

Russia: President Medvedev on the prospects for the Kaliningrad oblast

On 31 July, President Dmitri Medvedev visited the Kaliningrad region to participate in the celebrations honouring the Russian Navy, and met the regional governor Nikolai Tsukanov. The President declared his readiness to support the region's development, but did not explicitly say, whether he supported a unique system of customs and visa regulations for Kaliningrad.

President Medvedev referred favourably to Governor Tsukanov's idea of developing a federal law defining the region's long-term functioning (which would replace a law expiring in 2016 granting the region tariff concessions on the import of goods). At the same time, he recalled that discussions are also underway in Moscow on the subject. In his conversation with the governor, Medvedev also spoke in favour of the rapid and complete abolition of visas for Russians (including residents of the Kaliningrad region) entering the European Union. Medvedev did not address the European Commission's proposals to cover the whole of the Kaliningrad oblast and northern areas of Poland with a local border traffic regime (which would allow simplified border crossing for residents of the border regions). Russia's own stance towards this initiative remains unclear. On one hand, the Russian Foreign Ministry has been asking for this until now, and the EC's proposal has been welcomed by Russia's representative to the EU, Vladimir Chizhov, indicating that the facilitation of travel still requires the approval of the EU Council and the European Parliament. On the other hand, in June Prime Minister Vladimir Putin questioned the desirability of facilitating visas for the Kaliningrad oblast within a local border traffic regime, stating his opposition to the creation of exceptions for any region of Russia. <iwo>