The Role of the Long-Distance Commute Worker (LDC) in Connecting the Northern with Central Russian Regions: Influences of LDC on the host (Vorkuta, Novy Urengoy) and home communities (Republic of Bashkortostan)

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We examine the long-distance commuting (LDC) of inter-regional workers as a factor effecting the development of both host-communities, located in the Russian Far North, and the workers’ home places located in Central Russia. Both of the cities we studied in the North, Vorkuta in the Komi Republic and Novy Urengoy in the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous District, are hubs for the distribution of inter-regional LDC workers to fill positions on the remote sites of the petroleum industry. Despite these common general characteristics, both towns have different histories in terms of the type of extractive industries they host and the challenges they faced in terms of economic development over the past two decades. Vorkuta is a coal mining region, whereas Novy Urengoy is the center of the Russian gas industry. Whereas Vorkuta experienced the influx of inter-regional LDC only during the most recent few years – especially through its proximity to the extraction fields of the Yamal Peninsula and the construction site of the Yamal-Europe pipeline, Novy Urengoy is a traditional base and hub town for LDC workers since this flexible method of labor force provision was introduced in the early 1980s.

Residents of both Northern cities frequently see the influx of mobile workers from the central parts of Russia as a problematic development. Key sources of unhappiness include rising housing prices and the perception of the workers’ deviant behavior on the trains to and from the city or in the cities itself. The cause for concern, however, is that inter-regional commuters provide labor at lower costs and therefore force local workers into an uncompetitive position on the Northern labor market.

Interestingly, neither city keeps data on the potential of this mobile group for developing the local economy. This absence of information is particularly striking in the case of Novy Urengoy, where shift workers have been active for two decades, with their numbers increasing in recent years.

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The Republic of Bashkortostan, located in the southern part of the Ural mountains, which serves as an example of a sending region of LDC workers in this article, boasts a nearly one hundred year tradition of oil extraction and industry. Accordingly, this region has been providing qualified personnel to the northern hydrocarbon industries since the 1960s as migrants to the North and from the late 1970s onwards as inter-regional LDC workers. Today the Russian petroleum industry has an increasing demand for workers with a wide range of qualification levels. People from numerous places in the Republic of Bashkortostan are working in the Russian North today. The region and its family networks benefit to a great extent from the revenues sent home by employees in the North. These remittances are a crucial source of revenue for the Bashkortostani economy given the still disadvantaged socio-economic situation of central Russian regions outside the capitals of Moscow and St. Petersburg. Even though Bashkortostan is one of the central Russian regions with a comparably well-developed and diversified economy, socio-economic mobility for individual residents strongly depends on jobs in the North because there are high unemployment rates in the rural areas and smaller towns of the republic.

Our central argument is that LDC is a process which links Russia’s Northern and Central regions through the mobile lives of people travelling thousands of kilometers for work and new life- and job-experiences. In this way, Russia’s northern cities are not remote “islands” either of wealth and/or of extreme harshness and remoteness as often perceived by outsiders. There are tight regional relationships bolstered by the people commuting back and forth.

Geographical distance vanishes if space is perceived from a social dimension. The people of Bashkortostan benefit from their traditional linkages to Northern work brigades, the recruitment practices of companies and previously the Soviet state, and extensive kin-relationships and regional networks spread out across the North, because these ties link them to a wealthy space in the North that helps spur development in the South. Today these ties provide increased accessibility to an industrial sector, which is the most profitable and most sustainable in Russia today.

Not surprisingly, the growing willingness of workers to commute to the North combined with the strong demand for increasingly cheaper laborers on the part of an industry that acts not just in a national framework, but under the influence of a global liberalized market brings about a key problem: degrading work conditions and declining salaries. This downward pressure on salaries holds true for the local workers in the North as well as for the
increasing number of inter-regional LDC workers from the central Russian regions (and not just the ones from our case study region of Bashkortostan).

Our analysis shows how long-distance commuting has changed the life of host and home communities and how LDC has become a linkage that works to increase the social-spatial proximity of Russia’s northern and central regions.