

## **De/population and Migration in a Precarious Region: the case of the Russian Far East**

Igor Saveliev  
(Nagoya University)

Are peripheral regions doomed to depopulation and degrowth? In the mid-nineteenth century, major world powers hurried to plant their flags in the territories, which national belonging was still uncertain. These borderlands were eventually integrated into the nations, which succeeded in claiming their right on these new possessions. These nations tried to populate borderlands in order to keep them part of their sovereign territory. The encouragement of migration from the main territory into these areas also became a precondition for their future economic development and protection from the claims of neighboring countries. What was the fate of these latecomer regions in the state-building? Were central and local governments successful in turning borderlands into prosperous areas? What factors did determine their development? While the present study focuses on the case of the Russian Far East (former *Priamur* governor-generalship), similar research might be relevant for exploring the development, integration and challenges of many other regions, which have similar history and status. Academics already paid some attention to borderland identity and their colorful and peculiar urban centers. Some studies looked at them in a comparative perspective (for example, Toyota 2007; McKeown 1999).

The present paper will examine the relationship between de/population and the region's development on the example of the Russian Far East, basing on the analysis of a variety of sources. It will explore, how efficient immigration and settlement policies in this frontier region were, and what factors, except physical distance between Periphery and Center, play role in preventing remote regions from socio-economic development.

### **Populating eastern frontier**

The *Priamur* governor-generalship (the *Priamur'e*) was one of the last administrative units to be incorporated into the Russian Empire in the mid-nineteenth century. The debate on its economic development evolved along with the discussion on how and to what extent domestic and international migration should be encouraged by the local and central governments in this scarcely populated region. The settlement policies in the *Priamur'e* were initially rather loose and generous. Aspiring to populate the region, the Russian government granted privileges in acquiring land to both Russian and non-Russian settlers. Already in 1861, the "Regulations of Settlement of Russians and Foreigners in the Amur and Maritime Provinces" were approved to distribute parcels of land to new migrants (Complete Collection 1867:107-110; Petrov 2001:94). Those who arrived at their own expense received one-hundred-desiatina (equal to 109.2 hectares) parcels of land for each family. The Law of Citizenship, approved on February 10, 1864, stipulated that foreign residents had equal rights with Russians and were allowed to acquire Russian citizenship after five years of permanent residence. For example, many Korean migrants, who began moving to the Maritime

Province already in the 1860s, used this opportunity to become the subjects of the Russian Empire in the 1890s and were encouraged to do this by the governor-general.

Between the 1860s and 1870s, a big segment of the population in the region consisted of Cossacks (18,500 in 1869) , members of the military and merchants. At the same time, the movement of peasants from the country's west to the Far East was also encouraged (3,500 in 1875) (Grave 1912:6). From the 1880s, the central government urged the local authorities to enforce and further develop this borderland economically. In 1896, the Directorate for Resettlement was established for coordinating domestic migration. However, this new agency was quite slow in improving the organization of peasants' movement across Siberia. As Russian economist A.A. Kaufman pointed out, one of the most important transit points for domestic migrants in the city of Tyumen was equipped by a private initiative without any government's support (Kaufman 1905: 35) . Because of this inconsistency in policy implementation, the Far Eastern population grew slowly.

The Trans-Siberian Railways proved to be a catalyst for regional development and was expected to facilitate the movement of people from the inner parts of the empire. From the 1880s, numerous construction worksites required additional labor and caused the influx of laborers not only from Russia's interior, but also from neighboring countries. Labor shortages and rather non-restrictive immigration policies attracted East Asian migrants to seek employment at various worksites in the Far East. They gradually established their communities in Vladivostok and other cities. Chinese seasonal workers shuttled back and forth between northeast China and the *Priamur'e*. Thousands of Korean migrants settled down in the south of the Ussuri Region and were engaged in agriculture (Grave 1912). Small-scale Japanese communities formed in urban areas and contributed to the expansion of the region's trade (for example, Vaskevich 1906) .

Between the late nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, many nations had constant anxiety about their national integrity and were especially concerned about the protection of their borderlands. Along with widespread nativism, this feeling of vulnerability in the peripheral regions often led to the construction of exclusive societies, the implementation of discriminative policies against international migrants and the formation of distinctive borderland identities across the world. The introduction of discriminative poll tax, the growth of popular xenophobia and the implementation of employment restrictions played significant roles in curbing immigration from East Asia in various countries (McKeown 1999) . Chinese and Japanese were often ambiguously perceived as an essential element of the regions' development and an imagined threat at the same time. As a result, East Asian migrants had mostly been alienated from mainstream society in many countries of the Pacific region.

In the Russian Far East and Eastern Siberia, a discriminative poll tax was also levied on the income of Chinese migrants. Their economic activities and the formation of ethnic organizations were initially encouraged, but soon restricted. In the spring of 1909, the deputy minister of interior, S.E. Kryzhanovsky, headed a committee aimed at compiling a bill, which goal was to restrict "the influx of paupers and artisans from other countries" (RGIA 394-1-48 1914: 11) . The compilers of the bill believed that the replacement of measures against Chinese and Koreans exclusively in the *Priamur* general-governorship and the Trans-Baikal Oblast' by a general immigration law "would help to avoid any protests from the Chinese government" (RGIA 394-1-48 1914: 10-11) . These

policies only partly succeeded during the imperial period.

After 1917, despite criticizing the policies of imperial officials, the Soviet government similarly encouraged domestic population movement to the Far East and permitted Korean residents to naturalize in the 1920s. However, in the 1930s, it strictly banned immigration from East Asia and expelled most ethnic-minority-group members from the region.

### **Struggling with depopulation in the second half of the twentieth century**

As Kazuhiro Kumo pointed out, between the 1960s and 1970s, the Soviet government encouraged migration from the inner part of the Soviet Union to the peripheral regions, including the country's east, by offering a higher salary and providing jobs to new graduates (Kumo 2007:133-134). However, although these advantages were granted to all domestic migrants, the mobility of human resources in these areas remained high. The outflow of population from the Far East was observed already in the 1970s (Kumo 2007:134) and accelerated after 1999 (Kumo 2007:137). Kumo analyzes inter-regional migration in Russia and emphasizes that the degree of social-infrastructure development was an important factor in selecting the place of residence. His careful analysis confirms once again that the physical distance between the Center and Periphery as well as the lack of social infrastructure hampered government's programs, aimed to promote migration to remote regions. These two factors also cause the outflow of population (Kumo 2007:137). Several other factors are to be addressed.

It is important to note that the debate on the ways of promoting regional economic development by migration and settlement was resumed after the democratization of Russian society, which began the late 1980s. When the political reforms in the Soviet Union started and strict planned-economy controls on population mobility were significantly relaxed, young and middle-aged Russian-speaking people began moving within the post-Soviet space and outside the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). In the late 1990s, the Russian government tried to address the problem of population dwindling and established some programs in order to facilitate the return migration of compatriots (*sootchestvenniki*) from the former Soviet republics.

In the Far East, the population of the Primorsky Krai dwindled by 103,000 people during the period of eight years from 1991 to 1999 (Vashchuk 2000:161) as many left for economically developed European Russia. The labor shortages were partly compensated by 70,000 Chinese workers, which temporarily entered Russia under inter-governmental agreements from 1988 to 1993. The local authorities began discussing how to promote the re-emigration of several hundred thousand Russian-speaking "compatriots" from Central Asia and other former Soviet republics. A link of these policies was a Primorsky Krai's special program for the return of ethnic Koreans, forcibly resettled to Central Asia in 1937 as part of the Stalinist purges. In 1996, ethnic Koreans were permitted to occupy several abandoned military personnel's towns in the region. It was also projected to build six homogenous Korean villages in the Krai (Troiakova 2008:40) with the financial assistance from South Korean sponsors. A village called 'Friendship' (*'Druzhiba'*) was built in the vicinity of Ussuriisk. The overall number of Koreans in the Krai grew from 8,125 in 1989 to 18,000 in 1996 and 26,000 in 1997. Some sources even estimate that there were from 36,000 to 40,000 Korean migrants from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in the Krai in the early 2000s (for

example, Vaschuk 2000 : 159) . They became the largest group of migrants from the former Soviet republics in the region in 1999 along with two other big minority groups—25,000 Armenians and 21,000 Azerbaijanis (Vaschuk 2000 : 159) . However, later, the plan to create homogeneous Korean villages was abandoned as considered by the local law-enforcement agencies and locals being in contradiction with the region's tradition of mixed residence of diverse ethnic groups.

Despite these several measures and special programs, the depopulation of the Russian Far East progressed fast. Now, it seems irreversible. From the beginning of the 1990s until present time, the population dwindled by 20% in the Khabarovsk Krai and shrank in all other parts of the region. It is commonly known that, currently, a little more than eight million people or just 5.5% of the Russian population reside in the Far East, which occupies 41 % of Russia's territory. It is expected that the region's population will shrink by four times by 2050. This makes the Far East a highly precarious region.

### **Causes of depopulation in a precarious region**

Why the Russian Far East was not as successful in attracting population as, for example, British Columbia, which is also located far away from the more economically developed Eastern Canada? If one compares the policies in the imperial and Soviet eras, it becomes obvious that the government faced the same kind of problem in populating the region. The resettlement of peasants from Ukraine and other western regions between the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries and the movement of people from the west of the Soviet Union between 1960s and 1980s were semi-forced and temporarily succeeded only because of the strong government intervention, propaganda and insufficient knowledge of would-be migrants about their destinations and rare opportunity to return. It is also essential to note that the government-sponsored policies in each period were mostly focused on attracting and resettling people to the Far East (and other remote regions) , while no much effort had been made to improve infrastructure in the region and establish new industries, which would be able to provide employment to a big number of local residents.

There were only few short periods of rapid economic growth in the Far East. In the pre-1917 period, the region's economy significantly grew during the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railroad in the 1890s and during the First World War, during which Russia's west became a battlefield and European seaports were unavailable for trade. In the Soviet period, the region benefited from the construction of a plane plant in Komsomol'sk-on-Amur. In the early 1990s, the region also experienced a short period of trade boom, which essential elements were the import of used cars from Japan and cheap goods from China and the Republic of Korea and the export of timber and fish. However, the limits of the region's trade growth and the lack of investments soon became obvious and the migrants' economic activities have gradually been put under the stricter state control between the late 1990s and early 2000s. The introduction of heavy taxes on the imported Japanese cars in the 2000s cut the wings to the region's lucrative trade of used cars. The lack of new big industrial plants and the temporary closure of the plant in Komsomol'sk-on-Amur in the 1990s caused high unemployment and frustration of Far Easterners (especially their young generation) about the future of the region.

Family disruptions were another factor. Most Soviet-period migrants left their enlarged

families in the west of the country, and when the special allowances for Far Easterners were revoked, many of them hurried to rejoin their relatives in the areas of their origin.

The Russian government employed a number of measures to boost the region's economy and attract population from other regions. There was an attempt to enforce the regional cadres by officials and professionals from Moscow in the early 2010s, but almost no one showed interest in moving to the Far East. The introduction of so-called "Far Eastern hectare" (*dalnevostochniy gektar*), a parcel of land, distributed for free, reminded policies, implemented in the 1860s. This measure also does not seem to be efficient. The most recent initiative was a proposal to pay one million rubles to each Far Eastern family, which had the third child. It might become an efficient measure as in the past the special allowance for the second child had a positive effect on the birth rate in the country. However, the lack of long-term strategy for establishing and developing industries in the regions has been the most influential factor, which caused return migration to European Russia and depopulation in general.

### **Conclusive remarks: aging as a new challenge to regional development**

The outflow of population and the lack of high-tech and other industries in the Far East discourage qualified professionals, including academics, to stay in the region. Skilled workers have persistently been trying to secure jobs in metropolitan area or other big cities in Russia's west. The lack of cadres in its turn may affect the quality of policy-making and policy implementation. This vicious circle is very hard to break without introducing a long-term strategy for regional development. The progressing aging is likely to worsen this trend. It is likely that the processes of depopulation and outflow of professionals in the Far East has already passed the "point of no return." The population and cadres will probably continue concentrating in two big cities-Vladivostok and Khabarovsk, but without a perspective of significant growth.

### **References**

- Borderlands=Borderlands, Ethnicity, Identity and Violence in the Shatter-Zone of Empires Since 1848. The Conference held in Marburg on 17-20.05.2007. H-Net, Retrieved on 4 July, 2010.
- Chamberlain-Creanga, Rebecca A. Identity and Industrial Change on a Contested Borderland, Moldova and Secessionist Transnistria, Retrieved on 4 July, 2010.
- Complete Collection=*Polnoe Sobranie Zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii* (Complete Collection of the Laws of the Russian Empire) . Collection 2, vol.39. St.Petersburg, 1867.
- Grave V. V. (1912) "*Kitaitsy, koreitsy i iapontsy v Priamur'e: Trudy komandirovannoy po vysochaishemu poveleniyu Amurskoi ekspeditsii*" (Chinese, Koreans and Japanese in the Amur Region. Report on an expedition to the Amur Region sent by Imperial Order) . Vol.11. St. Petersburg: V. F. Kirshbaum.
- Gerasimova L. A. (2000) Rol' organov vlasti v obustroistve migrantov v Primorskom Krae (1990-e gody) (The Role of the State Agencies in the Settlement of Migrants in the Primorsky Krai, the 1990s) in *Adaptatsiia etnichskikh migrantov v Primor'e v 20 v.* (The Adaptation of Ethnic Migrants in the Primor'e in the 20th century) Vladivostok, 179-180.
- Kaufman A. A. (1905) *Pereselenie i kolonizatsiia* (Resettlement and Colonization) . St. Petersburg :

- Tipografiia Tovarishchestva "Obschestvennaya Pol'za".
- Kumo, Kazuhiro. (2007) Migratsiia naseleniia v postsovetskoi Rossii (Migrations of population in post-Soviet Russia). *Ekonomicheskaiia nauka sovremennoi Rossii* (The Economics of Contemporary Russia) . Moscow : Central Institute of Economics and Mathematics, vol.2, 132-145.
- McKeown, Adam M. (2008) *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders*, NewYork : Columbia UP.
- Petrov A. I. (2000) *Koreiskaia diaspora na Dal'nem Vostoke Rossii, 60-e-90-e gody XIX veka* (The Korean Diaspora in the Russian Far East, 1860s-1890s) . Vladivostok : DVO RAN. RGIA=Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Istoricheskii Archiv (Russian State Historical Archive) , file 394-1-48.
- Siegelbaum, Lewis H. (1978) Chinese Migrants in the Russian Far East, *Modern Asian Studies*, no. 12, pp.307-330.
- Stephan, John. (1994) *The Russian Far East: a History*. Stanford : Stanford University Press.
- Toyota, Mika (2007) Ambivalent Categories : Hill Tribes and Illegal Migrants in Thailand, in Prem Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr (eds.) *Borderscapes: Hidden Geographies and Politics at Territory's Edge*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp.91-118.
- Troiakova T. G. (2008) "Koreiskaia derevniia" v Primor'e: odin iz proektov natsional' nogo vozrozhdeniia, *Ekonomichskoe Obozrenie* (Economic Review) , 2008, no. 4, pp.37-43.
- Vashchuk A. S. (2000) Adaptasiia etnicheskikh migrantov iz Rossii i SNG v Primor'e (90-e gody 20 v.) (The Adaptation of Ethnic Migrants from Russia and CIS in the Primor'e, the 1990s) in A.S. Vaschchuk & E.N. Chernolutskaia (eds) *Adaptasiia etnicheskikh migrantov v Primor'e v 20 v.* (The Adaptation of Ethnic Migrants in the Primor'e in the 20th century) . Vladivostok : IIAE DVO RAN.
- Vaskevich P. Yu. (1906) Ocherk byta iapontsev v Pryamurskom krae (An Essay on the Way of Life of the Japanese in the Amur Region) : *Izvestiia Vostochnogo Instituta* (News of Oriental Institute) , 15. Part. I. Vladivostok : Parovaya Lito-tipografiia gazety "Dal'niy Vostok".