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The Political Dimension of Kaliningrad Identity Formation – An Attempt to Understand Russia's Kaliningrad Policy –

Plenary Lecture at the Seminar

Kaliningrad Identity – Crucial to Democracy and Development in the Baltic Sea Region
 Kaliningrad, 12-13 March 2007

The Russian State Immanuel Kant University, Kaliningrad
 in cooperation with CBEES/Södertörn University College, Stockholm

I.

The existence of specific regional or local identities within one state is a matter of fact. Usually, such regional identities co-exist smoothly with the respective national identity. Such co-existence of regional and national identities is also an option for Kaliningrad. Nevertheless, Kaliningrad constitutes a specific and politically sensitive case, also as concerns identity development, because some peculiarities add.¹

Kaliningrad is an integral part of the Russian Federation, but it is not long-standing Russian soil. It is Russian since roughly 60 years now, a time span which in terms of cultural and socio-psychological processes of change has to be regarded as still quite short. Furthermore, the indigenous population was expelled, and nowadays inhabitants of the region are all migrants in the first, second, or at best third generation. To the extent, the migrant identity is fading out and a new indigenous population is developing, mental space opens for allowing regionally bound identities to emerge. However, the process of regional identity formation has to start quite from the scratch and without any comfortable and clear-cut point of departure. During Soviet times the pre-Russian history of the region was tabooed, only nowadays it is more and more discovered, however for many people accompanied by "a certain discomfort when half a century of 'their' period of the Kaliningrad region is confronted to, and compared with seven centuries of the area's German period", as a Russian scholar put it.²

Kaliningrad identity formation is furthermore complicated by the fact that the region is separated from the Russian mainland. It is an exclave, surrounded by a non-Russian

1) This paper draws on Leonid Karabeshkin / Christian Wellmann: [The Russian Domestic Debate on Kaliningrad – Integrity, Identity and Economy](#) (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2004) as well as on a 100 page unpublished manuscript, part of a book under preparation by the author and Hanne-Margret Birckenbach in the framework of their common research project "Pilot-Region Kaliningrad? – Participatory Research in Conflict Prevention", which is financially supported by the Berghof-Foundation for Conflict Research. Full-scale references may be found in these texts. The paper on hand gives references only where other authors are directly quoted.

2) Vladimir Baranovsky: *Russia's Attitudes Towards the EU: Political Aspects*, Helsinki / Berlin: The Finnish Institute of International Affairs / Institut für Europäische Politik, 2002, p. 145.

environment. Catchwords such as "island psychology" and "exclave-syndrome" circulate, pointing to the fact of remoteness to the own compatriots and closeness to aliens. Unavoidably, the Kaliningradians are much stronger subject to non-Russian influences than the vast majority of the Russian population. They are constantly in exchange with non-orthodox believers, with non-Cyrillic writers, with non-Russian habits, life-style and culture. They frequently travel abroad whilst it is said that many younger Kaliningradians yet never visited the Russian mainland. They live in a topography and a climate that isn't very Russian in character. And whilst German visitors to Kaliningrad often are shocked by how little German style architecture has remained in this allegedly "Soviet" city, newcomers from mainland Russia are astonished about its non-Russian flair, with "red-tiled roofs ..., delicate cast-iron bridge railings and cobblestones" as the then Governor of the Oblast, Vladimir Yegorov, formulated it, when recalling the impressions he has had by his first arrival to Kaliningrad.³

In summing up, one may state that the socio-cultural self-identification of the Kaliningradians is obviously influenced by a non-Russian environment and by the specifics of the territory and its history. Therefore the determinants for regional identity formation in Kaliningrad differ from those in mainland Russia. Potentially this could (not: must!) result into a regional identity which does not smoothly co-exist with the national Russian identity, but partially relates to it in a state of tension. This potential for tension makes identity formation in Kaliningrad a politically sensitive issue.

The situation is aggravated by the fact that most foreign co-operation partners, starting from top-level EU officials and their understanding of neighbourhood policy and ending somewhere at the grass-roots, let's say a school twinning, give expression to their attitude that the Kaliningradians would do best if they became as 'we Westerners' already are. Of course, such paternalism is also voiced to Russia and the Russians in general. However, they have less extensive exchanges with the West and are much less dependent on smooth cross-border co-operation than the Kaliningradians are and thus are less in need to adapt.

Finally, it is not only the socio-cultural self-identification of the Kaliningradians which is subject to asymmetrical influence, but also their socio-economic self-assessment is affected by asymmetry. The Kaliningradians perceive their socio-economic situation worse than the Russian average although the region performs economically close to, and meanwhile even above, the Russian average. The reason for this biased perception is simply that Kaliningradians tend to compare their standard of living not with that of their compatriots somewhere far away in the Russian plains or the Siberian Taiga, but with what they are more familiar with, the EU-boosted standards of living in their nearer or

3) Quoted from Vladimir Kovalev: Kaliningrad Residents Look West, Not East, The St. Petersburg Times, 08.06.2004.

farther neighbourhood. Consequently, the Kaliningradians feel themselves poorer than they are in a Russian context and quite naturally blame the federal authorities for neglecting their needs.

II.

The Federal Centre suspiciously tracks the developments in Kaliningrad, not least the ongoing discourse on regional identity and the directions it takes. The limited scope of this paper does not allow to go into any details. Instead, it may roughly be stated that the core determinant of the Federal Centre's Kaliningrad policy are worries about the integrity of the Russian Federation.

In terms of Moscow's integrity discourse, the Kaliningrad identity discourse constitutes a major challenge. Obviously, the Federal Centre is worried that by both, external and internal factors, a wedge might be driven between the exclave and the mainland, that the links between the two will weaken, and that alienation of the Kaliningradians from Russia might develop – or even that secessionist attitudes will emerge.

The coming into existence of such scenario has not to be pushed intentionally by whom so ever. It is more about the long-term impact of the structural situation on the minds of the Kaliningradians. As one Russian analyst put it:

*"Many correctly believe that time is on the EU's side: if Moscow continues to do nothing, the Kaliningrad Region, like a ripe fruit, will fall into the EU's hands on its own accord."*⁴

And a Kaliningrad team of authors appealed to the Western actors with the following words:

*"We do not suspect you of evil intentions, but your activities could result in damaging the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation. You state, that you do not want the disintegration of Russia – then prove it with concrete actions."*⁵

One must not share the perception behind such assessments. Nevertheless, one should acknowledge that it exists and one should take it into account. Otherwise one will fail – as, by the way, the EU does – to understand Moscow's foreign and domestic policies towards Kaliningrad and to respond constructively.

4) Sergei Kortunov: Kaliningrad: Gateway to Wider Europe; Russia in Global Affairs, vol. 3, no. 1, p. 54.

5) A. P. Klemeshev / G. M. Fedorov / V. S. Korneevets / J. M. Zverev / T. R. Gareev: Concept of development of the Kaliningrad region under the conditions of Russian-European cooperation in the Baltic Sea region - Analytical report; Kaliningrad: Kaliningrad State University Publishing House, 2004, p. 49.

Moscow's policy becomes an astonishingly systematic and conceptually grounded appearance when recognizing what the federal authorities problem with Kaliningrad is about. Virtually all measures taken by the Centre with respect to Kaliningrad can be subsumed to at least one of three policy lines. All three respond to the worries about alienation to occur and the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation being harmed by the process of identity formation in Kaliningrad:

- 1) A first policy line may be described as "identity policy pure". It is about measures for strengthening the Russian national identity of the Kaliningradians. Some examples are the construction of Russia's second largest orthodox cathedral in Kaliningrad, schemes for subsidizing youth groups visiting mainland Russia, and the attempts to place any slightest element of historical Russian presence in the region under a magnifying glass (the establishment of the monumental statue of Tsaritsa Elisaveta - ruler of the region for seven years in the 18th century – is one such endeavour). In responsibility of the federal Ministry of Culture a federal programme "Culture of the Kaliningrad Region (2004-2010)" was launched, aiming at countering the wide spread feeling among the Kaliningrad residents of being only "temporary residents" – as Minister Schvydkoi termed it.⁶ A recent and quite striking case of identity policy were the festivities celebrating the 60th anniversary of the founding of the Kaliningrad Oblast and the 750th anniversary of the founding of the town of Kaliningrad. Particularly the latter case is telling: The event gave the impression that identity policy and measures for intensifying the exchanges with the mainland do not aim at nationalistically isolating the Oblast from its environment, but on the contrary at allowing it to entangle with its neighbours by counterbalancing their influence on identity formation and thus calming down the worries about the integrity of the Federation being at stake. In a Russian federal perspective intensified identity policy, emphasising the Russianness of the Oblast, seems to be a precondition for intensified regional cross-border co-operation.
- 2) The second policy line is about making the Oblast less dependent from the surroundings and strengthening the interdependence of the exclave and the mainland. To this policy line belong measures such as subsidizing air and railway tariffs on transit routes just as well as programmes for attracting more tourists from the Russian mainland to the exclave and making it more self-sufficient in terms of energy supply by building a large gas powered electric power plant, instead of importing or transiting electric energy, as it was the case until now. The discussions on building a branch line from the German-Russian sea-bedded gas pipeline to Kaliningrad for avoiding energy transit through foreign countries also belongs to this policy line. Finally, with the new law on the Kaliningrad Special Economic zone the privileges granted to the business

⁶ Quoted from Olga Kabanova: Westbound Cultural Aid. Russian Ministry of Culture set out to give a cultural reanimation to Kaliningrad. *Izvestia nauka* (<http://www.inauka.ru>), 28.07.2003.

were redesigned in a way that they make investment in the regional economy interesting not so much for foreign capital, but for large Russian companies from the mainland. By systematically linking up the exclave with the mainland the orientation of interests of the regional elite shall be re-directed from the abroad to focussing on the own country. For the same reason, Moscow reacts quite sensitive on any restrictions for transit of people and goods between the mainland and the exclave as they are introduced in the course of EU-Enlargement and Schengen accession by the neighbouring states, however is much more relaxed concerning the restrictions introduced in the same course for visits of Kaliningradians to their "near abroad".

- 3) The third federal policy line towards Kaliningrad tracks the ambitious aim to bring the socio-economic welfare level within a time span of ten years to the average level of the EU or to the level of the neighbours. Reaching this aim would mean that Kaliningrad performs economically much better than the Russian economy in general. The present economic boom with growth rates above the Russian average indicates the huge volume of resources Moscow directs to the oblast for avoiding its inhabitants to jealously look toward the West. Seemingly, Moscow has clearly understood, that if there is any danger of secessionism to emerge, it will be motivated economically.

Thus, one may summarize, that Moscow's Kaliningrad agenda is determined by the attempt to keep the process of Kaliningrad identity development in line with the overall Russian national narrative and an aspired homogenous national identity. It is a security political agenda, aiming at securing the integrity of the Russian Federation.

III.

When above some specific determinants were listed which the literature mentions as influencing the formation of a Kaliningrad regional identity, this should not be understood as a prognosis of the outcome of this process. Different scenarios seem to be possible:

- a) In line with the worries of the Federal Centre, the process indeed may lead in a direction of growing alienation of the Kaliningradians from mainland Russia. This would mean, a collective Kaliningrad regional identity distances to a certain degree from cultural and political self-assessments inherent to the identity as a citizen of Russia and as a bearer of Russian culture. Tensions between the region and the Federal Centre may then gain momentum.
- b) However, the development can as well take a direction which could be described as diaspora mentality. This would mean the regional identity is trying to keep the alien, non-Russian influences one is subject to on distance by developing an attitude more nationalistically charged than the average mainland identity.

If one takes voting behaviour as an indicator, one may suggest from results of the last ballots for the Stateduma and the Presidency, that in Kaliningrad the latter tendency is observable at least as much as the former. Kaliningradians voted more for the nationalistic left and the nationalistic right than the Russian constituency at average, but at the same time also more for the liberals, whilst the centrist party of power (and its candidate for Presidency, Putin) scored below Russian average. Furthermore, Kaliningrad was extremely high ranking with respect to the – meanwhile abolished – voting "against all", and it had one of the lowest turnouts of all subjects of the Federation. Or to put it different: the Centre has less control over the Kaliningradians than it is the case in most of the country, however due to both: the Kaliningrad constituency is more nationalistic and more liberal and it is more oppositional at the same time.

- c) A third possible scenario suggests that for a foreseeable future Kaliningrad will not at all develop a somehow coherent collective regional identity because of an unusual high turnover of the population moving in and out of the Oblast. In particular, if Governor Boss's plans will materialize to increase the population of the Oblast from roughly one million at present to one and a half million or more in a few years, a divers migrant identity may continue to prevail over any coherent regional identity.
- d) Finally, a fourth scenario is not impossible. Due to its location in a sphere of overlapping of Russian statehood and culture with the European Union's political, economical, and cultural gravity, Kaliningrad in principle is predestined to take the role of a forerunner in uniting and reconciling the best of Russian cultural traditions and values with the best Western European traditions and values without distancing from Russia. That means, for the same reasons Moscow is worried about Kaliningrad development, the exclave could substantially contribute to establish a common European cultural space in the substance of the term. It could develop a basically Russian identity, but unrestrictedly open to Europe, a necessary ingredient to the idea of a truly pan-European, not only EU-focussed identity. If it does not function in Kaliningrad, where else shall it do?

However, the latter scenario is quite ambitious whilst Kaliningrad is a tiny province in the double periphery of Russia as well as of the EU. One can fairly doubt whether Kaliningrad can mobilize by its own and out of its own the intellectual resources and creativity needed to cope successfully with a task which the European intelligentsia in sum does hard to cope with sufficiently. Consequently, the fourth scenario will only have a chance to work, if all actors, not least the many societal actors which cooperate with Kaliningrad, will learn to support such a process with their particular capacities and at the same time handle the issue very carefully, with *empathy* for Russia and its authorities just as much as for the Kaliningradians and their needs. Otherwise, again it will not work.