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Silke Schielberg

**CROSS-BORDER CO-
OPERATION OF THE RUSSIAN
REGION
KALININGRAD WITH POLAND
AND LITHUANIA:
OBSTACLES
AND OPPORTUNITIES**

This article analyses the cross-border co-operation between the Kaliningrad Region and the neighbouring Polish and Lithuanian regions. It provides, firstly, a short overview of the cross-border co-operation formation and development. The author outlines the present-day co-operation structures. Secondly, the article reviews the asymmetries that hinder the cross-border co-operation. Finally, it offers some examples of the cross-border cultural and social projects proving that the co-operation under difficult conditions can be successful. The analysis is based on the author's empirical research and interviews with regional experts¹

Key words: Kaliningrad region, cross-border cooperation, European Union (EU), TACIS programme, PHARE programme, Interreg programme.

Historical Background

During the era of the Soviet Union, the Russian region of Kaliningrad was the main base of the Baltic fleet and a military closed zone. The region was separated from Lithuania by an administrative border with minimal cross-border interaction. In contrast the border to the neighbouring country to the South, Poland, was hermetically closed. There was only central governed cross-border exchange on this border. This changed after the dissolution of the Soviet Union when the region of Kaliningrad was opened.

In 1991 Lithuania became independent, and Kaliningrad became a Russian exclave. It was not only separated from mainland Russia to the South by the Republic of Poland, but also to the North and East by its border to Lithuania. On one hand the political and territorial changes enabled cross-border co-operation with Poland, on the other hand the new political arrangement interrupted the existing minimal interaction to the neighbouring regions of Lithuania. An emerging need and an opportunity to set-up and establish cross-border co-operation with both neighbours arose. This co-operation would also help to sustain a crucial linkage with the Russian mainland. Kaliningrad had to avoid falling into political, economic and cultural isolation.

Formation and Development of Cross-border Co-operation with the Neighbouring Countries

In the early 1990's the Russian Federation as successor of the Soviet Union concluded co-operation agreements with Poland and Lithuania. These agreements were the foundation of cross-border co-operation between Kaliningrad and the bordering regions of Poland and Lithuania. It was agreed that co-operation councils would be initiated, they had the task to co-ordinate and implement the agreed cross-border initiatives. The Russian-Polish co-operation council was established 1994. The Russian-Lithuanian council only commenced its work in 2000 as a result of an additional agreement between the national governments in 1999.

Based on the agreements between the national governments, similar declarations between the regional administrations, parliaments and the administrations of the larger cities in the border regions were made. The agreements with the Polish regions were already concluded in the early 1990's, and renewed after the reform of administration structure in Poland at the end of the 1990's. The agreements with Lithuanian regions came into force only at the end of the 1990's.

As part of the agreements, economic co-operation and the expansion of the infrastructure near the borders became the highest priorities. At the same time environment, sciences and culture were also targeted. Although specific objectives and common projects were agreed upon, there were only a few joint activities in the first years.¹ Most projects were not realised. In the 1990's cross-border relations with the border regions of Lithuania had almost come to a complete halt. Simultaneously between 1996 and

¹ The following findings were partially published by the author in previous articles.

1999 no meetings of the Russian-Polish co-operation council took place. With the opportunity of European Union funding, the cross-border co-operation projects achieved significant new impetus.

Since 1997 Kaliningrad has had the possibility to apply for support for cross-border co-operation projects from the EU-TACIS-programme. Participants from the Polish and Lithuanian border regions together with their counterparts from Kaliningrad could apply within the EU-PHARE-programme for smaller projects from 1999.

Additionally Kaliningrad and the bordering regions from Poland and Lithuania had the chance to apply as partners for complementary projects within EU-INTERREG-projects for the Baltic Sea Region. The funding came from the PHARE-programme (Poland and Lithuania) and the TACIS-programme (Kaliningrad). Since the enlargement of the EU in 2004 there is an EU-INTERREG-programme intended to support cross-border co-operation between Kaliningrad, Poland and Lithuania. Kaliningrad did not play an active role in most projects that were funded by the EU before 2004. The reason for that was that in contrast to projects funded by PHARE the requirements for funding by TACIS were higher. For instance the required financial volume was significantly higher than that for PHARE-projects, so that the Russian partners often could not procure the requested co-financing.

Until the end of 2004 only six TACIS-cross-border co-operation projects between Kaliningrad and Polish and Lithuanian border regions were implemented. This compares to 138 cross-border projects that were financed through the PHARE-programme in Poland and Lithuania in the same period. Although this situation has improved with the new INTERREG-programme since 2004, there are still not enough cross-border projects that are funded in parallel by INTERREG and TACIS. As a result in only a few rare cases the funding from the EU has led to true cross-border projects in which both sides were involved, played an equally active role and benefited in the same manner.

It was mainly projects in the areas of culture, development of local self-government, tourism and social welfare that were funded by the PHARE-programme until 2004. A few smaller projects in the field of environment, economy and education were implemented as were larger infrastructure projects. Between 2004 and 2008 INTERREG funded mainly cultural projects and smaller local initiatives. The EU-funded projects attracted political institutions in the regions but also cultural and social NGOs.

Besides the activities that emerged through co-operation contracts and agreements on regional level, regular contacts between districts and municipalities on both sides of the border developed since the end of the 1990's. In contrast the contacts were mainly informal. The main focus of this co-operation was on cultural exchange and common sport events. In order to facilitate contact there were also common efforts to open additional border crossings.

Kaliningrad also co-operates with the neighbouring regions and partially with regions from Sweden, Denmark and Latvia in the Euro-regions Baltic/Bałyk, Neman/Niemen/Nemunas, Saulė, Šešupė and Łyna-Lava since the end of the 1990's. The co-operation in the Euro-regions has many different aspects. While the Euro-region Baltic/Bałyk favours a large variety of activities in a wide field (environmental protection, fostering economic development of the regions, developing democracy in the regions and promotion of youth exchange), the Euro-region Neman/Niemen/Nemunas is mainly interested in sustainable tourism. Saulė concentrates its engagement in the socio-economic development of the European transport corridor „Via Hanseatica“. Šešupė focuses as much as Neman/Niemen/Nemunas on sustainable tourism but also supports environmental protection.

In summary, since the beginning of the 1990's cross-border contacts have emerged and were institutionalised in the form of co-operation councils and Euro-regions. Despite many projects that were funded by EU since the end of the 1990's there is still no cross-border co-operation in the sense of a common elaborated strategy in which projects are jointly planned and implemented throughout the regions on both sides of the border. Mostly the content of the projects was oriented to the objectives set by the EU-programmes. This did not always align with a coherent, target-oriented strategy to further develop the cross-border region.

Border Regime as Obstacle

Besides the lack of a development strategy for the cross-border region and shortage of funding to support cross-border projects, the situation at the border did not encourage cross-border co-operation either. The opposite was the case: the co-operation was impeded. In the early 1990's the national governments made agreements allowing visa free travel so that people in the border region could move freely, even commute daily. This was the case until 2003.

Why didn't the open border policy in the 1990's lead to good cross-border co-operation? Considerable differences in the standard of living and in prices of goods in Kaliningrad on one hand and Poland and Lithuania on the other hand encouraged a large part of the population near the border to cross it several times every day to trade or smuggle goods. Thus, waiting times of up to 30 hours occurred at the border crossings. This made contacts between people on both sides of the border who were not part of the trading and smuggling businesses difficult. The result was that the majority of contacts between the population on both sides of the border in the 1990's were traders and smugglers.

Another obstacle for cross-border co-operation was the poorly developed border infrastructure. Governments and co-operation councils did not co-ordinate the reconstruction of the border crossings. In most cases, one side of the border was reconstructed while the other side remained unchanged. Not until the end of the 1990's were some border crossings were open for bicycle traffic. Not a single crossing is open for pedestrians up to now.

The situation at the borders changed in 2003, when Poland and Lithuania in consequence of negotiations for accession to EU introduced a visa formalities for border crossings to and from Kaliningrad. As a result the separating function of the border was reinforced and the possibilities to co-operate with the neighbours were further limited. Although there were multi-entry visas free of charge, the new border regime hindered the already established cross-border contacts. Visas had to be requested and it took time until granted. Spontaneous visits and meetings could not take place anymore. Since then Kaliningrad is not only a Russian exclave, but also an enclave within the EU.

With accession of Poland and Lithuania to the Schengen zone of the EU at the end of 2007 the free of charge visas that were introduced in 2003 were not longer available. Since then the citizens of Kaliningrad need to apply for Schengen visas if they want to cross the border to the neighbouring countries. A facilitation for the new stringent visa laws could come as a result of recent regulations for local border traffic that were defined by the EU in 2006.² According to these regulations two neighbouring states can specify that residents who have an authorisation paper and live within 30 kilometres of either side of the border, would be allowed to cross at any time. An additional hindering factor for cross-border co-operation is the introduction of prohibited areas along the border of the Kaliningrad region since 2007 by Russian national authorities.

Unequal Economical and Constitutional Conditions Hinder Co-operation

Besides the previously described problems with the border traffic, the different economic and constitutional development in the regions after the dissolution of the Soviet Union hinders cross-border co-operation. Kaliningrad was not only confronted with structural problems that resulted from a military centred industry. As Russian exclave the region also was dependent on energy imports from Russia. Both factors had wide range negative impact on the development of economy in Kaliningrad in the 1990's. The region was highly dependent on imports from Russia and the neighbouring states while the export rate was comparatively low. The standard of living was low, a widespread shadow economy served the majority of the citizens as livelihood. At the end of the 1990's the economic situation slowly started to improve. The upward trend continued and since 2005 the economy in Kaliningrad was very healthy. Mainly Russian investors but also companies from foreign states have invested in the exclave.

In comparison, the economic changes required in Polish and Lithuanian regions after the dissolution of the Soviet Union happened faster and more successfully than in Kaliningrad. A main reason for that was the funding from the EU as part of the accession. The Russian region of Kaliningrad did not benefit from these financial incentives. Thus socio-economic inequalities emerged and increased between the regions. It became increasingly difficult for Kaliningrad to participate in cross-border projects on equal terms.

Another reason why cross-border co-operation is difficult in the region may be found in the way political institutions are set-up and operate. According to the Russian constitution the Russian regions have a high level of representative participation, they take part in political decisions of the central state via the Federation Council. Compared to this, Polish and Lithuanian units of self-government seem to have less political influence. In reality the Russian regions cannot decide as much as the regions in Poland

² Regulation (EC) No 1931/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 December 2006 laying down rules on local border traffic at the external land borders of the Member States and amending the provisions of the Schengen Convention.

and Lithuania. For Kaliningrad as a Russian exclave, all relevant questions concerning co-operation of the region and the municipalities with neighbouring regions from other states are decided in Moscow.

In summary, cross-border co-operation between Kaliningrad with its Polish and Lithuanian neighbours takes place despite unequal economic and institutional conditions. These asymmetries hinder co-operation.

Opportunities for Co-operation in Cultural and Social Areas

Despite all obstacles, a diverse and sustainable cross-border co-operation in cultural and social areas – independent of EU-funding – is taking place. A variety of projects are in progress such as the integration of handicapped people, the exchange of knowledge and experiences in the areas of social welfare, planning the usage of palliative medicine, tackling down drug addiction and to integrating the unemployed in social activities. In the cultural sector, people develop culture information systems, plan and arrange artistic workshops and exhibitions, schedule music, dance, theatre performances and finally review common cultural history. Meanwhile these encounters take place on regular base. The participation in social and cultural projects has led to a sustainable co-operation between the involved organisations.

In addition to the funded projects, non funded cross-border activities have become normal particularly on local level. People cross borders to participate in city and municipality events, exhibitions and readings, music and dance events, as well as sporting events such as kayaking regattas, bicycle races, chess competitions or football matches.

While cross-border projects in the areas of infrastructure, the economy and environmental protection often fail to bring the desired outcome on both sides of the border, cultural and social co-operation projects seem to succeed despite the previously described asymmetries between the regions. The majority of all cross-border initiatives are of cultural or social nature. These projects prove to be successful because the interaction between the involved parties on both sides of the border is very direct, mainly on a person/group to person/group basis. The projects are less bureaucratic, more independent of national interests and participants can act freely. The size and scope for these projects can be adjusted to suit available financial resources.

Conclusion and Perspectives

Against the background of the referred obstacles that prevent a strong cross-border co-operation between public authorities, companies, NGOs and other groups across borders, cultural and social cross co-operation projects must be ranked high. Despite socio-economic and institutional asymmetries in the regions, citizens in the border regions stay in contact and, with the help of these projects, expand their relations. People have the chance to get to know each other better, they can get rid of anxieties and prejudices. Trust in the neighbours on the other side of the border and sustainability of the cross-border co-operation are the results. By talking to each other, people on one side of the border will be sensitised to the conditions of living of the people from the other side of the border. They will become aware of the differences and thus respect them in co-operation. It is important to maintain the communication, common activities such as meetings, seminars and workshops are helpful. The goal is to remove inequalities on both sides of the border. The progress that was achieved on co-operation in the cultural and social areas, points out that cross-border co-operation can only be successful if the people in the regions are actively involved. It is crucial to support the development of the civil society when it comes to cross-border co-operation.