

Jonathan Gast, 2004



**Political Geography of the Kaliningrad Oblast: Its problems as an Enclave within the EU and projected outcomes**



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GEOG 146: Political Geography

The KO (Kaliningradskaya Oblast) is a Russian exclave situated in the Baltic region on the European continent, nestled between Poland and Lithuania, belonging to the Russian Federation and populated by a majority of Russians (80%), Ukrainians (7.3%), Byelorussians (8%), and Lithuanians (1.9%). In addition, it is also home to the Russian Federation's Baltic Sea Fleet (<http://gov.kaliningrad.ru/>). Travel by land through either Lithuania or Poland and then Belarus must be undertaken in order to reach other parts of Northwestern Russia. With the accession of Poland and Lithuania to the EU (European Union) as of May 2004, KO has effectively become a coastal enclave surrounded by the EU. This means that agreements previously arranged between Russia and both Lithuania and Poland are now subject to EU regulations. In terms of the movement of people, access to the EU from KO has become much more restrictive with the introduction of FTD's (Facilitated Transit Documents), an otherwise fancy name for a transit visa (Browning 550). Restricting the movement of people across the EU-Russian border on KO is seen as a solution to preventing unwanted exportation of organized crime and health problems, as well as potential illegal immigration into the old and new Schengen countries. These soft security threats combined with frightening degradation of the environment are quite acute in KO and have caused it to be branded "the black hole" of the Baltic region (Lieven and Trenin 146). Many forces are at work to solve the problems of KO, but there is contention over which international actors should do this, and how. The dominant realist faction in Moscow believes EU enlargement is a hindrance to Russian sovereignty over KO, and they wish to bring it closer vis-a-vis centralized policies, rather than let the exclave run peripheral to Moscow in order to fix its problems. This modernist geopolitical approach relegates all matters to the state and pitches the EU and Russia into an *us versus them*

context. On the other hand, Although the EU *raison d'être* of peace in Europe would be better served through a post-modern geopolitical approach to KO, it currently runs an ambivalent policy of regionalism and marginalization, as it includes Poland and the Baltic states in the EU but clearly separates them from the Russian oblast (Browning 547). This puts the oblast in a precarious situation as centripetal forces pulling it closer to Moscow act in reverse as centrifugal forces in the Baltic. These contrasting geopolitical views will only end up tearing KO apart, and will in turn make the oblast even more difficult to control by the Russian Federation. The problems associated with KO's boundaries and situation, as well as its own economic, health, and crime difficulties would be best understood in a post-modern context, as most of these problems negatively affect the entire Baltic region and should thus be dealt with by the regional actors in addition to the Russian Federation.

KO's borders are, on a historical and legal (international) level, widely contested, however the stance of all interested states has been to relinquish claims to the region. The interested parties who do have claims to the region are small in comparison with their own states, but they represent sizable factions in comparison to all actors showing an interest in KO. This form of popular critical geopolitics must not be ignored, because although the claims of these groups may seem unrealistic, they represent potential threats to the stability of the region if their voices were to infiltrate and permeate the practical geopolitics of their respective states. Although this is likely not to occur, at least if we understand the claims of these groups, we will understand Russia's fears and persistence in formulating modern geopolitical approaches to the situation. In addition, it helps us to look at the Kaliningrad case through a postmodern political geographic lens (not to be confused with the aforementioned postmodern *geopolitics*) in order to gauge the situation from different

views. The contestations of KO's current borders and administration arise out of a turbulent past dating back to 1919. In that postwar period, the Memelland of East Prussia was handed over to French administration, but in 1923 it was annexed by Lithuania despite its largest city Memel (known as Klaipeda in Lithuanian) having an overwhelming German majority population. In 1939 the Third Reich reintegrated this strip of territory back into East Prussia, while in 1940 the USSR annexed Lithuania. At the Potsdam Conference in 1945, the southern two-thirds of East Prussia were handed over to Poland to compensate for the USSR's annexation of its eastern territories, while the USSR received the rest of East Prussia, including the capital Königsberg and the Memelland. From 1947 to 1951 the remaining German inhabitants of East Prussia were completely expelled, and in 1948 the Memel/Klaipeda District became integrated into the Lithuanian SSR. The remaining territory belonging to the USSR was renamed Kaliningrad and became a major military outpost with both army and navy stationed there. Access to the region was restricted even to Soviet citizens until 1991 with the breakup of the Soviet Union (Birckenbach and Wellmann 276). Now, military personnel account for only thirty-thousand of the one-million in population. The following paragraphs briefly outline contesting claims to the Kaliningrad region by various groups:

Kaliningrad was to have been transferred to the USSR in a peace conference following Potsdam, however, this never occurred. The US insists up to this day that Russia does not have *de jure* possession of the land, implying that it was illegally annexed (Krickus 34). Although US interests have been limited to the military aspect of Kaliningrad, the impact of the US' refusal of recognition has a large impact on arguments by groups in Germany and Lithuania claiming the territory for their own states. It is therefore argued

that if the US were to formally accept Russian sovereignty over KO then radical groups would have no basis for their claims under international law (Birckenbach and Wellmann 280).

Lithuania's hold over the Memelland has been contested by members of the Russian Duma and Kaliningrad's former governor on that grounds that the territory was granted to Lithuania as part of the USSR only in 1947. Since Lithuania's secession from the USSR, it is argued that the Memelland should go back to the KO. Birckenbach and Wellmann argue in their book, "The Kaliningrad Challenge", that Russia should sign a treaty giving the territory over to Lithuania, thereby receiving de jure recognition of Russia's sovereignty over KO (Birckenbach and Wellmann 282). Lithuania itself contains groups that make claims to KO, referring to it as Lithuania Minor. It was considered the Lithuanian center of literature at a time when Lithuania Major was a part of Tsarist Russia. Illegal publications and newspapers written in the Lithuanian language helped arouse Lithuanian nationalism. Historically, however, the area of Lithuania Minor has not been under any sort of Lithuanian or Baltic state since the Teutonic Knights, and this outlook completely ignores its settlement by Germans and a nearly eight-hundred year history as a very prominent German state (283 Birckenbach and Wellmann ). Finally, it is also well to recall that Krushchev offered to give KO to Lithuania, but Lithuania declined the offer, because it had no use for a territory filled with Russians (84 Krickus).

The case of the German expellees of East Prussia is often a controversial topic in today's Germany. The expellee groups have two main objectives, not necessarily opposing each other, but one more radical than the other. The first goal, one of extreme rightist groups, is the complete reintegration of East Prussia back into the German state. The

second goal, one voiced by most expellee groups, is the strengthening of their regional culture and identity in the former homelands. They propagate self-determination on the grounds of collective memory and a historical homeland. They typically do not question Russia's control of the region, but they do debate Russia's refusal to let foreigners own land in the oblast, thereby making it difficult for a resettlement to occur. This, of course, completely overlooks the right of self-determination for the current inhabitants in KO, to which they are just as entitled as the previous German inhabitants. Among the less radical goals is the desire for formal recognition by Russia of the injustices brought against them. While these groups total in a number of about two-million, it is important to note that the political stances of their members are varying, although most have conservative leanings due to the Christian Democratic Union's recognition of these groups as significant political interest groups. Contributors therefore may not hold the same political views as seen in some of their leaders. Even expellee groups dissociate themselves from small ultra-nationalist groups in Germany. Many believe these groups will disappear as the original inhabitants of East Prussia die off, but this overlooks the fact that these groups continue to teach their children the culture of their homeland in an attempt to continue the effort (Birckenbach and Wellmann 287-293). There is likely little to fear from the expellees. Currently they are responsible for little more than the yearly tourism to KO and the reconstruction of Prussian landmarks (i.e. churches). The policy of Germany has largely been to downplay the political aims of these groups in foreign affairs.

Russia's fears of separatism and claims by different interest groups on the region fuel the modernist geopolitical outlook in Moscow that tends to fear above all else, that the rest of the world is trying to take KO away from the Russian Federation. This has led to the

further centralization of the KO. Such sentiment can be seen recently in Russia's May 2002 proposal to have a transit corridor stretching through Lithuania for passage of Russians to and from Kaliningrad (Browning 555). At the same time, however, modernist geopolitics are prevailing in the EU. While Kaliningrad does receive money through the TACIS program to upgrade and repair infrastructure, they receive approximately €5 million per year in contrast to Lithuania's €80 million and Poland's €1.1 billion. And with Poland and Lithuania upgrading their road and rail networks as part of the Trans-European Network, KO will be isolated from the transportation networks of these new EU member states (Browning 551). In addition, KO falls under the EU's Directorate General for External Relations, and not the Directorate General for Enlargement. While this fact may be taken for granted, it reflects a sentiment of divide between the EU and Russia, and it shows how unwilling the EU is in dealing with KO directly instead of indirectly through Russia, as it is currently doing (Browning 560). Because the EU will not view KO as a special case, it is "mostly dealt with under the PCA, the EU-Russia Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (which came into force in 1997), or through the CSR, the EU's Common Strategy on Russia (1999)" (Browning 554). This pattern of relations clearly depicts how both Russian and European modernist geopolitics influence and sustain each other.

The EU and increasingly Russia have been attempting to solve the KO matter under means which are not necessarily centrifugal for the EU and Russia or for Russia and KO. Indeed, organizations do exist at present that represent a more regional approach to the Baltic Euro-region. First, the aforementioned TACIS program has been an important project in KO despite the disparity between the divisions of funds among participating states. From 1992 to 1996, TACIS was responsible for various programs in the

Northwestern territory of Russia (including KO) for the upgrade of municipal and educational infrastructure. This amounts to eighteen projects in total. TACIS also helps support the development of Kaliningrad's FEZ (Free Economic Zone) and SEZ (Special Economic Zone) status, which have up until today gained little ground due to conflicting laws in the Russian Federation that are keeping KO inline with central Russian politics and at the same time trying to make it a special case (Lieven and Trenin 165). EU citizens' fears of the AIDS epidemic and organized crime rings are major contributing stereotypes of what KO has to *offer* the EU, and therefore cooperation between the EU and KO on these matters is quite necessary. With the highest rates of AIDS in Europe, Kaliningrad has approximately 350 cases for every 100,000 residents, and Lithuania has complained that the highest AIDS percentage in Lithuania is found in the large border city of Klaipeda as a result of the free flow of people through their border. Criminal gangs in Kaliningrad are closely linked with the business, political, and military elite of the KO. The degree of corruption and cross-border black market operations is therefore high, and have contributed to a huge part of the economy since before the accession of the new EU states ("Deplore it, then ignore it" 1). Now, if smugglers are caught at the Polish border, for example, they can be fined, their cars impounded, and can also have their Polish visas voided (Chazan 2). TACIS provides €1 million through The Task Force on Organized Crime in the Baltic Sea Region, and "€2 million to northwestern health replication projects in Kaliningrad, Murmansk, and Archangel regions" (Lieven and Trenin 166). Ecological problems are enormous as well. Krickus states that "40 percent of Kaliningrad's contaminated water comes from municipal water companies. There is a real danger of a breakdown in water supplies because most municipal water facilities were constructed

prior to World War II and repair of them has been rare" (Krickus 100). Therefore, TACIS also devotes €2 million to water treatment and €3 million to waste cleanup on the coast of the oblast (Lieven and Trenin 166). While these funds are certainly helping to improve conditions in the oblast, the restrictions imposed by Schengen are worsening the economic problems.

The other example of regional cooperation is the Northern Dimension initiative which began in September 1997. The goal is "to create a common political platform between the EU member states and seven invited partner countries—Estonia, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and the Russian Federation" (Lieven and Trenin 167). Although Finland started this initiative, it and other Scandinavian countries were the biggest supporters of a strict Schengen border between Russia and the EU. Despite the contradictions, the 2000 Nida initiative proposed development of educational, health, environmental, transportation, and energy programs. These proposals have not been discussed within the EU and therefore without proper commitment, have died (Lieven and Trenin 169). Deadlock between Russia and the EU still remains on many issues, but headway has been made in a few areas, namely harmonizing illegal migration laws between Lithuania and Russia (Lieven and Trenin 171).

Finally, the US has tried to create its own regional organization for Northern Europe, known as the Northern European Initiative. Member states include Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland, northern Germany, and several Russian cities. US officials state that the aims are to set up a structure for solving cross-border problems in Russian Oblasts that adversely affect its neighboring states. Because it deals with hard security issues, in contrast to other initiatives, Moscow sees this

as an attempt to install NATO in all countries surrounding the Russian Federation. The EU also views this negatively, because it prefers to attack the Kaliningrad problem in bilateral, regional negotiations. In all, this is largely a powerless program, because the US, who initiated it, does not want to contribute funds to it. The US hopes that the Northern states will fund the cooperation projects themselves (Lieven and Trenin 172). These attempts are a far cry from a complete post-modernist geopolitical approach, but they do reflect a beginning for ways to deal with KO in a regional manner.

Kaliningrad specialists all sound the need for a long-term goal for KO. As of now, Russia and the EU have been dealing with the problems as they arise (i.e. transit visas). Without having a vision for the future of KO, it will remain the most undeveloped piece of land in the Baltic region. Unless KO suddenly decides it wants independence, Russia will need to make KO a special case or experiment. The EU would supposedly be more cooperative in developing special programs for KO if Russia were willing to treat KO as a special case. As of now, Russia does not want to lose its territorial integrity, so it therefore treats its regions equally. Since the EU does not wish to disrupt Russia's internal affairs by treating one piece of Russia different than another, they deal directly with Moscow instead of Kaliningrad (Lieven and Trenin 173). If Russia decided it could make Kaliningrad a special case, perhaps we can draw an example from Åland, an autonomously governed island represented by Finland. Since such a special case already exists within the EU, it is surely doubtful that the EU will not consider making KO a special case as well. Devolution to the oblast must therefore occur, and although this will take a large part of centralized Russian control away from the oblast, it will result in stronger territorial integrity—what Russia means to achieve—and stronger regional integrity—what the EU means to achieve.

Alexander Songal, IR head of the KO Duma, believes:

a federal policy toward KO should provide for more involvement and responsibility of the federal center in regional matters; more discretion for local authorities in foreign economic and trade relations; moving representative offices of federal bodies (primarily of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) dealing with external relations to the region; appointing a Russian government official dealing with EU-related issues in Kaliningrad; setting up a subsidiary of the European Communities Delegation in Russia in the region; participation of Kaliningrad representatives in PCA committees where appropriate; launching a joint program (TACIS-FARE-Russian) to estimate the impact upon the Kaliningrad Oblast of EU-related changes in Lithuania and Poland; and arrangements to ensure the free movement of people and goods into and out of Kaliningrad (Lieven and Trenin 175).

Most of these recommendations, especially the last, gear the KO toward a regional integration with its Baltic neighbors, rather than toward Moscow. It would thus allow NGO's, transnational as well as governmental organizations from both the EU and Russia to assist KO and help it develop. One major factor overlooked by such optimism is the security aspect of making a special case for an exclave with a naval fleet. However, even though Russia still thinks predominantly in a realist and modern geopolitical sense, the Baltic fleet is not seen by most politicians as hindering a special case for Kaliningrad in regional integration (Lieven and Trenin 178).

To recap, Russia fears its hold over the Kaliningradskaya Oblast is contested by various governments, even if these governments do not hold this as their official stance. Russia has therefore worked to pull KO closer toward a centralized Moscow-dictated policy despite KO's obvious geopolitical position in the Baltic region. Both regional and state funded projects are currently sustaining the region, though the former is thwarted by perception of security threats from the EU and the modern geopolitical discourse in Russia. To stabilize the situation, the US must formally recognize Russia's *de jure* ownership of the exclave, and in addition, Russia must recognize Lithuania's ownership of Klaipeda in order

to receive reciprocal recognition. Once this is done, the international law dimension will have been taken care of. Next, viewing the situation in terms of post-modern geopolitics will help to integrate KO into the Baltic region through EU based initiatives, but the EU needs a signal from Moscow that they may treat KO as a special case and may recognize decentralized control of the oblast. If this occurs, then the EU, alongside Russia, will help to make KO part of the Baltic and repair the dilapidated environmental, health, organizational, and structural problems in the region. If this happens, both goals of recognition and stability will be fulfilled, and the Russian Federation may boast of an example for economic, cross-border cooperation.

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