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**The Kaliningrad Oblast of the Russian Federation  
as a Geopolitical Wedge of Russia in Central and Eastern Europe:  
Regional, State and International Context**

Abstract

The Kaliningrad oblast of the Russian Federation is specific area of international relations observed in Central and Eastern Europe. The region can be understood both as area of cooperation and conflict between Russia and the West. The Kaliningrad oblast is also crucial area for security of Central and Eastern Europe, as in this subject of the Russian Federation are intersecting two key processes for European security: on the one hand, this is process of European integration, which is continued on the east part of Europe and the Kaliningrad oblast – due to its geographical location – is taking part in several nets of European cooperation. On the other hand, the Kaliningrad oblast is subject of the Russian Federation, which is carrying out great project of reintegration of post-Soviet area and the region is one of key elements of success of this project. The Kaliningrad oblast might play role of particular tool of Russian authorities to threaten states of Central and Eastern Europe, as they do in relation to other exclaves and separatist regions in post-Soviet space. The indicator of this factor is significance of the Kaliningrad oblast in system of national security of the Russian Federation as well as its geographical location, especially in the context of relations with states of Central and Eastern Europe.

Keywords: *the Kaliningrad oblast, the Russian Federation, Central and Eastern Europe, geopolitical wedge*

## Introduction

The political transformations in Central and Eastern Europe<sup>1</sup> after 1989 and the advancing processes of integration have resulted in a significant increase in the importance of the Kaliningrad Oblast of the Russian Federation for stabilisation of this part of Europe in two dimensions: the Kaliningrad Oblast provides a unique example and a specific “testing ground” for cooperation between the European Union (EU) and Russia, and also plays a crucial geopolitical role for the southern part of Baltic Sea region. For the Russian Federation, this region has become especially important in view of the integration processes occurring in Central and Eastern Europe over the last 25 years.

The European integration process has been ongoing, with significant milestones marked by two stages of the EU enlargement in 2004 and 2007, when a series of Central and Eastern European states joined the European Union. An increase in the cohesion of this part of Europe was also affected by progressive Euro-Atlantic integration, a subsequent step of which was the eastward expansion of NATO in 1999 and 2004. Thus, the area of European and Euro-Atlantic integration significantly approached the borders of the Russian Federation. It is important that the Kaliningrad Oblast has entered into intensive interactions with various entities from the EU member states, becoming involved, to some extent, in the network of relations with the EU: through integration of local governments, universities, non-governmental organizations and using various cross-border cooperation programmes.

On the other hand, it should be noted that the Kaliningrad Oblast, as a part of the Russian Federation, is participating in a great integration process carried out in the post-Soviet areas under the auspices of Moscow. The genesis of this process can be traced back to the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States in 1991, although the processes of reintegration of the post-Soviet area gained momentum after Vladimir Putin took office as the President of the Russian Federation in 2000. This process was marked by former Soviet republics entering into agreements of a political, military and economic nature – the crowning achievement of which seems to be the initiation of the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015 (Popescu 2014; Jarosiewicz, Fischer 2015).

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<sup>1</sup> Difficulties in terminology related to the issue of Central and Eastern Europe have been emphasised by Kiss 2011, pp. 111-114; Stańczyk 2001, pp. 197-211 and *Historia Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej* 2000.

The policy of the Russian Federation government towards the so-called “near abroad”, particularly the European part of the post-Soviet territories, should also be analysed in the light of these processes. The growing conflict in Ukraine and the risk of Russian unfriendly steps towards the Baltic states, Moldova and Georgia – have all led to an increase in the significance of territories controlled by Russia and situated somehow “behind the back” of the states participating, or aspiring for participation, in European and Euro-Atlantic Integration processes (such as the Kaliningrad Oblast of the Russian Federation, the Transnistria region, Crimea and Armenia).

The aim of this article is to present the key conditions for the security of Central and Eastern Europe in relation to the Kaliningrad Oblast of the Russian Federation, as well as to analyse the importance of this Russian region in the context of two integration processes observed in Europe: European (and Euro-Atlantic) integration and the integration of the post-Soviet areas carried out under the auspices of the Russian Federation. In view of the above presented circumstances, the thesis of the article should be to determine how the importance of the Kaliningrad Oblast of the Russian Federation, in terms of the safety of Central and Eastern Europe, will increase in the nearest years. This may be substantiated as follows: the Kaliningrad Oblast is an area where the routes of two great integration processes carried out in Europe are intersecting; the Russian Federation will strive towards maintaining its influence in the Baltic Sea basin and the Kaliningrad Oblast will play the role one of geopolitical wedges in Europe situated “behind the back” of the states participating in the process of the European and Euro-Atlantic integration or demonstrating such aspirations.

## **The Kaliningrad Oblast as an Element of Geopolitical Conceptions in Central and Eastern Europe**

Geopolitical significance of the Kaliningrad Oblast in the Soviet Union, as well as in the Russian Federation, has evolved adequately to geopolitical changes occurring in the Central and Eastern Europe. Three crucial phases may be distinguished here – the first one: connected with functioning of the region within the Soviet Union; the second one: directly after the collapse of the USSR; and the third one, after 2000, connected with Russia’s internal consolidation and its return to the concept of reintegrating the post-Soviet area. In the times of the Soviet Union, the region was attributed with a particular

geopolitical and military significance, as a kind of USSR's gate to the southern part of the Baltic Sea. It was proved by the fact that the region had not been included into the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic, but directly into the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. In the Cold War era, the region was included into a strategic region from the point of view of the Soviet Union's military doctrine. That was supported by the fact that the soviet Baltic fleet and significant land forces were stationed there.

Upon the collapse of the Soviet Union, the geopolitical significance of the Kaliningrad Oblast decreased seriously. After 1991, it was mostly used as a collection point for Russian troops moved from the East Germany and the Baltic republics to Russia. The Russian strategic concepts of that time did not foresee any particular role for the region in terms of the Russian Federation's geopolitics nor defence. However, most of the Russian Baltic fleet was gathered in the region at the same time, which increased its military significance even more. The third phase, after 2000, is connected with some intensified attempts of Russian authorities to reintegrate the post-soviet area and reinforce Russian influences by the Baltic Sea (Affek 2014, pp. 192-194).

Here, it is worth to analyse the Kaliningrad Oblast more accurately as a crucial element of the Russian policy in the post-soviet area implemented observed mostly after 2009. That time is characterized by intensified Russian actions aimed at increasing its influences in particular former soviet republics, which would result in persuading them into participation in a number of integrational initiatives in the post-soviet area: the Eurasian Economic Union, the Customs Union, or other initiatives of political and defensive character.

It is important now to distinguish three crucial groups of states, former soviet republics, that present different levels of acceptance towards the idea of the post-soviet area reintegration. The core of the integration processes should include Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan that even today manifest their will to participate in the integration processes. The second group includes the former soviet republics that show relatively ambivalent attitude towards the projects of the post-soviet area reintegration and their attitude towards those processes is to be dependent, to a large extent, on current political conditions of those states. The third group – which includes Ukraine, Moldova and the states of the South Caucasus, as well as the Baltic States to a lesser degree – forms a key challenge for the Russian objectives connected with the reintegration of the post-

Soviet area. In the nearest future, the main attempts of the Russian authorities connected with the project of the post-Soviet area reintegration are to be directed towards building some mechanisms of destabilization and forming regions/states which will be sources of threat for the key areas of that reintegration. Those regions – being, in fact, sources of military and non-military threats – make some kinds of geopolitical wedges that threaten those areas of the former Soviet Union, which are presently a part of the Euro-Atlantic integration process (the Baltic States) or show such aspirations (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan).

Here, it is worth to situate the paradigm of a geopolitical wedge in the scientific discourse on geopolitics and theory of international relations. The notion of a geopolitical wedge is referred to relatively seldom by the researchers of international relations and geopolitics. Nonetheless, it is a notion present in the scientific discourse on geopolitical conditions of changes in the world's order. Basing on criteria quoted by a number of researchers, the notion of a geopolitical wedge may be applied to a politically and geographically separated region with a huge geopolitical and military significance from the point of view of one country/alliance located in the sphere of influence of a competitive country/alliance or in a neutral area. In a narrower meaning, one country's geopolitical wedge is located “behind the back” of another country/alliance (Malik 2010, p. 80). In a wider context, a geopolitical wedge may be also interpreted as an area dividing spheres of influences owned by two (or more) world powers (Weijian 2002, p. 196).

The studied notion is used in the scientific literature in reference to a number of geographical regions of the world (presently as well as in the past), which are attributed the characteristics of geopolitical wedges. Researchers define with that notion the United States' areas of influence in the post-Soviet areas: Caucasus republics and republics of the Central Asia (Malik 2010, p. 80), as well as Poland, which is, in fact, an American geopolitical wedge between Germany and Russia.

From that point of view, a similar role may be played in future by Ukraine and the common Polish-Ukrainian passage makes a potential focus for American influences in the area located between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea as well as in the Balkans (Gowan 1999, p. 301). Other researchers identify the geopolitical wedge with key areas between Euro-Atlantic and Euro-Asiatic integrations (Tunsjø 2011, pp. 60-77) or with historical changes in the Central and East Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Pearson 2014, p. 187; Harbutt 2010, p. 140).

The paradigm of a geopolitical wedge inscribes into the already formulated geopolitical concepts being their creative development and supplementation. Some explanatory values of that notion are particularly visible in reference to one of the most important geopolitical models of the world that focus on a competition between Halford Mackinder's *Heartland* and Nicholas Spykman's *Rimland*. *Heartland*, understood as the central area of Eurasia, conditions the reign over the rest of the world. *Rimland*, on the other hand, forms a ring surrounding the central part of Eurasia and it is the competition between the states of the centre and peripheries of Eurasia that shapes the world's order (Mackinder 1981, p. 260; Spykman 1944, p. 43).

As for this article, the explanatory motif connected with the concept of *Rimland* by Nicholas Spykman is particularly important. According to that concept, it is having influence on the key areas of *Rimland* – the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, the Caucasus, and the Middle East – that conditions taking domination over the world by the Soviet Union, and then by Russia. That factor seems to justify the Russian authorities' determination in striving for making and maintaining their geopolitical wedges by the Baltic Sea (the Kaliningrad Oblast), the Black Sea (Transnistria, Crimea), and the South Caucasus (Armenia).

The concept of a geopolitical wedge should be situated between the theories explaining the geopolitical conditions of the world's order connected with the concept of chokepoints and geopolitical pivots by Zbigniew Brzeziński. A chokepoint is interpreted as a geographical object or an element of transportation infrastructure, possession of which gives a significant military and economic advantage and, further, a geopolitical one. From this point of view, it is a narrower notion than the paradigm of geopolitical wedge as it refers to a particular geostrategic situation noted in a defined area. Nonetheless, the notion has got a number of common features with geopolitical wedges: firstly, while characterized by a relatively small area, it is of a crucial geostrategic significance; secondly, due to its significant geostrategic role, it is used to concentrate military potential (troops and army infrastructure); and finally, possessing a chokepoint makes it possible to have an influence on the neighbouring areas/states (Hobbs 2009, pp. 229-231).

What makes a second significant notion connected with the issue of geopolitical wedges is the concept of geopolitical pivots developed by Zbigniew Brzeziński<sup>2</sup>. According to Brzeziński's claim: "Geopolitical pivots are the states whose importance is derived not from their power and motivation but rather from their sensitive location and from the consequences of their potentially vulnerable condition for the behaviour of geostrategic players. Most often, geopolitical pivots are determined by their geography, which in some cases gives them a special role either in denying access to important areas or in denying resources to a significant player. In some cases, a geopolitical pivot may act as a defensive shield for a vital state or even a region. Sometimes, the very existence of a geopolitical pivot can be said to have very significant political and cultural consequences for a more active neighbouring geostrategic player" (Brzezinski 1997, p. 41).

Geopolitical pivot is, thus, an area including a state that does not play a stand-alone geopolitical role, yet, at the same time, it influences the balance of forces noted in a particular region of the world. When addressed that way, a geopolitical pivot is a wider notion than the notion of a geopolitical wedge as it includes formally stand-alone political and spatial units. At the same time, the concept of geopolitical pivots may be criticized from the point of view of functionalism as enclaves/exclaves or separatist areas may be of similar significance in geopolitics of world powers/alliances.

### **The Specific Character of the Kaliningrad Oblast of the Russian Federation**

The Kaliningrad Oblast of the Russian Federation is an area where various tendencies, as well as social and political phenomena, have emerged, on one hand, reflecting the diversity of Russia itself and, on the other, specific features of this area of the Russian Federation. One of its characteristics is its geographical location: the Oblast is an enclave "squeezed-in" between Poland and Lithuania, territorially disconnected from the remaining part of the Russian Federation. The peripheral nature of this region in relation to other Russian territories is accompanied by its geographical proximity to Central and Eastern European states, which has an influence on the opportunities for establishing economic and social contacts on various levels (Wellman 2000, p. 404).

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<sup>2</sup> The notion of a geopolitical pivot is used here according to the interpretation by Zbigniew Brzeziński, not by Halford J. Mackinder. See: Moczulski 1999, pp. 12-14.

The Kaliningrad Oblast is an area with less than 70 years of historical tradition. No social or political structure of a similar territorial shape or national identity existed here before. The specific character of the area under discussion is related to the fact that it was created as a result of decisions made by the allied superpowers at the end of World War II, conditioned mainly by geopolitical and geostrategic reasons and not for historical or demographic reasons (Kretinin, Briushkin, Galtsov 2002, p. 452). As a consequence, after the war the demographic and material image of the region which was created was not rooted in any previous history or tradition of those lands. Legal sanctioning of the existence of the Kaliningrad Oblast and establishment of its borders took place over the period of 1945-1957. It is considered that the year 1946 marked the formal beginning of the existence of this area as part of the USSR and, currently, the Russian Federation.

What is worth emphasizing is the specific nature of the community of the Kaliningrad Oblast, which was meant to illustrate – according to the intentions of its creators – a model Soviet community. A series of consequences resulting from the plans of the constructors of the social and economic reality of the region includes the particularly important fact that the national diversity of Kaliningrad District reflects, to some extent, the multi-national character of the Soviet Union and, later, the Russian Federation, with Russians as the majority of the population (86%), although the region is also inhabited by Byelorussians and Ukrainians (3% each), Lithuanians and Armenians (1% each) and peoples from the Caucasus and Central Asia. A significant element determining the character of the Oblast community is also the clash of two opposing tendencies related, on one hand, to the drive for closer integration of the region with “big” Russia and, on the other, with the desire to gain special autonomous status within the Russian Federation (Kronenfeld 2010, pp. 159-161).

It is worth mentioning that, in recent years, federal authorities have undertaken a series of initiatives aiming at tightening the cooperation between Russia and the region, the most important of which included a procedure introduced in 2004 concerning the appointment of governors of individual federal regions (revoked in 2012) and the implementation in 2006 of a programme of relocating the Russian population from former Soviet republics to the Oblast (Rogoża, Wierzbowska-Miazga, Wiśniewska 2012, pp. 10-11).

## The Kaliningrad Oblast as a Subject of Russian Security Policy

The attitude of Russian authorities towards the Kaliningrad Oblast is based on the claim that it makes up an integral and significant part of the Russian Federation, particularly from the point of view of national defence and security. All discussions – held over the last dozen years or so – concerning the special status of the region or the need to introduce economic privileges should take into account the inseparability of relations between the region and “big” Russia.

It should be emphasized that the far-reaching dependence of the region on federal authorities has, first of all, political and systemic dimensions. Currently, the decision-making ability of the Oblast government is highly limited. Most decisions concerning the social and economic development of the region are taken at the central level. Both the structure of the Constitution of the Russian Federation and a series of other legal regulations at the federal and regional level make the Oblast only a tool in Russian policy, depriving it of any major importance as an autonomic political and spatial entity.

The dependence of Kaliningrad Oblast on federal authorities is also sanctioned by the formal and legal status of the region within the structural and political system of the Russian Federation. The Kaliningrad Oblast is one of 83 subjects of the Russian Federation and its political system is to a large extent determined by the structural system and the political scene of Russia. Under the Constitution of the Russian Federation of 1993, the Kaliningrad Oblast gained official status of administrative-territorial unit. Strong relations between the Oblast and “big” Russia are also reflected in the provisions of the federal agreement of 31 March 1992, providing a legal basis for the functioning of the region within the Russian Federation (See: *Federalniy dogovor* 1992).

Another instrument for deepening the relations between the Kaliningrad Oblast and Moscow are mechanisms for integrating the political system of the region with the federal authority system and a gradual reduction of the powers of regional authorities. One of the most meaningful examples was the abolition in 2004 of the direct elections of Oblast governors, replacing them with appointments by presidents of the Federation, held upon the consent of regional legislatures. Although this regulation was revoked in 2012, the political dependence of governors on federal authorities must be emphasized.

A factor clearly placing the Kaliningrad Oblast among the crucial regions of Russia – from a geopolitical point of view – is its military character. The Kaliningrad Oblast makes up a part of the North-West Federal District and the Western Military District of Russia. The region is also an important component of the Baltic Naval Zone, the objective of which is to protect the Russian military presence in the Baltic Sea basin. The region is characterized by developed military infrastructure, based on a system of land, air and naval military bases. A significant element of this infrastructure is the Russian Baltic Fleet, with naval bases in Baltiysk, Primorsk and Kaliningrad (Sakson 2014, p. 114).

Ground forces in the area of the Kaliningrad Oblast include infantry, missile, artillery and motor brigades stationed in Baltiysk, Kaliningrad, Gusev and Chernyakhovsk. Major combat units of the air forces are located in air bases in Chkalovsk and Chernyakhovsk and a helicopter regiment is located in Donskoye and Ljubino. To complete the picture, it should be added that the Kaliningrad Oblast is also an area where several reconnaissance and anti-aircraft units are located. The main centres are: Pereslavl'skoye (radio-technical regiment), Gvardeysk and Znamensk (missile defence regiments) (Ciechanowski 2014).

Although after the collapse of the Soviet Union the number of troops in the Oblast was reduced, it still remains one of the largest clusters of military units in Russia, determining, to a significant extent, the Russian military potential in the Baltic Sea basin. After 1991, the number of troops garrisoned in the region was estimated at 40-100.000 soldiers and sailors (Abramov 1998, p. 27; Galtsov 1996, p. 210). Although these numbers were gradually reduced throughout 1990s, the region still plays a significant role in Russian military strategy (Sakson 1997, p. 247; Szymański 1999, pp. 143-149).

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Russian government supported the need to maintain the military nature of the region in view of its strategic importance. According to this concept, it was a vital interest of the Russian Federation to keep significant ground and naval forces in the region. Despite a clear reduction in the military potential of the region, it should be expected that the Russian side will not refrain from taking advantage – at least in the political rhetoric – of this potential, as exemplified by repeatedly announcing the deployment of short- and medium-range missiles (Szeligowski 2013; Oldberg 2015, pp. 8-9).

Arguments of a threesome nature are factors that indicate an increase of significance of the Kaliningrad Oblast in the Russian military doctrine. Firstly, Russian strategic documents on the sector of national security stress the significance of increasing the influence of the Russian Federation in the post-Soviet area identifying, at the same time, threats connected with the NATO's military infrastructure approaching the borders of Russia. Both, in the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation until 2020, accepted in 2009, as well as in its novelization as of December 2015, it has been stressed that disturbances to the balance of military powers in the neighbourhood of Russian borders or its allies make threats to the state security (National Security Strategy 2009, chapter II, pt. 12; National Security Strategy 2015, pt. 15).

Thus, the threats resulting from a possible infrastructure deployment in the NATO states neighbouring with Russia (Poland, the Baltic States) have been indicated. In that context, the Kaliningrad Oblast makes one of the key areas from the point of view of the Russian security strategy.

Secondly, in accordance with the content on the latest Security Strategy, ensuring the strategic stability in the Russia's direct neighbourhood should be achieved by reinforcing integrational actions, political and military ones, in the post-Soviet area as well as by harmonizing the integrational processes in the European continent (National Security Strategy 2015, Chapter IV). The content of the document is to be understood as a proposition to find a specific *modus vivendi* with the European Union and, at the same time, obtaining a larger freedom to implement the concept of the post-Soviet area reintegration. The Kaliningrad Oblast makes a crucial element of that concept being a wedge that closes the post-Soviet area from the west.

Thirdly, a practical dimension of the role played by the Kaliningrad Oblast in the Russian security strategy and war doctrine is also worth noticing. The majority of military manoeuvres conducted in the recent years in the Russian Western Military District had their Kaliningrad episodes<sup>3</sup>. Apart from the military potential of the region, shown before, it should be also pointed out that it is located in one of the key areas of Russia from a geostrategic point of view. In the case of a hypothetical military conflict with the West, the Kaliningrad Oblast is to form a Russian gate to the southern part of the

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<sup>3</sup> The following Russian military exercises had their Kaliningrad episodes: Zapad 2009, military exercise of Russian Western military District in 2012, Zapad 2013, exercises of rocket forces in 2014 as well as Union Shield 2015 (Norberg 2015, pp. 65-74; *Russia's Zapad 2013. Military Exercise. Lessons for Baltic Regional Security* 2015; *Rosyjsko-białoruskie ćwiczenia „Tarcza Związku”* 2015).

Baltic Sea region making it possible to cut the Baltic States (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia) off territorially from the rest of the NATO member states<sup>4</sup>.

### The Kaliningrad Oblast in Relations Between Russia and the West

The Kaliningrad Oblast, as the westernmost area of the Russian Federation, is a natural area of economic, social and cultural cooperation with states participating in the process of European and Euro-Atlantic integration. As a result of the political transformations after 1989, the region has become an enclave surrounded by Polish and Lithuanian territories, and, at the same time, one of the border regions of the Russian Federation (Bilczak 2001, p. 122, Chelminiak 2009, p. 88).

After enlargement of the European Union and NATO in 1999-2004, the Kaliningrad Oblast became an area bordering on territories of member states of both structures. In this context, the region is one of key issues in EU–Russian and NATO–Russian relations, to a certain extent defining common operations at the level of central institutions and in bilateral relations between Russia and Poland, Lithuania, Germany and Scandinavian states – serving as a benchmark as regards the temperature and quality of those relations.

Issues related directly and indirectly to the Kaliningrad Oblast were addressed in numerous policy papers on the EU-Russian relations, which were elaborated and adopted at the EU-Russia fora. The first paper was the Common Strategy of the European Union on Russia approved at the summit of the European Council in Cologne on 4 June 1999. One of the key intentions contained in the paper and related to the Kaliningrad Oblast was to enhance Europe's cohesion through regional and cross-border cooperation (Dziewulski, Hyskawy 1999, pp. 1-7).

Another important document for the EU-Russian relations and cooperation on the Kaliningrad Oblast was the Medium-Term Strategy for the Development of Relations between the Russian Federation and the EU (2000-2010) published in October 1999 (Menkiszak 2006, pp. 3-32). The Kaliningrad issue was also addressed in other docu-

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<sup>4</sup> Area of high risk is so-called Suwalki Gap – part of Polish territory that separates the Kaliningrad Oblast and Belarus. This area was defined by general Ben Hodges, commander of US Army Europe, as another NATO “gap” to worry about. See: McLeary 2015; Sisk 2015.

ments and discussed at numerous events that constituted a part of the EU-Russian relations. The European Commission report “The EU and Kaliningrad” published in January 2001 identified a number of risks and benefits for the Kaliningrad region resulting from the European Union enlargement eastwards (Gemziak 2008, p. 347). In turn, the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on relations with Russia (February 2004) emphasised the need to establish friendly relations with the Russian Federation, in particular through the creation and development of cross-border cooperation. The document also provided liberalisation of the visa policy towards Russia and its border areas depending on the progress in the modernisation of the economic and political systems (Menkiszak 2006, pp. 28-29).

In observing the EU-Russian relations, particularly those carried out in the political layer, it must be noticed that the issues related to the Kaliningrad Oblast are key problems hindering the development of those relations<sup>5</sup>. Undoubtedly, the existence of the Kaliningrad Oblast as an enclave surrounded by territories of EU Member States, with all its negative consequences, to a significant extent determines the relations between the European Union and Russia – and this is how this issue should be analysed. At this point, it is worth emphasizing that the Kaliningrad issue was present in discussions concerning the relations between the European Union and the Russian Federation as far back as the early 1990s<sup>6</sup>.

Enlargement of the European Union and NATO to the East and involvement of the Kaliningrad Oblast of the Russian Federation in European cooperation became the basis for concerns expressed in some Russian circles concerning the growth – as a result of cooperation with the EU entities – of the independence of the region in relations with the Russian Federation. According to those opinions, various initiatives carried out by Western states, related to deepening the cooperation with the Kaliningrad Oblast, are a tool for arousing awareness in the region of its distinct character as “the westernmost” outpost of Russia. The Russian Federation attaches great significance to separatist tendencies emerging in the region – although they are actually marginal.

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<sup>5</sup> The importance of the Kaliningrad Oblast of the Russian Federation in EU-Russian relations was noticed especially in the period immediately preceding the enlargement of the EU in 2004. See: Menkiszak 2006, p. 10; Gemziak 2008, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Issues referring to a practical dimension of the EU-Russian Federation relations and neighbourhood were a subject of the regulations included in the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement 1994.

The Russian side also perceives, in this context, the proposals of the Western states concerning their support for social, economic and political contacts with the Kaliningrad Oblast of the Russian Federation<sup>7</sup>.

At the same time, it should be emphasized that the Kaliningrad Oblast will continue to be one of the key areas in EU-Russian and NATO-Russian relations. It should be stressed that the Kaliningrad Oblast, being a part of the Russian Federation, is an element of a great project of the post-soviet area reintegration carried out since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century under the auspices of Russia. Therefore, the region is to form a natural zone of Russian interests in the area of the southern part of the Baltic Sea region forming a threat to the Baltic States and Poland. The region is a key area from the point of view of the Russian Federation's geo-strategy in the Central and Eastern Europe as it facilitates cutting the Baltic States off from their NATO allies in the case of a potential military conflict. For that reason, the Kaliningrad Oblast has been a crucial element of Russian military manoeuvres in the recent years (Norberg 2015, pp. 65-74; *Russia's Zapad 2013. Military Exercise. Lessons for Baltic Regional Security* 2015; *Rosyjsko-białoruskie ćwiczenia „Tarcza Związku”* 2015).

At the same time, attempts to install elements of constant military infrastructure by NATO or the United States on the territories of Poland and the Baltic States is to pose a crucial threat for the Kaliningrad Oblast of the Russian Federation, which justifies the Russian objections to the actions by NATO aimed at that direction (Oldberg 2015, p. 9).

The future role of the region in the development of those relations can also be analysed on several planes: at the level of political relations between the EU and Russia, at the level of political and military relations between the NATO and Russia, at the level of international relations with EU Member States (Polish-Russian, Lithuanian-Russian relations), and at the regional level (economic cooperation and social-cultural relations of the borderland regions). The most advanced cooperation is observed in the latter, with a significant achievement in the form of introducing local border traffic, as a tool for engaging the Oblast in the network of European cooperation and playing a special role as a laboratory of transformations in cooperation between Russia and the West. In

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<sup>7</sup> One of the manifestations of these concerns was ambiguous attitude of the Russian authorities toward the liberalization of the visa regime on Polish-Russian border in 2012. See: *Władimir Putin przeciwmy wizowym ulatwieniom dla obwodu kaliningradzkiego* 2011.

view of this, Kaliningrad Oblast, as an entity of the Russian Federation, can be both a significant link in relations between Russia and the West and also serve to reduce the often confrontational operations of Russia in Central and Eastern Europe.

### **Alternatives for the Kaliningrad Oblast**

Although the role of the Kaliningrad Oblast in the political stability and security of Central and Eastern Europe has already become important today, it seems that the geopolitical importance of the region will grow even more in the future. This will not only be the result of the specific geographical location of the region but, above all, the effect of the above-mentioned intersection of two great integration processes in the area of the Kaliningrad Oblast: Euro-Atlantic integration and Euro-Asian integration carried out under auspices of Russia. On the one hand, the Kaliningrad Oblast, as a part of the Russian Federation, will be an element of a broader political plan carried out by Russian authorities, aimed at political, military and economic domination of the post-Soviet space.

On the other hand, the Kaliningrad Oblast is, and will remain in the future, a participant in intensive cooperation with member states of the European Union and NATO. In this context, it is worth making an attempt to create alternatives for the region in view of the changing international conditions that can be observed in Europe.

It should be emphasized that although the role of the region in the security of Eastern and Central Europe is obviously the outcome of various factors and phenomena affecting international relations and security in Europe, those alternatives can be presented as four scenarios:

1. Status quo – the Kaliningrad Oblast as an important, from the geopolitical perspective, region of Russia, with some elements of independence, especially in contacts with partners from Central and Eastern European states;
2. The Kaliningrad Oblast of the Russian Federation as a laboratory and a specific testing ground in relations between Russia and the West. In this scenario, the region would play the role of a stabilizing factor for the situation in Central and Eastern Europe and the mechanism of political cooperation between Russia and the West;

3. “Deep” independence of the Kaliningrad Oblast as the fourth Baltic republic – which seems an unrealistic scenario under current conditions of political and military consolidation of the Russian Federation. If separatist tendencies emerge, the region would become a source of conflict in Central and Eastern Europe;
4. The Kaliningrad Oblast of the Russian Federation as a tool in the hands of the federal authorities, used in order to “hold in check” member states of the EU and NATO in the South Baltic region.

Although we can now observe mixture of above-mentioned scenarios in the present geopolitical situation, particularly in the context of the conflict in Ukraine and the implemented project of integrating post-Soviet areas under the auspices of the Russian Federation, it should be expected that the fourth scenario is more likely, since it is related to the use of the geographical location of the Kaliningrad Oblast as an element of the geopolitical game carried out in Central and Eastern Europe, however, it should be expected that, at the social and economic level, the federal authorities will still allow the region to keep, to some extent, independent contacts with their European partners.

At this point, it should be mentioned that the southern part of the Baltic Sea region is one of the key geostrategic areas in Europe. According to many experts, the enlargement of NATO to the east from 1999-2004, has redefined the previous directions of geostrategic interests of Moscow, which, apart from the western direction (Poland, Lithuania, the Czech Republic), now includes, among others, the southern (Crimea, Donbas, Caucasus), south-western (Carpathians, Balkans) and north-western directions (Baltic states, Scandinavia) (Sakson 2015, p. 45; Kronenfeld 2010, pp. 166-167; Ivanov 2002, pp. 10-11).

The internal political and military consolidation of Russia since 2000, the strengthening of integration tendencies in the post-Soviet area and, as a consequence, the conflict in Ukraine, have only reinforced the importance of the above-mentioned geostrategic directions of interests of the Russian Federation. The geopolitical transformations in Central and Eastern Europe presented above have resulted in the Russian authorities identifying areas of particular importance through which Moscow could protect its interests in this part of Europe and somehow “hold in check” the states participating in European and Euro-Atlantic integration – or aspiring to participate in those processes – by controlling the areas situated somehow “behind the back” of those states. In this

context, the key areas of geopolitical interest to Russia can be treated as specific geopolitical wedges in relation to states participating in the European relation network (Dyner 2015, pp. 3-4).

This is the way in which the incorporation of Crimea into the Russian Federation, as well as – more or less – official support for separatists in Eastern Ukraine, should be interpreted, which could be treated as a potential warning to Ukraine about demonstrating European aspirations. A similar role is currently played by Transnistria, both in relation to Ukraine and Moldova, as well as by Armenia (with which Kremlin maintains exceptionally warm relations) in relation to Georgia and Azerbaijan. It might be expected that a similar role – at least as intended by the Russian authorities – can be played by the Kaliningrad Oblast towards Poland and the Baltic states, as a source of a permanent (more or less real) threat, helping Russia to preserve its influence in southern part of the Baltic Sea region.

Thus, the factors that may define the role of the Kaliningrad Oblast as the Russian Federation's geopolitical wedge in the Central and Eastern Europe according to the thesis presented in the introduction to this article should be singled out. Firstly, the geographical location of the region predestines it in a particular way to play the role of a specific guard of Russia's interest in the region of the southern Baltic Sea.

Although the size of its area, population, or economic structure do not indicate its crucial role in the federal structures of Russia, the significance of the region attributed in the Russian strategic documents, or including the Oblast into the Russian plans connected with military manoeuvres prove a crucial geopolitical potential of that region.

Secondly, its role in the Russian military doctrine is an indicator of the significance of the Kaliningrad Oblast for the security in the Central and East Europe: event today, the region is a place of concentrated troops and military infrastructure and the military manoeuvres carried out in the recent years on the territory of the Kaliningrad Oblast or the ones that used the military units stationed there have been of an expansive (and not defensive) character.

Thirdly, the character of actions by the Russian authorities on the international arena, including the expected aims of the Russian foreign policy connected with the post-Soviet area reintegration, indicate that using the territories belonging to the Russian Federation or tightly connected to it economically, militarily, and politically is to be one of the tools for implementing Russian interest in that area.

## Summary

The Kaliningrad oblast of the Russian Federation is unique area in Central and Eastern Europe from the point of view of development of cooperation between the European Union and the Russian Federation as well as geopolitical conditions of security in the Baltic Sea region. Due to this reason the Kaliningrad oblast is crucial area for security of the Baltic Sea region, as in this subject of the Russian Federation are intersecting two key processes for European security: on the one hand, this is process of European integration, which is continued on the east part of Europe and the Kaliningrad oblast – due to its geographical location – is taking part in several nets of European cooperation.

On the other hand, the Kaliningrad oblast is subject of the Russian Federation, which is carrying out great project of reintegration of post-Soviet area and the Oblast is one of key elements of success of this project. The Kaliningrad Oblast might play role of particular tool of Russian authorities to threaten states of Baltic Sea region, as they do in relation to other exclaves and separatist regions in post-soviet space. The thesis of the lecture is assertion, that significance of the Kaliningrad Oblast for security of the Baltic Sea region will rise with increasing of process of integration in post-Soviet area. The indicator of this factor is significance of the Kaliningrad Oblast in system of national security of the Russian Federation as well as its geographical location, especially in the context of relations with the Baltic states. An important factor in this process are also goals of Russian foreign policy with reference to the Baltic states as well as the Nordic states.

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