

LABOUR MIGRATION IN THE WESTERN SIBERIAN NORTH: LIVES AND SOCIAL SPACES OF LONG-DISTANCE COMMUTE WORKERS

A Qualitative Empirical Account

Who are the people behind the extraction processes of crude oil and natural gas in the Russian Federation?

This research project takes an ethnographic look from the individual and community perspective on the complex inter-relation of natural resources, power structures, and social-spatial particularities in north-western Siberia, where the most important oil and gas deposits of the RF are located.

The lives of LDC are shaped by three meaningful social spaces HOME – JOURNEY – ON DUTY. A relational social-spatial theoretical approach allows the material, physical and socio-economically characterised spatial structure to be linked with the agency and responses of the people involved. Social-spatial impacts turn out to be closely related to inequality structures.

The LDC known in Russia as *Vakhtoviki*, have become an increasingly important work force

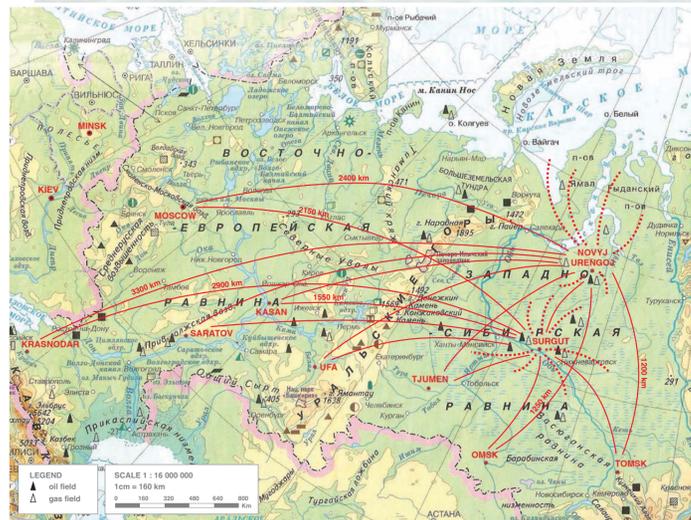
due to the fact that hydrocarbon extraction sites are continuously shifting northwards beyond the polar circle and further away from northern urban settlements. LDC lead a life on the move, characterised by a cyclical presence at and absence from home, subordination to strict company-regimes in closed work camps, and long journeys to and from work sites.

Whereas inter-regional LDC from southern and central parts of the RF make journeys of up to several thousand kilometres, the intra-regional LDC are permanent residents of base towns near oil and gas-fields, but the latter may still commute over several hundreds of kilometres. Both groups work on shift rosters, i.e. 30, 45 or 60 days on shift with perhaps 30 days of recreation. LDC are constantly on the move, travelling back and forth. This involves a constant cycling presence at and absence from home, and regular subordination to the regimes in closed LDC-camps.

Understanding the coping strategies, motivation for and resistance toward LDC forms a crucial basis for perspectives on labour potentials

in a sector where demand for highly skilled workers is enormous. 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. This basic theoretical contextualisation may apply to LDC regardless of where it takes place in the world.

LDC Long-distance Commuter(s) and Long-distance Commute Work
 RF Russian Federation
 KMAO Khanty-Mansi Autonomous District
 YNAO Yamal-Nenets Autonomous District
 CIS Commonwealth of Independent States



City development in northern towns during the last two decades: communal accommodation in wooden barracks is gradually replaced by contemporary urban architecture (Novyj Urengoj)



Private construction activities in the north and south are possible through high incomes of LDC and private or bank loans (Radushnyy, KMAO, Bresi, Republic of Chuvashia)



Many people from Bresi (Republic of Chuvashia) work on the Yambug gasfield, also the next generation is expected to be hired there; social security for pensioners is enhanced through offspring's income from LDC



Railroute from Tjumen to KMAO and YNAO



Airports like: Moscow, Ufa, Samara, Belgorod or Kazan are hubs for the transfer of workers to northern base towns. Some companies have an own aircraft fleet and own air fields at the extraction sites.

JOURNEY

is not a mere physical activity of connecting distant places. JOURNEY as a social space itself is shaped by hierarchies and inequality structures. Liberalised market conditions have changed standards and costs for public transport and have also provoked fundamental changes in working conditions. Workers who were previously provided with flight tickets by employers may nowadays be forced to fund their own journeys and therefore choose the train. A one-way trip from Moscow to YNAO takes three days by train (compared to four hours by aeroplane) which substantially cuts into workers' recreation time. Furthermore, JOURNEY is an emotional shift from one social sphere to another and an activity of connecting meaningful places. It might be seen as an act of integrating spaces.



On the way to the work-site in the Tundra and the Taiga



Different housing standards: worker-camp at the Yambug peninsula; low-standard housing in carriage-cottages on a mobile work-site

HOME

A life characterised by alternating presence and absence of a family member may challenge traditional gender roles since, for instance, household and family duties can be shifted from the wife's responsibility to the husband's when he is back home for a month. Father-child relationships may be intensified. The wife is fully responsible for family affairs during husband's absence. Absence from family and spouse may provide space to obtain personal fulfilment through being a member of different social networks that he, she or the children can join when alone. Commuting single mothers usually employ a highly sophisticated social network of friends, neighbours and relatives for the organisation of child-care during absence. LDC's particular family arrangements have a substantial influence on children's views on LDC as well as on family and gender organization.

During the long leisure time at HOME, a key element to coping successfully with shift-labour is satisfying activities: e.g. creative work as an artist or a second bread-winning job. Activities such as constructing private houses are common and are also connected to raising social capital within the community.

The recreation period also includes medical care and prophylactics like sports and physiotherapy. Today, not all employers cover these expenses. Risk of alcohol abuse among LDC during recreation period is high and connected to domestic violence, social exclusion, health problems, loss of employment etc.



Life on commuter trains



JOURNEY

has a social dimension resulting from an individual's position in the work context, which, in turn, substantially influences his or her private context. That applies e.g. to the question of why inter-regional LDC do not opt for a permanent residence in the north. It may also go some way to explaining intra-regional LDC's regular trips during the year to the regions of their origin, which they left twenty or thirty years ago. Many of these places are now located in countries of the CIS. Even if they prefer to stay in the RF after retirement, many wish to be buried there and save money for the transfer of their remains. In this way, mobility and the impacts of the structuration of the inter-relatedness of spaces can even transcend the limits of life for some LDC.



At the work-site: canteen, operations room, smoking area in a natural gas processing plant



REGION AND MULTI-SITED FIELD-WORK

ON DUTY HOME Novyj Urengoj, base town in YNAO (2007, 2008)
 In the north: Novyj Urengoj (intra-regional LDC);
 In central Russia: Republic of Chuvashia and Republic of Mari El (2007, 2008), Republic of Bashkortostan (2009) (inter-regional LDC)
JOURNEY Commuter trains (slight extent aeroplane) from Moscow, Kaban and Ufa to work-sites along the main rail-route to the northern oil and gas towns: e.g. Tjumen; Surgut, Pyt-Jakh etc. (KMAO); Nojabrsk, Novyj Urengoj (YNAO)
JOURNEY Mobile field-site; accompanying workers to and from work (up to 3.5 days one way).

Methodology amongst others: participant observation, narrative interviews

— routes of inter-regional LDC
 - - - routes of intra-regional LDC

SOME PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

- 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.
- The extent and shape of changing and degrading working conditions through the restructuring and marketisation processes of the whole hydrocarbon sector varies among companies. Contemporary sub-contracting systems have had an especially negative affect on employees of smaller and non-state companies since labour rights are more easily bypassed.

- Young workers – especially those who are not socialised to this way of life – cope with LDC only with difficulty and regard it as an interim solution.
- 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 is profoundly shaped by gender differences: difficulties in child care for commuting mothers, sexual harassment at the work place, prostitution, unequal job opportunities; majority of workforce are men etc.
- LDC is not necessarily perceived as negative.