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'Koenigsberg is a Russian City,' Kaliningrad Mayor Says

By Paul Goble

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About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

Author **Paul Goble** is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space.

Kaliningrad is not a trophy won by Moscow as a result of the Soviet victory in World War II but rather "a Russian city" that became part of the Russian Empire two centuries earlier, the city's mayor Feliks Lapin said in a wide-ranging interview that aired on radio station Echo Moskvy on Saturday. For that reason, he said, it is his personal view that it would not be a problem to restore Koenigsberg as its name.

Indeed, Lapin said, Russians should be proud of the fact that Koenigsberg is a Russian city, although he admitted that many people would have problems with this or with calling the entire oblast, created in 1945, Eastern Prussia.

Because of the sensitivities of Russia, Poland, Lithuania, and Germany about a region they all have a stake in, that comment has attracted a great deal of attention, but Lapin also provided an intriguing perspective on the difficulties Kaliningrad faces as a Russian exclave and on the impact of its propinquity to EU and NATO member countries.

On the one hand, Lapin said, the economic crisis had hit his city harder than many other Russian regions, not only because of the downsizing of the military there &mdash he said that Kaliningrad is no longer a military "city" but a military "town" &mdash and the impact of other post-Soviet changes but also because of its being cut off from the Russian Federation proper.

But on the other, he argued that despite the problems he and the residents of his city face, its location and the influence of its neighbors on Kaliningrad have had some positive consequences, making it one of the safest Russian cities at present and promoting a more cosmopolitan set of attitudes among residents.

Residents of his city, Lapin said, have been steadfast in the face of the current economic crisis because "all of them understand how complicated things are, because [they] are people who have passed through a crisis much more difficult than was the case" in the remainder of the Russian Federation.

They know that the downsizing of the Russian military, which provided much of the city's life blood at one point in time, has left them with challenges others do not face, Lapin continued, and they understand, especially now, that the completion of some projects, including the building of new housing stocks and highways, will have to be put off.

One of the reasons for their understanding, he said, is that Moscow, "over the last three years," has lifted many restrictions on the region and allowed it to develop as a special economic zone with ties to Europe. And another is that the situation with crime is much less negative than in other Russian cities.

"Many people say," his interviewer remarked, "that Kaliningrad is a port city with prostitution, narcotics, HIV/AIDS" and wonder how the people there are coping. Lapin responded that "everything [there] is like in a normal big city," including all the problems his interviewer mentioned.

But, he added, there is one dimension in which Kaliningrad is distinguished "from other [Russian] cities in a positive way: [people] can walk about at night without fear." And he acknowledged that this was "certainly" the result of what his Echo Moskvy interviewer described as "the influence of [its] neighbors."

Those include both the Poles and the Balts, all of whose countries are members of two key Western institutions, the European Union and NATO. But those memberships do not prevent the Russian residents of Kaliningrad from having regular and positive interaction with the people of those nations.

"You know, when people talk to one another," Lapin said, "no one typically asks whether you are a NATO member or not a NATO member." Instead, they focus on common issues, including shared works of art and culture, topics that lay the foundation for "a communion and closeness of people."

Because that is the case, the mayor continued, how one calls the city he heads matters. Calling

it Kaliningrad, as it is currently known, focuses on the events of 1945, while restoring its earlier name of Koenigsberg would serve to underscore the way in which that city has long been part of Russia and of Europe.

Russians have every reason to be "proud that Koenigsberg is a Russian city," although he noted that many would object and even more would have problems with calling the oblast "Prussia." It might be better to keep its current name, Kaliningrad oblast, "or call it something else," such as "Western Russia."

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