

Kant's Future: Debates about the Identity of Kaliningrad Oblast

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The more than twenty-five years that have passed since the disintegration of the Soviet Union have been marked with various attempts to understand and describe the changing identities of post-Soviet societies, with Russia as their focal point. A considerable number of studies have focused on nation-building processes. They have often taken into account much more than politics, religion, and history; for instance, the broad societal context of political and economic transition and the politics of memory and commemoration in the former Soviet satellite states.¹ Some of the latest studies have touched upon the evolving meaning of space in post-Soviet cities and regions, such as the impact of the so-called mega events.² Following Benedict Anderson's example, scholars have referred to such phenomena as the engagement of new national and regional elites in identity-shaping processes.³ Other authors have examined non-political fragmentation processes, including the demise of collective identities, as well as specific elements of nation- and identity-building state policies under new, post-imperial and post-colonial circumstances, including the notion of a "wider Europe" and a "new regionalism."⁴

In this context, Kaliningrad oblast is a particular case due to its geographic location, political developments in and around Russia, and its centuries-long participation in non-Russian history. In this paper, I seek to answer the question of how pre-WWII legacy, in particular, its spatial dimension, is present in the discussion of the regional identity of the post-Soviet Kaliningrad oblast

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1. See Rico Isaacs and Abel Polese, eds., *Nation-Building and Identity in the Post-Soviet Space: New Tools and Approaches* (London, 2016); Włodzimierz Marciniak, *Rozgrabione imperium: Upadek Związku Sowieckiego i powstanie Federacji Rosyjskiej* (Krakow, 2001); Michael H. Bernhard and Jan Kubik eds., *Twenty Years after Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration* (New York, 2014).

2. Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsyk, eds., *Mega Events in Post-Soviet Eurasia: Shifting Borderlines of Inclusion and Exclusion* (New York, 2016).

3. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Rev. ed.) (London, 2006); David Lane, ed., *Elites and Identities in Post-Soviet Space* (London, 2012); Mark Bassin and Gonzalo Pozo eds., *The Politics of Eurasianism: Identity, Popular Culture and Russia's Foreign Policy* (London, 2017).

4. Martin Ehala, "Blurring of Collective Identities in the Post-Soviet Space," *Sociolinguistic Studies*, 9 (August 2015): 173–90; Vladimir Kolossov, "Ethnic and Political Identities and Territorialities in the Post-Soviet Space," *GeoJournal* 48, no. 2 (June 1999): 71–81; Tassilo Herrschel, *Borders in Post-socialist Europe: Territory, Scale, Society* (Burlington, 2011).

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population. To fulfil this goal, I raised a number of the following issues. I identified the main stakeholders taking part in the discussion: central authorities, regional authorities, the Russian Orthodox Church, and non-governmental organizations. I examined the role of the policies pursued by Russian state authorities, in particular, the “new conservative project” announced by President Vladimir Putin in 2012. Having this in mind, I took a closer look at the relationship between pre- and post-war realities, including post-1991 architecture, in shaping the public space of the oblast. I also looked the proposed hosting of the FIFA 2018 World Championship by, among other Russian cities, Kaliningrad. Finally, I made limited reference to the role of the legacy of the pre-World War II years in Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship of Poland, covering the southern part of former East Prussia.

I collected and analyzed a diversified set of research material. For the historical background of Kaliningrad oblast I used works of Iurii Kostiashev, who analyzed the process of new inhabitants’ migration to the region and their memories about that time, as well as the attitude of the Soviet authorities towards East Prussian remnants during the first years after 1945 and the way the province was depicted in the Soviet propaganda of that period.⁵ Il’ia Dement’ev examined changing attitudes of subsequent generations of the oblast’s inhabitants towards its pre-war past.⁶ Eckhardt Mattes and Andrzej Sakson authored a comprehensive study about the post-war inhabitants of all of East Prussia.⁷ Valuable knowledge about the past and present of the Kaliningrad Russian Orthodox Church was provided by works of Anna Karpenko and Evgenii Maslov.⁸ Other important positions in examining the past and the present identity of Kaliningrad oblast and inhabitants were provided by Olga Sezneva and Ingmar Oldberg, who dealt with processes that led to the emergence of regional identity.⁹

5. Iurii Kostiashev, *Povsednevnost’ poslevoennoi derevni: Iz istorii pereselencheskikh kolkhozov Kaliningradskoi oblasti, 1946–1953 gg.* (Moscow, 2015); Kostiashev, *Vostochnaya Prussiiia glazami sovetских pereselentsev: Pervye gody Kaliningradskoi oblasti v vospominaniakh i dokumentakh* (Kaliningrad, 2003).

6. Il’ia Dement’ev, “Chto ia mogu znat’?”: Formirovanie diskursov o proshlom v kaliningradskoi oblasti v sovet’skii period (konets 1940-kh–1980-e gody),” in *Liudi i teksty: Ist. almanakh* (Moscow, 2014): 175–218.

7. Eckhardt Mattès, *Zapreshchenoe vospominanie: Vozvrashchenie istorii Vostochnoi Prussii i regional’noe soznanie zhitelei Kaliningradskoi oblasti (1945–2001)* (Kaliningrad, 2003); Andrzej Sakson, *Od Kłajpedy do Olsztyna. Współczesni mieszkańcy byłych Prus Wschodnich: Kraj Kłajpedzki, Obwód Kaliningradzki, Warmia i Mazury* (Poznan, 2011).

8. Anna M. Karpenko, *Regional’naia identichnost’ kak kategoriia politicheskoi praktiki*, (PhD diss., In-t filosofii RAN, Moskva, 2008); Karpenko, “Peredacha simvolicheskii znachimykh pamiatnikov kul’turnogo naslediiia Kaliningradskoi oblasti v sobstvennost’ RPTS. Sotsial’nye i kul’turnye aspekty konflikta,” *Vestnik Rossiiskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta im. I. Kanta*, 12 (2010): 92–95; Evgenii A. Maslov, “Zaselenie Kaliningradskoi oblasti i formirovanie religioznoi struktury eë naseleniia,” *Baltiiskie issledovaniia*, 1 (2002): 17–33; Maslov, *Na puti k religioznomu podpol’iu: Vlast’ i veruiushchie v Kaliningradskoi oblasti kontsa 1940-kh godov* (Kaliningrad, 2006).

9. Olga Sezneva, “Living in the Russian Present with a German Past: The Problem of Identity in Kaliningrad, Formerly Königsberg,” in David Crowley and Susanne Reid, eds., *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc* (London, 2002): 47–64; Sezneva, “The Dual History: Politics of the Past in Kaliningrad, Former Koenigsberg,” in John Czaplicka and Blair Ruble, eds., *Composing Urban History and the Construction of Civic*

To get a more comprehensive perspective, I drew from a number of publications on the emergence of a new sense of cross-border regional identities in post-Soviet Russia and its neighbors, such as the work by Anssi Paasi.¹⁰ In reference to Poland's part of former East Prussia, I obtained valuable information from regional and local publications, as well as from the Polish Film *Chronicle*, which shows the reconstruction of the town of Frombork (*Frauenburg*) by Polish scouts (*harczerze*) at the turn of the 1960s and 70s.¹¹ Despite being produced in the 1930s and 40s, works of Polish geographer Stanisław Srokowski have proven to be very up-to-date in describing the legacy of East Prussia in contemporary Poland and Russia.¹²

I found and used a significant portion of my research material online. There is a variety of Russia-wide (*izvestia.ru*, *ng.ru*) and regional (*klops.ru*, *prussia39.ru*, *regnum.ru*, *rosbalt.ru*, *ruwest.ru*) web portals, representing a whole spectrum of views, as well as frequently-updated websites of official institutions, such as the Russian Orthodox Church (*patriarcha.ru*), which refer to identity-related issues. Discussions on web fora and social media, such as Facebook and VKontakte, proved to be useful in tracking main topics of the ongoing debate on, for instance, the fate of the Königsberg Castle and the House of the Soviets.

Moreover, during study visits to Kaliningrad oblast and the neighboring area of Poland between May 2015 and December 2016, I carried out forty-five interviews based on the storytelling method with ordinary citizens, public officials (including municipal clerks), diplomats, academicians and NGO activists from Poland, Russia, and Germany.

The Two Narratives

East Prussia and Kaliningrad oblast have been a unique area since the very beginning of their existence. Once conquered by the Teutonic Knights, who

Identities (Baltimore, 2003): 58–85; Sezneva, "Converting History into 'Cultural Treasure' in Post-1991 Kaliningrad: Social Transitions and the Meaning of the Past," in Klaus Eder and Willfried Spohn, eds., *Collective Memory and European Identity: The Effects of Integration and Enlargement* (Aldershot, 2005): 151–78; Sezneva, "We Have Never Been German: The Economy of Digging in Russian Kaliningrad," in Craig Calhoun and Richard Sennett, eds., *Practicing Culture* (London, 2007): 13–34; Sezneva, "Locating Kaliningrad on the Map of Europe: 'A Russia in Europe' or 'a Europe in Russia'?", in John Czaplicka, Nida Gelazis, and Blair A. Ruble, eds., *Cities after the Fall: European Integration and Urban History* (Baltimore, 2009): 195–217; Sezneva, "Modalities of Self-understanding, Identification and Representation in the Post-1991 Kaliningrad: A Critical View," in Stefan Berger, ed., *In Kaliningrad in Europe: Perspectives from Inside and Outside* (Lüneburg, 2010): 35–57; Ingmar Oldberg, "The Emergence of a Regional Identity in the Kaliningrad Oblast," *Cooperation and Conflict* 3, no. 35 (2000): 269–88.

10. Anssi Paasi, *Territories Boundaries and Consciousness: The Changing Geographies of the Finnish-Russian Border* (New York, 1995).

11. "Polska Kronika Filmowa 1973, /29a," YouTube video, posted by "bobcatpoland," April 16, 2011 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AfTgwBBbIWA> (last accessed May 21, 2018).

12. Stanisław Srokowski, *Prusy Wschodnie. Studium geograficzne, gospodarcze i społeczne* (Gdańsk, 1945); Srokowski, *Miasta i ludzie Prus Wschodnich* (Warsaw, 1946); Srokowski, *Prusy Wschodnie (Mazury, Warmia, Powiśle)* (Warsaw, 1947).

exterminated some of the native Baltic Prussians and assimilated the rest, the region was politically dependent on the Polish-Lithuanian state for two centuries until the 1650s. It was not until 1701 that Elector Friedrich crowned himself as the King of Prussia, which consisted of many territories east of the Elbe River.¹³ As the country's borders expanded over time, the role played by East Prussia diminished visibly, mainly because of its low economic output. This tendency only deepened after the unification of Germany.

Public perception of East Prussia began to change after 1914. The province witnessed one of the largest military campaigns of the early phase of World War I. After initial successes, the Russian army was defeated in a two-week fight in August 1914 near the towns of Ortelsburg and Neidenburg. Germans proclaimed General Paul von Hindenburg the savior of Germany. The Treaty of Weimar of 1918, however, cut East Prussia off from the core of the country (*Kernland*), making it a semi-exclave surrounded by Poland, Lithuania, and the Baltic Sea. German state propaganda used this geopolitical alteration to emphasize that the province was under constant threat. At that time, East Prussia witnessed the erection of monuments commemorating German soldiers who died during the war (*Heldendenkmäler*).¹⁴ Their main aim was to underscore the Germaneness of the province. The Tannenberg Monument (*Tannenberg Denkmal*) most visibly exemplified this tendency, which became stronger after Adolf Hitler came to power. The National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP) received more votes in East Prussia than the German average in the early 1930s.

General von Hindenburg, *Heldendenkmäler*, the thoroughly renovated Teutonic Castle in Marienburg (Malbork today), as well as other mythologized elements of the past and present became the symbols of Nazi-era East Prussia. All of them influenced the way the province was perceived. For millions of Germans, they became the *Bollwerk des Deutschentums*—the Bullwark of Germanness. For many non-Germans, however, these symbols were a fortress of militarism and aggression against Slavic and Baltic nations under the pretext of bringing cultural progress and civilization to central and eastern Europe. Polish historian and political scientist Robert Traba argues that both narratives have had an impact on how the understanding of “East Prussianness” has evolved up to the present day.¹⁵

World War II marked the end of East Prussia. In late 1944 and early 1945, advancing Soviet troops tore down hundreds of cities, towns, and villages. Most inhabitants either fled their homes or were killed. No more than a tenth of the pre-war population remained in the northern part of East Prussia in 1945.¹⁶ Acts of brutality by the Red Army were dictated by vendetta. East

13. Christopher M. Clark, *Prusy. Powstanie i upadek. 1600–1947*, trans. Jan Szkudliński (Warsaw, 2009), 349–56, 379–85.

14. Many photographs of *Heldendenkmäler* can be accessed on the website of Deutsches Dokumentationszentrum für Kunstgeschichte (Bildarchiv Foto Marburg): www.fotomarburg.de (last accessed October 25, 2018).

15. See Robert Traba, *Ostpreußen—die Konstruktion einer deutschen Provinz: Eine Studie zur regionalen und nationalen Identität 1914–1933* (Osnabrück, 2010).

16. Iurii Kostiashev, *Sekretnaia istoriia Kaliningradskoi oblasti: Ocherki 1945-1956 gg.* (Kaliningrad, 2009), 72.

Prussia was one of the starting points for the Wehrmacht's attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941. Soviet propaganda called the province "the lair of the beast" (*логово зверя*) and the temple of German militarism and Nazism.¹⁷

The fate of Königsberg (Kaliningrad) well illustrates the scale of destruction in East Prussia. Its historic downtown had already been bombed and heavily damaged by British and American air strikes in August 1944. In January 1945, the city was surrounded by the Red Army. After more than a two-month siege, Königsberg was seized on April 9, 1945, with over 100,000 casualties and utter devastation of a seven-century-old city together with the destruction of its rich, multicultural and multiethnic tradition.¹⁸

Among few symbols miraculously spared by both Soviet military and civilian administration was the tomb of Immanuel Kant. Erected in 1924 to commemorate the anniversary of the philosopher's 200th birthday, it survived the British air bombings in August 1944. It was not destroyed later because Kant's works partly laid the foundations for Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, whose thought, in turn, influenced Karl Marx. Only the Cathedral was severely damaged. It was partially renovated with the use of temporary solutions in the 1970s.¹⁹

As a result of the war, East Prussia was divided between Poland and the Soviet Union. In 1946, Kaliningrad oblast emerged. Over the next five years, almost all remaining Germans were resettled in the occupation zones in Germany. Russian-speaking newcomers slowly repopulated the area. They had never seen west European cities and villages. They were mostly unfamiliar with local conditions, including the level of destruction in the province, which turned out to be the main reason for many leaving the oblast over the following years.²⁰

The Soviet authorities planned to destroy all material and non-material remnants of East Prussia, as they associated them with Germany and Nazism. The history of the province was to be thoroughly reinterpreted to fit into the rigors of the Soviet communism.²¹ In the first post-war years, an intensive propaganda campaign was launched to do so. One of its slogans was the "expulsion of the Prussian spirit" (*изгнание прусского духа*).²² The role of reinventing both material and symbolic dimensions of public space in Kaliningrad oblast was thus crucial for strengthening the new Soviet identity. In other words, new buildings, streets, monuments and other elements of commemorative

17. Iurii Kostiashev, *Izgnanie prusskogo dukha: Kak formirovalos' istoricheskoe soznanie naseleniia Kaliningradskoi oblasti v poslevoennye gody* (Kaliningrad, 2003), 7–80.

18. See Mikhaël' Wieck, *Zakat Kënigsberga: Svidetel'stvo nemetskogo evreia*, trans. Jurij A. Volkov (Kaliningrad, 2015).

19. Igor' Rudnikov, "Kenigsberg i sobor. Simvol drevnego goroda ot rozrusheniia spasla mogila Immanuila Kanta," *Novie Kolesa*, at http://www.rudnikov.com/article.php?ELEMENT_ID=12274 (last accessed May 21, 2018).

20. Iurii Kostiashev, *Sekretnaia istoriia Kaliningradskoi oblasti: Ocherki 1945–1956 gg.* (Kaliningrad, 2009).

21. "Kaliningradskii Arkhitekturnyi Festival' 2010 'Nesluchivshcheesia Budushchee'," *Rossiiskaia Arkhitektura* at <https://archi.ru/events/3714/kaliningradskii-arhitekturnyi-festival-2010-nesluchivsheesia-budushee> (last accessed May 21, 2018).

22. Iurii Kostiashev, *Izgnanie prusskogo dukha: Kak formirovalos' istoricheskoe soznanie naseleniia Kaliningradskoi oblasti v poslevoennye gody* (Kaliningrad, 2003), 7–80.

nature were erected, aimed at helping to shape an obedient and loyal *Homo sovieticus*.²³

Streets and squares were renamed to reflect the new reality. *Hansaplatz* (Adolf-Hitler-Platz from 1934 until 1945) became Victory Square (*площадь Победы*). In its center, a monument of Stalin was erected in 1953, just two months after his death. It was later replaced by a statue of Lenin in 1958. Remnants of pre-war icons of Königsberg were destroyed or left to their own devices, mostly due to the fact that the financial and organizational burden of overcoming the war damage was so high that already by the beginning of the 1950s, the process of expelling the Prussian spirit had slowed down. Many buildings fell into disrepair. The ruins of Königsberg Castle were blown up in the late 1960s, despite the local intelligentsia's protests. In its place, the Soviet authorities started building the House of Soviets, which they never completed due to financial shortages and the overall crisis in the 1980s. The ruins of the Cathedral were left untouched because of the tomb of Immanuel Kant.

Today in Kaliningrad and the other towns of the oblast are dominated by socialist realism, in particular by *хрущёвки* and *брежневки*—Khrushchev and Brezhnev era blocks of flats. Only individual pre-war buildings survived the Soviet period. Seeing them as essential elements of everyday life by many Kaliningraders is a part of a broader phenomenon of growing interest in discovering the region's pre-war past. It already became strong in the late 1980s when *perestroika* allowed people to delve into the pre-1945 history.²⁴ After the collapse of the Soviet Union, regional NGOs, local activists and, to some extent, the authorities started to look after the remnants of bygone days. It was then that the reconstruction of the Cathedral began, with most of the work carried out throughout the 1990s. Nevertheless, the notion of rediscovering the traces of the pre-war past was that of a narrow group of academicians and enthusiasts.

The Incident at Veselovka

In March 2015, an incident occurred in the small village of Veselovka (formerly Judtschen or—after the campaign for the Germanisation of old Prussian names in 1938—Kanthausen), in the central part of Kaliningrad oblast (Cherniakhovskii district). The perpetrator(s) spray-painted two words on an old, red brick building: “Kant—loser.” Such an act of vandalism might seem rather commonplace since sprayed walls are everywhere. It is also unclear whether the incident amounted to vandalism, as the spray-painted house was in a deplorable condition.

It was, however, no ordinary building. Immanuel Kant had spent approximately three years in the now-demolished house. He later became one of the most prominent figures of modern philosophy, as well as the symbol of old Königsberg. Interestingly enough, Kant became even more popular and more

23. Mikhail Geller, *Cogs in the Soviet Wheel: The Formation of Soviet Man* (New York, 1988).

24. Olga Sezneva, “Converting History into ‘Cultural Treasure’” and “We Have Never Been German.”

iconic in post-Soviet Kaliningrad than he was in German East Prussia. Two hundred years after his death he has become a regional celebrity. His name, bust, and quotations from his most famous works have been widely used in tourism, cultural events, and by the advertising industry.

I dare to say that Immanuel Kant is a beacon of the incorporation of pre-war history into the new regional identity agenda in Kaliningrad oblast. The restoration of the Cathedral on the historic island of Kneiphof began in the 1990s. In 1996, the tomb of Kant was thoroughly renovated. The large-scale starting point of these changes is closely linked with preparations to commemorate the 750th anniversary of the founding of Königsberg, as well as the 60th anniversary of the creation of Kaliningrad oblast in 2005–2006. It was then that the highest Russian authorities, including Vladimir Putin, started speaking openly about the European roots of Kaliningrad and its role as a bridge between Russia and the west. Putin, together with the German chancellor Gerhard Schröder, announced that Kaliningrad State University would become the Immanuel Kant Russian State University.

Apparently, this rhetoric was part of a broader Russian policy towards western countries, including Germany, and did not aim at exploring Kaliningrad's pre-war roots literally. Nevertheless, it resulted in a major regional debate on how the East Prussian, Soviet, and Russian historical narratives should have met and co-existed in the oblast. It also evoked first, limited initiatives of reconstructing the historic center of Kaliningrad. In 2006, the so-called Fishermen's Village (*Рыбная деревня*) was erected. Even though it never existed before 1945, it became a beacon of how picturesque, neat, and aesthetically different "pre-war" architecture could be. Other projects that followed included: the charm of the villa district of Amalienau, the reconstruction of the Royal Castle, grassroots campaigns against dismantling the tramways, and the development of institutions for preserving the remnants of Prussian fortifications in Kaliningrad.

Interestingly enough, another element of commemoration activities was the construction of one of Russia's largest Orthodox churches (*церкви*) at the heart of Kaliningrad—the Christ the Savior Church. Its construction began in 1996 and was completed in 2006–7. It was in the traditional Vladimir-Suzdal' style, typical for central Russia. Its lower part commemorates Russian soldiers who died in the Seven Years' War of 1756–63, Napoleon's Russian campaign of 1812, and both World Wars in East Prussia.²⁵ It seems clear that the authorities of the Church wanted to strike a balance between acknowledging the non-Russian roots of Kaliningrad oblast and its adamant Russian present and future.

Growing public interest in caring for the public space in the oblast came as a surprise to the authorities. "Prussianness" became a hot topic on the regional political agenda and could not get overlooked by government officials. It also pointed to two phenomena: significant civil society activity and

25. "Mitropolit Kirill sovershil chin Velikogo osviashchenie malogo khrama Kafedral'nogo sobora Khrista Spasitelia g. Kaliningrada—Khrama Voinskoi Slavy," *Khram Sv. Blagovernogo Kniazia Aleksandra Nevskogo*, September 27, 2007 at <http://www.ubrus.org/news-region-unit/?id=2299> (last accessed May 21, 2018).

the potential for showing discontent. Both became very much visible in the period between 2009 and 2012. Kaliningrad oblast experienced the global crisis more severely than Russia on average. Thousands of Kaliningraders turned against the governor, Georgy Boos, who was thus forced not to run for re-election—an unusual situation for Russian political life in general.²⁶ Although reasons for public manifestations were mostly economic, people also expressed their discontent towards turning over the red brick church of Arnau (in the contemporary village of Rodniki) and other cultural objects to the Russian Orthodox Church.²⁷

The protests made the authorities reconsider their decisions. Newly-appointed governor Nikolai Tsukanov made the “East Prussian agenda” a visible part of his policy. It was then that the idea of rebuilding the castle and revitalizing the historic center was set in motion. Although none of these efforts have moved onto the ground so far, the years of Tsukanov as head of the regional administration (2010–16) were a true “pre-war legacy carnival,” present in the everyday life of Kaliningraders. He even seemed to pay special attention to Kant’s house in Veselovka. As a foreigner living in the oblast said: “[The governor] seems to be in favor of renovating the house where Kant used to live quickly. I think so because I saw a mock-up of the house in his office.”²⁸

Threatening Russianness

By coincidence, at roughly the same time as the incident at Veselovka, the World Russian People’s Assembly held its regional forum in Kaliningrad, followed by a resolution. The Assembly is a non-governmental organization led by the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church. Since it was set up in 1993, it has aimed to “take care of the present and future of Russia regardless of political views.”²⁹

Discussants debated the challenges and threats faced by the Russian state and nation. The resolution stressed the need to take steps to preserve the civilizational identity and unity of the Russian nation in the future. This goal, discussants determined, can only be reached by returning to roots, which means seeking continuity with Russia’s spiritual history brutally interrupted by the October Revolution and its consequences, which reach as far as 1991. New post-Soviet circumstances play a particular role in liminal regions such as Kaliningrad oblast. Externally, the creation of an independent Lithuania and

26. Irina Sattarova (text), Aleksei Milovanov (photos) “‘Edinaia Rossiia—idite v Rossiia’: fotoreportazh ‘Novogo Kaliningrada.ru,’” *Novii Kaliningrad*, December 12, 2009 at <https://www.newkaliningrad.ru/news/foto/k994153.html> (last accessed May 21, 2018); “UVD priznalo, chto na mitinge bylo 10 tys chelovek,” *Novii Kaliningrad*, January 30, 2010, at <https://www.newkaliningrad.ru/news/incidents/k1017362.html> (last accessed May 21, 2018).

27. Anna M. Karpenko, “Peredacha simvolicheskoi znachimyykh pamiatnikov kul’turnogo nasledia Kaliningradskoi oblasti v sobstvennost’ RPTS: Sotsial’nye i kul’turnye aspekty konflikta,” *Vestnik Rossiiskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta im. I. Kanta*, 12 (2010): 92–95.

28. Foreign diplomat, interview, Kaliningrad, November 2015.

29. *Vsemirnyi Russkii Sobor (VRNS). Opisanie, Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov’*, at <https://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/77467.html> (last accessed May 21, 2018).

Belarus hit the region, as those countries separated it from mainland Russia, impeding people-to-people and cross-regional contacts. Internally, the oblast suffered from policies developed in Moscow that favored importing goods over supporting local production. Regional entrepreneurs began to accept western values and gravitate towards the west, leading to the emergence of forces calling for independence from Russia in various forms.³⁰ The forum's resolution suggests that some would want the semi-exclave to become part of the European Union, including academics and cultural activists investigating the region's supposedly unique "German-Russian" identity. These actions were supported by foreign institutions and resulted in a feeling of distinctiveness among the local population. So far, many people have drifted away from the Russian cultural tradition, their "civic self-identification" weakened.

The resolution concluded that all these negative tendencies required urgent and comprehensive actions. These include creating and implementing a cultural and educational program that would strengthen the spiritual and cultural sovereignty of the Russian nation and preserve Russian identity (*русская идентичность*). They also suggest strengthening cross-regional intra-Russian cultural bonds and popularizing Russian history in the region, especially wartime events such as the period of the Great Patriotic War, World War I, Napoleon's invasion of Russia, the Seven Years' War, and the Great Northern War of 1700–21. The authors propose to use Soviet- and Russian-era toponyms to reflect the Russian present of the region. They also want to increase the region's population by decreasing the number of abortions, and create conditions for repopulating rural areas of the oblast. These measures should be complemented by building a regional consensus based on respect for Orthodoxy (as well as other traditional Russian confessions).³¹ Regional consensus should also be found in Russian culture and history, fighting the use of drugs and alcohol abuse, as well as by influencing the regional information space so that the media promotes traditional cultural and spiritual values.³²

Some might argue that only a small group of activists share the point of view expressed in the resolution, but the concerns expressed are not,

30. It is worth noting that the resolution points to the economic dimension of identity changes among the inhabitants of Kaliningrad oblast. By accusing the authorities of promoting imports, it clearly referred to the Special Economic Zone, which started operating in the final month of the Soviet Union. The aim of the zone was to stimulate the region's economy. Yet, its legal status was mostly used by Russian entrepreneurs to purchase high quality products from abroad, bring them to Kaliningrad oblast with no customs fee, and then re-export them to other parts of Russia. The resolution seems to suggest that foreign companies are blamed for this malfunctioning. This was not the case, as the main beneficiaries were Russian enterprises and private individuals. It shows, however, how vivid the memory of the deep socioeconomic crisis of the early 1990s is and how it is still used in identity discourse.

31. Religions considered indigenous (in the official Russian nomenclature, the word "traditional" is used) for Russia are: Christianity (with particular emphasis on Orthodoxy), Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism.

32. "Rezoliutsia I Kaliningradskogo foruma Vsemirnogo russkogo narodnogo sobora," *Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov'*, March 14, 2015 at <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/4013534.html> (last accessed May 21, 2018).

however, isolated. In September 2015, an NGO called the Russian Assembly of Kaliningrad issued a resolution (or rather a statement) similar to the one from March. The authors argued that Germanization and westernization threaten the Russianness of Kaliningrad oblast. They stated that over the past thirty years, pro-western organizations had been continuously plotting first to make Kaliningrad oblast drift away from Russia (*отдаление*), and then to separate it from it (*отделение*): “Massive propaganda is conducted to spread the false notion that “Kaliningrad is not Russia” and thus create the critical mass of supporters for an anti-Russian riot so that at the right time a Kaliningrad version of the Ukrainian Maidan can begin.”³³

The core element of the threats expressed in these documents revolve around the notion of Russia’s “traditional values.” They also promote the official Russian narrative of history, including its military victories and the dominant role of Orthodoxy over the centuries. These proposals are fully in line with the official state policies expressed in numerous programs in areas such as national security and patriotic education.³⁴ They are also present in the Russian state-owned media on a daily basis. Similar views appeared in a series of articles published by Vladimir Putin in late 2011 and early 2012 as he was running for his third presidential term, notably in the ones titled “Russia focuses—challenges we need to answer” and “Russia: the national question.”³⁵

Struggle over Public Space

The incident at Veselovka triggered a significant debate in the regional media. A detailed look at it points to a direct link between calling Kant a loser and the discussion about the role of pre-war identity dilemmas in Kaliningrad oblast. Those who suggested an immediate rescue operation for the house received accusations of being pro-western and pro-German as they support the reconstruction of the center of Kaliningrad and destruction of the House of Soviets. Those who argue so believe that there is a significant number of buildings and monuments from the post-war era that should be renovated in the first place. Taking care of the pre-war architectural legacy instead would mean denying the semi-exclave’s Russianness.

33. “Russkoe Sobranie Kaliningrada: Nashi zadachi,” *Ia Rex*, September 23, 2015, at <http://www.iarex.ru/articles/52023.html> (last accessed May 21, 2018).

34. Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 12 maia 2009 g. no 537 “O Strategii natsional’noi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii do 2020 goda,” at <http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/29277>; Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 31 dekabria 2015 goda no 683 “O Strategii natsional’noi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii,” at <http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/40391>; Postanovlenie Pravitel’stva Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 30 dekabria 2015 g. no 1493 o gosudarstvennoi programme “Patrioticheskoe vospitanie grazhdan Rossiiskoi Federatsii na 2016–2020 gody,” at <https://tinyurl.com/y8vy5qtn> (last accessed November 6, 2018).”

35. Vladimir Putin, *Rossiia sosredotochivaetsia—vzovy, na kotorye my dolzhny otvetit’*, *Izvestia*, January 16, 2012 at <http://izvestia.ru/news/511884> (last accessed August 19, 2016); Putin, “Rossiia: natsional’nyi vopros,” *Nezavisimaia*, January 23, 2012 at http://www.ng.ru/politics/2012-01-23/1_national.html (last accessed May 21, 2018).

Others favor reconstruction that would combine post-war architecture with modern, pre-war stylized buildings, just like in the Polish city of Elbląg, a mere 100 kilometers from Kaliningrad.³⁶ Elbląg was also heavily destroyed during the war and not rebuilt right away. Instead, broad archaeological excavations were carried out. Reconstruction of the Old Town did not begin until the 1990s.³⁷ A local government official from Elbląg gave a hint of how the attitude of officials from Kaliningrad oblast towards this process looked like:

So we are sitting today in the Old Town—try to imagine that in 1994 a delegation of regional deputies from Kaliningrad oblast came [here]. Our task was to show them the Old Town [and the way reconstruction works were carried out here]. And [one of the deputies] was sitting here like we are now and he said: “It is wonderful—you are building [something new], on these ruins, on old basements a new Old Town. But how am I supposed to explain to citizens [of Kaliningrad] that we need to destroy a Soviet park to rebuild German basements?”³⁸

The resolution issued by the World Russian People's Assembly Forum seems to correspond to this way of thinking. It suggests that Kaliningrad Oblast is increasingly exposed to foreign (meaning western) influence in a context of political, cultural, and economic struggle. This struggle bears signs of a civilizational conflict, which is a well-established concept in Russian public discourse. From this perspective, the imminent danger for Russia is that its ties with its westernmost region may become weaker through the rebuilding of pre-war places, not only architectural but also of symbolic value.

For Russia's cultural and religious leaders this should be the other way round. Russia is the one that should use Kaliningrad as a platform for dialogue and leverage to influence the EU states with its soft power. As Patriarch Cyril said, the oblast should “bring our traditional spiritual values into this dialogue.”³⁹ One can assume that this is strictly connected to the idea of the Russian World (*Russkii Mir*). According to it, Kaliningrad oblast's Russianness should be defended and strengthened, just like the presence of Russian culture in other parts of the post-Soviet world, which should help reverse the gradual shrinking of the Russian *oikumene* (or *ummah*, as Ukrainian writer Mykola Riabchuk put it).

36. In Polish, it is informally called *retrowersja*, which might be directly translated as “retroversion.”

37. Another example of how the East Prussian architectural legacy was incorporated into the official narrative of the history of Poland was the town of Frombork (Frauenburg), located thirty kilometers northeast of Elbląg, founded during the Teutonic Knights' rule over Prussia. Under the auspices of Polish the communist authorities, the town was revitalized in 1966–73 with the help of 40,000 scouts. The main rationale behind this otherwise surprising move was that Frombork was the place where Nicolaus Copernicus lived. Revitalization was a part of commemorating the 500th anniversary of Copernicus' birth, who became a prominent figure in the official propaganda of the People's Republic of Poland about the close ties between Poland and East Prussia. See: “Polska Kronika Filmowa 1973/29a,” YouTube video, posted by “bobcatpoland,” April 16, 2011 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AfTwgBBiIWA> (last accessed May 21, 2018).

38. Miłosz J. Zieliński, “National and Regional Identity in Kaliningrad oblast from the Cross-Border Perspective,” *Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review*, 34 (2015): 127.

39. Iuliia Paramonova, “Kant—lokh”? *Rosbalt*, April 10, 2015 at <http://www.rosbalt.ru/kaliningrad/2015/04/10/1387526.html> (last accessed May 21, 2018).

Some initiatives aimed at bridging the Russian present in Kaliningrad with bits and traces of Russian past here over centuries. Most of them concentrated on Emperor Peter the Great and his visit to East Prussia, as well as the Seven Years' War, when Russia occupied East Prussia for four years. Already in 2003, a bronze sculpture of Peter the Great was installed on Kneiphof Island in the so-called Sculpture Park. A considerably larger monument was erected (also in 2003) in front of the main administration building of the Baltic Fleet in Kaliningrad. Other monuments and commemorative plaques stand in Baltiysk, Chernyakhovsk, and Sovetsk.

Regional authorities appear to act in line with the narrative coming from Moscow, especially when it comes to sacral buildings. Nikolai Tsukanov, the then-governor of Kaliningrad oblast (he became the Presidential Plenipotentiary to the North-Western Federal District in July 2016), expressed this bluntly by saying that there should be more traditional Russian-style churches (*церковь* or *храм*). Until this is achieved, neighbors (meaning neighboring countries) “might think that this territory will become a part of another country [at some point in the future].” Building Orthodox churches is important because, as Tsukanov indicates, the “[traditional Russian-style] *храм* symbolizes Russia.”⁴⁰ The Governor's visit to the tourism fair in early 2017 serves as another telling example. While visiting a stand of the Dönhoff Fort (*Форт Дёнхофф*), he “gave concrete instructions not only on how to preserve the pre-war forts in the oblast, but also how to immortalize the memory about those who died defending the Fatherland.”⁴¹

The resolution issued by the World Russian People's Assembly touches upon toponymy as an essential factor influencing people's awareness. This proposal refers to the ideas for renaming Kaliningrad that have existed for almost thirty years. The first attempt took place during the last years of the Soviet Union. Its proponents argued that Mikhail I. Kalinin, as the formal head of the state at that time, was responsible for Stalin's purges in the 1930s. Later on, they also pointed to the cases of Tver' (Kalinin) and Korolyov (Kaliningrad), both of which returned to their historic names in 1990 and 1996 respectively. The latest initiative was put forward by a group of social activists who also suggested that Kaliningrad could become Königsberg again.⁴² This is gaining importance as the 300th anniversary of Immanuel Kant's birthday approaches. Those who see it as a way of reverting the gravity point of regional awareness to the pre-war past largely criticized such a way of thinking. They argue that renaming Kaliningrad would mean turning one's back on the very essence of the Russian presence on the southeastern Baltic coastline embodied in legacy of World War II and the Soviet years. The name “Kaliningrad,” along with the names of many streets and squares, is a symbol as well as a manifesto.

40. “Tsukanov: Poka v oblasti vmesto tserkvei stoiat kirkhy, sosedni dumaiut, chto eta zemlia mozhet pereiti drugomu gosudarstvu,” *Rusbalt*, April 6, 2015 at <http://www.rosbalt.ru/kaliningrad/2015/04/06/1385387.html> (last accessed May 21, 2018).

41. Obtained via Facebook fan page of the Dönhoff Fort.

42. Miłosz J. Zieliński, “Z Kaliningradu na *Koenigsberg*—zapotrzebowanie społeczne czy marzenie nielicznych? Społeczna inicjatywa zmiany nazwy miasta,” *Sprawy Narodowościowe. Seria nowa*, 43 (2013): 131–41.

The Soviet authorities changed names of main towns in the northern part of former East Prussia the so-called renaming campaign in 1946 (*кампания переименований*).⁴³ Later on, new inhabitants did the same in their living places in a spontaneous and uncoordinated manner that resulted in having names of different origins. Some commemorated Russian and Soviet heroes or symbols of the October Revolution, and of communist rule in general. There were also many villages with names related to their location (such as *Poliana*—forest glade), or the inhabitants' regions of origin. The renaming process was sometimes so chaotic that there are cases of villages with the same names close to each other.⁴⁴

Crossroads of the Future

Although the Soviet plan to destroy the pre-war reality and construct a new one on its ashes succeeded to a large extent, the victory was not complete. Forty-five years of Soviet rule was apparently not enough to eradicate everything redundant and unwelcome from people's minds. What is more, the collapse of the empire shattered people's belief in the kind of world it had promoted, especially in Kaliningrad oblast—a region that had been in the eye of the Cold War storm. Many Russians described the catastrophic economic situation and the lack of confidence in the 1990s by as a time of humiliation. Those negative tendencies did not subside until some fifteen years ago when the financial crisis and its consequences were largely overcome. This process coincided with Vladimir Putin's coming to power.

Political processes led directly to profound social changes in Kaliningrad oblast. Its separation from mainland Russia did not mean isolation anymore. After 1991, the region was no longer impermeable. Despite many obstacles, it became possible for both locals and foreigners to explore the past. Inhabitants of the oblast were also allowed to travel abroad. Even though only the wealthy ones could afford to go to France, Spain, or Italy, most have been to Poland and have seen the scale of post-communism economic transition in the adjacent regions. They have noticed that their pre-war history is explored and cherished there. In these circumstances, many Kaliningraders have been asking questions about their own identity. It does not mean, however, that they intend to redefine their identity entirely and abandon its Russian component. On the contrary, it seems that they are searching for new elements that would enrich their Russianness by adding a feeling of regional distinctiveness to the idea of a broader Russian nation. In these attempts, the role of material elements of the pre-war past cannot be underestimated.

43. The 1946 renaming campaign was not the first one of its kind on the territory of East Prussia. In 1938, the Nazi government decided to change all those toponyms that were not of German origin. See Olga Peteshova, "K voprosu o toponimicheskom purizme v severo-vostochnoi Prussii pervoi poloviny xx veka," in *Vestnik Baltiiskogo universiteta im. Kanta*, vol. 2 (2014): 68–73.

44. Per Broderzen, "Pozovi menia tikho po imeni . . .": Kampaniia pereimenovaniia v Kaliningradskoi oblasti v 1946–1950 gg. v kontekste kaliningradsko-moskovskikh otnoshenii poslevoennogo vremeni," in *Baltiiskii region v istorii Rossii i Evropy: Materialy mezhdunarodnoi konferentsii. Kaliningrad, 29–30 oktiabria 2004 g.* (Kaliningrad, 2005): 201–10.

During Vladimir Putin's first two terms in office, Russian authorities came up with a bizarre amalgamate of events and heroes connected with medieval Ruthenia, Eastern Orthodoxy, and tsarist and Soviet Russia. The presence of different, contradictory traditions and narratives is striking in this respect. Although it seems very inconsistent and fragile, it has been bearing fruits in the specific case of Kaliningrad oblast. The majority of its inhabitants consider themselves to be Russian nationals (*россияне*) and describe this as their basic level of self-identification.⁴⁵ Many Kaliningraders are afraid that exploring the pre-war past will tip the identity scale of the region against "traditional Russianness." In the eyes of the Kremlin, the Russianness of the semi-exclave needs to be as close to the officially recognized Russian identity as possible. This imperative only gained in importance after 2014. Thus, taking care of the legacy of the pre-war years does not always correspond with state-sanctioned Russianness.

The Russian *Kulturträger* were the only ones present in Kaliningrad oblast for the past forty-five years. Politically speaking, together with the high level of destruction and the total change of population, this itself made the pre-war past harmless. Nevertheless, under current Russo-western tensions, there have been voices calling for reducing the role of this legacy of violent transformation in public spaces and public discourse. There are, of course, some exceptions, such as Kant and traces of earlier Russian presence in East Prussia, yet they only confirm the general rule. Kant can find his humble place in the contemporary popular culture and symbolic space in Kaliningrad oblast only in a strictly limited sphere: the Cathedral and his tomb (as long as it is in the city called Kaliningrad, not Königsberg), as well as symbolic patronage over Albertina. Beyond Kant, many view any attempt to underscore the legacy of pre-war multiethnicity as a way of gradually replacing the Russian national narrative with a non-Russian (western) one. Taking care of monuments and pre-war architecture allegedly poses such a threat.

For all that, the explore-the-Prussian-past movement has been somewhat modest: it emerged over twenty years ago and so far has not even attempted to question the Russianness of Kaliningrad oblast in any sense. Instead, it seems to enrich the semi-exclave's Russian *mien* and plays an active role in issues such as the protection of old architecture. The *Kreuz Apotheke* and protests against covering cobbled streets (*брусчатка*) with asphalt or removing tram lines have been some of the best-known examples of this. Numerous websites focusing on these issues have existed in the region's online sphere, created mostly by enthusiasts from the younger generation of the pre-war history of Kaliningrad and the rest of the oblast. They are also not afraid of criticizing steps by the regional authorities that do not take into account the few remaining traces of East Prussia.⁴⁶ Some openly show how disastrous towns and

45. "Sotsiolog Efim Fidria: "My stali sil'nee oshchushchat' sebia rossiiunami," *Baltiiskii Federal'nii Universitet*, October 2, 2015 at <https://www.kantiana.ru/news/151/161935/> (last accessed May 21, 2018).

46. Anton Koval'skii, *Kazhdyi den' v Kaliningrade umirayet chastichka Königsberga*, December 23, 2015 at http://imperative.eu/kaliningrad/kazhdy_den_v_kaliningrade_umirayet_chastichka_kenigsberga (last accessed May 21, 2018).

villages can look seventy years after the war.⁴⁷ By doing so, they contribute to creating an active civil society in the region whose members strive to put pressure on the authorities in matters essential for the everyday life of citizens.

The “traditional Russians” who live in Kaliningrad Oblast, perhaps, see threats posed by such actions in a more complex way. They are aware that the pre-war level of development in East Prussia was relatively higher than that of today’s oblast. Local culture was well-established and vibrant, a result of over seven centuries of predominantly constant demographic development (with a massive influx of migrants until the nineteenth century). The local population had a strong feeling of distinctiveness. Post-war newcomers must have felt very unsure in this land, also because they did not know whether their new places of living would belong to the Soviet Union in the long run. The same phenomenon, although on a much smaller scale, took place in the Polish part of former East Prussia.⁴⁸ Soviet authorities aimed to destroy the pre-war cultural legacy and make Kaliningrad oblast the area where the new Soviet man would finally emerge. It could not happen within a forty-five-year timeframe. Thus, Russianness (rather than Sovietness) has to be continuously strengthened, given both internal and external challenges the Russian state faces in Kaliningrad oblast.

Among all the discussions about the pre-war and post-war history in Kaliningrad oblast, there is also a growing element of identifying artists and activists who supported the Nazi regime and whose names are present in the public space of Kaliningrad oblast. This was the case of a commemorative plaque for Agnes Miegel, a poet who published a volume of poetry dedicated to Adolf Hitler in 1938 and adamantly supported the Nazi regime up to its end in 1945. Her works were on the list of prohibited books in the Soviet occupation zone of Germany (*Deutsche Verwaltung*, 1946). Despite this fact, the plaque commemorating Miegel was placed on one of the buildings on Serzhant Koloskov Street (*улица Сержанта Колоскова*) by a joint Russian-German non-governmental initiative in the 1990s.⁴⁹ It is worth noting that Alexei A. Koloskov was a Soviet war hero who fought in East Prussia.⁵⁰ The plaque in his memory was just a few meters away from the one dedicated to Miegel. Regional authorities removed the latter only in December 2015.⁵¹

There is another factor of identity processes among Kaliningrad oblast inhabitants that cannot pass unnoticed because it is tightly related to the notion of war heroes. Since 1946, the region has played a vital role in the security policy of the Soviet Union. Its importance only increased after

47. “Za 70 let prebyvaniia v sostave Rossii nemetskii gorodok prevratilsia v pomoiku (fotoreportazh),” *Bramavu*, April 13, 2015, at <http://bramaby.com/ls/blog/history/2389.html> (last accessed May 21, 2018).

48. See Sakson, *Od Kłajpedy do Olsztyna: Współcześni mieszkańcy byłych Prus Wschodnich. Kraj Kłajpedzki, Obwód Kaliningradzki, Warmia i Mazury* (Poznan, 2011).

49. Memorial’naia doska Agnes Migel’, *Prussia39.ru*, at <http://www.prussia39.ru/sight/index.php?sid=1520> (last accessed May 21, 2018).

50. “Memorial’naia doska Koloskovu A.A.,” *Prussia39.ru*, at <http://www.prussia39.ru/sight/index.php?sid=1521> (last accessed May 21, 2018).

51. “V Kaliningrade demontirovana doska podpisantu ‘Kliatvy vernosti’ Gitleru,” *Regnum Infomatsionnoe Agentstvo*, December 21, 2015 at <http://regnum.ru/news/polit/2041244.html> (last accessed May 21, 2018).

the geopolitical changes of 1989–91. For the Kremlin, in the post-Cold War security architecture, with tensions between Russia and the west over a number of issues, Kaliningrad oblast remains a place where overall political, societal, and economic integrity has to be indisputable. Factors such as the exaggerated accentuation of non-Soviet and non-Russian history are not likely to weaken it.

All of these aspects are reflected in and influenced by changes in the regional administration. In July 2016, Tsukanov was replaced by Evgenii Zinichev, whose term in office was very brief. Anton Alikhanov, a 29-year old economist from outside Kaliningrad oblast, soon became the new governor. This move was widely commented on as a sign of mistrust towards Tsukanov, who did not cope well with using central budget funds, especially to prepare Kaliningrad for hosting the FIFA 2018 World Championship. The local media described Alikhanov as an efficient manager. Most probably, his task set by the Kremlin was to successfully complete preparations, as well as to keep social discontent at bay.

At the beginning of 2017, it was not entirely clear what the new governor's policy towards reshaping public space in Kaliningrad would be. Being an outsider and having a specific task to fulfil, however, Alikhanov is not likely to get involved in projects that will not be connected directly to his primary policy goals. In particular, initiatives revolving around exploring pre-war history could gradually be sidetracked or even abandoned. Alikhanov openly stated that he would not allow the rebuilding of the Königsberg Castle as long as he remains in office.⁵² Although such a scenario will not halt the process of internalizing elements of the East Prussia's (German) past by a large part of the region's population, it can slow it down. Thus, the risk of a growing number of remaining pre-1945 objects falling into decay will rise. As one of the interviewees noticed: "The only way to retain traces of the German legacy is to create a Russo-German legacy. But it depends exclusively on whether the Russians want it to happen. The Germans cannot force them to do so as this issue is still susceptible."⁵³

This will be even more critical because in 2018 Kaliningrad will enter the period of grand festivities and celebrations: the 2018 football championship followed by two anniversaries. In 2021, Kaliningraders will commemorate seventy-five years of the Kaliningrad oblast's existence, whereas 2024 will mark the 300th anniversary of Immanuel Kant's birth. Both events will be a playground for different visions of how public space in the region should influence the inhabitants' way of thinking. It is also a question of what symbols will dominate, which will be mostly decided by the central and regional authorities.

A quarter of a century after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the role of the legacy of pre-war and post-war history has become one of the leading dimensions

52. "Alikhanov: Vosstonavlivat' Korolevskii zamok my ne budem," *Kgd.ru*, March 18, 2017, at <https://kgd.ru/news/society/item/62005-alihanov-vosstanavlivat-korolevskij-zamok-my-ne-budem> (last accessed May 21, 2018).

53. Foreign diplomat, interview, Kaliningrad, November 2015.

of the discourse on the present and future identity of Kaliningrad oblast, as well as the tensions that it evokes. Even minor acts of vandalism are capable of adding fuel to controversies that have their roots long before 1991. It has been the case despite the fact that most Kaliningraders who favor preserving pre-war history do not treat it as a political issue. They do not want to build a comprehensive political agenda with the use of pre-1945 symbols either, contrary to what the proponents of strengthening the Soviet and Russian component of regional identity suggest. This *status quo* is very much visible in regional governments' modest financial and political possibilities for shaping public space in the oblast independently from Moscow. Although the former did prepare a rapid plan to save Kant's house, they have done little since 1991 to renovate other pre-war sites of cultural and architectural value or to prevent them from falling into decay. They also seem to be reluctant or extremely cautious about accepting and implementing any far-reaching plan to rebuild the historic center of Kaliningrad or the Royal Castle, which would most probably require destroying the House of Soviets.

The developments in and around Russia of the last three to four years can help to explain this stance. The war in Ukraine and a sharp deterioration of Russo-western relations made the Kremlin strengthen its centralization efforts towards the regions. Although already significant earlier, they had been limited mostly to financial and economic aspects. Now, under the new circumstances, Moscow grew unhappy with the politics of memory in Kaliningrad oblast. It is why we have observed the creation and growing activity of such organizations as the World Russian People's Assembly. They openly claim that there is a link between exploring-the-East-Prussian-past movement, no matter how unstructured and ephemeral it is, and a broader, anti-Russian political agenda of both internal and external forces.

Although some academics and experts from Russia and other countries debated the possible partitioning of Kaliningrad oblast in the 1990s, as well as Moscow's granting it extensive autonomy or even the creation of a fourth Baltic republic, the debate was purely theoretical.⁵⁴ Some argued that inhabitants of Kaliningrad were unique and that they differed from Russians coming from "mainland Russia" in significant ways. These suggestions were not made, however, by any major political force in Germany, Poland, or Lithuania, as most politicians and experts were aware of the post-war reality of Kaliningrad oblast.⁵⁵

54. No major political forces from Germany, Lithuania, or Poland took part in this debate. They were of the opinion that any territorial changes in Europe need to be made with respect to international law and should not be subject to political science-fiction. Additionally, they treated the question of the future status of Kaliningrad oblast as a very delicate one, as there were still Soviet/Russian troops stationed all across central Europe. The last Russian soldier left Poland only in September 1993 (Russian technical personnel stayed until 1994).

55. It is not a coincidence that people of such origin constituted more than 90% of the post-war population of Kaliningrad oblast. They were perceived as ethnically Russian. Even though the Soviet Union declared itself as a multinational, ethnically-diverse state, many of its politicians and intellectuals demonstrated a Great Russian approach that had its roots in tsarist Russia. According to this view, Belarussians and Ukrainians were not considered as separate nations, but just a branch of the Great Russian nation.

Indeed, Kaliningrad oblast's centuries-long non-Russian, East Prussian traditions have not entirely been erased and do play a visible role for many reasons. They contribute to the emergence of grassroots interest in the pre-Soviet past, partly because of its genuine charm. Even those parts of the population who do not possess extensive knowledge and/or sensitivity about the red-brick Gothic or Neo-Gothic architecture consider it very romantic and aesthetically pleasing. Additionally, many Kaliningraders travel to neighboring countries, in particular to neighboring voivodeships of Poland, and see how attractive renovated and rebuilt historic city centers can be. Thus, proposals to do the same in Kaliningrad and the smaller towns of the oblast have been gaining widespread support, also because they offer developmental opportunities.

Nonetheless, such proposals should not be expected to become commonplace, going beyond aesthetic and economic dimensions. Inhabitants of the semi-exclave are far more Sovietized than one would expect. First, typical Soviet surroundings shaped their lives. The unifying function of Soviet architecture, education, or culture was strengthened by Cold War tensions, including its vestiges on the ground, such as the presence of large military installations like the Baltic Fleet. Secondly, the remnants of pre-war history in Kaliningrad oblast were something utterly different to ordinary inhabitants for a long time. They belong to a different civilizational *mien*, making it very difficult to build a deep, primordial bond between it and the elements brought from the Soviet interior. In this sense, it would never have been possible to organize a government-sanctioned reconstruction of any town in the oblast, contrary to what happened in neighboring Poland already in communist times.

As I stressed above, the struggle over identity in Kaliningrad oblast has also occurred because of broader, decades-long geopolitics. Its *raison d'être* has been Kaliningrad's proximity to western Europe and the non-freezing Baltic Sea harbors. Any non-military agenda has played a secondary or tertiary role unless it has had at least some impact on the geostrategic well-being of the Soviet and Russian state. In this sense, the population of the oblast has been a hostage to policies shaped and goals pursued elsewhere. As long as any regional phenomena, such as the exploration of the pre-war past, was not viewed at least as a potential threat by Moscow, they were tolerated or even supported, especially if they coincided with fugacious tendencies at the very top of Russian domestic and international politics. It is why President Putin acknowledged the western roots of Kaliningrad in 2005/2006 in the presence of President Jacques Chirac and Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. Now, however, when tensions between Russia and the west are high and the chances for de-escalation are slim, a significant shift in regional identity policy, pursued at the central level, has been established.

The officially recognized definition of Russianness has recently become homogenizing and somewhat intransigent. The Kremlin and the entire central Russian administration treat any aberration as a threat. Regional differences

This phenomenon was described by Mykola Riabchuk, for example, in the online article *Postkolonial'nii Sindrom* (Postcolonial Syndrome), available at <https://day.kyiv.ua/uk/article/podrobici/postkolonialniy-sindrom> (last accessed November 9, 2018).

in Vladivostok, Kazan, Vyborg, or Kaliningrad, stemming from, for example, historical and/or geographical circumstances, are not welcomed by a highly-centralized state apparatus if they result or have the potential to result in social activity that is not controlled by state institutions. In the particular case of Kaliningrad oblast, there has been a growing incompatibility between central and regional expectations regarding identity-related policies. As a result, there is little place in the oblast for the politics of memory of its own and symbols that would co-exist with the ones constructed at the center.

In 2005, when Kaliningrad celebrated the 750th anniversary of the founding of Königsberg, “European” rhetoric was widely used. Foreign leaders who came to Kaliningrad at that time saw the region on the eve of rediscovering its pre-war roots and linkages to western civilization. It was also a time when Russia’s growing assertiveness in international politics was not yet considered an obstacle to building better relations between Russia and other European countries. The disappointment came only in 2008 and especially after the events in Ukraine in 2013–14. Additionally, it was a moment when the Russian economy was rapidly improving, benefitting from rising oil and gas prices, as well as from foreign investments.

At this point, it is not possible to determine whether the 2021 and 2024 celebrations will be rhetorically similar to 2005. For one thing, Russia’s internal situation is much more difficult than it was during Putin’s first term in office. The Russian economy has been in dire straits at least since 2013. Annexation of Crimea and engagement in the war in eastern Ukraine has led to international personal and economic sanctions. At the time of writing these words in 2017, it seems impossible to imagine French and German leaders participating in official celebrations in Kaliningrad as they did in 2005. For one thing, internal circumstances in Russia have changed significantly. In particular, the Russian state ideology has shifted mainly toward emphasizing the importance of the legacy of Soviet history. The state-controlled media in Russia and neighboring countries describe the Soviet Union as a global superpower that every Russian (*Русский*) should be proud of. Additionally, the notion of Russia being a besieged fortress is again intensively used as the economic situation deteriorates.

Regardless of the hitherto and future results of the identity debate in Kaliningrad oblast, Immanuel Kant remains a loser when it comes to using his universal unifying and apolitical potential as a thinker who can be held dear by virtually everyone without significant controversies. His popularity is shallow and often reduced to an empty cliché that he was a great philosopher. Just like in the Soviet times, when Kant’s tomb was spared only because he gave indirect inspiration to Karl Marx and communism, nowadays he is present in people’s minds because he has always been there, not because he symbolizes anything more, such as a shared sense of belonging to a community.

One might suspect that it is likely that in preparations for both the 2021 and 2024 festivities in Kaliningrad oblast, more emphasis will be put on Soviet-related symbols. There is no doubt that the overall discussion on the pre- and post-war past will play a visible role given the crucial events of the 2018–24 period for further shaping the direction of identity-related processes in the region.

Postscript

After some time it turned out that the person who was responsible for spraying Kant's house in Veselovka was a seventeen-year old girl from the local community. As she explained, she did it out of sheer boredom, without any political or ideological agenda behind her action. On August 1, 2016, almost a year and a half after the incident at Veselovka, President Putin signed an order assigning 46.3 million rubles from the Ministry of Culture's reserve fund to restore the house.⁵⁶

56. Rasporiazhenie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 1 avgusta 2016 goda no 229-rp, at <http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/41173> (last accessed September 20, 2018).