

# NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE RUSSIAN BALTIC EXCLAVE IN THE CONTEXT OF CHANGES IN THE COUNTRY'S GEOPOLITICAL SITUATION

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*Current geopolitical and geoeconomic changes require a reconsideration of the role of the Kaliningrad region in the Baltic region. This study aims to demonstrate the possible effect of some trends in the development of the neighbouring countries on the future of the Kaliningrad region and make recommendations on the territory's macrospecialisation. Amid the erosion of the world order, Sergey A. Karaganov calls for moderate isolationism. The Kaliningrad region is an incredibly interesting historical experiment bound to produce unexpected results. The strengthening of Russia, which coincided with the termination of 300 years of attempts to become part of Europe in some capacity, radically affects the functions of the Kaliningrad region. Its unique geographical position and caring attitude to the historical heritage make it a likely outpost of Russia's soft power. Developing the region as a laboratory of the future, which builds models for the domestic market and exports, will allow the country to benefit from scale, taking advantage of its larger and smaller territories. Higher education may play a leading part in the process. In particular, as conservatism revives, it is time to take another look at the ideas and approaches used when creating Akademgorodok in Novosibirsk.*

## **Keywords:**

Kaliningrad region, Poland, Lithuania, Big Eurasia, conservatism, intellectual emancipation

The ongoing rapid changes in the balance of power lead to a radical restructuring of the entire system of international relations. Countries and regions have to respond to fundamental geopolitical and geo-economic shifts; they proactively look for ways of turning these shifts to their advantage, minimizing inevitable losses and deriving maximum benefits from the current situation. The article attempts to redefine the role of the Kaliningrad region given its unique geographical position, as well as the region's intellectual and cultural potential for achieving the primary objectives of the country's development. Both geo-economic

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and geopolitical situations call for Russia's turn to the East, for strengthening its ties with Asia while still maintaining tolerable, to a degree, relations with Europe. This change is necessitated by the need to ensure the country's economic development and, simultaneously, avoid its unilateral dependence on China. The national geopolitical strategy is aimed at accelerating the development of Siberia and the Far East. However, accomplishing this mission requires the most profound changes in society. Rising to these considerable challenges will become a catalyst for these changes. There will be a need for bold experiments not only in the areas of new development but also in the western direction. To play an active role in Europe, Russia will have to use its Baltic frontier region not only as a receptacle for capital and innovation but also as a projector of its soft power. The geographical location of the Kaliningrad region in the west of Russia, its exclave status along with other factors, create extremely favourable conditions for conducting pilot experiments here. This polemical paper is a humble contribution to the discussion.

### **Distribution of power in the emerging world order**

The current profound global geopolitical transformation requires a reconsideration of seemingly sacrosanct concepts. According to Bordachev, "it would be strange to think that the emerging reality will only be the repetition of the past adapted to the new international equilibrium" [4]. We cannot expect that in the future world order the balance-of-power scales will only use different weights in essence remaining the same. We can reasonably assume that the design of the scales will also change.

Researchers with a natural-scientific style of thinking are doomed to be torn between their desire to formulate objective laws of social development and their utter unwillingness to take up the position of historical materialism or "the end of history". Events, perceived as inevitable in hindsight, actually may not have been such. Reflecting on the origins of the current confrontation, Sarott writes, "Later, German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher proposed another option: to integrate NATO and the Warsaw Pact into an "interlocking system of mutual collective security", within which "both alliances will eventually dissolve". Former dissidents from Central Europe were ready to go even further, proposing a complete demilitarization of the region" [17]. However, Europe's political development did not follow this path. Nowadays, it obeys, alas, quite different while still objective laws. In both Russian and Western experts, consensus exists not only on the duration of sanctions but also on their increasing severity over the next 10–15 years [23].

The era of strong, securely cemented alliances is ending. The emerging world order is a stage for interaction between coalitions of convenience. The bipolar world based on the confrontation of the blocks made any country, even a smaller one, a valuable asset for bigger players. This is convenient for both accomplishing military-strategic tasks and increasing political influence; a country is a vote

in international organisations. It is difficult to say now whether the world has become truly multipolar. Nevertheless, it has turned into a new structure having fuzzy rather than clearly defined boundaries between the blocs [2].

The current, second cycle of global disintegration began in 2008, when the last economic crisis reached its climax, and it continued for another 15 years, after which the third globalisation will begin. The contours of it are still completely unclear. The first globalisation (mid-19th century — 1914) went down in history as *Pax Britannica* [18], the second one (1945—2008) as *Pax Americana* with some reservations about the US-USSR rivalry. It would be extremely imprudent to herald the coming of *Pax Sinensis*. “The age of Europe ended in 1914, the age of America is ending now, and the age of China will not come since all countries will be trying to prevent it. The 21st century will be the age of Asia, and the main systemic conflicts will take place in the most populous part of the globe” [3]. Multipolarity and even bipolarity hardly allow for the leadership of individual countries. Drastic changes in the “design of the scales” have already resulted in an attempt of the leading players to ensure their security on their own; they are not inclined to intervene in conflicts between or within smaller countries unless they believe that these conflicts pose a significant threat [2]. A typical example of this approach is Russia’s stand in the 2020 armed conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

This new development could eventually become of great importance for the Kaliningrad region squeezed between Poland and Lithuania, the countries having a very unamicable policy towards Russia even compared with other EU countries. While the relations with Poland with its dynamic economy and growing population are unlikely to improve in the near future, the prognosis for Lithuania may be slightly more optimistic. Unlike largely self-sufficient and, therefore, economically independent Poland, Lithuania is a small country whose economy has not demonstrated high growth rates recently. Over the years of its independence, this country has lost a quarter of its population. The confrontation with Russia, chosen as *raison d’être*, is becoming increasingly unprofitable as the US geopolitical interests now focus on the Asia-Pacific region and Germany has become the EU’s sole leader. It is unlikely that Berlin’s willingness to generously sponsor Lithuania’s anti-Russian policy, as well as that of Latvia or Estonia, will grow. Therefore, it is most probable that in the coming years, Lithuanian leaders will show an increasing tendency to derive maximum benefit from the country’s geographical position within the framework of the emerging Greater Eurasia.

### **Neo-isolationism as a condition for experiments**

Given the ongoing disintegration, the “fall” of the world order [1] Karaganov calls for moderate isolationism, “Russia must become a strong and powerful fortress; this is the main objective in this dangerous and unpredictable world. The more intertwined we are with the world that is about to shatter, the more vulnerable we become. Any gain in such a turbulent situation is transient, and any

loss is a loss of time, money and everything else” [7]. Nevertheless, moderate isolationism, with an emphasis on the word *moderate*, is compatible with an active foreign policy, whether in Syria or Transcaucasia, provided limited means and efforts are sufficient to achieve desired results. He states the priority of internal geopolitics and geoeconomy, implying that solutions to foreign policy challenges would facilitate national development. He sees it as a geopolitical projection of moderate conservatism discussed by President Putin at the XVIII meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club on October 21, 2021 [5].

Suchentsov wrote that “each state is an open-ended experiment” [19]. In many ways, this is also true for regions, especially for the Kaliningrad region. The experiment brings success if it is bold and well-designed. Joliot-Curie (1900–1958) wrote that the farther an experiment is from theory, the closer it is to the Nobel Prize. The region can play an outstanding role in the formation of Greater Eurasia, being the western extremity of the axis that begins off the coast of the East China and South China Seas. With Russia’s turn to Asia, its expanding economic interaction with China and other oriental countries, the geopolitical and geo-economic importance of the Kaliningrad region will not diminish. On the contrary, it will increase due to the general strengthening of the country’s position. Geographers should not forget about the “scale game” taught by Maergoiz (1908–1975) [11]. “Having started turning to the East, we have significantly changed the balance of power in our relations with the West, especially with Europe, in our favour. From its periphery, aspiring to become a more central player and willing to pay for it, we are now growing into the centre of a new and large Eurasian space, bringing back Russian-Eurasian identity, which is particularly important given the rise of Asia. Naturally, we are doing this without abandoning our largely European culture” [6].

For two and a half centuries with a short (by historical standards) interval between the two world wars, the Baltic States have been playing the role of a sea gate to Russia. Now St. Petersburg, Leningrad and Kaliningrad regions remain Russia’s window to Europe. The Kaliningrad region has an advantageous geographical position compared with the other two regions. Coupled with the abandonment of three-hundred-year attempts to fit into Europe in one capacity or another climaxing in the first 15 post-Soviet years [12], the strengthening of the country leads to considerable changes in the functions performed by the three regions. Given the changing balance of political power in Europe and the enhanced standing of Russia in Asia, they are to perform both transport and logistics functions, as well as the function of a receptacle of capital and innovation and a strategically important place for Russia’s economic and cultural expansion to Europe, the trend, which should reinforce in the future.

Unlike China, Russia cannot beat the West by playing according to western rules. China’s success led to a revision of the principles of globalisation, which was especially extensive during Trump’s presidency. Russia has just started acting symmetrically by launching *Russia Today* and *Sputnik*. These advances

caused an outburst of arbitrariness and even hatred in many democratic countries. This was the best evidence of success. Likewise, the Soviet's jamming of Western radio broadcasts in Russian on the territory of the USSR was an undeniable proof of the high demand for them.

The unique geographical position of the Kaliningrad region combined with its rich historical heritage makes the region a convenient platform for the projection of soft power. A constant heightening of its cultural and recreational potential, infrastructure and urban development increases the region's attractiveness to the neighbouring countries' residents. Higher education has a crucial role here since it is in this area that it is possible to compete with and outpace the West. However, this calls for drawing on the Soviet experience, getting rid of the existing inconsistencies and flaws in education, and moving forward instead of repeating patterns developed by other countries. In this case, as in some others, having conservative Poland as a neighbour is undoubtedly a considerable advantage.

### **Ratzel's paradox, big and small countries**

A breakthrough always requires courage and talent. Karaganov notes that Siberia historically developed as an area of economic freedom. The new turn to the East cannot be successful unless Siberia becomes a giant laboratory of the future since the pioneering development of the territory is a venture [14]. Its success requires the frontier spirit, courage and positive adventurism of pioneers. However, along with its eastern laboratory, the country needs a smaller, although ultra-modern one in its western part. At the beginning of the intellectual emancipation of Russia, the transition from replicating American and European ideas to independent creative research combined with the westernmost geographical location and the exclave status, create objective prerequisites for this macro-specialization of the Kaliningrad region. After all, rivalry contributes to creativity. Cooperation allows for adopting patterns and ideas and then adjusting them to local conditions, which does not require first-class research facilities. Meanwhile, Ortega y Gasset (1883—1955) urged us to borrow material, not items, in no way relieving ourselves of strenuous creative work [13].

The biggest internal and external geopolitical challenges associated with the turn to the East and the growing role of big nations in international relations combined with a relative reduction in the importance of small ones [2] naturally require a much greater focus on large spaces. According to Ratzel (1844—1904), the father of human geography and the forerunner of geopolitics, rapid development is impossible without high population density. Produced in the 19th century, this famous idea seems so intuitively correct that it does not require any proof. Thus, it still lies at the heart of almost all research on the spread of innovation. Meanwhile, Ratzel, who was much deeper than he might have seemed to his contemporaries and descendants, left us the following idea to contemplate on, "the broader and clearer the geographical horizon, the more ambitious the political plans and the greater the measure. This leads to growing states and peoples.

A nation working in a large space wins in power, the breadth of worldview and freedom; this is the reward for its selfless work” [16, p. 31]. This apparent contradiction deserves to enter science as *the Ratzel paradox*. Its analysis is beyond the scope of this article, but it is necessary to relate it to other theoretical constructs to solve the problems posed here.

The problem of comparative competitive advantages of large and small nations is not new. Zimin (1929—1995) worked on it when he was working on the theory of small highly developed countries at the turn of the 70s and 80s [15]. According to his definition, a small country has less than one standard economic area (which he also defined). The main advantages of small highly developed countries come from a higher level of social infrastructure, which Zimin interpreted not only in the traditional sense but, first and foremost, as labour thinking. The basis of the competitive advantage is the so-called direct perception pyramid: all residents of a small and highly developed country know each other personally or through mutual acquaintances. The result is a shorter distance between authorities and people, less waste of human resources on bureaucracy, lower crime rates, as well as higher levels of education and innovation. Zimin often emphasized that in some Scandinavian countries higher education became free at the beginning of the twentieth century, even earlier than in Soviet Russia. With considerably limited human resources, small countries had to work tirelessly to use them as efficiently as possible. It was a question of their survival in their fierce competition with bigger countries having large markets and abundant human resources.

### **Regional macro-specialization**

The development of the Kaliningrad region as the country’s westernmost laboratory of the future, which designs and tests models not only for domestic use but also for export, will allow Russia to confidently play the scale game and exploit the competitive advantages of both a large and a small country. In the face of the inevitable revival of conservatism, the country’s intellectual potential should be exploited to the full. The situation was quite different during the modernisation period based on borrowing understood broadly. We should adopt ideas and approaches behind the Novosibirsk Academgorodok project, including those that could not be fully implemented at the time of its creation due to political constraints and ideological biases.

We are still far from being fully aware of the fact that we have become (or rather, have remained) one of the freest countries intellectually, and all the limitations in this field, to a considerable degree though not completely, result from the borrowing of Western models [10]. The limitations include, first of all, a lack of academic discussions and the death of seminars making not only the development of science and higher education but also a normal democratic process inconceivable. At the same time, attempts to present our country as an abhorrent totalitarian state will continue and intensify since they have no connection with the actual level of political freedoms and civil rights guarantees being rooted solely in geopolitical confrontation.



According to Laruelle, the prospects for a mutual understanding between the West and Russia are by no means encouraging. For the West “normality” refers to the short period when Russia almost unconditionally accepted the principles and rules of conduct imposed on it in the international arena, whereas for Russia “normality” is the status of the great power it used to have during the Cold War, which the country eventually lost. The lack of uniform understanding of “normality” leads to numerous interpretations of the future of Europe and the resulting division into friends and enemies. The dismantling of both the Yalta world order and the foundations of classical European civilization with postmodern theories denying traditional values, national identity and state sovereignty is unacceptable to conservative Russia [24].

The ideological war has been imposed on us. We must vigorously defend what we hold dear. However, defense is not the way to win a war. The Kaliningrad region seems the most suitable launching ground for the forthcoming counter-offensive. In the Soviet period, the existence of the developed countries of the West as an alternative to the situation in our country greatly contributed to the critical attitude to domestic realities and critical thinking in general. Now we should rely only on ourselves, our understanding of what both Russian and international history can teach us. That should be the basis for our ideology and our strategy in the outer world.

The development of the Kaliningrad region should involve, first of all, its positioning in the intellectual space of Europe as a platform for the free exchange of opinions on the most burning issues. International forums of different scales ranging from research seminars to congresses can facilitate free exchange of opinions, free discussions between advocates of different viewpoints. Recently, there have been no similar events both in our country and beyond. Open discussions on acute themes will certainly attract many participants. The decline of debates in the West is not a result of some misconception or ridiculous intellectual fad. Rather it is the evidence of a deep systemic crisis. The more vulnerable the existing order to criticism is, the more it must be avoided. In these terms, the West has become a mirror image of the USSR.

Open multilingual scientific, socio-political journals, popular science magazines should also become a permanent platform for free discussions. They will be a powerful manifestation of soft power, free from the negative propaganda and counter-propaganda we discussed previously [21]. Competitive success, including that at the regional level, requires proper consideration of our strengths and weaknesses. We should neither despise nor idealize ourselves, although historically we are strongly inclined to fall into one of these extremes. We are people of impulse rather than discipline and method. It would be nice to have a bit of a German in ourselves, as we have long been advised by Kuzminov, but this will hardly help us bypass Germany in any way. We need to learn to turn our weaknesses into competitive advantages. If our weaknesses are a continuation of our virtues, then the opposite is also true. We love arguing, and quite often all the

steam is used on the whistle. Why do not we use the long-standing passion of ours for the development of international journals ensuring a high level of intellectual and moral debate on their pages?

### **Experiments in science and higher education**

Reasonable, healthy and moderate conservatism President Putin spoke about [5] clearly implies benefiting from our lag behind the West in many spheres of education, science and socio-political life. Unfortunately, it is in these areas that the gap is being bridged especially zealously. Having restored independent goal-setting in foreign policy, having sharply increased military efficiency, the country still depends on the West in education and science. How could the assessment of the qualifications of researchers and academics, research organizations and universities have been outsourced to our political geopolitical rivals?!

A renowned epistemologist and philosopher of science Rozov (1930—2011) introduced the *telling fact* concept, which means a fact that helps reveal a relevant feature or regularity. The recent experience of the Institute of Geography of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IGRAS) illustrates the conceptual content of this notion. In July 2021, the Institute of Water Problems of the Russian Academy of Sciences offered to join a consortium to study the water resources of Crimea. The idea was wholeheartedly supported by the IGRAS Hydrology Laboratory. Participation in any consortium has to be approved by a decision of the scientific council. The issue seemed to be purely technical. However, during the remote voting, a serious and heated discussion broke out. It turned out that many members of the scientific council, including heads of departments and some very reputable researchers, either strongly opposed the initiative or did not support it since any associations of the IGRAS with Crimea would damage their international links. To repeat, it was the question of the IGRAS's participation rather than their personal participation in the project. Everybody was free to choose the level of involvement. Only a long and heartfelt letter from the acting director helped gain the necessary 2/3 of the votes. It is not always easy to identify and assess the prevailing mood and trends in the corridors of power. Nevertheless, a question arises — why the country would need scientists who look in the wrong direction even at important moments? How can one change their motivation and make them think of their own country first?

“The problem is that presidential decrees are elements of planned economy (the goal is to raise the prestige of the scientist), while the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation wants to implement them with strictly market methods”, writes the director of INION RAS Kuznetsov [9]. A bigger problem is that the current officials simply do not know other methods. They never lived in the USSR where the level and the quality of science were outstanding. There was no bibliometrics. Regardless of some flaws, science developed much more efficiently than today. In the near future, our country will not be able to approach the United States or any other leading Western country in terms of funding



education and science. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on cost-efficiency. It requires bold experiments, and the Kaliningrad region could be a suitable testing ground. “Catch up and overtake”, the romantic slogan of the 1930s, may prove to be an old but potent weapon. Science in the West may not be as efficient as it may seem which was apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, although there had been some evidence of it in the past.

The quality of higher education is even more astonishing. We are used to speaking reverently of the Ivy League. However, a graduate of Harvard George W. Bush, Jr., confused Austria and Australia, the U.S. state of Georgia and Georgia as a country. The graduate of Brown University Nuland was ready to send the American fleet to the coast of Belarus. The strength of these universities (and many others) lies in their rankings. Their high reputation provides them with abundant funding; the latter allows attracting top scientists. These world-class academics, in turn, provide for high ratings. Nevertheless, the quality of research conducted at universities does not necessarily translate into the quality of their graduates, most of whom do not aspire to an academic career. At the same time, major scientists invest their effort and time in working with students only if they need to prepare substitutes. Most students can only contemplate their pictures. Harvard students privately say that representing their *alma mater* in sports competitions contributes as much to academic success as poring over books until early hours. The situation we observe in Russian universities is surreal: the publish-or-perish requirement is accompanied by an equally steady decrease in the requirements for students' knowledge. This is a result of the ridiculous race over time for rankings, where the mere fact of our participation will surely lead to our failure.

Meanwhile, in the West, there are clear-headed people, who are aware of the mission of university education, which Ortega i Gasset formulated 90 years ago — to train professionals having a broad scientific and cultural outlook rather than single-discipline specialists, at best, knowledgeable in their narrow field while remaining barbarians in everything else. He attributed the victorious march of fascism to the catastrophic fall of the cultural level of the educated strata of society [13]. The Leuphana University of Lüneburg, established by the Landtag of Lower Saxony in 1989 (founded in 1946 as a teacher training college), hardly cares about its rankings. It makes its own decisions on what to teach. The university focuses on the disciplines that form a humanistic and scientific worldview and disapproves the idea of narrow specialisation. Every year the university has many applicants. “Smart companies know that good graduates look beyond the horizon of their specialisation and are concerned about key public problems. That is why our graduates find their first job easily”, says the university rector [22]. Answering the question “Is your model of education more expensive than the traditional one?” he says, “Our model is more complex because both students and professors have to work harder. However, it does not necessarily have to be more expensive compared with the traditional one” (ibid.).

We should stop worshipping rankings as pagan gods; we should draw on the best practices of the Soviet tertiary education (which was not bad, especially by today's standards). It is particularly important to bring the faculty back to teaching since their main function is to give knowledge and share skills whereas doing research is an additional asset. There is no need for WoS publications, especially in its upper quartiles, to teach students the fundamentals of their profession. A possible decrease in the number of students (dropouts) should not affect the salaries of faculty or administration. This is the only way to make students learn rather than pretend to do it.

It seems that the Russian outpost in Europe, the Kaliningrad region, has the most favourable conditions for this excitingly bold and very realistic experiment. Within a few years, the level of higher education is bound to rise; it will make the region even more attractive and authoritative at least among the Baltic countries. At the same time, it will significantly contribute to Russia's soft power. Surely, we have enough intelligence, talent and funds for it. The only thing lacking is political will.

Fedortsev wrote that ever since 1973, after the first energy crisis, the Germans have been investing in RES, and now they believe that it is their time to become an energy superpower since almost all resources are commonly available, and they are the ones having the technology [20]. The Germans will clearly pay any price. They are abandoning coal and, most probably, will abandon gas in the future. Almost all nuclear power plants are closed, though it did not affect the carbon footprint. There is no way Germany would assume nuclear leadership. It is high time we came to our senses, returned to sound conservatism, and reassessed the Soviet legacy (while there is still something left) created by enormous efforts and sacrifice to make Russia an integral part of the world.

We will need much less funding than Germany, but much more courage and intellectual honesty to restore the sovereign independent goal-setting, the skill we lost in the post-Soviet period. That is largely a task we have to solve in designing a world where independent goal-setting is a norm. We should put all our intellectual strength into designing a world order, in which the country will be one of the key players. We may not be as efficient as Germany yet. However, we will have to be just as successful in implementing our project.

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Speaking at the meeting of the Valdai Club, Vladimir Putin answered the question of how to ensure the effectiveness of Russia's soft power, "The most important thing is to have self-respect. You do not have to prove to someone that you are good. We should not do that. That is the most important thing. Respect yourself, your history and culture, and people will reach out to you" [5]. We do have a lot to think about if we want to set great goals for a great country rather than live for the day. By restoring respect for ourselves, we will gain the confidence, which is much-needed for large-scale and bold experiments. Without them, it is impossible to ensure a future worth living for the country in this highly turbulent

and constantly changing world. The contours of the new world order will begin to emerge only in a few years, but we need to act now. “Societies and states have an inalienable right, even an obligation to experiment with their national political and social development paths. Every experiment, whether successful or not, contributes to the common social experience of humanity. History will judge which models will ultimately prove effective, efficient, fair and successful, and which will find their place in the vast and constantly growing graveyard of human misconceptions” [8].

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