

Re-Bordering the Russian North

Anna Stammler-Gossmann
(Arctic Centre – University of Lapland, Finland)

Abstract

For the first time ever in the country's history, Russia has emphasized its identity as a northern country. This new northern spatiality seems to offer a considerable creative capital for political, economical and social paradigms, where Russia can determine its own honourable and respected position. 'Northernness' may even be articulated as an option in the search for a new unifying national identity to replace the 'single united Soviet people' ideological construct that was lost after the Soviet Union. However, the problem of defining the North is fundamental and the question *where the North is* inevitably brings another question *what the North is*.

Many disciplines have attempted for decades to bring forward scientifically grounded definitions on northern boundaries; yet up to the present, combining such definitions to a generally applicable term 'North' may still result in 'an exercise in confusion' (Sater 2003: 3). Consequently, it is seen more meaningful to view the North, as Armstrong, Rogers and Rowley pointed out already in 1978, as 'a group of concepts and attributes' (Armstrong, Rogers, Rowley 1978). Yet how could a coherent definition of an area be negotiated if there are a multitude of conflicting concepts about it?

Space as a whole and in particular as a social reality embraces a huge diversity of characteristics, which cannot be ignored when we attempt to give a general picture of the North in Russia. Every society produces its own space (Lefebvre 1991), and according to Foucault space can adapt to social changes depending on its assigned role and function for society

(Foucault 1986). Borrowing these ideas I conceptualise the understanding of the North as a space that has a specific role and function for Russian society, for which legal characteristics are central components. Both perspectives are important for my analysis and represent the North as a space that is formed by society and as a society that is formed by space. In this article I focus on the North as a social construction, which is produced and reproduced by discourses in legal practices.

Key words:Northernness, Russia, border, space

Space of controversy

Russia as the world's largest country has its unique relations to space in general and to the North in particular. Nowhere else in the circumpolar North we find such big and developed industrial cities and administrative centres than in northern Russia. The majority of the northern population consists nowadays of Russian-speaking immigrants and their descendants. During the Soviet era the North became a region of large-scale industrialisation, including a whole complex of social infrastructure. This industrialisation was tailored for both economical and ideological needs. The idea was that people should not only extract resources, but also live permanently, have families, grow up children and get education in a single location.

It is worth mentioning that although there was no strict distinction between the notions of 'North' and 'Arctic', both definitions were used separately, as economic-geographical and natural-geographical unities, respectively. The term 'Arctic' was used in the Soviet Union mainly in relation to military, nature protection issues, and marine activities. The notion 'North' was applied as the territory of location of indigenous peoples. It was also reflected in the division of interestsspheres. As Vitiazeva and

Kotyrlo state, 'Far North' and 'territories equivalent to the Far North' belonged to the issues of social science and state administration, and 'Arctic' was the field of interests of natural science and military complex. Both definitions were treated separately and hardly intersected each other (Vitiazeva and Kotyrlo 2007:33).

The Soviet 'mastering' of the North shaped urbanisation patterns and demographic structure of the northern population, changed considerably the geographical proximity factor, especially for the European Russian North. Post-Soviet North has become new 'dimensions'. While 'physical' borders of the North after disintegration of the Soviet Union moved north-eastwards with the 'loss' of the parts in the West and in the South, socio-economic borders shifted southwards. Regions previously considered as non-northern were included into the legal category of the North. These processes have strengthened longitudinal (vertical) axes of the European Russian North, where the North can be seen as a continuation of the South. However, northern projections are made around latitudinal lines that are fundamental.

The outcomes of industrial development, political and social transformations have made the North more fragmented on the spatial level. Entire northern debates revolve around largely contradictory assessments. There are concepts based on the calculations of the high costs of the North, emphasising its depressive subsidiary character. On the other hand, the governmental 'Concept of the state support for economical and social development of the northern regions' (Decree Nr.198, 07.03.2000) about its key role in the national economy states that the North 'accounts for around 60 percents of hard currency income'. This has become a standard argumentation in political speeches and scientific research alike. The North here is often interpreted in terms of innovation and modernisation. In this more symbolised quality that is oriented towards the future, the North has the best integrative potential and represents the most attractive

and pragmatic theoretical idea which is possible to use politically and transform into more or less concrete practices (Stammler-Gossmann 2007).

According to some estimation the North may be overpopulated from 25 to 40 per cent (Vitiazeva & Kotyrlo 2007), while other authors may emphasise under populated characteristics. It raises the question of preserving the old Soviet approach to the North as a place of permanent settlements for a large population, as different from seeing the North as a place for settlements populated by transient shift workers. While the federal centre is concerned with these future orientations related to its northern peripheries, regions are searching for different sources to develop their territories on a permanent basis, emphasising the need for switching their orientation from mono-resource development to economic diversification. Furthermore, they also promote to the potential of non-industrial administrative centres (Nikolaev 2005; Lamin & Malov 2005; Fauzer 2008).

Since the beginning of the 1990s, different political and academic approaches have been applied for capturing the essence of the Russian North, which has been subject to several changes. Currently there is a whole flurry of diverse conceptions of how to delineate the North, various projections for the future development of the North and its population. Many visions of the North exercise a significant impact on political and economic activities, financial flow, residents' movement, labour force and regional identities/ This holds true both from the pessimistic view of the North as a burden for Russia and the optimistic view of the North as asset. The existing legal categorisation of the North still provides the key to combining different interpretations of the North into something which has meaning and utility. Solving the lack of legal clarity is seen as the most urgent challenge to form a new model for the North of Russia.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the Russian government forced different institutions of the Russian Academy of Science to

reconsider the existing system of the regional division within the North and determine its southern boundaries (Decree SM RSFSR, 29.08.1990; Decree RF Nr. 107-r, 18.01.1992). In 2004 former president Putin called for a new model of northern development and for clear criteria for defining regions as northern (Putin 2004). Four years later the current president Medvedev once again pointed out the necessity of continuing activities towards the adoption of the Federal Law on the southern borders of the Russian North (Il'in 2008), which has yet to be completed.

Where is the North?

The drawing of the northern borders is complicated in Russia by numerous types and levels of internal administrative, economic, political and other subdivisions: Russia has 7 federal districts, 12 economic districts, more than 80 administrative sub-entities (called „subjects“ of the Russian Federation), and even more complicated divisions if we analyse deeper within this basic framework. Geographical borders not necessarily overlap with economical or administrative divisions. As a result, one region can have multiple spatial belongings. For example, the biggest administrative entity of Russia, Republic of Sakha Yakutia, belongs geographically to Siberia. At the same time, administratively it is a part of the Russian Far East, and in terms of economic zoning, it is considered to be in the Far North. The North in Russia is divided among 5 federal districts and many geographic, administrative and economic zones.

The dominant understanding sees the North in its official classification based on geographical and economic criteria that are a part of the Russian legislation. This classificatory principle is so called zoning into different regions (*raionirovanie*). Zoning divides the Russian North into the Far North and territories equivalent to the Far North. The idea of “Far North” was introduced in the beginning of 1930s (Decree RSFSR 29.01.1934). It was further

extended in 1945 by the understanding of “territories equivalent to regions of the Far North” (Decree SNK USSR, 18.11.1945). These categories were created mainly for economic reasons. In particular, they consider in particular how effective the transfer of the production could be and connected to that the necessity of attracting labour force to the North. The categorisation became part of Soviet law in the “List of regions of the Far North and territories equivalent to the regions of the Far North” (Decree Nr. 1029, 10.11.1967). The Decree from 1967 was revised several times and nowadays there are approximately 20 different editions of that document (Decree Nr.245, 24.04.2007).

The basic principle for this zoning was Slavin’s conception for developing the productive capacities of the North (Burkhanov 1967; Hamelin 1979; Vitiازهva& Kotyrlo 2007). His main interest was in technology and materials for the North with their special adaptation to northern extreme conditions, in terms of construction details, characteristics of long term use and economy. Slavin participated in the organisation of a scientific council dealing with the “problems of machines working under conditions of low temperatures”. Slavin determined the borders of the economical and geographic understanding of the North, considering the specifics of industrial development in the region, and the need for increasing the economical efficiency of technical processes (Slavin 1958, 1972):

He defined the regions as being part of the North if they were 1) situated to the north of the economically stable and settled regions of the country and were distant from the principal industrial centres; 2) distinguished by sparse population and a low level of development of the basic mass-production sectors of the economy; 3) characterised by high costs of construction compared with other regions of the country; and 4) distinguished by a harsh physical environment making economic development more difficult. (Burkhanov 1967: 27). Using a multiple-factor definition of the North, Slavin also recognised the dynamic character of its

borders and was criticised for that by some other researchers (Vitiazeva&Kotyrla 2007).

In 1967, Burkhanov designed a geographic-engineering boundary for the Soviet North that used a combination of climatic data for a single climatic indicator of the harshness of the northern climate. His criteria used different factors like the distribution of minimum temperatures, wind speed, humidity and solar radiation, the extent of permafrost and other factors for engineering purposes (Burkhanov 1967: 28). Burkhanov and other experts considered a sectoral approach in defining the North as most appropriate. For them, the main characteristic of the North were its constant attributes, which may be represented only by physical-geographical criteria (Burkhanov 1967; Agranat 1984). According to Burkhanov's index, the North was broken down into four zones of different harshness. Mapping the range of harshness values resulted in four zones: The Arctic zone of maximum harshness, the subarctic zone of high harshness, the northern harsh zone, and an eastern moderately harsh zone. Two approaches based on definition have been both in use, but Slavin's model was accepted as a base for the legal map of the North.

The present legal categorisation of the northern regions, even in its revised versions, still reproduced criteria established between the 1930s and 1980s. Nowadays, Soviet criteria of the North do not fit properly to the current situation in the Russian Federation: the goals of northern policy have changed; the question of pioneering mastering the North has changed to issues of industrial restructuring, regional economic diversification; attraction of labour is replaced by questions of out migration or labour migration e.g. from the Central Asia or China. There are many overlapping understandings of what the North is, expressed by particular names for the region that carry certain symbolic meanings.

Today, a highly developed infrastructure in transport and industry of the West- European northern regions of Russia are

comparably close to the economical, political and cultural centres of Russia. Therefore, the urbanised Murmansk region (Kola Peninsula, Northwest Russia) with its highest population density worldwide in the North, is more easily associated with the *Zapolyar'ye* (the area to the North of the Arctic Circle) than with the Far North. From a geographic point of view (in terms of latitude), regions such as Kamtchatka in the Far East or the Republic of Tyva as members of Russia's „northern club“ cause slight confusion: Kamtchatka has the same latitude as Kiev (Ukraine), Tyva Republic has a common border with Mongolia.

On the other hand, all these criteria fit perfectly for regions such as the Sakha Republic in North East Siberia. Its capital Yakutsk is 5680 km from Moscow by airplane, the coldest inhabited place on Earth is there, and the Republic's territory of 3.2 million square km is approximately the same size as India, with the difference Yakutia hosts only 1 million people, relying on an infrastructure consisting of just 115 km railroad and 7000km paved roads (Nikolaev 2002). Therefore the Lena River has to serve as the main traffic artery of the region, but it is only navigable on water for 3 months of the year, the rest of the time being covered by ice.

Along similar lines, the Yamal-Nenets district in West Siberia fits well to this category of the Far North. Its infrastructure is only developed in the southern bits, where oil and gas is extracted, and one city on the foothills of the Polar Ural Mountains with railroad access. Both parts of the region are not connected by ground transport with each other, but separately by railroad to Moscow, which is typical for the central Soviet spatial planning. The category of “Far North” therefore rather misfits the European North of Russia like Murmansk, even though the area is almost entirely located north of the Arctic Circle, whereas only 40% of Sakha Republic and 50% of the Yamal-Nenets district are north of the Arctic Circle.

The zoning of the North and determining which territories belong to it in Russia was introduced to the legislation first and foremost for regulating state guarantees and compensations for the hardships that workers have to endure in a cold harsh climate. Financial assistance was given to northern regions for attracting labour force (salary top-ups called regional coefficients) and stimulating qualified workers to stay in the North (salary top-ups called northern benefits) for developing industry in remote regions (Fig.1).



Fig.1. Northern regions of Russian Federation (Far North and territories equivalent to the regions of the Far North) and northern benefits system (website: Arctic Today, <http://www.arctictoday.ru/region/район/550.html> accessed 17.02.2007)

As mentioned above, after the fall of the Soviet Union the borders of the legal category “North” moved considerably to the south. According to the Ministry for economic development, northern benefits are even paid in 14 other places that are not officially on the list of northern regions (Zhukov 2006). Examples include Vologda, Bashkiria, Udmurtia, Khakassia, and the Jewish Autonomous region in the Russian East. The existing benefit

system for northern regions has also changed. Whereas in the Soviet Union benefits were for the sake of „building communism“ during industrialisation, nowadays, benefits are more conceptualised as compensations for the harsh climatic conditions and high costs of live in the North.

The list of northern regions from 1967 is in spite of numerous changes still the basic document for a number of other lists that were established subsequently. For example, the concept of indigeneity is sensitive to legal territorial categorisation, because the federal legislation related to indigenous peoples is strongly focused on the ‘northern’ group (Stammler-Gossmann 2009). Being accepted as indigenous, but residing outside of the territory defined as the North may have implications on issues concerning state assistance. Belonging to the official North also matters for funding by the government for delivery of goods to remote northern regions with inadequate transport infrastructure. Several documents of the ministry of labour determine the northern salary top-ups, and even for the production, delivery and sale of alcohol there is a list of northern regions in Russia with special regulations. (Decree Nr. 400, 25.06.2007).

It would be wrong to see the North in its legal categories as a stable space. Its consistence was and is constantly changing, sometimes expanding and sometimes contracting through including or excluding particular regions. For example the town of Kandalaksha in Murmansk region is regularly changing its status of “northernness”. Kandalaksha is north of the Arctic Circle, and legally belonged to the „territories equivalent to the Far North“ until 1990, when the “equivalent” was dropped and the town became a part of the Far North (Decree Nr. 594, 1990). Two years later Kandalaksha got the “equivalent” back (Decree Nr. 776, 1992). There are many other examples for these changes. For example, there were discussions that the border between two different northern zones may run right through the regional capital of the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, Salekhard. This would

happen if a categorization of the North into discomfort zones as discussed below implying different benefit regimes would be implemented for one administrative unit like a town or region. Depending on time and different particular legal documents, the North currently counts for 60-80% of Russia's territory. Depending on this, the number of northern residents changes as well.

The uncomfortable but beneficial North

As we have mentioned before, the question about the borders of the North are for the inhabitants of Russia not only theoretical constructions of space, but have very practical implications. This question is connected to the everyday life within these borders, because the government, according to the Federal Law on 'State guarantees and compensations for persons working and living in the regions of the Far North and equivalent territories' (Law Nr. 5082-1, 02.06.1993; Federal Law Nr.122-FZ, 29.12.2004), pays considerable compensations and subsidies for those inhabiting the North. For example, the "regional coefficients" (*raionnye koeffitsienty*) on top of the usual salary are between 50-80%. Another type of payments is used to keep people in the North, by increasing salary top-ups depending on the number of years a person has worked in the North. Northerners also have the right to retire earlier, they get 14 days more holiday per year, they get once in two years a free return trip to any place in Russia from their northern place of residence, and they are entitled to support in case of resettlement from the North to more temperate regions in Russia after having worked for 15 years or more in the North.

All these financial privileges apply for more than 40 of Russia's administrative entities. For regions, which were added to the list of northern regions later, the new plans for zoning in the Russian North may have the most practical implications. For new

models for classifying the borders of the North in Russia either a single climatic-geographic factor definition or criteria based on climatic harshness combined with socio-economical and medical-biological data are applied. There are different variations of such new categorisations, each advocated by a particular group of scholars from different scientific or political institutions (Zhukov 2006; Vitiازهva & Kotyrlo 2007). One of the most discussed classificatory systems for the North is focused on the principle of “uncomfortability” (diskomfortnost’), which revisits the borders of the North and determines a new “northernness”.

This new model of regional division within the North was discussed in April 2007 in a session of the Russian Parliament on the initiative of the Duma committee for northern affairs and the committee for natural resources. Basing on the “uncomfortability” principle, the model envisions a threefold division of the North: the absolutely uncomfortable zone, the extremely uncomfortable zone, and an uncomfortable zone. The first two zones should cover what is currently called the “Far North” (krainyi sever), whereas the third zone should consist of the “territories equivalent to the Far North” (territorii priravnennyye k krainemu severy). According to this ‘zoning’ model some members of the “northern club”, such as Novosibirsk or Kemerovo, might lose their northern status and express their discontent with the new system (Kuznetsov 2007). According to other classificatory versions, parts of Murmansk, Arkhangelsk and Karelia regions could lose their northern status as well (Shmeleva 2004).

The “uncomfortability” principle does not satisfy all actors interested in northern zoning. Therefore the Russian ministry for economic development went beyond the understanding of “uncomfortability” and came up with a scale of “comfortability” using a single-factor climatic approach. That model classifies all regions of Russia, not only the North. All of Russia is divided into six major zones, three of them being “uncomfortable” and three of them “comfortable”. The last zone is called “favourable”

(blagopriatnaia), covering the area around the Azov and Black Seas and the western parts of the Northern Caucasus (Fig.2).

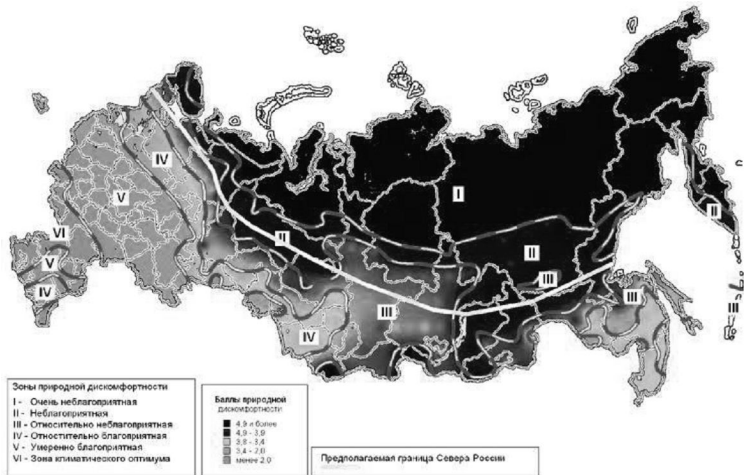


Fig.2. Discomfort zones of the Russian Federation. (Yellow line: the southern border of the North) (website: Arctic Today, <http://www.arctictoday.ru/region/rayon/550.html> accessed 17.02.2007)

Today the inhabitants of all “Norths” wait for a decision about the new official borders of their region, because for them and Russia as a country this will have immense consequences. The current system of financial privileges was inherited from the Soviet planned economy and does not work properly under the conditions the new Russian economy. In many regions the general system of salary-coefficients is not tied to a particular branch of the economy. Nonetheless, there are significant differences in the scales of payments between the extractive industries, where payments are much higher, and, for example, agriculture. Employees of the state administration are also treated differently from those employed in the private sector, where many northern benefits are not guaranteed.

The new models of northern zoning have been criticised along several lines. Firstly, classifying the North along lines of “uncomfortability” is an unnecessarily negative starting point for a definition. Secondly, a new zoning and rethinking of northern benefits may generate significant out-migration from the North, as many might suffer losses in income when staying there. Thirdly, practical questions of payments and structures have been criticised and cause many additional questions that are now in discussion not only on the national level but on the regional level as well:

What are the financial and economical consequences of new zoning in the North and for Russia as a whole? How will the transfer of money among different budgets happen if one administrative entity ends up lying in three different zones? Will this lead to further social and financial stratification of the population? How will the new zoning influence the development of infrastructure and construction in the North? Will a new system be capable of solving the problem of high production costs in the North?

A new system of determining northern finances may also lead to a reconfiguration of relations between the centre (Moscow) and the northern peripheries in Russia. This transformation is accelerated by tendencies of centralisation in Russia in the last 5 years, which had already significant financial consequences in the regions. The crisis of definition in the North is tied to global dynamics too and therefore definitely is not likely to be solved within a year. It will continue to attract attention and thoughts of all stakeholder groups, including politicians, scholars and inhabitants of all “Norths”.

Conclusion

This paper has elucidated the relevance of the Northern territories in Russia for the country's future as a whole. Any country needs to make sense of its domestic space, and in Russia this is a particular challenge due to its sheer size and diversity. Therefore the North has been approached mainly from a legal perspective, focusing the discussion on the following questions: What are the goals of northern development? How can a government push forward its agenda for development through financial incentives? In other words, why should northern benefits be paid and to whom? In order to determine in which regions the population should be eligible for northern benefits, the southern borders of the North become an important defining criterion of inclusion and exclusion.

The existing conceptualisations around the Russian North show an active process of determining spatial frameworks and a growing awareness of the unique possibilities as well as problems of the North. The "legal North" with all its cold and remote characteristics is densely tied to numerous realities in everyday life. Therefore it is not surprising that today the question of who belong **Key words:**the mostly debated topics not only in terms of legal zoning, but also in terms of defining the Russian North in general.

The category of space appears here as a product, which is created by social actors and becomes an instrument for their activities. At the same time, the understanding of the North has its place in society. Our analysis confirms Lefebvre's argument about the constitutive dualism of the category "space". Space has therefore simultaneously global, homogenous, unifying as well as fragmenting and dividing qualities. In this dualism space can develop in all possible options and variations. These characteristics of space may offer new political, economic and social paradigms

for post-socialist Russia, but may also hamper the evolvement of the North as home for their residents.

The contemporary northern spatiality in Russia is without doubt moving towards integration on the global level, which is also having its effect within the country. This, however, does not mean the classification of the entire country as “northern”. Both inclusion and exclusion can occur simultaneously. Only with their multiple and constantly interacting characteristics we can understand local, regional and national forms of geographically diverse practices and identities.

In spite of hot debates around the North during the last two decades the crisis of northern definition continues and will no doubt continue for years. However, the ongoing political and academic discussions around the northern lines show that definition of the North cannot be only limited to legal criteria that should be scientifically ‘measured’ and recorded. A new ‘northern dimension’ of Russia requires careful reconsideration of the legal representation of the North that was established in a different historical context. It is not surprising that some experts suggest keeping the legal base that is already proven by experience and change it only gradually through the introduction of new parameters for defining the northern regions.

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