Information about interviewee:

Vytautas Grubliauskas is the mayor of Klaipeda, Lithuania. Interview conducted in Klaipeda, Lithuania

R= Respondent – Vytautas Grubliauskas

I=Interviewer – Sam Wrighton

I: Would you say that social integration of the Russians in Lithuania has been more successful in Lithuania than the other parts of the Baltics?

R: Of course we will always agree when Lithuania is among the leaders. Yes, I think so, but we don’t have official figures about it, things can improve. Lithuania not only has a good experience, but good results, but it doesn't mean we are perfect and nothing to do better. So its process without an end.

I: All those in Lithuania, when independence was gained in 1991, all those in Lithuania were given Lithuanian citizenship. This was not the case in Latvia or Estonia. Do you think this has enabled a more inclusive society?

R: Let's come back to the beginning of our conversation. If we are better in than our neighbours it means, our decisions in the beginning, in this field, were done with more wisdom and more efficient. It is not so easy to say, we must not forget the situation. Each country has a different situation. The numbers of Russian speaking community, Lithuanian community, other national communities, so as well it is very important. So for instance, in Latvia it is approximately half and half Russian speaking community and Latvian community, so it is an absolutely different situation. If we speak more about Klaipeda, rather than Lithuania generally, it has a different situation, there are different scenarios about integration about communicating between different people, different speaking communities, about, how to say, relationship between different cultures, religions. Each situation has, maybe not absolutely unique scenario, but they must pay attention to different situations.

I: What are the biggest challenges?

R: I think, maybe it is not a challenge, but it is very important to think about a position. To be equal, to think about respect of different peoples, communities, and to provide them with equal rights. It doesn't mean, if you speak Russian, you speak in Jewish, you speaking Latvian, you speak Ukrainian or other language, or you are a member of these communities, that you have the same equal rights, for education, social life, possibilities to develop, culture and relationship. It depends of course of our solutions and our mentalities and good will. It is very important and Klaipėda is one of the most international cities in Lithuania. Maybe the figures are not so impressive, when we speak about 25 or 30% of people who speak in Russian or different languages, but it doesn't mean that they feel like a minority. Our task, our goal, it means there is no minority in discrimination, maybe in figures or numbers, but not in daily life. It comes from this office, that we keep this way and this tradition. I think it is a Klaipeda that we can find a common language, common values, it doesn’t depend on which nationality you have.

I: How has EU membership affected this city?

R: Open borders mean open possibilities to use this. Of course when people have the right to choose better conditions for their life, better salaries for their job, of course they look for it and they find better possibilities. The EU has great values in my understanding. Of course this value maybe not risks, but some problems. People are free to move. Particularly young people, particularly professional people, they have possibilities to move. It is a challenge for the local and national institutions and of the municipality, to provide, maybe not better, maybe not absolutely equal, but as good as possible close to these conditions, so people will have the same quality of life in this place. It won't be as big as a temptation to look for better, if everything is good here, maybe you won't go abroad, to Germany, the Scandinavian countries. Open borders are a much bigger challenge to local institutions, and local politicians, to provide a better quality of life in this country and this city, so people are not so interested to life. If they have good salary, social infrastructure, public transportation, waste management, these things depend on the municipality, probably they will never leave. It is a big challenge, big possibility but a big challenge.

I: What is the relationship like between Klaipeda and Kaliningrad?

R: Yes, we still have, official relationships between Klaipeda and Kaliningrad as twin cities. This official agreement is still working, maybe our connections which change from official delegations are not so open and such a big number as it was before. Maybe this relationship is not so active, but it still exists. We think that it is very important for both states, both cities, as Lithuania and Russia still have multiple relationships, so it doesn't mean we are absolutely separated, like divorced from our neighbours. Of course, probably, the geo political situation, made in advanced, and the segments of these relationships are changing the locations but we still seem sportsman, cultural people, people from other speciality and occupations they come to Klaipeda and Klaipeda citizens go to Kaliningrad. It is not an open border, you need a visa, but you have possibility to travel to get a visa, so life is lasting, life is going on, but not so active as it was before.

I: Are there any NGOs here in Klaipeda that receive funding from Russia?

R: I don't know about it officially. You must ask other institutions who are looking for that. Non-governmental organisations live their own life. Of course they are responsible for their financial policy and financial order. Do they get any Russia? Any rhetorical support from Russia? We don't control that situation, but I think, and I am sure that we have institutions in Lithuania that control that situation and they do their job.

I: I have heard that despite being prohibited, some of the Russian speaking community hold two passports, Russian and Lithuania. Is this correct?

R: It depends not on the municipality, it depends on the state and on state solutions and parliament solutions about dual citizenship. As you know, a couple days before, we had a referendum for dual citizens for EU space and NATO space. So Russia was not in this list, about dual citizenship, but it depends not on the municipality.

I: So you are not aware of people within your municipality that hold two passports?

R: No.

I: Has Russia's recent geo-political activities affected Klaipėda in any way?

R: Official state policy, as I said, between Klaipeda and Kaliningrad, in the municipality there have been different situations, that we cannot exclude from the situations, in Georgia, Ukraine, Crimea, of course they affected the mentality of people, no doubt. But it was a kind of a protest or demonstration, maybe not big, maybe symbolical in front of Russian consulate, but it was more symbolic action, like official big meetings in front of it. But not doubt, it affects the mentality of people, it is not so easy to fix, how it was before and how it changed after, but it was official solutions, reactions, I think it is a national level solution, we must feel problems the challenges for municipality, we are an irascible part of Lithuania.

I: Does 'Victory Day' cause any tensions in Klaipėda?

R: Yes, as you know Europe celebrates the same celebration on 8th May and Russia celebrates this day on the next day, the 9th May. If you compare Lithuania and Klaipeda, the 9th May was celebrated a long time before, maybe 30 or 40 years. The 8th of May was just 15 years or something like that. It is not easier to compare this history. From the other cases, Russia speaking community still has possibility to celebrate this day and they do it every year. They have two dates. One of them is the 28th January and according to Russia, this is the date that Klaipeda was liberated from Nazis, they have as well meetings in the same place. The 9th May is total celebration of Russia over Nazi Germany, so they still celebrate, they still have big event, they meet there in this place near this sculpture most people are older generation, people from the younger generation, there are not much of them. This history or this past is not so actual, or so interesting or so important. It is a day they celebrate but Klaipeda as a part of Lithuania and of Europe celebrates this day on 8th May.

I: Are there an exclusively Russian speaking schools in Klaipėda?

R: Yes, they have a couple of gymnasiums. Yes, they have schools. We try to provide equal rights but it doesn’t mean all the programme, school girls or school boys, must learn Lithuanian. They have much more lessons about Russian history and Russian language. Anyway the schools are for the Russian speaking community, but they are part of the Lithuanian education system, the same programme, the same tasks, the same level of examinations. They follow Lithuanian law.

I: Are there any members of that community that do not speak Lithuanian?

R: Of course, there might be a very small number of the community, maybe very old. Most people speak both languages. If we speak about people that speak just Russian, then it is a very small community.