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KALININGRAD IN THE "MIRROR WORLD": From Soviet "bastion" to Russian "fortress"

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The escalation of tensions between the Russian Federation and NATO member states over the Baltic that skyrocketed in April 2016 revealed two main tendencies. First, the region has proven to be vital for the Kremlin, which perceives it as its natural sphere of influence. Second, Moscow's growing assertiveness has given totally new meaning to the issue of "border regions" and territories that are physically separated from Russia proper. Under these circumstances the role of Kaliningrad Oblast has largely been recovered. It would be true to suggest that it has reacquired its former status, and become the Russian "stronghold" on the Baltic. Moreover, recent developments have signalled a resurrection of Russian political ambitions in the region, which for centuries has been a long-desired object of the Russian state's expansionary policies and a battleground between Russia and the West. This article aims to trace the essence, patterns, logic and, to some extent, even the inevitability of the retransformation of post-Soviet Kaliningrad. In addition, key factors (both internal and external) that have led to this perplexing, quite gruesome and perhaps potentially dangerous metamorphosis shall be discussed.

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Kaliningrad gained a gruesome reputation as the "smugglers capital" of the Baltic Sea region and many observers defined Kaliningrad as the "black hole of Europe".

The so-called "Kaliningrad identity" forged during the Soviet was a system of privileges and compensation for its "unfavourable" geopolitical position and this special status was gladly embraced by the local community and became deeply rooted in the public mass consciousness.

An aggressive Kremlin-sponsored information campaign carried out in 2002–2003 aimed to portray Kaliningrad as a "besieged bastion" and cut-off Russian region being strangulated by Lithuania and Poland.

Kaliningrad has never been an exclusive zone of European responsibility. The EU could only act in accordance with Russia, not on a separate basis, which would surely have been construed as a sign of irredentism.

"Great expectations"... and the ugly reality of post-Soviet transformation

The collapse of the Soviet Union, which at the time seemed to have tossed the oppressive communist regime into the dustbin of history, was perceived by many as a new beginning and a road to a bright future promising numerous opportunities and prospects. These feelings were especially strong in the westernmost region of the Russian Federation. Once one of the most militarised spots in Europe (and perhaps the world), the former "Soviet bastion" on the Baltic gazed at the new world full of promises. These expectations were additionally boosted by the successes of Kaliningrad's geographical neighbours and the overall odour of freedom that was in the air. The so-called "Baltic Sea Rim" that had by then embraced Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia and managed to break the shackles of foreign ideology and the political regime lured Kaliningrad as well. This example was particularly glorified by those committed to a democratic future as the only possible path for Russia. One of those was the first governor

of Kaliningrad, Yurii Matochkin. A well-known scholar (he had PhD in economics), intellectual and practitioner, he was one of very few to recognise that Kaliningrad could only prosper as a “bridge” between Russia and Europe – not a secluded “island” as it was from 1945 to 1990. Inspired by the rapid integration of its former communist neighbours (Poland and the Baltic states) into the regional architecture, Matochkin and his team dreamed of turning Kaliningrad into the “Baltic Hong Kong” – a place where two distinct yet in many ways close civilisations would meet, merge and complete each other, leading to prosperity for Kaliningrad. Indeed, Kaliningrad (contrary to the rest of Russia) was endowed with qualities and conditions that at the time were quite rare in the mainland. Namely, it was spared from ethnic conflicts, violent separatism, aggressive far-right movements and other discouraging factors. The apex of liberal thinking was the governor’s proposal to attract ethnic Russians from abroad to Kaliningrad to make it an “intellectual capital” of the Russian Federation and an embodiment of multiculturalism and cooperation.

Unfortunately, this dream was never meant to come true. The main reason was the absence of clear strategy on/for Kaliningrad on the part of two key powers. Russian elites were engulfed in a whirlpool of political strife while the country itself was facing the grim spectre of separatism that put its territorial

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integrity into question. Europe was not keen to meddle in Russian internal affairs lest it jeopardise its nascent relations with post-Soviet Russia and resurrect Russian imperial nationalism (which, incidentally, was on its way anyway). Moreover, major European players after the Maastricht Treaty (1992) were mainly concerned with European integration and the processes that accompanied it, thereby paying little attention to the tiny speck on the Baltic. European integration came into clear dissonance with the Russian disintegration stemming from below that Moscow tried to suppress by all means available.

In the end, the burden of transformation and the bulk of challenges encountered by Kaliningrad outweighed the opportunities. Being unable to get rid of the “Soviet legacy”, Kaliningrad was about to experience one of the murkiest chapters in its contemporary history. But the image of prosperity and wellbeing Kaliningrad pursued was, in fact, a mirage leading it no closer to its goal.

From the “black hole of Europe” to illusory progress: how costly is freedom?

The landmark events that predetermined the development trajectory of contemporary Kaliningrad were the local elections (1996) that led to the victory of Leonid Gorbeko – who was portrayed as an “effective manager” (and explicitly supported by president Boris Yeltsin) – over the liberal and way-too-intellec-

tual Matochkin. This ushered in the dark era of anarchy, havoc, the blossoming of organised criminal groups and endemic corruption. Kaliningrad gained a gruesome **reputation as the “smugglers capital”** of the Baltic Sea region, with skyrocketing rates of HIV infection (peaking in 1997 with Kaliningrad then Russia’s most infected region), tuberculosis and other highly contagious deceases. These developments have led many observers to define Kaliningrad as the **“black hole of Europe”**. Undoubtedly, such unfavourable conditions could not possibly have promoted the oblast as a desirable destination for foreign (and even Russian) investors, leaving it at the mercy of the Kremlin’s reluctant support.

In the meantime, ailing/ageing president Boris Yeltsin, who was tending to spend more and more time outside Moscow, was losing control over processes that were underway in Russia. Moreover, the humiliating Khasavyurt Accord (1996) and financial collapse of 1998 diluted the economic power and political ambitions of the Russian Federation, which had reached a very dangerous historical threshold, with the image of the “Time of Troubles” (end of 16th - beginning of 17th century) revived in a modern version.

Under these circumstances, with financially and politically troubled Kaliningrad cut off from Russia proper and ruled by a chaotic and incoherent governor (though not completely without ambitions of his own), it steadily but surely evolved into a *liability* rather than an undisputable advantage. It may sound utterly outlandish today, yet back in the 1990s even populists such as Vladimir Zhirinovsky and emerging imperial nationalist Aleksandr Dugin seriously considered the possibility of handing Kaliningrad to Germany as a part of a “grand bargain” aimed at improving relations with Germany in pursuit of an anti-American Eurasia led by both Russia and Germany as the two main centres of power. It goes without saying that such a prospect would terrify everyone with even basic knowledge of 20th century history.

It must be highlighted that the Russian economic crisis that occurred in 1998 turned out to be a genuine calamity for Kaliningrad which, in addition to having suffered an economic shock, was affected in a number of other ways. For instance, a growing sense of alienation and self-escapism, widespread aloofness and the changing perception of a distant Russia would be further affected by inevitable comparison with the buoyancy of its geographical neighbours. In this regard it is worth mentioning that separatism (this tendency was quite evident in several Russian regions) had never been a serious issue. Even the so-called **Baltic Republican Party**, which stood on the platform of greater autonomy from a federal centre, never seriously attempted to repeat either the “Chechen” or “Tatarstan” scenario. It would not, however, be thoroughly accurate to search for an explanation in the domain of such a popular notion as **“patriotism”**, as it is currently actively promoted by president Putin and the Russian ruling elites. Rather, the roots should be looked for in two main dimensions. First, a deep fear of repeating the path taken by Chechnya, which was given a harsh “lesson” for inappropriate assertiveness. The second (and to my mind most important) cause was deeply engrained in lo-

cal culture, traditions and historical experience – the so-called “Kalininograd identity”. Many scholars erroneously associate its emergence either with the physical separation of the enclave after 1991 or an alleged synthesis between the “German” and the “Soviet” past. In fact, it dates back to the Soviet period of local history when the system of privileges and compensation for its “unfavourable” geopolitical position was being established. This special status was gladly embraced by the local community and became deeply rooted in the public mass consciousness. Similarly, the complete absence of competition (not welcomed by Soviet ideology) caused genuine shock among the local population: surging unemployment and plummeting living standards were not understood as an inevitable challenge/by-product of drastic transformation, but were blamed on “liberals”, which was quite typical across the rest of Russia. Another vital aspect that resulted in the emergence of a very specific type of identity was engrained by the eviction of the ethnic German population and getting retribution with the historical past of the area. Huge masses of settlers from various Soviet regions represented a patchwork of different national identities and ethno-cultural patterns that melded in this artificially created melting pot – one of the largest of the Soviets’ social experiments.

Within the aforementioned period Kaliningrad was frequently described as a “double periphery”: being practically forgotten by Moscow and avoided by Europe, the region was developing along its own negative trajectory. I would argue that the best definition of this interim should be the “triple periphery” as, in addition to Russia and Europe, Kaliningrad was neglected by yet another institution whose power and authority could hardly be overestimated, especially in East Slavic communities – the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). For centuries, the ROC has been deemed the main source of solace, serenity and moral guidance – its power was understood even by a rogue such as Joseph Stalin, who had no other choice but to appeal to it during the Great Patriotic War (1941 - 45). However, Patriarch Alexy II was consumed by the consolidation of power both in Russia and in the “near abroad”, meaning Kaliningrad was eclipsed by Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova and the Baltic states, giving foundations to the policy known as the “assembling of Russian canonical lands” – the harbinger of the notorious “Russian World”.

The beginning of the new millennium and drastic changes on the Russian political Mount Olympus proved to be crucial for the westernmost Russian region. Namely, Kaliningrad started to adjust to the **unwritten contract** that President Vladimir Putin offered Russia. For this region it could be briefly summed up in the following unsophisticated formula: “stability for tranquillity”. The first step was election of Putin’s favourite admiral, Vladimir Yegorov, for whom winning the elections was a technicality rather than an onerous task. After all, his predecessor had done enough to be despised and loathed by various layers of the locals. Instead of being a manager he turned out to be a scandalous anti-Semite, addicted to alcohol, and famous for corruption and outrageous public behaviour.

Transformations in the local political architecture were also initially acclaimed by Moscow’s European partners – stability was a much sought-after commodity in the countries of the former Soviet Union. Undoubtedly, such a chance could not be wasted. And yet, regrettably, the course of developments reiterated the old wisdom that everything comes at a price. For Kaliningrad it meant the complete forfeiture of control over its own fate, which was sugar-coated and masked by façade changes reflected in artificial economic growth based on financial injections from Moscow, a system of privileges and high prices on energy resources that obscured the genuine role that Moscow had been preparing for the region. Europe was faced with an assertive Russia that was experiencing some semblance of “Dizziness from Success” and starting to pose questions about the fairness of the “unipolar world”.

Nevertheless, I would strongly disagree with those who claim that Europe did nothing to ease the lot of Kaliningrad during such an arduous period. It would not be superfluous to recall that the first country to offer its economic help to Kaliningrad when the 1998 crisis hit was Lithuania, currently portrayed as “**the most Russophobic country in NATO**”, and as a kind of European beggar being abandoned by its population in search for better life. Although **results of the research** confront this dubious supposition. Moreover, Kaliningrad was offered member-

In the beginning of the 2000', Kaliningrad started to adjust to the unwritten contract that Putin offered Russia. For this region it meant “*stability for tranquillity*”.

ship of EU-sponsored/promoted projects such as the Northern Dimension and the Euroregion initiative. With this in mind, I would reiterate the saying that “everyone is the blacksmith of their own fate”. Kaliningrad has never been an exclusive zone of European responsibility. The EU could only act *in accordance* with Russia, not on a separate basis, which would surely have been construed as a sign of irredentism.

In any event, this weak shadow of cooperation between the EU and Kaliningrad started to take shape way too late. By the time those projects obtained any concrete form Kaliningrad had already arrived at the brink of fateful changes that were dictated from above and disposed of neither the political will nor capabilities to change this. Carefully wrapped in the image of progress and economic stability, the westernmost point of the Russian Federation was drifting toward a status of “geopolitical hostage” in a power play initiated by Moscow.

Kaliningrad and “Putin’s Russia”: Recreating the “bastion”, saying “goodbye” to Europe

The 750th anniversary of Kaliningrad/Königsberg attended by leaders of many European powers and President Putin in 2005 was a remarkable event. Firstly, it reaffirmed that Kaliningrad’s status could not be questioned in any possible way (even though no serious external political force did so). Secondly, the Russian side revealed its interest in the creation of an anti-American “Continental Europe” led by Russia,

Germany and France. Thirdly, during the course of the celebrations Kaliningrad was visited by Georgy Boos, a stalwart of Putin and the United Russia political party, signifying the initiation of a new round of profound political changes in Kaliningrad. Apparently, Moscow was dissatisfied with the previous governor, who despite his former occupation, did not prove to be reliable enough. He sought to increase ties with EU partners and had on several occasions tried to defend Kaliningrad in arguments with Moscow.

Quite predictably the abrupt replacement was not accompanied by any signs of discontent from the local population. The key to this was the practical implementation of the first part of the “covenant” – the advent of stability and the outbreak of a corruption-related scandal pertaining to the previous governor’s team. Nevertheless, this was largely a growth on paper. The best evidence of this can be deduced from the amount and sources of foreign direct investment (FDI, a key driver and indicator of genuine economic progress in a market economy). The fact that more than half of local FDI was provided by Lithuania, Cyprus, Netherlands and the Virgin Islands speaks volumes, whereas the overall amount of FDI received by Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia surpassed the “Amber Region” by 36-250 times.

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By and large, in the first post-Soviet decade Kaliningrad failed to become a bridge between Europe and Russia, stepping on the same rake as its Soviet predecessor (though this time conditions were much more lucrative). Also, the “honeymoon” between Russia and the EU turned out to be nothing more than a marriage of convenience: European leaders did not seriously consider Russia as a first-tier partner (rightly assuming that a “strategic” partnership is based on something more viable and long-lasting than the oil and gas trade), whereas Russia started the transition to “sphere of influence” thinking. This was evident during the Russo-Ukrainian gas wars (2007/2009), in [Putin’s notorious Munich speech \(2007\)](#) and the disgraceful military conflict between Russia and Georgia (2008). Clearly, relationships between Russia and the EU had reached their historical low-point (although the real bottom was still to come) and Kaliningrad experienced its impact to the full.

Incidentally, the first signs of the looming crisis broke out before the aforementioned activities. An aggressive Kremlin-sponsored information campaign carried out in 2002–2003 aimed to portray Kaliningrad as a “besieged bastion” and cut-off Russian region being strangulated by Lithuania and Poland (acting as puppets of ambitious external forces) and subject to “creeping de-Russification”. Preposterous as such claims may sound, the hysteria over Kaliningrad facilitated the career progression of many prominent Russian politicians, among them Dmitry Rogozin, one of the founding fathers of the nationalist “Rodina” / “Motherland” political party. Similarly, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation rose from ashes and

aggressively demanded a border treaty with Lithuania not be signed, in order to hinder that country’s accession to the EU. It is not difficult to understand the fervent protests made by Lithuania, where memories of the Soviet occupation were (are) still alive.

It would be no exaggeration to suggest that this was one of the first major blows administered to Kaliningrad and its relations with close neighbours and economic partners.

Furthermore, the Kremlin made it clear to “external partners” that the military potential of Kaliningrad Oblast could easily be translated from hypothetical into tangible. The image of Kaliningrad as an impregnable fortress started to loom much more clearly when the Kremlin moved from words to deeds. In 2009, Kaliningrad and Belarus jointly hosted major war games that sent a clear message to other regional players (primarily Poland). These would, however, be dwarfed in 2013 (“Zapad 2013”) when the largest military exercises since the Soviet period were held in the region. Moreover, in 2012 the Iskander missile system (with a range of 400 kilometres) and other types of advanced weaponry were installed in Kaliningrad. This not only recalled cold war crises, it also underscored the intolerably low level of readiness to maintain dialogue, with Kaliningrad being boastfully portrayed as some monstrous “revolver held against the temple of Europe”.

The local population was also subjected to an unprecedented information campaign (amidst the anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western frenzy streaming from Russian information outlets) unleashed by state-sponsored mass media in the summer of 2014. The height of this came when the local governor, Nikolay Tsukanov, and members of his team accused Western special services of attempts to “prepare a Maidan” on the territory of Kaliningrad. All in all, the similarity between the Soviet period when local officials tried to manipulate Moscow by continuously citing history, geography and the adverse environment was indeed uncanny. Regrettably, Kaliningrad seems to have lost track of time. Surrounded by European neighbours it is looking at them through the lens of the bygone era, burying its present and future in the gruesome past and clinging to the mythical legacy of the Soviet period.

Moving toward the “ideological battlefield”: Why Kaliningrad... why now?!

The Euromaidan in Kyiv (in autumn 2013) and the debacle that ensued in relations between Russia and its Western partners led to yet another change of perception by Moscow. In the light of growing political confrontation, Moscow added a remarkable new facet – a so-called “*value-added*” dimension. The vocabulary of Russian elites has been saturated by such fuzzy notions as “conservatism”, “patriotism” and “Christian values” – allegedly core Russian values that distinguish Russia from the West. Surely, in this regard, one may recall the vitriolic remark made by the famous Russian satirist of the 19th century, M. E. Saltykov-Shchedrin, who said that initiation of talks about patriotism by Russian statesmen probably meant that they were going to steal something.

From 2014 onwards, in addition to a “militarising bastion”, Kaliningrad started its transformation into an “ideological battlefield”. Interestingly enough, this message was heralded not only by lay powers but also, quite unexpectedly, by the Russian Orthodox Church and Patriarch Kirill, as chief promoter of an expanded version of the “Russian World” project. Under these circumstances Kaliningrad started to be perceived as a crucial “pillar” of the “Russian World” and its protector in the west.

Somewhat unexpectedly, the remaining German architecture still present on the territory of the oblast has become a symbol of the “foreign past”, with a comparatively small number of churches and cathedrals construed as a sign of “Russianness” being diluted amid the increased presence of foreign actors – “creeping Germanisation” – and “proof” that Russia is losing Kaliningrad. Suddenly, the city’s mayor and the governor, in alliance with the local church hierarchy, jumped into a rather peculiar mission: the proliferation of the “moral-ethical training” of the local population.

The peak (or the beginning of a new phase) was reached on March 14th 2015 when Kaliningrad hosted the forum of the World Russian People’s Council for the first time in its history. The tone of the entire event was set by the Patriarch himself and his speech was provocatively entitled, *“Borders of Russian statehood: global challenges, regional responses”*. For the first time in its post-Soviet history Kaliningrad was proclaimed the “edge where the Russian land ends” and a place where ideological strife between the West and Russia begins. Moreover, Kirill claimed that Kaliningrad’s mission was to become a “beacon” for the decadent Europe drowning in disrespect for the core Christian values and permeated with a spirit of hedonism and activities that are unnatural for humans. According to the hierarch, the oblast should also become a shield for the whole of Russia against the “debauchery” and “obscurantism” reigning in the West. Other speakers (the event assembled the most illustrious Russian conservatives) were significantly blunter in their definitions and more categorical in their rhetoric. Numerous made unsubstantiated accusations about the West (both NATO and the EU) “declaring a war on Russia” that were frequent and audible. Vsevolod Chaplin even suggested that Kaliningrad was where the “European Spring” ought to start. Undoubtedly, such rhetoric identified growing differences between “us” and “them”, which is now spreading well beyond primitive xenophobia.¹ On the other hand, the intensification of activities in Kaliningrad is rather perplexing since the region is considered to have the lowest level of religiosity in the Russian Federation, replicating its Soviet experience and “glory” as the “most atheist city in the USSR”.

A very discouraging lesson to be learned from this landmark event is that Kaliningrad is subjected to the radicalisation of public consciousness in which the church (especially given the acuteness of the current political environment) plays an essential role, thereby breaking its commitment to universally recognised adherence to humanism, compassion and forgiveness. It feels wrong that the institute that used to bless Russia in its most fateful historical moments now allies itself with radicals from the “Night Wolves” gang and open xenophobes from the artificial “Anti-Maidan” movement. It is also hideous that traces of German material culture – the only bond that reminds the locals about the multicultural historical traditions once present in Königsberg/Kaliningrad – are being mercilessly erased under the guise of striving for the “Russian culture” and the ROC (which also suffered physical assault under communism) is unwilling to do anything about it.

It is also hardly explicable how the rapidly proliferating Cossack movement (whose ties with Kaliningrad are questionable) have increased their involvement in local affairs ranging from religious activities and public holidays to “patriotic actions”. One such activity commenced in August 2015 when participants of the Kafka and Orwell Forum in Kaliningrad were violently attacked by Cossacks. Moreover, should Ka-

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liningrad be “granted” a right to develop a so-called “Yunarmia” (militarized youth), which is a relic of the Soviet regime aimed to foster patriotism among local youths, the dangerous trend would receive access to the most susceptible group of all – the young.

In 2016 anti-Western propaganda has been on the roll: within several months Kaliningrad has been visited by key architects of Russian militaristic nationalism. Those actors managed to somehow bind “creeping Germanisation” and “de-Russification” with the presence of the Raiffeisen Bank in the city centre (in Victory Square), simultaneously accusing foreign cultural centres and societies of covert activities. Shocking as it is, it cannot be denied that the local population is steadily becoming accustomed to the vocabulary of the cold war and the image of the West as a foe.

One should also recognise that both the place and timing of the campaign are perfect. Kaliningraders are used to enjoying the proximity of the EU countries and its economy is dependent on Poland and Lithuania to an extent unmatched by any other region in the Russian Federation. Therefore, at a time of political conflict and economic sanctions leading to stagnating economic development it is Kaliningrad where the “blame the West!” motto could be particularly well received. On the other hand, this shows how the oblast has become trapped in some sort of a “Groundhog Day”: trying to escape from the past, within these 25 years it has in many ways returned to where it was before.

1. For more information see: Sukhankin, Sergey. “Russia for Russians! Ultrナationalism and xenophobia in Russia: from marginality to state promoted philosophy”. *Notes Internacionals*, 128. CIDOB, Barcelona, September 2015. Available at: http://www.cidob.org/ca/publicacions/series_de_publicacio/notes_internacionals/n1_128_russia_for_russians/russia_for_russians.

"Where are you rushing, oh Kaliningrad?"²

The pace, scope and extent of the changes experienced by Kaliningrad within a very brief period raise more questions than answers. Once called the "Fourth Baltic Republic", the "Baltic Hong Kong" and the "pilot region", it is losing the aura that makes it so special and distinct from the rest of Russia. Instead of being the region of cooperation, Kaliningrad is evolving into the area of confrontation, becoming a toy in the hands of politicians "living in a different dimension". Instead of becoming a place where two civilisations interact and complete each other, it is turning into an "ideological battlefield" between them. Instead of being the "Amber Region", full of new projects and initiatives, it is mutating into a "military base" filled with advanced weaponry and a "scarecrow" for Europe. This is a matter of deep sorrow which also gives way to further reflection about what Russia is and for that matter what Russians actually want. For the past 25 years the local residents enjoyed a genuinely unique chance – the ability to interact with European countries freely, unconstrained by artificially established borders, huge distances, or any visa-related difficulties (which is the case for many post-Soviet countries). Moreover, since 2013 north-eastern Poland has been accessible to Kaliningraders without any visas, to the

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visible displeasure of Moscow, which had been obstructing the law for a long time. Nonetheless, this precious opportunity was mainly wasted on primitive shopping tours to Poland, and anything but the establishment of dialogue or deeper cooperation.

However, I am quite resistant to the idea that it is only the local population that should be blamed for these unpleasant developments. The burden of responsibility should be shared equally by other actors as well. For instance, one ought to remember the enormous strength of Russian propaganda and the historically proven susceptibility of Russians to it. By purposefully rewriting the past, the ideologists of the confrontation are distorting the present and jeopardising the future of Kaliningrad. A malignantly disfigured picture of the reality does nothing but sow havoc and confusion in the hearts and minds of local residents, putting them behind the false opaque mirror that obscures and disfigures reality.

Amidst the military conflict in Ukraine, Pavel Gubarev (one of the leaders of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic) juxtaposed the "Kiev junta" with his perverted vision of this territory as the "Red Orthodox Rus", matching the unmatchable (orthodoxy and communism), yet rightfully depicting the horrendous stage of delusion and deep isolation from reality widespread among locals. Let's hope that the

current ruling elites will be prudent enough to spare Kaliningrad, formerly Königsberg, the home of Kant, Hoffmann, Bessel and many other genuinely outstanding intellectuals and scientists, from the grim fate of its Soviet predecessor.

2. Paraphrasing a fragment of Gogol's renowned novel *Dead Souls*