

Suwalki Gap – The Lithuanian Nightmare

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After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's claim to Kaliningrad was not contested by any government, though some groups in Lithuania called for the annexation of the province, or parts of it.

Russia and Lithuania negotiated the simplified transit regime to Kaliningrad in late 1990s. Initially, Russia pushed for a right to have a military corridor, but Lithuania refused as it would breach the country's sovereignty.

Nevertheless, Russia continues to view the region as a vital element of its ability to project power in the Baltic region.

Though Lithuanian officials claim that military capabilities in Kaliningrad had been significantly diminished, they insist on strengthening the border with Belarus (main Russia's ally in Europe) in order not to allow the widening of Russia's influence.

A series of restrictions on transit through Lithuania between the Russian semi-exclave of Kaliningrad Oblast and mainland Russia were implemented in June 2022.

Among other things, the transit of coal, metals, cement, wood, building materials and high-tech products by railway transport has stopped. The governor of the Kaliningrad Oblast, Anton Alikhanov, said that the ban affected 40-50% of cargo transported between the region and the rest of Russia. On June 21, Lithuania extended restrictions on freight vehicles as well.

On July 11, Lithuania expanded restrictions on the transit of goods, starting the phased introduction of sanctions announced

by the EU. The list included concrete, wood, alcohol and alcohol-based industrial chemicals.

The European Union, in its turn, tries to remain more pragmatic and not so aggressive towards Russia and Belarus. On 23 July Lithuania removed rail transit restrictions for Kaliningrad after EU revised its sanction recommendations that only apply to road transit and not rail.

Though Lithuania lost a large part of its imports when sanctions were imposed, the authorities' activity and rhetoric remain aggressive.

So, it has become known that in March Lithuania detained at the border more than 30 wagons and returned them back to Belarus. The more so, Lithuania also creates conditions resulting in huge queues of loaded trucks on the border with Russia. As of 9 am on April 4, 2023, there were 70 trucks in the direction of Lithuania and 24 more in no man's land, already cleared by Kaliningrad customs officers. Problems at the border arose on the night of Sunday, April 2, due to a "failure" in the information system of the Lithuanian customs. For more than a day, loaded vehicles were not allowed into the territory of Lithuania.

In response, the Russia openly threatens Lithuania. Andrey Arkadyevich Klimov, the head of the temporary commission of the Federation Council for the protection of sovereignty, said that if the EU „does not correct the situation with the blockade, it will free Russia's hands to solve this problem by any means”.

Russia tries to soften the situation and also trying to prepare the Kaliningrad region for “complete isolation and to ensure food safety and that its energy system is capable of functioning independently”.

It is a big question for how long Russia is ready to tolerate Lithuania's behavior. Judging by Moscow's operation in Donbas,

where it defends Russian speaking population, it is highly likely that Russia will not stop itself if its population in Kaliningrad region will be isolated. Is Lithuania ready to loose Suwalki Gap? To behave in such a way as Vilnius does means a possible open military confrontation.

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