-to-date EW means that Russia has at its disposal;<sup>23</sup>

- the Murmansk-BN electronic suppression systems (deployed in 2019), which can suppress targets at a range of up to 5,000 km (some sources claim 8,000 km);<sup>24</sup>
- the Samarkand-PU EW complex, whose technical characteristics remain classified.<sup>25</sup>

Another essential aspect related to Kaliningrad-deployed means of EW is premised on the fact that Moscow perceives KO as one of the three key pillars for upholding Russia's strategic security on the western flank. Specifically, according to Russian sources, with the upcoming deployment of the Yakhroma early-warning missile-defense radar in the Crimea-Armavir-Kaliningrad perimeter, Russian armed forces will acquire extended capabilities in terms of spotting and tracking all types of ballistic missiles launched at the territory of Russia or its allies.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, information has spread—especially amid growing political destabilization in Belarus—that the Konteiner-type over-the-horizon radar (which underwent combat duty for the first time in Mordovia on December 1, 2019) could be deployed in Kaliningrad as a substitute for the facilities—the 43<sup>rd</sup> Communications Center of the Russian Navy (Minsk oblast) and the 474<sup>th</sup> Communication Center Baranavichy—located in Belarus. According to Russian sources, the Konteiner radar can track mass takeoffs of aircraft (including jets, helicopters, UAVs) and cruise missile/hypersonic weapon launches at a distance of up to 3,000 kilometers. Some experts have suggested that simply voicing these plans sends an unequivocal message to Minsk that the Russian facilities on Belarusian territory can be easily replaced.<sup>27</sup> For now, however, given the development of the political situation in Belarus and Minsk-Moscow relations, the urgency of such a move is debatable.

The second pillar is the construction of the integrated, deeply echeloned anti-aircraft/missile defense system (PVO-PRO). The main goal boils down to protecting KO's aerial space against flying objects

23. "Novejšij kompleks REB 'Divnomorije' razmeshchen pod Kaliningradom" [The most up-to-date EW complex 'Divnomorije' has been deployed near Kaliningrad], *Yandex*, 16 November 2020, available at: [www.yandex.ru](http://www.yandex.ru).

24. A. Ramm, A. Kozachenko, B. Stepovoy, "Glushitelnyj uspekh: kompleks REB nakroet Evropu iz pod Kaliningrada" [A spoofing success: An EW complex will cover Europe from Kaliningrad], *Izvestia*, 26 April 2019, available at: [www.iz.ru](http://www.iz.ru).

25. "Minoborony Rossii razvernulo komplekсы 'Samarkand' v riade regionov strany i Belorussii" [Russia's Defense Ministry has deployed the "Samarkand" EW complexes in some Russian regions and Belarus], *Kommersant*, 28 October 2018, available at: [www.kommersant.ru](http://www.kommersant.ru).

26. S. Sukhankin, "Crimea: The Expanding Military Capabilities of Russia's Area Denial Zone in the Black Sea", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, 27 April 2021, available at: [www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org).

27. K. Riabov, "RLS 'Kontejner': polgoda do boevogo dezhurstva" [RLS "Konteyner": Half a year until deployment], *Armejskij Vestnik*, 5 December 2018, available at: [www.army-news.org](http://www.army-news.org).

(fighting jets, bombers, helicopters, drones, different types of missiles) in the range of between 15 and 500 km. In this architecture, the first layer is composed of the S-400 surface-to-air missile systems. In the future (starting in 2025 or even earlier<sup>28</sup>) Russia is likely to deploy the S-500 Prometey complexes reportedly capable of dealing with stealth warplanes like the F-22, F-35, and the B-2, as well as certain types of low-orbit spacecraft.<sup>29</sup> The second layer is primarily composed of the Pantsir-S1 surface-to-air missiles and anti-aircraft artillery systems, the TOR-M2, and the Buk short-range surface-to-air missile systems.<sup>30</sup> In the case of military escalation, this layer would be tasked with dealing with drones and/or military helicopters approaching KO territory.

Speaking about these two layers—EW and PVO/PRO—two aspects need to be highlighted. On the one hand, the Syrian and Libyan conflicts demonstrated some imperfections inherent in the above-mentioned PVO/PRO elements (especially, the Pantsir); on the other hand, the most recent Karabakh war (September 27–November 9, 2020) highlighted some of the deficiencies intrinsic in the former element.<sup>31</sup> While it would not be wise to make far-reaching assumptions about the quality of these elements on the basis of these conflicts—Russia did not take direct part in either of them (except for Syria) and these elements were not navigated by Russian military personnel—these aspects still need to be taken into account.

The third pillar is the proliferation of precision-strike capabilities, where Russia mainly relies on three main components, including:

- The 3K60 Bal coastal defense missile systems—to provide cover to territorial waters, naval bases, other coastal facilities and infrastructure—seen as one of the two key elements of local anti-ship defense capabilities;
- The K-300P Bastion-P coastal missile complexes (used in Syria in 2016), which represent the second major type of anti-ship/vessels defense. The Bastion system is equipped with P-800 “Oniks” missiles with a killing range of approximately 600 km (the actual range might be even greater). This complex could also be equipped with the world’s first maneuvering

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28. R. Kretsul, A. Lavrov, “S ‘Prometeem’ v raschete: Minoborony nachalo gotovit’ kadry dlia S-500” [With the “Prometheus” onboard: Russia’s Defense Ministry states that it is preparing personnel for work with the S-500], *Izvestia*, 13 April 2021, available at: [www.iz.ru](http://www.iz.ru).

29. D. Majumdar, “No-Fly Zone: Russia’s Next-Gen S-500 to Start Tests This Year”, *National Interest*, 1st February 2016, available at: [www.nationalinterest.org](http://www.nationalinterest.org).

30. L. Stepusheva, “Voennyj ekspert: Rossiia ne budet zhdat’ udara po Kaliningradu, a otvetit preventivno” [Military expert: Russia will not be waiting for a military strike on Kaliningrad, but will act preventively], *Voennaiia Pravda*, 29 September 2020, available at: [www.militarypravda.ru](http://www.militarypravda.ru).

31. S. Sukhankin, “The Second Karabakh War: Lessons and Implications for Russia”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, 5 January 2021, [www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org).

hypersonic missile, the ‘Zircon’,<sup>32</sup> which can reportedly strike targets within a range of 400 km, with both conventional and nuclear warheads.<sup>33</sup>

- The Iskander-M mobile short-range ballistic missile systems, permanently deployed in KO since 2018,<sup>34</sup> are nuclear-capable and reportedly equipped with at least seven types of missiles.<sup>35</sup> While no further details have been revealed, some Russian officials, including KBM deputy director Valery Drobinoga, have contended that Iskander-M complexes are now equipped with hypersonic missiles with a maximum speed of Mach 6 (around 7,350 kilometers per hour).<sup>36</sup> It should be noted that deployment of this type of weaponry, unlike the other above-mentioned pieces, is not confined to hard security. Rather, its deployment needs to be also seen as an information-psychological and diplomatic-political gesture. Starting from 2008/9, Moscow has been playing the “Iskander card”, threatening to deploy these complexes as a response to the USA’s potential European Ballistic Missile Defense System initiatives.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, following the deployment, one of Russia’s most authoritative military experts, editor-in-chief of *Arsenal Otechestva* magazine, Colonel (ret.) Viktor Murakhovsky, characterized the fact of the deployment of these complexes as a “serious argument for NATO to start talks with Russia about military de-escalation in Europe”.<sup>38</sup>

That said, the above measures aimed at restoring Kaliningrad’s military potential—commensurate, of course, with Russia’s own capabilities, the changing nature of warfare and the so-called principle of “asymmetric response”—make up only a part of the overall collection of measures introduced by Russia since 2014. Also worth mentioning is the process of partial restoration of the local naval capabilities—in many ways in line with the Russian “Maritime Doctrine-2015”, which highlighted, among other aspects, the

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32. “Raketa ‘Tsirkon’ stanovitsia koshmarnoiu realnost’iu dlia zapada” [The “Zircon” missile is becoming a nightmare for the West], *Regnum*, 13 October 2020, available at: [www.regnum.ru](http://www.regnum.ru).

33. S. Sukhankin, “‘Catch up and Surpass’: Russia Claims to Have Tested Hypersonic Missiles”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, 1 March 2017, available at: [www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org).

34. S. Sukhankin, “The End of ‘Hide and Seek’: Russian Iskanders Permanently in Kaliningrad”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, 23 February 2018, available at: [www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org).

35. “Raketnyj kompleks Iskander-M poluchil novye tipy raket” [The Iskander-M complex has received new types of missiles], *TASS*, 14 September 2017, available at: [www.tass.ru](http://www.tass.ru).

36. “Rossijskie konstruktory zaiavili ob otsutstvii u Zapada sredstv protiv Iskanderov” [Russian engineers claimed the West does not have means against the Iskanders], *Charter 97*, 11 February 2018, available at: [www.charter97.org](http://www.charter97.org).

37. “Poslanie Prezidenta RF Federal’nomu Sobraniuu. Polnaia versiiia” [Address to the Federation Council by the President of the Russian Federation. Full version], *Ria Novosti*, 5 November 2008, available at: [www.ria.ru](http://www.ria.ru).

38. “Rossiia vydvinula ‘zheleznyj argument’ v dialoge s NATO po razmeshcheniiu vojsk v Evrope” [Russia has put forth a “solid argument” in the dialogue with NATO about troops deployment in Europe], *Expert*, 15 February 2018, available at: [www.expert.ru](http://www.expert.ru).



“inadmissibility of NATO eastward enlargement”<sup>39</sup>—resulting in the improvement of the C2 structure of the Baltic Sea Fleet.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, Russia’s actions in reinforcing local units of territorial defense—in line with Gerasimov’s argument about “control of territory”<sup>41</sup>—which includes amassing local paramilitary groups is undoubtedly a noteworthy development requiring special attention.<sup>42</sup>

Also, in addition to the above-indicated measures (primarily aimed at boosting local military-technical potential), some notable transformations designed to upgrade local military capabilities in terms of number and quality of troops have taken place. Specifically, in 2016, the 11<sup>th</sup> Army Corps was created as a part of the Baltic fleet.<sup>43</sup> Later in 2021, it was reinforced by two Motor Rifle regiments, which means that now the main land forces deployed in KO, aside from those already mentioned, include the following formations:<sup>44</sup> 11<sup>th</sup> Tank Regiment; 7<sup>th</sup> Guards Motor Rifle Regiment; 79<sup>th</sup> Guards Motor Rifle Brigade; 336<sup>th</sup> Guards Naval Infantry Brigade; 25<sup>th</sup> Coastal Missile Brigade; 152<sup>nd</sup> Guards Missile Brigade; 244<sup>th</sup> Guards Artillery Brigade; 183<sup>rd</sup> Fleet Ground Forces Rocket Regiment; 22<sup>nd</sup> Guards Air Defense Regiment; 44<sup>th</sup> Air Defense Division (consisting of 183<sup>rd</sup> Guards Air Defense Regiment and 1545<sup>th</sup> Air Defense Regiment).<sup>45</sup>

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39. “Morskaja doktrina Rossijskoj Federatsii” [Russia’s naval doctrine], Kremlin, 26 July 2015, available at: [www.kremlin.ru](http://www.kremlin.ru).

40. S. Sukhankin, “From ‘Bridge of Cooperation’ to A2/AD ‘Bubble’: The Dangerous Transformation of Kaliningrad Oblast”, *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 31:1, pp. 15-36, 2018.

41. V. Gerasimov, “Tsennost’ nauki v predvidenii” [The value of science is in forecasting], *Voenna-Promyshlennyj Kur’er*, 26 February 2013, available at: [www.vpk-news.ru](http://www.vpk-news.ru).

42. S. Sukhankin, “Russian Irregulars and PMCs in the ‘Heart’ of Europe: The Case of Kaliningrad Oblast”, The Jamestown Foundation, 24 April 2020, available at: [www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org).

43. “Shojgu: odinnadsat’j armejskij korpus sformirovan v sostave Baltflota” [Shoygu: 11<sup>th</sup> Army Corps has been formed in the structure of the Baltic Fleet], *Ria Novosti*, 29 June 2016, available at: [www.ria.ru](http://www.ria.ru).

44. “Voennaia gruppirovka v Kaliningradskoj oblasti usilena dvumia motostrelkovymi polkami” [Kaliningrad armed forces have been reinforced with two motor rifle regiments], *Interfax*, 28 April 2021, available at: [www.militarynews.ru](http://www.militarynews.ru).

45. For more information, see: R. D. Hooker Jr., *How to defend the Baltic States*, Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation, October 2019, available at: [www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org).

# Departing from Foreign Dependency: Kaliningrad and the “Sanctions War”

Being physically separated from the rest of Russia, the Kaliningrad Oblast is facing several challenges affecting its economic development, including:

- lack of strategic natural resources—primarily, oil, natural gas and various types of metals indispensable for production of end goods—causing dependence on Russian supplies;
- a small local market—with slightly more than one million inhabitants—with reduced purchasing potential/capabilities;
- underdevelopment of the local agricultural sector and strategic dependence on imports.

All these issues have one common aspect. In one way or another, Kaliningrad has been historically heavily reliant on neighboring states, which, in turn, makes it excessively dependent on the state of political relations between Russia and its Western counterparts. For Moscow, this dependency is a serious challenge that constrains freedom of movement vis-à-vis Western counterparts. For years, however, these problems were not dealt with by Moscow, which opted to rely on temporary solutions. However, the introduction of anti-Russian economic sanctions after 2014, which hit KO with particular severity,<sup>46</sup> magnified these issues, forcing Russia to take a much more proactive approach.

In its policies aimed at reducing Kaliningrad’s dependency on neighboring states—both Lithuania and Poland joined the anti-Russian economic sanctions, while relations with Belarus have not met Russia’s expectations—the Kremlin took several decisive moves along three main lines:<sup>47</sup> policies in the realm of facilitation of transportation and transit; policies in the realm of energy dependency on third countries; policies aimed at achieving self-sufficiency in food security.

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46. S. Sukhankin, “Kaliningrad Oblast and the ‘Sanctions War’: Genuine Progress or Avoidable Stagnation?”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, 7 October 2020, available at: [www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org).

47. “Tovarooborot Belarusi s Kaliningradskoj oblast’iu b’et rekordy” [Trade Balance Between Belarus and Kaliningrad Is Setting New Records], *Voenna-Politicheskoe Obozrenie*, 6 August 2019, available at: [www.belpo.com](http://www.belpo.com).

First, policies in the realm of transportation and transit. To reduce Kaliningrad's dependence on the EU, back in 2004 Moscow proposed that Minsk switch its cargo flow from Klaipeda (Lithuania) and Ventspils (Latvia) to KO-based seaports. However, despite the rhetoric Minsk never fulfilled its promises, which has caused friction in the Moscow-Minsk-Kaliningrad triangle.<sup>48</sup> Russian sources confirm that, in 2020, “practically all Russian transit to Kaliningrad goes [overland] via Lithuania mainly through Belarus or, to a much more limited extent, Latvia, which approximates to almost 6 million tons per annum”.<sup>49</sup> This trend might be changed in the next several years, however. Given Minsk's growing economic and political dependency on Russia—which might eventually lead to unification of Belarus and Russia in one form or another—and rapidly worsening ties with the EU, in the future Belarus is likely to concede to Russia's demands and restructure (at least in part) its cargo in a way that would cater for Russia's economic and political interests. So far, however, Russia has not been able to work out any long-term viable solution for Kaliningrad to dramatically decrease its overland transport dependency on third countries, even though some moves in this direction have been made.

Second, policies in the realm of energy dependency. Throughout the 1990s–2000s, energy security was one of the most acute issues faced by KO. While local power-generating capabilities remained weak and unable to satisfy local electricity needs, Kaliningrad almost totally depended on energy supplies via the Minsk–Vilnius–Kaunas–Kaliningrad gas pipeline. Following the outbreak of the “sanctions war”, Russia launched an ambitious program aimed at reducing Kaliningrad's dependence on third parties in the energy domain. Importantly, this became one of the focal points explicitly outlined in the Russian Doctrine of Energy Security, adopted in 2019. Article 27 (point a) states that the “development of energy infrastructure in Eastern Siberia, the Arctic region, the Far East, the North Caucasus, Crimea and Kaliningrad Oblast” was to become a central priority for Russia's energy policy.<sup>50</sup>

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48. A. Gamov, A. Denisenkov, “Glava Kaliningradskoj oblasti Anton Alikhanov—o sotrudnichestve s Belarus'iu: Minskie ‘kuznechiki’ preobrazili gorod” [Head of Kaliningrad Oblast Anton Alikhanov—on cooperation with Belarus: The Minsk “grasshoppers” have changed the city], *Souznoe Veche*, 15 February 2017, available at: [www.souzveche.ru](http://www.souzveche.ru).

49. “Na tranzitnye gruzi v region predlagaiut stavit' elektronnye plomby” [It has been proposed to mark cargoes with electronic stamps], *RBK*, 23 November 2020, available at: [www.kaliningrad.rbc.ru](http://www.kaliningrad.rbc.ru).

50. “Ukaz Prezidenta RF ot 13 maia 2019 №.216 ‘Ob utverzhdenii Doktriny energeticheskoi bezopasnosti Rossijskoj Federatsii’” [Presidential Decree from May 13, 2019 “On the Adoption of the Doctrine of Energy Security of the Russian Federation”], *Garant*, 14 May 2019, available at: [www.garant.ru](http://www.garant.ru).

In pursuit of this strategy, Moscow concentrated its efforts on three strategic dimensions:<sup>51</sup>

- Electrification of the oblast, which ultimately led to the launch of four main power plants: the 900-megawatt (MW) Kaliningradskaya Thermal Power Plant 2 (TPP-2), Talakhovskaya TPP (159 MW), Mayakovskaya TPP (157.3 MW) and Pregolskaya TPP (455.2 MW), whose cumulative production capacity now fully satisfies KO's annual electricity consumption.
- Gasification, where the most ambitious initiative was the launching of the Floating Storage Regasification Unit (FSRU) Marshal Vasilevskiy, as well as the construction of an underground gas storage facility. These measures allow Russia to transport LNG from its territory, Ust Luga, via the Baltic Sea and regasify it in KO, becoming a viable alternative to the Minsk–Vilnius–Kaunas–Kaliningrad pipeline.
- Digitalization of the local energy infrastructure, aimed at modernizing the local power grid into the most up-to-date system in Russia. For this purpose, the Public Joint Stock Company (PJSC) Rosseti, fully in charge of this strategic initiative, has diverted approximately \$285 million (between 2015 and 2020) from several separate regional projects.

Russia's steps in reducing KO's dependence on third parties in terms of energy security has, arguably, been one of the main successes in the post-2014 period. Despite very high costs, Russia's main achievement in the realm of energy security has become its ability to create an alternative means of supply that could be activated over a brief period—a prospect that would have been utterly unrealistic several years ago. For now, however, Russia continues using the Minsk–Vilnius–Kaunas–Kaliningrad pipeline to supply the oblast with natural gas; this is primarily driven by economic considerations, since completely switching to the alternative mode of supply would incur large economic losses.

Third, achieving self-sufficiency in food security. Akin to energy, this domain has remained one of the most problematic spots for KO since the early 1990s. A combination of factors—the weakness of local agriculture, the strength of foreign competitors and lack of attention from the federal center—did not allow KO to fully cover its basic needs in essential food products. Quite logically, two decades of oblivion coupled with Western sanctions and Russia's countersanctions had a massive negative impact on the oblast: with prices peaking (the sanctions-related effect), many imported products became simply unavailable (due to

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51. S. Sukhankin, "The Belarus Factor in Kaliningrad's Security Lifeline to Russia", Jamestown Foundation, 29 January 2021, available at: [www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org).

countersanctions) to local consumers. Later, Moscow—via subsidies, the development of local agriculture and the redirection of imports—managed to achieve some stability. This said, overall, Kremlin’s policies in this realm have yielded mixed results. On the bright side, for the first time in its post-1991 history the local agrarian sector is now able to (almost fully) satisfy local needs in basic commodities, while in some sectors KO is even able to export the surplus.<sup>52</sup> In 2019, the last stable year before the pandemic, in terms of collection of legumes and cereals KO became second in Russia and first in corn and rapeseed.<sup>53</sup> All in all, in 2020 the overall amount of agricultural products produced in KO stood at 42.5 billion (approximately EUR 488 million), specifically: milk, serials and potatoes (satisfying 100 percent of local need); meat (90 percent); dairy (84 percent); eggs (82 percent); and vegetables (68 percent).<sup>54</sup>

On the other hand, however, the much praised policy of import substitution has not fully achieved its main goal. The reduction of imports from the EU has enabled the generation of income for non-Western countries such as Belarus, Serbia, Chile, Macedonia and Morocco, but increased transportation costs have resulted in very high prices of many commodities.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, despite exemplary “destruction” of products from the EU as well as toughening of anti-smuggling policies, the smuggling of food/staples from the EU is thriving.<sup>56</sup> On top of that, it appears that massive investments earmarked for some sectors of local agriculture (including grain) have become unprofitable:<sup>57</sup> producing more than KO is able to consume, the surplus cannot be exported, given a combination of factors (sanctions, relative lack of local grain elevators for storage, and weakness of infrastructure of transportation).<sup>58</sup>

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52. For instance, in 2018 KO exported agricultural products worth \$840 million. For more information see: “Oblastnye vlasti otmechaiut ser’eznyj rost eksporta selkhozproduktov” [Oblast authorities noted an impressive growth in export of agricultural goods], *Novyj Kaliningrad*, 29 October 2018, available at: [www.newkaliningrad.ru](http://www.newkaliningrad.ru).

53. For more information see: “Minselkhoz: urozhaj zernovykh dostig naivysshikh pokazatelej za vsiu istoriiu oblasti” [Ministry of Agriculture: The yield of crops has reached its peak in the oblast’s history], *Novyj Kaliningrad*, 14 October 2019, available at: [www.newkaliningrad.ru](http://www.newkaliningrad.ru).

54. “Alikhanov: Kaliningradskaia oblast’ obespechivaet sebja ovoshchami na 68%” [Alikhanov: Kaliningrad oblast is satisfying 68 percent of its own needs in vegetables], *Komsomol’skaia Pravda*, 16 June 2021, available at: [www.kaliningrad.kp.ru](http://www.kaliningrad.kp.ru).

55. “Bez prezhnikh tsen: kak otrazilis’ na regione shest’ let produktovogo embargo” [Without previous prices: How have the six years of the product embargo affected the region?], *Novyj Kaliningrad*, 29 August 2020, available at: [www.newkaliningrad.ru](http://www.newkaliningrad.ru).

56. “Meria: kaliningradtsy na udivlenie ochen’ obradovalis’ vozvrashcheniiu sanktsionshchikov” [Major’s office: Surprisingly, Kaliningraders have rejoiced in the comeback of *sanktsionshchiki*], *Novyj Kaliningrad*, 21 September 2020, available at: [www.newkaliningrad.ru](http://www.newkaliningrad.ru).

57. In terms of investment, agriculture has become the third largest area of investments (ceding the first two positions to energy and logistics). For more information see: “Kaliningradscoe s/h stalo krupnejšej rynočnoj otrasl’iu po ob’emu investitsij” [Kaliningrad Agriculture has Become the Largest Market Area in Terms of Investment], *Rugrad*, 9 April 2019, available at: [www.rugrad.eu](http://www.rugrad.eu).

58. “Minselkhoz: urozhaj zernovykh dostig naivysshikh pokazatelej za vsiu istoriiu oblasti” [Minselkhoz: The amount of crops collected has surpassed all previous records in the oblast’s history], *Novyj Kaliningrad*, 14 October 2019, available at: [www.newkaliningrad.ru](http://www.newkaliningrad.ru).

# Outlook

Reflecting on the transformations undergone by KO after 2014 as well as Russia's logic behind this process, it needs to be recognized that Kaliningrad's strategic role for Russia is much more multifaceted and complex than just military concerns. Sovereignty over Kaliningrad—now increasingly referred to as “Russia's bastion in the West” by politicians, the expert community and even the hierarchs of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC)—is a matter of Russia's national pride and prestige.<sup>59</sup> In comparison with the 1990s–mid 2000s, KO has gone through a remarkable transformation, which has changed the image of the oblast in a decisive way. It could be argued that—along with Saint Petersburg, Moscow, Sochi and Kazan—Kaliningrad, which was chosen to host four games in the 2018 FIFA World Cup, now presents one of very few “glittering” (by Russia's standards) facets associated with Russia's economic exuberance of the post-2000 era. However, despite some notable successes and achievements, the overall picture of Kaliningrad's development in a long(er)-term period raises some questions. The most important one is, perhaps: What are the main foundations of Russia's strategy on Kaliningrad, and what place does Moscow allocate to KO with regards to its general approach to the BSR? While Russian officials repeat that Russia does not want to follow the Soviet model again, many Russian policies—in the economics, business, and security domains—resemble the pre-1991 model. This is particularly visible in Kaliningrad, which since 2014 has firmly stepped on the path of becoming an isolated, centrally controlled (even more than before), remilitarizing entity, economically dependent on the center.<sup>60</sup> While the form is different due to Russia's integration in the global economy, and vestiges of the post-communist transformation, this path in many ways resembles the same crooked model dismantled by the collapse of the USSR, and now seemingly repeating itself. With that said, three aspects need to be underscored.

First, the (partial) rebuilding of Kaliningrad's military potential within a very limited period is a noteworthy development, but its practical impact is likely to be limited and, most importantly,

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59. S. Sukhankin, “The ‘Russkij Mir’ as Mission: Kaliningrad Between the ‘Altar’ and the ‘Throne’ 2009–2015”, University of Joensuu, 2017.

60. In this regard, one should recall the case of the Small Border Traffic (“Mały ruch graniczny”), as well as Warsaw proposals to cancel all visa requirements for Kaliningraders entering Poland—which was created in 2011 and cancelled in 2016 as a result of Russia's actions in Ukraine.

potentially counter-productive for Russia (and Kaliningrad).<sup>61</sup> By converting the oblast into an “amber pistol”, Moscow is simultaneously transforming it into a target that, in the case of escalation, would be hit first. Moreover, given the gruesome pre-1991 experience, the pronounced emphasis on developing military capabilities—now carried out by Russia in a better, calculated way—poses multiple risks and challenges to economic sustainability, and curtails foreign contacts, *de facto* isolating KO from the rest of the rapidly developing Baltic Sea region.

Secondly, by reducing external contacts and eradicating the vestiges of the “Prussian spirit”, as well as running anti-Polish/Lithuanian information campaigns in the oblast, Moscow hopes to achieve full information security and safeguard the oblast against “detrimental influence” from abroad, thereby eradicating separatist/secessionist tendencies (or the prospect of their emergence).<sup>62</sup> This approach is profoundly mistaken and deeply corrupt in nature. While Kaliningrad—even in the darkest moments of its post-1991 history—has never supported separatism, remaining loyal to the federal center, the intensification of artificial isolation and the fomenting of anti-Western sentiments among its people is a path to nowhere. The only outcome it will achieve will be the development of a twisted self-perception and erroneous views of the outer world—to what used to be the case before 1991. This is particularly dangerous now, when Russia is a part of the global economy and Kaliningrad, by virtue of geography, is inseparable from its neighbors. This already happened after 1991, yet the lesson was not learned.

Thirdly, policies aimed at achieving full autarchy—in energy and food security as well as transportation—result not only in reduction of overdependence on third parties (which makes sense from various points of view), but, given the broader trend, could increase Kaliningrad’s separation from its neighbors and exclusion from the economically rapidly developing BSR at large. Additionally, the extra demands on the Russian budget will—given the volatility of prices for non-renewable sources of energy, as well as the existence of other economically unsustainable and center-dependent regions such as Crimea, Chechnya and Dagestan—have a negative impact on the Russian economy overall.

Constructing its policy toward Russia in the BSR—where KO is one of the bones of contention between Moscow and EU/NATO—Western countries should clearly understand one thing. Exerting extra pressure on KO will have only one outcome. Fear of economic

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61. The true capabilities of Russia’s PVO-PRO systems and EW are still to be fully discovered.

62. This policy, which was characteristic of the Soviet period, did not end with the demise of the USSR. The new wave started after 2014.

losses and greater isolation will not persuade Russia to depart from its post-2014 course. On the contrary, Moscow will increase its efforts in beefing up KO's military potential, a step that—thanks to propaganda—will be understood and largely embraced in both Kaliningrad and the rest of Russia.



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27 rue de la Procession 75740 Paris Cedex 15 – France

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