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WHAT IS ITS FUNCTION IN
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Kaliningrad: What is its Function in Contemporary Russia?

Greg Simons

Throughout its history Kaliningrad has, in a number of aspects, been a special region, and it continues this 'tradition' today, albeit for different reasons. When the Soviet Union annexed East Prussia in the redrawing of national borders that occurred in the wake of World War II, it embarked upon the ambitious task of transforming the region with a strong Prussian brand and association to a Soviet one. As a result many symbols of Prussian identity were erased and replaced by Soviet symbols. People from across the Soviet Union were used to populate the now Kaliningrad region. It was a closed and heavily militarised zone, serving as the Western most point of the Soviet Union. Therefore, simultaneously its identity and function was as a Soviet outpost and bastion.

Kaliningrad was an exercise in building the 'perfect' Soviet society, the local population had been removed (those that had not retreated Westwards with the German Army in 1944-45) and architects were poised to rebuild the war devastated city of Kaliningrad, formerly Königsberg. The project was initiated and gained significant early momentum. However, one of the greatest weaknesses was soon exposed with the break-up of the Soviet Union. The region's sense of identity, purpose and function was indelibly linked to the fate of the fallen giant. Therefore, with the passing of the Soviet Union into the pages of history, the fate and function of the Kaliningrad region also hung in the balance.

This meant that the task of re-inventing Kaliningrad, its position and function, needed urgent consideration. What could be a viable alternative model or brand to replace the old one?

The task was made extremely difficult under the very turbulent political, economic and social conditions across Russia during the early 1990s. In the new age of the Russian Federation, relying on the continued military purpose and function was no longer viable, owing to the dire economic realities faced by the state. Other problematic aspects occurred as well (from the perspective of the new Russian state), such as the new geographic position and realities meant that the Kaliningrad region was cut off from direct land connections with the emergence of the newly re-independent Baltic States.

But with these various problems listed above, also came opportunities. Kaliningrad was free from any ideological constraints, and Moscow was busy and occupied with other matters and issues, the region had an opportunity to create a new brand and function whilst the federal centre was distracted. One of the first responses was to address the internal problems in the region caused by the complete disruption of the economy as a result of the Soviet Union's collapse. In 1991 the Federal Economic Zone (FEZ) was established in the Kaliningrad region. With the Shock Therapy Reforms, however, the focus of the region and FEZ shifted from prospects of economic development to economic survival. FEZ gradually became a new acronym and position: Special Economic Zone (SEZ).

However, the economic situation has not greatly improved, and periodically challenges emerge, such as the 1998 economic crisis that severely affected the whole of the country. Different foreign models and experiences have been voiced and considered – Singapore and Hong Kong for example. The primary question being, is it possible to 'transplant' these experiences into the Russian realities? This particular conversation concerning proposals for a special economic position and function is likely to continue for some time.

With President Vladimir Putin's coming to power in 2000, political circumstances began to change, and accelerated in the wake of the August 2000 Kursk tragedy and the subsequent establishment of the Vertical of Power. A closer watch was kept on the subjects of the Russian Federation, especially those ones located in strategic areas (in terms of geography and presence of resources). This became even more apparent as the initial euphoria wore off, from when President George Bush 'saw Putin's soul' to the gradual sliding of relations towards a more cold and dysfunctional state.

The evolving political situation of mutual suspicion regenerated the *military* vision for the Kaliningrad region. Russia was in a much better position economically to support developing its military capacity. An event that saw the convergence of suspicion and projecting a military response was the threatened deployment of Iskander missiles to the Kaliningrad region in response to the proposed Anti-Ballistic Missile Defence system. This is framed within a symmetrical policy response context. Therefore, the military function and position of Kaliningrad is proven as not being forgotten. And the special economic function and position, although facing serious problems, is also not completely relegated.(1)

(1) A number of the above issues are broached in a book published in March 2014, Eugene Krasnov, Anna Karpenko and Greg Simons (Editors), *Crisis Management Challenges in Kaliningrad*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014). This book concerns the nature of different crises occurring in the Kaliningrad region in the new Russian state. The problems of handling multiple and complex risks and threats is exacerbated when located within a context of a period of rapid political, economic and social change. Chapters in this volume are written by researchers from the region, and make available a lot of material that has been previously hidden by different barriers. Individual chapters cover different aspects, such as environmental, social, political and economic issues that have affected the region. For more information visit the publisher's website at <http://www.ashgate.com/isbn/9781409470748>.