



ANDREA SZEGEDI ARANYOSSYÉ

## THE IDENTITY OF THE INHABITANTS OF THE KALININGRAD OBLAST

### ABSTRACT

The Kaliningrad Oblast – geopolitically speaking – is one of the most exciting regions of Russia. Indigenous people of the territory were Baltic tribes of Lithuanians and Prussians. Their language, traditions and religion differed from that of the Slavic peoples surrounding them. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century indigenous Prussian people were partially eradicated or assimilated by their conquerors. However, in a most unique way in history, the winners took the names of the defeated and the new kingdom was named after the Prussians. East Prussia used to be a multinational territory while the ratio of German population always exceeded 90%. At the end of the 1940's the ethnic composition of the population changed radically by the annexation of northern East Prussia to the Soviet Union, in line with the decision of the Allies following World War II. The whole population of a region was replaced completely in a very short period of time. Soviet settlers had to build a new life based on a foreign culture. This way the Kaliningrad Oblast became a Russian region with a long, German history in Europe. All this obviously has an imprint on the identity of the population.

*Keywords: Russia, Kaliningrad oblast, identity of the inhabitants*

## INTRODUCTION

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the joining of the Schengen agreement by surrounding countries of EU and NATO, a whole new situation developed in the Kaliningrad Oblast. This, ideally, could act as the token of development for the region. Cooperation with surrounding countries had become a key element for the most militarized region of the Soviet Union until 1991. In the geopolitical situation that developed after 1991, the Kaliningrad Oblast had several problems to fight that reached back to its exclave situation. The most important of these were:

- The question of separatism
- Demographical situation
- Free movement of people and goods
- Economic situation
- Agricultural situation
- Labour market and social situation
- Energy supply
- Environment protection
- Security Policy

Moscow gives far less of its attention than would be needed when it comes to the solution of economic and social problems of the exclave. Nevertheless it reacts with sensitivity to every suggestion in connection with the affiliations and identity of the territory and its inhabitants. Russia has not had any experience so far about an exclave that fits into the legal, cultural and economic environment of the „west”. This partly explains the worry of the government officials and journalists in Moscow about a possible separatist endeavour.

The Kaliningrad Oblast is the smallest and the westernmost administrative division of Russia (Oblast), which now borders Poland in the south, Lithuania in the north and east and is lapped by the Baltic Sea (Fig.1 ). Following World War II, the northern part of former East Prussia was annexed to the Soviet Union according to the decision of the Allies.

In the history of post World War II Soviet Union one of the most monumental episodes was the repopulation of former East Prussia with Soviet inhabitants. Until 1991 the history of the eviction of Germans and the settling of Soviet inhabitants was a forbidden topic. The archival documents were inaccessible, the first studies were allowed to be published only in the mid 90's. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, parallel to the social and economical changes, significant changes took place in the academic life, too. The fundamental change in the paradigm of historiography fits into this process (BEBESI, 2013). Part of this process was the fact that the archival documents dealing with the eviction of Germans and the settlement of Soviet inhabitants became accessible and researchers were allowed to publish in this topic.

Figure 1: The Kaliningrad Oblast



Source: <http://suffragio.org/>

The aim of this study is to shortly present the population affairs of the Kaliningrad district and the change in the composition and population numbers of the oblast. The study shows how radical opinions in the press differ from the results of the wide, scientific research done into the topic of separatism.

### RESEARCH METHODS

This study is based on processing studies, articles and literature of national and international research into the topic. The examination of the special geopolitical situation of the Kaliningrad Oblast is immensely exciting from both a theoretical and practical point of view. Systematic research into the history of the oblast began only in 1978, although real breakthrough happened in 1991 with the opening of the Russian archives to the researchers. Literature about the situation of the oblast is very little in Hungarian. KOMÁROMI S. (2005) published a study in Hungarian about the population of the Kaliningrad district. Problems arising from its exclave situation are presented in this study based on the works of MITE V. (2002) and NAUMKIN S. (2004). The most comprehensive geographical analysis of the oblast is by ОПЛЕHEК В. В. (2008), whose work is referred to in my study. Deportation of the German population and the settlement of Soviet people is discussed in great detail by КРЕТИНИН Г. В. (2002). He was the first person to gain access to the documents in the Russian archives and to elaborate on them. The Department of History at Kant University in Kaliningrad put together a sociological research with the leadership of АЛИМПИЕВА А. В. in 2008, in the framework of which they examined the sociological identity of the oblast and compared it with the identity of the Pskov Oblast that showed a lot of similarities in many ways. The results of the research indicated and highlighted a possible separatist endeavour and the reasons behind it.

### **The population composition of East Prussia before World War II.**

East Prussia used to be a multinational territory but at the same time the ratio of German population always exceeded 90%. After the occupation of Prussian lands, the Teutonic Order began the repopulation of Germans that arrived from Lübeck, Lower Saxony, Lower Franconia, Mecklenburg and Pomerania. The descendants of these settlers made up the majority of East Prussia's population. The indigenous tribes were crowded out to the borderland and by the 18th century many of them disappeared as ethnic groups. Apart from Germans, Polacks, Lithuanians, immigrant Huguenot French, Estonians, Italians, Austrians, Swiss and Russians populated East Prussia. Despite the many ethnicities living there, the capital of East Prussia, Königsberg, was considered the most German town (ПРЖЕЗДОМСКИЙ, 2006).

At the end of the 1940's the ethnic composition of the population changed radically by the fact that the northern part of East Prussia was annexed to the Soviet Union according to the decision of the Allies following World War II.

### **Peopling the Soviet Kaliningrad territory**

One of the most monumental episodes in the history of post World War II Soviet Union was the repopulation of former East Prussia with Soviet inhabitants. The whole population was replaced completely in a very short period of time.

The fate of East Prussia, „liberated” at a late phase of World War II belongs to the list of white spots of the 20th century history almost to this day. It is especially true for the northern part that was incorporated into the Russian Federation (SFSR) and for the historic city of Königsberg that was renamed as Kaliningrad. Among the first tasks of the area's sovietization was the replacement of inhabitants that fled on the approach of the Soviet army and to a smaller degree the replacement of the German, mainly country people that were evicted from the annexed areas. This task was to be solved by the organized relocation of people from the inner Russian lands. They needed to start from scratch, build on the empty lot of a once lively regional culture and a totally annulled folklore. All around the Soviet Union each district operated a relocation department as part of the regional administration but under the appropriate high authority of republics; the latter were held together by the main federal government relocation authority.

Their methods included the writing of so-called invitation letters to the people of Kaliningrad with the explanation of possibilities and local affairs somewhat rose-tinted, so when people arrived, they were often extremely deluded. Applicants were modestly awarded in cash and in nature. In spite of the above, shipments often failed: there were not enough applicants, some applicants changed their minds in the last minute. The kolkhoz leaders were not very eager either as workforce was needed locally and counterpropaganda was also at work: letters answered, rumours scaring people with poor conditions. In order to meet target-figures the authority offered some gratuity for the organisers on one hand, but on the other it soon accused them of sabotage.

The number of people to be sent sometimes did not quite add up on arrival as some people and their belongings got lost on the way. Public administration came up with stringent solutions like sending whole kolkhozes with police back-up (this usually meant choosing the least productive farming units).

The prototype of the „professional” settler appeared, one that would escape so that he could reapply and get hold of the advanced allowance again. The exhibition of documents of at least 15 recruitment regions proves the fact that the resettlement of the Kaliningrad area emptied after the war resulted in a 100,000 kolkhoz peasant, immigrant mass within a few years – with similar or individually different possibilities and circumstances that reflect on the mid-chapter of the Soviet regime (KOMÁROMI, 2005). The first regulation on mass relocation was signed by Stalin himself on 9 July 1946. Settlers were promised benefits such as free transportation of people and their belongings, cancellation of debts plus three tax free years, non-refundable financial support (1000 Rubels for the head of the family and 300 Rubels for all other family members), their own house with 0.5 acres of land for each family, favourable loans for building houses and buying livestock and the sale of certain products to settlers at a state-aided price.

The first settlers appeared as early as 1945. Three to four thousand people arrived monthly, some of them released and returned from fascist concentration camps. The first special railways wagons carrying Soviet settlers arrived in 1946. Altogether 58,762 people arrived until the end of the year.

The majority of the Soviet inhabitants who came from Russian or Belarusian territories (these were the areas most affected by Hitler’s occupation), were settled between 1946–1950. The settlers were mainly motivated by the possibility of having their own house or flat, and by being able to escape starvation. Kaliningrad was their only chance of survival. Apart from the areas mentioned above, one must not forget about the Ukraine, The Baltic States and Lithuania either, the latter acting as a sender area of great importance.

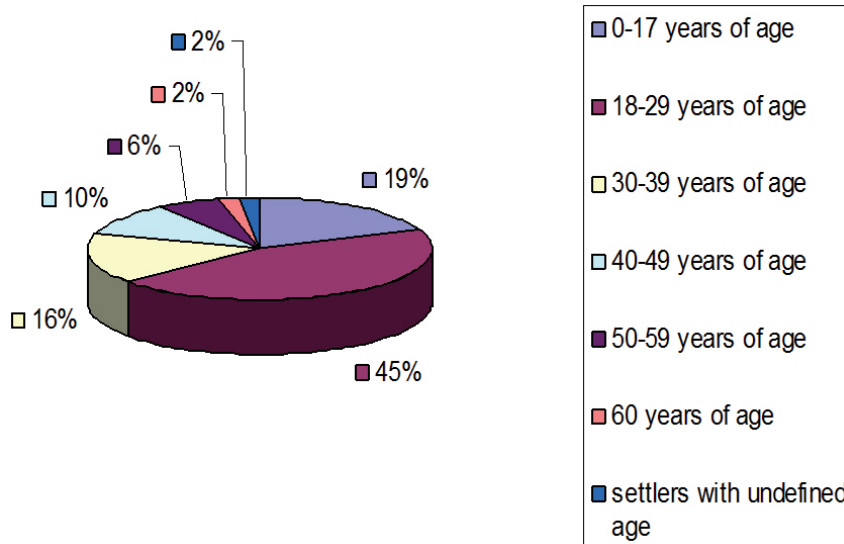
A significant part of the settlers (36%) decided not to stay in Kaliningrad although the Belarusians stayed in the biggest numbers. In total 21.5% of the settlers left Kaliningrad. A great number of Lithuanians decided to return to their original homes (65%), but almost the same percentage of settlers from Kazakhstan and Central–Asia left Kaliningrad. According to the available data we can track down what areas the settlers chose as their home. While the majority of the Lithuanian and Ukrainian inhabitants settled down in cities, mainly in city centres, the Russian and Belarusian settlers chose a place almost exclusively in villages.

In 5 districts of the 13 Kaliningrad Oblasts, where agriculture was dominant (Krasnoznamensky, Gusevski, Bagrationovsky, Nemanski, Chernyakhovsy), more than 50% of the settlers arrived from the Oblasts of Tambov, Ryazan and Yaroslavl. These settlers chose one specific district of a given Oblast. For example people from the Ryazan Oblast settled in Bagrationovsky district. In the four districts of Nestrerovsky, Ozyorsky, Polesky, Slavsky the composition of settlers by their origin was very mixed. The remaining districts were made up of inhabitants from 2–3 Oblasts.

The number of town and village inhabitants was almost equal, though significant differences showed in the time of settlement. In the beginning almost only village people settled in the Oblast. It was only by 1948 that the ratio of city and village inhabitants was balanced out. This was obviously a result of the trend that was set by company leaders who were looking to find qualified workforce in the Kaliningrad Oblast. Apart from looking for professionals, they went to find graduates at institutions of higher education and technical schools.

The age composition of the Oblast significantly differed from that of other parts of the Soviet Union (Fig.2). Inhabitants under 17 and above 40 were much fewer, but while in the Soviet Union 25-30% of the inhabitants was between 18–39 years of age, this ratio in the Kaliningrad Oblast was 61% (КРЕТИНИН, 2002).

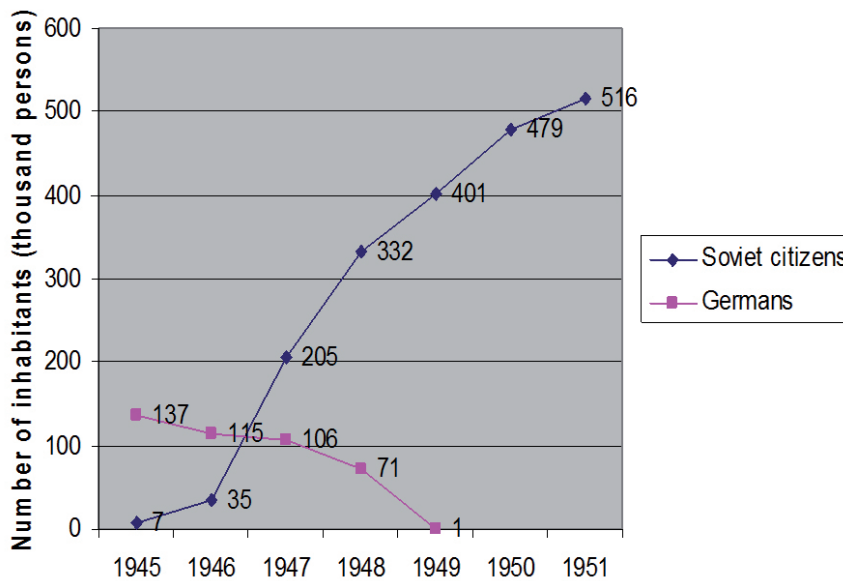
Figure 2: Distribution of age groups of Soviet settlers between 1947–1950



Source: Edited by the author based on КРЕТИНИН, (2002)

The composition and the number of inhabitants in the Oblast changed the most dynamically between 1946 - 1948. Consequently the increase of population happened not only due to the rise in the number of settlers but as a result of a natural population growth (Fig. 3).

Figure 3: Change in the number of inhabitants in the Kaliningrad Oblast between 1945–1951



Source: Edited by the author based on КРЕТИНИН, (2002)

The second settlement wave started in 1992, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. At the beginning, the number of Russian settlers from the Baltic States increased significantly, then mostly Russian, Azerbaijani and Armenian inhabitants came from the Caucasian region.

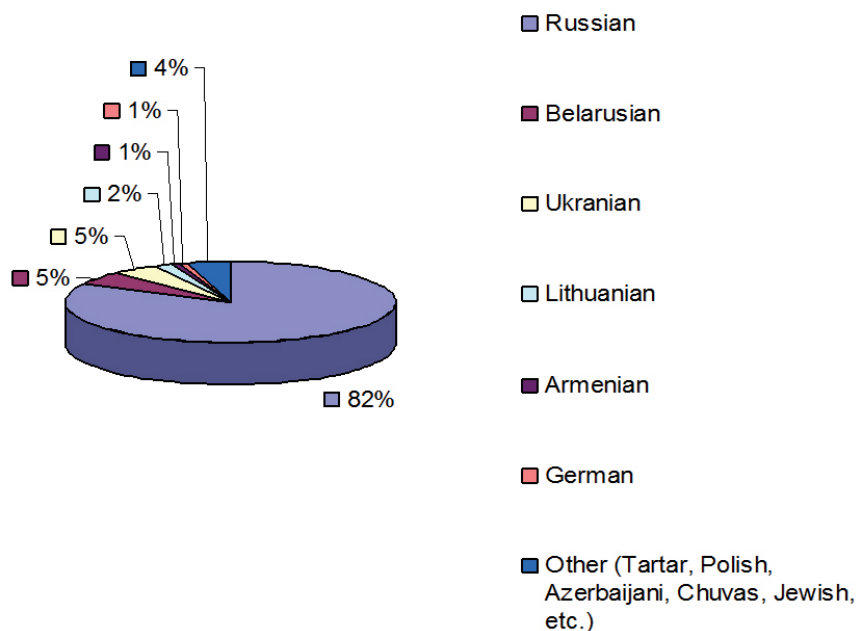
From the mid 90's typically Russian and German people settled down from the regions of Kazakhstan and Central-Asia and the northern and eastern regions of Russia.

At present the quarter of the population is made up of the people that settled in after the 90's. Almost 165,000 people resettled from other parts of Russia into Kaliningrad between 1991–2006. This was increased by the 136,000 people, who resettled from Russian member states in the same period.

The number of settlers is still growing today, as the economic development of the region requires professional workforce (Fig. 4).

According to the data of the last census in 2010, the population of the Kaliningrad Oblast was 941,424. 729,731 people were town dwellers, 211,693 people lived in the countryside. Throughout Russia the number of inhabitants per 1 km<sup>2</sup> is high – 62.8 people (Russian average is 8.6 people) (www.fpmp39.ru).

Figure 4: The ethnic composition of the Kaliningrad Oblast



Source : Edited by the author based on OPJIEHEK, (2008)

### The identity of the inhabitants of the Kaliningrad Oblast

The identity of the inhabitants of the Kaliningrad Oblast is an exciting point because of its special situation both in a geopolitical and sociocultural sense.

The exclave situation isolates the inhabitants of the Oblast from the motherland not only in a geographical but also in a psychological sense. (NAUMKIN, 2004).

„It is a sandwich, where two European Union members – Lithuania and Poland – are the bread. Kaliningrad is not in the west, but not really in Russia either. Apropos of the EU accession of the

neighbouring countries, more and more people talk about the possibility of the secession of the exclave.”(MITE, 2002).

Resulting from its geographical situation its inhabitants literally and figuratively feel closer to Europe. A Kaliningrad resident can reach either the Polish or Lithuanian borders by car in barely an hour, the closest border is 35 kilometres. In case one wants to reach the territory of the motherland, it is minimum 600 kilometres and one needs to cross two independent states (Lithuania and Latvia, or Lithuania and Belarus). Most of the young people have been to neighbouring countries more times than to the motherland. 20% of the young people between 18–24 years of age have never been to the motherland, while they have travelled to foreign countries many times already. (NAUMKIN, 2004). To this end a public financed programme has been set up to support school trips.

The concept of separatism is not unknown in Russia. At the same time the case of Kaliningrad Oblast is not the same as Chechen or Tatar separatist tendency. While the latter are strivings of ethnical groups, separatism here has its roots in the feeling of hopelessness after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. With the leadership of ALIMPIEVA Anna Viktorovna, docent at the Sociological Research Laboratory operating at the History Department of Immanuel Kant University in Kaliningrad, in 2008 a research was done by asking focus groups, examining the sociological identity of the inhabitants of the Oblast. Parallel to this examination in the Oblast the researchers of the university also did the sociological identity examination of the inhabitants of the Pskov Oblast. Due to the bordering position of the Pskov Oblast it fights similar problems as the exclave. The results of the research in the two oblasts could then be compared. The research was trying to clarify how the inhabitants assess the situation of the region, what the closeness to Europe, the separation from the motherland means to them and how they define their identity in this position.

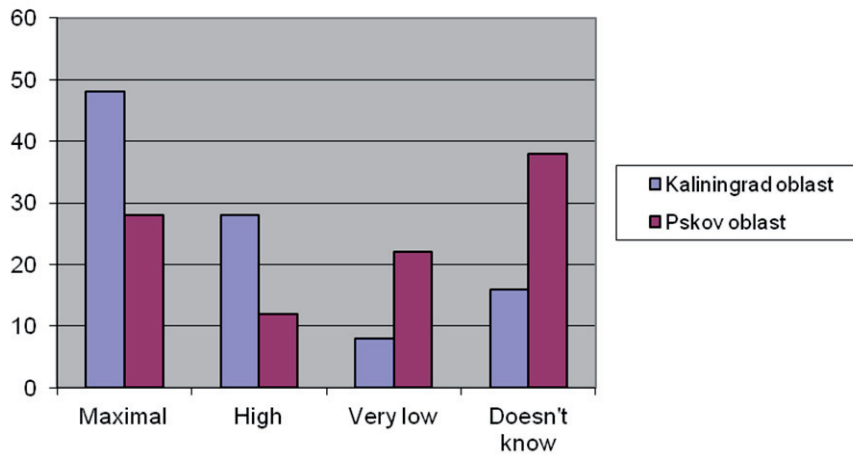
The research showed that the most defining characteristic of the Kaliningrad Oblast was thought to be the exclave situation. According to those questioned the following were the decisive factors:

- Its natural endowments (sea, amber)
- Its history
- The fact that its inhabitants were settled into the religion
- Multicultural environment due to this settlement
- Active connection reaching across borders
- Higher standards of life in most of the Russian regions than of those who live here and managed themselves
- Barriers that rise from the exclave situation and are often ignored by Moscow

The majority of those questioned think of themselves as citizens of Kaliningrad in the first place and only second as European and Russian citizens. In comparison with the focus group asked about the Pskov Oblast, those of Kaliningrad see their regional life standards in a better and more perspective way. The numerical results of the questionnaire are shown in Figure 5.



Figure 5: The satisfaction of members of the focus group with their region

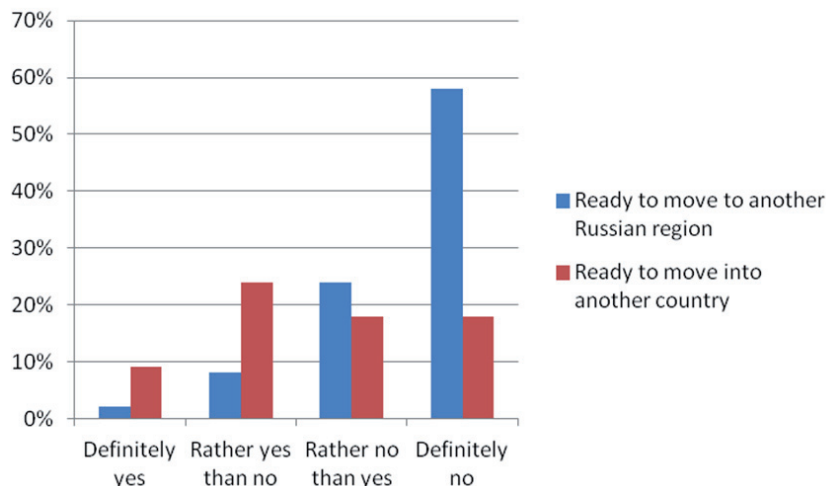


Source: АЛИМПИЕВА,(2009) edited by the author

The social identity of those questioned were mainly defined by the fact of being torn from the motherland and by indifference of the central state organizations about the problems arising from this special situation. The inhabitants expect much more attention, economic and political support from the motherland. The state, on the other hand, does not strive to solve these problems and often makes life even more difficult for the inhabitants of the exclave by certain measures. People questioned mentioned the law brought about the establishment of a gambling zone. At the same time it is an interesting result of the research that the people of Kaliningrad do not think that the future of their habitation greatly depends on Moscow, as opposed to those living in the Pskov Oblast. The research also showed that the inhabitants of the Kaliningrad Oblast think of the results reached as something they achieved themselves and think that reaching future goals depends on them only, not Moscow.

Loyalty towards the motherland is higher among those living in Pskov, while their willingness to migrate is lower. The majority of those questioned from Kaliningrad are ready to move to another country in hope of a better life standard, while those living in Pskov a much smaller fraction would move into another region of Russia. (Fig. 6.)

Figure 6: Willingness to migrate in the focus group of the Kaliningrad Oblast



Source: АЛИМПИЕВА,(2009) edited by the author

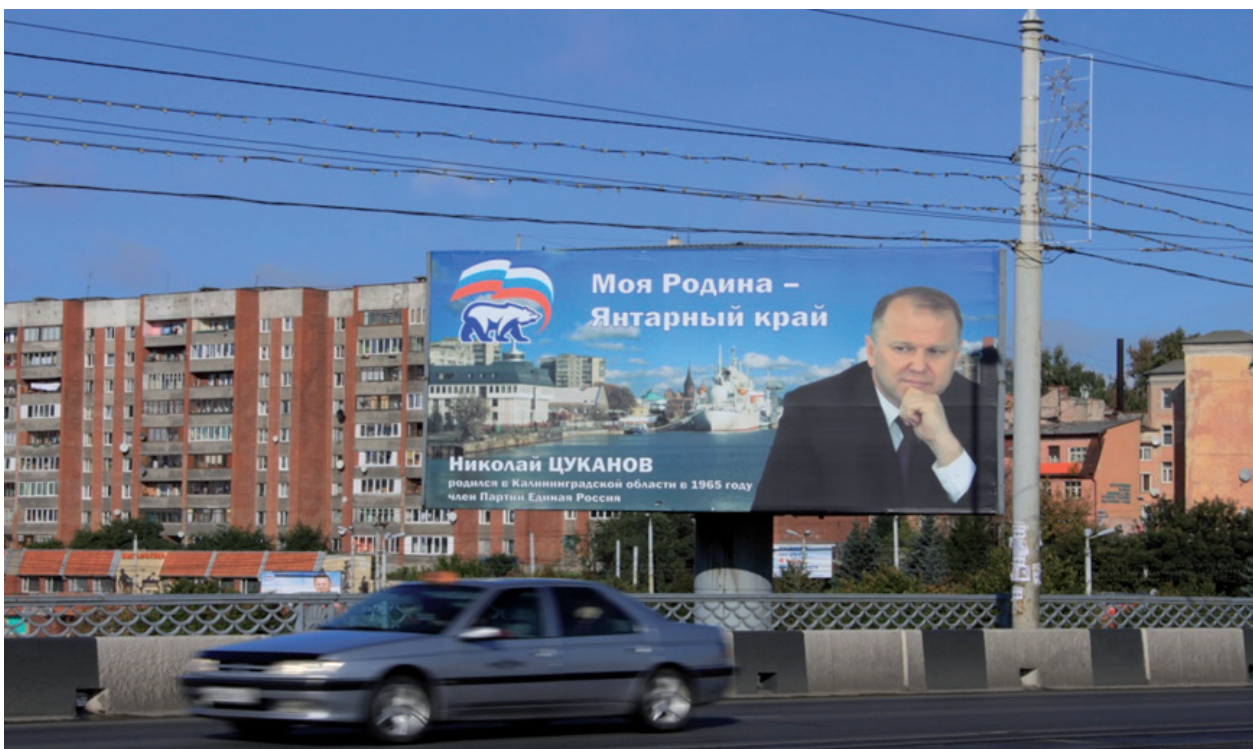
During the in-depth interviews it turned out that 20% of the region would support secession from Russia in certain circumstances, especially if the territory of Kaliningrad could become an independent state. According to ALIMPIEVA this shows more of a social attitude of the inhabitants in connection with the region, the Russian state and themselves rather than a realistic separatist effort.

The inhabitants of the Kaliningrad Oblast rely on central state help mainly in the solution of the visa question, since the EU declared on several occasions that it did not wish to treat the exclave separately from Russia. But it is exactly because of the exclave situation that the Oblast has very active economic relations with other European countries. The development of these, on the other hand, is almost impossible without the settlement of the visa problem.

Its strong relations with European countries is not only significant on the field of economy. The Kaliningrad Oblast stands closer to Europe than any other Russian region not only in the geographical sense, but in lifestyle, in regional economic development, local traditions, personal and business relations, too. One of the questioned people summarizes this in the following manner: „Kaliningrad is a European city with a Russian image”. To the question whether it would be better for people in the oblast if they got closer to Europe or Russia, one person replied: „It would be better if Russia got closer to the Kaliningrad Oblast”. All of this is confronted with the categorical resistance of Russia against any change in the present status of the oblast. (АЛИМПИЕВА, 2009).

Local power – obviously following the requirements of Moscow – takes serious steps towards keeping separatism at bay. The situation does not get to open confrontations, it is more like a conscious propaganda. A part of this – among others- are the political billboards urging local patriotism across the city before the elections. Fig. 7).

Figure 7. „My country – the amber land” Political billboard urging local patriotism in the city centre of Kaliningrad.



Author's own photo.

## SUMMARY

The question arises whether the powers deciding on the fate of East Prussia had the justice of a claim to bring their decisions. The Allied Powers used their winner's position to dictate the conditions to the defeated, in this case to Germany. The redrawing of post-war European borders was not a sudden decision without any consideration. The Allied Powers had been discussing and coordinating it from the Autumn of 1941. The Big Three – The Soviet Union, the USA and Great-Britain – attended the forementioned conferences as legal entities and possessed the right of decision as regards the position of post-war Europe. These decisions were recorded in bilateral agreements by the Soviet Union, Poland, Czechoslovakia, GDR and West Germany.

At the Helsinki Conference in 1975 33 countries, the USA and Canada accepted and confirmed the inviolability of European borders in the final declaration. After the reunification of West Germany and the GDR, Germany joined them in the recognition the inviolability of post-war borders.

The situation of the Kaliningrad Oblast defines the identity of its inhabitants. Different political interests aim to suggest that the exclave is striving for some kind of independence or secession, but sociological surveys do not justify this fact. What is more, in the neighboring region (Pskov Oblast) local patriotism and a sense of attachment to the motherland is more typical than in the Kaliningrad Oblast. At the same time the geopolitical situation of the oblast can mean several sources of problems for its inhabitants. They rightly expect more and more effective help from central authority bodies. It is not permissible to allow the inhabitants of the exclave to become tools of political games and that giving help remain only a propaganda-driven promise.

## CONCLUSION

Separatist efforts are not unknown in Russia. At the same time the case of the Kalningrad Oblast is not identical with the Chechen or Tartar separatist pursuit. While the latter is a pursuit of ethnical groups, in the case of the Kalningrad Oblast, separatist efforts are rooted in the hopeless situation that emerged after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In my opinion if Moscow gave real attention to the problems of the exclave's inhabitants, worked out an adequate solution for them and backed these up with financial support, the people of the territory would think of their exclave situation more as an opportunity than a source of problems. Ideally, Moscow would give the oblast a certain level of autonomy, which would build up a close cooperative relationship with the neighbouring EU member states. It would create such a legal and economic environment that harmonizes with that of the neighbouring countries and would guarantee attractive conditions for foreign investors. The programme of the long-term regional development strategy finished in 2006 and valid until 2016 identifies the fields that need development and would increase the competitiveness of the Kaliningrad Oblast, the living standard of the population would approach that of surrounding countries. The politics of „opening” was perceptible in many areas – the small border treaty between Poland and Kaliningrad was realised and made the movement of the inhabitants of the oblast easier. Infrastructure development in the tourism sector began that contributed to the well-being of the people (international bicycle road, hotel projects, one location of the 2018 World Football Cup). At the same time the escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and thus the development of EU-Russian conflict has a strong impact on

the inhabitants of the Kaliningrad Oblast. The area is beginning to be militarized again and chances are the cooperation across borders will come to an end. With the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula Russia faces the problem of another exclave. The two exclaves show similarities in many aspects but handling the situation of the Crimean Peninsula is of a higher priority to Moscow. With this, the oblast can easily become a double periphery again and its social and economic development will significantly lag behind surrounding countries, which in turn would create substrate for population discontent and further fuel separatist endeavours.

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