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Kaliningrad: Putin's Citadel or Russia's European Future?

How Kremlin militarization confronts Kaliningrad's European aspirations

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Kaliningrad is being turned into the Kremlin's forward bastion on the Baltic – a militarized exclave configured to support potential military operations against its neighbors.

Yet strong pro-European sentiment among its residents, if not a barrier, is at least a factor working against dragging the region into war – and keeps open the possibility of closer integration with the wider Baltic region if its military posture is substantially reduced.

Key topics:

1. "Our Far West": The FSB Runs the Region
2. "Impregnable Fortress": The Militarization of the Region
3. "Königsberg and König": Residents' European Aspirations

Executive Summary

On September 23, Poland reported that a Russian Mi-8 military helicopter from Kaliningrad had briefly entered Polish airspace, penetrating 300 meters and lingering near Braniewo for 42 seconds before NATO fighters were scrambled.[1] Poland's Armed Forces Operational Command said[2] the incident appeared to be another test of the country's air-defense readiness.

The incident was soon followed by a familiar information operation. Russian outlets amplified[3] claims originating from a report in Croatia's Jutarnji list, which cited a Polymarket contract trading at roughly 30% for at least one direct military clash between NATO and Russia by the end of 2026. The report suggested that Kaliningrad could become one possible flashpoint.[4] In an interview with KP.RU, Russian military commentator Andrei Klintsevich warned that "the Old World would perish" if it attacked Kaliningrad.[5] The message is clear: test the border, then weaponize the fear.

In summer 2026, Kaliningrad became one of the central issues for Russia's security establishment. Behind official discussions of the region's anniversary, the Kremlin's preparations for a possible escalation in the Baltic are becoming increasingly visible.

A July 1 Russian Security Council meeting was devoted entirely to the region and was attended by Vladimir Putin and several of Russia's senior security officials, including Dmitry Medvedev, Sergei Shoigu, Nikolai Patrushev, Andrei Belousov (Defense Minister), Alexander Bortnikov (FSB), and Sergei Naryshkin (SVR).

On July 2, Putin met with Kaliningrad Governor Alexei Besprozvannykh for the second time this year. Even government-aligned experts noted the unusual nature of these meetings, saying that "clouds are gradually gathering over Kaliningrad." NEZYGAR, a Telegram channel close to the Presidential Administration, linked

the urgent meeting to the threat of a blockade of the exclave, Putin's lack of confidence in Lukashenko, and a "new reality."

The Kremlin's personnel policy suggests that the security services exert an unusually strong influence over regional governance. Governor Besprozvannykh is an officer of the Federal Security Service (FSB). His nonstaff security adviser, Andrei Kozlov, who was elected to the State Duma in the 2026 elections, is also an FSB officer.

All individuals who served as acting governor of the region over the past decade had either documented or reported ties to the FSB, including Yevgeny Zinichev, one of the so-called "Putin adjutants," who later became deputy director of the FSB and minister of emergency situations.

In 2020, the independent outlet Novye Kolesa, citing a serving FSB officer, described Anton Alikhanov, who initially served as acting governor and then led the region from 2016 to 2024, as an agent of the service. In June 2026, the security services' penetration of the regional government was institutionalized with the creation of a Ministry of Regional Security, described by investigators as a "mini-FSB."

The ministry was assigned 128 functions, including "political monitoring" and "manning military units," and is headed by Dmitry Konnov, a former colleague of Kozlov in the FSB. Similar ministries exist in only four other regions. The practice can therefore hardly be described as mainstream Kremlin regional governance, which makes the developments in Kaliningrad all the more notable.

Structural militarization, which accelerated sharply after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, has turned the region into Russia's citadel in the West. Kaliningrad hosts the headquarters of the Baltic Fleet, nuclear-capable Iskander-M missile systems, Container and Voronezh-DM radar systems, electronic warfare facilities, and Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS) denial capabilities. Open-source intelligence projects count as many as 250 military facilities in the region.

Yet the expansion of technical infrastructure has coincided with a visible weakening of the ground-force contingent. Lithuanian intelligence reports that most troops and equipment have been redeployed to Ukraine, while the remaining units are staffed mainly by conscripts. On September 11, Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski said, "There are hardly any troops there." Russian propaganda nevertheless continues to construct an image of a besieged fortress, claiming that the region hosts 50,000 military personnel and a "powerful strike force."

Kaliningrad continues to serve as a base for influence operations targeting the Baltic states and as a recruitment ground for the Kremlin's Baltic apparatus. Vladimir Balobaev, the current Kremlin official responsible for Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, previously headed the Kaliningrad-based "Russian Baltic" center. His predecessor, Vadim Smirnov, also built his career in Kaliningrad before overseeing the Baltic department in the Presidential Administration.

Moreover, beyond militarizing the region, the Kremlin is no less concerned about Kaliningrad's residents themselves. Many readily refer to the city as "Königsberg" – the historical capital of East Prussia, renamed Kaliningrad by the Soviet Union in 1946 – or simply "König." Their attitudes also differ noticeably from those prevalent elsewhere in Russia. **More than one-third of residents** primarily identify with Kaliningrad Oblast, rising to 40.5% among young people. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, almost half traveled to Europe at least once a year, while the share of young people who wanted to move abroad was more than twice the overall rate, 28.8% compared with 13.3%.

In 2024, during the presidential campaign, only half of residents in the regional capital trusted Putin, 50.9%, compared with 79–83% nationwide according to the Kremlin-controlled Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM) and Public Opinion Foundation (FOM).

During the 2026 campaign, the Kremlin demonstrated its response to these attitudes. Opposition candidates running high-profile campaigns were systematically removed from the race. Anton Hendrikson of the anti-war Yabloko party, for example,

was disqualified from both the State Duma and regional Legislative Assembly elections for displaying "extremist symbols" in the form of Facebook and Instagram logos, after which the entire party list was also removed.

Even under these conditions, New People – a systemic party that some members of the Russian opposition urged voters to support as a protest against the ruling party – won 11.22% of the regional State Duma party-list vote, compared with 7.91% nationwide. It also became the only systemic-opposition party to win a seat on the Kaliningrad City Council. The remaining 29 seats went to United Russia, which made maximum use of administrative resources.

These attitudes also have an institutional background. In the late 1990s, Moscow itself proposed turning Kaliningrad into a platform for cooperation with the European Union. The EU invested tens of millions of euros in the region through the Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) program, and in 2006 the European Parliament linked the region's development to greater openness and a reduced military presence.

The social base that remains in the region keeps open the possibility of returning to discussions of Kaliningrad as a demilitarized Baltic hub integrated into the regional economy, should political conditions change – a scenario that could benefit both Russia and Europe.

> Such a model could transform the region from a strategic frontier into a space for cooperation and reduce security risks across the Baltic.

"Our Far West": The FSB Runs the Region

Since the beginning of the Kremlin's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, Kaliningrad, traditionally presented in official propaganda as Russia's "western outpost" that is "standing firm,"[6] has been a particular focus of the Russian authorities. That focus has steadily intensified as Moscow's escalation toward Europe has grown.

The surge in attention has been particularly evident this year. On July 1, 2026, an operational meeting of the Russian Security Council was devoted exclusively to Kaliningrad Region.[7] In addition to Vladimir Putin, it was attended by all the key representatives of the security establishment: hawkish Security Council Deputy Chairman Dmitry Medvedev; former defense minister and current Security Council Secretary Sergei Shoigu; former Security Council secretary and former Federal Security Service (FSB) director Nikolai Patrushev, who now chairs the Maritime Board; Defense Minister Andrei Belousov; FSB Director Alexander Bortnikov; Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) Director Sergei Naryshkin; and a number of other senior officials.

> At a minimum, such intensive involvement by senior security officials demonstrates the region's significance on the federal agenda and Kaliningrad's importance within the Kremlin's military strategy.

The following day, Vladimir Putin met Kaliningrad Governor Alexei Besprozvannykh for the second time in 2026.[8] Although the brief official readouts presented both events as discussions of "socioeconomic development ahead of the 80th anniversary of the establishment of Kaliningrad Region," government-aligned experts noted[9] that such activity was "not at all characteristic of Russian politics and bureaucratic practice" and that "clouds are gradually gathering over Kaliningrad. This tells

us that something unusual is either being prepared or is already happening."

In the same period, NEZYGAR, a Telegram channel close to the Presidential Administration, described the events as the "Kaliningrad case":

> "The Kremlin clearly recognizes the risks of a blockade of Kaliningrad, which, combined with the problems around Crimea, creates strategic difficulties. Putin has no confidence in Lukashenko [EK Stratcom discussed this in detail in one of its reports[10]]. And according to rumors, the urgent Security Council meeting on Kaliningrad was prompted by a new reality after the talks at Valdai."[11]

The Kremlin's obvious focus on the region is also reflected in its distinctive personnel policy toward the regional leadership. Governor Alexei Besprozvannykh, appointed in 2024, is an FSB officer,[12] as is his nonstaff security adviser, Andrei Kozlov, who was elected to the State Duma from one of Kaliningrad's two single-member districts in the current elections.[13]

Kozlov worked in the FSB Directorate for Murmansk Region, another strategically important coastal region of Russia, and arrived in Kaliningrad in 2016, according to investigators, to work for Russian Railways on assignment from the FSB. **This personnel pattern is longstanding.** Over the past decade, every individual who served as acting governor of the region had either documented or reported ties to the FSB.

During the 2024 gubernatorial rotation, the post was temporarily held by Sergei Yeliseyev, first deputy chairman of the regional government and a former FSB officer.

In 2016, Yevgeny Zinichev, then head of the FSB Directorate for Kaliningrad Region, served as acting governor for slightly more than two months before later becoming deputy director of the FSB and minister of emergency situations. From 2006 to 2015, he served in Vladimir Putin's personal protection detail within the Federal Protective Service (FSO) and was one of the so-

called "Putin adjutants,"[14] trusted FSO officers on special assignment who remain close to the president and whose most trusted members have later been appointed to senior positions. **There is also evidence that Anton Alikhanov**, who led the region from 2016 to 2024 and later became minister of industry and trade, was connected to the FSB. In 2020, the regional independent outlet Novye Kolesa, citing a serving FSB officer, described him[15] as an agent of the service "who is placed in a position at an institution, organization, or ministry and gathers information." According to the outlet, this relationship and Zinichev's patronage helped Alikhanov advance his career.

The security services' penetration of the regional government does not end there. In June 2026, Kaliningrad created a Ministry of Regional Security headed by Dmitry Konnov, a former FSB colleague of Andrei Kozlov who had worked with him under cover at Russian Railways in the region.[16]

The new regional agency, described by investigators as a "mini-FSB," was assigned 128 functions,[17] including "implementation of a unified state policy in the field of civil and territorial defense," "political monitoring," "manning military units," "protection of state secrets," and "the surrender of weapons and ammunition by the public."

> Similar ministries had previously been created in only four other Russian regions. This redistribution of security-sector functions to regional bodies can hardly be described as a mainstream feature of Kremlin governance, which further underscores the significance of these developments in Kaliningrad.

"Impregnable Fortress": The Militarization of the Region

The drive toward structural militarization and the transformation of Kaliningrad into Russia's citadel in the West accelerated immediately after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent proxy war in Ukraine. As early as 2015, anonymous NATO officials publicly stated[18] that "Moscow is stationing thousands of troops, including mechanized and naval infantry brigades, military aircraft, modern long-range air defense units and hundreds of armored vehicles in the territory."

Today, even based solely on open-source data, Kaliningrad has one of the highest concentrations of military infrastructure of any Russian region. It hosts the headquarters of the Baltic Fleet; Iskander-M missile systems, deployed there since 2018 and capable of carrying nuclear warheads;[19] numerous technical-intelligence facilities, including the Container over-the-horizon radar system[20] "for monitoring Europe"[21] and the Voronezh-DM radar system;[22] electronic warfare facilities and Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS) denial capabilities;[23] air defense nodes; and three air bases, Chernyakhovsk, Chkalovsk, and Donskoye.

The configuration of Russian air defense, electronic warfare, and communications systems changes continuously. For example, Russian pro-war Z-channels explained the high concentration of NATO intelligence and combat aircraft near Kaliningrad on August 18–19, 2026 as "comprehensive mapping of Russian air defenses and electronic warfare nodes"[24] and as evidence of a "possible change in the configuration of Russian facilities, whose activity triggered increased interest from Western intelligence."[25]

The pace of infrastructure expansion increased sharply after the start of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine,[26] and this also affected the restructuring of the troops stationed in the region. In late 2025, for example, a naval infantry brigade was reorganized into a division.[27] Open-source intelligence

projects now count as many as 250 military facilities in the region,[28] which also hosts Russia's 11th Army Corps.

At the same time, the expansion of technical infrastructure has coincided with a visible weakening of the ground-force contingent, as documented by Lithuanian intelligence:

> *"Most of the land component troops and combat equipment have been deployed to fight against Ukraine. The land component units in the Kaliningrad Region are mainly staffed by conscripts and a small number of professional soldiers."*[29]

Polish officials acknowledge the same trend. On September 11, Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski said,

> "We closely monitor, as you may imagine, the Kaliningrad exclave. There are hardly any troops there."[30]

Independent analysts have likewise noted that

> "From the 1990s through early 2016, Kaliningrad's military forces were relatively weak but got a significant boost by 2021 with heavy and diverse armaments – missiles, warships, armored vehicles, and troops. The latter consisted of the 11th Army Corps, whose composite ground force units had a nominal strength of 12,000 to 18,000 troops."[31]

Russian propaganda, by contrast, claims the opposite and continues to construct the image of a besieged fortress. In August 2025, it put the approximate number of troops in the region at 50,000 and described them as a "powerful strike force."[32]

> Since 2022, the region has hosted five major military exercises involving the Baltic Fleet, in June 2022, June 2023, Ocean 2024, July Storm 2025, and Zapad 2025, as well as 20 tactical exercises involving various branches of the armed forces.

"Königsberg and König": Residents' European Aspirations

Kaliningrad Region's position as a Russian exclave between Poland and Lithuania has long shaped residents' mobility, regional identity and links with Europe, while making the region a sensitive issue for the Kremlin. In the 2000s, amid mounting regional problems, one particularly salient issue was whether to raise the region's legal status from an oblast to a republic.

Rostislav Turovsky, one of Russia's leading scholars of regional politics, notes[33] that

> "in 2005, the Respublika public movement appeared in Kaliningrad. It had been preceded by the separatist Baltic Republican Party [first suspended by a Justice Ministry decision in 2002 and dissolved by a court in 2003]. [The movement was revived in 2020.][34] At the same time, calls emerged to grant Kaliningrad Region the status of an 'overseas territory,' which is not provided for under Russian law."

In addition, Kaliningrad was among the first Russian oblasts to sign a power-sharing treaty with Moscow, doing so in 1996 as it sought to shift as much authority as possible to the regional level.

Kaliningrad has a pronounced regional identity. According to a 2023 study,[35] when respondents were allowed to select multiple identities, 35.5% identified themselves as residents of Kaliningrad Region. When asked which identity was more important, 19.1% chose Kaliningrad.

Regional identification clearly correlates with age: among those aged 18–29, the figures were 40.5% and 23.4%, respectively, while among those aged 60 and older they were 31.9% and 14.1%.

This identity is also reflected in language. Many residents call the city "Königsberg" or simply "König," thereby emphasizing its European character.

Before the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, Kaliningrad also differed from other Russian regions in the high level of European mobility among its residents. Overall, 46.5% visited European countries at least once a year, including 42.7% of young people. Young people's European aspirations are also visible in other indicators.

Almost one-third of respondents aged 18–29, 28.8%, said they would like to emigrate to another country, compared with 13.3% overall, 12.6% among those aged 30–59, and 4.8% among those aged 60 and older. Almost one-quarter of young respondents, 23%, also saw prospects for obtaining higher education abroad rather than in Russia, compared with 11.6% overall.

A 2024 study[36] **also points to a clear divide** between the city of Kaliningrad and the surrounding region in attitudes toward the authorities. The more opposition-minded regional capital was almost evenly split on trust in Putin, with 50.9% expressing trust and 49.1% expressing distrust.

In the wider region, the figures were 74.3% and 25.7%, respectively. Nationwide trust in Putin during the period when the study was conducted stood at 79.4–81% according to the Kremlin-controlled Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM)[37] and around 83% according to the state-run Public Opinion Foundation (FOM).[38]

It is important to note that the survey was conducted during the active phase of Putin's 2024 presidential campaign. The figures, including those for Kaliningrad, may therefore have been temporarily elevated by the effects of pro-presidential campaigning and propaganda.

This pattern was partly visible in the 2026 State Duma campaign and the parallel elections to the regional parliament

and Kaliningrad City Council. During the campaign, the Kremlin systematically removed opposition candidates from the race.

The high-profile campaign of Anton Hendrikson, a member of the anti-war Yabloko party who was running for both the State Duma and the regional Legislative Assembly, was halted by the regional election commission on August 13[39] over the display of "extremist symbols," specifically posts containing Facebook and Instagram logos. Hendrikson had previously been arrested for 10 days over the same issue at the height of the election campaign.[40]

On August 28, Yabloko's party list was also removed from the regional Legislative Assembly election,[41] while the two Yabloko candidates who remained in single-member districts in the regional parliamentary race received death threats.[42]

Despite these Kremlin interventions, public dissatisfaction and regional distinctiveness were also reflected in the election results. In online voting for the State Duma, New People, the least openly pro-war of the Kremlin-aligned systemic parties and one backed by parts of the opposition, won 14.7% of the vote, finishing second behind ruling United Russia.[43]

In the regional party-list vote, it won 11.22%[44] compared with 7.91% nationwide.[45] In the regional Legislative Assembly election, New People received 11.59% of the party-list vote,[46] winning two seats in the 40-member parliament. In the 30-member Kaliningrad City Council, the only deputy from the systemic opposition was a New People candidate. The remaining 29 seats went to United Russia.[47]

Residents' European aspirations are also reflected in the history of international projects that treated Kaliningrad as a special platform for cooperation between Russia and Europe. As early as 1999, Moscow itself proposed treating the region as a "pilot region" in relations between Russia and the European Union.[48]

In 2001, the European Commission prepared a separate strategic document, The EU and Kaliningrad,[49] followed in 2002 by EU–Russia Co-operation on Kaliningrad: 2002 and Beyond.[50]

That same year, the EU allocated around €40 million to projects in the region through the Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) program and considered allocating another €25 million,[51] including for business development, border crossings, and infrastructure.

After Poland and Lithuania joined the EU, a special transit regime through Lithuania was established for Kaliningrad,[52] while cross-border, municipal, university, and civil society ties continued to develop. In 2006, the European Parliament explicitly proposed developing the region as a "more open and less militarized pilot region" with improved access to the EU internal market.[53]

This model gradually faded as the Kremlin's foreign policy became more aggressive and relations between Russia and Europe deteriorated. That shift increased Kaliningrad's military-strategic importance for Moscow, while the final break came after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

At the same time, the sociological data cited above indicate that a social base with potential relevance for similar projects remains in place.

> Taken together, these factors make the restoration of a strategic project centered on "Kaliningrad as a Baltic hub," integrated into the wider Baltic economy, one possible scenario under changed political conditions.

Historical experience shows that such a model already existed institutionally. The European Parliament's 2006 concept also treated reduced military tensions through the demilitarization of Kaliningrad as one of the conditions for transforming the region from a strategic frontier into a space for cooperation, expanding opportunities for the region's residents and its neighbors, and reducing security risks in the Baltic region.

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