

## ***Severnye Prostory* -- The Northern Expanses 1985-2000**

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In this review article I explore central issues raised in the journal *Severnye Prostory* (*The Northern Expanses*) and the changes that took place between the Soviet and post-Soviet periods as regards the journal's coverage of those issues.<sup>1</sup> My textual analysis focuses on the presentation of indigenous cultures, land use and reindeer breeding between 1985 and 2000. I selected two, three-year periods, roughly divided into the Soviet (1985, 1988, 1991) and post-Soviet eras (1994, 1997, 2000). These samples represent crucial moments of political and socio-economic change in the USSR and the Russian Federation.

### ***Severnye Prostory***

The journal was first published in 1985<sup>2</sup> as a supplement to the Soviet agricultural journal, *Sel'skaya Nov'* (*The Agrarian Virgin Soil*).<sup>3</sup> It was initiated by members of the political elite who copied the format of specialized Soviet journals to cover regions of the European North, Siberia and the Far East.<sup>4</sup> It has published on topics ranging from Siberian fauna and flora, resource exploitation, structural development, indigenous ecological knowledge, and folklore to glasshouse construction, northern cuisine, crosswords, legal advice and more. The journal addresses a broad readership of indigenous peoples, immigrant workers, and scientists. In Soviet times, *Severnye Prostory* (SP) was distributed from the Baltic states to Kazakhstan.

<sup>1</sup> The focus here is not a comparison of popular and scientific literature on the so-called 'peoples of the North,' but a qualitative analysis of the content and language in just *one* of many newspapers and journals.

<sup>2</sup> In 1985 the journal was described as: 'Illustrirovannoe prilozhenie k obshchestvenno -- politicheskomu i nauchno -- populyarnomu zhurnalu "Sel'skaya Nov'" (SP 1985: 1). About 50 percent of its readers lived in regions of the North, Siberia and the Far East. The other 50 percent of subscribers came from southern and western Republics.

<sup>3</sup> 'Ezhemesyachnyj obshchestvenno-politicheskij i nauchno-populjarnyj zhurnal Ministerstva sel'skogo chozyaystva SSSR i CK profsoyuzov rabotnikov sel'skogo chozyaystva.' *Sel'skaja Nov'* began printing in 1966. It was published in the agrarian publishing house *kolos*. The content of *Sel'skaja Nov'* was aimed primarily at *sovkhoz* and *kolkhoz* workers.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with V.D. Golubchikova, April 4, 1998.

Between 1985 and 1991 its staff included journalists from *Sel'skaya Nov'*, but the majority of writers came from other disciplines and included biologists, social anthropologists, sociologists, indigenous writers, physicians, teachers, tundra workers, reindeer breeders, environmentalists and more. They published articles, wrote editorial comments and communicated their professional expertise.<sup>5</sup> The texts were censored through the sending of drafts between editors and censorship offices in Moscow for 'revision.'<sup>6</sup> In 1990, following *glasnost* and *perestroika*, censorship was officially abolished though it continued informally. Furthermore, since 1989, *Severnye Prostory* has been registered as an 'independent' periodical.

Thus '[...] the legal foundation was laid for the founding of print entities independent of state direction' (Mickiewicz 1999:218), and print media began to change in the mid-1980s. For example, in *Severnye Prostory*, we find an emerging coverage of religion and more critical reporting concerning Siberian industrial development. Prior to becoming independent, in fact, *Severnye Prostory* was not purely an instrument of the state. Between 1985 and 1988 critical discussions were taking place within the journal. Indigenous writers such as V. Sangi, E. Ajpin, as well as social scientists and members of administrative bodies (such as ministers and local leaders of *sovkhozes*), expressed their criticism of seventy years of the construction of *homo et femina sovieticae* (Slezkine/Diment 1993:218) in *Severnye Prostory*. Soviet cadres, particularly indigenous intellectuals, developed their criticism in this journal.<sup>7</sup> As members of the Writer's Union or as Duma deputies these public figures were thought to know more about the functioning of public media than, for example, tundra workers.

<sup>5</sup> No more than 10% of professional journalists published in the journal. (Interview with V.D. Golubchikova, April 4, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Interview with V.D. Golubchikova, April 4, 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Gellner observed that one Soviet goal was to create an educated local and exchangeable population of cadres, which were thought to prevent the development of certain forms of nationalism (Gellner 1991:46).

## ***Socialist Development***

Soviet politics focused on creating a socialist civilization centred around technological development (Graham 1993:49-67). The political elite was interested in spreading Soviet achievements among all people(s) of the Soviet Union, regardless of their so-called 'backwardness' or 'undeveloped' status (as was thought to be the case among the peoples of the North). State planners hoped to draw '[...] the indigenous population out from timelessness [...] and [...] [to bring] them into history' (Grant in Slezkine/Diment 1993:227).

The building of a socialist society reaching up to the vast territories of the North and the Pacific ocean was, in addition to other political agendas, an important part of state propaganda. In 1985, Vladimir Orlov, the first representative of the Ministry Council of the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic (RSFSR) stated: 'Social changes obviously influenced the fate of the northern nationalities. They lived in primitive backwardness and were headed toward physical extinction until the Revolution. [...] the regular help of the state and the support of brother nations meant a historical transition from patriarchal family-based structures to a developed socialist society.' (SP 1985/ 1:2) <sup>8</sup> The meaning of Orlov's words was reproduced in various forms in the pages of *Severnye Prostory*: 'The Chukchian geologist, [and] the Nenez oilworker [...]' (SP 1985/1:3) were to participate in the integration of *all* peoples, regardless of social and ethnic background. In Soviet times equality had to be guaranteed. Slezkine's work is particularly helpful here, in showing how minorities in the Soviet North were considered part of a *communal house of cultures* (Slezkine 1994b:414-452).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> On socialist reconstruction see Eidlitz-Kuoljok (1985:38) or Slezkine (1994a:187ff).

<sup>9</sup> According to official statements '[...] ethnicity was seen as universal and irreducible' Slezkine (1994a:258). Ethnic boundaries in Soviet minority politics were more or less thought to be stable collective identities. This can be seen in the concept of (collective) ethnicity as a form of transition to a Soviet socialist model, where the culture of folklore dominated as a transitional form to a socialist society. This "folklore concept" is still visible today and a concept for generating, arguing and transporting problematic forms of cultural difference in political contexts.

At the same time, however, the wealth of the territories behind the Ural mountains, also perceived of as ‘rough land’ (*Surovaya zemlya*; SP 1985/1:2), could only be opened and exploited with the help of modern technologies. Ecological resources were viewed as economically and strategically valuable resources to be tamed and tapped into through what was called ‘a battle with nature.’<sup>10</sup> In the 1980s, Soviet models of reconstruction often opposed indigenous models of knowledge. The Soviet Union and its policy of industrial and cultural development in the North was understood by some of the journal’s authors, in contrast to development in capitalist countries, as a way of taking care of, and looking after, the needs of indigenous peoples. As late as the mid-1980s, indigenous intellectuals were sometimes in favour of this version of socialist development. As one put it in 1985:

The North is reviving for real and for a long time to come. Before the XVII party congress, where [political and economical development] is discussed, you understand with all clearness: [...] a significant part of the arctic shores and the tundra zones belong to the Soviet Union. Our people [the Chuckchi] can be the first in history to demonstrate, in the region of the midnight sun, all the achievements of socialism. (SP 1985/ 3:2)<sup>11</sup>

For the most part, however, indigenous commentaries, mostly from cadres (Kojanto in SP 1988/1:11-12), criticized insufficient education, poor medical care and the general lack of infrastructure (SP 1988/1:25). Indigenous authors also commented sharply on the unscrupulous economic and industrial exploitation of natural resources in Siberia (SP 1991/1-37:3). They complained about these ‘immoral practices’ and we see the beginning of demands for a share in profits and for the compensation of local inhabitants.

Intellectuals were concerned with the exploitation of natural resources from the journal’s inception. As early as 1985, poet and journalist E. Aypin criticized the oil industry for

<sup>10</sup> As the poet Zazurbin put it at the First Congress of Siberian writers in 1926: ‘Let the crumbling green beast of Siberia be dressed in the cement armor of cities, armed with stone ratters of factory chimneys, forged with taut hoops of railroads. Let the taiga be scorched, cut down, let the steppes be trampled. Let it be as it inevitably must be. Indeed only on cement and iron will a fraternal union of all people be built, an iron brotherhood of all mankind’ (see Shtil’mark 1976;*Taiezhnye dali*, Moscow 1976, p. 205, in: Shtil’mark 1992:431).

<sup>11</sup> The party congress took place from 25.2. to 6.3. 1986.

devastating nature and the decline of traditional land use (1985/4:24). In the last issue of 1988, R. Rugin put it this way: 'Jamal gives a lot to the rest of the country, but receives very little back' (SP 1988/ 6:3). Furthermore, when asked by the ethnographer A. Pika about compensation for indigenous inhabitants, V. Sangi<sup>12</sup> explained bitterly that, '[...for] hundreds of years [...] they [the Russians] confiscated [...] what they could carry without any compensation' (SP 1991/ 9:9).

Politicians like V. Etylen, the chairman of the *Chukotskiy Okruchnyy Sovet* (Chukotkan Soviet District) and *Narodnyy Deputat* (Deputy of the Soviet Parliament), discussed the legal status of autonomous regions, such as Chukotka and the Jamalo – Neneckij, in the hopes of promoting regional legal and economic rights and issues concerning traditional land use (see SP 1991/ 8:2). Traditional land use<sup>13</sup> and the compensation policies of neighbouring Alaska and Canada,<sup>14</sup> served as models for indigenous Siberian intellectuals in discussions about land rights and higher cultural independence in the Soviet setting (SP 1991/8:7).

During the final years of the Soviet Union, new possibilities to found private economic units were generated legislatively. Contributors to *Severnnye Prostory* argued that registering as an *obshchina*<sup>15</sup> -- *rodovoe khozaystvo* (family or clan based unit), with a focus on traditional land use, would strengthen indigenous ecological knowledge and traditional economies (SP 1997/1-2:25). However, since *sovkhoses* and *kolkhozes*<sup>16</sup> remained dominant productive units, registering as an independent economic unit was complicated in practice (SP 1991/8-45:2).

<sup>12</sup> In 1985 Sangi was *sekretar' pravlenija Sojuza pisatelej* (Council Secretary of the Writers Union) of the RSFSR as well as *predsedatel' Soveta po literaturam narodov Krajnego Severa i dal'nego Vostoka* (Chairman of the Council for the Literatures of the Peoples of the Far North and Far East) (SP 1985/ 2:24). In March 1990 he was elected first president of the Federal Association of the Indigenous Peoples of the Soviet North, Siberia and the Far East.

<sup>13</sup> In western literature the term TEK (Traditional Ecological Knowledge) is used as a *terminus technicus* in dealing with local ecological expertise; see Nuttall 1998.

<sup>14</sup> See for example the *Inuvialuit* treaty from 1984: [http://www.aboriginalcanada.gc.ca/abdt/interface/interface2.nsf/LaunchFrameSet?OpenAgent&RefDoc=13.7.3.html&URL=http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/Pubs\\_pol/dcgpubs/ContPolNotices/97-8E-02.html&altlang=http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/Pubs\\_pol/dcgpubs/ContPolNotices/97-8E-02.html&disp=e&end](http://www.aboriginalcanada.gc.ca/abdt/interface/interface2.nsf/LaunchFrameSet?OpenAgent&RefDoc=13.7.3.html&URL=http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/Pubs_pol/dcgpubs/ContPolNotices/97-8E-02.html&altlang=http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/Pubs_pol/dcgpubs/ContPolNotices/97-8E-02.html&disp=e&end), 26.12.02

<sup>15</sup> *Obshchina* is a legal term used to connote a family- or clan-based unit often linked to traditional economies, see <http://www.systema.ru/search/Bdoc.asp?Id=60394>; 26.12.02. For a more detailed analysis of property types in the Taimyr region see: Ziker 2002.

<sup>16</sup> *Sovetskoe Khozaystvo* are more or less specialized agrarian entities under state control, whereas *Kollektivnoe Khozaystvo* means a farmer's cooperative formed by communities or farms where private property is largely given up.

### ***Post-1991: Land Use***

As we have seen, contributors to the journal argued that indigenous land use and access to local renewable and non-renewable resources have been used in these territories for centuries. Yet in 1997 some indigenous politicians argued that their people should not be given any special socioeconomic status. Some spokespersons considered it a mistake to link indigenous Northerners exclusively to traditional activities like reindeer breeding (SP 1997/1-2:24-25). In an interview in 1997, Mr Ojnvīd, an indigenous representative in the state committee for problems of the North, focused on some of the North's problems. The indigenous populations should not have more rights than other citizens, he claimed. Ojnvīd's view reveals a difference among intellectuals following preservationist versus humanitarian views. The former can be connected to juridical texts in which keywords like "tradition, continuity or land use for centuries" are used as protective markers to define indigenous people's rights and territories. A humanitarian viewpoint, such as Ojnvīd's, indicates an emphasis on equal rights for all citizens—one which can lead to inequalities and the political under-representation of indigenous concerns in today's Russia.

Nevertheless, pieces of protective legislation (meaning the indigenous right to use land, as well as the possibility of founding smaller private units) were passed in the 1990s (SP 1997/1-2:24). Criticisms persisted, however: Supporters argued that protective laws and the promotion of indigenous economic associations exist(ed) only on paper (SP 2000/4:5-8). These ongoing discussions about the dependency of indigenous concerns on state legislation demonstrate the fluid process of negotiating cultural and economic rights.

Take, for example, the case of Chukotkan land use, which contributors examined at length in *Severnnye Prostory* in 1994. Indigenous representatives argued that land should be the

property of indigenous communities and not owned privately. Communal structures, one argued, provided better conditions for economic survival (SP 1994/5:18). Patty Gray observed a similar process in her analysis of the Chukotka<sup>17</sup> land-use debate: ‘One of the solutions proposed by indigenous advocates in the 1990s was to give rural residents more local control by allowing them to form *obshchiny*, or ‘ancestral communities,’ a special category of land tenure defined in Russian federal law’ (Gray 2001:2).<sup>18</sup>

(Urban) indigenous intellectuals advocating traditional land use practices generated their own definitions of an ‘authentic’ *tundra/taiga* culture. Moreover, when arguing for local economic interest and territorial rights,<sup>19</sup> indigenous commentaries linked territorial claims to ethnicity. Some indigenous writers developed their expertise as cultural keepers (SP 1997/1-2:17) and as preservationists of an indigenous conscience. Korjak artist K. Kilpalin was quoted as saying: ‘We do not live the way our ancestors lived. We do not respect nature, we went away from it and lost our intuition, we are weakened physically and psychologically. We have to tell the tundra people about this, we have to warn them’ (SP 1997/1-2:70).

The foundation of local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the Federal Association of the Indigenous Peoples of the Soviet North, Siberia and the Far East<sup>20</sup> were logical outgrowths of debates in the 1980s and 1990s concerning indigenous cultural and territorial rights. These organizations have become increasingly important in negotiating and communicating ‘cultural competence’ with local and federal administration agencies. NGOs

<sup>17</sup> Chukotka is a special case because from 1993 to 2000 Governor Nazarov ‘attempted to maintain an iron grip on power at the expense of the development of Chukotka’s economy and, in some extreme cases the very survival of its population’ (Gray 2001:2).

<sup>18</sup> In the Soviet Union two types of property were established: formally assigned territories and common-pool zones surrounding the villages (Ziker 2002:1).

<sup>19</sup> Most conflicts between indigenous peoples and nation states concern territorial issues (Eriksen 1993:126f).

<sup>20</sup> This organization – RAIPON (Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North) – was founded in the spring of 1990, see: <http://www.raipon.org>; 26.12.02.

increasingly advocate legislative measures to improve rural economic and social circumstances and draw on the journal to communicate their positions.

### ***Reindeer Breeding***

During the socialist era, indigenous and non-indigenous contributors to *Severnnye Prostory* made links between reindeer breeding and nomadism as a lifestyle (*bytovoe kochevanie*) to suggest that the indigenous peoples of the North lived an antiquated life (R. Rugin in SP 1988/6:2). The modernization and reorganization of reindeer breeding was thus seen as advantageous to all breeders. According to state planners, increased output and contribution to the pan-Soviet economy would require the transformation of reindeer breeding in accord with large-scale economic goals. This ongoing process of reorganization by the state dominated reindeer breeding from 1937 to 1989 (Anderson 2000:35), reaching its final stage in the late 1980s. Later, many reindeer-breeding *sovkhoses* crashed due to the introduction of a liberal market system and the cutting of state subsidies during Yeltsin's initial years as President.

Thus, much like discussions of land use in the late 1990s, we see arguments and debates on the pages of *Severnnye Prostory* contesting the restructuring of reindeer breeding.<sup>21</sup> Ten years after massive political and economic shifts, global market liberalization, threats to indigenous cultural traditions, and the depletion of biological and mineral resources of the Russian Federation are seen as dangers—as were socialist designs during the previous period (SP 2000/1:6). Renewed calls for a protective state now demand that northern territories be shielded from 'foreign economic occupation' (SP 2000/1:7).

<sup>21</sup> For a more detailed exposition see Bauer 2002: 112-143.



## ***Concluding Remarks***

Since the early 1990s, *Severnnye Prostory*'s focus has gradually shifted from federally oriented topics to regional issues of indigenous economy, ecology and questions of identity. This shift was accompanied by greater interest in circumpolar topics such as land use, militarization, resource policies and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) in arctic and sub-arctic regions, as well as global changes as regards indigenous communities (TRIP treaty).

In both Soviet and post-Soviet media settings, *Severnnye Prostory* presented northern indigenous cultures to its readers, placing special emphasis on northern economies, material culture, social organization and environmental concerns. The journal's aim was to inform all citizens about the unique ecosystems and the cultures of the North, Siberia and the Far East. The policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost* played decisive roles in shaping the content and direction of the journal and raised the hopes of changes in the region, especially after a long period of political stagnation (*zastoy*; SP 1988/4:2). Still, from today's perspective, it is important to take into account the circumstances of intended text production during the journal's earliest years, when the Soviet Union still existed. Despite the political changes taking place at the time, journalists, social scientists and *kolkhoz* workers were subject to powerful state oversight and control.

Nevertheless, initial expectations that *Severnnye Prostory* would become yet another Soviet journal advocating the construction of socialism in the regions of the Russian North, Siberia and the Far East were not met. Although style and content were typical for a Soviet periodical, this "Ogonek of the North" (Schweitzer 1991:88) contained significant criticism of Soviet industrialization policies before 1991. The journal shifted from a vertically structured, state-controlled periodical to a postsocialist one, and the issues and content its editors choose are now judged by its readers.

Thus, particularly from 1988 onward, we see growing ties of indigenous peoples to ‘their’ ecological expertise. The latter was more important for indigenous intellectuals and upcoming NGOs when claiming basic land rights, financial compensations and cultural rights in negotiations with local and state administrations. In the 1990s, the discourse shifted toward self-governance, resource exploitation, conservation of the (local) environment and the stabilization of indigenous peoples’ economic activities and the improvement of their social conditions.

In this regard, it is interesting to follow the specific discourse of reindeer breeding in connection with the settling down of citizens. The journal’s discussions, articles and letters to the editor show a variety of different comments on, and approaches to, this topic. In 1985, under the still strictly authoritarian political system, economic integration was of major concern, while in the 1990s the cultural aspect of reindeer breeding played a more decisive role. Discussions in *Severnye Prostory* about the future of reindeer breeding, then, followed similar discursive changes and patterns taking place in other settings (SP 1997/1-2:25).<sup>22</sup>

In Soviet times, specialists contributing to *Severnye Prostory* promoted the paternalistic development of the northern regions. This changed, albeit slowly, in the 1990s. More and more people of indigenous origin entered positions of political authority (SP 1997/1-2:12-14). The transformation of local administration underpinned a shift from ‘traditional’ concepts of ethno-territorialization (and the pejorative differentiation between the ‘majority’ population and indigenous minorities in the 1980s) to what comes to be understood as the equality of local actors and self-governance in the post-Soviet Russian Federation. As we have seen, reindeer breeding and traditional knowledge about reindeer breeding had been linked to antiquated economic structures. In the 1990s we see the differentiation of ideological approaches; that is to say, distinctions get made between the previously negative connotation of ‘nomadism as a way

<sup>22</sup> Discursive events often cannot be traced immediately. Events like subterranean atomic testing in the Republic of Sacha-Jakutiya were eventually discussed years after their occurrence, during the period of *glasnost* (SP 1991/ 3:13).

of life' and more positive associations with local expertise, regardless of whether those modes and practices were considered traditional.

My analysis suggests that the journal did not fit into the traditional canon of Soviet publications. Even before *perestroika* and *glasnost*, *Severnye Prostory* featured sophisticated discussions of northern topics. Critical voices concerning natural protection and indigenous rights gained in significance from year to year. Thus, when conducting research on the journal's content, we must be persistent in discerning critical reporting, keeping in mind the role of censors, and attempt as much as possible to read between the lines. This is all the more remarkable when we recognize that censorship through the mid-1990s could have endangered the very existence of the young periodical. Today, *Severnye Prostory* is one of numerous periodicals devoted to indigenous cultures and to the social and political situation(s) in Northern Russia and Siberia.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Circulation dropped from about 90,000 per issue in the 1980s to 5,000 issues today.

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