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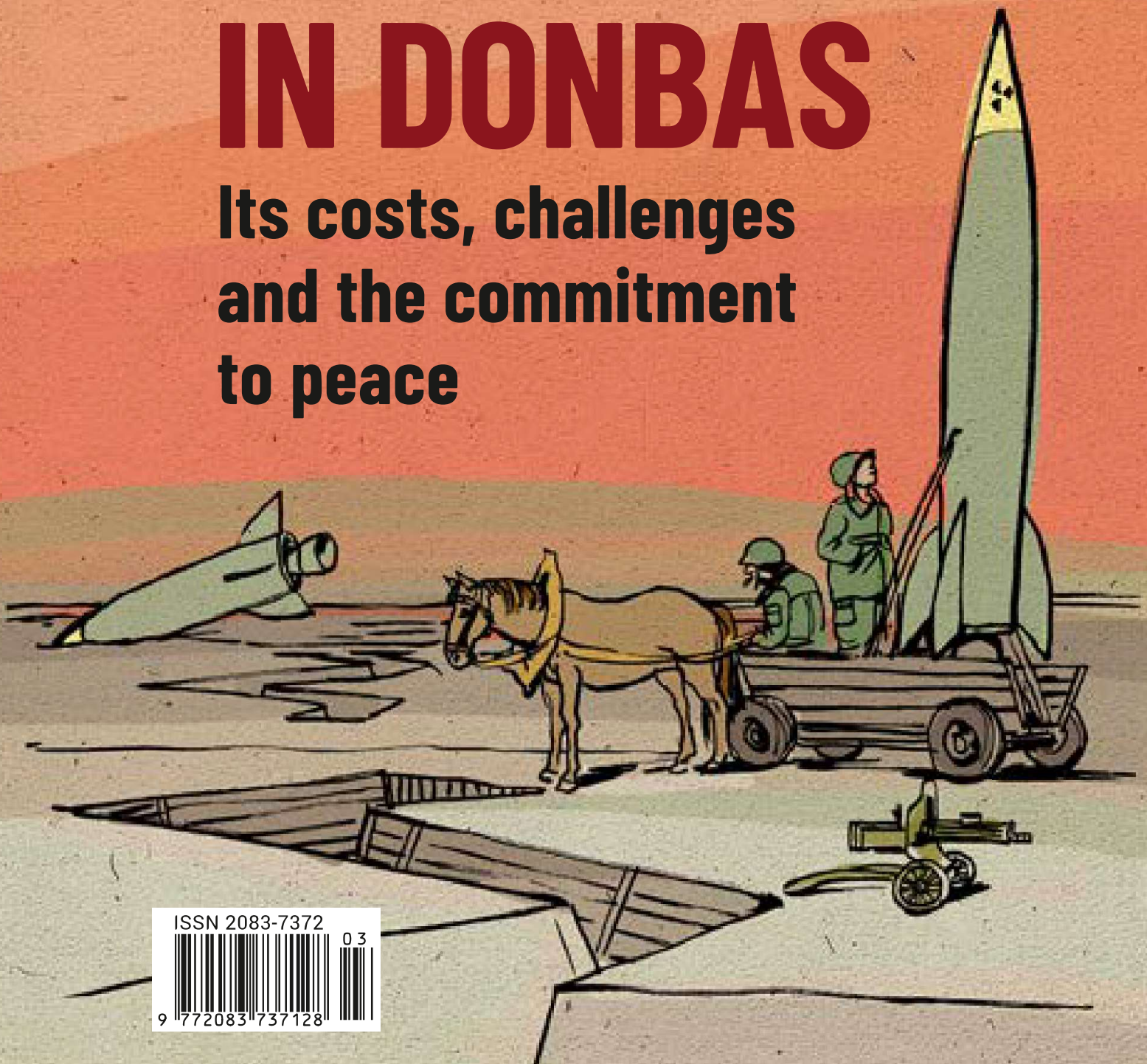
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New Eastern Europe

WAR IN DONBAS

**Its costs, challenges
and the commitment
to peace**



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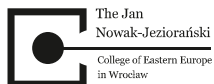
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Kaliningrad's first million

MIŁOSZ J. ZIELIŃSKI

Although Russia as a whole suffers from a continuous population decrease, Kaliningrad Oblast keeps attracting newcomers. For the first time in its 75 year-long history, the semi-exclave has exceeded one million inhabitants and **continues to grow**. Yet only the city and its immediate surroundings benefit from this trend.

The Kaliningrad Oblast, which is located on the Baltic Sea between Poland to the south and Lithuania to the north and east, was built on the ruins of the German province of East Prussia together with its capital city, Königsberg. The majority of its population, mostly ethnic Germans, fled in late 1944 and early 1945 as the Soviet Red Army advanced beyond the borders into pre-war Germany and started to encircle the region. The remaining thousands were resettled by the new authorities at the beginning of the 1950s. The repopulation of the region, now under Soviet control, was gradual and slow. By the beginning of the 1980s, the number of inhabitants in Kaliningrad had reached its pre-war levels.

On the eve of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the region had a population of around 900,000 people. In spite of Russia's constant demographic decline since the early 1990s, the Kaliningrad Oblast continued to grow. Almost 30 years later, for the first time since the end of the Second World War, the number of inhabitants of the Kaliningrad Oblast has exceeded one million. This took place sometime in the autumn of 2018, although the exact date and reasons are still difficult to pinpoint.

Kaleidoscope

At first, the regional authorities seemed to be taken completely aback by the fact that the region had surpassed one million residents. Eventually, they decided

to use it as a publicity stunt so that they could take credit for the oblast's steady rise in population. A search went underway to find a proper family which would perfectly represent the millionth Kaliningrader. They found Kira Yegortseva, who was born as a second twin just a couple of minutes after her brother Makar (who was counted as the 999,999th). Their parents live in the town of Gusev, in the eastern part of the oblast. Their mother is an engineer at a heating plant while their father is employed in the military. For the honour of bringing into existence the one-millionth Kaliningrader, the family received a brand new car (assembled in the region), 100,000 roubles (some 1,400 euros) and special baby clothes for the twins from Anton Alikhanov, the governor of the oblast.

The governor's move brought attention to perhaps the biggest development challenge of the region. Although Kaliningrad Oblast remains a green island of population growth – countering trends in mainland Russia, as well as the neighbouring Baltic states and Poland – only a small section of the semi-exclave has benefitted. Towns such as Gusev, lying in the centre and east of the oblast, have been struggling with a large-scale outflow of people. This phenomenon is a kaleidoscope of the turbulent processes that the Kaliningrad Oblast has been subject to since 1991. Official statistics say that 482,000 out of a million live in the capital city, Kaliningrad. But in reality this number could be as high as 600,000. Together with the surrounding areas, including the very attractive Baltic Sea coastline where many prominent businessmen and politicians have their residences, it could be as high as 750,000. What is clear is that, over the past decade, the city of Kaliningrad has grown at an astonishing rate – one per cent annually, exceeding the nearby city of Gdańsk in Poland, a country with a much more developed rural landscape.

During the Soviet times, Kaliningrad was considered a medium-sized city which had a limited potential of attracting newcomers as it suffered from poor public services, a lack of living space and the slow pace of removing the visible traces of the Second World War. The city benefitted from the lumber and fishing industries as well as a strong military presence. Other Soviet towns in the region, including Sovetsk and Chernyakhovsk, also grew steadily until the end of the 1980s, although they never became major industrial or administrative hubs.

All in all, the well-being of the region was strictly connected to dependencies functioning across the Soviet Union. When the empire collapsed, the oblast suddenly became separated from the rest of Russia and had to struggle with the subsequent economic downturn. For thousands of people working within bankrupted state-owned factories and farms, Kaliningrad became the only prospect for making ends meet. At the peak of the 1998–99 financial crisis, Kaliningrad reached 430,000 inhabitants.

Rapid development

The city of Kaliningrad's spatial expansion has favoured suburbanisation. The population of the adjacent Guryevsk district increased from 45,000 in 1999 to almost 70,000 in 2019. Nearby coastal areas have benefitted as well. Successful entrepreneurs and public officials moved outside of the capital to build their residences there. This process coincided with the rapid growth of tourism in the region. Today, towns like Zelenogradsk and Svetlogorsk, officially 10,000–15,000 people, are full of ten-storey high blocks of flats. It is no coincidence that the first expressway route in the oblast led from Kaliningrad to the coast.

The 2018 FIFA World Cup provided another impetus for urban development. Kaliningrad profited greatly from the football stadium, roads and other objects constructed for the tournament. All of these investments required workers who mostly came from Central Asia and, to a lesser extent, the South Caucasus. In 2013 the former represented around 70 per cent of all migrants coming to Kaliningrad Oblast from countries not requiring visas to Russia. Five years later, this number rose to 90 per cent.

But the biggest factor in the population growth and development of the Kaliningrad Oblast has been the state-sponsored relocation programme. Since 2007, this programme has allowed ethnic Russians from the post-Soviet area to move to selected regions of Russia while receiving aid and public assistance to do so. Until the end of 2018 approximately 820,000 people benefitted from the programme Russia-wide, out of which 44,000 moved to Kaliningrad Oblast. Thus, the relocation programme accounted for about two-thirds of the region's total demographic gain between 2007 and 2018 – nearly 65,000 people. While during the same period the population of Kaliningrad city grew by 60,000, the rest of the oblast had been steadily losing its population. Why is this?

A large part of the region has still not recuperated since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Breaking economic ties with other parts of the empire, most of all with neighbouring Lithuania, led to many small and medium-sized factories shutting down. When Russia started to gradually open up their market to foreign goods, the remaining companies could not withstand competition. The post-dissolution crisis also hit the agricultural sector in the oblast. Having been fully collectivised after the war, farmers did not have any emotional attachment to the land and left when the state-owned farms went bankrupt. Provisioning was so tragic in the 1990s that the oblast had to receive humanitarian aid from abroad. The Russian financial meltdown in 1998–99 had a huge impact on its ability to recuperate.

The biggest **factor** in the population growth of the Kaliningrad Oblast has been the state-sponsored relocation programme.

Yet migration to the city of Kaliningrad was considerable after the 2008–09 global economic crisis, which seems to have been the turning point for many inhabitants of the oblast. Many abandoned any illusions about the prospect of steady development and well-paid jobs in their towns and villages. In the last decade, Sovetsk, Chernyakhovsk, Ozyorsk, Slavsk and other municipalities have seen their populations diminish. Only Gusev managed to avoid a similar fate, yet it was mostly because of luck; it is the family town of Nikolay Tsukanov, one of the former governors of the oblast. When Tsukanov was in power, Gusev profited from a steady flow of investment, thus managing to retain economic and social output.

Urban-rural divide

Chernyakhovsk is perhaps the most emblematic example of the disparities between a thriving west and a depopulating and economically handicapped east. The town started to develop quickly at the turn of the 20th century thanks to one of the most important railway junctions in East Prussia (before the war it was the Prussian city of Insterburg – editor's note). Although it suffered greatly during the Second World War, Chernyakhovsk quickly repopulated thanks to the presence of heavy and dairy industries which secured widespread employment. Even in the decade after 1991, Chernyakhovsk's population was still growing and reached over 44,000 in 2002. Since then, the town has been rapidly depopulating. In 2017 only 36,400 people lived there. Despite this, Chernyakhovsk managed to curb its population decrease since it serves as a local administrative and industrial centre.

The town of Ozyorsk (in German Darkehmen), however, suffered worse. Located in one of the most remote parts of the oblast, it had almost no industry before the war. In Soviet times Ozyorsk relied solely on local collective farms. When they were shut down, the town lost 40 per cent of its population, becoming the region's anti-champion.

When discussing the development of tourism in 2019, Andrey Yermak, the regional minister for culture and tourism, indicated that the biggest issues facing the oblast's centre and east were their proximity to Kaliningrad city and the increased quality of roads. It is relatively easy and convenient for visitors to embark on day trips to Chernyakhovsk, Gusev or Sovetsk and return to Kaliningrad the same day. Hence local hotels and restaurants do not fully benefit from the increased number of tourists in the region (which rose from 1.54 million in 2018 to 1.75 million in 2019). Although somewhat oversimplified, this explanation could be extended to other sectors of the economy. The distance of 80 or 100 kilometres from the capital

city is too big to partake in the development of Kaliningrad, but too small to build independent microeconomic regions.

Attractiveness of Kaliningrad

It is important to note that the Kaliningrad Oblast is certainly not the wealthiest or most dynamic region in Russia. In most rankings on income or the availability of well-paid jobs, it not only lags behind Moscow and St Petersburg but also many other parts of central Russia and Siberia. Nevertheless, the oblast scores well in terms of quality of life and is still an attractive place for Russians to move. There are at least three possible explanations for this and to an extent, they are interconnected.

After the war migrants to Kaliningrad Oblast mostly came from Russia, but also Belarus, Ukraine, the Baltic republics and Central Asia. Interestingly, during the first 15 years of its existence in the Soviet Union, about two thirds of all newcomers left. Although the situation stabilised later on, the local population remained mobile.

The geostrategic importance of the oblast also played a role. By liquidating East Prussia, Stalin hoped to acquire access to warm water from the Baltic Sea. Militarily, the USSR invested in developing not only the Baltic Fleet but also stationing thousands of soldiers on the territory. Many of the soldiers positioned in the Kaliningrad Oblast came from distant parts of the Soviet Union, as was the policy of the Moscow centre to detach recruits from their native lands. After completing their service, many decided to stay. Since the semi-exclave has remained a largely militarised area, these tendencies are still present today.

Finally, the post-1991 inflow of thousands to the Kaliningrad Oblast is possibly best explained by migrant network theory. Those who decide to migrate do not necessarily cut ties with relatives and friends. On the contrary, if they manage to establish themselves, they can convince others to follow their path. It simultaneously makes the lives of “old” migrants more comfortable and facilitates the settling down of “new” ones. It is also beneficial for the state as it reduces the economic and social costs of migration.

Migrant network theory helps us understand why new inhabitants of Kaliningrad come primarily from two regions. One of them is the Russian North, which greatly suffered from the economic crisis of the 1990s. The other is northern Kazakhstan, which is populated by a considerable number of ethnic Russians. Both were hit by cuts in industry. In addition, the people of Arkhangelsk or Murmansk are attracted to Kaliningrad by its favourable climate, whereas Russians from northern Kazakhstan often say they have suffered from the nationalist policies of the new post-Soviet state.

Climate changes

Population changes have also generated challenges for the development of the Kaliningrad Oblast. As newcomers are mostly in their late thirties and early forties, the region still suffers from an ageing population. Over the last eight years the number of people who reached pension age increased by 40 per cent. Urbanisation

Kaliningrad needs more **green areas** to mitigate the effects of exceptionally hot days during the summer months.

in and around Kaliningrad requires a completely new approach in urban planning. It is especially important because the capital suffers from insufficient and obsolete road infrastructure.

What is more, the oblast is susceptible to the effects of the climate crisis. One report published at the beginning of 2019 noted an increasing number of storms affecting the Kaliningrad coast. One of the storms destroyed the promenade in Svetlogorsk. Kaliningrad it-

self needs more green areas to mitigate the effects of exceptionally hot days during the summer months. Paradoxically, the same temperature changes are likely to provide some benefits to the centre and east of the oblast. Increasing temperatures extend the vegetative period and allow for new types of plants to thrive. Kaliningrad is already one of the most fertile regions in Russia, known for grains and corn. It is also becoming a place where experimental plantations are used to establish whether certain plants can be cultivated in other parts of the country.


Regional agriculture is further strengthened by tensions between Russia and the West since the illegal annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine. The Russian government's policy of replacing goods imported from the West with domestic production has led to a sharp increase of arable area within the Kaliningrad Oblast, which now consists of 271,000 hectares. In 2018 local farmers harvested over 588,000 tonnes of grain and this is expected to increase to 650,000 tonnes in 2019. If predicted accurately, it would be the area's largest harvest in its history under Soviet and Russian rule.

Cross-border lessons

Useful lessons can be drawn from neighbouring regions in Poland. In the 1990s, some regions in Poland suffered from high unemployment and depopulation as people began to search for work in larger cities. In the municipality of Gołdap (in north-east Poland), for instance, 40 per cent of its inhabitants were at one point jobless. Local entrepreneurs were forced to find new ways to attract those seeking

recreation and healthy food. Over the last 20 years, tourism has increased and local goods have found their way to Polish and European tables. Poland's north-eastern counties also used European Union funds to retrain former factory workers and farmers. All these efforts have helped eradicate poverty and social exclusion.

The transfer of experience and knowledge between the Kaliningrad Oblast and adjacent parts of Poland is already taking place via various projects and bilateral partnerships. One of its pillars has been the Poland-Russia 2014–2020 Cross-Border Co-operation Programme, co-financed by the two governments and the EU. It provides over 62 million euros in four thematic objectives: historical, natural and cultural heritage; clean natural environment; accessible regions and sustainable cross-border transport and communication; and border efficiency and security. The Polish central and municipal authorities also support more local activities aimed at showcasing the transformation/transition experience of both large Polish cities and smaller towns and villages. In one of them, the Association of Polish Communes of Euroregion Baltic has created mechanisms for co-operation between municipalities, NGOs and local entrepreneurs. Their counterparts from the oblast have come to see these developments as an important factor in encouraging social cohesion and the micropillars of economic growth. These are likely to contribute to halting further depopulation.

Interestingly, the demographic situation of the Kaliningrad oblast, which has seen its population become increasingly concentrated in certain areas, in some way reflects that of Russia as a whole. Around 800,000 (or 80 per cent) of the region's population lives on 20 per cent of its territory; whereas the rest of the territory (nearly 12,000 square kilometres) is inhabited by a mere 200,000–250,000 people. Similarly, about 78 per cent of Russia's inhabitants live in the European part of the country, which constitutes roughly one-quarter of its total area. This similarity is also reflected very clearly in the country's urbanisation. About 73 per cent of Russians live in cities. In the Kaliningrad Oblast, this figure is higher by only five percentage points. Perhaps, 75 years after the Second World War, the Kaliningrad Oblast is becoming more and more Russian? 

This article was prepared by the author in his personal capacity. The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and reflect the view of neither the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland nor any other institution that the author is affiliated with.

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