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The EuroMaidan in 2013-2014 showed Russia's unwillingness to recognise the existence of a sovereign Ukraine still perceived by Moscow as within its natural sphere of influence. The subsequent military intervention triggered tensions between Russia and its neighbours and with the West. However, evidence suggests that Ukraine might not be the only trouble hotspot and that the Baltic Sea region (BSR) remains a strategic goal in Moscow's ambitions.

This chapter aims to explore and discuss the main threats and challenges to the BSR that flow from Russia's aggressive attitude to the region as a whole, as well as to individual countries. Kaliningrad Oblast – the westernmost Russian enclave on the Baltic – plays a pivotal role and mission in the Kremlin's strategy and goals.

Kaliningrad: From “double periphery” to the vanguard of the “Russian World”

The collapse of the USSR in 1991 and the breakdown of the “Iron Curtain” inflicted a severe blow to the Russian posture on the Baltic and downsized its geopolitical ambitions. The emergence of independent and staunchly pro-Euro-Atlantic Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland as well as a unified Germany drastically reduced Russia's influence.

Nevertheless, in spite of economic calamity and a wave of separatism that struck the country in the early 1990s, Russia was able to keep the Kaliningrad Oblast, a territory annexed by the Soviet Union in 1945 and considered since then an asset of pivotal importance in a region perceived as vital. During the Cold War, Kaliningrad remained one of the most militarised spots in the world and served as a “military outpost” of the USSR, ensuring military predominance over NATO.

The dissolution of the USSR altered the balance of powers in the region, rendering Kaliningrad physically isolated from the mainland by the borders of newly created sovereign countries. Influenced by the end of confrontation between the West and the USSR a significant number

of domestic and external observers and policymakers predicted Kaliningrad would soon become a “Baltic Hong Kong”, a bridge of cooperation between Europe and Russia. Among other things it was hoped that the huge gap in mutual understanding resulting from decades of alienation could be overcome with the help of Kaliningrad as Russian “gateway to Europe”.

Regretfully, these dreams and hopes were not destined to materialise. In the 1990s Russia did not have any coherent strategy pertaining to the future of its westernmost region. Even though the Kremlin was very well aware of the upcoming enlargement of the EU that was to turn Kaliningrad into an enclave, nothing was done. These policies – to be more precise lack of actions – from the side of the Kremlin had a dire effect: within a very brief period the oblast deteriorated into a “double periphery”: the Russian HIV/AIDS capital, and the “Baltic smugglers capital” (Sukhankin, 2016a). This dramatic transformation negatively affected the outlook of the local population in every possible way. But for the Russian authorities it was not a difficult task to direct public anger against “liberals” and the West. Russian propaganda (at the time rather unsophisticated and making its first steps, but still connected with the Soviet period) would portray the city as a “Russian citadel strangled by the West”.

As far as facts are concerned, these and similar arguments had very little (if any at all) to do with the reality. The Euroregion Baltic (ERB)² and Northern Dimension initiatives³ were specifically created to integrate Kaliningrad into the “Baltic Sea rim”, proliferate economic and cultural ties with other regional players and alleviate the consequences of post-Soviet transition. Moreover, Poland had done extensive work promoting the initiation of the Small Border Traffic (SBT) zone, meeting the staunch opposition of the Kremlin. This finally started to function in 2012 only to be later revoked by Warsaw after Russia-sponsored hostilities in Ukraine erupted.

In stark contrast to 1990s expectations, Kaliningrad Oblast has turned into a “pawn” in a power play with NATO and a sort of a regional “scarecrow”. In this regard, it is worth mentioning the dividing line between the Soviet and contemporary periods. Prior to 1991 the role of the oblast was primarily reduced to being an isolated military outpost tasked with securing Soviet military superiority over the region. Today, things are much more complicated than used to be the case: aside from the military compound Moscow has added a non-military one. Together these pose a probably even greater threat than before 1991.

2. Euroregion Baltic (ERB) was established in February 1998 and is a politically solid and well-anchored cooperation in the south-east of the Baltic Sea region, consisting of eight regions of Denmark, Lithuania, Poland, Russia and Sweden. It was the first Euroregion to formally include a partner from the Russian Federation.
3. The Northern Dimension is a joint policy between EU, Russia, Norway and Iceland, initiated in 1999 and renewed in 2006.

Kaliningrad Oblast: from Soviet “bastion” to Russian “fortress”

During the Soviet period, Kaliningrad Oblast was a heavily militarised and excessively isolated spot closed to foreigners. The level of secrecy reached such heights that even local residents were prohibited from entering certain parts of the oblast. After the breakdown of the USSR many things changed. What remained unaltered, however, were the geopolitical position of the exclave/enclave and its historical experience – qualities that would be used by Moscow in reconvertng Kaliningrad into a Russian military fort and a source of threat to the region.

The first disturbing signals were spotted in the 1998–1999 period and were indissolubly connected with the developments in Russia's westernmost region in particular. On July 28th 1998 the Kaliningrad Special District (KOR) was formed. According to an official statement this decision was prompted by the necessity to “protect Kaliningrad Oblast and defend Russian national interests in the southern part of the Baltic Sea”.⁴ In 2009, the KOR would be included in the Western Military District (WMD) as a result of extensive, rather ambitious, frequently criticised, yet still quite effective military reform.⁵ Furthermore, in 1999 the first strategic military games under the code name “Zapad” (“West” in Russian) were carried out. Interestingly enough, previous games under the same code name were conducted by countries of the Warsaw Pact in 1981, which implicitly suggests partial resurrection of the traditions of the Soviet regional presence. Officially it was declared that re-initiation of military activities in Kaliningrad had to do with the process of overcoming the consequences of the dire crisis faced by Russian armed forces in the 1990s. It was specifically underscored that these developments were not levelled against any neighbouring state(s).

Apparently, Russian plans to start remilitarisation of the oblast were inspired by the emergence of the first signs of friction with the West (mainly with the US) over the war in the former Yugoslavia and NATO's eastward enlargement. In this regard, “Zapad-99” demonstrated two main aspects: first, in spite of reconciliatory rhetoric emanating from Moscow, Russia construed NATO's enlargement as a military threat and an attempt to downsize the Russian presence in its traditional spheres of influence. Kaliningrad then became one of the potential means of retaliation. For instance, nuclear weapons were first deployed in the oblast in the early 2000s and the new National Security Concept (2000)⁶, which allowed Russia to use its nuclear arsenal in the case of inability to repel a potential attacker through conventional means, was elaborated as a direct result of “Zapad-99”.

At the time, however, Russia was still recuperating from the economic collapse of 1998 and could not launch militarisation of its western flank: the Kremlin instead saw its main mission in a somewhat different dimension. Specifically, it would not be superfluous to recall events in Kaliningrad in the summer of 2005, when celebrations of the 750th Anniversary of Königsberg/Kaliningrad were held (Lopata, 2006). Assembling the leaders of France and Germany in Kaliningrad Vladimir Putin hoped to create the “European Triumvirate” and simultaneously tried to pit three Baltic states and Poland (which according to Kremlin sponsored-narratives were the most Russophobe elements in the EU) against Berlin and Paris. This attempt however suffered a sound defeat: neither Jacques Chirac nor Gerhard Schröder exhibited willingness to trade partnership with newly accepted EU countries for better relations with Russia. Neither were France and Germany interested in the proliferation of an anti-American “axis” on the pretext of the war in Iraq (2003).

Apparently disappointed with this outcome Moscow decided to switch from “soft persuasion” to ultimatums. The notorious “Munich Speech” by the Russian president, in February 2007, which identified Russia's readiness to challenge the West over self-proclaimed zones of influence, was a turning point. For this purpose two traditionally weak NATO flanks (the Baltic and the Black seas) were to become the main targets of

4. For more information see: http://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/dictionary/details_rvsn.htm?id=5867@morfDictionary.

5. Военный эксперт Александр Гольц – о ходе военной реформы. <http://www.svoboda.org/a/24521818.html>.

6. Концепция национальной безопасности Российской Федерации. For more information see: http://nvo.ng.ru/concepts/2000-01-14/6_concept.html.

Russian aggression. Concrete proof came in 2008 with the war against Georgia and the practical alienation from Tbilisi of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and in 2009 with the initiation of massive military build-up on the territory of Kaliningrad Oblast. Aside from the already mentioned military reform, from 2008 on Russia started to activate “Iskander diplomacy” – blackmailing the West with potential deployment of “Iskander-M” missiles on the territory of the enclave as a “response” to alleged anti-Russian activities by the US in Europe.

The year 2009 witnessed proliferation of Russian military-related activities in the Baltic. Namely, in the course of the so-called “Osen-2009” special emphasis was made on upgrading military capabilities of the WMD. For this purpose, the “Zapad” and “Ladoga” war games were carried out: their territorial scope (from the Kola Peninsula to Kaliningrad Oblast and Belarus) and the manpower employed were somewhat comparable (yet less impressive) to exercises conducted by the USSR. Nevertheless, these were dwarfed by the next series of games – “Zapad-2013” – whose territorial scope, manpower and military equipment equalled those of the Soviet period. According to some estimates up to 100,000 military personnel deployed from the Norwegian to Polish borders took part in the event (Järvenpää, 2015).

Moscow’s next moves further articulated the seriousness of its intentions – although for more solid and profound steps the Kremlin had to remove several legal obstacles that did not allow military build-up commensurate with Russia’s plans and ambitions. At this point the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis and the debacle in political relations with the West facilitated the task for Moscow to a substantial degree. In March 2015, it was announced that the Kremlin was no longer bound by the provisions and obligations enshrined in the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe.⁷ Aside from huge symbolic meaning (this treaty came to be widely associated with perestroika and the initiation of dialogue between the Warsaw Pact countries and NATO) this decision brought serious practical repercussions.

The first concrete step that ensued – reanimation of the 1st Guards Tank Army on the territory of the WMD (disbanded in 1998)⁸ – not only drastically shifted the balance of conventional military power in Russia’s favour, in many ways it became a sign of reviving Soviet traditions and symbolism.⁹ Aside from this, Kaliningrad Oblast entered into a new stage of militarisation which was mostly associated with deployment on its territory of up-to-date military equipment:

7. А.Ю.Мазура. Заявление руководителя Делегации Российской Федерации на переговорах в Вене по вопросам военной безопасности и контроля над вооружениями. Официальный сайт МИД РФ (10.03.2015). http://www.mid.ru/obychnye-vooruzeniya/-/asset_publisher/MIJdOT56NKIk/content/id/1089925

8. For more information see: http://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12076048@egNews.

9. This Army was created in 1943 and its units were among the first ones to enter Berlin in 1945.

- “Iskander-M” missile complexes with nuclear warheads (SS-26 Stone in NATO classification) were deployed in the oblast in October 2016. This complex can target objectives within a range of up to 500 kilometres, effectively covering all the countries of the Baltic region;
- S-300 (SA-10 Grumble) and S-400 (SA-21 Growler) anti-aircraft weapon systems with strike ranges of up to 400 kilometres;
- K-300P Bastion-P coastal defence system (SS-C-5 Stooge) equipped with P-800 Oniks missiles (strike range between 400 and 800 kilometres) that were deployed in Kaliningrad in 2016;
- Sunflower-E (Podsolnukh-E) long-range air and surface radar (500 kilometres of coverage) anti-missile radar Voronezh-DM (some sources claim that it can monitor 6000 kilometres).

As a result of these activities (the deployment of advanced anti-ship and surface-to-air missiles) Kaliningrad has formed the centre of an anti-access/area denial “bubble” (A2/AD).¹⁰ The most distinctive traits of this entity are that it does not start at some fixed spot/perimeter (for instance, 500 kilometres) – its capabilities cannot be identified precisely.

Under these circumstances, the emergence of the new A2/AD should be seen as a source of potential threat not only to Poland and the Baltic states – countries that have most frequently been named as potential targets of Russian aggression – but also to Denmark, Finland and Sweden.¹¹ Incidentally, those three countries have shown a great deal of uneasiness about the Russian militarisation of the Baltic and expressed deep concern about the Aland Islands, Gotland and Danish Straits (Gotkowska and Szymański, 2016). Sweden has started a process of remilitarisation of Gotland Island and brought back military conscription in 2017. The Baltic Sea Fleet (BSF) – the “nest of crime” (Elfving, 2016) – seems to have become a reflection of Russia’s determination to tip the balance of forces in its favour to an even greater extent. Russia’s sweeping decapitation of the BSF’s high command may be deemed a reflection of this thesis (Sukhankin, October 2016b). Yet these countries are not the only ones who might be potentially endangered by growing Russian military presence in the region. For instance, the upcoming “Zapad-2017” war games that are to take place in the autumn have already puzzled many international and Belarus-based observers and commentators. Despite dismissive tones from Belarusian and Russian officials other experts express signs of alarm and uneasiness.

Non-military threats

The military activities conducted by the Russian Federation in the Baltic pose a serious challenge to regional security and peace. Less visible but by no means less significant are the deeds of the Kremlin in the domain of non-military activities. Russian activities are not reduced to state-sponsored programmes/initiatives, they also include the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) as a powerful political actor and the driving force of the “Russian World” project in the Baltic (Sukhankin, October 2016c). The speech presented by Russian Patriarch Kirill in Kaliningrad during the World Russian People’s Council on March 14th 2015 unambiguously displayed the changing perception of Kaliningrad and its role in the “Russian World” project:

“Borders of Russian Statehood” – the title of this conference could not have been more topical anywhere else than here, in Kaliningrad on the shores of the Baltic Sea. Here everything is “breathing” with proximity of the national border, propinquity of other countries, an open sea, so to say – the line where the Russian land ends ... Also, it is a border-territory, an enclave placed in the far West... Kaliningrad Oblast is a fruit of Victory, its material result and Kaliningraders, perhaps to even greater extent than other Russian citizens should feel themselves to be the chief custodians of the Victory. The Oblast was created not merely as a Russian strategic fort-post with a prime task of forestalling this previously mentioned “thrust toward the East” for

10. For more information see: <https://corporalfrisk.com/2016/08/11/kaliningrad-and-the-suwalki-gap-a-look-from-the-other-side/>.

11. And probably even Norway, given Russian activities in the Arctic.

good. It has to become a spiritual fort-post of Russia in Europe. Not however a region being most susceptible to Western influence but a district that is ready for a dialogue with the West to the most possible extent, being prepared to saturate this talk with our national spiritual norms and values".¹²

The council, created in 2007 for the "promotion of Russian language and culture", should in reality be seen as a reflection of Russian geopolitical ambitions in the so-called "near abroad" and refusal to acknowledge the emergence of sovereign states in the region. The new impetus for the project was given in 2009 when Kirill (Gundyayev) became Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus'. The so-called "canonical lands" concept has supplemented the initial meaning of the "Russian World" project, broadening its horizons and territorial scope. In its final version, this enabled Vladimir Putin to state that "Russia does not have borders". This is a very dangerous postulate which has received practical supplement in the course of the Ukrainian crisis.

Of the three Baltic states it is relevant to note how Estonia and Latvia have been targeted by Russia since 1991. Moscow has learned how to pit the ethnic Russian minority against the indigenous population, sowing discord and furthering the rift between these groups. In the meantime, with the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis, the focus of Russian attention has somewhat shifted toward Lithuania. The "crusade" against this country was initiated by the governor of Kaliningrad Oblast Nikolay Tsukanov in 2014 and the local mass media. Vilnius and some "Western security services" have been repeatedly accused of attempts to "create Maidan in the oblast".¹³ Later, however, the rhetoric would alter, changing from mostly "defensive" to more aggressive. It started to be claimed that Lithuania, whose economy was in ruins due to membership of the EU, was being abandoned by its population and that the country is in fact experiencing an exodus of truly Biblical scope. This means that in the short and medium term all three Baltic states will continue to be the prime targets of Russian ideological assault.

Furthermore, aside from frequent instances of cyber and information warfare Russia has increased its use of provocations against regional actors. In this context, it makes sense to recall the most recent episode that occurred in Vilnius in the end of 2016. The Russian Embassy started to disseminate highly provocative leaflets stating that the gap in wellbeing between Lithuania and Kaliningrad is profound and the locals should move to the oblast in pursuit of a better life (Sukhankin, 2017). The documents contained a list of web-pages and information outlets where "more information about Russia" could be found. These included RT, Sputnik, the Russkij Mir Foundation, ORT TV channel, and many other sources that are known for the dissemination of anti-Western materials and the promotion of the "Russian World" ideology. The most hideous aspect of this occurrence was that the Russian Embassy (along with its officials) did not try to deny its involvement. In practical terms this means that Moscow does not shy away from meddling in the affairs of sovereign countries that are parts of the EU and NATO, which is a very dangerous tendency and should be seen as a stern warning to the Europeans.

12. Выступление Святейшего Патриарха Кирилла на I Калининградском форуме Всемирного русского народного собора (14 марта 2015). Available at: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/4013160.html>.

13. Цуканов: Западные Спецслужбы Хотят «Раскачать» Майдан В Калининградской Области (1 июля 2014). Available at: <http://kaliningrad-life.ru/Politics-Society/Zapadnye-Specsluzhby-Majdan-Kaliningrad.html>.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. The strategic importance of the Baltic Sea region. The challenges posed by the Russian Federation to the countries of the Baltic region should not be underestimated or downplayed. This region is not peripheral, rather it constitutes one of the main cornerstones of Russian foreign policy and geopolitical interests. Similarly, as far as facts and evidence are concerned Moscow is to continue proliferating its influence in the region.
2. European cohesion as a response to Russian activities. The EU authorities should demonstrate to the Kremlin that regional challenges are not the problems of individual countries. Russia ought to recognise that bullying one country (group of states) will not be tolerated either by NATO or by the EU.
3. The military dimension. Even though there is no immediate military threat, the EU member states should attain greater cohesion in terms of military cooperation. Even though the US military presence in the region is growing, the balance of power is clearly in Russia's favour. This also means that achieving the 2% NATO benchmark is a must. This would be the best proof of commitment and a serious argument in front of the Russian Federation, where official propaganda does not consider Europe capable of decisive collective actions in terms of military-related activities.
4. Counter-disinformation and coordination of activities in the domain of cyber security should become key elements of NATO and EU coordinated strategies when dealing with Russian activities in the region.
5. Kaliningrad Oblast is no longer a "double periphery" or Russia's backwater region. It has been transformed into a "military fortress" and a pivot of the "Russian World" in the Baltic, and the EU should be aware of both the fact of this metamorphosis and the speed with which it has been accomplished.

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