Central Asian Migrants as New Actors in Russia's Arctic Urban Landscape

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Urban sustainability in Arctic regions has multiple facets, and social sustainability is one of them. Urban social sustainability can be defined as a set of elements includes equity, diversity, social cohesion, quality of life, and governance.1 This aspect of sustainability is especially important as the world trend toward urbanization is fundamentally changing the human and natural environments, including in Arctic regions. Among the elements of urban social sustainability, such as diversity, governance and social cohesion, is situated the migration question: migration is the driver of urbanization.

This memo investigates one of the most unknown faces of Russia's Arctic urban landscapes: the presence of migrant populations from abroad, in particular populations whose culture is marked, in one way or another, by Muslim traditions.

The Russian case is not unique. In Canada, Alberta is home to a growing Muslim community: the largest mosque in the country is located in Calgary, and the town of Fort MacMurray, an outpost for oil sand exploitation, has opened an Islamic school that teaches the Alberta curriculum from an Islamic perspective. Svalbard, which has a specific legal status enabling persons not having received political asylum in European space to settle locally, has a rapidly growing community of Middle Eastern migrants (from Iran, Iraq, etc.). In Russia, the phenomenon is even more marked: there are hundreds of thousands of persons of Central Asian origin, principally from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, working there year round – added to which are the Azeris, Tatars and Bashkirs that have been present since the Soviet period, and a rising number of Dagestanis.

These migrants are often left out of analyses of local urban landscapes, which tend to concentrate on the arrival of indigenous peoples in town, and on migration movements of Russians between European and Arctic regions. The “Muslims” of the Arctic are, however, just as populous as the indigenous groups: today, the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous District has as many Nenets as it does Kazan Tatars (about 5.5%), as many Khant as Azerbaijani (close to 10,000), and Central Asians, whose numbers are difficult to calculate because they are often undocumented.2 This memo briefly explores the main trends of Central Asian migration to Russia's Arctic cities, and outlines the contours of the ongoing research.

A New Phenomenon….with a Historical Past

If the massive arrivals of Central Asians in the Russian Arctic are a new phenomenon dating from the 2000s, they are part of a peculiar, larger historical context that connected Muslim regions of the Soviet Union to the Arctic.

In Azerbaijan, which has exploited its oil wealth since the start of the 20th century, many Azeris quickly became specialized in the oil sector. In the 1960s, exploitation began on the large deposits of Western Siberia, in particular in the Khanty-Mansi autonomous district, by Azeri engineers who had trained at the Azerbaijan Oil and Chemistry Institute of Baku. As a result, there exists an Azeri community that is relatively large and well organized in towns such as Surgut.3 In the 1970s, it was the turn of the Tatars and Bashkirs to specialize in the oil industry and take up positions in the sector, which they did right throughout Western Siberia. In the
1990s and 2000s, the number of Azerbaijanis multiplied in the Arctic towns, this time not in the oil sector, but in the domain of services, in particular, the small trade and bazaar economy.

The case is similar for the Central Asian, as well as for the North Caucasians, in particular the Dagestani peoples. With the exception of some young Kazakhs trained in the Kazakhstani oil and gas institutes and who have moved to Russia, the Central Asians who arrived in the post-Soviet period in Russia’s Arctic cities are not engineers, but mainly unskilled workers. They thus cannot be sociologically compared to the Azeri, Tatar and Bashkir graduates who preceded them, though many Tajiks and Kyrgyz, settled in Russia for a decade now, have succeeded in climbing the professional ladder and are today positioned as mid-level skilled personnel. Despite these differences, the imprint on the urban landscape left by these Central Asian migrants is in part similar to the longer term one of the Azeris, Tatars, and Bashkirs: sites of Muslim worship have become one of the most surprising faces of Russia’s Arctic cities, and Arctic markets are in part supplied by so-called “Asian” or “southern” produce, such as fruits and vegetables.

When Demographic and Economic Trends Meet

This inflow of Central Asian migrants can be explained by long-term demographic trends. The population of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan is particularly young (half the population is less than 20 years of age) and the employment prospects in their countries of origin are slim, or very poorly paid (GDP per capita is about 2,200 dollars). Labor migrations have thus quickly become the “safety valve” of the Central Asian economies: Tajiks were the first to migrate in the 1990s, pushed by the civil war, followed in the 2000s by Uzbeks and Kyrgyz. Mainly settled in Russia, Central Asian migrants are trying to move to the major cities of the country, to the Moscow region, but the best places are already taken and the new migrants are pushed toward less attractive regions. Since the second half of the 2000s, they have formed the majority of the migratory flows to South Siberia (Buryatia and other regions) and to the Far East (Vladivostok, Khabarovsk), far ahead of the Chinese. They also have also taken advantage of the industrial boom of some Arctic and sub-Arctic cities, from Khanty-Mansiisk to Novyi Urengoy and Norilsk.

If the major industrial cities of the Russian Arctic were still attracting people in the 1990s, as they were the only ones to offer salaries in the worst periods of crisis, the situation has changed today: high wages and Western living conditions are to be found mainly in the European regions of the country. The ethnically-Russian skilled workers continue to converge there since the major oil and gas companies recruit them at competitive rates. However, an entire section of the urban economy only attracts labor migrants, not Russian citizens. This is the case with jobs in the construction sector (for industrial infrastructure as much as for housing), public roads (street cleaning and public transport), and the small services economy (cafés, restaurants, markets, and domestic services). The Central Asian labor migrants are precisely to be found in these sectors, and sometimes enter into competition with indigenous populations pressed into the rural exodus. As elsewhere, the private sector plays an ambiguous role in the socio-economic situation of the migrants: Russian firms are scarcely interested in legalizing their workforce, even if the specificity of Arctic towns – which monitor work and residency permits far more strictly than in the rest of Russia – means a reduced proportion of migrants are undocumented. The corruption of the security services, however, remains everywhere the same, impelling the migrants to remain in illegality.
The sustainability of this need for workforce is problematic. The major industrial construction sites of Russia's High North, for instance Gazprom's Yamal Megaproject, necessitate a great deal of cheap labor with little regard for working conditions. However, once the infrastructure is completed, this need will drop rapidly. This situation risks presenting as-yet unknown difficulties to the Arctic towns: historical trends in similar situations in other countries show that a large portion of migrants tend to settle down permanently, and in families, even if the initial employment conditions are not fulfilled. As for the sectors of services and public works, as far as they are concerned, they are unlikely to fall unless the urban fabric itself contracts in a lasting way. A large part of these migrants will therefore tend to build their life in Arctic towns.

**Social Cohesion as a New Challenge for Arctic Cities**

The settlement, medium or long term, of migrants from Central Asia or the Caucasus in the Arctic towns has led to several changes in the urban landscape: a growing number of mosques and requests for new places of worship even in small localities previously devoid of Muslims; the emergence of ethnic neighborhoods, with their specialized boutiques, restaurants, cafés and bazaars; new sociabilities of migrant communities (*obshchiny*) which seek to recreate the kind of social gatherings they enjoy at home; and specific strategies of mutual aid. Central Asian migrants, for example, tend to group together by nationality or by region, while the Dagestani have recreated their *jamaat* (religiously based communities, often Sufi), and mixed marriages with Russians or indigenous people are multiplying. Today the main Muslim Spiritual Directorates of Russia are forced to take stock of this situation and so urgently named new Imams for Arctic cities, principally from Central Asia.5

The patterns of mobility are changing as well: rare are Central Asian or Caucasian migrants that arrive directly from their region of origin in the High North. They have often worked for several months or years in another town of Russia, in particular in west or south Siberia, where they have left women and children. Mobility is thus triangular, unfolding between the place of work, the place of the family's habitation, and the country of origin.

These new actors in Arctic cities also influence collective and individual identities. For several decades, the inhabitants of Arctic cities have developed strong feelings of belonging expressed through several narratives: the remoteness from the continent (*materik*), the harsh climatic environment, human domination over nature, contact with indigenous cultures, and so on. Today, new discursive drivers have been added to the puzzle of High North identities: the destruction of the social fabric by massive emigration, the will to stay and be proud of one's "small motherland" (*malaia rodina*) despite the difficulties, and the stakes of social cohesion linked to the appearance of new urban populations. The subtle hierarchies of classification of populations into autochthonous (*korennye*, but not necessarily indigenous) and newcomers, and the different underlying legitimacies contribute to transforming local social sustainability. The presence in some towns of skinhead groups, such as in Vorkuta or Novyi Urengoy, has given rise, as it has elsewhere in Russia, to affrays between far right youths and migrant groups, and the "interethnic tensions" there are often experienced by the inhabitants themselves.

The Russian authorities are not neutral actors in these processes of identity transformation. Anti-migrant xenophobia is broadly instrumentalized by the Kremlin to strengthen the Putin regime, to forge a consensus between the population and its elites, and to avoid tackling fundamental problems, such as bad governance and difficulties in implementing strategies. The
presence of migrants is thus routinely associated with criminality and drug-trafficking, as well as the poor quality of products for sale (food and textiles). Recently anti-migrant legislation is spreading like wildfire in Arctic Russia. As such, in December 2012, the governor of Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous District decided to no longer to authorize entry of people into the region except those with an invitation from a resident or a work permit issued more than thirty days beforehand, and has placed check points at the airport, on the main highway and at the railway station. The authorities of Novyi Urengoy have reinforced this decision by affirming that they have restricted the access of Russian citizens and foreigners to the town because it is on the Russian border. In both cases, these decisions, supported by Vladimir Putin personally, are grounded in anti-migrant narratives: Arctic regions have allegedly seen a surge in criminality due to the presence of Central Asian and Caucasian migrants, and must also tackle head-on the alleged risk of Islamic radicalism.

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Far from the folkloric clichés which make Arctic regions out to be simple virgin spaces strewn with rare indigenous inhabitants leading so-called traditional ways of life, Russia’s Arctic cities are undergoing evolutions similar to those of numerous other urban spaces both in the country and beyond. Arctic cities are becoming more international, with populations of ethnic origin but also with more diversified professional backgrounds. Their inhabitants must learn to build new forms of sociability that will have a huge political, social and cultural impact on the long-term sustainability of these Arctic cities.

1 Three main research institutions work on social sustainability issues: the Oxford Institute for Sustainable Development; the Sustainable Europe Research Institute; and the Institute for Sustainable Futures at the University of Technology Sydney.
4 Use of the term “Russian citizen” is ambiguous since the migration patterns of North Caucasians, although Russian citizens, is similar to that of foreign migrants, and their social integration is just as difficult.