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# Observations on the Russian Heartland

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**Abstract:** An American economic geographer comments on two preceding papers devoted to the new Russian “Heartland.” Initially focusing on the legacy of Soviet infrastructure development for present-day oil and gas production (and consequently regional economic fortunes), he proceeds to explore the spatial pattern of multiplier effects stemming from resource development. In the ethno-political context, the author ponders whether an exclusivist Russian ethnic nationalism may replace the inclusive Soviet internationalism. A final challenge to territorial cohesion is the need for a viable mechanism of income redistribution from a few “rich” donor regions to many making no net contribution to the federal budget. 19 references. *Journal of Economic Literature*, Classification Numbers: 010, L71, P20, R11. Key words: Russian Heartland, Russian oil, oil and gas infrastructure, effective territory, territorial cohesion, regional and intergenerational equity.

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A century has passed since Sir Halford Mackinder first proposed his influential notion of the Eurasian “Heartland” as “The Geographic Pivot of History” (Mackinder, 1904), and 40 years since David Hooson published his book, *A New Soviet Heartland?* (Hooson, 1964). The Soviet Union, which controlled the “Heartland” and most of its periphery, was at the zenith of its power when Hooson’s book appeared. Although that superpower is no more, the Soviet “Heartland,” defined by Hooson as the Volga-Baykal zone, remains within the Russian Federation, except for a sliver of northern Kazakhstan. In this special issue two senior geographers, one British and one Russian, revisit that heartland (Bradshaw and Prendergrast, 2005; Treivish, 2005). They now have a 13-year perspective on the “impact that recent economic, political, and demographic changes are having on Russia’s occupation of its national territory” (Bradshaw and Prendergrast, 2005, p. 84). The interval between the last Soviet census (1989) and the first post-Soviet census of independent Russia (2002) also overlap closely with the years of the post-Soviet transformation. Fortuitously, in addition to the papers appearing in this issue, a major Western work (Hill and Gaddy, 2003) and a Russian bestseller (Parshev, 2001) also have appeared since 2000, both dealing with the interrelationship of geographic constraints and socio-economic development over the Russian-Soviet landmass. These help to further enrich our understanding of the issues and give us Russian views as well.

Bradshaw-Prendergrast and Treivish do not confine their analysis to Hooson’s “effective national territory” (the Volga-Baykal zone); rather their intriguing, in-depth analysis encompasses the whole of Russia’s geo-economic space. Bradshaw and Prendergrast evoke the European Commission’s concept of “territorial cohesion” and attempt to assess whether that cohesion is imperiled by disparities in development, ethno-political fissures, and threatening demographic processes. Their probing of the economic, political, and demographic

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dimensions is bolstered by a wide range of supporting quantitative data applied extensively to the analysis of two of these dimensions. Discursive, yet penetrating, qualitative assessment characterizes their examination of the political dimension.

Andrei Treivish focuses on the territorial demographic-economic issues somewhat differently. With a synthetic “average size index” (ASI), based on world shares of GDP, population, and territory, he traces Russia’s changing position among the major states of the world since 1913. Treivish then moves to an examination of the internal spatial development of the country over the decades. He juxtaposes conclusions from his own research, from those of Hill and Gaddy (2003) on *The Siberian Curse*, and from a popular Russian book (Parshev, 2001) whose author comes to radically opposite, anti-market conclusion from similar data. The bulk of the article then is devoted to demo-economic shift across the heartland’s geographic space. Regional shifts and gradients in population and industrial distribution are examined to arrive at his measured, if tentative, conclusion. It is indeed true that “the vast spaces of Mackinder’s geographic pivot are now more a source of weakness than security” (Treivish, p. 152). But one cannot abandon the old structures entirely, so that strengthening of the major “islands” in the ocean of space is the only feasible alternative (ibid.).

Both papers use the year 1998, when the ruble collapsed, as a critical watershed for the economic dimension. Sectors and industrial branches, as well as regional fortunes, shifted quite differently pre- and post-1998 for reasons that are discussed at length. In the political dimension, a more implicit recognition is made of Putin’s efforts at re-centralization as a crucial, if less distinct, divide, given the ongoing but controversial reforms. While the authors note the limited *spatial* coincidence that plagues analysis of the various dimensions, one could observe that the *temporal* coincidence is clearly imperfect as well. My comments here are focused on the economic and political dimensions. The exhaustive treatment of the demographic issues by Bradshaw-Prendergrast and Treivish’s further imaginative elaboration (through population centroid, cross-sectional axes, and the like) raise no criticism nor additional comment. In my view, however, the economic dimension is underlain by layers of deeper determinants and constraints not illuminated in their analysis. And these will operate both nationally and regionally far into the future.

### THE SOVIET LEGACY

Bradshaw and Prendergrast (2005, pp. 88-89) note that during 1991–1998 the “inherited economic structure was one of the most important factors explaining the relative degree of regional economic decline. . . . ‘Regions with the right industries did better than regions with the wrong [ones]’. . . . resource . . . regions weathered the recession the best, while regions specializing in manufacturing and light industry . . . experienced significant decline.” By contrast, the period starting with 1999 saw the emergence of new centers of market-oriented recovery, even though the resource sector remained the engine of the economy.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the authors observe a “surprising continuity” in resource exports of the 1990s with those during the Soviet period, while distinguishing the present resource dependence as a classic “resource curse” that allows the postponement of painful economic adjustment and reforms (ibid., pp. 95).

<sup>2</sup>The authors note, for example, that the resource sector continued to provide 70 percent of all growth in industry during the period 2001–2003 (Bradshaw and Prendergrast, 2005, p. 12).

All of this is true, but much more needs to be said. Supporting exports during both periods is a physical “formation” of concrete infrastructure, constructed overwhelmingly in the Soviet era. It is this physical infrastructure, especially the gigantic pipeline system and the oil and gas fields it tapped, that determined the geographic pattern of “right industries” that could weather the transitional recession best. Similarly, it is the reliance on that same physical infrastructure that overwhelmingly was responsible for the recent recovery and the dynamism of the past few years. For example, almost 90,000 km of gas trunkline consisting of 40- to 56-inch pipes (and another 60,000 km from 28- to 40-inch pipes) was laid during final 15 years of the USSR, and most of the large-capacity compressor stations also were installed after 1970.<sup>3</sup> The 21-string 42- to 56-inch pipeline bridge from the Yamburg and Urengoy fields alone constitutes the largest energy flow in the world today aside from that which passes through the Strait of Hormuz. It is inconceivable that these gigantic infrastructural projects would have materialized under post-Soviet market conditions in less than two decades. Transneft’ and the new Russian oil companies did expand the infrastructure of oil exports through the country’s ports (principally Primorsk, north of St. Petersburg, and Novorossiysk), but additions to the oil pipeline system per se have been modest. With respect to expansion of production capacity of mineral resources more broadly, most of what took place in the resource industries was limited to existing fields and mines.

My point here is that both the pre-1999 transition and the post ruble crash *cum* oil-boom recovery have been emphatically predicated on the Soviet legacy.<sup>4</sup> The authors are right about the surprising continuity of resource exports with the Soviet period and their concern about the “resource curse, which has made the Russian government complacent about reforms. Correctly they take note of the raging debate over whether resource dependence is a blessing or scourge. However, in their focus on the regional dimensions of Russia’s resource abundance, they appear inhibited from adumbrating the *geographic prospects* of the heartland. Somewhat ironically, their care and precision in marshaling the impressive array of quantitative evidence for the present seem to induce reluctance to cast their spear ahead. By contrast, in the section treating the political dimension, the nature of qualitative and discursive analysis affords them greater latitude and more boldness in this regard.

As the infrastructure underpinning the resource-dominated economy ages, it must be renovated (even the loops [strings] of the West Siberian gas pipeline corridor are 25–30 years old). Moreover, economic growth places demands for the development of new reserves. The profiles and roles of the resource regions that supply the Russian economy today are highlighted and ably analyzed in the two papers. However, Russia at present is rapidly spending that “inheritance.”<sup>5</sup> Today confusion and disarray characterize the further direction of structural and regional development even *within* the oil and gas sector. A recent article (Fokina, 2004) even evokes the traditional cry of Russian politics, “Kto vinovat? Chto delat’?,” a reflection of frustration with the aimlessness and indecision surrounding energy policy, and in particular where and how to proceed with upstream oil and gas infrastructure development in the future. “Everyone for himself”—Transneft’, the various oil and gas producers, government ministries, departments, and regional administrations (*ibid.*). This confusion is more poignant if we note that these desperately needed new projects will secure oil and gas vol-

<sup>3</sup>A portion of this system lies outside Russia today, but continues to earn export revenues for Moscow.

<sup>4</sup>To what degree the development thrust that produced that “inheritance” would appear rational today is beside the point here.

<sup>5</sup>For a critical assessment of the sustainability of Russia’s recent surge in oil production, see Dienes (2004).

umes that pale in comparison with those derived from the gigantic projects bequeathed to post-Soviet Russia from the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>6</sup>

### THE YENISEY DIVIDE

Neither of the two papers probe critical differences between resource regions west of the Yenisey River and east of it or, still more markedly, east of Lake Baykal. Yet even in Stalin's time, with all the repressive power of a Gulag state, or later with paid labor and more advanced technology, virtually all mineral resources originated west of that river. East of the Yenisey, vast distances and the environment restricted resource exploitation overwhelmingly to high value per weight and transportable minerals, namely gold, diamonds, tin, and a few space-age metals. Noril'sk, originally also of Gulag notoriety, could and can continue to *operate* profitably, thanks to its location at the eastern extremity of the navigable part of the Northern Sea route (although icebreakers are frequently needed).<sup>7</sup> Few would suggest, however, that Noril'sk, the largest nickel-copper-platinum mining complex in the world, could have been *developed*, even in the most labor-saving fashion, under market conditions. Incidentally, as the authors themselves note, neither Mackinder nor Hooson included the territories east of Baykal, nor most of East Siberia within the Heartland.

### MULTIPLIER EFFECTS

Somewhat related to this argument is the locational pattern of multiplier effects from resource industries. Natural gas extraction produces few such linkages, except in the construction phase of wells and pipelines, and it is not labor intensive. The oil industry, extraction and refining, gives rise to much more numerous linkages, both upstream (for inputs) and downstream (through refinery and chemical products), and the petroleum sector is much more labor intensive than natural gas. Both are highly technology intensive. Gaddy and Sutela (2004) have shown how much of Russia's recent manufacturing upsurge, especially in machine building and steel owes to orders by the resurgent oil industry.<sup>8</sup> Such upstream and downstream linkages, however, are not associated geographically with the sites of extraction. Remote and harsh frontier regions dominate the latter, and prospective areas are even less accessible and more environmentally difficult. The benefits of the economic multiplier, whether directly from demands for inputs or indirectly from the export revenues received, accrue overwhelmingly to major metropolitan centers and manufacturing concentrations in European Russia and the Urals. Indeed, Figure 3 in the Bradshaw-Prendergrast paper (appearing in this issue) depicts only average rates of growth for the oil-, gas-, and nonferrous metal-producing regions of West and East Siberia during the 1998–2001 period. By

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<sup>6</sup>For example, the Sakhalin-II offshore project is at last taking off. Far more accessible to world energy markets than oil and gas developments in the "Heartland" itself, it is now assessed to cost \$12 billion, a cost overrun of 20 percent, with Japan alone sinking \$5 billion into the venture thus far (Brooke, 2004; Pirani, 2004). Yet it is scheduled to deliver annually to various markets less than 10 million tons of LNG plus modest volumes of crude, no more than the equivalent of 10 million tons of oil. The Tayshet-Nakhodka oil pipeline alone will demand \$15 billion, according to the latest estimates, with an equal amount for exploration of East Siberian oil reserves to fill the pipeline (News, 2004; Shatilova, 2004). Many thousands of workers will be needed for its construction.

<sup>7</sup>The huge aluminum smelters associated with hydroelectric stations along the Yenisey and Angara rivers operated with imported bauxite.

<sup>8</sup>As noted in Hill (2004). Included are orders for pumps, compressors, pipes for drilling and transport, railway rolling stock, etc.

contrast, the major manufacturing and urban centers of the Urals and European Russia show much higher overall industrial growth rates.<sup>9</sup>

### THE POLITICAL DIMENSION

Bradshaw's and Prendergrast's imaginative treatment of the political dimension focuses on regionalism and ethnic considerations. They highlight the insufficient development of civic identity and the fact that "identity conceptions operate at various scales," all having an "integral territorial dimension" (Bradshaw and Prendergrast, 2005, p. 98). They analyze how the constitutional and economic asymmetries have weakened state cohesion, with Yel'tsin buying off loyalty with bilateral treaties, budgetary concessions, and subsidies. By contrast, as the authors note, Putin "has moved against both formal and informal asymmetries, but most notably against those republics that were powerful under Yel'tsin, retracting many accrued advantages by insisting on legal harmonization [and] retaking control of the fiscal purse strings . . ." (ibid., p. 100). Nonetheless, both strategies appear to have fostered the emergence of *regional* identities, in a permissive way in the former case,<sup>10</sup> and in a reactive way (in a number of republics) in the latter case (Putin's recentralization). *In the best of cases*, Bradshaw and Prendergrast find that these emerging regional identities take on the character of a "broadly civic identity that seeks to avoid alienating the many ethnic peoples of the republic (ibid., p. 102)." The authors here have Tatarstan in mind, but also mention the emerging regional identity of Dagestan, and, while not a republic, Primorskiy Kray. I could add Sakha and, perhaps, others to the list.

Bradshaw and Prendergrast here do cast their glance ahead to provide an assessment of the risks and future dangers of Putin's reforms aimed at re-centralization. While undermining ethno-cultural distinctiveness and using the federal purse toward poorer regions to boost their loyalty to Moscow, President Putin lends at least implicit support to an exclusivist Russian ethnic nationalism. The latter has certain militaristic overtones, especially in the context of a continuing war in Chechnya. Putin's authoritarianism, and political and federal centralization, therefore, may promote stability in the short run, but will weaken cohesion and legitimacy over the longer term. His refusal to countenance the emergence and congealing of "civic identity alternatives in both the increasingly fragmented heartland and the increasingly isolated peripheries" (Bradshaw and Prendergrast, 2005, p. 104) will, in the end, weaken not strengthen the cohesion of the state.

I would add here that the increasingly exclusivist ethnic nationalism that has begun to afflict the Russians themselves is a relatively recent development. However, it could become perhaps more unsavory in its implications than the state and imperial consciousness that historically characterized Russian nationalism. Many specialists have pointed out that the Russian Empire was not based on ethnic consciousness but on loyalty to the sovereign autocrat and the Orthodox faith. In Soviet times and through Soviet modernization, the Party strove to shift this imperial *superethnos* into something vaguely similar: "the Russian nation not as a separate ethnos but as the leader of other nations" (Lieven, 1999, p. 65). This was manifest in the Soviet national anthem as "The unbreakable union of free republics/United

<sup>9</sup>The very high growth rates in sparsely populated Chukotka and Altay Kray, and more populous Buryatia, Khabarovsk Kray, and other regions are mostly anomalies caused by the impact of one or two major construction projects, new mines, etc., and do not weaken the above argument.

<sup>10</sup>The chaotic years of Yel'tsin's presidency resulted in a variety of "constitutional frivolities" at the regional level (Leksin, 2004, p. 54).

over the centuries by Great Rus’.” Despite a considerable level of hypocrisy, many Russians genuinely believed in this concept, and a level of inclusive “Soviet internationalism” cannot be denied (*ibid.*).<sup>11</sup> If the breakup of the USSR, the loss of superpower status, the pains of economic transition, and fierce conflicts on its Caucasian borders push the Russians far in the direction of exclusive ethnic nationalism, the transition from “Soviet internationalism” will not be benign.

## FISCAL POLICY AND INCOME DISTRIBUTION

I believe that one element of the fine section on political dimensions of the Heartland deserves further comment. In my view, the most significant aspect of Putin’s re-centralization involves streamlining the budgetary structure, to which nearly all other social relations are becoming subordinated. One Russian commentator even claims that as Western experience produced such models as cooperative and coordinated federalism, his country is developing a new model of a predominantly “budgetary nature” (Leksin, 2004, p. 63). The ambiguities of the Russian Constitution left the delineation and coordination of jurisdiction between national and regional/republic governments vague. For example, more than three-fifths of all federal laws regulating actions in the fields of the economy, resource management, and social development (with economic resources being indispensable for the latter) require coordination between federal and regional governments. Yet, according to Leksin, the instructions of the Constitution (mostly in Article 72) pertaining to joint ownership, jurisdiction, management, and consultation “establishes . . . no standard procedures for carrying out such interaction and legally documenting the results” (*ibid.*, p 70). Putin, in his effort to strengthen the “power vertical” and his dominance over the regions, has waded into the ambiguities of Article 72, which hitherto permitted resource-producing regions to retain the bulk of the revenue from taxes levied on subsoil use. Even before the Duma formally revoked joint management rights from the regions in autumn 2004, a series of changes entirely deprived the regions of revenues from the consolidated severance tax on gas and all but 8 percent of other minerals (Kriukov et al., 2004, pp. 112-113). Moscow has justified the move by arguing that it is essential in order to diminish the tremendous gap among regions in per capita budgetary revenues.

The provinces that produce most of Russia’s resource rent are overwhelmingly in the North and mostly in Siberia. Bradshaw and Prendergrast (2005, p. 18), quoting the World Bank, note that in 2003, 37 percent of Russia’s government revenues originated from hydrocarbons. That share must be even closer to 40 percent today. Because Tyumen’ Oblast, and especially its two northern okrugs (Khanty-Mansiysk and Yamal-Nenets), are responsible for the great bulk of this contribution, they feel particularly injured by the loss of virtually all the “resource rent.” Such donors of resource revenues argue vigorously that their harsh frontier areas have special needs, above and beyond the rest of the country, and Moscow’s appropriation of these tax revenues prevents them from taking care of their own. Yet the fundamental problem of the Russian Federation is manifest in the fact that only a handful of the country’s 89 regions can support the budget in any way, with Tyumen’s two northern okrugs far overshadowing the contributions of all the others. Russia’s Northlands and the Far East are alone home to 15 percent of the country’s population, and 25 percent if the entire Trans-Ural expanse is included.<sup>12</sup> Little commonality of interest exists *vis-à-vis* Moscow even among

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<sup>11</sup>For an examination of the persistence of such attitudes among ordinary Russians in the present-day Russian Federation, see O’Loughlin and Talbot (2005).

regions of the country's northern and Siberian vastness, and they have even less in common with other needy provinces. How and by what mechanism would donor provinces in the Federation share funds with other needy regions, many in equally harsh physical environments?

The fuel and metal reserves of Siberia were developed over decades by the efforts and sacrifice (voluntary *and* coerced) of the whole of Russia and, indeed, the entire USSR, so the answer to the question posed above entails the concept of equity. In all federations, equity (both interregional and intergenerational) is an issue that properly involves the federal center to a significant degree. In Russia the question is further complicated, however, by the absence of a deeply embedded federal political culture, by a new Constitution riddled with ambiguities, and the murky, corruption-ridden transition process itself. Depriving the main revenue-producing provinces of nearly all resource rent and windfall profits gravely weakens their political weight and their bargaining power. At the same time, the proper share of wealth to which they are entitled has not been objectively established in any society.

Aside from the issue of equity, taxation of resource rent and windfalls should be linked to a sensible regional policy (which the two papers in this issue indicate is lacking), including resettlement as necessary to ease the myriad distortions of the Soviet era. Furthermore, if super- and windfall profits are simply taxed away for the federal budget, private oil and gas companies may begin to "view their presence [their own activities] in the territories where they develop deposits as something temporary and transient" (Kriukov et al., 2004, p. 122). The practice of developing resources only for corporate interests would intensify, and the proper management of the resource would suffer.

## CONCLUSION

The destiny of the Eurasian "Heartland" has been inextricably linked to outside centers of political and economic power. Since the conquest of the Volga khanates and the crossing of the Urals, that fate has been political subordination. Lobbying by commercial and regional interests did have an impact on imperial responses before the Revolution. While the former ceased during the Soviet era, provincial and sectoral (ministerial) lobbying remained influential until that communist country's dissolution, and helped shape its industrial structure and the distribution of population. Ultimately, however, "[r]egional viewpoints and the viewpoints of sectors which contribute[d] little to economic and military strength [were] subordinated" (North, 1979, p. 236). Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, specific center-periphery relations in the Trans-Ural Heartland have played out on a much larger canvas. A series of momentous changes are affecting the future prospects of the major subregions of the vast Trans-Ural expanse, and by clear extension, of Russia as a whole.

The first such change is the epochal transition in the economy itself. A system geared toward maximizing output within a predetermined industrial structure (insulated by administered prices) yielded to an open structure, where demand and world prices are the primary determinants. Profitable and loss-making industries became clearly differentiated, with immediate impact on the fortunes and viability of regions. Second, the impact on the Heartland of the overall demographic decline was further accentuated by a sharp decrease in economic viability across most of this vast territory, with the exception of settlements directly linked to massive resource exports. Significant outmigration indicates the direction of adjustments to the new conditions, but serious barriers retard that process. The third major change

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<sup>12</sup>A similar share live in remote rural areas of European Russia (the so-called *glubinka*), with a much more temperate climate but with the same appalling lack of infrastructure and services.

concerns the role of federalism in Russia's governance. The way Yel'tsin, and then by contrast Putin, have exercised power and utilized the federal structure for larger political purposes had immediate repercussions on the scope and direction of regional development, not least in the regions east of the Urals. All of these processes continue today and remain in flux. What appears certain is that, despite its resource riches, Russia's Heartland remains a vast, harsh land, much of it with too scattered a population to chart its own destiny. As past history is any guide, its destiny will continued to be shaped by distant centers of power.

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