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The Iron Sarcophagus lands over the Kaliningrad region

The Kaliningrad region, located between Lithuania and Poland, was not annexed to the Soviet Union until after World War II. After the collapse of the USSR three decades ago, the Kaliningrad region became a Russian exclave that no longer had a land connection to the Russian mainland.

About 15 years ago, I acted as an expert for the European Parliament on the development of the Kaliningrad Special Economic Zone ([a link](#)). It was then hoped that Kaliningrad would become a kind of pilot zone in which EU-Russia integration could be deepened ([a link](#)). My view of the development of Kaliningrad was optimistic at the time.

However, the Kremlin's attitude towards Kaliningrad's European integration began to change. President Putin's speech in Munich in February 2007 may have served as a historic watershed. The Kaliningrad region was no longer developed to serve as a pilot zone for Russia's European integration, but the Putin administration sought to integrate Kaliningrad more closely with the Russian mainland. President Putin's background in the KGB and the deep mistrust towards the West that stems from the KGB gradually began to show in Kaliningrad's development.

Despite growing distrust, Kaliningrad is still one of Russia's most foreign trade-oriented regions, as evidenced by the fact that the Kaliningrad region accounts for over three percent of the Russian Federation's total imports, even if the region accounts for only 0.6-0.7 percent of the Russian GDP and population ([a link](#)). In addition to the foreign trade orientation of Kaliningrad's economy, the residents of Kaliningrad have traditionally traveled more actively to the European Union than to mainland Russia.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine launched by President Putin in February 2022 will fundamentally change the position of Kaliningrad and its inhabitants. It is likely that the Kremlin-instigated separatism paranoia in Kaliningrad intensifies, increasing control and censorship. Foreign business is also subject to special monitoring. It remains to be seen when Russia will start restricting the travel of its citizens abroad. If this were to happen, it would mean that the Kaliningrad region would become a kind of open-air prison for almost one million Russian citizens living in the Kaliningrad region. In this context, it is worth remembering that in 2016, Poland ended its regional visa-free agreement with the Kaliningrad region following Russia's annexation of Crimea two years earlier.

It seems inevitable that the Kaliningrad region will become a fortress of the Russian army, to which foreigners are less welcome than earlier. Here, it should not be forgotten that the Kaliningrad region was closed to foreigners until the turn of the 1990s. In this respect, Kaliningrad is unfortunately returning to the past.

The closure of Kaliningrad will mean a decline in the living standards of Kaliningrad residents. The living standards of Kaliningraders will deteriorate faster than the Russians living elsewhere in Russia, as Kaliningrad tends to flourish in free cooperation, while in the face of confrontation, Kaliningrad will become a military stronghold whose economic well-being is of little interest to the Kremlin. The Kremlin is only interested in the standard of living in Kaliningrad to the extent that there is no social turbulence in the region. Although at the moment social turbulence does not seem likely, I believe that Kaliningrad, the Caucasus and Crimea are the most socially explosive regions within Russia's control.

If Putin's invasion of Ukraine caused the Iron Curtain to land over Russia, the invasion would cause an Iron Sarcophagus to land over Kaliningrad. In other words, in the next few years, we will regrettably see Kaliningrad becoming a dead spot in the Baltic Sea region.

We, the citizens of the European Union, did not want this. On the contrary, we tried to warn President Putin several times before his decision to attack Ukraine on 24 February. We warned that the consequence of the full-scale war in Ukraine would manifest on a scale previously unheard of. Russia's success in the Ukraine War has been catastrophic, and the Russian army or troops under it have undoubtedly committed war crimes in Ukraine ([a link](#)).

In practice, this means that the West will not find a new constructive dialogue with Russia as long as President Putin is in power. Waiting for a new beginning may take long time. Sure, the West does not determine who the Russians will elect as their next president in 2024, but on the other hand, the West has no plans to build relationships with those responsible for war crimes in Ukraine.

We failed to integrate Russia and the EU. However, there is still hope after the Putin regime. As I still have some 10 years before my retirement, I hope to have a chance to see a new window of opportunity for cooperation between Russia and the EU.

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