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In his spartan, chilly office, the mayor of Snezhnoe leans back in his chair beneath a pencil portrait of Lenin and begins to wax nostalgic: "The things we used to have here!" he says with a beatific smile, seeming to forget his visitors. "Canned goods, fruits and vegetables, apples the year round, and the most expensive item was a ruble fifty. But now we can't even accomplish the bare minimum-pay salaries, feed children. Ethnic problems? What ethnic problems? We're all in the same boat here."

It was a theme reiterated often in Snezhnoe, a tundra village about as far east and north as you can get and still be in Russia. Sitting around the central hearth fire of a reindeer skin tent at one of the village's reindeer camps, Native residents shared bittersweet memories of a time when regular helicopter deliveries brought all the food you could want, and huge cans of candy for the kids. And if the bread wasn't deemed fresh enough, or if the cigarettes were the least bit damp, they were sent back to be replaced with items of the proper quality.

Nostalgia couldn't make up for the paltry offerings from the latest resupply mission, especially when the supplies from the last delivery had already been depleted and folks made do on tea and homemade flatbread, baked in the hearthfire from a batter of flour, soda and water and perhaps a few fish snagged in the river below. It also doesn't help matters that fewer people now work in the reindeer-herding operation; since the state farm had stopped paying wages three years ago, many herders have taken jobs in town.

Shortages of provisions, shortages of people. That is what life is like in "the regions:" an amorphous mass of territory beyond Moscow that has been long ignored by Western analysts. It seems that places like Snezhnoe, in the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug, could only be "discovered" by the West after the collapse of the Soviet Union and, with it, the foundations of

Moscow-centrism.

Ironically, just when Western attention is beginning to earnestly focus on Russia's regions, Russian citizens are just as earnestly abandoning those regions and trying desperately to find a place for themselves back in the materik, the mainland of Russia, meaning any place back in the more temperate zones of the former Soviet Union. Life is hard everywhere in Russia, but the farther you stretch into areas such as the far north, everyday life becomes an excruciating struggle for survival. Those who can are leaving for Russia's center-often where they came from in the first place-in many cases creating a vacuum of skilled professionals and glut of vacant residential space.

Chukotka is struggling to make a place for itself among the resource-rich regions of the North. In 1991, it declared itself a republic, completely independent of its parent Magadan Oblast. In 1993, the Russian Constitutional Court recognized Chukotka as a separate, independent territory, though not a republic. Thus, Chukotka traded a measure of economic stability for increased autonomy. But autonomy for whom?

Although the Chukchi gave their name to the region, this indigenous ethnic group is not the majority population. According to the 1989 census, the Chukchi then made up about 7.5 percent of the total population of 163,934. Together with other small indigenous groups, such as Eskimos, Chuvantsy, and Eveny, the native population totaled about 12 percent. Slavic nationalities dominated the ethnic profile: about 66 percent of Chukotka's residents in 1989 were Russians and 17 percent were Ukrainians. But the demographic profile has changed drastically since 1989. As it turns out, those who are able to leave tend to be from among the non-Native population. Recent counts put the total population at about 99,000, based on the total number of individuals officially registered as residents of Chukotka. But not everyone who leaves registers

that fact, a process connected to the possession of a dwelling. There is such a glut on the privatized apartment market that many give up trying to sell their apartment and simply abandon it. Educated guesses put the population of those physically present in Chukotka today at about 70,000, less than half the 1989 figure.

Most Russians will show at least a sign of recognition at the mention of Chukotka, mainly because of a 1980's fad of Chukchi jokes. Few outside the region are aware that the majority population is Russian. Yet Russians and others throughout the USSR had good reasons for moving there. Yuri, a television journalist-turned-businessmen, came to Chukotka from Ukraine 12 years ago. He describes with a nostalgic smile how he and many like him came for "the big bucks." Wages for the same jobs are triple that of central Russia, a coefficient known as the "northern supplement." Besides the financial advantages, Chukotka, far from Moscow's bureaucracy, offered a sense of freedom and relaxed rules. It was a refuge for the maverick soul. While freedoms have increased since the USSR's breakup, the material advantages are drying up. The triple salary loses its punch when groceries are often more than triple what they cost in Moscow. Yuri, who abandoned his unlucrative journalism career, struggles to make a go of it with his sundry business ventures, but he often speaks of returning to Ukraine. Many of his friends have already gone.

But leaving is difficult as well. Fliers plaster the walls outside of shops, advertising apartments for sale. In Anadyr', the capital city, the going price for a one-room apartment is around \$5000. Alongside those apartment fliers are twice as many advertising the sale of furniture, electronics, musical instruments, motorcycles, and cars, as people opt to simply dump their belongings and fly away with what they can carry.

Fading towns, Waning villages

"Beautiful city, her white stories reaching to the sky," writes local poet Andrei Gazha of his adopted home of Anadyr'. Little is left of that vision.

Sidewalks are a patchwork of intact and crumbling cement. Fading murals on the sides of buildings recall former Soviet brilliance. The city's main streets are lined with a barricade of battered, pre-fab cement-block apartment buildings. Off the main avenues are several older districts of crumbling wooden dwellings, thrown to such impossible tilts that it appears some cataclysmic event-an earthquake or a flood-threw them off their foundations. In reality, it is only the arctic tundra's slow, rhythmic, freeze-thaw-sink gradually sucking them down.

With a population of 13,000 Anadyr' is the region's largest city; in physical size, it is small enough to fit between two Moscow metro stops. Since 1993, it has also been a district city-an independent territory within Chukotka. In front of the regional administration building stands a granite statue of Lenin, gazing out across the Gulf of Anadyr'. "It was decided to the retain the statue for its historical significance," one administration official demurred, adding that the rare granite was locally quarried. A few splotches of red paint can always be found splashed somewhere on Lenin's person.

In the face of economic hardship, the town boasts a startling number of thriving commercial shops. From all appearances, they represent the foundation of the city's fledgling capitalist economy, and in 1996 alone their numbers increased by at least a third. Recently, some shops have begun to stock many American products, such as apples from the state of Washington, easily distinguishable by the little "Washington" stickers on each apple. As incredibly incongruous as those products seem in Anadyr', it makes perfect sense: Seattle,

Washington, is one of the closest, most accessible ports to Anadyr', and Washington food distributors are quite eager to tap into this new market.

Aleksandr Viktorovich Nazarov is the newly elected head of administration in Chukotka, after serving as a Yeltsin appointee in the position since 1993. Changes in election law mandated popular elections throughout the regions, which in Chukotka were held in December 1996. Afterwards, the headline in the state-run newspaper Krainii Sever (Far North) declared, "ALEKSANDR NAZAROV -- FIRST GOVERNOR OF CHUKOTKA, ELECTED BY THE WHOLE PEOPLE." "Governor" is not an official term in Russian politics, but Nazarov employs it gleefully and often. He openly emulates Alaska's governor, Tony Knowles, whose name is nearly a household word in Chukotka.

Villages that lie across the Arctic tundra are accessible from Anadyr' only by the most extreme forms of transportation. The quickest and most in demand is the helicopter, but flights have become prohibitively expensive in recent years, driving many to seek unofficial passage on medical and freight flights. In the summertime, a slower, cheaper, and rather languidly pleasant option is to travel by one of the coal barges that runs up and down the Anadyr' river and along the sea coast all summer. In winter, the river route turns into an "ice road" for trucks and other ground transportation.

The village of Snezhnoe, with its 375 mostly native residents, lies along the Anadyr' River some 300 kilometers west of Anadyr'. Unlike most Chukotkan villages, which existed in some form prior to collectivization, Snezhnoe was a Soviet creation. The site was chosen by Soviet planners in 1929, and the new village became Chukotka's first state farm.

The village has no plumbing, except for two apartment complexes, built in the early 1990s, which are equipped with cold water taps. But the majority of villagers must haul their

water up in buckets from a central water pipe, or from a water truck parked nearby, usually right outside the driver's own apartment. Bathing happens once a week and communally, in the small, wooden bathhouse by the river (men's day Friday, women's day Saturday). A pitiful banshik (bathhouse attendant) spends the entire day in a tiny adjacent booth, tending the flame that provides the village's one source of deliciously steamy water. There are no indoor toilets. Raw sewage is deposited in communal dumpsters that appear to have been completely abandoned by municipal services.

Everything about the village seems to be in a state of suspended animation. Villagers often use the word bespredel to describe their situation, a word that implies the complete lack of orderly limits in society. A once-thriving village has been slowly crumbling around them. Junk piles up at the village outskirts, from oil drums to construction cranes. Buildings burn and are not rebuilt, new construction lies half-finished, the offices of vacated personnel stand empty, public services shrink to an absurdly minimal status. Once, a telephone worked in every apartment, and residents could call directly to any point in Chukotka. Now, there is only one telephone line for the entire village, accessible only at the post office and the mayor's office. If the mayor happens to be using his ancient, wind-up phone, those hoping to make a call from the post office must wait.

The phone line allows no direct dialing; the postmistress in Snezhnoe shouts the desired number to an operator in Anadyr', who then places the call. To make matters worse, the post office is now open only three hours a day. "They won't pay me for any more than that," barks the postmistress.

Televisions were introduced in the 1980s, but only one channel can be picked up, the state channel ORT. All of Chukotka's local programming is carried on another channel, RTR,

which means that villagers are more informed about national and international news than the events in their own home region. But that one source of news is avidly consumed. In the middle of a friendly tea-time discussion, nursery-school teacher Galya glanced at the time and suddenly leaped frantically to switch her television on.

"We're missing 'Press Express'!" she wailed. "Press Express" is a review of major stories in a variety of major Russian newspapers. It's the only way to keep up with the newspapers and journals villagers were once accustomed to receiving. Subscription rates for Krainii Sever have long since exceeded most people's budgets, eliminating another source of local news. Even home-wired state radio, the long-time Soviet-era staple of mass communication, has been cut off in the village since the teleradio company began charging village administrations a subscription rate. The only option now is to tune in using a transistor set, but the need for batteries makes it difficult for those in the reindeer brigades. Margarita, the head of the Chukchi-language radio staff in Anadyr', was astonished-and crestfallen-to learn that her programs, such as "District, Village, Brigade," and "Know Your Countrymen," do not even reach the reindeer herders they target.

All of this entropy stands in sharp, almost comical, contrast to the original plan for the village, betrayed by a faded diagram hanging on the wall of the state-farm director's office. The faint lines of the blueprint show a much larger village than was ever realized, including a sports complex and an elaborate fish processing plant, shadows of an ideal reality that was never destined to be.

The village was designed to support the reindeer herding brigades. Snezhnoe at its height boasted ten herds of over 2000 reindeer each; now there are only two herds totaling barely over 3000 deer altogether. The remaining brigades function more as a family unit than an economic

unit of the state farm. In fact, there are few herders left who are not linked to the brigade by family ties. But those who choose to leave can hardly be blamed. State farm workers in Snezhnoe have not received their wages in over three years.

They survive by taking some staple foods on credit and supplementing that with locally available foods: berries, mushrooms, pine nuts, herbs, fish, and reindeer meat. It is hard to get by that way, and therefore some are enticed by the vacancies in the village, jobs that are paid out of a different budget and that tend to see paychecks more consistently.

Vacancies in village jobs come up as some residents, usually non-native professionals who migrated in to begin with, seek opportunities elsewhere.

Yura, a middle-aged, lifelong reindeer herder, is now working as a stoker in the electric plant, although he longs to be out on the tundra, where a few of his privately-owned reindeer run with the herd. His wife, Maia, used to work with him at the reindeer camp, but she now holds a position in the mayor's office. The state farm once had four young, specially-trained veterinary specialists who shared a bustling office in the farm's headquarters. Now all but one have left for non-state farm jobs. "I don't blame them for switching," says Petya, the one remaining veterinarian, whose entire family lives in the tundra and depends on the herd. "But I wasn't going to abandon the reindeer." He forlornly admitted that even while he was in school in the late 1980s, he already heard talk of the decline of the state farm.

These are all symptoms of a domino effect from the massive outflow of people abandoning Chukotka: people leave the cities for the center; people leave the villages to take up vacancies in the cities; and people leave the tundra to fill vacancies in the villages. And hardly anyone is left to tend the reindeer.

But that in turn creates new pressures in the the region's cities, where economic problems

take on an ethnic component lacking in the village, where, as the mayor of Snezhnoe stated, everyone is in the same boat. In the city, the more wealthy residents who can afford to buy their own apartments are usually non-native. Those who cannot afford to buy apartments are usually natives who have been driven to the city by the impossibility of survival in the village, and they take up residence with friends and relatives. Their only hope of an apartment of their own is the law granting certain privileges to native peoples, one of which is a free, state-provided apartment.

But despite a housing glut, there is a critical shortage of apartments for natives. The regional administration cannot or will not come up with the funds to purchase enough of them to meet the demand. So natives must sign on to a waiting list. Some have waited ten years, all the while living in crowded conditions or in sub-standard city housing without plumbing or hot water. And the the waiting list is growing, creating headaches for city agencies that administer housing and native social organizations that implement native privileges.

Native advocacy is in its infancy in Chukotka; yet one of the key items on the agenda is the defense of the traditional practice of reindeer herding, seen as one of the keys to preserving native language and culture. Vladimir Etylin, a Chukchi activist who was once chairman of the Chukotka soviet, created the National Union of Reindeer Herders in 1995, based on the model of the already-successful Norwegian reindeer herders union. Larisa Abriutina, a former deputy in the Chukotka Duma, proposes the formation of obshchiny (communities) as a form of home rule for native peoples in the tundra, arguing that it will contribute to successful reindeer herding. These are only some of the many interpretations of "autonomy" that are competing for primacy in sovereign Chukotka.