

ОТНОШЕНИЯ БЕЛАРУСИ И КАЛИНИНГРАДСКОЙ ОБЛАСТИ КАК ГЕОПОЛИТИЧЕСКИЙ ФАКТОР В БАЛТИЙСКО-СКАНДИНАВСКОМ МАКРОРЕГИОНЕ

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Аннотация. Доказывается, что отношения Беларуси и Калининградской области России являются важным геополитическим фактором в Балтийско-Скандинавском макрорегионе и Восточной Европе, особенно в свете противостояния России и Запада, спровоцированного конфликтом на Украине. Отмечается, что особое положение Калининградской области как эксклава, окруженного территорией ЕС, способствует росту напряженности и становится одним из элементов этого противостояния, в контексте которого изучаются отношения рассматриваемого региона с Беларусью. Обращается внимание на то, что после распада СССР Беларусь превратилась в стратегический тыл Калининградской области. Она обеспечивает континентальные коммуникации российского эксклава с основной территорией России, а также играет важную роль в гарантировании безопасности этого региона. Кроме того, показывается, что Беларусь и Калининградская область образуют стратегическую связку, которая формирует уязвимые места на восточном фланге НАТО. Прежде всего речь идет о Сувалском коридоре и связанных с ним угрозах для Прибалтики как важного плацдарма НАТО. Также рассматриваются экономические и гуманитарные аспекты сотрудничества Беларуси и Калининградской области.

Ключевые слова: Беларусь; Калининградская область; Россия; Балтийско-Скандинавский макрорегион; Балтийское море; геополитика.

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RELATIONS BETWEEN BELARUS AND THE KALININGRAD REGION AS A GEOPOLITICAL FACTOR IN THE BALTIC-SCANDINAVIAN MACROREGION

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Abstract. The main objective of the article is to demonstrate that relations between Belarus and the Kaliningrad Region of Russia are a significant geopolitical factor in the Baltic-Scandinavian macroregion and Eastern Europe, especially considering the confrontation between Russia and the West provoked by the conflict in Ukraine. It is noted that the special position of the Kaliningrad Region as an enclave surrounded by the territory of the EU contributes to the growth of tension and becomes one of the elements of the mentioned confrontation. The geopolitical problems of the Kaliningrad Region are considered in the broader context of the confrontation between Russia and the West in the Baltic Sea basin. The role of Belarus

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is also considered in this context. It is noted that after the collapse of the USSR, Belarus turned into a strategic rear of the Kaliningrad Region. It provides continental communications of the Russian exclave with the main territory of Russia and also plays an important role in ensuring the security of this Russian region. In addition, it is shown that Belarus and the Kaliningrad Region form a strategic link that creates bottlenecks and vulnerabilities on NATO's eastern flank. First of all, this concerns the Suwalki Gap and the associated threats to the Baltics as an important NATO bridgehead. The article also examines the economic and humanitarian aspects of cooperation between Belarus and the Kaliningrad Region.

Keywords: Belarus; Kaliningrad Region; Russia; Baltic-Scandinavian macroregion; Baltic Sea; geopolitics.

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Introduction

The Kaliningrad Region of Russia is a unique territory, being the only exclave in Europe that is detached from the mainland of its parent country. Naturally, such an exclave status inevitably gives rise to certain challenges and geopolitical tensions, which have become especially evident due to the deterioration of relations between Russia, the EU, and NATO over the conflict in Ukraine.

Belarus does not have a direct border with the Kaliningrad Region. However, as a member of the Union

State, it plays an important role as a strategic rear for the Russian exclave. The ties between Belarus and the Kaliningrad Region are a significant geopolitical factor in Eastern Europe and the Baltic-Scandinavian macroregion, largely determining the balance of power in this area.

This article examines the military-political, economic, and humanitarian aspects of Belarus relationship with the Kaliningrad Region.

Belarus as a security guarantee for the Kaliningrad Region

After the collapse of the USSR, Belarus and Lithuania became the countries that separated the Kaliningrad Region from the main territory of Russia. The total distance separating the Kaliningrad Region from its parent state is about 1 thsd km, most of which runs through Belarus.

Thus, the further development of the Kaliningrad Region has largely depended on the relationships Moscow can establish with these new transit states.

While the initial years after the USSR's dissolution were characterised by a certain strategic uncertainty, it became evident over time that a new geopolitical alignment was taking shape in Eastern Europe and the Baltic-Scandinavian region, marked by the close proximity of Euro-Atlantic structures, the EU, and NATO, to Russia's borders.

Poland, Lithuania, and the Baltic states pursued EU and NATO membership, completing their integration into these structures by 2004. Simultaneously, the hopes for creating a greater Europe and forming a pan-European security architecture involving Russia became increasingly illusory. Accordingly, tensions began to grow between Moscow and the eastward-expanding Euro-Atlantic structures. The Kaliningrad Region, surrounded by EU and NATO member states, became one of the

factors contributing to this tension. Under these conditions, the strategic importance of Belarus as the rear area for the Kaliningrad Region significantly increased.

As a member of the Union State, Belarus, as aptly noted by Russian researcher Yu. Zverev, provides the Russian Federation with strategic depth by moving the line of direct contact with the EU and NATO 600–700 km westward [1].

From the perspective of the Kaliningrad Region, this narrows the geopolitical gap with the main territory of the Union State. The so-called Suwalki Gap emerges – a narrow strip separating the exclave from the territory of allied Belarus. This substantially shortens the length of land communications between the Kaliningrad Region and the main territory of Russia, passing through the countries of the Western bloc. In essence, Lithuania becomes the only transit country within NATO and the EU.

The unified regional military grouping of the Union State, the shared air defense system, the deployment of Russian tactical nuclear weapons on Belarusian territory, and the anticipated placement of missile systems «Oreshnik» are all significant factors in ensuring the security of the Kaliningrad Region.

The Suwalki Gap issue and Baltic confrontation

From the Western perspective, Belarus and the Kaliningrad Region form a strategic alliance, significantly complicating the situation on NATO's eastern flank and posing a strategic threat to the Baltic states.

Western experts emphasise the importance of this alliance in the event of a military confrontation between

Russia and NATO. According to Western observers, Russia is transforming the Kaliningrad Region into a military stronghold in the midst of the European Union [2; 3].

Belarus is also often viewed by Western analysts as a Russian military stronghold [4]. Together, Belarus and the Kaliningrad Region form geopolitical pincers

around the so-called Suwalki Gap, which connects Lithuania and the Baltic states with the rest of the EU. In the event of an armed conflict between NATO and Russia, the Suwalki Gap is seen as the most probable strike direction for the joint Belarusian-Russian group [5].

The Suwalki Gap issue has long been a concern in the West, as it is considered to create vulnerabilities for NATO's eastern flank and the alliance's position in the Baltic region.

One must also consider the factor of increasing confrontation between Russia and NATO in the Baltic Sea. Following Sweden and Finland's admission to the alliance, it becomes evident that NATO aims to turn the Baltic into its «internal sea» and to maximise Russia's restrictions in the region.

It is worth noting that after the USSR's collapse, Russia's presence in the Baltic fundamentally decreased. Moreover, the configuration of Russia's coastline itself is far from optimal. Essentially, Russia today lacks full access to «open waters».

The coastline of the Leningrad Region, where Russia's main export ports are now located, can easily be blocked by Finland and Estonia. In this regard, Estonia's attempts to inspect Russian vessels passing through the Gulf of Finland, as well as to review the status of neutral waters, are quite indicative¹.

Incidentally, in the event of a negative development in the Gulf of Finland, Belarusian transit through Russian ports would also be at risk.

Since the start of the special military operation, Lithuania introduced several restrictions on land transit to the Kaliningrad Region². Additionally, the Baltic states closed their airspace to Russian and Belarusian airplanes heading to Kaliningrad. All these measures can be considered preparations for a potential blockade of the Kaliningrad Region.

Accusations against Russia for sabotage of Baltic Sea infrastructure regularly arise, they are evidently aimed at pushing Russia out of the region.

In light of this strategy to push Russia out of the Baltic region, the West remains intent on disrupting the Belarusian-Russian alliance and the strategic linkage between Belarus and the Kaliningrad Region.

Belarus, despite lacking direct access to the Baltic Sea, significantly influences the balance of power in the region. Acting as a strategic rear for the Kaliningrad Region, Belarus complicates plans to stifle it, while the Suwalki Gap creates serious vulnerabilities for the Baltic states as NATO's outpost in the Baltic-Scandinavian macroregion.

The failed attempt of a colour revolution in Belarus sparked discussions among Western experts about the geopolitical consequences for the Kaliningrad Region if there were a change of power in Minsk [6]. Thus, a political coup in Minsk and the rise to power of political forces hostile to Russia are seen in the West as a way to address the Kaliningrad issue.

Indeed, such developments would eliminate the Suwalki Gap issue for the West and significantly strengthen the Baltic states' position as NATO's eastern stronghold. Moreover, a thousand-kilometer Lithuanian-Belarusian corridor would emerge, separating the Kaliningrad Region from the rest of Russia, substantially broadening the West's opportunities for geopolitical leverage against Moscow.

Therefore, Belarus, while lacking direct access to the Baltic Sea, considerably impacts the power dynamics in the Baltic-Scandinavian macroregion. As an ally of Russia, Belarus significantly strengthens Moscow's position in the Baltic Sea amidst the unfavourable geopolitical configuration formed after the USSR's dissolution and the Baltic states' accession to the EU and NATO.

Belarus provides a strategic rear for the Kaliningrad Region, creating vulnerabilities and choke points (the Suwalki Gap) on NATO's eastern flank.

This position of Belarus naturally leads to Western efforts against Minsk, aimed at changing the government and establishing a pro-Western regime modeled after Ukraine and the Baltic states.

Economic cooperation

The relationship between Belarus and the Kaliningrad Region is not limited to military-political aspects or the confrontation with common geopolitical challenges and threats in the Baltic-Scandinavian macroregion and Eastern Europe.

Economic cooperation between Belarus and the Kaliningrad Region is largely determined by the exclave status of the latter and the lack of a shared border, which imposes significant limitations.

Belarus primarily interests the Kaliningrad Region as a transit country through whose territory the region is connected with the main territory of Russia. The main flow of goods, on which the sustenance of the Kaliningrad Region largely depends, inevitably passes through Belarusian territory.

Following the collapse of the USSR, concerns arose that the supply of goods to the Kaliningrad Region might face the challenge of crossing two new customs territories

¹The Ministry of Foreign Affairs assessed the possible closure of the Gulf of Finland to Russian ships // RBK : website. URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/01/10/2024/66fb7fd89a7947886759efe6?form=MG0AV3> (date of access: 25.03.2025) (in Russ.) ; The Ministry of Foreign Affairs commented on Finland and Estonia's planes to close the Gulf of Finland to Russia // News.ru : website. URL: <https://news.ru/vlast/v-mid-vyskazalis-o-planah-finlyandii-i-estonii-zakryt-finskij-zaliv-dlya-rf/?form=MG0AV3> (date of access: 25.03.2025) (in Russ.).

²Lithuania has introduced new restrictions on cargo transit to the Kaliningrad Region // The Moscow Times : website. URL: <https://www.moscowtimes.ru/2025/03/04/litva-pochti-na-tret-snizila-obem-razreshennogo-tranzita-v-kaliningradskuyu-oblast-a156989> (date of access: 25.03.2025) (in Russ.) ; Lithuania will restrict the disembarkation of Russians from Kaliningrad trains // RBK : website. URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/22/02/2024/65d676159a7947b175584e03> (date of access: 25.03.2025) (in Russ.).

(Belarusian and Lithuanian) which could considerably slow down and increase the cost of deliveries to the Russian exclave. Amid the broader crisis triggered by the painful transition to a market economy, this could have posed a genuine threat of collapse for the Kaliningrad Region.

However, the initiation of integration processes between Belarus and Russia and the signing of the Union State treaty removed this threat from the agenda. Russia and Belarus function as a single customs space, and there are no restrictions on the transit of Kaliningrad goods through Belarusian territory.

In the framework of integration with Russia, Belarus also sought to strengthen its cooperation with the Kaliningrad Region. Despite the lack of a shared border, Belarus is closer to the Kaliningrad Region than any other Russian region, offering promising opportunities for interaction.

Nevertheless, as Belarusian researcher A. V. Tikhomirov notes, during the 2000s and 2010s, trade turnover between Belarus and the Kaliningrad Region consistently lagged behind the trade turnover of the Russian exclave with Lithuania, Poland, and Germany [7, p. 81].

Up until the onset of the Ukraine crisis in 2014, the Kaliningrad Region actively developed cross-border cooperation programmes with neighbouring EU states [8]. Given the absence of a direct border with Russia, establishing stable trade and economic ties with European neighbours in the context of relative military-political tranquility appeared logical and reasonable.

Belarus, lacking a direct border with the Kaliningrad Region and forced to supply its goods via transit through the EU customs territory, found it challenging to compete with the European neighbours of the Russian exclave.

The same difficulty thwarted the idea of transiting Belarusian goods through Kaliningrad ports. It is a notion discussed in the 2000s. Political contradictions between Belarus and the Baltic states, whose ports handled Belarusian exports, were already evident. Redirecting goods

to Kaliningrad seemed viable, ensuring exports through Union State ports. However, it soon became clear that transit via Kaliningrad ports would be significantly more expensive for Belarus than transit through ports in Lithuania and Latvia due to greater distances and the need to cross two state borders [7, p. 83].

When Lithuania and Latvia closed their ports to Belarusian goods in 2021–2022, rerouting goods to Kaliningrad was impossible due to tighter transit conditions through Lithuania and the unpreparedness of port infrastructure for handling Belarusian cargo. Instead, Belarusian transit was redirected to ports in the Leningrad Region.

Similar challenges hinder the development of tourism and recreational cooperation. The Kaliningrad Region is actively developing its tourism potential, but on the Belarusian tourism market it has lost out to the Baltic states or Poland, largely due to the high cost and inconvenience of transport links. To travel to the Kaliningrad Region by train, bus, or car, Belarusian citizens must obtain a European visa that permits transit through Lithuanian territory. As a result, many people preferred traveling directly to the EU rather than to the isolated Russian region.

Today, even though tourist trips to EU countries have become significantly more complicated for Belarusian citizens, the tourism appeal of the Kaliningrad Region remains relatively low due to transit issues through Lithuania.

It is also worth noting that air travel between Belarus and the Kaliningrad Region has worsened because the Baltic states have closed their airspace to Belarusian planes, forcing them to bypass the region via the Gulf of Finland.

Thus, despite its potential, economic ties between Belarus and the Kaliningrad Region are significantly constrained by the absence of a shared border and transit challenges through EU territory. These issues are only exacerbated under the conditions of geopolitical confrontation with the EU and NATO.

Humanitarian cooperation

Effective interstate and interregional collaboration is impossible without robust interpersonal humanitarian ties. In case of Belarus and the Kaliningrad Region, a significant factor is the presence of a substantial Belarusian diaspora.

It is well known that the Kaliningrad Region is a settlement territory, with its modern population formed during the post-war period following the deportation of Germans.

The majority of settlers came from the RSFSR, which included the former lands of East Prussia that became the Kaliningrad Region. However, the BSSR also participated in the resettlement programme, resulting in Belarusians becoming the second-largest ethnic group

in the region. Estimates suggest that at the turn of the 1940–50s, the BSSR contributed 12 % of migration growth to the Kaliningrad Region. Between 1948 and 1953, 54.5 thsd people moved from the BSSR to the Kaliningrad Region. The number of Belarusians in the region peaked in the 1980s (approximately 74 thsd people). According to the 2010 census, the Belarusian population in the Kaliningrad Region was 32.5 thsd people, or 3.6 % of the region's population [9, p. 290].

Belarusian researcher A. V. Tikhomirov notes that a sharp decline in the number of Belarusians occurred between the 2002 and 2010 censuses, attributing this to assimilation processes and the weakening of Belarusian national identity [7, p. 84].

Indeed, given the minimal ethnocultural distance and the conditions of joint living with Russians in the same region, Belarusians tend to integrate into the population and adopt the dominant Russian identity. Similar processes occur with Russians in Belarus, where census data also shows a decrease in those identifying as Russians, likely due to shifts in identity toward Belarusian.

Nonetheless, despite the reduction in the proportion of self-identified Belarusians in the Kaliningrad Region's population, the memory of Belarusian contributions to the development and settlement of the region fosters a positive backdrop conducive to cooperation and the establishment of strong bilateral ties.

As a testament to the special relationship between the Kaliningrad Region and Belarus, a monument to Francysk Skaryna, who served for a time at the court of Prussian king Albert Senior, was established in Kaliningrad with funding from the Belarusian community. The park of Russian-Belarusian friendship in Kaliningrad also serves as an important symbolic reminder

of the unique Belarusian contributions to the region's development.

In 2023, a monument to governor general M. N. Muravyov-Vilensky, whose efforts to suppress the Polish uprising of 1863 were closely connected with Belarusian provinces, was unveiled in Kaliningrad. The monument is a replica of one that previously stood in Vilna. In 1915 it was dismantled³.

In October 2022, during the Belarusian-Russian forum «Borders of the Union State» held in Svetlogorsk, an initiative was proposed to create a new international expert platform called the «Baltic platform». Within this framework, experts from Russia, Belarus, and other countries would have the opportunity to discuss actual issues of the Baltic region⁴.

The creation of the «Baltic platform» could turn the Kaliningrad Region into an important dialogue venue for expert communities from both countries, contributing to the establishment of stronger humanitarian ties between the Kaliningrad Region and Belarus.

Conclusions

Belarus and the Kaliningrad Region form a kind of strategic linkage that is of particular importance under the conditions of geopolitical confrontation with the West. Belarus acts as a strategic rear for the Kaliningrad Region and plays a crucial role in ensuring its communication with the main territory of Russia.

Together, Belarus and the Kaliningrad Region create the issue of the Suwalki Gap on NATO's eastern flank, making the Baltic states vulnerable. This, in turn, complicates the NATO's plans to further push Russia out of the Baltic Sea region.

At the same time, the exclave status of the Kaliningrad Region significantly complicates and hinders the

development of economic and tourism cooperation with Belarus. Under conditions of confrontation with the EU, this cooperation becomes even more challenging.

Thus, the unique position of the Kaliningrad Region on the map of Eastern Europe and the Baltic-Scandinavian macroregion defines the special character of the Russian exclave's relationship with Belarus. However, the absence of a shared border and the separation of the Kaliningrad Region by EU territory significantly limit its cooperation potential with Belarus. Solving this problem appears feasible only through a radical restructuring of the entire system of international relations in the region.

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