

The Russian North – an ecological pearl cursed with resources?

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I will discuss the question of sustainability of local development in the Russian North through an example from Komi republic. Similarly as my study area Troitsko-Pechorsk municipal district, bordering itself with northern part of the Ural Mountains, many areas in the Russian North are blessed with ecologically valuable locations, but at the same time also cursed with abundant natural resources. Why cursed? Because intensive exploitation of those resources, such as fossil fuels, wood and minerals, endangers the existence of ecologically valuable locations and maintains a one-eyed attitude towards future development perspectives.

Some Western European localities, which have been described by Leimgruber and Hammer (2002, p. 136) as “ecologically central locations”, have been able to preserve ecologically valuable territories. With this concept they mean regions, which are defined as socio-economically peripheral, but from the viewpoint of biological diversity and lack of environmental problems they can be regarded as core areas. Actually, these municipalities and provinces have diversified their economy by using the ecologically central location as a key asset in local development. Mainly this has had to do with developing a wide range of tourism activities and other livelihoods that are associated with it in or close to nature conservation areas.

Troitsko-Pechorsk and areas north from it can be regarded as an ecologically central location. Forest coverage is among the highest in European Russia (90 %), the area is very sparsely populated (about 0.5 persons km²) and the environment is not threatened by polluting

industries (Glushkova et al., 1999, p. 209-211; Goskomstat, 2001, p. 6, 9). Moreover, Troitsko-Pechorsk and the whole of South East Komi contains the largest intact old growth forests in Europe. Part of these forests within the Jugud-Va National Park, the Pechoro-Ilychskiy *zapovednik* are protected (Global Forest Watch, 2003, p. 56-57). Due to high biological diversity and lack of environmental problems Troitsko-Pechorsk can be regarded as core area, albeit defined as socio-economically peripheral.

A dualistic attitude about the area

From the socio-economic core areas of Russia places like Troitsko-Pechorsk are seen as peripheral resource areas whose natural resources should be exploited. This view was most evident in the Soviet era, but it has not changed much during the years of Russian democratisation. For example, the official development strategy of the North West federal district states that core areas of North West Russia should concentrate on high technology production, whereas the periphery is perceived solely as a natural resource production area (Osnovnye napravleniya, 2003, p. 12).

During the course of history peripheral areas of Eastern Komi have been used primarily for wood harvesting and developing oil and gas deposits. In the 1960's and 1970's, there were also plans to form a reservoir in the valley of River Pechora. If the plan was to be followed through, a significant part of virgin forests

would have submerged which today constitute the biggest intact old-growth forest area in Europe. Projects like these and later empirical studies (Karjalainen, 2001, p. 89-92) imply that the area has been seen as a cornucopia of resources ready to be extracted.

However, in addition to this resource store view the area of virgin forests and its ecological importance has been acknowledged officially, since 15 % of the republic's territory is protected. The ecological potential of these territories has not yet been fully used for enhancing socio-economic development, but in a symbolic sense they seem to have a very high value:

“Especially in these areas oxygen is being produced which Europe is breathing. (...) Forests like this, which have been saved from human pressure and technological effects, have not been preserved in Europe.” (Ofitsial'nyy ..., 2004).

In the following chapter I will examine how the different views on the territory, that is “a resource cornucopia” and “an ecological pearl”, are internalised on the local level, in the administrations of Troitsko-Pechorsk district and the local unit of the Russian state forestry service. First, I will discuss the resource cornucopia or “the resource curse” view and later, in the concluding part, examine the possibilities of promoting the view based on ecologically valuable territory.

The resource curse in the periphery

The resource curse is a concept elaborated in order to characterise states and areas, which are blessed with large natural resources and are inclined to use these resources extensively and overly trust in one resource in their economic policy (cf. Kim, 2003, p. 17-21; Karl, 1997, p. 16). This delays or even prohibits mobilisation of other natural resources and human capital. Development policy forms into one which offers no alternatives, so that the state or region maintains a biased role in world trade. The export of raw materials plays an overemphasised role. The resource curse weakens state institutions, and puts brakes on the introduction of democratic practices.

According to my analysis of official texts and interviews this curse is having a profound effect on the worldview and attitudes of both republican and local government in Komi. The

only way to escape from the socio-economic whirlpool affecting the region is to get the oil and forest industry to focus their interest on its resources. No alternative ways to develop the district were imagined, however. The mental fixation on the permanent dominance of one or two sectors of the economy reflects the Fordist thinking of the “hard modern” (cf. Bauman, 2002, p. 174-176), that is, contemporary Russian society, where industrial production is emphasised as a key factor in regional development.

In Russian northern regions the forest and oil industry have traditionally been crucial for economic development. This is why the view of the leaders of Troitsko-Pechorsk does not differ from the dominant one. Although they do understand that economic weaknesses they have are connected to the fact that the district has been and still is dependent on one sector of the economy.

This implies that in the Russian periphery a very Fordist production model is being carried out. It is enforced by socio-economic marginalisation of the communities and the colonial mindset of the federation, and is promoted by a government that stresses a vertical power structure and the wide-scale exploitation of natural resources (cf. Bauman, 2002, p. 141-142, 160).

The resource curse detected in places like Troitsko-Pechorsk is surely far less all-encompassing than in resource enclaves or one-industry towns of the Russian Far North. Socio-economic backwardness and extreme marginalisation, apparent in Troitsko-Pechorsk, reduces the attention of external corporations towards the region, which in part diminishes the pressure to act according to the will of one dominant sector. In places like Troitsko-Pechorsk the main effect of the resource curse is that it limits innovative thinking, which could act as a platform for more pluralistic development ideas.

The arguments used by Troitsko-Pechorsk district officials imply that the district and its environment are framed through industrial production reasoning. In many arguments an image of a region with endless resources was created, which has very much resemblance to the Soviet era propaganda. In reality natural resources produce wealth only when they are easily attainable. Forestry villages, like Troitsko-Pechorsk, have lost their former function as part of the industrial production

chain that is economically connected with the core areas, and thus, become part of the passive, economically inactive periphery.

The resource curse is connected also to negative social and ecological consequences. The region's economic potential is perceived through the amount and volume of natural resources found in the region. Developing the area solely for industrial needs and internalising it as a resource reserve does not give high hopes for diversifying the local economy.

The resource curse is most clearly visible in the republican administration, which has a profound effect on the ideology of the local level actors, like the ones in the Troitsko-Pechorsk. In the development strategy of the Komi republic the emphasis is put on natural resources production:

“Assessment of natural resources and industrial production potential will enable us to define the ‘poles of growth’ and choose those resources which are most likely to be adopted in the future.” (Ekonomicheskaya programma ..., 2004).

Conclusion

The largest intact untouched virgin forests of Europe have attracted every year more and more tourists, domestic and foreign. The objective of these people travelling in the forests and rivers of the Urals Taiga is to see places where human influence on the natural environment is minimal. Eastern parts of the Troitsko-Pechorsk district and a forest territory governed by local unit of state forestry service, *leskhoz*, have been the most popular places to visit. The administration of the *leskhoz* have offered transport and lodging services to travellers and that way gained profit. Workers of the forestry unit have also started projects with a global Environmental NGO, WWF, in order to promote eco-tourism in their territory. Through this money-earning cooperation the *leskhoz* administration has turned, at least partly, into an institution that not only logs forests, but also preserves it for eco-tourists.

This expanding livelihood could act as a starting point for a more pluralistic local economy that can widen the base of livelihood structure of narrowly specialised peripheral areas where new economic activity is hard to accomplish by traditional means. This gives a possibility to break the spell of the resource

curse. However, the crucial question is: will the ecologically central locations of Russia be acknowledged as an active resource? As an active resource they can produce not only socio-economic growth on the local level, but also promote ecological sustainability of the whole country.

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