

COMING TOGETHER IN KALININGRAD

TEXT | MARK RASMUSSEN PHOTO | ALEXANDER POPADIN

IN A CORNER OF THE BALTIC SEA PLAGUED WITH POLLUTION, NEW APPROACHES ARE BRINGING TOGETHER COMMUNITY GROUPS AND GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS TO BUILD BOTTOM-UP SUPPORT FOR WATER IMPROVEMENTS.



In 2012, officials and residents of Kaliningrad gathered at the construction site of a treatment plant aimed at bringing modern sewage treatment to this city of nearly half a million on the coast of the Baltic Sea. Getting to this point was a major achievement, not just for local residents but for the entire sea.

The water resources of Russia's Kaliningrad Oblast are defined by the Pregola and Neman rivers; the unique Vistula and Curonian Lagoons into which they drain and 610 smaller tributary streams which feed them. The waterways are polluted by inadequately treated municipal wastewater, industrial discharges,

and upstream agricultural runoff making this one of the most environmentally degraded corners of the Baltic region. Their impairment represents an ongoing challenge for Russian officials and a hindrance to international water pollution control efforts.

To date, the water resources of Kaliningrad have not received the same level of attention afforded Russia's principle Baltic Sea outlet – St. Petersburg – where major wastewater treatment plant upgrades have succeeded in reducing pollutant loads to the Gulf of Finland. As a result, poor environmental conditions hinder the Oblast's full economic potential,

reduce quality of life for its residents, and degrade the Baltic Sea.

Three years on and new sewer plants remain off line and much work remains. The benefits of improved water resource management to the enclave's economic vitality are well established and accepted by Oblast officials. In the face of other fiscal priorities, however, action on water pollution can fall behind. It is a challenge confronting local officials in municipalities on all continents.

But today a new generation of Kaliningrad non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is working to raise the profile of the Oblast's rivers on the public agenda. And they ●●●

●●● are doing it through a new model of government support and cooperation. They are citizens who are impatient for improvements, but also optimistic about the future. They are a positive voice for water and one that is attracting attention throughout the eastern Baltic region.

Oleg Ivanov, a former law student, is chairman of GreenFront, an inter-regional environmental advocacy organization. Members of the NGO, which was set up in 2011, are also part of the Kaliningrad Public Council and work to maintain open dialogue with government officials to support the cleanup of illegal dumping, city waste-water planning efforts and restoration on agricultural lands. GreenFront also engages with the media to raise awareness of problems.

“We collect and present high quality information to help authorities not only take a closer look at the problems of the quality of water in the rivers but to insist on their cleanup”, says Ivanov. A recent GreenFront

Kaliningrad Oblast and the Transboundary Water Resources



finding of an industrial polluter discharging waste into a tributary of the Pregola River provided the basis for the Kaliningrad Public Prosecutors office to take action. They proudly note that the industry today is investing approximately EUR one million in upgrading its waste treatment systems to avoid fines.

In other parts of the Baltic Sea

helping to implement on-the-ground projects such as the collection of environmental data.

Local governments now view civil society actors as partners in the enhancement of environmental quality at the community level; partners able to employ methods and resources unavailable to government. Most importantly, a supportive NGO community can bring the key element that is needed in democratic societies to make change: public support.

In Kaliningrad, government officials today are embracing this support role played by groups like GreenFront. Mr. Denis Kim, Kaliningrad Inter-district Environmental Prosecutor, has said, “We see Green Front as our partner who helps us to identify, reveal and solve problems of water pollution and water quality in the Oblast.”

It is a trend that extends far beyond local government. Even large multi-lateral institutions such as the 40-year old Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission, or Helsinki

basin, throughout Europe and elsewhere in Russia, NGOs play a critical role in raising public awareness of environmental issues, educating people about the need and benefits to be accrued from clean water improvements, building political will which local officials can use to advance cleanup actions, and

“Poor environmental conditions hinder Kaliningrad’s full economic potential, reduce quality of life for its residents, and degrade the Baltic Sea.”

Commission (HELCOM), is adjusting its approach to water problems to invite greater NGO participation.

“HELCOM’s enhanced cooperation with the non-governmental sector, particularly in project-based collaboration, is a sign of a shift in its policy: the inter-governmental level alone is no longer recognized as sufficient for the successful implementation of environmental policy. To create awareness, legitimacy and acceptance of decisions requires the participation of societal actors.” (Joas, Jahn and Kern, *Governing a Common Sea: Environmental Policies in the Baltic Sea Region*, 2008)

Last year, Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI) brought together the most active and effective NGOs in Kaliningrad working in the areas of environmental protection and youth education – GreenFront, EkoRybOhot, Green Planet and Natural Heritage – to discuss how best to enhance river protection efforts in the Oblast.

“The NGO community can bring the key element that is needed in democratic societies to make change: public support.”

Joining them in this effort were non-profits from Sweden, St. Petersburg, Lithuania, and Belarus to provide examples of regional models and to build stronger transboundary relationships.

The project was rooted in a fundamental belief that a credible NGO effort in Kaliningrad – one that is both locally based and supported but also connected to similar organizations in other river basin countries – can support and encourage local, regional and federal officials in water protection and ecological restoration. Together, these partners envisioned coordinated NGO activities that can:

- act as a credible, public and independent voice to support the improvement of water resources in Kaliningrad Oblast.
- build public support for clean water, highlight needs, and convey those needs to local, regional and federal officials. Active public involvement should be a hallmark of the work as a means to building community awareness and support for water quality investments in the Oblast.
- manage a long-term water quality-monitoring programme for the Neman and Pregola Rivers.
- work to support city, oblast and federal officials in efforts to advance river restoration.

Oleg Ivanov from GreenFront sees great potential in the NGO model that is developing in Kaliningrad. He is focused on achieving practical fixes to pollution at the local level in partnership with government officials, but also on the power of his new connections to NGOs working upstream across the border in Lithuania, Belarus and Poland. And his eyes are on the future.

“After we’ve eliminated the major sources of water pollution here in Kaliningrad, we can start developing programmes focused on restoration of the health of these rivers.” ●

A discharge of industrial effluents discovered by GreenFront (Kaliningrad)



Mark Rasmussen is a SIWI Associate.