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## *Kaliningrad: a Russian strategic enclave in the midst of tension with NATO and the EU*

### **Abstract**

On the southern shores of the Baltic Sea, and between the borders of Poland and Lithuania, lies a Russian Oblast of 15,100 square kilometres in area. Its distance from Pskov Oblast, the closest geographical point in Russia, is more than 400 kilometres. This region is a strategic enclave in the rear of the European Union and NATO's military dominance, which undoubtedly provides a presence as disturbing as provocative.

In this territory, Russia has deployed numerous units, vehicles and military equipment. The arms build-up on the borders with NATO in recent years has only further reinforced the martial and operational character of this «island» dependent on Moscow. The development and impact of this situation is of great interest for the defence and security dynamics of our environment, as well as the responses to it.

### **Keywords**

Russia, European Union, NATO, Kaliningrad, Baltic Sea, Poland, Lithuania

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## Vertebration and historical context of the enclave

**K**önigsberg—the historical name of the city of Kaliningrad until 1946—was founded in the 13th century after the Prussian crusades of the Teutonic Knights. Under Polish, Bohemian or Prussian rule—among others—until the 19th century, during the Second Reich (1871-1918) it was one of the main cities of the German Empire. After World War II and the Russian siege of the earlier Nazi advance in the aftermath of the war, the city came under USSR rule. With the death of Mikhail Kalinin in 1946, the Soviets changed the name of Königsberg to Kaliningrad (city of Kalinin), in honour of the late Bolshevik revolutionary.

This was only the first step in the profound Russification of the city that was to follow. The official language was changed from German to Russian, and the city was repopulated with citizens from other territories of the USSR, in addition to post-war reconstruction.

But what really reinforced this strategy on the part of the Kremlin, in Sukhankin's words, were the measures taken in terms of physical separation from adjacent territories—Poland and Lithuania, also under Soviet rule—and the prohibition of unauthorised access to the Oblast<sup>1</sup>. Kaliningrad was thus set up as a citadel on the fringes of the Soviet federal regions and under the direct orbit of Moscow. Two fundamental reasons justified this strategic articulation of what had just become an enclave: firstly, a symbol of the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany in what had been historical Prussian territory; and secondly, the establishment of a military and naval base in one of the most sensitive points of the Baltic Sea—the beginning of the disturbing and provocative presence mentioned above.

Although little is known about the size and scope of the military deployment in Kaliningrad during its Soviet era, there is a prevailing view among those who have researched it, which assumes that it was sufficiently large and massive to be seen not only as a checkpoint against the Allies in the Baltic Sea and Eastern Europe, but also as a bastion to entrench the subjugation of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

When the USSR collapsed in 1991, both Poland and Lithuania had already disassociated themselves from Moscow's communist orbit. Kaliningrad, however, remained unchanged as Soviet territory, leaving several options open in the face of this historic *impasse*. Naturally, a continuist path whereby the enclave would continue with its military and strategic character in the new Russia; on the other hand, the possibility of structuring the area as a link between Eastern Europe and the rest of the continent; or even the formation of a “Baltic Hong Kong”<sup>2</sup>.

1 Sukhankin, S. (2018). *Bridge to nowhere: Kaliningrado on geopolitical map between Russia and Europe*. Doctoral thesis supervised by Francisco Veiga (thes. dir.) Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. Pp. 59. [Date consulted: 1 October 2021]. Available at: [https://www.educacion.gob.es/teseo/imprimirFicheroTesis.do?idFichero=61ryn\\_c5s9zE%3D](https://www.educacion.gob.es/teseo/imprimirFicheroTesis.do?idFichero=61ryn_c5s9zE%3D)

2 Lopata, R. (2008). *Kaliningrado y las relaciones UE-Rusia: ¿obstáculo u oportunidad?* [Kaliningrad and EU-Russia relations: obstacle or opportunity?]. *Documentos CIDOB [CIDOB Documents]*. Europa, N.º 3, pp. 6. Available at: <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=3049194>. [Date

In the end, as is well known, the first option prospered: Kaliningrad has since become a Russian “island” in the middle of two countries that have recently separated from the USSR. The military presence was considerably reduced thereafter. The Cold War was over, and with it the border tension that had existed between the two blocs. However, in 1994 it was declared a special defence region under the direct command of the commander of the Baltic Navy. This decision was contextualised by NATO’s near expansion in the region: in 1991 the Visegrad Group<sup>3</sup> was formed, which had as one of its objectives the entry of its member countries into NATO. This was followed by Poland in 1999 and Lithuania in 2004.

But the changes were not only at the military level. Under Boris Yeltsin, several key economic and political reforms were carried out that redefined the enclave’s status. The significant reduction of the military presence brought with it the dismantling of much of the arms industry that had hitherto proliferated in Kaliningrad. This conversion was driven by the Kremlin towards the extraction of oil and amber in the area, as will be detailed below. However, the major economic reform was the creation of the Special Economic Zone, which, in order to correct trade imbalances with neighbouring countries and boost the territory’s growth, established tax and tariff advantages. According to Saiz Álvarez, the aim was to combat the steady decline of the Oblast and reduce the flow of investment outwards, or even to other Russian economic centres such as St Petersburg.

Between 2000-2005, with Vladimir Putin as Russia’s leader, a series of new reforms were adopted, generally aimed at greater understanding and cooperation with the EU—without this meaning the disappearance of the most fundamental reticence and the presence of such an extraordinary border. These were measures on transport, trade, air fares and social policies, among others, which were more open-minded and adapted to the profound changes that were to take place in Eastern Europe as a result of the incorporation of so many countries into the EU. In short, a turn of the rudder to avoid economic isolation in the face of the imminent removal of trade barriers in neighbouring countries.

At the time, according to Torrecuadrada, European concerns about the enclave were mainly based on border management, environmental pollution, the fight against AIDS, and relations in the field of justice and home affairs<sup>4</sup>. In his article on the implications of the Baltic Sea for Spain, Rodríguez de Espona emphasised the risk posed

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of consultation: 1/10/2021]. The Baltic Hong Kong option refers to a similar configuration to the Chinese city based on its port, resources and location.

<sup>3</sup> Formed by Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia.

<sup>4</sup> Torrecuadrada García-Lozano, S. (2005). Uno de los problemas derivados de las nuevas fronteras europeas: Kaliningrado. [One of the problems arising from the new European borders. Kaliningrad]. *Agenda Internacional* [International Agenda]. N.º 22, pp. 177. [Date consulted: 5 October 2021]. Available at: [https://dialnet.unirioja.es/buscar/documentos?querysDismax.DOCUMENTAL\\_TODO=torrecuadrada+kaliningrado](https://dialnet.unirioja.es/buscar/documentos?querysDismax.DOCUMENTAL_TODO=torrecuadrada+kaliningrado).

by the new naval routes of the mafias, as well as their spread from Kaliningrad or St Petersburg<sup>5</sup>. Similarly, Karpenko went so far as to claim that both Russia and the EU were then defining their strategies for achieving stability within the framework of the dynamic development of multilateral cooperation<sup>6</sup>. In short, notoriously less intense relationship factors than have been reached in recent years as discussed below.

However, the big stage on which this new relationship became apparent was the celebrations marking the 750th anniversary of the founding of the city of Kaliningrad. These included slogans referring to the city as an enclave “in the heart of Europe”. In fact, Putin invited Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schröder to this meeting, which seemed to open a new period of EU relations with its giant neighbour, were it not for what happened with Poland and Lithuania. Both countries were not invited to the celebrations, a gesture that was perceived with considerable unease in the two new EU member States.

This event can be interpreted as a prologue to the change of attitude that would take place in the following five years (2005-2010). Russia relaxes the path of appeasement and begins to act more as a power oriented towards a set of strategic interests that will prevail over understanding with the West. López Mora blames this new attitude, among other reasons, on the EU’s neighbourhood policies, which were seen by Moscow as a challenge to its geopolitical interests<sup>7</sup>.

One of the most representative examples of this new dynamic of geostrategic action would be the start of tensions from 2007 onwards over missile and missile shield deployments. The international press noted at the time that this was the worst scenario in relations between the two countries since the end of the Cold War. The US and Russia were once again experiencing an escalation of tension in the border space between the European allies and Russian territory. This situation seems to have normalised and has continued up to the present day, even intensifying markedly at certain moments, although it has also experienced a few breaks that have not been fruitful in the long term. Thus, one of the first glimpses of this was the threatening–yet another–

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5 Rodríguez de Espona, R. J. (2008). El mar Báltico como escenario estratégico: implicaciones para España [The Baltic Sea as a strategic scenario: implications for Spain]. Jorge Juan Chair, University of La Coruña. Pp. 180. [Date consulted: 5/10/2021]. Available at: <https://ruc.udc.es/dspace/bitstream/handle/2183/9034/CC95art10.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

6 Karpenko, A. (2006). Regionalization and identity: the subjectivity of Kaliningrad. NISCI Discussion Papers, No. 10, pp. 280. [Date consulted: 5 October 2021]. Available at: <https://revistas.ucm.es/index.php/UNIS/article/view/UNIS0606130277A/28145>

7 López Mora, F. (2015). La Unión Europea y la Federación de Rusia en sus dinámicas históricas contemporáneas: cooperación institucional y recelos de vecindad [The European Union and the Russian Federation in their contemporary historical dynamics: institutional cooperation and neighbourhood misgivings]. Cuadernos de Estrategia [Strategy Papers]. N.º 178, pp. 88. [Date consulted: 6 October 2021]. Available in: [https://www.academia.edu/19305220/\\_La\\_Uni%C3%B3n\\_Europea\\_y\\_la\\_Federaci%C3%B3n\\_de\\_Rusia\\_en\\_sus\\_din%C3%A1micas\\_hist%C3%B3ricas\\_contempor%C3%A1neas\\_cooperaci%C3%B3n\\_institucional\\_y\\_recelos\\_de\\_vecindad\\_en\\_Rusia\\_bajo\\_el\\_liderazgo\\_de\\_Putin\\_La\\_nueva\\_estrategia\\_rusa\\_a\\_la\\_b%C3%BAsqueda\\_de\\_su\\_liderazgo\\_regional\\_y\\_el\\_reforzamiento\\_como\\_actor\\_global](https://www.academia.edu/19305220/_La_Uni%C3%B3n_Europea_y_la_Federaci%C3%B3n_de_Rusia_en_sus_din%C3%A1micas_hist%C3%B3ricas_contempor%C3%A1neas_cooperaci%C3%B3n_institucional_y_recelos_de_vecindad_en_Rusia_bajo_el_liderazgo_de_Putin_La_nueva_estrategia_rusa_a_la_b%C3%BAsqueda_de_su_liderazgo_regional_y_el_reforzamiento_como_actor_global).

er-deployment of tactical rockets in 2008 in Kaliningrad, an operation with which Dmitry Medvedev responded—once again—to the reinforcement of the US missile defence shield in the Eastern European-Baltic space<sup>8</sup>. This action had already been warned only a year earlier by Sergei Ivanov, Russia's deputy prime minister<sup>9</sup>. It is worth noting that this context is the same as that of the South Ossetia war, an equally contentious and disruptive focus of Russia's relations with NATO.

In 2010, Barack Obama and Medvedev signed the START III agreement in Prague; a truce in the midst of worsening relations between Russia and the US and its allies. The pact established a notable reduction in the deployment of missiles, ballistics and arsenals by the two blocs, which meant a new path of appeasement that, although it extended until February 2021—the treaty's deadline—, did not represent a change of trend in the medium term.

In 2013, the Ukraine crisis erupted, a new cause of deep rifts between the US and the European Union and Russia. The conflict would lead to the annexation of Crimea by the latter and a war in the east of the country that is still raging today. The new Russian manoeuvres did not only extend around Ukraine's neighbour: Kaliningrad, among other strategic points, was militarily reinforced with deployments that prompted Poland and Lithuania to call for greater protection from what they perceived as a compulsion<sup>10</sup>. The operation involved the installation of Iskander missiles, extremely powerful projectiles, as will be discussed in more detail in the section on Russian deployment.

In short, recent years have not only confirmed the strategic character of the Kaliningrad enclave, but have also re-launched it as such at the mercy of the political and military moves taken by influential actors in its context.

## Characteristics of the territory and strategic location

Kaliningrad's geographic location and resources make it a strategic location that no state would want to get rid of. Russia has shown that it is fully aware of these features and their potential ramifications.

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8 El Periódico de Extremadura. (6 November 2008). Rusia redobla el desafío a la OTAN enviando misiles a Kaliningrado [Russia redoubles its defiance of NATO by sending missiles to Kaliningrad]. [Date consulted: 6 October 2021]. Available at: <https://www.elperiodicoextremadura.com/internacional/2008/11/06/rusia-redobla-desafio-otan-enviando-45223488.html>

9 Thomson Financial. (4 July 2007). Rusia amenaza con instalar misiles en el enclave de Kaliningrado [Russia threatens to install missiles in the Kaliningrad enclave]. [Date consulted: 7/10/2021]. Available at: <https://www.economista.es/mercados-cotizaciones/noticias/240315/07/07/Rusia-amenaza-con-instalar-misiles-en-el-enclave-de-Kaliningrado.html>

10 Gallego, J. (2014). Polonia llama a consultas a los aliados de la OTAN por sentirse amenazada por Rusia [Poland calls NATO allies for consultations because it feels threatened by Russia]. *El Mundo*, 3 March. [Date consulted: 7/10/2021]. Available at: <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2014/03/03/5314dae1268e3ef1758b4580.html>

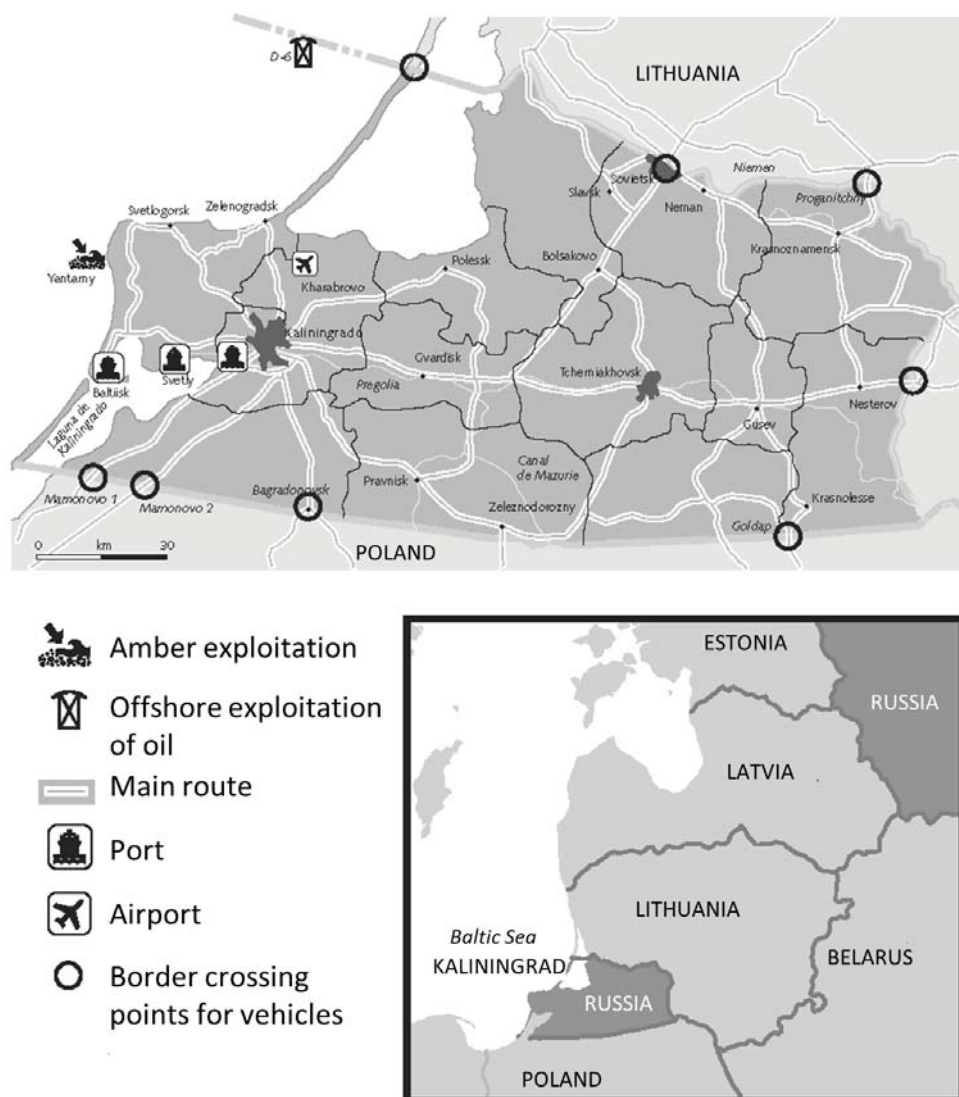


Figure 1. Map and location of Kaliningrad. Source. La Documentation française, 2004, in LOPATA, Raimundas: «Kaliningrado y las relaciones UE-Rusia: ¿obstáculo u oportunidad? [Kaliningrad and EU-Russia relations: obstacle or opportunity?]

The Oblast, as noted above, borders politically with Lithuania and Poland almost equally in border area. The rest of the region’s contours are the shores of the Baltic Sea, and in particular, the most prized shores of the Baltic Sea in Russia. This is because it is the only port in the country –together with Svetly<sup>11</sup>– in the whole of this Sea, which does not freeze at any time of the year thanks to its warm waters. And outside it, it only happens in the Black Sea port of Sevastopol—despite the countless kilometres of coastline of the Ural region. Thus, although the HQ of the Russian Baltic Fleet is in

<sup>11</sup> The port is also located on the Vistula Lagoon, on the north bank of the mouth of the Pregolia, about 15 kilometres from Kaliningrad.

Kronstadt<sup>12</sup>, the majority of the naval deployment is stationed in Kaliningrad, specifically at the Baltiysk base<sup>13</sup>.

This naval base is home to everything from large ship refuelling depots to numerous cranes and docks for ship repairs. It is also linked by rail to the port of Svetly; the town of Primorsk; and the Yantar shipyard. The importance and deployment of this base make it the starting point for numerous Russian Navy operations ranging from the fight against piracy in the Indian Ocean to logistical support in the Red Sea, such as deployments to South Africa<sup>14</sup> and Port Sudan. For his part, Villanueva López justifies the enormous importance of this dock with up to five fundamental reasons. The first of these was advance protection for St Petersburg and the Leningrad Oblast. Second, Russian projection capabilities that threaten foreign ports. Third, support for grey zone operations. Fourth, the strategic listening and radar systems so close to NATO. And lastly, the installation of anti-ship and anti-aircraft systems adjacent to it<sup>15</sup>.

These conditions have also meant that one of Russia's largest shipyards is also located on the shores of the enclave. In this case, the Yantar is located at the mouth of the Pregolia River, through which ships are floated directly into the Vistula Lagoon. The volume of naval production and its strategic location make the shipyard particularly sensitive for the Russian fleet. In recent years, amphibious assault ships<sup>16</sup>, guided missile frigates<sup>17</sup>, and huge fishing trawlers<sup>18</sup>, among others, have been built there—both for the national fleet and for foreign powers or even private companies.

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12 Port located on the island of Kotlin, 30 kilometres from St Petersburg, and linked by road both north and south to the nearest mainland extremities.

13 Treviño, J. M.<sup>a</sup>. La Marina rusa en el mar Negro [Russian Navy in the Black Sea]. *Defence.com Magazine*. [Date consulted: 8/10/2021]. Available at: <https://www.defensa.com/ayer-noticia/la-marina-rusa-en-el-mar-negro>

14 Noticiero de la Revista General de Marina [News from General de Marina Magazine]. *News year 2020*, June, volume 278, pp. 990. [Date consulted: 30/6/2021]. Available at: <https://armada.defensa.gob.es/archivo/rgm/2020/06/rgmjuno20.pdf>

15 Villanueva López, C. (2019). La geopolítica de las bases militares (XIII) [The geopolitics of military bases (IX)]. Documento de Investigación del Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos (IEEE) [Research Document from the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies]. [Date consulted: 8/10/2021]. Available at: [https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_investig/2019/DIEEEINVo6-2019GEOPOLITICABASESXIII.pdf](https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_investig/2019/DIEEEINVo6-2019GEOPOLITICABASESXIII.pdf)

16 Industrias pesqueras. El astillero ruso Yantar ultima la entrega de su segundo arrastrero que operará en Kamchatka [Russian shipyard Yantar is finalising the delivery of its second trawler to operate in Kamchatka]. [Date consulted: 10/6/2021]. Available at: <https://industriaspesqueras.com/noticia-59067-sec-Naval>

17 Galaxia militar. (2020) Rusia entregará dos fragatas de misiles guiados a la India para 2024 [Russia to deliver two guided missile frigates to India by 2024]. [Date consulted: 8/10/2021]. Available at: <http://galaxiamilitar.es/rusia-entregara-2-fragatas-de-misiles-guiados-a-la-india-para-2024/>

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One of the main natural resources of the Oblast is its amber deposits. While the Baltic Sea is the main source of this fossilised resin, Kaliningrad is the area with the most fossilised resin. Its main exports are for jewellery and ornamentation, with Poland being the most common destination for this type of work. The importance of these exports has led the Russian government to promote the creation of a cluster with the aim of boosting this industry and establishing conditions conducive to its growth, as stated in the cluster's public file<sup>19</sup>.

Likewise, the enclave is equally rich and decisive due to its natural oil reserves under the depths of its Baltic coastline. With a large volume of crude oil (6.73x10<sup>-3</sup> tcf of shale oil), offshore developments in its prospective areas produce more than what is extracted in Poland and Lithuania.

The creation of the aforementioned Special Economic Zone led to the enclave becoming a point of entry and/or manufacture for numerous products that are either already manufactured in Europe or are manufactured in Kaliningrad from products coming from there. This is the case of the powerful automobile industry –for example, the reconditioning of German BMW vehicles and the assembly of Chevrolet and KIA– or the production of a third of the televisions sold in Russia. Kaliningrad is, in a sense, one of the main trade gateways in western Russia. However, this special status has failed to correct the imbalances in wealth levels compared to the rest of the country. It remains a relatively poor region in Russia, where black market and illicit activities such as smuggling and the mafia are rampant. The illegal tobacco trade has repeatedly preoccupied European authorities and has even been the subject of debate in the European Parliament. The main reason for this concern on the EU side is the high volume that it has reached: the value of this activity has been estimated at USD 1 billion<sup>20</sup>. In this way, Herrero De La Fuente went so far as to describe the Special Economic Zone project as a failure<sup>21</sup>. In the author's opinion, tax and tariff advantages have not revitalised its economy, which is significantly inferior to that of its neighbouring countries.

19 Government of Russia. Clúster de la industria del ámbar de la provincia de Kaliningrado [Cluster of amber industry of Kaliningrad oblast]. [Date consulted: 8/10/2021]. Available at: [https://gisp.gov.ru/gisip/pdf/clusters\\_gen\\_info/193/es/Cl%C3%BAster%20de%20la%20industria%20del%20%C3%A1mbar%20de%20la%20provincia%20de%20Kaliningrado.pdf](https://gisp.gov.ru/gisip/pdf/clusters_gen_info/193/es/Cl%C3%BAster%20de%20la%20industria%20del%20%C3%A1mbar%20de%20la%20provincia%20de%20Kaliningrado.pdf). The document positions the cluster with a key specialisation in jewellery products, and extends additional specialisations to the production of furniture, construction materials and glass, among others.

20 Shleynov, R., et al. Made to be smuggled: Russian contraband cigarettes 'flooding EU'. The Center for Public Integrity. [Date consulted: 8 October 2021]. Available at: <https://publicintegrity.org/health/made-to-be-smuggled/>. This article was referenced in an oral question in the European Parliament in October 2013. The questioner was German MEP Michael Theurer on behalf of the Committee on Budgetary Control. [Date consulted: 8 October 2021]. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/O-7-2013-000105\\_ES.html?redirect](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/O-7-2013-000105_ES.html?redirect)

21 Herrero de la Fuente, M. (2003). El futuro de Kaliningrado ante la ampliación de la UE y la OTAN [The future of Kaliningrad in the face of EU and NATO enlargement]. Constitutional Notebooks of the Fadrique Furió Ceriol Chair. No. 43-44, pp.52. [Date consulted: 9/10/2021]. Available at: <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=1129348>

However, new investments are on the horizon that could give an economic boost to the region, which is comparatively poorer than the rest of Russia, let alone its adjacent EU neighbours. There are plans to build a huge battery factory that will have a major impact on the Oblast. Russia's state-owned nuclear energy company Rosatom will have completed a plant specialising in energy storage and lithium-ion cell production by 2026<sup>22</sup>. The development of tourism in the area could also become another engine of growth for the enclave. Re-establishing itself as a prominent holiday resort—as it was during the Soviet era thanks to its seaside resorts near the Baltic coast—the Vistula river ridge, or the former sites of old Napoleonic battles could revitalise Kaliningrad.

The Oblast is also home to two of the main radars of the Russian air traffic control and reconnaissance system on the Baltic coast: one at the Baltiysk naval base, the other at the town of Primorsk. Together with those at Donskoye and Yantarne, these stations are the cardinal points of Russia's western aviation security<sup>23</sup>. In addition, two other secondary radars are also located there: one at Kaliningrad airport and the other in the town of Chernyakhovsk, which is 90 km from the regional capital.

On the other hand, the Suwalki Corridor is another factor that not only reinforces the geostrategic character of the enclave, but also reinforces it in the event of contingencies. In the event of a conflict with Russia in the area, the likelihood of the Kremlin ordering the occupation of such a crucial thread would, according to experts, be very high<sup>24</sup>. At 96 kilometres long, it would not only link the enclave to the rest of Russia, but also isolate the Baltic republics from NATO by land, inhibiting Lithuania's border with Poland. Van Herpen, who compares the Suwalki runner to the Fulda runner<sup>25</sup>, contextualises this fine line with the ease with which Russia could reach Tallinn and Riga: 60 hours in a space where it is very easy to be cornered<sup>26</sup>.

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22 Roca, J. A. (2021). Rosatom construirá una gigafábrica de baterías en Kaliningrado [Rosatom to build a giant battery factory in Kaliningrad]. *El Periódico de la Energía*, 17 September. [Date consulted: 8 October 2021]. Available at: <https://elperiodicodelaenergia.com/rosatom-construira-una-gigafabrica-de-baterias-en-kaliningrado/>

23 Zyla, M. (2014). Kaliningrad oblast in the military system of the Russian Federation. *Security and Defence Quarterly*. Vol. 25. No. 3, pp. 114. [Date consulted: 10/10/2021]. Available at: <https://sin.akademia.mil.pl/people/details/marek.zyla>

24 Iriarte, D. (2017). El «corredor de Suwalki» la franja de la que depende la seguridad de Europa [The «Suwalki Corridor» - the strip on which Europe's security depends]. *The Confidential*, 21 August. [Date consulted: 10/10/2021]. Available at: [https://www.elconfidencial.com/mundo/2017-08-21/franja-suwalki-seguridad-europa-rusia\\_1429582/](https://www.elconfidencial.com/mundo/2017-08-21/franja-suwalki-seguridad-europa-rusia_1429582/)

25 Corridor between Hesse and Thuringia with Frankfurt, which in the Cold War separated the GDR and the FRG through two huge underground tunnels, through which a tank attack could have taken place.

26 Van Herpen, M. (2017). La respuesta al nuevo imperialismo ruso: el dispar destino de Ucrania, Belarús y las Repúblicas Bálticas [The response to the new Russian imperialism: the disparate fates of Ukraine, Belarus and the Baltic Republics]. CIDOB Monographs Collection 2017. [Date consulted: 10 October 2021]. Available at: [https://www.cidob.org/es/articulos/monografias/war\\_in\\_peacetime\\_](https://www.cidob.org/es/articulos/monografias/war_in_peacetime_)

## Escalation of tension

From 2013 to the present, Russia has extensively strengthened its military presence in Kaliningrad, adding to its growing importance for a Kremlin in growing rivalry with the EU and NATO. The hiatuses of understanding between the giant and its Western neighbours have been dissipating and stabilising into a new relationship of tension and distance.

Between 2015 and 2016, NATO installed a missile defence shield—also known as an anti-nuclear shield—to protect Europe from external threats from the East. It was equipped with eight SM-3 type ballistic missiles, disaggregated into three different batteries. While this dam had been put in place according to the Atlantic alliance in the face of hypothetical attacks from Iran or North Korea<sup>27</sup>, Russia took it as a new border and military challenge. Putin made a move and gave an equally forceful response. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, while stressing that it was not a threat to Moscow, acknowledged that the new armour was capable of shooting down some Russian missiles as well<sup>28</sup>.

Taken as a new affront, the Kremlin ordered the installation of the controversial Iskander missiles in response to the new missile shield. The remarkable and sophisticated qualities of this type of missile set alarm bells ringing in Allied defence structures. The Iskander can reach a speed of *mach 5* (hypersonic), and can fly at an altitude of 40,000 metres, beyond the recognition of the vast majority of radars. However, its weakness is its electronic fragility, as it can be deflected or hindered by radio frequency signals<sup>29</sup>. Despite this drawback, its risk, speed and ability to evade radar poses a potential danger to EU and NATO borders. So far, this has been perhaps the greatest Russian threat to Europe since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR.

In response to this move, the US sought to strengthen its military presence in the Baltic states. In early 2017, in the final days of Barack Obama's presidency, a convoy of more than 3,500 troops was dispatched along with tanks and heavy vehicles.

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[russia\\_s\\_strategy\\_on\\_nato\\_s\\_eastern\\_and\\_southern\\_flanks/la\\_respuesta\\_al\\_nuevo\\_imperialismo\\_ruso\\_el\\_dispar\\_destino\\_de\\_ucrania\\_belarus\\_y\\_las\\_republicas\\_balticas](https://elpais.com/internacional/2016/05/12/actualidad/1463044946_021885.html)

27 The range ratio of the Taepoong-2 (North Korea) and Sejil-2 (Iran) missiles can reach up to 8,000 km or 2,000 km respectively, which is enough to reach the EU.

28 Abellán, L. (2016). EE. UU. y la OTAN activan el escudo antimisiles en plena tensión con Rusia [The US and NATO activate the missile defence shield in the midst of tensions with Russia]. *El País*, 12 May 2016. [Date consulted: 11/10/2021]. Available at: [https://elpais.com/internacional/2016/05/12/actualidad/1463044946\\_021885.html](https://elpais.com/internacional/2016/05/12/actualidad/1463044946_021885.html)

29 Manrique Montojo, F. (2018). Iskander M. La última ratio del Zar [The Tsar's Last Ratio]. *Revista del Ejército de Tierra Español*. N.º 931. [Date consulted: 11 October 2021]. Available at: [https://ejercito.defensa.gob.es/Galerias/multimedia/revista-ejercito/2018/931/accesible/Revista\\_Ejercito\\_Accesible.pdf](https://ejercito.defensa.gob.es/Galerias/multimedia/revista-ejercito/2018/931/accesible/Revista_Ejercito_Accesible.pdf)



Figure 2. Map of the range perimeter of Iskander missiles deployed in Kaliningrad. Source. Military and Commercial Technology. Available at: <https://thaimilitaryandasianregion.blogspot.com/2017/06/iskander-tactical-ballistic-missile.html>. Date consulted: 12 October 2021.

NATO also took part in this replica, involving military units from several of its member states, including Spain. This was agreed at the NATO Defence Ministers' meeting in October 2016, under the framework of what was signed at the Warsaw Summit in July 2016. The Spanish mission consisted of the participation of a Tactical Sub-Group in Latvia, under Canadian leadership. The Spanish government's Department of National Security's own press release cited the deployment of Iskander missiles as one of the most worrying issues at the meeting of the counterparts of European defence executives<sup>30</sup>.

However, it does not appear that this new deployment was a forceful action against the missiles. In fact, NATO did not officially respond to them until 2020, almost three years after the first installations. Stoltenberg's message was to strengthen air and missile defence, improve combat readiness, and increase missile warning time<sup>31</sup>. Specifically, these objectives will be realised through the installation of Patriot and SAMP/T batteries in some countries; the modernisation

<sup>30</sup> Department of National Security of the Government of Spain. Los ministros de Defensa de la OTAN se reúnen para adaptar sus acciones a los retos de seguridad en los nuevos escenarios estratégicos [NATO defence ministers meet to adapt their actions to the security challenges of new strategic scenarios]. [Date consulted: 11 October 2021]. Press release at: <https://www.dsn.gob.es/es/actualidad/sala-prensa/ministros-defensa-otan-se-re%C3%BAnen-para-adaptar-sus-acciones-retos-seguridad>

<sup>31</sup> Topwar. La OTAN prometió responder al despliegue de Iskander-M OTRK con nuevos misiles [NATO promised to respond to the deployment of Iskander-M OTRK with new missiles]. [Date consulted: 11 October 2021]. Available at: <https://es.topwar.ru/166691-v-nato-poobeschali-otvetit-narazmeschenie-otrk-iskander-m-s-novymi-raketami.html>

of intercontinental ballistic missiles; and the development of a nuclear-powered cruise missile<sup>32</sup>.

In 2020 Donald Trump announced that the US would abandon the Open Skies Treaty, an international agreement signed in 2002 by several countries for aerial reconnaissance, with extensive military movement control and weapons-carrying capabilities. In May 2021, President Joe Biden confirmed the decision taken by his predecessor and implemented it. This march is contextualised by the aforementioned international tension with Russia, as its missile deployment breakthrough eventually became incompatible with that treaty. So much so that they took the same decision *ipso facto* after the American exit. In June, Putin announced that Russia would leave the pact on 18 December 2021, although he would reconsider his decision if the US decided to go back to it<sup>33</sup>.

The summer of 2021 saw the last notable movements before the publication of this article. Russia has taken the decision to reinforce its western flank with the provision of 20 new battalions with 2,000 pieces of weapons equipment, some of which will be deployed in the Kaliningrad enclave, the size of which is unknown<sup>34</sup>. Moreover, this operation includes Belarus, where the Lukashenko regime is advancing its relations with the Kremlin at the behest of its international isolation from the West.

## Conclusions

The Kaliningrad enclave has not only reaffirmed its geostrategic status and character in recent years, but also pronounced it in the context of escalating NATO-EU tensions with Russia.

Similarly, as discussed in the previous pages, it is not one factor, nor a limited set of factors, that determines this provocative situation at these borders. From the very configuration of the enclave itself, to a Baltic harbour where the waters never freeze, to an outstanding amber production, they form the backbone of a compendium of causes that make the enclave of enormous interest.

32 Las Provincias. (2020). La OTAN reforzará su escudo antimisiles ante el rearme ruso [NATO to strengthen its missile defence shield in the face of Russian rearmament]. Las Provincias, 17 June 2020. [Date consulted: 11 October 2021]. Available at: <https://www.lasprovincias.es/internacional/otan-reforzara-escudo-20200617210459-ntrc.html>

33 Europa Press. (2020). Putin promulga la ley sobre la retirada de Rusia del Tratado de Cielos Abiertos [Putin promulgates the law on Russia's withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty]. June. [Date consulted: 11/10/2021]. Available at: <https://www.europapress.es/internacional/noticia-putin-promulga-ley-retirada-rusia-tratado-cielos-abiertos-20210607100613.html>

34 Sahuquillo, M.<sup>a</sup> (2021). Rusia exhibe fuerza militar en plena escalada de tensión con la OTAN [Russia flexes military muscle amid escalating tensions with NATO]. El País. 2 June 2021. [Date consulted: 11 October 2021]. Available at: <https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-06-02/rusia-exhibe-fuerza-militar-en-plena-escalada-de-tension-con-la-otan.html>

Its growing significance stems from the EU and NATO's increasingly acrimonious relationship with Russia. Rearmaments, deployments and, above all, reported statements and announcements have made Kaliningrad a sharp thermometer of bilateral relations. We could thus say that, given the question Torres Cazorla posed in 2003<sup>35</sup> as to whether Kaliningrad—which he described at the time as a micro-problem—would be a gauge of this tension, it has indeed been, and with blatant justifications.

Moreover, given the development of the latest rifts, and the lack of any prospect of an end to them, Kaliningrad will almost certainly remain a hotspot for the EU and NATO. The steps and decisions taken in this dynamic of cold confrontation become increasingly risky in view of the next response that might be adopted from the Kremlin. The deployment of the Iskander and recent troop movements have shown that Russia is not afraid to challenge a NATO that is slower to respond to its eastern adversary. Thus, given the development of current conflicts such as Ukraine, if allies want to maintain their influence, interests, and of course, the guaranteed defence of Western values, an unequivocal common position must be defined—marking red lines for possible new risks—and diplomatic efforts further deepened.

In short, the Baltic area and its possible political and military implications are of particular importance for Spain and its allies. Any disputes that may continue to arise affect us as Europeans and members of the Atlantic Alliance. Kaliningrad, like the vast majority of enclaves around the world, and despite its relative isolation from the rest of the country, is a position, even a threat, on a strategic axis with a high potential for conflict.

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35 Torres Cazorla, M.<sup>a</sup> I. (2003). Kaliningrado un microproblema enclavado en Europa [Kaliningrad a micro-problem embedded in Europe]. *Constitutional Notebooks of the Fadrique Furió Ceriol Chair*. N.º 43-44. [Date consulted: 11 October 2021]. Available at: [https://dialnet.unirioja.es/buscar/documentos?query=Dismax.DOCUMENTAL\\_TODO=torres+cazorla+kaliningrado](https://dialnet.unirioja.es/buscar/documentos?query=Dismax.DOCUMENTAL_TODO=torres+cazorla+kaliningrado)

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