

Reshaping the North of Russia: towards a conception of space

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Abstract

This article analyses the understanding of the North in Russia as a spatial category, drawing on circumpolar characteristics and arguments. Basing on theories of space by Lefebvre and Foucault, space is treated as a geographic, mental and social category. I identify the main tendencies in the construction of northern space as reflected in recent academic and political debates in Russia, and analyse their relation to categories of spatial identity in the reality of Russia. This analysis enables us to evaluate the potential of a promoted Russian northern commonality in comparison to other alternatives for a uniting national idea. In conclusion, space acquires traits of elasticity and thus is broadly applicable as an idea at different levels of political and social identity construction.

Keywords: Northernness, Russia, theories of space, spatial identity, northern civilisation, Russian regionalism

Introduction

The understanding of “North” is used in both singular and plural in Russian language – and this not by random, because there are so many different “Norths”. It is not easy to find an answer to the question “where is the North” in Russia: there is the “Russian North” (*russkii sever*) in the sense of the region inhabited mostly by ethnic Russians north of St Petersburg, and the “European North” (*evropeiskii*), the “Polar North” (*zaploynarn’e*), the “Far North” (*krainyi Sever*), the “endless North” (*beskrainyi*), there are so called “territories equivalent to the Far North”, there is a category “other regions of the North” (i.e. not belonging to the “Far North”). Searching for an answer to this question is further complicated by the dynamics of recent integrative processes, enlarging the plurality of “Norths” by “global North”, “geostrategic North”, “circumpolar North”, “Arctosphere”, “Hyperborea”.

The establishment of the EU “northern dimension” in 1997 strengthened considerably the international cooperation in the Baltic States and the northwestern regions of Russia. Russia’s chairmanship of the Arctic council (2004-2006) further increased the attention to the North. “Northern” as a term nowadays functions as an important factor uniting all northern regions, which in the framework of the EU mostly means the European North. This international dynamic tends to shift political ideas about the Russian North as a geostrategic region more towards the West, where the Barents region and West Siberia become possible key regions for future resource development. On the other hand, with the Fall of the Soviet Union and the “loss” of the Baltics in the west and the Central Asian parts in the south, Russia’s borders really moved north- and eastwards. As a result, the geographic centre of the country, which had been in the Khanty-Mansiisk Okrug of West Siberia during the Soviet Union, moved north-eastwards to Evenkia in the Krasnoyarsk region. In terms of political zoning of the Russian North, its borders shifted southwards during the last decade. In spite of all these complications, the common perception of the North is still one of a cold, remote, sparsely populated and marginal space off the track of any mainstream development in the country.

Russia is increasingly presenting itself as a northern country, for the first time ever in the country’s history. In political and academic debates expression like ‘Russia as a northern country’, or ‘60% of Russia’s territory lies in the north’ have become more frequently used as arguments. “Northernness” in Russia even gets considered as an alternative in the search for a new unifying national identity, which was formerly occupied by the “single united Soviet people” (*edinyi sovetskii narod*), which had become obsolete after perestroika. The definition of the North and its borders is not only a question of perspective today in Russia (there is a ‘North’ even in Africa), but also one of pragmatic approaches and theoretical conceptions. The increased importance of the North as an active geopolitical space has resulted in a wide political and public enthusiasm for the northern topic, which is now thoroughly turning upside down the previous perception of the North of a hostile cold space.

In this article I analyse the understanding of the North in Russia as a spatial category, as a geographic, mental and social space. I identify the main tendencies in the construction of a northern space as reflected in recent theoretical academic and political debates in

Russia, and analyse their relation to categories of spatial identity the reality of Russia as a country as well as in particular regions. The analysis of the North as a spatial category enables us to evaluate the potential of a promoted commonality along northern lines in Russia in comparison to other alternatives for a uniting national idea. This study bases on an analysis of political and academic conceptions of the North by Russian intellectuals as well as on empirical material from several northern Russian regions (Murmansk, Yamal, Sakha Republic and Kamtchatka).

Theoretical considerations

In his landmark theoretical work on the “production of space” Henri Lefebvre (1991) conceptualises space in a triad to start with: natural, mental and social space. These three are analysed in their ontological transformations, for example the inhabited space or the perceived and imagined (representative) space. Without going too deep into theoretical debates about these categories, for our purpose they are a useful starting point, which is why I continue by identifying their major characteristics:

Natural space is imagined mainly through physical, physiological and biological characteristics and includes location, climate and other features. Nature creates, but does not produce space. Nature only delivers and maintains the values that are already in circulation. Mental space exists in discourses, language, in logical and formal abstractions, image and signs, and also as a set of practices (Lefebvre 1991). It is the space of philosophers, their reflections, feelings, expressions of their self, open for experiments and relations (Young 1994). The North can be seen as a cultural construction and as a space that is created by people and their practices (Ingold 2000, ch. 9, 11). Lefebvre underlines the unlimited diversity and polyvalence of social space. Social space is a production, a process and simultaneously a product, the result of a process and also a reproduction, i.e. the materialisation of a social reality.

The diversity of belonging to different spaces in one region can be well illustrated on the example of the Sakha Republic in East Siberia, one of the most ‘authentic’ Northern regions of Russia. Geographically Sakha belongs to Siberia, economical and administratively, it is a part of the Russian Far East, and in terms of Russian political zoning, it is considered to be in the Far North. Outside of Sakha, this region is usually associated with permafrost and remote periphery. From ‘within’ perspective the perception of course is more differentiated, and categories of orientation and direction, of closeness and distance, centre and periphery acquire a different meaning (see e.g. Vitebsky 2000). Driving from Yakutsk airport into town, the incomer is greeted by a poster saying “welcome to the capital”. In Sakha colloquial language the word *sohuruu* (south) is often used referring to a centre. The expression ‘he left to the centre’ or ‘he left for studying in the centre’ can mean in fact either Moscow, Novosibirsk, Khabarovsk or even Vladivostok, all of which are located south of Yakutsk, but in completely different directions.

Space as a whole and in particular as a social reality embraces a huge diversity of characteristics, which cannot be ignored when we attempt to give a general picture of the

North in Russia. Every society produces its own space (Lefebvre 1991), and according to Michel Foucault space can adapt to social changes depending on its assigned role and function for society (Foucault 1986).

Borrowing these ideas I conceptualise the understanding of the North as a space which has a specific role and function for Russian society, for which spatial characteristics are central components. Both perspectives are important for my analysis and represent the North as a space that is formed by society and as a society that is formed by space. In this article I focus on the North as a social construction, which is produced and reproduced by discourses and practices in its institutionalised form.

Looking at the creation of a new spatial conception in Russia under this theoretical framework, my starting point is that this process happens as a response to a different global spatial infrastructure, conditioned by changes in geographical, political-economic and mental scales. The following aspects are important to underline in this context:

Determining a clear position in relation to space becomes ever more important for the participants of a new global spatial integration, which also leads to clarifying the relation between space and identity within this integrative process. Conceptual differences with practical consequences for the understanding of the North among different partners are already identified, for example, in the framework of the EU northern dimension (2004). The question of spatial identity is also one of the most discussed among other 'geographic' entities, for example the Nordic (Scandinavian, Sørensen and Stråth 1997, Goetz 2003), or Euro-Mediterranean (Pace 2006).

Speaking of integrative processes in the global North does not mean to create differences between a progressive centre and an undeveloped periphery, but rather creating a space uniting equal partners (Heininen 2005). Therefore there is not much to gain for our starting point from an understanding of the North that bases on popular perceptions of a region where people have to exist by 'coping', 'surviving', 'overcoming' 'dealing with the situation' – an image often created by western specialists in relation to the Russian North. I rather prefer the idea of agency (Giddens 1979) to analyse the contemporary conceptualisation of the North as connected to global political and economic relations. I suggest to see agency here as individual or collective 'adaptive agency' under conditions of existing impact or pressure from outside. It is a sort of adaptation as a response to outside impacts, but in a more proactive form.

Currently spatial northern identity can offer a considerable creative capital for political, economical and social paradigms in the development of Russia, where Russians can determine their own honourable and respected positions. Drawing on Elwert's idea on "switching identity", identity is a rather pragmatic concept. Specific groups can change their identity from political to ethnic, from religious to cultural depending on the specifics of the place, the situations and the time. In cases where we speak about survival, identity is about getting more privileges, or for joining more powerful group (Elwert 1997). The analysis of the different conceptions that promote the "Northernness" of Russia helps to

understand the process of establishing a spatial identity with their tasks, functions and perspectives.

Where is the North?

We start with the first basic category of the North, understanding it as crucial part of Russian society as well as a product of society. The question of defining the North is one of the most fundamental in northern academia (Armstrong et al 1978, Nicol 2005). Russia as the world's largest country has its unique relations to space in general and the North in particular. These relations go beyond the usual lack of scientific clarity of the definition even in the attempt to draw lines round the North, such as latitude, 10 degree isotherm, the treeline, the permafrost border, and others. The north as an idea or myth for Russia can be compared with the image of northern Fennoscandia for Europeans, of Alaska for Americans, and the northern territories for Canadians. All are united by the idea of a cold periphery and a place for hopes and dreamers (Sörlin 1989, Slezkine and Diment 1993).

The definition of the North is complicated in Russia by numerous types and levels of internal administrative, economic, political and other subdivisions: Russia has 7 federal districts, 12 economic districts, more than 80 administrative sub-entities (called 'subjects' of the Russian Federation), and even more complicated divisions if we analyse deeper within this basic framework. As shown above for the Sakha Republic, geographical borders not necessarily overlap with economical or administrative divisions. As a result, one region can have multiple belongings, e.g. to different economic districts. This complicated internal structure is inherited from the Soviet Union, where there was even a division of the country in different price-levels. This is why formally today the North in Russia is divided among 5 federal districts and many more geographic, administrative and economic zones.

The dominant understanding of the North itself is in Russia, however, its official classification based on a geographic-economical index which is part of the Russian legislation. This classificatory principle is called zoning into different regions (*raionirovanie*). Zoning divides the North in Russia into

- the Far North
- regions and territories equivalent to the Far North.
- in 1993 the category "other regions of the North" was added to the Russian legal classification of the North (resolution of the supreme council of the Russian Federation, 1993), but this category did not survive for long (Tarakanov 2007).

This contribution does not aim for an analysis of the complicated and constantly changing system of zoning in legal categories, but zoning practices are interesting here in so far as they affect spatial perspectives of understanding the North.

The idea of "Far North" was introduced in 1932 by a resolution of the Union-wide central executive commission and the council of people's commissioners¹. It was further extended in 1945 by the understanding of "territories equivalent to regions of the Far

North”. These categories were created mainly for economic reasons, and considered in particular how effective the transfer of production could be and connected to that the necessity of attracting labour force to the North. The categorisation became part of Soviet law in the “list of regions of the Far North and territories equivalent to the regions of the Far North”². Nowadays there are approximately 20 different editions of that document. The main goal of this kind of zoning was the attraction of labour forces to the North and its retention there.

The basic principle for this zoning was a conception for developing the productive capacities of the North by the famous soviet scholar S.V. Slavin. His main interest was in technique, technology and materials for the North with their special adaptation to northern extreme conditions, in terms of construction details, characteristics of long term use, economy. Slavin participated in the organisation of a scientific council dealing with the “problems of machines working under conditions of low temperatures”. Slavin determined the borders of the economical and geographic understanding of the North, considering the specifics of industrial development in the region, and the need for increasing the economical efficiency of technical processes. According to Slavin, regions count as northern in case of

- location north of the economically and more densely populated areas of the country, and also the remoteness to the main industrial centres of the country.
- low population density and a low level of mass production for the economy of the country.
- high cost of construction and production in comparison to the more tempered regions of the country.
- harsh climatic conditions that make economic development more difficult (Slavin 1972, Graham 1990).

Such a categorisation basing on remoteness and harshness of the climate fits less to the European northern regions of Russia. Those have a highly developed infrastructure in transport and industry, are comparably close to the economical, political and cultural centres of Russia and therefore look less like ‘authentic’ northern region in people’s perception. Therefore the urbanised Murmansk region, which has the highest population density worldwide in the North, is more easily associated with the “*zapolyarnoe*” than with the Far North. From a geographic point of view (in terms of northern latitude), regions such as Kamtchatka, the Republic of Tyva or Mongolia as members of Russia’s ‘northern club’ cause slight confusion: Kamtchatka has the same latitude as Kiev, Tyva Republic has a common border with Mongolia.

On the other hand, an index basing on coldness and remoteness fits perfectly well for regions such as the Sakha Republic. Its capital Yakutsk is 5680 km from Moscow by airplane, the coldest inhabited place on Earth is there, and the Republic’s territory of 3.2 million km² is approximately the same size as India, with the difference that in Yakutia only 1 million people live there, relying on an infrastructure consisting of just 115 km railroad and 7000km paved roads (Nikolaev 2002). The Lena River has therefore to serve as the main traffic artery of the region, but it is only navigable on water for 3 months of the year, the rest of the time being covered by ice. Along similar lines, the Yamal-Nenets

district in West Siberia fits well to this category of the Far North. Its infrastructure is only developed in the southern bits, where oil and gas is extracted, and one city on the foothills of the Polar Ural Mountains, with railroad access. Both parts of the region are not connected by ground transport with each other, but separately by railroad to Moscow, which is typical for the central Soviet spatial planning.

The category of “Far Northernness” therefore mis-fits the European North of Russia and Murmansk, even though the region is almost entirely located north of the Arctic Circle, whereas only 40% of Sakha and 50% of the Yamal-Nenets district is north of the Arctic Circle.

The indexation of the North and determining which territories belong to it in Russia was introduced to the legislation first and foremost for regulating state guarantees and compensations for the hardships that workers have to endure in a cold harsh climate. Financial assistance is given to northern regions for attracting labour force (salary top-ups called regional coefficients) and stimulating qualified workers to stay in the North (salary top-ups called northern benefits) for developing industry in remote regions. After the Fall of the Soviet Union the borders of this legal northern category ‘North’ moved considerably to the south. According to the ministry for economic development, northern benefits are even paid in 14 other places not officially on the list of northern regions (Zhukov 2006). Examples include Vologda, Bashkiria, Udmurtia, Khakassia, and the Jewish Autonomous region in the Russian East. The existing benefit system for northern regions also changed. Whereas in the Soviet Union benefits were for the sake of ‘building communism’ by attracting labour force during industrialisation nowadays benefits are more conceptualised as compensations for the harsh climatic conditions and high costs of live in the North.

The basic list of northern regions from 1967 is in spite of numerous changes still the basic document for a number of other lists that were established subsequently, for example a climatic zone for construction in the North, or several documents of the ministry for labour for determining the northern payment top-ups, or even a list of northern regions in Russia with special regulations for the production, delivery and sale of alcohol (resolution of Russian government No 400, 2007). The “legal North” with all its cold and remote characteristics is densely tied to numerous realities in everyday life and therefore always played an important role for the perception of the Russian North in general.

It would be wrong to see the North in its legal categories as a stable space. Its consistence was and is constantly changing, sometimes expanding and sometimes contracting through including or excluding particular regions. Therefore it is not surprising that today the questions of who belongs to the North and who does not in Russia is one of the mostly debated topics not only in terms of legal zoning, but also in terms of defining the Russian North in general. For example the town of Kandalaksha in Murmansk region is regularly changing its status of ‘northernness’. Kandalaksha is north of the Arctic Circle, and legally belonged to the ‘territories equivalent to the Far North’ until 1990, when the ‘equivalent’ was dropped and the town became a part of the Far North (resolution of

Russian government No 594, 1990). Two years later Kandalaksha got the ‘equivalent’ back (resolution No 776, 1992). There are many other examples for these changes. Depending on time and different particular legal documents, the North currently counts for 60-80% of Russia’s territory. Depending on this, the population of the North is also changing.

From these examples we see that the North is not a state but a process running along the line of “inclusion and exclusion”. This theoretical concept developed by Schlee and others (Schlee & Werner 1996, Woodward and Kohli 2001, Kirsch 2006) accompanies contradictory processes of conceptualising the North and is suited to analyse the ambivalence and the multiplicity of spatial practices.

The contemporary northern spatiality in Russia is without doubt moving towards integration on the global level, which is also having its effect within the country. This, however, does not mean the full expansion of integration of the whole country as ‘northern’. Both inclusion and exclusion can occur simultaneously and are not necessarily opposed to each other. Only with their multiple and constantly interacting characteristics can we understand local, regional and national forms of geographically diverse practices and identities.

The question of where the north is today in Russia is difficult to answer both from outside and from within the country. One of the most important characteristics of the North is the legal one. It bases on the natural-geographic and economic variables and is currently in an acute crisis. The question of enlarging the ‘northern club’³ towards the west and the south entailed questioning the definition on the base of geographical and economic factors. One of the new northern axes in Russia is running along the line of Yaroslavl-Vologda-Arkhangelsk and does not fit well to the categories formulated by Slavin. Along this axis, the North is represented vividly for example in titles of regional newspapers such as “*severnyi krai*” (northern end, Yaroslavl), “*Russkii Sever*”, “*Krasnyi Sever*” (“Russian North”, “Red North”, Vologda), “*Pravda Severa*”, “*Severnyi Komsomolets*” (“Truth of the North” “Northern Komsomolets”, Arkhangelsk). The region increasingly figures as a European region between the Volga and the White Sea (Turovskii 2003).

Currently there is a whole flurry of diverse conceptions of northern benefits and understandings of the North, leading to disparities and confusions. The need for changing to a more rational and transparent system of northern benefit distribution leads again back to the final question where the southern border of the North is in Russia. In 2004 president Putin asked for a clear definition of regions belonging to the North⁴. Three years later he suggested establishing a special institute of the Russian national arctic council for coordinating the North, and establishing a clear legal basis for the Russian state policy in the North (session of the presidium, 2007). The need for rethinking the southern borders of the Russian North is also emphasized in academia (Ten 2004). Another suggestion for coordinating the activities of all northern territories in Russia is the creation of an special 8th federal northern district, to be ‘carved out’ of the existing 7 districts (Gromyko 2004). In 2007, there are still many ‘Norths’ left in Russia. A member of the Khanty-Mansiisk regional government, born in Vologda, answered to my question

if she was born in the North with a smile, saying “maybe, but this is another North” (interview 2007).

The uncomfortable but beneficial North

As we have mentioned before, the question about the borders of the North are for the inhabitants of Russia not only theoretical constructions of space, but have very practical implications. This question is connected straight to the everyday life within these borders, because the government pays considerable compensations and subsidies for those inhabiting the North. For example, the ‘regional coefficients’ (*raionnye koeffitsienty*) on top of the usual salary are between 50-80%. This is used to attract people to come to work in the North. Another type of payments is used to keep people in the North, by increasing salary top-ups depending on the number of years a person has worked in the North. Northerners also have the right to retire earlier, they get 14 days more holiday per year, they get once in two years a free return trip to any place in Russia from their northern place of residence, and they are entitled to support in case of resettlement from the North to more temperate regions in Russia after having worked for 15 years or more in the North.

All these financial privileges apply for more than 40 of Russia’s administrative entities (subjects of the Russian Federation, see above). Strange enough, 14 of these regions are not in the official list of northern regions in Russia from 1967. For these regions the new plans for zoning in the Russian North have the most practical implications.

The current situation in Russia concerning the definition of the North and corresponding financial support for northern regions reminds on the discussions of northern indices in Canada in the 1960s and 1980s (Hamelin 1979,1988, Brunelle et al 1989, Graham 1990). In Canada the zoning of the North was done to support and motivate the working population in remote northern regions. This idea was borrowed by Canadian geographers from the Russian professor Burkhanov, who developed in 1968 indices for the North using combined climate data. This system had been mainly developed for engineering, namely determining conditions for the use of technology in northern mineral resource extraction. Burkhanov identified four different stages of climatical “harshness” and according to those divided the North into four different zones: the “Arctic extreme zone”, the “subarctic zone of high extremeness”, the “northern extreme zone” and the “eastern zone of relative extremeness” (Burkhanov 1970: 29).

From 1958 on, the Canadian government worked with a system of payments to motivate workers in remote northern regions. These payments corresponded to the climatic harshness and extremeness of natural conditions (Graham 1990). However, Canadian as well as Soviet scholars were aware from the beginning that climatic harshness cannot be the only criterion to classify northern regions. A new model for classifying the borders of the North in Russia combines Burkhanov’s system with socio-economical and medical-biological data. There are different variations of this new model, each advocated by a particular group of scholars from different scientific institutions (Zhukov 2006). (Shmeleva 2004, Moiseev n.d., Selin and Vasiliev n.d.). One of the most discussed

classificatory systems for the North connected to financial transfers of the Russian state is the principle of ‘uncomfortability’ (*discomfortnost*), which revisits the borders of the north and determines a new “northernness”.

In April 2007 this new model of regional division within the North was discussed in a session of the Russian Parliament on the initiative of the Duma committee for northern affairs and the committee for natural resources. Basing on the ‘uncomfortability’ principle, the model envisions a threefold division of the North: the absolutely uncomfortable zone, the extremely uncomfortable zone, and an uncomfortable zone.⁵ The first two zones should cover what is currently called the ‘Far North’ (*krainyi sever*), whereas the third zone should consist of the ‘territories equivalent to the Far North’ (*territorii priravnennyye k krainemu severy*). Using this model, members of the ‘northern club’ such as Novosibirsk or Kemerovo might lose their northern status and therefore have already expressed their discontent with the new system (Tuleev 2007; Kuznetsov 2007). According to other classificatory versions, parts of Murmansk, Arkhangelsk and Karelia regions could lose their northern status (Shmeleva 2004).

The ‘uncomfortability’ principle does not satisfy all stakeholders interested in northern zoning. Therefore the Russian ministry for economic development went beyond the understanding of ‘uncomfortability’ and came up with a scale of ‘comfortability’. That model classifies all regions of Russia, not only the North (Selin and Vasiliev n.d.). Russia is divided into six major zones, three of them being ‘uncomfortable’ and three of them ‘comfortable’. The last zone is called ‘favourable’ (*blagopriatnaia*), covering the area around the Azov and Black Seas and the western parts of the Northern Caucasus.

Today the inhabitants of all ‘Norths’ wait for a decision about the new official borders of their region, because for them and Russia as a country this will have immense consequences. The current system of financial privileges was inherited from the Soviet planned economy and does not work properly under the conditions the new Russian economy. In many regions the general system of salary-coefficients is not tied to a particular branch of the economy. Nonetheless, there are significant differences in the scales of payments between the extractive industry, where payments are much higher, and for example agriculture. Employees of the state administration are also treated differently from those employed in the private sector, where many northern benefits are not guaranteed.

The new models of northern zoning have been criticised along several lines. Firstly, classifying the North along lines of “uncomfortability” is an unnecessarily negative starting point for a definition. Secondly, a new zoning and rethinking of northern benefits may generate significant out-migration from the North, as many might suffer losses in income when staying there. Thirdly, practical questions of payments and structures have been criticised and cause many additional questions:

- What are the financial and economical consequences of new zoning in the North and for Russia as a whole?
- How will the transfer of money among different budgets happen if one administrative entity ends up lying in three different zones?

- What happens in the Yamal-Nenets district, one of the richest northern regions, if the planned border of one of the zones will run through the regional capital of Salekhard?
- Will this lead to further social and financial stratification of the population?
- How will the new zoning influence the development of infrastructure and construction in the North?
- Will a new system be capable of solving the problem of high production costs in the North?

So far my northern friends and informants still prefer to go to China or other places in order to buy the popular mink fur coats, not only because the design is more modern, but also because they are cheaper than in the North. As long as the system does not change and the situation stays unclear, many pensioners who chose to leave the North after retirement to spend their old days in the south will continue to be northern residents and keep their flats in the North on paper, in order to preserve their higher northern pensions, which they might lose if they de-register.

A new system of determining northern finances will also lead to a reconfiguration of relations between the centre (Moscow) and the northern peripheries in Russia. This transformation is accelerated by tendencies of centralisation in Russia in the last 5 years, which had already significant financial consequences in the regions. The crisis of definition in the North is tied to global dynamics too and therefore definitely is not likely to be solved in a year. It will continue to attract attention and thoughts of all stakeholder groups, including politicians, scholars and inhabitants of all ‘Norths’.

The mental map of the North

Mental maps are images of the environment in our minds and store our knowledge about spatial organisation of our surroundings, alongside information about characteristics which we associate with different places or regions. Mental maps do not necessarily comply with geographical scales.

The more detailed the scale of a map, the easier it is to determine the understanding of the North. Outsiders do not have to be very exact in their definitions, whereas the perception of insiders is more detailed. That perception can, however, fade out, the further away the mind goes from the centre-location of the subject. Inhabitants of Rovaniemi in Finland, one of the most famous towns on the Arctic Circle and home town of Santa Claus, for example imagine the Arctic starting some 300 km north of their home, in the vicinity of the town of Ivalo. For Ivalo people, however, the border of the Arctic moves even further north, to the towns of Inari or Utsjoki. For my informants in Murmansk their town is not in the Arctic, although it is far more beyond the Arctic Circle than any other big town in Russia. However, several of them associated the Arctic with a railway station called ‘Arctic Circle’ (*stantsia polyarnyi krug*), which is in fact located hundreds of km south of Murmansk at the border to Karelia in the Loukh area. However, these two respondents were not aware of the ‘southernness’ of that Arctic railway station. For Nenets reindeer nomads the borders of Yamal, which translates as “end of the land” from Nenets

language (Stammler 2005), are equally elastic, moving northwards depending on the location of the respondent.

For a general Russian perception, the North is easiest to be understood through a dichotomy between centre and periphery. This determines in many ways the mental dimensions of the North and the specifics of spatial relations in Russia as a whole. Any place outside of the ‘centre’ bears the mark of periphery in people’s minds. The popular ‘anatomic’ expression of Moscow being the head and St Petersburg the heart of Russia divides the whole country into centre (the two mentioned megapolis) and the rest of the country, at best distinguishing some little islands within the huge peripheries, ‘mini Moscows’, for example Novosibirsk, Ekaterinburg or Vladivostok. Peripherality here is understood not in terms of geographic distance to the centre, but also in political, ideological and cultural dimensions.

This is inherited from tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union and continues to be the basic element of spatial identity in contemporary Russia, in spite of considerable recent developments of horizontal links within the country. A fellow passenger on a non-stop flight to Moscow from Yakutsk had to go through Moscow, just to fly back again several thousand kilometres northeast, because there was no direct connection between two northern Siberian cities. Russia continues to be a highly centralised country with a huge difference between a rich, dynamic and glossy centre and the rest of the country. This situation is cemented by central superiority in almost all aspects of life, starting from the main flows of capital, political decisions, the supreme commission to evaluate scientific dissertations and ending with the possibilities for shopping, the level of health care and the standard of life as a whole.

The North, however, in scientific discussions as well as in common understandings is not only associated with the periphery, but also first and foremost with the word ‘Far’ (*krai*), meaning located at the end). This reproduces another spatial dichotomy in Russia, the one between *krai* and *materik*, the ‘Far end’ and the ‘mainland’. The Russian policy from the 18th to the beginning of the 20th century focused mainly on economic factors and conceptualised the northern periphery mainly in terms of benefits to the southland. This included fur-trade, minerals and other resources. During the Soviet Union this policy turned into a giant industrialisation of northern territories, including a whole complex of social infrastructure. This industrialisation was tailored for both economical and ideological needs. The idea was that people should not only extract resources, but also live, have families, grow up children and get education in a single location.

This idea fitted well with the collective ideology of Soviet people, emphasizing the ‘human factor’ in the country. The argument was that such an endeavour is only possible in the context of a centrally planned economy. Moreover, such a policy was thought to be the asset of ‘human’ socialism, as opposed to capitalism, where the main criterion was the rate of profit. The economic logic of socialism was “improvement of socialist production (...) for the purpose of satisfying to the fullest the constantly growing material and cultural needs of the whole society” (Slavin 1972: 60). That was different from logic of capital accumulation only, and therefore, nowhere else in the circumpolar North we

find such big and developed industrial cities than in northern Russia. The majority of Russia's northern population consists nowadays of Russian-speaking immigrants and their descendants (rather than indigenous peoples). The first waves of incomers in the 1920s and 1930s are considered to be locals in the North for several generations already. Nonetheless, the idea of staying in the North for a limited period in one's life, usually until retirement, before moving back to the 'mainland' (*materik*) is still quite popular.

The incomer-population is usually viewed as being connected to the 'mainland' and the south by the indigenous and native population of the Russian North. In the Sakha Republic and Yamal there is a rather clear classification of different Russian-speaking groups of people in the North, e.g. old settlers (*starozhily*), transient workers (*vremenshiki*), incomers (*priehy*). This differentiation is less expressed in the Murmansk region, where infrastructural links are more developed and the geographic distance to the central Russian regions is smaller. For all these categories of people, however, connections to the 'mainland' continue to be an important factor, be it through parents, relatives, children studying, having a house or flat, for other reasons. Such connections continue to present a potential for out-migration to the 'mainland'.

The idea of a 'frontier-mentality' or the dichotomy *krai-materik* continues to be important for both inhabitants in the North and perception by outsiders. Among all my fieldwork experiences, the word *materik* was used most frequently in Kamtchatka. When I asked colleagues in Petropavlovsk if it is safe to go out in town at night, they smilingly answered that criminality is much lower than on the *materik*, because anyway there is nowhere to escape (*vse ravno bezhat' nekuda*). One criminal who tried to escape was caught immediately, when he tried to find the closest railway station on Kamtchatka, which in fact can be reached only by air or water (interview, July 2007).

The idea of *krai*, 'Far end', "which you reach and there is nowhere else to go" (Razumova 2006: 179), and the idea of *materik* in relation to the North are first and foremost Russian conceptions that arose as a result of migration experiences, be it through relocation, exile, labour migration, or industrialisation of the North. Connected to these experiences there is another contradictory pair of perceptions of the North, as house of the dead and as a realm of utter freedom, as a frightening head of darkness and a fabulous land of plenty, as frozen wasteland and as colourful frontier, as a silent cold space and as *alter ego* of Russia, as place of Russia's 'backward' northern indigenous peoples and as wealth of Russia (Slezkine & Diment 1993, Lamin&Malov 2005, Blakkisrud & Hønneland 2006).

It is not possible to understand the general idea of the North without considering these numerous dichotomies in their context. They do not have to be mutually exclusive. Nonetheless the physical-geographic classification was and still dominates over other temporary categories basing on historical memory or experience. Not long ago many inhabitants of central Russia did not have any idea where the 'authentic North', e.g. Yamal or Sakha (Yakutia) were. These places were mainly known as some frosty and remote marginal space, which somewhere behind the Ural mountains merged with

categories of Siberia and the Far East, finally all being some kind of periphery. This construction of marginality is supported by two more aspects:

Firstly, the whole North, beginning in Europe west of the Urals and reaching to the Bering Strait, is a set of territories of many indigenous ethnic groups, which in Soviet times consolidated into different levels of regional autonomy⁶. Secondly, the lack of clarity of the most important question in Russia about the North, namely whether the North for Russia is a burden or an asset, also contributes to preserving this previous image of the North as a cold remote periphery. In practical terms this is a question of preserving the old Soviet approach to the North as a place for permanent settlement of large populations, or rather rethink it as a place for transient settlements of fly-in – fly-out shift workers in mineral resource extraction. This hotly debated question remains still unanswered by now. There are programmes supporting both approaches to the North, on the one hand supporting out-migration of permanent population from the North (Heleniak 2001; World Bank 2001; Federal Law 2002, №02079, Thomson 2004; Round 2005), on the other hand projects of building up cities as permanent centres of future northern resource development (Zuev 2005: 237, Stoliarov 2007).

Therefore, a contemporary mental map of the North bases on a combination of these natural and cultural, political and economic factors discussed above. However, global and inner Russian processes ask for thorough adjustments in this mental map, for example the changing centre-periphery relations after the 1990s (Gossmann 1997, Blakkisrud & Hønneland 2006). There was a time when some regions had acquired considerable autonomy from Moscow in administering their vast mineral resources. Establishing straight international contacts and inner-Russian horizontal relations among regions led not only to an improved political reputation of the northern periphery, but also made yesterday's "unknown cinderellas" better known to a broader public. "When you fly in to Moscow, you better don't say that you come from the North, otherwise the taxi drivers will increase the price. From the North means with lots of money, that's what they think" (interview, Yakutsk summer 2003), was the instruction of an informant for me before leaving Yakutsk. The previous stereotypes have weakened because of a new image of the North as economically strong resource rich region. Yamal is now more associated with gas and Sakha (Yakutia) with diamonds, and not only with permafrost and reindeer anymore. Within these regions, a dominant perception is that the centre extracts most of the resource revenues and flourishes at the costs of the northern periphery.

All in all the image of the North as 'backward and uncivilised' has changed positively as a region with growing economic potential for Russia as well as for the whole globe. This new image of the North draws more on positive sides of Russia's history, such as the heroic expeditions of Potanin on drift ice, Chkalov's non-stop flight over the North Pole in 1937 or the exploration of the Northern Sea route (Gromyko: *moda na sever*). Other components of this new image are postsocialist ideas such as the mythical, transcendent North (Shiropaev 2005), the passionate North, and the North as a vector for Russian ethnogenesis (Gromyko 2001, Krupnov 2003), the positive postmodern North (Neklessa 2005, 2007) and the fresh wind from the northeast (Shtepa 2000) or from the northwest (Shtepa 2004).

Reshaping the North or a new philosophy of space

The question about the ideological and intellectual basis of understanding northern spatiality in Russia is becoming more acute, as a result of the numerous discussions by politicians and scholars about the northern borders, the geopolitical importance of the North, the potential of Russian hydrocarbons in the Arctic, about northern benefits, the ‘cost of the North’, and the search for new governmental approaches.

The manifestation of ‘Northernness’ cannot be limited to political or economical interests only. It also has to be supported by ideas that connect straightforwardly to a new spatial identification of the whole country. Among the most complicated tasks in this respect is the compatibility of the new ‘northern dimensions’ of Russia with the marginal status of the North in Russia’s society as a whole. Such a new spatial idea has to emphasize the integrative potential of the North for the whole country, and also has to be a thoroughly Russian conception that cannot look like being borrowed or adapted from the west. This is not an easy task, considering the vastness of Russia as a country and the ‘traditional’ image of the north as a cold hostile region. In addition to that, Russia is also a multiethnic, multinational country. According to the Russian census in 2002, more than 150 ethnic groups were registered in the country, with ethnic Russians counting for 79,82% of the population. In the Soviet Union the unifying ideological construction was the ‘soviet people’, which formed a mega-umbrella over all diverse ethnic and regional identities. The ‘soviet people’ served for many decades as the single national identity for all of Russia’s inhabitants.

The search for a new national idea as a replacement for the lost Soviet identity was not successful so far, in spite of many debates and ideas. One of these ideas for example draws on the Slavic or ‘ethnic Russian’ idea (Verkhovskii 2003). Another one emphasized conciliarism (*sobornost*) (Borodai and Nikiforov 1995). Both of these concepts base on a Russian orthodox spirit, which does not quite include Russia’s non-Russian inhabitants, among which are, for example, large Muslim groups, among other religious congregations. Another idea for Russian national consolidation was “Eurasianism”, where Russia would be the central bridge between Europe and Asia both geographically and culturally (Humphrey 2002). However, Eurasianism offers to this day less political weight and capital for Russia in comparison to northern spatiality. The concept of a Russian national idea basing on northern spatiality is now intensively being discussed by theorists as a more neutral and less conflictuous way for consolidating Russia as a multiethnic and polyconfessional country.

Finding a balance between national non-western models for development and the need for cooperation with the global community is another important aspect of incorporating “Northernness” into geopolitical and national interests in Russia. Russia today is demonstrating an increasing self-confidence, not at least underlining its namely “Russian” roots and its own way of global integration, which has to be different from western models. Emphasizing the “Russianness” of development happens in spite of the fact that many of the suggested development scenarios in fact were borrowed by popular

western theorists such as Toynbee, Huntington, Giddens, Appadurai, Wallerstein, Robertson and others, which were translated to Russian. However, all of these models are creatively reinterpreted and transformed into what is thought to be an original Russian model. The main currents of contemporary intellectual thought in Russia definitely have now gone beyond the period of enthusiastic adaptation of western ideas, such as ‘catch-up development’ or ‘sustainable development’. The new ‘northern dimensions’ of Russia are a chance to meet this challenge. The ‘northern way’ sounds less provocative than adapting a ‘western way’, which is still more ideologically loaded with ideas of the west as contemporary competitor or past enemy. The ‘northern way’ suits better to Russia’s increased self-confidence in an international position.

One of the most discussed and developed recently ideas is the concept of northern civilisation. In academic debates it is often introduced as a philosophical reflexion of a new understanding of the North, and as suitable for building a ‘northern model’ of an all Russian culture (Golovnev 2004, Popkov and Tyugashev 2004, 2004a, Neklessa 2002a, 2007). Northern civilisation is thought to be a spatial model which is opposed to the Eurasian model, and which is a new geopolitical factor (Gromyko 2001, Shiropaev 2005). Northern civilisation also functions as a new approach to administering the North in public and political movements and unions, such as the “party of Russia – Northern Civilisation”, the “Parliament of peoples of the World” or the cooperation of northern cities “60 parallel (60 degrees latitude)” (Krupnov 2003, Popkov and Tyugashev 2004a). In numerous political and academic discussions northern civilisation is present as a strategy for strengthening social relations and institutions in spatial categories, and even as a structural basis for a national statehood (Neklessa 2007). In 2004 the first congress “Northern civilisation: formation, problems and perspectives” in Surgut (Khanty-Mansiisk region, West Siberia), where many well-known Russian and international northern scholars participated, was a stimulating kick-off event for a broad discussion of this new concept.

The manifestation of northern spatiality as a political and cultural construction is not an entirely new event. When the question of a new uniting national idea for Russia to replace the lost Soviet idea was especially pressing in the beginning of the 1990s, many regional leaders suggested their own ideas for regional identities, partially drawing on international relations in their regions. Those became an important support for the regions in the search for a new identity and policy towards the federal Russian centre. International relations were developed mainly along ethnic or confessional lines, for example Finno-Ugric cooperation (Saarinen 2001), or the “Euro-Islam” movement (Khakimov 1998). In the remote northern peripheries of Russia without any Diaspora abroad, the idea of space became the central concept on the regional political agenda.

The first president of the Sakha Republic Mikhail Nikolaev introduced a new understanding of ‘circumpolar civilisation’ in numerous publications, declaration and activities (Stammler-Gossmann 2006). Promoting this concept drew on the support by local scholars, who developed ‘circumpolar civilisation’ on the basis of Arnold Toynbee’s ‘frozen types of civilisation’ (1976). The term ‘circumpolar civilisation’ was understood as a community of people living in similar climatic natural conditions of the

circumpolar North and being united by a close spiritual and material culture and worldviews (Vinokurova 1995). The conception developed at a time of very specific relations between the regional Sakha political elite and the federal centre in Moscow (Gossmann 1997). The declaration of a regional “Northernness” (‘we are northerners’) was used in support of the considerable regional sovereignty that Sakha had acquired from Moscow, and to preserve the volatile unity of different ethnic groups within the region, as well as to overcome the complex of inferiority of the ‘little brother’ of different ethnicity in comparison to the strong ethnically Russian centre.

The circumpolar civilisation was a good opportunity to underline the uniqueness and the advantages of the northern community. The prestigious international activities of the region in the 1990s helped to enter the global community and strengthen the reputation of the Sakha Republic as a whole, and also the situation of its indigenous minorities. However, within Russia the Sakha Republic was too far away from the centre and hardly known there. The circumpolar concept was too much connected to indigenous minorities of the North and to the unique relations between man and the environment and with these particularities did not have much chance to go beyond any regional frameworks.

Within 15 years after the Soviet Union, the Sakha Republic has experimented with numerous spatial reference frameworks for finding a regional identity. All of them have their pluses and minuses. For example in the meantime the office of the ‘northern Forum’ was closed and its former chairman, Mikhail Nikolaev, is now the chairman of the new ‘Eastern Dimension’ programme in Russia, aiming mainly at intensifying relations between Russia and the countries of the Asian Pacific (Presidential decree no.559, 07.04.2006). Therefore the ‘northernness’ of Sakha has gone to a more hibernating state, whereas the ‘easternness’ has become more active. This shows how spatial references in local identity can change and become activated on different occasions when needed.

The northern civilisation as a post – and proto-space

The two categories of a) space (northern) and b) civilisation, entered today the all-Russian arena. In their connection to global processes they have become central in discussions about development models for the country. Although a full theoretical treatment of the concept of northern civilisation goes beyond the framework of this article, it is worth looking at the main traits and approaches.

Northern civilisation is seen as a prototype for a future unity that goes beyond national frameworks, but at the same time functions as a strong factor of Russian reality. As a unique country of northern civilisation Russia is thought as an equal participant in the general civilisatory process of the planet and at the same time preserving itself as an independent subject. In a way this includes both a ‘new north’ and an ‘old north’. The aspect of civilisation dominates here about the aspect of northernness in both the new and the old interpretation. Russia as a northern country is introduced as a new type of world civilisation with a ‘soft statehood’, with multicultural and multi-confessional transnational borders and with a horizontally structured network of regions (Krupnov

2003). According to the congress resolution of “Northern Civilisation” (Surgut 2004), the North as a particular type of civilisation has to become a space of cooperation and partnership among regions, states and nations that all belong to different types of civilisations (resolution 2004). In the numerous publications on the website sever.inache.net, dedicated to questions of northern civilisation, it is more than the mechanical sum of Europe, Russia and America basing on cultural unification. Northern civilisation also draws on common economic values (Shtepa 2004).

Samuel Huntington’s theory about the clash of more or less homogenous civilisations (1996) has gained much attention of Russian intellectuals (Popkov& Tyugashev 2004). Assuming these different civilisations in Huntington’s model as equal partners in global processes, they argue, fits better to their idea of an original Russian model of development than certain civilisations that aim for catching up to the level of others. From this point of view we can also understand why Russian intellectuals are sympathetic to the Japanese term of ‘glocalisation’ that has been popularised by R. Robertson (1995). Glocalisation is interpreted as a synthesis of global interests and localised uniqueness, a regional scenario of globalisation (Bauman 2002, Kotomina 2003, Shtepa 2004).

The innovative North

The main characteristic of this ‘new’ North is its innovative and corporative face. Geographical borders fade out in such an understanding, whereas their symbolic importance becomes the principle criterion of belonging. In this more symbolised quality that is oriented towards the future, the North has the best integrative potential and represents the most attractive and pragmatic theoretical idea which is possible to use politically. The basis is the idea that the inner generative energy of northern space has to be realised with the production of high technologies. The sociologist Ivanov (2002) introduced the understanding of “virtual economy” in the end of the 1990s to Russian debates, which was taken as a starting point for different visions in Russia, such as ‘silicon valley’ (Nikolaev 2005, 2005a), ‘intellectual economy’, ‘digital world’ (Neklessa 2002, 2002a), ‘hard and soft technology’, ‘haute couture resources’ (Shtepa 2005). These variations figure prominently in numerous projects and suggestions about northern development and transform into more or less concrete practices.

The innovative direction has gained attention by president Putin, who emphasized it as a strategic task for Russia at a state council meeting entitled ‘on information and communication technologies’.⁷ According to the politician Sergei Mironov the leaders of the 21 century will be those countries that succeed best in controlling high technologies, rather than those with huge natural resources (Nikolaev 2005a).

Applying this direction of thought to the circumpolar civilisation, these high technologies for the North include digital network villages, cluster-factories, new high tech transport on strings as invented by A. Unitskii, new types of energy resources such as mini nuclear power stations or bioenergy, and latest telecommunication technologies. Moreover, innovations for the circumpolar civilisation should also include the social sphere, in the

form of life-insurance, social forms of citizenship, and personal patronage (Gromyko 2001, Krupnov 2003).

It is in this innovative sphere where the northern dimensions acquire the lines of a future Russian statehood. The way to become successful here is seen in the corporative approach. It is understood as a kind of agreement between the federal centre of Russia and the main industrial companies in the North, which should combine mineral resource extraction with a high-tech economy (Chernyshev 2004, Neklessa 2005, Andreev 2006). One possible model of development on this basis can become the ‘northern contract’, according to the political anthropologist Sergei Zuev (2005). This contract should be built on the basis of mutual business commitments between the state, industrial companies and the regional institutions of self-governments. Neklessa (xxxx) suggests a “glocal” model of Russian statehood in the form of a transnational corporation “Russia”, which should be fed by a regional corporation “North-West” and “points of alternative scenario for the country’s future (Neklessa).

Proto North

Creating a ‘Post-North’ with new original qualities is among the more important components when conceptualising the ‘northern’ status of Russia in the global context. This paradigm offers the possibility of overcoming the current national stress when attempting to realise an Euro-Atlantic cooperation, where Russia’s participation still somehow has the reputation of a passive developing country. This is why the uniqueness and originality of the Russian way is another important ‘civilisatory’ component of the conception. The current situation with the North is interpreted as repetition of the history of Russian northern development in the energetic phase of Russia from the discovery and exploration of the northern territories to the reconstruction and consolidation of the country (Programme ‘60 parallel’, 2005). It is also about a revival of the times of big northern infrastructure projects, and the unrealised or uncompleted models of development, such as an international northern transport corridor with a tunnel under the Bering Strait in the early 20th century, or the Northern Sea Route (Zuev 2005, Krupnov 2003,).

The Russian roots of the new northern concept are emphasized by drawing on traditions of millennia in building and defending an original civilisation, on the pre-revolutionary experience of saving cultures, and on the organisation of a successful polyethnic life (Krupnov 2003). Moreover, the unique practical experience of Russia in establishing scientific approaches to northern exploration is used to justify the ‘Russianness’ of the North in the 21 century (Gromyko 2001, Zuev 2005). Examples for achievements of this kind are shipping in the North, agriculture, and health care. Terms like revival, repetition, reconstruction, and neo-tradition related to the northern model of Russian development became essential in almost all interpretations and underline the Russian ‘rootedness’ of this new north. The uniqueness of Russian natural landscapes is used as another argument for the Russianness of the ‘northern civilisation’ when the Russian North is seen as ‘Noah’s Arc of humankind’ (Gromyko 2001), with its huge reserves of ‘wild’ nature,

being the “lungs of the planet”, as the Americans already for a long time breathe Russian oxygen” (Nikolaev 2002).

Nonetheless, the possibilities of the ‘civilisation’ component in the conception of northern civilisation become more critical when adding the spatial component (‘northern’). How can these aspects of civilisation from the theoretical literature introduced above be successfully linked to the communities of indigenous northern peoples and the common social position of the North as periphery, resource colony, and frontier? How can this old status of the North be combined with the proclaimed northern mission that should unite whole country? The historian Victor Ten (2005) sees the solution of this problem in representing the North “referring to the past time of rule of the appropriative and natural economy. Yuri Gromyko (2001) refers to the ways of surviving in harsh conditions that were developed by the peoples of the North.

The Novosibirsk scholars Popkov and Tyugashev (2004, 2006) underline the existence of the northern (Arctic) civilisation as a philosophical reflection of the superiority of mind in the “frozen civilisations” (Toynbee 1976), rather than using traits of ‘civilisation’ such as the presence of cities, division of labour, classes, statehood and written law. Different from Toynbee’s pessimistic predictions about the scope for evolution of these communities, the Russian scholars underline the potential of the northern civilisation to continue or revive development. They prove the role of indigenous northern communities and their importance for the evolution of humankind using classical Russian and world philosophy from Voltaire and Nietzsche to Chaadaev and Gumilev (Popkov and Tyugashev 2006).

Relations with Fennoscandia are also used to support cultural categories in the North of Russia for example the Finno-Ugric roots of many northern peoples, the role of the Vikings for the development of early Russian statehood, the Scandinavian relations of the Novgorod Republic, and the historical contacts of the Pomor population living on the shores of the Barents Sea. Many authors see these relations as historical continuity or the revival of historical tradition (Shiropaev 2001, Shtepa 2004; Golovnev 2004). Nonetheless neither philosophical nor historical Fennoscandian references are enough powerful as a resource to overcome an inherent contradiction between the ‘northern’ and the ‘civilisation’ aspect when conceptualising the North as an integrative national category for the whole of Russia.

There is, however, one deficit in the attempt to link the European (western) high-tech society to the ‘traditional’ northern society through the northern type of a Russian civilisation. It is the lack of symbolical and empirical proofs. Categories of inclusion and exclusion enforce that conflict. The northern status of Russia, as it is argued in a geostrategic and innovative context, is mainly oriented towards the dynamic regions in the European North of Russia and West Siberia with their hydrocarbon resources. The rest of the Russian Arctic cannot compete with those regions, neither in terms of resource abundance, nor with infrastructure. Weaker integrative symbols such as the ‘Scandinavian myth’ exclude ‘other Norths’ such as Sakha (Yakutia) or Kamtchatka altogether. We may observe in these remaining regions a rise of the marginal indigenous

communities which looks like a late revenge of their cultures. However, for the Russian-speaking majority of the Russian northeast this movement to compensate earlier humiliation does not meet any of their interests.

The search for a balanced conception of northern spatiality including political and cultural aspects is most active in the geographic and geostrategic ‘centre’ of the Russian North – in the Yamal-Nenets and Khanty-Mansiisk districts of western Siberia, where most of the Russian oil and gas reserves are located. The Nentsy are a Finno-Ugric speaking indigenous group of the North and herd successfully the world’s largest herd of domestic reindeer, in the world’s biggest gas production area (Stammler 2005). For the paradigm of a dynamic North this region has an important role for building up a northern civilisation (Popkov and Tyufashev 2004, 2006). This process is still at its early stages, but from the very beginning it is happening in tight connection to global processes and mobile resources, e.g. people, goods and services. The activities of the Arctic Council, intergovernmental and non-governmental programmes and projects, international economic relations, and the increasing mobility of regional elites enables the development of trans-territorial dimensions in these regions. In addition to that, new symbols in the regions (e.g. the new flag of Yamal), more attention to image-making policy (e.g. the first international forum of image-making in Khanty-Mansiisk 2006), are used to build bridges between the political and academic rhetoric and regional values.

Conclusion

The debates discussed above and the existing conceptualisations around the Russian North show an active process of determining spatial frameworks and a growing awareness of the unique possibilities as well as problems of the North. Northernness in a global context reflects a generally increased actuality of space as a relevant category. Space becomes a crucial trait of ‘centeredness’ on the global agenda. Having analysed the diverse interpretations of space, we can say that the North can help Russia to create new forms of competitive power in the global arena. In this respect it is important for Russia that playing the northern card enables to emphasize a unique specific Russian way, rather than buying into western models of development. The non-western potential helped the North to gain popularity. It is hard to imagine that without this the North would have become important in this quality and as an integrative model for the whole country.

The category of space figures here as a product which is created by social actors (Appadurai 1996). In our case these are politicians and theoreticians, and space has become an instrument (Lefebvre 1991) for their activities.

At the same time, we see that the understanding of the North has its place in society. Considerable activity of the ‘global North’ in transnational projects has far reaching effects for the North within Russia. Therefore Russia’s ambitions to become a major player in this ‘northern club’ are more than theoretical abstractions on a global scale; they are integrated in specific existing regional contexts.

Our analysis confirms Lefebvre's argument about the constitutive dualism of the category 'space'. Space has therefore simultaneously global, homogenous, unifying as well as fragmenting and dividing qualities. In this dualism space can develop in all possible options and variations and can facilitate negotiations in a non-aggressive context. These characteristics of space offer new political, economic and social paradigms for postsocialist Russia.

Our analysis revealed several different spaces functioning in the name of the North, but not any general understanding of what the North really is. We have seen that the North functions on several levels in Russia, e.g. the global, the national and the regional levels. The narrower the spatial frames, the stricter are their criteria inclusion and exclusion, for example in the region. At the same time, they also become easier exchangeable. The different spatial reference frames for an identity of the Sakha Republic after the Soviet Union are a good example for this. Basing on our empirical material from different Russian northern regions, we see that space as a social construction is used as an instrument and concept for solving actual challenges of very diverse nature, be it the quest for regional identity, political weight, economic capital, or international cooperation. In this sense space is constructed by society and also reproduced through discourses and social practices.

From the regional perspective we observe how space can manifest its versatility: space as concept can satisfy local needs and 'work' properly to the extent to which it corresponds to local perceptions. My informants from different social and age groups prefer to express their approach to space as a more 'readable' or 'visual' form of social practice. Space is pragmatically approached in terms of possibility to work, division of labour, hierarchy or power. For example, if believing in Sakha as a northern region gives jobs in northern international cooperation, why not believe in Sakha's northern spatial identity?

It is important to understand that the question is not whether or not spatial identity exists. Spatial identity can be an essential part of a constantly changing and shifting diversity of identities. A newly articulated spatial identity does not necessarily mean that it becomes the main frame of reference on all social levels. At the same time this does not mean that spatial identity is immediately refused. Pragmatic approaches to spatial identity in society include careful evaluation of the opportunities and problems connected to one or the other suggested concept. Even switching between different spatial frameworks, such as 'northern' or 'eastern' dimension, means activating one framework and letting the other 'hibernate', rather than mutually exclusive practices. The circumpolar civilisation in the remote Sakha Republic, for example, changed to another 'southern' reference space, emphasizing historical connections of Sakha with the Asian world of Chingis Khan. Ever since, the northern spatial reference is hibernating.

Therefore, as long as the spatial identity is institutionalised and directed from the top, it becomes meaningful when it finds a rational pragmatic basis in the regional society, not necessarily an emotional basis.

The north is today not only an ideological construction, but also a huge energy of imagination. Therefore the North is often associated with the birth of new life, with the conquest of the cosmos, or with the frozen rich history of Russia that will thaw and revive as a result of a new spiritual ‘warming’ period (Gromyko 2001).

The analysis of ideas about the North in this article leads us to conclude that space can change its location and its borders, as well as its contents. It can also change from, say, a geographical frame of reference to a more imaginary frame. This ‘elasticity’ and versatility of space as a category is one possible source of its legitimisation.

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¹ "on privileges for persons working in the Far North of the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic", postanovlenie VCIK I SNK RSFSR.

² Perechen raionov krainego severa i mestnostei, priravnennykh k raionam krainego severa, 1967.

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³ i.e. regions belonging to the North legally and thus entitled to more budget transfers

⁴ opening speech at the meeting of the Presidium Gossoveta v Salekharde, April 28, 2004, accessed at www.president.kremlin.ru

⁵ In this classification “absolutely uncomfortable” is one step more than “extremely uncomfortable”.

⁶ e.g. the Yamal-Nenets autonomous district, or the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), or the Chukotka autonomous district

⁷ In February 2006 in Nizhnyi Novgorod, see <http://www.nr2.ru/nn/56508.html> (accessed 06/10/2007)