Polar Geography
Vol. 32, Nos. 3–4, September–December 2009, 91–109

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Neoliberalism in the North: the transformation of social policy in Russia's northern periphery

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Social policy is a vital dimension of well-being in the harsh conditions of the Russian Far North. This article examines how longstanding welfare provision in the region has been restructured within the context of nationwide social reforms under Vladimir Putin. It starts with an analysis of Soviet-era policies for northern inhabitants and their evolution during the socio-economic crisis of the 1990s. I then look at how recent changes to budgetary and federal relations in the country have affected the delivery of social assistance in the North. Ultimately, the neoliberal undertones exhibited in federal social policy may be inappropriate in the region, where markets and individuals cannot be expected to sustain well-being.

1. Introduction

Life in the Far North places spatial, climatic, and financial pressures on well-being found in few other areas of Russia or the world. State social policy plays an important role in mitigating these conditions and supporting livelihoods. However, the scope and nature of welfare provision in the region has undergone multiple changes since the end of the USSR. The comprehensive welfare system established in the Soviet period broke down during the social and political upheavals of the 1990s and has since been restructured as part of wider moves to regulate and modernize Russia's welfare state. In considering these developments, I argue that the remaining vestiges of 'northern' policies are indicative of the 'recombinant' welfare state that has emerged in Russia where neoliberal policies operate and interact with Soviet-era forms of assistance and individual coping mechanisms.

After introducing the Russian Far North as a region, I examine how a wide range of welfare policies for its inhabitants were created during the Soviet period and fused to notions of moral entitlement and industrial development. This background information is needed to understand the socio-economic dislocation and migration patterns of the 1990s as well as recent policy changes, including social benefit reform. I show how the market-oriented principles underlying social policy in today's Russia differ considerably from Soviet practice in the Far North and clash with historical and societal expectations about 'just' social assistance. Leading into the conclusion, I connect social policy developments in Russia with those in other countries that face the challenges associated with providing welfare support in far northern regions.

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Polar Geography
ISSN 1088-937X print/ISSN 1939-0513 online © 2009 Taylor & Francis
http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals
DOI: 10.1080/10889370903471292

In referring to neoliberalism in the article's title, I acknowledge the controversy surrounding this concept and its applicability to Russia. In the welfare state literature, the term generally refers to the transfer of responsibility for well-being away from the state to individuals and the private sector, often in line with pressures to be globally competitive (Deacon 2000; Esping-Andersen 1990). Vladimir Putin's time as President is generally seen as 'something of a breakthrough in welfare state liberalization' due to the radical welfare proposals made by his early governments (Cook 2007: 145). However, actual changes have been more moderate than initially mooted (Cook 2007; Wengle and Rasell 2008). This means that it is inaccurate to describe the Russian welfare state as neoliberal, although recent reforms have certainly had a neoliberal flavor. In this article, I am interested in the reductions to state support for the population of northern Russia. I include both financial benefits and social services in my analysis in line with ideas that it is one-sided to focus exclusively on social insurance policies (cf. Abrahamson 1999). Indeed, the state support available to northern residents is a distinctive mix of monetary payments, job-related privileges, travel, pension rights, and social services.[1]

This article enhances our understanding of contemporary Russian social policy by discussing national-level welfare reforms in the distinctive context of the Far North. This gives an important regional perspective on welfare reform in Russia and poses the broader question of how governments in northern regions can support societal well-being. In addition, my study contributes to work on development in northern Russia and the Arctic region (Blakkisrud and Honneland 2005; Granberg 1998; Young 2007). Such literature often considers the effects of adopting market mechanisms in the region, but has tended to focus on political, security, environmental, and indigenous issues without explicitly addressing welfare policy (Blakkisrud and Honneland 2005: 2). Much of the research on livelihoods and coping strategies in northern Russia in fact emphasizes the minimal role of the welfare state (e.g. Pallot and Moran 2000; Round 2006). Yet, ethnographers of the post-socialist region are starting to challenge the assumption of state withdrawal by highlighting the multiple actors and blurred boundaries of the state (cf. Thelen and Read 2007). In a similar vein, my work suggests that social policy has high significance for well-being and socio-economic development in northern Russia and that local factors greatly influence how federal reforms are realized.

2. The Russian Far North

The notion and geography of the Russian North are highly contested, with even Russian legal and official documents giving inconsistent definitions and periodically changing the boundaries of the region (Bradshaw 1995: 196). Russia's Far North is defined by government decree as fully encompassing 13 of the country's 83 regions and incorporating parts of a further 11.[2] Although this land mass makes up about 70% of the country's territory, only 17.6% (25.1 million people) of the country's population live there (Severkom 2007: 1). Close to 80% of Russia's natural resources – timber, metals, fossil fuels, and fish – are located in the Russian North (Oleinik 2007: 2). This concentration explains why the northern regions contributed 47.0% of the federal budget in 2006 (Severkom 2007: 2). In addition, the area has high strategic significance given the Northern Sea Route and location of several key military and naval bases. The economic and strategic development of the region have often taken priority over social and environmental protection, with certain areas of

the Russian North among the most polluted in the world (Riabova 2000: 8). The region is home to a large number of indigenous peoples with varying ethno-linguistic backgrounds, 40 of whom are recognized as 'small indigenous peoples' and granted certain rights in Russian legislation (Duma Northern Committee 2007a: 1). In addition, larger ethnic communities living in the North comprise the titular nationality in a number of the Russian Federation's 21 'republics,' including the Komi, Nenets, and Yakut peoples.

Climatic conditions in the Far North are such that the average January temperature in Yakutsk is −41°C. The high latitude of the region means that winter days see very little sunshine, while summers are permanently light. Transport links between settlements and to other parts of Russia are very limited and often restricted to particular times of the year, for example, summer when rivers flow and non-asphalted roads are passable. Certain areas are only accessible by air, with the large town of Norilsk having no long-distance road or rail connections for its 130,000 inhabitants. This effective isolation of the Russian North is clear in how resident northerners refer to the rest of the country as the *materik* or 'motherland' as if it were a distant and separate entity.

The hardships associated with living in the North mean that social policies and services are important to the well-being of the population. This is evident from the following discussion of how distinctive welfare policies were established during Soviet times, only for them to disintegrate in the Yeltsin period and more recently undergo an extensive overhaul.

3. The Soviet 'conquest' of the North

Although a handful of towns and state policies existed in the Russian North as long ago as 1822, it was only in the Soviet period that a comprehensive attempt was made to 'conquer the North' of the country (Oleinik 2007: 3). Much of the region's communications and infrastructure were constructed by gulag prisoners during the Stalin period and many political prisoners remained in the area after the disbandment of labor camps (Round 2006). Special welfare policies for residents of northern Russia were introduced from the 1930s to facilitate the exploitation of the region's military and natural resource potential, although it would be wrong to say that settlers in this period were motivated primarily by material incentives (Egorov and Egorova 2006: 74). There were strong ideological and moral reasons for migration to the North related to providing labor for the expanding Soviet industrial-military complex. A mixture of political coercion and economic incentives allowed state factories and mines to be established in the North within a remarkably short period of time, accompanied by large inflows of workers, experts, and their families (Blakkisrud and Honneland 2005: 11). In line with Soviet development strategy, many settlements were built around a single large enterprise, a mono-industrial structure that caused substantial social problems during the economic transformations of the 1990s.

Workers–inhabitants of the North received special benefits beyond the three universal pillars of the Soviet welfare state that existed from the 1950s – compulsory employment, subsidized consumer prices, and free welfare services. As in other parts of the Soviet Union, transport was heavily subsidized both within the region to connect smaller settlements and to provide links with major towns in central Russia. A so-called 'northern shipment' delivered food, fuel, and consumer goods to

inhabited areas, however remote, ensuring that shortages were far milder in the North than in other areas of the Soviet Union (Thompson 2002: 273).

The most significant development of social policies in the Soviet Far North came in the 1960s, when a series of government decisions increased wages and pensions for inhabitants to attract workers and compensate for the unfavorable setting.[3] Indeed, 'the Far North was a construct employed to delineate an area in which wage increments and cost of living bonuses were applied as part of a program to recruit workers for tours of northern service under conditions that were viewed as otherwise so inhospitable that development would not be possible because of labor shortages' (Bond 1994: 299). Workers were granted longer periods of leave from work, early retirement, and received free annual travel to central Russia and special health resorts in southern Russia. Their northern wage and pension coefficients ranged from 1.15 to 2.0 depending on region, thus representing substantial increases in income (Zhuravleva 2008). Furthermore, incremental wage increases of up to 100% were offered as incentives to remain in the North on a long-term basis, thereby reducing labor turnover. The financial advantages associated with relocating to the North were complemented from the 1970s onwards by the provision of comprehensive public services and a modern social infrastructure (Heleniak 1999: 19). Overall, these policies meant that [material] living standards in Russia's Far North were no worse than in other parts of the USSR and sometimes much higher (Oleinik 2007: 4).

As a result of these settlement and social policies, the Soviet North was densely inhabited in comparison with other northern regions in the world and had a population that was comparatively young, educated, male, urban, and non-local (Heleniak 1999: 3). Indeed, more people live in the Russian Far North than in all the other Arctic regions of the world put together (Einarsson *et al.* 2004: 19). Rural dwellers tended to hail from the small communities indigenous to the region. It is hard to summarize the contradictory indigenous policies of the Soviet Union, which varied between groups and periods. On the one hand, certain waves of policy were designed to impose a 'socialist' way of living on what were seen as 'backward' people (Grant 1995). Thus, the collectivization process forcibly reorganized traditional livelihoods of fishing, hunting, and reindeer herding around state enterprises (Ventsel 2003: 123). The nomadism of certain groups gave way to settlement and 'modern' living, with boarding schools established for children from indigenous families and remote settlements. The influx of non-indigenous migrants resulted in many native ethnic groups becoming minorities in their own territories, while greater access to Russian-language material diminished the use of native tongues. Yet there was considerable official support for national folklore and culture through arts centers and educational materials (Hajda and Bessinger 1990). Furthermore, Soviet ethnology often operated in order to record and protect local cultures (Hirnsperger 2005). A full exploration of Soviet and more recent policies for indigenous groups is beyond this article, although culture undoubtedly is important to various dimensions of well-being from livelihoods to group identity.

The large-scale social and industrial development of the Russian North during the Soviet period was only possible because financial considerations were overridden by political and military priorities in the USSR's centrally planned economy (Cook 2007: 31). Questions of well-being and social provision were subordinated to the

region's broader development strategy, which reflected the centralized control and priorities of the Soviet system (Bradshaw 1995: 199). The heavy subsidization of the region became untenable during the transformation away from state socialism when cost became an important issue in budgetary politics (Crate and Nuttall 2003: 87). The following section examines the socio-economic shocks caused by the 'transition' toward a market economy and breakdown of the welfare state, explaining that social problems appeared in the early 1990s as rapidly as state assistance to support inhabitants in the North declined. This leads onto discussion of how administrative and budgetary reforms under Vladimir Putin restructured social policies in the region dating from the Soviet period.

4. Socio-economic transformations in the 1990s

The Soviet welfare system in the Russian North was maintained on paper during the transformational 'chaos' of the 1990s and even enhanced by highly populist laws and presidential decrees (Granberg and Riabova 1998: 188). However, in reality infrastructure and welfare mechanisms deteriorated across Russia as the country underwent economic, political, social, and national transformations (Standing 1998). Failures of heating, water, and electricity became commonplace in the absence of federal investment and subsidies (Thompson 2002: 281), while a sharp fall in government funding for northern shipments reduced supplies of consumer goods, especially in remote areas (Heleniak 1999: 61). Distance and poor transport links meant that consumer prices in the Russian North climbed far above the average in Russia once market forces started to set them. As a result, official poverty lines in most northern regions are two to three times higher than in central Russia (Severkom 2007: 16). The full extent of the social crisis that hit the North is reflected in the fact that its suicide, mortality, and alcoholism rates are the highest in Russia, which is alarming given how the country leads globally in these indicators (Einarsson *et al*. 2004: 156).

Russia's welfare state in the 1990s was chronically under-funded and could neither support traditional recipients of support nor ameliorate new social problems. In the absence of federal intervention, regional governments were forced to assume the burden of tackling social problems despite their inexperience and low resources (Kharitonova and Vizhina 2004: 168). In particular, many large enterprises discarded the social infrastructure that had been attached to them during the Soviet period (Einarsson *et al*. 2004: 80). Kindergartens, polyclinics, housing, and leisure facilities were either closed or turned over to local authorities that were financially and administratively unprepared to maintain them (Bradshaw 1995: 200). A striking mismatch between state obligations and actual provision of social assistance emerged in the Far North, where social policy could not cushion the worst effects of the country's economic and social crisis. The reduction in social provision caused a sharp drop in the living standards such that 'the pre-existing social contract between state and northern settler was nullified' (Thompson 2004: 74). Indeed, while all of Russia had to deal with declining state support, 'the Far North is particularly disadvantaged when the rules of the game call for "muddling through" by one's own devices' (Bond 1994: 302). In these conditions, deprivation and out-migration were key social issues in the region as livelihoods became directed

at survival (Kalugina *et al.* 2005: 49). It is important to bear these two issues in mind when discussing social policy developments.

4.1 *Material well-being*

Workers and enterprises in the North were sorely affected by the collapse of the Russian economy in the early 1990s. Many companies were connected to the military-industrial complex whose unsuccessful conversion to civilian production prompted closures and unemployment among manual and skilled workers (Kalugina *et al.* 2004: 163). The mono-firm structure that prevailed in the North meant that joblessness (both hidden and official) and the cessation of social services provided by enterprises tended to affect entire settlements. Even today, unemployment in the North is considerably higher and lasts longer than in general in Russia (Severkom 2007: 2). For those inhabitants who remained in work, wages were very low and often not paid – in 2000, 44% Siberian workers received wages less than the poverty line (Kalugina *et al.* 2004: 171). Although only parts of Siberia are classified as the Far North and therefore subject to the social policies discussed in this article, such figures indicate the potential scale of social problems in the region.

The picture is however complicated by significant regional variation. Against the backdrop of a generally bleak situation, inequality grew rapidly in the Russian Far North during the 1990s. This had historical dimensions, for Siberian and Far Eastern areas were far less developed than European parts of the North during Soviet times (Kalugina *et al.* 2004: 168). Today, differences in natural resources account for highly differentiated living standards. Salaries in the Nenets Autonomous District – the 'Arctic Kuwait' – are two–three times higher than in other northern and Russian regions due to the lucrative salaries paid by the oil industry (Severkom 2007: 16). However, only part of the region's population benefits from this wealth and intra-regional inequality in the North is the highest in Russia after Moscow. Just 16% workers in Sakha are employed in the well-paid mining sector (Einarsson *et al.* 2004: 78). In contrast, indigenous peoples and rural inhabitants are particularly deprived, with only a third of housing in the Nenets autonomous district having piped water and sewerage (UNDP 2007: 30). Such indicators of material well-being as calorie consumption, car ownership, and computer use are much lower in Siberia than other areas of the country (Kalugina *et al.* 2004: 169). The adoption of a market economy was thus accompanied by rising inequality in the Russian North with the wider community gaining little from the region's natural resource wealth.

The changes to traditional livelihoods brought about by the Sovietization of the North placed indigenous communities in a difficult position during the 1990s. On the one hand, areas used for traditional activities were often polluted or off-limits. However, the Soviet organization of work and life could not be sustained once central funding and regulation disappeared. Many livestock and agricultural collectives that had been established during the Soviet period fell apart, resulting in dramatic declines in output and herd sizes in many northern regions (Einarsson *et al.* 2004: 80). Welfare and healthcare services in rural areas shrank due to resource constraints, out-migration of specialists and geographical remoteness (Finkler 1995). Socio-economic crisis was a major factor behind the fall in the life expectancy of indigenous groups in the North with alcohol frequently being the underlying

cause of death (Petrov 2008: 282). Indigenous peoples tended to be employed in the low-paid agricultural sector and lacked the skills to obtain better-paid work. They were thus at particular risk of deprivation and ill-being. Indeed, the Human Development Report for Russia found that 'in Nenets Autonomous District and Komi Republic, extreme poverty seems to be ethnically based . . . an inequality that creates a permanent layer of extreme poverty in the North' (UNDP 2007: 28).

4.2 *Out-migration*

A lack of job prospects and the disintegration of the welfare state caused significant out-migration from the Russian North during the 1990s, when almost one-quarter of Russia's Arctic population left the area (Einarsson *et al.* 2004: 29). It is no surprise to find ghost towns and villages abandoned by residents scattered across the region. The population of Chukotka region declined by 70% and the city of Vorkuta lost 40% inhabitants between 1989 and 2002 (Einarsson *et al.* 2004: 39). Young and educated workers moved away of their own volition and the remaining population therefore contained a large proportion of people receiving state support, for example pensioners and disabled people (World Bank 2004: 34).

Despite the declining population, the Russian government and certain scholars frequently refer to the 'overpopulation' of the Russian North, that is the non-sustainability of the region's current population (e.g. Hill and Gaddy 2003). Climatic conditions certainly do not suggest that northern Russia should have nine settlements with more than 250,000 inhabitants each (Heleniak 1999: 42). At the other end of the size scale, it is also unviable to maintain small, distant settlements regardless of what local residents wish. Since the 1990s the Russian government has operated resettlement programs at the federal and regional level to reduce the population of the North by relocating inhabitants to central and southern Russia. Several factors have however complicated this 'rationalization' of the population, including unwieldy schemes and long waiting lists for housing. Some administrative obstacles were reduced following World Bank recommendations to increase participant choice in resettlement (World Bank 2004: 34). Current policies nonetheless fail to recognize the importance of social dimensions of well-being – many inhabitants in the North are reluctant to move away due to an absence of social ties beyond the region (Thompson 2004: 78). They have longstanding networks of friends and acquaintances that can ensure their material and social well-being despite the area's inhospitable conditions (Round 2006).

4.3 *Policy responses*

Russian social policy under Boris Yeltsin was markedly reactive in that it tended to respond to social crises rather than tackle emerging problems (Standing 1998). This was a period when northern regions began to assume greater political powers and central government finances were in decline. This combination of circumstances resulted in the breakdown of economic co-ordination and supplies to the North (Poelzer 1995: 210).

The legal basis for social provision in Russia's Far North was reaffirmed in legislation in the 1990s on the area's general socio-economic development and more narrowly on the rights of northern workers.[4] These documents tended to be

protectionist in nature, giving support to local residents, industries, and enterprises to reduce social crisis, but not actively developing the region (Ministry of Regional Development 2006: 5). They thus represented a continuation of late Soviet policies and approaches (Bond 1994: 300). A special State Committee on the Socio-Economic Development of Northern Regions (*Goskomsever*) was created in 1990 and carried responsibility for regional matters, including indigenous affairs, until its disbandment in 2000. While the body cannot be seen as especially effective or energetic, its existence did signify governmental recognition that that North required particular attention and non-standard policies. However, many regional governments saw the committee as an instrument of centralized control and it was 'drawn into a crisis management mode in its decision-making, operating in a policy vacuum precluding its capacity to rationalize the effectiveness of its interventions' (Finkler 1995: 244). The limited impact of Goskomsever meant that 'the liquidation of this governmental body did not entail considerable negative or positive consequences for whomever it was supposed to serve,' although its 'ten-year activity was inseparably linked with the overall crisis in the Russian North' (Golovnev 2001).

One issue that Goskomsever and other layers of government were unable to overcome was the chronic underfunding that affected all sectors of the Far North in the 1990s, including social services. The non-payment crisis whereby salaries, bills, and state benefits were not paid due to lack of cash circulation was especially severe in the North, undermining the value of any legal entitlements and rights.[5] A problem of 'unfunded mandates' arose when regional and local governments were obliged to assume various social functions and fund services without requisite financing from the federal government (Lavrov *et al.* 2000: 5). Whilst questions of 'survival' were pertinent across Russia in this period, individual coping strategies were particularly important in the North where state support had been crucial to well-being and indeed the reason for many people's residence in the region (Round 2006).

Policy responses in the 1990s to the problems of the Far North were therefore halting and severely affected by under-financing. One of Vladimir Putin's main goals upon coming to power was resolving the imbalances of federal power and funding that afflicted many sectors and regions. His reforms clarified the administration and financing of state social provision, but also reduced state responsibility for societal well-being. Most dramatically, an overhaul of federal–regional relations in 2005 restructured longstanding northern policies for both workers and those receiving pensions and social assistance. The next section discusses these controversial changes in detail.

5. Northern social policy under Putin

When Vladimir Putin became President in 2000, he was confronted with ineffective systems of social policy and federal relations whose problems were exacerbated by inadequate funding. Although his reform solutions did somewhat improve the organization of state administration, they were far from beneficial to the well-being of northern residents. Instead, federal support for the North, especially its individual residents, grew increasingly limited at both the discursive and funding levels.

One of the main goals of the Putin administration was to bring order to Russia's chaotic system of federalism, creating a 'vertical' line of authority that gave Moscow greater control over regions and clarified the complicated state budget (Reddaway and Orttung 2005). The government was also concerned with regularizing and

stabilizing the market foundations of the Russian economy and the state's role in it (Kharitonova and Vizhina 2005: 5). Indeed, the opaque financing and administration of the welfare state in the 1990s was a factor behind wage, pension, and benefit arrears in Russia and 1998 financial crash. Retrenchment and tighter social spending have thus been key features of social policy since 2000 that many analysts characterize as neoliberal (cf. Cook 2007).

The federal government's overall approach to the Far North became far more functional under Vladimir Putin, with financial considerations replacing Soviet-era aims to 'conquer' the North (Blakkisrud and Honneland 2005). For example, the socio-economic development program issued by the Russian government in 2000 regarded the North as 'part of the overall economic space of Russia across which universal economic conditions and "rules of the game" must apply' (Gref Programme 2000). This influential policy document emphasized the desirability of awarding welfare support according to individual need and cost-effectiveness rather than regional specificity. This line of thinking was extended in a government concept paper issued soon after Putin was first elected President that criticized the system of state support in the Far North as unstructured, Soviet, and incompatible with desirable economic and federal relations (Ministry of Regional Development 2006: 5). President Putin himself spoke of the need to balance inter-budgetary relations and create a targeted model of state assistance in the North (Osipov 2004). All in all, the 'northerness' of the Russian North is no longer perceived as a sufficient reason for state support and the region is increasingly subject to standard federal policy (Blakkisrud and Honneland 2005: 14).

On 1 January 2005, Federal Law 122 came into force in Russia, marking a watershed in the country's social policy and significantly affecting the social rights of 30% of the country's population, including most northern inhabitants. This 'super-law' was designed to clarify the administrative and financial responsibilities of individual regions and the federal center, particularly in the field of welfare policy. It abolished a 1996 law on socio-economic development in the North, swept away many Soviet policies and radically curtailed the state's role in the region (Duma Northern Committee 2004). It made a new delineation of policy tasks, giving regions a greater role in social provision at the same time as reducing federal funding. This double burden is likely to 'accelerate the destruction of social infrastructure' in the North, especially in fields that became the responsibility of regions, for example healthcare, utilities, and housing (Kharitonova 2005: 214).

The new social system established by Law 122 involved major changes to wages, pensions, and benefits in the North. One controversial move was the abolition of federal funding for many of the wage supplements and travel privileges that have traditionally accompanied residence in the region. It is now expected that employers will provide the cancelled benefits for private-sector employees, despite evidence that firms in the North are already over-burdened by social obligations (Kharitonova and Vizhina 2005: 8). Another unpopular change was the harmonization of pension rules across the country, which meant that old-age pensions were no longer weighted by northern coefficients if a resident moved to a more hospitable area of Russia. This policy very much contradicted government policy to encourage pensioners to leave the North and in fact prompted the return of some former workers to the region (Duma Northern Committee 2007b: 4).

Law 122 became widely known in Russia as the 'monetization law' since it replaced many forms of in-kind welfare provision with cash payments. Up to 2005,

military veterans, disabled people and Chernobyl victims enjoyed free or discounted local transport, medicines, and utilities, but now they receive cash and must pay in full for these services. As of July 2008, the payments vary from €31 to €77 per month depending on the category of recipient. This move was driven by a wish to clarify the financing of social assistance and to begin the process of marketizing public and welfare services (Wengle and Rasell 2008). The change has important implications for northern inhabitants. The cash payments are not weighted by northern coefficients and therefore their purchasing power is less than in other areas of the country due to higher prices in the North. This is particularly problematic in view of rapidly rising prices for public services in line with moves to ensure that public services fully cover their costs.

The only reprieve in the monetization legislation was the option to retain a so-called 'social package' of in-kind benefits in return for a smaller cash payment. This covers prescription medicines, annual sanatoria trips, and local transport, but its benefit is undermined by frequent shortages of medicines and sanatoria places (Parfitt 2007). Residents in the Far North are nonetheless far more likely to opt for the social package compared to other regions (Regnum 2007). This suggests that cash is far from a panacea for inhabitants in the North, for its real value is low and alone it cannot sustain their well-being.

Another feature of the 2005 law was the decentralization of administrative and financial responsibility for pensioners, former political prisoners, home front workers (civilian workers during the Second World War) and labor veterans to individual regions. Each region now sets its own policy and funding for these groups based on political priorities and budgetary resources. This has increased regional inequalities in social provision in the North and throughout Russia, thus codifying in law the situation that de facto developed during the 1990s (Wengle and Rasell 2008: 752). Whereas richer administrations can afford to provide extensive support to their inhabitants, the simultaneous reduction in federal funding and increase in their responsibilities leaves poorer areas facing great budgetary pressures. This inevitably affects the quality and generosity of social polices that they can offer.

The cancellation of benefits and transfer of many social responsibilities to regional governments suggests that the Putin government rejected the logic and symbolism behind Soviet-era social policy in the Far North. The new policies altered patterns of official recognition and support that have long existed and been regarded as fair by the population of the North and beyond. They challenge Soviet-era narratives that Russia has benefited from the efforts of northern inhabitants and should therefore compensate the hardships that they endured. Niobe Thompson has written of the 'moral economy' of sacrifice and entitlement that frames a northerner's residence as service to the country (Thompson 2002, 2004). Even federal ministers admit that the state has a 'moral duty' (*moral'nyi dolg*) to pay northern benefits, albeit one they argue rests with regions rather than the federal government (Vesti Obrazovaniya 2006).

Unsurprisingly, the changes made to social policy in the North were hotly contested in both political and societal arenas. Nationwide protests in January 2005 by pensioners and other groups affected by monetization were strongly supported in the Far North (Shirov 2004). Despite ferocious January temperatures, unsanctioned demonstrations on various scales were recorded across northern cities from Arkhangel'sk to Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk (Schroder 2005). Protestors challenged the cancellation of social benefits (especially free local transport) and feared that

inflation would erode the low value of their cash payments. The new pension rules angered many residents by affecting the period needed to earn a full pension and removing northern weights if a pensioner left the region. The variation in service standards and cash payments across regions also evoked significant discontent among welfare recipients who had been treated equally before 2005 when subject to federal regulation.

Northern politicians in Moscow and the region were also very critical of the 2005 welfare reforms and the parliamentary fraction of the pro-Putin United Russia party called on the federal government to revise the cancellation of northern supplements (Moi Arkhangel'sk 2005). These political figures had championed the cause of peoples native to the North during the passage of Law 122 through the Duma, but to no avail (Vladimirov 2004). The protests on the streets prompted regional authorities to raise cash benefits and re-introduce certain services, for which the federal government eventually provided additional funding (Wengle and Rasell 2008). However, the Kremlin consistently resisted proposals to reinstate the northern benefits abolished in 2005 and applied pressure on regions to introduce their own monetization reforms. Regions, individuals, and the private sector thus have greater responsibility for well-being despite doubts about their ability or willingness to take on this burden.

6. Current policy directions

It seems unlikely that northern policy in Russia will significantly change under the new President Dmitrii Medvedev. Rather, the present approach of reducing the Russian North's special status and social provision is likely to continue. The only significant concession made to northern inhabitants since 2005 was a decision to weight their pensions by northern coefficients even if they leave the region (Prime Tass 2007). Otherwise, most proposals to improve or restore pension and social provision for Northerners have been rejected by the government (Duma Northern Committee 2007a). Interestingly, plans have recently been put forward to establish a special 'Arctic Zone' in Russia (Ministry of Regional Development 2006). The establishment of this region would be official recognition that the Far North cannot be governed by a standard 'one-size-fits-all' federal policy. The proposed law makes some reference to social issues, although they are likely to be overshadowed by the economic and strategic significance of the Northern Seapath and natural resource extraction. Indeed, the government's recent concept paper on Russia's long-term development speaks of the need to develop transport, raw materials, and timber in the North, but contains no mention of welfare policies in the region (Ministry of Economic Development and Trade 2007). It is probable that special provision will be made for indigenous peoples, for whom the federal government is creating a sustainable development program and increasing funding (Prime-Tass 2008).

Plans to increase the industrial capacity of the Russian North will necessitate changes in the region's labor and business activities. In parallel with schemes to resettle the permanent population, there has been a growth in the number of shift workers (*vakhtoviki*) traveling to the North to work. Already significant numbers from central Russia and former Soviet republics make fortnightly or monthly visits to natural resource extraction sites (Spies 2006). Official discourse at both the federal and regional levels suggests that the Russian government favors replacing the settled populations of certain remote areas in the North with temporary workers

(Kharitonova and Vizhina 2004: 174). Such thinking may explain the lukewarm official support for socio-economic development in the North (Oleinik 2007: 5). However, much needs to be done to provide these workers with legal and pension rights, for they currently work in a legal vacuum (Kharitonova 2005: 215).

The additional wage and welfare responsibilities placed on companies in the Far North by Law 122 raises the saliency of corporate social responsibility. The Russian government is encouraging such practices due to the shortage of budget resources for effective social policy and the prominent role of major corporations in regional development (Soboleva 2007: 84). Commitment from the private sector is however lukewarm at best, although certain large companies in the North do claim to be socially responsible, for example Norilsk Nickel and Gazprom. The salaries and benefits offered by companies vary greatly, with great competition among workers for jobs that provide a generous 'social package' of financial and non-monetary benefits. Nonetheless, there are significant problems with ensuring that Russian firms meet even basic legal requirements concerning taxes, working conditions, and the environment, let alone contribute to broader social development. Concrete support from regional governments is also lacking, with only Tomsk and Novosibirsk having credible sustainable development plans (Kostin 2007). It is therefore unlikely that Russia's private sector will expand its social role in the North to fully compensate for the reduction in state welfare activities.

While federal policies to support the well-being of indigenous peoples have had mixed results, there have been interesting developments at the regional level. Roman Abramovich, the governor of resource-rich Chukotka in 2000–2008, emerged as a staunch defender of the rights of indigenous communities, holding that they should not be persuaded to resettle regardless of economic conditions (ORES 2004). Despite its relatively successful resettlement program, Chukotka has not closed settlements populated by indigenous people and is improving housing and public services for rural residents (Thompson 2004: 79). There is some sign that the federal government recognizes the problems facing native groups, for it reinstated support for reindeer herding in 2007 (Oleinik 2007: 7). However, such largesse is not a typical experience in the Far North. Indeed, the cancellation in the 2005 reforms of transport benefits for schoolchildren and students from the region has exacerbated the social isolation and deprivation of native peoples as it becomes more difficult and expensive to study and travel. Deprivation among indigenous people thus remains both a pressing issue and low political priority (Kalugina *et al.* 2004: 173).

7. International perspectives

The existence of 'northern' social policies is not unique to Russia, although development polices in Soviet North 'contrasted sharply with both those employed by other circumpolar countries and those amenable to a market economy' (Crate and Nuttall 2003: 87). All states in the Arctic region face policy challenges related to climatic difficulties, geographic remoteness, higher living costs, and lower service levels. Often their solutions are similar, for example shift workers similar to *vakhtoviki* in Russia have long been employed in northern Canada (Thompson 2002: 285). Most comparisons of northern policies either look at support for indigenous peoples or political and economic dimensions of federalism (e.g. Nuttall 1998; Solomon 2004, 2005; Young 2007). Issues of welfare provision are rarely discussed, although the 2004 *Arctic Human Development Report* did include demographic,

health, and welfare issues (Einarsson *et al*. 2004). All this work highlights that many social issues in the Russian North have cross-border resonance, although the precise nature of development problems and appropriate policy solutions will inevitably depend on local factors.

As in Russia, social policy change in northern countries has been associated with a decentralization of political authority to local and regional bodies (Riabova 2004: 9). The Arctic Human Development Report concluded that Arctic communities face an unprecedented challenge to their resilience in light of the resulting governance issues (Einarsson *et al*. 2004: 232). Across the world they have seen a move away from direct subsidization by central governments and the introduction of policies that place greater responsibility on individuals and the private sector for providing welfare services. For example, cuts have recently been made to healthcare, education, and subsidized accommodation in the Canadian North, exacerbating housing shortages in Nunavat and Nunank and affecting well-being in areas where income stems mainly from seasonal activities (Einarsson *et al*. 2004: 81). The Canadian Chamber of Commerce (2007: 86) has long argued for increasing social support in the region, maintaining that 'assistance to northern residents remains critical to the long term sustainability of northern areas'. Processes of economic deregulation are underway in Greenland, where a series of reforms have phased out uniform prices for infrastructure services, which were used to offset high costs in remote settlements (MFEA 1998). With certain goods still subsidized by the Danish Government, this represents a much softer liberalization than Russia's rapid move to 100% cost recovery for public services. These cases show that state provision in the North cannot be restructured in line with standard neoliberal prescriptions without negative consequences for the welfare of the population.

The experiences of other northern regions suggest possible development strategies for the Russian North. The Putin government has frequently lauded the technological success of Finland, regarding it as a good model of economic self-sufficiency for the Russian North (Kalugina *et al*. 2004: 173; ORES 2004). While this comparison fits with a political desire that Russia develops hi-tech industry, little consideration has been given to how state policy positively interacts with general economic development (Kalugina *et al*. 2005: 58). Indeed, international experience suggests that state protection is needed to release the potential of Arctic regions, making it unlikely that technology can be encouraged in the region without public support (Blakkisrud and Honneland 2005: 9). Rather, resource extraction is likely to remain the largest source of revenue in the Russian North and it may therefore be most fitting for Russia to draw on the environmental protection legislation operating in Norway and Canada.

On social issues, much value can be found in the Canadian notion of 'community health' that emphasizes sustainable development and quality of life (Riabova 2004: 10). This broad model of well-being reveals the flaws in Russia's increasingly economistic social policy, highlighting that money cannot guarantee well-being in places where public services are restricted by climate and distance. Indeed, scholars have long argued for a human-focussed approach to reduce emerging exclusion in the Russian North (e.g. Granberg and Riabova 1998: 192). Such innovations as telemedicine could improve access and modernize healthcare, with its speed and geographical reach useful to both isolated indigenous settlements and temporary *vakhtovik* settlements (Einarsson *et al*. 2004: 164). Mechanisms operating in Scandinavia and Canada to support the health, welfare,

and self-government of indigenous peoples could also be useful in Russia if adjusted for local cultural and economic specificities (Wilson 2007).

8. Conclusions

Article Seven of the Russian constitution defines the country as a 'social state whose policy is directed at creating conditions that ensure a dignified life and the free development of man.'[6] This proclamation of a social dimension to state activity is especially important in the context of northern Russia, where weather conditions, remoteness, poor infrastructure, and lack of local foodstuffs greatly affect well-being. Official understanding of what the 'social state' entails has recently changed, with the federal government abandoning established policies that granted special finance and support to the Far North. The discussions above highlight how social policies and well-being in the region are closely linked to broader development concepts and strategies. The welfare cuts and cost rationality being applied to the North are indicative of a broader liberal trend in Russian social policy (Cook 2007; Kharitonova and Vizhina 2004: 170). They represent a break with past practice and seemingly ignore both Soviet history and the realities of life in the area. Coming at a time when the Russian state had accumulated vast revenues from natural resources, the move from 'state paternalism to the minimalization of the social functions of the state' was understandably frustrating for local inhabitants (Kalugina *et al.* 2005: 58).

Overall, it is difficult to see how significant problems in the area, including resettlement and economic diversification, can be solved without focussed intervention. Looking beyond social and cultural policy, pressing issues in northern Russia include healthcare, alcoholism, environmental standards, socio-economic marginalization, and the spread of HIV. Recently launched 'national priority projects' to improve healthcare, education, housing, and rural living standards have yet to yield positive effects in the region (Gontmakher 2008). There is strong evidence that the Far North needs tailored support to solve its specific problems and circumstances. While the long-term subsidization of Russia's North is arguably unviable, a broad range of measures is needed to improve well-being in the region. Without denying that Russia's welfare state needs restructuring, it seems clear that the neoliberal undertones currently exhibited in federal social policy are unsuitable in a context where markets and individuals cannot be expected to sustain well-being. Reforming social policies in the Russian North without providing adequate support to the population will only exacerbate vulnerability in the region.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Larissa Riabova, Ulla Partanen, Gertrude Eilmsteiner-Saxinger, and two anonymous reviewers at *Polar Geography* for their knowledgeable comments on earlier drafts. All mistakes and interpretations remain my own responsibility. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the NORFISCA Summer School 'Social Production of Space: Field Experiences of the Russian North,' organized in August 2007 by the Center for Independent Social Research, St. Petersburg and supported by a grant from the Nordic Research Board (Nordforsk).

Notes

1. I also strongly believe that family, social networks, and community groups play important roles in supporting well-being, but these non-state actors are unfortunately beyond the scope of this article.
2. I use the terms 'North' and 'Far North' interchangeably to refer to the entire area of Russia in which an explicit 'Northern social policy' operates. It should however be noted that Russian legislation distinguishes between 'regions of the Far North' and 'localities equal to them' for the purposes of awarding social benefits (Bond 1994: 299). Although the specific benefits available in the two classifications of regions vary, both have northern social policies and are therefore included in the coverage of this article. The 13 regions fully classified as Far North are the Republics of Karelia, Komi, Sakha (Yakutiya), and Tyva; Kamchatskii krai; Arkhangel'sk, Magadan, Murmansk, Sakhalin oblasts; Nenetskii, Khanti-Mansiisk-Yugra, Chukotskii, and Yamalo-Nenetskii autonomous districts (okrugs). Regions with parts in the North include the Republics of Altai and Buryatiya; Krasnoyar, Zabaikal, Perm, Primorsk, Kharbarovsk krais; Amur, Irkutsk, Tomsk, and Tyumen oblasts (Severkom 2007: 3).
3. The entry 'Far North' (*Krainii Sever*) in the Great Soviet Encyclopaedia outlines the specific legislation and benefits introduced for northern inhabitants in 1960 and 1967, see http://bse.sci-lib.com/article065603.html, accessed 10 October 2009.
4. See Federal Law 78 passed on 19 June 1996 'The bases of state regulation of the socio-economic development of the Russian North' and Federal Law 4520-1 approved on 19 February 1993 concerning 'The guarantees and compensation for workers and residents of areas of the Far North and regions equal to them' (both discussed in Ministry of Regional Development 2006)
5. Donald Lynch (2003) examines the ground-level adaptations made by residents of several northern regions – 'hostages of the North' – in response to the socio-economic crisis and failure of state welfare provision.
6. Author's translation. The Constitution of the Russian Federation is available in English on the website of the Russian President, http://eng.kremlin.ru/articles/ConstMain.shtml (accessed 15 September 2009).

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