

# **Demographic challenges of the Kaliningrad region in the new geopolitical reality: Trends, risks and prospects**

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# Demographic challenges of the Kaliningrad region in the new geopolitical reality: Trends, risks and prospects

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## Abstract

As Russia's westernmost enclave, the Kaliningrad region faces unique demographic challenges exacerbated by the ongoing geopolitical crisis and Putin's war against Ukraine. This study analyses the region's population dynamics, fertility, mortality, and migration trends in the post-Soviet period, focusing on the impact of recent events. Despite initial successes in stabilising its population and improving demographic indicators, the region now confronts a growing threat of depopulation due to deteriorating age structure, declining fertility, slowing mortality reduction, and diminishing migration attractiveness. The devastating consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine have accelerated negative demographic trends, manifesting in reduced births, increased deaths, and intensified migration outflows, particularly among the youth and skilled professionals. In the new geopolitical landscape, the Kaliningrad region risks falling into a trap of peripherality and isolation, with severed ties to European partners, logistical constraints, technological lag, and shrinking markets. Overcoming confrontation with the West and restoring good-neighbourly relations are crucial for the region to regain its role as a bridge between Russia and Europe. The demographic future of the Kaliningrad region largely depends on national trends and the chosen vector of the country's development, necessitating a reassessment of regional demographic and migration policies to create an environment conducive to the realisation of human potential.

**Key words:** Kaliningrad region, demographic challenges, population dynamics, fertility, mortality, human migration, depopulation.

**Credits:** The author expresses deep gratitude to Cara and Northumbria University.

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## 1. Introduction

The full-scale invasion unleashed by Russia against Ukraine in February 2022 is already having numerous negative effects on the socio-economic development of the Kaliningrad region, and these consequences are likely to grow and deepen in the long term. As Russia's westernmost region, separated from the main territory of the country by other states, the oblast (region) has traditionally been characterised by a higher level of population mobility and close socio-economic, trade, and cultural ties with EU countries.

These circumstances largely determined the specifics of the region's socio-economic development in the post-Soviet period. However, under the new geopolitical conditions of confrontation with the West, the oblast risks facing depopulation due to both natural decrease and a sharp decline in its migration attractiveness.

One of the most painful blows to the region has been the EU sanctions imposed in response to Russian aggression. As part of the latest restrictive measures, the EU and Lithuania have banned the transit through their territory of a wide range of goods from the main part of Russia to the Kaliningrad region. The ban covers metals, building materials, cement, timber, electronics, industrial equipment, parts for the aerospace industry, and much more (Boffey, 2022; Cokelaere, 2022).

The restrictions have also affected road transit. Attempts to reorient cargo flows to maritime transport via the ports of Ust-Luga and Baltiysk have only partially alleviated the problem. The carrying capacity of the ferry line is limited, and tariffs and delivery times have increased. Air transportation is also not a panacea due to small volumes and extremely high costs. As a result, the oblast has found itself in a semi-blockaded position, incurring huge economic losses.

The consequences for the enclave's economy have been quite severe. The most affected industries are manufacturing and construction, which rely on supplying materials and components from Russia. Many enterprises have faced disruptions in production and logistics chains, reductions or stoppages in production, and cash gaps. A sharp increase in transport costs has led to more expensive products and reduced competitiveness.

A shortage of certain building materials, steel, timber and other raw materials has slowed down or paralysed the implementation of investment projects. The sanctions pressure is exacerbated by the severance of long-standing cooperation ties between Kaliningrad enterprises and EU partners, while Russia's remaining important trading partners, such as China, India and other Asian countries, are located quite far away. Foreign investors are curtailing projects and leaving the region, depriving it of advanced technologies and expertise.

For instance, the brands BMW, KIA and Hyundai (whose automobiles were assembled at the Avtotor plant) have completely withdrawn from the region. Some manufacturers have remained in Russia but have moved their production to other regions. For example, the television manufacturer STI Group (brands TCL, BBK, etc.) has relocated its production to the Moscow region, and Telebalt T (brands Hyundai, Toshiba, etc.) plans to launch new production facilities in the Leningrad region. All of this is happening due to the loss of the Kaliningrad region's competitive advantages in the form of tax benefits and convenient logistics.

The scientific and educational cooperation of the Kaliningrad region with European countries has also been disrupted. Joint research projects, academic exchange programmes, and expert platforms have been curtailed. A number of cultural and language centres that supported cultural and humanitarian ties with Germany, Poland, and Lithuania have been closed. The new 'Iron Curtain' is cutting off Kaliningrad's youth from education and careers in the EU, increasing their deprivation and frustration (Studzińska & Dunaj, 2023).

The deterioration of relations with neighbouring countries has dealt a painful blow to the cross-border contacts of the oblast's residents, who are accustomed to 'a European way of life'. The cancellation by Poland and Lithuania of agreements on local border traffic (LBT) has deprived Kaliningraders of the opportunity for visa-free trips to neighbouring regions for recreation, shopping, and visiting relatives. Whereas previously millions of people crossed the border under LBT, now legal travel to the EU has become an inaccessible luxury. The oblast is rapidly losing its role as a bridge between Russia and Europe, turning into a dead-end closed region.

Meanwhile, defence and security spending in the Kaliningrad region is likely to grow, reinforcing its militarised character. The region has already been turned into one of Russia's most fortified 'fortresses' aimed against NATO. The arms race may entail a proportional reduction in social spending and environmental risks for the oblast's fragile nature. The imposition of military-patriotic ideology on the mass consciousness is weakening Kaliningrad's unique identity (Hamilton & Pita, 2022; Veebel, 2022; Karnitschnig, 2022).

Before Putin's aggression, the region was distinguished by greater openness, Europeanness, and civil society activity compared to the rest of Russia. Now it faces the threat of unification and suppression of any dissent. The closure of independent media, persecution of the opposition, and ideological purges in universities and schools are turning the oblast into an ordinary province of the Russian Federation. Growing dependence on Moscow leaves no room for Kaliningrad's 'special path' (Sukhankin, 2022).

The long-term consequences of the war will inevitably lead to the degradation of human capital in the Kaliningrad region. Declining real incomes amid high inflation may contribute to the migration outflow of the most skilled and mobile personnel, especially young people, to other regions of Russia and abroad, as well as affect lower fertility and hinder further mortality reduction. Given that the oblast experienced a labour shortage even before the war, the loss of human potential may be irreplaceable.

Depressing social trends will be exacerbated by the revision of state priorities. The concentration of budgetary resources on waging war will objectively reduce the volume of federal investments and subsidies to the Kaliningrad economy and social sphere. Most likely, large-scale infrastructure projects in energy, transport, and tourism will be cut or postponed. In a stagnant regional economy, the oblast will have to rely primarily on its own meagre funds, which is fraught with the degradation of utility networks, housing stock, and educational and healthcare institutions.

To summarise the above, Putin's war is becoming a turning point that devalues a significant part of the Kaliningrad region's post-Soviet achievements. The severance of ties with Europe, militarisation, and stagnation of the economy and social life put the region in the position of a depressed semi-exclave, losing the unique advantages of its geographical position and identity (Kalugina, 2023).

In the absence of political changes in Russia, the negative effects of the war are likely to accumulate, forming a vicious circle of stagnation and degradation. It is unclear whether Kaliningraders will be able to reverse this trend or whether the region will eventually turn into a dead-end military outpost generating threats to European security instead of fruitful cooperation and losing its human potential. Much will depend on the willingness of local elites and society to defend their own interests and values, which are alternative to the Kremlin's militaristic course. However, no reliable prerequisites for this are visible yet.

As part of this study, we will attempt to analyse the impact of new geopolitical challenges and their socio-economic consequences on the demographic situation and migration processes in the Kaliningrad region. Based on official statistics from Rosstat, Kaliningradstat and EMISS (Edinaya mezhvedomstvennaya informatsionno-statisticheskaya Sistema, i.e. the Unified Interdepartmental Statistical Information System), we will examine the dynamics of key demographic indicators: population size, fertility, mortality, natural increase, and net migration, both in the pre-war period and in the context of the current crisis. Particular attention will be paid to trends in recent years and estimates for the near future.

## 2. Population dynamics: urbanisation versus ruralisation

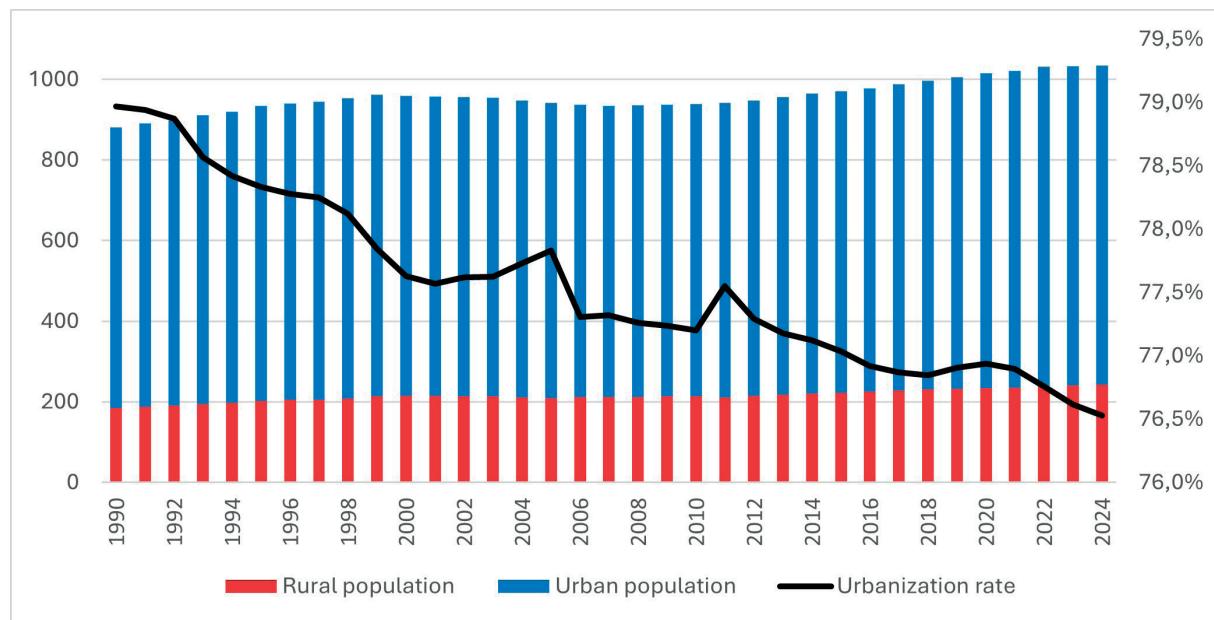
At the end of 2021, the 30th anniversary of the collapse of the USSR passed, and during this time, Russia and its regions have gone through a complex demographic path of transformation. According to official data, the country as a whole, within its internationally recognised borders, experienced a population decline of 3% or more than 4.5 million people. However, this federal trend masks significant regional differences. In a quarter of the constituent entities of the Russian Federation, the population increased or at least remained unchanged.

The maximum increase - about 168% - was recorded in the Republic of Ingushetia. Substantial growth was also noted in Dagestan (+67%) and Chechnya (+28%). Such high figures in these North Caucasus republics are explained by a combination of factors, including traditionally high fertility with relatively low mortality. For Dagestan and Ingushetia, significant flows of internally displaced persons during the Chechen military campaigns also played an important role. At the same time, the reliability of official demographic data for these regions is often questioned by experts.

In addition to the North Caucasus republics, the regions with the largest urban agglomerations and developed economies became the most attractive for migration flows in the post-Soviet period. These include City of Moscow and the Moscow Oblast with growth of 40% and 15%, respectively, Krasnodar Krai (+21%), the Tyumen Oblast together with the autonomous okrugs (+19%), and the Kaliningrad region, which outpaced even St. Petersburg and the Leningrad Oblast in terms of population growth (14% versus 7.5% and 13%, respectively) (Abylkalikov, 2022).

Let us analyse the dynamics of population size and urbanisation level in the Kaliningrad region in more detail, paying special attention to the impact of the consequences of Putin's aggression on these processes. The total population of the Kaliningrad region grew from 881,000 people in 1990 to over one million people at present. However, the growth rates were not uniform throughout the entire period. In the 1990s, there was steady growth; in the 2000s, stagnation; and then, in the 2010s, a new stage of growth. The population reached the one-million mark during 2018 (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Population of the Kaliningrad region at the beginning of the year in thousands (left scale) and urbanisation rate in % (right scale)**



Source: Compiled from EMISS.

However, with the start of the full-scale invasion in February 2022, the demographic situation in the Kaliningrad region began to experience certain changes. Although the total population continued to grow, the growth rates in 2022-2023 slowed down noticeably compared to previous years.

Notably, the absolute number of urban residents in the Kaliningrad region increased from 696,000 people on 1 January 1990 to 791,000 people by the beginning of 2024. This represents a mere 13% increase over the 34-year period. At the same time, the rural population grew from 185,000 people in 1990 to 243,000 people in 2024 - an impressive 31% increase. Therefore, the share of the urban population in the Kaliningrad region gradually declined but remained within the 75-80% range.

In 1990, the rural population of the Kaliningrad region was 185,000 people. Over the next decade, it gradually grew, reaching 213,000 in 1999, representing a 15% increase over this period. From 2000 to 2010, there was a slight decrease in the rural population by 500 people, or 0.25%. However, in the following decade, the growth rate accelerated again, and the rural population reached 234,000 people in 2020, which is 9% more than in 2010.

Overall, during the 34 years from 1990 to 2024, the rural population of the Kaliningrad region grew by 57,000 people, or almost by a third. However, it is important to consider this growth in the context of the total population of the Kaliningrad region. Despite the significant increase in absolute terms, the share of the rural population in the total population of the region grew quite modestly - from 21.0% in 1990 to 23.5% in 2024. This indicates that, although rural areas were indeed growing faster than urban ones, the Kaliningrad region still remains a largely urbanised region.

It should also be noted that population estimates for the period from 2011 to the present may contain certain inaccuracies due to the extremely low quality of the 2020 (2021) population census conducted both in Russia as a whole and in the Kaliningrad region in particular. This census was conducted during one of the most-deadly waves of the novel coronavirus pandemic and was accompanied by a highly insufficient informational provision to the population (Abylkalikov et al., 2023; Andreev & Churilova E., 2023).

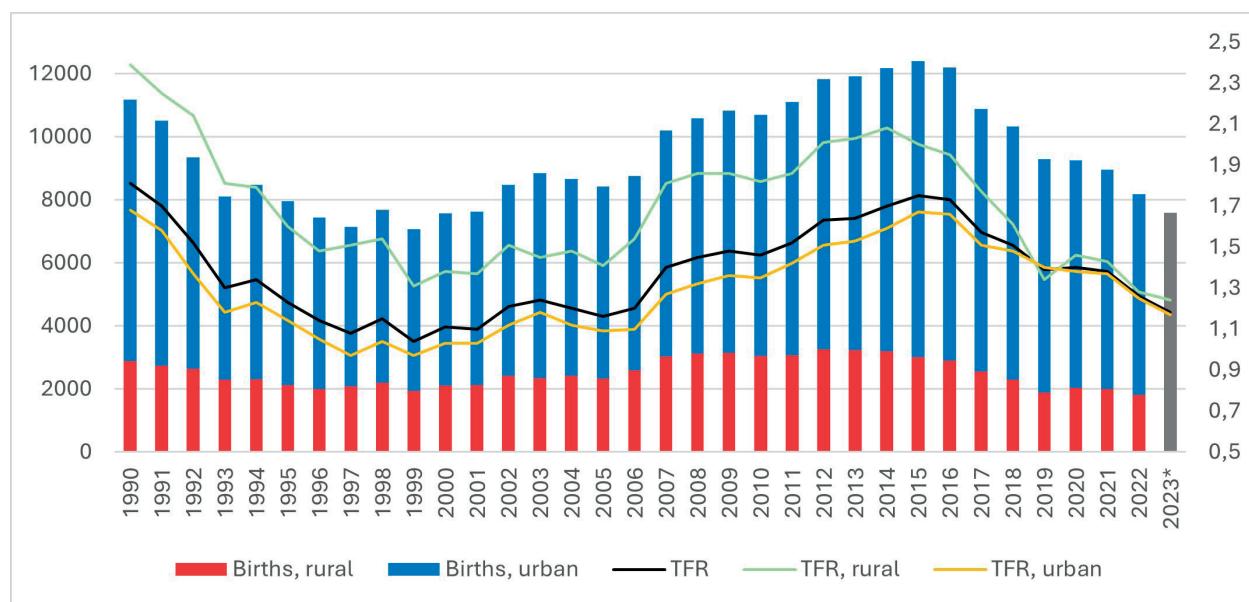
### 3. Fertility: ups, downs, new challenges

Fertility, along with mortality and migration, is one of the components of population dynamics. The number of births in the Kaliningrad region experienced significant fluctuations over the period under review. In 1990, 11,000 children were born in the region. However, in the following years, this figure steadily declined, reaching a minimum of 7,000 births in 1997, representing a 36% decrease in just seven years (Figure 2).

Note that the data on the number of births (as well as deaths) for 2023 represent operational information from Rosstat. However, operational data have less completeness and accuracy compared to annual data, as they are based on preliminary estimates and may be subject to subsequent adjustments when calculating final, annual data.

This decline in fertility coincided with a period of deep economic and social upheaval following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Economic instability, rising unemployment, and general uncertainty caused by the severe transformational crisis contributed to many people postponing or abandoning plans to start a family, leading to a decline in fertility. This will be further demonstrated in terms of the total fertility rate (TFR), i.e., a relative indicator measuring the intensity of childbearing per woman. Another important factor was the downward demographic wave with a rather noticeable decrease in the number of potential parents in those years.

Figure 2. Number of births (left scale) and total fertility rate, TFR (right scale)



Note: Number of births for 2023 according to Rosstat's operational data for urban and rural population combined.

Source: Compiled from EMISS and Rosstat.

However, from the early 2000s, the number of births in the Kaliningrad region began to gradually recover. Between 2000 and 2016, the annual number of births increased from 8,000 to 12,000, representing an impressive 63.7% growth. This period of revival was due to a combination of improving economic conditions, rising living standards, and the implementation of an active pronatalist policy by the state. This, however, not only increased fertility as such but also shifted the birth calendar – that is, some mothers gave birth not to more children, but to the same number with a shorter intergenetic interval (Sobotka & Lutz, 2011; Zakharov, 2023).

Since 2017, the region has seen a new stage of decline in the number of births. Between 2017 and 2022, the annual number of births decreased from 11,000 to 8,000, representing a 25% decrease in just five years.

The most alarming trend in recent years is undoubtedly the sharp drop in fertility observed since the start of Putin's invasion of Ukraine. Preliminary data for 2023 show a decrease in the number of births to 8,000, which is 15% less than in 2021. Let us clarify that, given the start of the war in the third decade of February 2022 and the average gestation period of 9 months, the consequences of changes in reproductive plans should fully materialise mainly starting from 2023.

We can gain additional insight into the region's changing demography by analysing fertility trends separately for urban and rural populations. For most of the period under review, fertility dynamics in urban and rural areas generally followed similar trajectories, with urban areas accounting for the majority of births (70% to 75%).

Nevertheless, some differences have emerged in recent years. While the number of births among the urban population has been steadily declining since 2017, the number of births in rural areas has remained relatively stable and even increased in some years. But in 2020, for the first time in a long time, the number of births in rural areas dropped below 2,000.

Next, we will analyse the dynamics of the TFR in the region from 1990 to 2023. The TFR, reflecting the average number of children born to one woman during her reproductive period (15-50 years), is an important and frequently used indicator of fertility that is independent of the age structure of the population. To maintain a stable population size, the TFR should be around 2.05-2.1 children per woman; otherwise, the population is 'doomed' to natural decrease in the long term.

The TFR in the Kaliningrad region experienced significant fluctuations over the period under review. In 1990, the TFR was 1.81 children per woman, which was already significantly below the level of simple generational replacement. In the following years, this indicator steadily declined, reaching a minimum of 1.04 in 1999, representing a striking 42.5% decrease in just nine years.

However, from the early 2000s, the TFR in the Kaliningrad region began to gradually recover. Between 2000 and 2015, the TFR grew from 1.11 to 1.75, or almost 60%. Nevertheless, since 2016, the region has seen a steady decline in the TFR. Between 2016 and 2021, the TFR decreased from 1.73 to 1.38. In 2022, the first year of full-scale conflict, the TFR in the Kaliningrad region fell to 1.26, which is 8.7% lower than in 2021, and data for 2023 indicate a further decrease to 1.18.

Throughout most of the period under review, the TFR in rural areas consistently exceeded the TFR in urban areas. For example, in 1990, the TFR was 2.39 children per woman in rural areas compared to 1.68 in urban areas. Even at the peak of fertility in 2014-2015, the TFR in rural areas was close to the replacement level (2.08 and 2.00, respectively), while in urban areas it remained significantly lower (1.59 and 1.67).

Nevertheless, it is important to note that even in rural areas, the TFR has fallen sharply in recent years, especially since the start of Putin's full-scale invasion. In 2023, the TFR in rural areas was 1.24 children per woman, and in cities even lower, 1.17. Thus, the uncertainty, declining real incomes, and population well-being caused by the war and its economic consequences may lead to the emergence of a long-term trend towards reduced fertility. Faced with deteriorating economic conditions and uncertainty about the future, people tend to postpone or abandon plans to start a family and have children.

#### **4. Mortality: from the shock of the 1990s-2000s to the pandemic and war**

The study of mortality and life expectancy is an important task of demographic research, as these indicators reflect not only the general state of population health but also the quality of life, level of socio-economic development, and effectiveness of the healthcare system. Analysis of the dynamics of mortality and life expectancy at birth (LE), as well as gender and settlement differences, allows us to identify key trends, problems, and factors affecting the demographic situation in the region.

Analysis of the dynamics of the number of deaths and life expectancy at birth (LE) in the Kaliningrad region for the period from 1990 to 2023 reveals several key trends and features of demographic processes in the region in the post-Soviet period. From 1990 to 2002, there was a steady increase in the number of deaths from 9,000 to 16,000 people, which is associated with both the general ageing of the population and the socio-economic upheavals of the 1990s. In the period from 2003 to 2019, the number of deaths

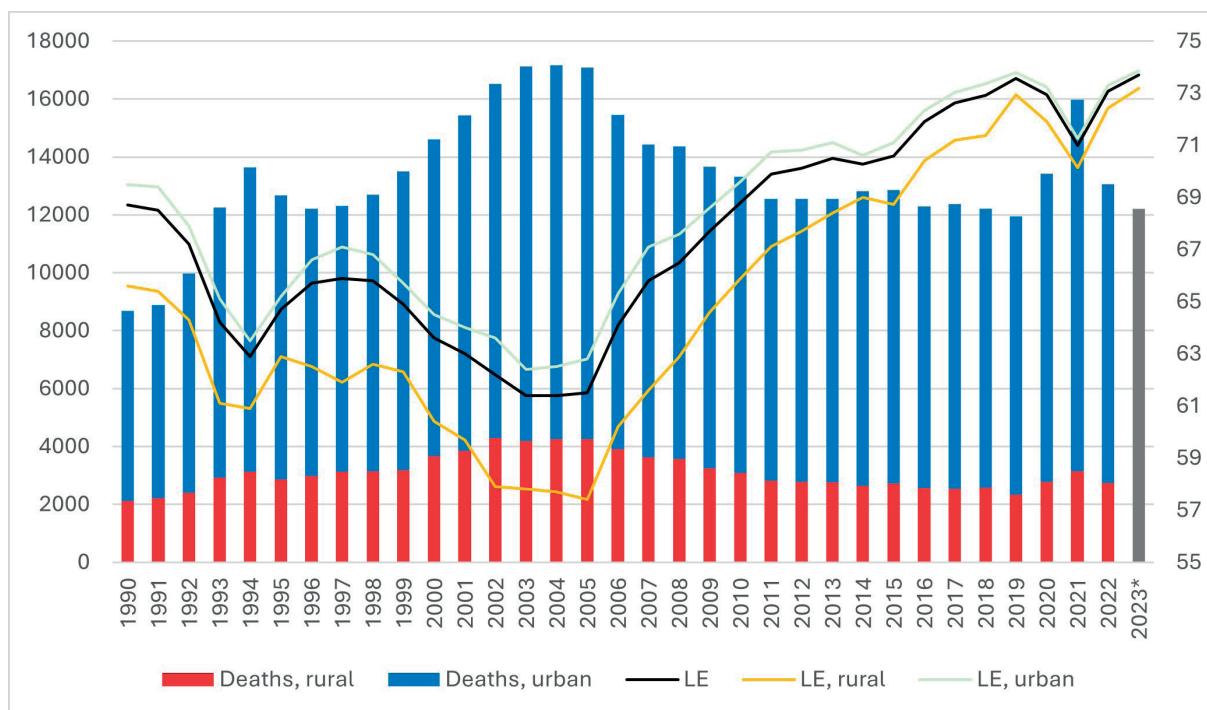
gradually decreased (from 17,000 to 12,000), which may be due to improvements in quality of life, medical care, increased education levels, reduced consumption of hard alcohol, and increased self-preservation behaviour, especially among men (Kvasha et al., 2017; Shkolnikov et al., 2022).

However, in 2020-2021, there was a sharp jump in mortality due to the COVID-19 pandemic: the number of deaths increased to 13,000 in 2020 and 16,000 in 2021. The increase in the number of deaths in 2021 compared to the pre-pandemic year 2019 amounted to 4,000 people or 34%. In 2022, the number of deaths somewhat decreased (to 13,000) but still remains above the 2019 level. According to an operational estimate for 2023, there was a further decrease in the number of deaths to 12,000 people (Figure 3).

From 1990 to 2005, LE for both sexes decreased from 68.7 to 61.5 years, which is associated with the difficult socio-economic situation and increased mortality during this period. From 2006, there was a steady increase in LE, which continued until 2019 (73.6 years). This indicates an improvement in the quality of life and healthcare in the region.

The COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected LE: in 2020, it decreased to 72.9 years, and in 2021 – to 71.0 years. The drop in LE in 2021 compared to 2019 was 2.6 years, which set the region back in this indicator to approximately the level of 2012. In 2022, LE recovered to 73.1 years, and in 2023 there was a further increase to 73.7 years, which even slightly exceeded the pre-pandemic level.

**Figure 3. Number of deaths (left scale) and life expectancy (years) for both sexes (right scale)**



Note: Number of deaths for 2023 according to Rosstat's operational data for urban and rural population combined.

Source: Compiled from EMISS and Rosstat.

Throughout the entire period, there are significant gender and settlement differences in LE. LE for women is substantially higher than for men. In 2023, the gap is 9.4 years (78.4 years for women versus 69.0 years for men). In addition, LE in urban areas is higher than in rural areas. In 2023, the difference is 0.7 years (73.9 years in cities versus 73.2 years in rural areas).

The impact of the invasion of Ukraine, which began in February 2022, on mortality in the Kaliningrad region is still difficult to assess due to the fact that, apparently, not all those who died in the war are sufficiently accounted for by official statistics. According to estimates by the independent Russian-language media Meduza and Mediazona and the British BBC, as of May 10th, 2024, there are confirmed lists of 52,789 dead. Of these, 557 are from the Kaliningrad region (including 100 prisoners recruited into Putin's army, 46 mobilised, and 21 representatives of private military companies such as Wagner, Redut, and others) (Mediazona, 2022).

At the same time, this estimate is a minimum, lower bound of losses. Thus, estimates by the same team of inheritance investigators already amount to about 85,000 people, that is, almost 60% more. At the same time, not all these deaths could have been included in the official statistics of the Civil Registry Offices and from there in Rosstat. When working with aggregated statistics, it is also not always clear what proportion of deaths occurred from other, 'competing causes'. For example, from the still ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, albeit incomparably less deadly than in previous years.

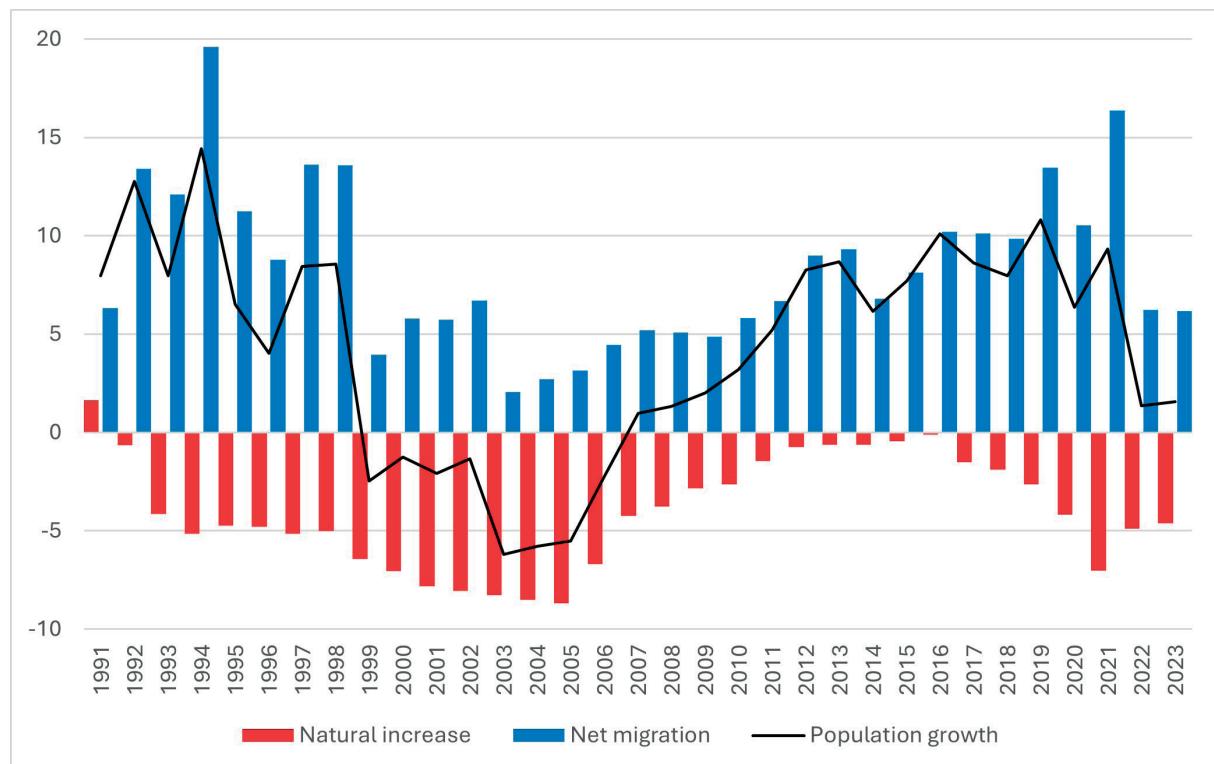
However, it can be assumed that the escalation of the conflict and the associated economic difficulties may negatively affect mortality rates and LE in the region in the medium term. It is quite likely that the indirect losses from this will be many times higher than deaths directly from hostilities. A shortage of medicines and limited access to modern medical technologies are expected, which will slow down the introduction of new treatment methods. In conditions of hopelessness, part of the population may increase the consumption of hard alcohol. The return of war participants with injuries, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), will lead to an increase in crime, domestic violence, alcoholism, and drug use. Thus, the reduction in mortality in Russia and in the Kaliningrad region, in particular, is unlikely to occur at the same pace as before.

## 5. The Kaliningrad confrontation: migration versus natural decrease

The region has been in a state of prolonged natural population decline for three decades, due to the excess of the number of deaths over the number of births. However, despite this, the Kaliningrad region has managed to maintain a positive overall population growth due to steady net migration.

In the early 1990s, the Kaliningrad region experienced a period of demographic growth, as evidenced by high rates of total population growth. In 1992, the total increase amounted to 13,000 people, and in 1994 it reached the maximum value for the period under review – 14,000 people (Figure 4). However, from the mid-1990s, the situation began to change: the total population growth began to decline, and in 1999-2006, the region faced depopulation. The greatest decrease in population was observed in 2003-2005, when annual losses amounted to more than 5,000 people.

**Figure 4. Ratio of population change, natural increase, and net migration (thousand people)**



Source: Compiled from EMISS, Rosstat and Kaliningradstat data.

The main reason for depopulation in the Kaliningrad region was natural population decline, which was observed throughout the period from 1991 to 2023. The highest values of natural decrease were recorded in 2003-2005 (more than 8,000 people annually), which is associated with a decrease in fertility and an increase in the number of deaths in the region.

Despite the natural decrease, the Kaliningrad region managed to maintain a positive overall population growth due to net migration. Over the period from 1991 to 2023, the region received 277,000 migrants, which fully compensated for the natural decrease (-134,000 people in total for 1991-2023) and ensured an overall population increase of 143,000 people. The largest net migration was observed in 1994 (20,000 people), as well as in 2019 and 2021 (14,000 and 16,000 people, respectively). This number likely includes thousands of professional military personnel and their family members but estimating their exact number is extremely difficult (Stoicescu, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in 2020, had a negative impact on the demographic situation in the Kaliningrad region. The natural population decrease increased sharply: if in 2019 it amounted to -3,000 people, then in 2020 it reached -4,000, and in 2021 – a record -7,000 people. However, due to the maintenance of high net migration (10,000 in 2020 and 16,000 in 2021), the overall population growth in the region remained positive.

Putin's war against Ukraine could also have affected demographic processes in the Kaliningrad region. Although the data for 2023 are preliminary, we can note a decrease in net migration to 6,000 in 2022 and 6,000 in 2023 (compared to 16,000 in 2021). This may be due to disruption of transport links, economic difficulties, and general uncertainty caused by the military conflict. At the same time, the natural population decrease somewhat reduced (-5,000 in 2022 and -5,000 in 2023), which is associated with a certain decrease in mortality after the peak of the pandemic.

Overall, despite the difficult demographic situation characterised by long-term natural population decline, the Kaliningrad region has demonstrated resilience due to net migration. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and the acute phase of war against Ukraine pose new challenges for the region's demographic development. The demographic sustainability of the Kaliningrad region largely depends on its ability to attract and retain migrants.

## **6. Migration in the Kaliningrad region: trends, challenges, adaptation**

The Kaliningrad region, being a region with a special history and effectively resettled anew as a result of World War II, has always been significantly influenced by migration processes. Migration has played a key role in shaping the demographic, socio-economic, and ethno-cultural landscape of the region. Analysis of the dynamics of net migration, as well as the number of arrivals and departures in various territorial directions in the post-Soviet period, allows us to identify key trends and features of the current migration situation (Figure 4 and Table 1).

In the 1990s, the region experienced a period of intensive net migration associated with the collapse of the USSR and the return of the Russian-speaking population from the former Soviet republics. The peak of net migration occurred in 1994, when the region received almost 20,000 migrants. In subsequent years, net migration remained positive but gradually decreased, reaching a minimum value in 2003 (2,000 people).

Since the mid-2000s, net migration in the Kaliningrad region began to recover and reached 9,000 people by 2013. This was facilitated by both the improvement of the socio-economic situation in the region and the implementation of state programmes to attract compatriots from abroad. In 2019, net migration amounted to 13,000 people – the maximum value for the last decade.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in 2020, had an ambiguous impact on migration processes in the region. On the one hand, the number of arrivals in the region decreased from 31,000 in 2019 to 28,000 in 2020 due to the introduction of movement restrictions. On the other hand, the number of departures from the region also decreased (from approximately 18,300 to 17,500), resulting in positive net migration of some 10,700 people.

**Table 1. The population migration in the Kaliningrad region**

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2013-2022
<b>External migration</b>											
Arrivals	21155	20073	22341	24642	26577	27285	31263	28217	31294	27202	260049
Departures	12179	13632	14403	14716	16738	17818	18294	17536	15214	20961	161491
Net	8976	6441	7938	9926	9839	9467	12969	10681	16080	6241	98558
<b>with other regions of Russia</b>											
Arrivals	13383	13312	14106	15298	17094	19045	19988	19718	21911	17676	171531
Departures	9881	10483	11642	11628	12459	13085	12505	11571	11932	13319	118505
Net	3502	2829	2464	3670	4635	5960	7483	8147	9979	4357	53026
<b>with CIS countries</b>											
Arrivals	7209	6257	7654	8644	8812	7539	10211	7843	8492	8473	81134
Departures	1988	2611	2244	2680	3740	3863	4840	5076	2610	6790	36442
Net	5221	3646	5410	5964	5072	3676	5371	2767	5882	1683	44692
<b>with other foreign countries</b>											
Arrivals	563	504	581	700	671	701	1064	656	891	1053	7384
Departures	310	538	517	408	539	870	949	889	672	852	6544
Net	253	-34	64	292	132	-169	115	-233	219	201	840

Source: Compiled from Kaliningradstat data.

In 2021, despite the ongoing pandemic, the Kaliningrad region demonstrated a record net migration of 16,000 people. This was due to both an increase in the number of arrivals (31,000) and a decrease in the number of departures (15,000). Migration from other regions of Russia played a significant role in this, providing 61% of net migration (10,000 people).

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine made adjustments to the migration situation in the Kaliningrad region. Although overall net migration remained positive, it decreased significantly compared to previous years and amounted to about 6,000 people in both 2022 and 2023 (according to preliminary data). This is due to both a decrease in the number of arrivals (to 27,000 in 2022) and an increase in the number of departures (to 21,000).

In 2022, there was a sharp reduction in net migration in exchange with the CIS countries (to 2,000 people compared to 6,000 in 2021), which may be due to disruption of transport links, economic difficulties, and general uncertainty caused by the military conflict. At the same time, net migration in exchange with other regions of Russia remained positive (4,000 people), although it decreased compared to previous years.

Migration exchange with other foreign countries throughout the post-Soviet period was characterised by relatively small scales and unstable dynamics. In some years, there was net migration (a maximum of 292 people in 2016), in others – a net migration loss (a minimum of -233 people in 2020). In 2022, net migration in exchange with far abroad countries amounted to 201 people.

The negative consequences of the war and international sanctions for the socio-economic situation of the region, restriction of transport links with other subjects of the Russian Federation and the outside world, and the threat of military escalation on Russia's western borders contribute to a decrease in the migration attractiveness of the Kaliningrad region. The influx of migrants, which throughout the post-Soviet period ensured population growth, improvement of the demographic structure, inflow of labour force and intellectual potential, sharply decreased in 2022-2023. At the same time, the number of people leaving the region is growing, especially young people and qualified specialists who fear mobilisation and seek better conditions abroad.

An important tool of migration policy in the Kaliningrad region is the Programme for Assistance to Voluntary Resettlement of Compatriots. The region has been participating in its implementation since 2007 and is one of the leaders in the number of resettled people. During the period 2007-2016, more than 31,000 compatriots arrived in the region, which accounted for about 6% of the total number of programme participants in Russia.

At the same time, the scale of resettlement turned out to be much lower than planned. Thus, according to the initial plan, it was supposed to attract 300,000 compatriots to the region in 2007-2012, but in fact, only about 13,000 arrived during this period. The vast majority of immigrants (over 90%) came to the Kaliningrad region from the CIS countries. The largest flows were observed from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia. The region had the closest migration ties with the so-called "far abroad" countries, particularly with the Baltic states, Germany, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic – that is, with countries located in the neighbourhood or relatively close by (Abylkalikov & Sazin, 2019).

Russia's war against Ukraine and the subsequent international isolation of Russia have a negative impact on migration processes in the Kaliningrad region and the formation of the regional identity of its residents. The influx of migrants from other regions of Russia and the CIS countries, which previously contributed to the integration of the region into the country's socio-cultural space, has significantly decreased under the new conditions. Transport and logistics restrictions, economic difficulties, and uncertainty about the future reduce the migration attractiveness of the region.

At the same time, the de facto semi-blockade of the Kaliningrad region, its isolation from the rest of Russia and neighbouring countries creates prerequisites for strengthening the sense of separateness and 'self-enclosure' of the region. The reduction of migration and social ties can lead to a transformation of regional identity towards greater autonomy and self-sufficiency. The exclave position of the region in the context of Russia's confrontation with the West increases the risks of isolationist sentiments.

The process of forming a regional identity in the Kaliningrad region in the new geopolitical realities is becoming even more complex and contradictory. On the one hand, the residents of the region currently demonstrate a high level of loyalty to the Russian State and support its official course of confrontation with Western countries. On the other hand, interest in finding alternative development paths, including European ones, may increase over time. The restriction of contacts with neighbouring EU countries is painfully perceived by a significant part of the local community. The deterioration of the socio-economic situation can become a catalyst for new processes in the region.

## 7. Demographic future in the fog: ageing and depopulation

One of the key factors determining the demographic dynamics of the Kaliningrad region is the deterioration of the age structure of the population. Like all of Russia, the region is experiencing the impact of demographic waves generated by the catastrophes of the 20th century. The small generations of the late 1990s and early 2000s, now entering the most active working and reproductive ages, cannot ensure a steady increase in the number of births. At the same time, accelerated population ageing leads to an increase in the demographic burden on the working-age citizens, as well as an increase in the number of deaths and, consequently, an intensification of natural decrease (Abylkalikov, 2023).

The situation may be exacerbated by an increase in youth emigration, which is deprived of attractive prospects for professional and personal self-realisation in the context of Russia's growing international isolation, which will be felt especially strongly in the Kaliningrad region. The severing of cooperation ties with European partners, the curtailment of scientific and educational projects, and the restriction of academic mobility accelerate the outflow of the most qualified and in-demand personnel at the most productive age. This negatively affects the innovative and reproductive potential of the region.

In parallel with the decline in fertility, the Kaliningrad region faces a slowdown in the reduction of mortality. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerability of the healthcare system, and the growing sanctions pressure and restricted access to modern medical technologies create risks of further deterioration of the situation. Of particular concern is the increase in mortality among men of working age, including due to their participation in the military operation against Ukraine.

The shortage of labour, especially skilled labour, is becoming a serious challenge for the economy of the Kaliningrad region<sup>1</sup>. In conditions of technological isolation and reduced access to advanced developments, the region risks being stuck in a trap of low productivity and uncompetitiveness for a long time. Without an influx of 'fresh blood' in the form of young specialists and innovators, the region may lose growth drivers and turn into a depressed periphery.

<sup>1</sup> Thus, according to data from Rosstat based on sample surveys of the population on employment issues, the unemployment rate in the Kaliningrad region was only 5.6% in 2013 and decreased by almost half to 3% by 2023.

Hopes for compensating demographic losses through migration under the current conditions seem illusory. The severance of ties with European neighbours, transport restrictions, and general uncertainty about the future reduce the attractiveness of the region for potential migrants. At the same time, the increased militarisation of the region and its transformation into a fortified outpost on Russia's western borders increase the risks of military conflicts and deter people seeking stability and security.

Thus, the demographic situation in the Kaliningrad region under the conditions of the geopolitical crisis and the war with Ukraine looks extremely alarming. The region faces multiple challenges, including deterioration of the age structure, declining fertility, rising mortality, accelerated population ageing, outflow of youth and qualified personnel, and reduced migration attractiveness. The combination of these factors creates a real threat of depopulation and degradation of the region's human potential.

It is quite likely that the Kaliningrad region will become one of the Russian regions most affected by the consequences of the current crisis. Even without being a frontline zone, the region is already experiencing the devastating impact of sanctions, transport and technological blockade, and brain drain. If negative trends persist, the region risks plunging into a state of demographic and socio-economic depression for a long time.

## 8. Conclusion

The analysis of demographic processes in the Kaliningrad region in the post-Soviet period and especially in the context of the current geopolitical crisis and Russia's war against Ukraine allows us to draw the following main conclusions.

Firstly, despite certain successes in stabilising the population size and improving several important demographic indicators in the first two decades of the 21st century, the region faces growing demographic challenges. The deterioration of the age structure, declining fertility, slowing mortality reduction, combined with a drop in the migration attractiveness of the region, create a real threat of a new wave of depopulation.

Secondly, the devastating consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and especially Russia's war against Ukraine are accelerating negative demographic trends in the region. This is manifested in a decrease in the number of births, an increase in mortality (including that associated with military losses), and an intensification of migration outflow, especially among young people and qualified personnel. Without a radical change in the country's foreign policy course, these trends will only worsen.

Thirdly, under the new geopolitical conditions, the Kaliningrad region risks being caught in a trap of peripherality and isolation. The rupture of long-standing cooperation ties with European partners, being in the far periphery from alternative trade routes, transport and logistics restrictions, technological lag, and narrowing markets can undermine the region's socio-economic development for a long time. Supplying an entire million people and the functioning of the economy under conditions of complex logistics and semi-closed borders is a very difficult task. Most importantly, all this hinders dynamic development and worsens prospects.

Fourthly, the emerging situation requires a radical rethinking of regional demographic and migration policy. In addition to focusing on attracting 'Russian-speaking compatriots' from the CIS countries, the region needs to bet on creating a comfortable environment for life, work, and self-realisation of its own population, especially young people. Overcoming confrontation with the West, restoring good-neighbourly ties with European partners, and openness to the world can return the region's role as a bridge between Russia and Europe. This means making the Kaliningrad region a place where people want to live again.

Fifthly, the demographic future of the Kaliningrad region crucially depends on national trends and the country's choice of development vector. If the course towards self-isolation, escalation of military conflicts, and restriction of citizens' rights and freedoms is maintained, the region will face a deepening demographic crisis. On the contrary, a return to peaceful coexistence with neighbours and internal reforms can help restore the region's attractiveness for living and realising human potential. The place of the Amber Region on the demographic map of the future largely depends on which trend prevails.

Thus, betting on the militarisation of the Kaliningrad region in the context of geopolitical confrontation seems extremely risky and short-sighted. It is more of a survival strategy than a development one. Turning the region into an 'unsinkable aircraft carrier' cannot compensate for the loss of human capital, technological and investment potential associated with the severance of ties with European partners and will most likely have long-term severe socio-economic and demographic consequences.

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