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Vladimir Putin opposes visa facilitation for the Kaliningrad oblast

On 6 June in Sochi, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin criticised the desirability of visa facilitation for the Kaliningrad oblast by bringing it under local border traffic (LBT) regulations. This statement represents a clear change in Moscow's rhetoric on this issue; Russia's foreign ministry had hitherto sought to have the Kaliningrad area covered by the LBT regime. Putin's statement should be seen as a means of putting pressure on the European Union before the EU-Russia summit, with the aim of accelerating talks on the introduction of visa-free travel. At the same time, it confirms the supposition that Moscow is not greatly interested in resolving this issue in any way which would open up the Kaliningrad region to its EU neighbours, as it fears that the region's ties with the rest of Russia would be loosened.

Putin stated that Russia does not intend to fight for visa privileges for the Kaliningrad oblast, and will not seek special interests for that region at the expense of others. This is a clear change in the Russian government's attitude; since 2007 they had been lobbying for the introduction of an LBT regime between Kaliningrad, Poland and Lithuania (a solution which then-President Putin actually supported in 2008). From April 2010, the Polish and Russian foreign ministers Radoslaw Sikorski and Sergei Lavrov had both sought to incorporate the Kaliningrad region into an LBT regime. Although the demand goes beyond the Schengen regulations (which provide for the introduction of LBT within a 30-kilometre border zone), there were reports in 2011 that the European Commission was ready to accept such a solution.

The sudden change in Russia's position can be seen as an attempt by Moscow to put pressure on the European Union before the EU-Russia summit on 9-10 June, in order to accelerate the negotiations on visa-free travel between Russia and the European Union. This is a priority for Russian diplomacy, although negotiations on it are moving very slowly. <JR>