

LIVES ON THE MOVE:

Social Spaces and Systems of Inequality among *Vakhtoviki* – A Qualitative Empirical Account of Long-distance Commute Work



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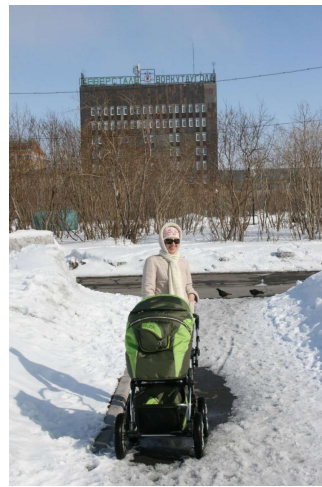
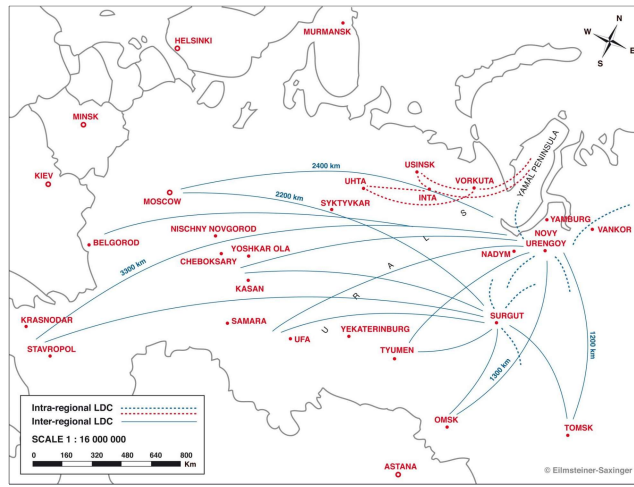
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Labour force provision in remote and climatically harsh regions around the polar circle has been a major issue in the creation of a successful energy sector since the Soviet Union era onwards. Today extraction sites of hydrocarbon resources in Russia continuously shift northwards and arctic off-shore deposits are being prospected. Although in the Russian Far North the number of urban settlements exceeds that of other sub-arctic regions, the growing labour demand is met only through long-distance commuters (LDC).

For economically disadvantaged settlements both in the North and in the South of Russia commuting to new deposits in the Arctic region provides alternative income for the families of workers and has the potential to support diversified development at the community level. Both economic diversification and LDC appear to be potentials for keeping these towns long-term viable.

Qualitative Methodology: mobile and multi-sited field-setting, accompanying workers on commuter trains, long-term field research at the work in the North and the home regions.

Multidisciplinary research: the project incorporates ethnography, history and policy analysis.



RQ: How are Home – Journey – on Duty related to each other for those who repeatedly leave and those who remain behind?

A life spent constantly on the move, back and forth, is common to all LDC and characterised by three meaningful spaces: *Home – Journey – on Duty* which affect workers and their families. Some LDC describe their lives as split “into two halves” and others as leading “double lives”. The reason for that is not the mere physical separation of a life at HOME and a life ON DUTY. Workers are drawn into different social settings with their own rules and customs, joys, hardships, expectations, obligations and hierarchies. Therefore, understanding the coping strategies, motivation for and resistance toward LDC forms a crucial basis for perspectives on labour potentials in extractive industries.

RQ: How did the itinerant lifestyles of inter-regional LDC change with the passage of time from the late Soviet period onwards until the last decade?

Integration of a historical and a contemporary perspective enables understanding of structural changes and changes of people’s life with the passage of time. This is of particular importance in the context of structural and symbolic changes in LDC labour organisation through the transformation period from Soviet Union to the Russian Federation.

Increasingly LDC have changed community life and perceptions about moving. It is important to consider how this form of labour is integrated in home communities and how it is passed on to the next generation.

RQ: How does LDC impact socio-economic development and community viability of sending regions both in the South and the North?

From an economic point of view, LDC is commonly considered as the more cost efficient approach, if compared to the construction of new resource towns. The increased use of LDC has important implications for the sending regions as well. LDC impacts community viability through providing home regions of employees with revenues in the form of northern salaries usually spent in the place of living. On the other hand, LDC causes a temporary but constant brain-drain from the sending places since worker’s involvement in the community life is limited by the specifics of the work. How do communities and regions respond to macro-level structures of LDC?

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

- Distance becomes “normality”: LDC from central parts of Russia have incorporated the “North” as well as the temporal and geographical distance into their lived social space. The north is no longer “unknown” territory. Vast distance emotionally shrinks and seems to “vanish”. This also holds true for family members.
- The development of coping strategies, of ideas and values to this way of life is not only a personal matter. Agency results also from experiences passed on by peers and older generations. In sending regions LDC has turned into social practice that shapes community life and perspectives of a region. Regular absence of family members is not regarded as deviant. Mobile livelihood has been institutionalised through e.g. vocational schools preparing for LDC in the hydrocarbon sector.
- Objections to LDC result primarily from unclear working conditions, lacking knowledge about the north and its entrepreneurial culture, unfavourable shift-rosters, unsatisfying transport facilities and housing conditions as well as labour safety concerns.
- On the other hand, LDC provides a comparatively high income in a solid economic sphere that can secure the social status of the individual, the family and which raises opportunities for the children’s future, all of which are fundamental values in that society.
- LDC does not necessarily negatively impact community well-being.

