

5 CHUKOTKA AFTER PERESTROIKA: SOCIAL ACTORS AND POLITICAL POWER¹

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*Das eine "historische Ereignis" zieht über das private
– d.h. wirkliche – Leben hin wie eine Wolke über einen See;
nichts regt sich, nur ein flüchtiges Bild spiegelt sich. Das andere peitscht
den See auf wie Sturm und Gewitter; man erkennt ihn
kaum mehr wieder. Das dritte besteht vielleicht darin,
daß alle Seen ausgetrocknet werden. Ich glaube,
Geschichte wird falsch verstanden,
wenn man diese ihre Dimension vergißt
(und sie wird fast immer vergessen).
Sebastian Haffner, Geschichte eines Deutschen.*

The focus

This article is about the Chukotkan Autonomous Okrug (ChAO) during a most important period in its recent history: the late 1980s – early to mid-1990s. The subject of this article is ChAO's transition from the Soviet to the post-Soviet situation. The situation in ChAO during this period was usually described as a state of deep social and economic crisis caused by the collapse of the former Soviet system, for which Chukotka was viewed primarily as a source of valuable metals – tin, gold, tungsten, and other (Gray 2000:31–37; Krupnik and Vakhtin 2002; Nielsen 2007; etc.). The main ports of ChAO were valued as important for the Northern Sea Route; in addition, Chukotka was viewed as a symbolic outpost "on the eastern borders" that had to be supported despite its economic unprofitability. In the 1950s and 1960s, favorable economic conditions for immigrant specialists were artificially created to fulfill these objectives, leading to a sharp increase in the population of the ChAO. This lasted until the late 1980-s when, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the onset of the economic crisis, the population began to decline.

Niobe Thompson provides an eloquent graph in his book on Chukotka, showing the ratio of Indigenous and immigrant populations from the late 19th to the early 21st centuries:

¹ The present paper is based on an earlier publication (Vakhtin 2023).

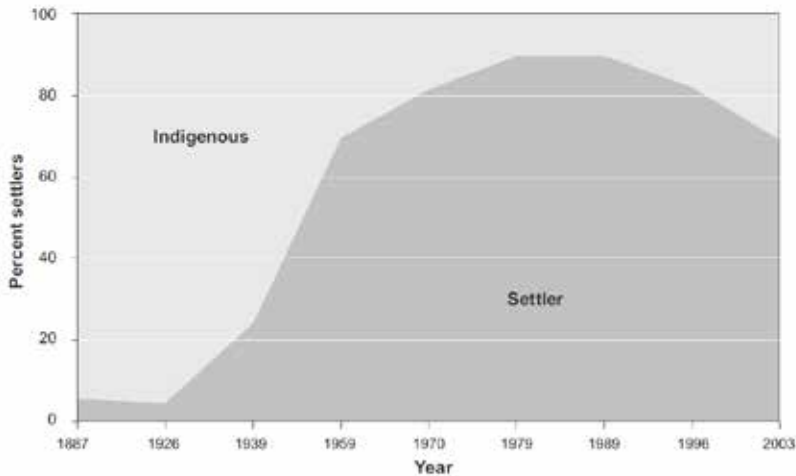


Fig. 1 Settlers as a percentage of total population, 1887–2003.

Source: Thompson 2008: 5.

Until 1926, newcomers constituted approximately 7 % of the Chukotka population. By 1989, the share of newcomers reached 90 %, after which it began to decline. Today (according to the 2021 census), newcomers make up approximately 54 % of Chukotka's population. Clearly, the straightforward model “first specialists arrived in Chukotka and the population increased, then they left and the population declined again” is inadequate: a significant proportion of “newcomers” remained in Chukotka despite the crisis.

Chukotka, as the Far North in general, is a complex field, and cannot be boiled down to a simple dichotomy between Indigenous and incomer populations: the two groups aren't homogeneous, and there also were other actors besides the two groups who were significant players in the social field (Gray, Vakhtin, and Schweitzer 2003). In addition, as Thompson puts it, there is an “unexamined belief that we understand who in these regions is native and who is only visiting” (2008: 3).² One has to bear this in mind when describing the history and consequences of, and the attitudes towards, the transition from the Soviet model to the post-Soviet one: these can differ for different groups.

Uncertainty

To describe ChAO's transition from the Soviet to the post-Soviet situation, it is convenient to use the concept of *uncertainty*. In economics, the assertion that uncertainty increases during periods of political and economic crises – that is, during periods of

2 Thompson's entire book (2008) is dedicated to the analysis of this interesting process.

radical social upheaval – has become a platitude.³ There is no doubt that the political, social, and economic events of the late 1980s and early 1990s were precisely such a crisis, and both sociologists and anthropologists writing about this period have not ignored the concept of uncertainty, particularly in their attempts to explain the diverse life strategies of different strata of the population.

The word *uncertainty* constantly appears in scholarly texts devoted to the last Soviet and early post-Soviet years. Michael Burawoy and Catherine Verdery emphasized that “everyday life under postsocialism is beset with uncertainty” (1999:7).⁴ Caroline Humphrey noted that the complete collapse of the entire previous system, of all familiar life, that occurred at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s “threw people into a state of *radical uncertainty*” (2002: XVII). Martha Lampland wrote about Hungarian “socialist enterprises” that they existed “in a situation of *high uncertainty*” (2002: 49). Olga Shevchenko described how people in Moscow in the 1990s “*made sense of the acute uncertainties of everyday life*” (2009: 59). Sergei Oushakine, focusing primarily on Barnaul and Altai, attempted to answer the question of what symbolic resources people use to create meaning in *the context of uncertainty* (Oushakine 2009: 28) and, more broadly, how Russian residents cope with “*conceptual uncertainty*” (Ibid: 70). This chain of quotations can easily be extended. Uncertainty thus turns out to be a generally accepted backdrop for describing the post-Soviet situation.

Here I understand uncertainty as *an emerging situation external to an individual or group that makes their usual (routine) existence impossible, disrupts their existing short-, medium-, or long-term plans, and hinders the development of new plans*. This definition is close to the approach in the book by Rebecca Bryant and Daniel Knight (2019), in which uncertainty is understood as something that determines the horizon of expectations: if uncertainty increases significantly, people may lose sight of the future and begin to live for the moment and make no plans at all. Moreover, the more carefully a community or its individual members plan their lives, and the more rigorously they approach planning, the more acutely the sudden uncertainty is perceived.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, rapid socioeconomic changes left a significant portion of the ChAO’s population unable to continue their routine existence, or to predict anything: will there be heating in the village next month? Will there be food in the store next week? Will wages be paid the day after tomorrow? – and so on. This situation of uncertainty lasted in Chukotka for almost ten years, from the collapse of the previous economic structures until 2000, the beginning of the so-called “Abramovich era.” It was perceived very acutely not only because it objectively led to the collapse of the economy, impoverishment of the population, and in some places literally to starvation, but also because a significant portion of the Chukotka population ended up in the north precisely as a result of careful life planning: ten to fifteen years of contract

3 See for example the article “Uncertainty in Economics” in *The Great Russian Encyclopedia*, <https://old.bigenc.ru/economics/text/2260314> [accessed 24.11.2025]

4 Here and in the following quotes, the italics are mine – N.V.

work there were intended to provide for their families forever. With the salaries they earned in the North, very high by the Soviet standards, families planned to provide housing for themselves and their children, buy a car, and so on. The collapse of these plans increased the sense of disaster.⁵

The data

More than 30 years ago, in 1993, I took part in the joint French-Swiss-Russian expedition *Transibering Longines*. We travelled, by helicopter, throughout northeastern Yakutia and practically all of Chukotka, staying in each village for 4–5 days. My main objective was to describe the state of school education in local schools, but I also collected considerable material on the economic situation in ChAO, as well as information and opinions on the new forms of economic relations that were just beginning to emerge. I reported on the results of this trip (Vakhtin 1993), and in November 1993 delivered a paper at a colloquium in Paris, Peoples of the North: “Cultural Revival in the Context of the New Russia;” this was more or less the extent of my publications on the topic.

In 1995 and 1996, Igor Krupnik and I worked in Chukotka as part of the Project “Environmental Change and Indigenous Knowledge” led by Piers Vitebsky. We published two articles (Krupnik and Vakhtin 1997; 2002). However, a significant part of the data remained in unpublished reports (Krupnik and Vakhtin 1995; 1996). All these materials are used in the present article. The focus is on Chukotka; data from northeastern Yakutia are used for comparison.

Since the time described in this article, significant changes have occurred in the economy of ChAO, in the social sphere, and in the legal sphere of the activities of *obshchinas*⁶ of the Indigenous population.⁷ Thus, already in July 2000, Federal Law No. 104-FZ “On the General Principles of Organizing Communities of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East of the Russian Federation” was adopted. Numerous amendments have been made to this law in subsequent years; the most recent is Federal Law No. 403-FZ of October 2022,⁸ the adoption of which

5 On long-term planning as an important component of everyday life in the North, see (Istomin, Liarskaya, and Vasilyeva 2025).

6 An – often Indigenous – community or organization based on kinship ties and practicing collective ownership of land and resources, which can vary in forms or functions according to the given regional context. *Obshchina* is often translated as “clan community,” “tribal community,” or “clan commune.” Here the Russian word (using the English convention to pluralize the noun, by adding ‘s’) is maintained – E.K.

7 In this article, I use the term “Indigenous” in its legal meaning – to designate a group included in the officially approved “List of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East of the Russian Federation” (2006), see: RF Government Order of April 17, 2006, No. 536-r.

8 Federal Law No. 403-FZ of October 20, 2022, “On Amendments to the Federal Law ‘On General Principles for the Organization of Communities of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East of the Russian Federation’” entered into force on October 31, 2022.

was preceded by years of discussion, including parliamentary hearings and published recommendations.⁹ Today, 68 *obshchinas* operate in ChAO, many of which are quite successful. However, the period after 2000 is beyond the scope of this article.

Perestroika in ChAO

Between 1989 and 1993, the socioeconomic system that had existed in ChAO since the mid-1950s experienced a period of uncertainty: the familiar, routine lives of virtually all residents were disrupted. This process was complicated by the fact that on June 17, 1992, the Okrug seceded from the Magadan Region and became an independent member of the Federation.¹⁰ This led to a sharp strengthening of the position of local authorities and a significant redistribution of control over resources.

The weakening of ideological control by the federal government led to an explosion of political and economic activity at the local level, raising hopes for the development of new economic forms, primarily in the traditional activities of Indigenous peoples, and for the revival of the status and culture of the Indigenous population. This grass-root movement in ChAO was enthusiastically supported by public organizations in Alaska and Canada.

This brief period quickly ended. On the one hand, the district administration soon became a source of authoritarian bureaucratic power, just as the Soviet bureaucracy had been. As we wrote over 20 years ago:



Fig. 2 Anadyr, the capital of the ChAO in 1980s. Photo from the family archive of Anastassiia Yarzutkina.

The newly entrenched regional bureaucracy in Anadyr remained as staunch an opponent to indigenous self-determination as were the old Communist bosses of the Soviet era; in fact, many of them *were* the former old Communist *apparatchiks*, including the then all-powerful Chukotkan Governor. (Krupnik and Vakhtin 2002:30)

Thompson confirmed this in his 2008 book and, twenty years later, Natalia Naumova wrote about the same thing:

9 See: On the current state and challenges of legal regulation of traditional economic activities of indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation. April 28, 2011 (<http://council.gov.ru/media/files/41d44f24451fa583e9d2.pdf>). [accessed 24.11.2025]

10 The process of separating ChAO from the Magadan Region began with the decision of the 2nd session of the District Council on September 28, 1990.

[In the 1990s], the state retreated somewhat, giving indigenous people the opportunity to form associations to defend their interests and, in some cases, quite successfully organize and manage sea hunting. However, quite soon, all hunting enterprises were municipalized as a result of the actions of local and regional officials [...] who continued to reproduce the hierarchies established during the Soviet era and were opposed to independent grassroots initiatives. (Naumova 2022: 99)

On the other hand, the economic crisis, the decline in production, disruptions in food supplies, the rise in the cost of living and the bankruptcy of most enterprises in the ChAO buried many of the shoots of new beginnings and led to a sharp decline in the standard of living (Krupnik and Vakhtin 1995: 5).

Hence, the main question of the present article is: why, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in a situation of sharply increased uncertainty, despite the presence of intellectual forces and significant external support, did the region so quickly revert to authoritarianism? As Caroline Humphrey elegantly puts it, "...the Soviet welfare state, which has shrunk, though its bare bones remain" (1998: 445). Or, to put it another way: why did the system of governance that emerged in ChAO 4–5 years after 1989 turned out to be so indistinguishable from what had existed before? This was a recurring theme among our many consultants, both in 1993 and in 1995–1996 (see below). What is the mechanism of this tenacity?

This question is reminiscent of the question Michael Burawoy and Pavel Krotov posed thirty years ago in relation to the city of Vorkuta: the workers went on strike, demanding political reforms; all their demands were met, the reforms were implemented – the Communist Party was dissolved, the command economy was destroyed, democracy was introduced, a free market was on every corner. Why, then, "nothing has changed"? Why had "the workers' movement set out to introduce a market economy but ended up being absorbed into a transmuted form of the old order?" (Burawoy and Krotov 1993)

Their basic answer – that all socio-economic changes were concentrated in the sphere of exchange rather than in the sphere of production – ceased to satisfy attentive researchers after only five years (see Humphrey 1999). Their other answer – that the stability of the Soviet production system restrains political change – is in fact nothing more than a statement of fact. Yes, post-Soviet production retained all the characteristics of the Soviet era for a long time, and merchant capital itself did not transform into modern capitalism; yes, the close ties between the management corps and political power hindered the growth of an independent class of producers (Ibid.: 65); yes, the same people remained in power, whom Verdery [1993] aptly described as *enterpratchiks* (a hybrid of entrepreneur and *apparatchik*). But what is the social mechanism of this stability?¹¹

11 Stephen Collier offers another possible explanation: the infrastructure created during the Soviet era greatly complicated reforms, and in some cases made them simply impossible, and thus a rollback to the Soviet model was forced (2011, Ch. 8). This is partly confirmed by the

Evgeniia Lezina offers her own explanation: after 1991, the Soviet repressive organs were not completely dismantled, as in some Eastern European countries; the structures and old connections remained, and on these connections a new system of power was built (albeit sometimes with new people), which turned out to be very similar to the old one (2021: Ch. 6, 7). This is an important factor, but also not a definitive answer.

It is unlikely that a social anthropologist can be satisfied with a general answer, such as the free market contradicts the usual patron-client relations, and the patron has an instinct to monopolize power and exclude potential competition from other patrons (cf. Thompson 2008: 101). This is a bird's eye view – but we are interested in a specific region.

Similar questions have been raised by many researchers in relation to other regions and other countries. David Anderson wondered “how the old socialist forms of coordinating industrial development with centrally-interpreted needs have so easily been restructured in the new highly concentrated areas of money and power” (2002: 101). Martha Lampland asked the same question (in relation to Hungary): “What factor allowed the former socialist leaders to stay in position of authority and privilege?” (2002: 43), etc.

Those who investigated the situation in Chukotka observed the same. For example, Bent Nielsen wrote in 2007 that “Socialism and the Communist Party do not exist in present day Chukotka, but administrative practice as well as social and personal attitudes are still deeply rooted in the Soviet way of thinking” (2007: 166). This is undoubtedly true, but – once again – what is the social mechanism of this stability?

Why is this question relevant today?

The notorious cyclical nature of Russian history gives reason to believe that the reform attempt of the early 1990s in ChAO was not the last. This territory and its population, including the Indigenous groups, will likely have at least one more opportunity to transition from the current state to a situation in which they have greater opportunities to influence their lives and destinies. It is doubtful that this will happen automatically, though: it is hardly true that, since one state of society is “better” than another, society will automatically transition to this “better” state; and even less convincing is the assertion that, since a “better” state of society exists, the natural “movement” will lead in this direction (Anderlini and Sabourian 1992: 83). Such a view of history, as if its only function is to reflect the gradual onset of the inevitable (Ashton 2019: 68), is incorrect or at least counterproductive. No law exists that would automatically lead a system to a “better” state; on the contrary, the “natural” direction of movement is more likely to lead downwards. Upward movement requires effort, including

example of the banking system cited below – however, it is unclear why, if the infrastructure (in this case, banking) was not up to the new challenges, it took so long to reform.

intellectual effort. Reflecting on a past (unsuccessful) attempt at such an effort may prove useful; in this sense, an analysis of the situation in the ChAO in the 1990s is, to some extent, an exploration of one of the possible futures, whose expectation is always embedded in the present (Bryant and Knight 2019: 193).

Socialist economy of ChAO

The entire socialist economic system of ChAO, like other regions of the country (and other countries of the Soviet bloc), was built on a single principle, which researchers of post-socialist transformation call “resource redistribution:” competition was for access to the opportunity to obtain and distribute resources in a situation of endemic shortage (Verdery 1993: 174). It is significant that this structure was multi-tiered: at the top stood the central authority, with the right to redistribute resources down to the next level; the received resources were redistributed down the chain, to the chairman of the village council or the director of the state farm, who had the right to decide which brigade or which enterprise in the village would receive more benefits. Piers Vitebsky characterizes the director of an Even state farm:

It was the director [of the Sovkhoz] who decided who could use a Farm tractor to fetch winter firewood, who had a piece of hardboard flown in so that they could cover their floor, and what could be done with every one of the Farm’s 20,000 reindeer (2005: 50).

Verdery calls this “party paternalism:” the center took everything and then redistributed it according to its understanding of the needs of the population (2013: 72).

Power in this system consisted of the ability to (re)distribute (not necessarily self-interestedly, although those in power, as a rule, did not forget their own interests in the process). This was a fundamental, structure-forming characteristic of Soviet power: without it, power as such in the socialist system lost its meaning. The secretary of the district committee, the chairman of the City Council executive committee, the chairman of the village council simply could not imagine power (or themselves in power) without the ability to (re)distribute. To allow the existence of independent centers of power meant losing some of their redistributive rights, that is, reducing their power.

Rather than use hackneyed, meaningless terms like “people” and “government,” I’ll use the terms “upper, middle, and lower echelons of the system.” This requires comment. In contemporary sociological literature, “there is still no consensus on what model of stratification is characteristic of modern Russia” (Tikhonova ed. 2022: 10). One way to analyze the development of contemporary layout of the society may be as follows. The previous Soviet society consisted of *two* main groups. One included the apparatus of party leadership and state administration, highest industrial management, highly qualified specialists, including the “worker elite,” as well as those work-

ers whose activities were associated with the distribution system. All these had to be members of the Communist Party. The second was “the masses:” workers, collective farmers, and intelligentsia. Natalia Tikhonova calls these groups “high-resource” and “low-resource,” respectively; in her opinion, within each of these groups, the standard of living of its various components was more or less equal in Soviet times (2007: 288). The binary structure of Soviet society was also noted by Finn Nielsen, who used the terms “upper and lower echelons of the system” (2004: 26).

Regarding the post-Soviet situation *three* strata are commonly distinguished. After 1991, the deepening social differentiation led to the previously homogeneous lower group disintegrating into “a set of strata with qualitatively different statuses and life prospects.” Some of its representatives managed to “climb to the top” through small and medium-sized businesses; meanwhile, large businesses remained the preserve of those from high-resource groups of Soviet society (Tikhonova 2007: 289f.).

For the period under review in Chukotka, one has to use this rather crude stratification, because “for 1991–1993, there are no reliable statistical or sociological data on the social stratification of Russian society; such data have only appeared since 1994” (Tikhonova, ed. 2018: 205). It is important to emphasize here that the emergence of a third (intermediate) “echelon of the system” in the post-Soviet era significantly complicates the situation. Belonging to the “upper” or “lower echelon” became relative; a specific person can occupy both positions simultaneously: in relation to one stratum, they are “upper echelon,” in relation to the other, “lower.”¹² The director of the village “house of culture” belongs to the “middle echelon;” for the “upper,” they are a subordinate, for the “lower,” they are a superior; from the “upper,” they receive, and to the “lower,” they transfer, various benefits and resources.¹³

This is the theory. The actual situation in ChAO in the 1990s appears to have differed significantly from this simple scheme in at least two respects. The first is the geographical remoteness and isolation: ChAO is the most remote region of Russia if one measures “from Moscow.” The second is the special measures taken by the governor of ChAO in the 1990s to limit outsiders’ access to the district and control the flow of information (Thompson 2008: 101f.). This, along with the aforementioned separation of ChAO from the Magadan Region in 1992 and its transformation into an independent member of the Federation, placed the governor of the district in a nearly unique position: while formally subordinate to Moscow, for Chukotka he was effectively the absolute “highest echelon of the system.”

12 It seems that Yulian Konstantinov (2015) underestimated this circumstance: in the key expression of his book, “power-to-grassroots talk,” the conversation is understood as a direct dialogue between the authorities and reindeer herders.

13 Cf.: Weber’s model is applicable to the contemporary Russian situation “in four key spheres of life: economic status, the work situation, opportunities for maintaining and increasing human potential, consumption, and leisure.” However, “in reality, each person is characterized by a certain set of [these spheres’] attributes, which [...] coexist with each other in approximately two-thirds of cases” (Tikhonova ed. 2022: 52).

The Post-Soviet situation: A view from below

Attempts at change: power

By 1991, it became clear that the planned economy system had exhausted its potential. Recall that the transition from a more-or-less free market to a rigidly planned economy at the beginning of the 20th century took in Soviet Russia approximately twelve years (1917–1929) and was associated with enormous human suffering; the reverse transition was accomplished in an incredibly short period of time. As had been the case eighty years earlier, no one really knew how to carry out such a transition; Verdery rightly noted that “by far the most telling obstacle to property transformation was that no one had ever done anything like it on so massive a scale” (2003: 77). The inevitable mistakes along the way (including choosing the wrong people for the mission) quickly led to the formation of a legislative and administrative vacuum, which allowed local authorities not only to slow down and/or block reforms, but to exploit the situation to their own advantage.

The authorities of ChAO, like in other regions, were ordered to initiate reforms under guidance from Moscow (the government decree of September 4, 1992, and the presidential decree of December 29, 1992).¹⁴ The “upper echelons” convinced the population that they knew how to make the transition from the old (state farm) system to the new, based on private property. In specific cases, various privatization options were proposed “for discussion by work collectives,” but interestingly, the authorities never offered a choice between all possible options, but only between those they were confident would not bring any surprises, meaning they would essentially leave everything more or less as it was.

One of such top-down reforms was the creation of *obshchinas* (see footnote 6) in ChAO; this was seen in the early 1990s as a way to replace state management of the economy with private initiative. However, these *obshchinas* were created by the same bureaucratic system, and on familiar principles. During this period, the district administration (the “upper echelon”) carried out what could be called, following Vladislava Vladimirova, a “cosmetic transformation” (2009: 219). “The old system under a new name” emerged (Grant 1995: 144).¹⁵ State-owned enterprises were hastily, sometimes forcibly, and without regard for the opinions of their employees, transformed

14 Regulation on the reorganization of collective farms, state farms and the privatization of state agricultural enterprises (approved by RF Government Resolution of September 4, 1992, No. 708), with amendments and additions of December 11, 1992, August 3, 1998; Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of December 27, 1991, No. 323 “On urgent measures to implement land reform in the RSFSR.”

15 Konstantinov, who looked at this situation from another region (the Kola Peninsula), called the so-called “re-registration” of state farms in 1992–1993 into limited liability partnerships or other legal forms “a simple renaming;” moreover, this reform covered no more than half of all state agricultural enterprises in the country (2015: 210).

into joint-stock companies.¹⁶ At the same time, the “upper echelon” reserved several fundamental rights and positions that guaranteed the cosmetic nature of these transformations. Foremost was the right to adopt and implement new laws or, if needed, to delay their adoption. Because of this, a legal vacuum existed in ChAO for almost two years: by mid-1990s, according to our consultants, there were several competing draft laws on *obshchinas*; a draft law on the legal status of ethnic villages was also under discussion. Until these laws were adopted, neither Indigenous *obshchinas* formally created shortly beforehand in ChAO nor the villages’ administrations were legally able to become either landowners or financial entities.¹⁷

The ChAO’s Law “On Establishing Land Tax Rates” was adopted only in 1995¹⁸ – and was far from perfect. It detailed the collection procedures and land tax rates within the *Okrug* for arable land, forage land, reindeer pastures, private garden plots, land occupied by cities, towns, industrial and transport enterprises, and military installations. However, this law made no mention of hunting and fishing grounds. It did not specify who owns, or who must pay for, the coastal areas, fur hunting grounds in the tundra, and so on. While “legal entities and individuals engaged in reindeer herding” were exempt from paying land tax on reindeer pastures, marine hunters were simply forgotten: the Yupik use of marine and land resources was not regulated by any legislation.

In the absence of laws, the old norms of relations between the government and public organizations remained in effect – as they were understood by the “upper echelons.” Let us cite some examples (Krupnik and Vakhtin 1995).

Example 1. The Chukotka Eskimo Society *Yupik*,¹⁹ created in August 1990, signed an agreement in 1994 with one of the territories of northern Alaska (North Slope Borough) to study the migration of gray and bowhead whales. The American side provided funds for the observers’ salaries and equipment. The observations were to be conducted by experienced local residents. Eighteen native residents of the Providenskii District and the same number from the Chukotskii District were officially registered as observers. Three observers from each village were assigned to monitor

16 Molchanov I. Seven circles of hell “Bytovik” in *Far North*. 1995. July 25. P. 5; Piaternina L. K. Don’t live the way you want in *Far North*. 1995. July 20: 4.

17 Unlike the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug, the Supreme Council of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) adopted a law in 1992, “On the clan, tribal, and nomadic community (*obshchina*) of the Indigenous peoples of the North” (see: <http://yakutiakmns.org/istoriya>). Federal Law 104-FZ, “On the general principles of organizing *obshchinas* of Indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East of the Russian Federation,” was adopted only in 2000.

18 Adopted by the Duma of the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug on February 17, 1995, despite the fact that the resolution of the head of the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug administration was published in July 1992, and the decision of the VIII Session of the Council of People’s Deputies of the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug on this issue took place in December 1992 (<https://docs.cntd.ru/document/805043840>). [accessed 24.11.2025]

19 In Russian, the name “Eskimo” does not have the pejorative flavour it has in English, and is used, alongside with the name Yupik, including by this Indigenous group.

the migration of marine animals, from April 1994 till December 1995.

For this and similar programs, the *Yupik* Society received ammunition, radios, binoculars, motors, and other equipment from Alaska. This gift was supposed to turn the Society into a source of first-class marine equipment for local hunters, independent of state farms. However, five motors, donated by the American side, were held at customs in Provideniia for a year due to the Society's inability to pay the customs duty (\$2,500 for each motor).

The actual process of dispatching observers also appeared far from smooth. In early July 1995, three retired Yupik men from the village of Sireniki set out for an observation post near the former settlement of Avan. After pitching a tent, they began observing the movements of the sea mammals through binoculars and recording their observations. On the second day, the Society's office received a phone call from the border guards; the border guard commander announced, half-seriously, half-jokingly, "We've arrested yours!" The Society had forgotten to "ask permission" for this particular expedition (this forgetfulness itself is a very characteristic indicator of hopes for change). The absurdity of the situation was obvious to both parties; nevertheless, the following letter was written to formally resolve the conflict:

To the commander of military unit No....

We would like to inform you and request your approval and issuance of the necessary documents for work and residence on this coastal area. The Chukotka Eskimo Society has sent a group of indigenous residents from the village of Sireniki to the seashore near Lake Istikhed, formerly the village of Avan: [Three names follow]. Group tasks: sea observation, recording the numbers of migrating whales, walrus, and seals. Traditional hunting and fishing at sea and in Lake Istikhed, monitoring the ancient site of 'Avan.' Duration of stay: temporary, until December 1, 1995. [...] We ask that you coordinate this program of residence and activities of the aforementioned people and issue the appropriate permit.

Chairman of the Chukotka Eskimo Society *Yupik*, July 6, 1995.

After this letter was sent to the border unit command, the elderly observers were left alone. One of them had been born in this abandoned village, and the other's father had been born there; that is, travel by Yupik across their native land was only possible with special permission from border guards. This arrangement, in existence in Chukotka since at least 1948, continued despite political changes in the 1990s. As one Yupik activist apologetically put it: "We had to find out *which* [border guard] *outpost owns this land* (sic!) before sending observers."

Example 2. In 1994, at the initiative of the Canadian side, the Indigenous people of Chukotka, together with the Canadian Inuit and the Mapuche Indians (Chile), joined the educational program "Nunavut Sivuniksavut."²⁰ The program involved three academic semesters: two in Canada, where, with the help of Canadian instructors, students would gain knowledge in management, computer literacy, radio and televi-

20 See: <https://nunavutsivuniksavut.ca/> [accessed 24.11.2025]

sion programming, and English. The third would be in Chukotka, where the already-trained students, under the guidance of Canadian instructors, would organize summer courses for children and youth from villages in Chukotka using a similar program.

The first two semesters of the program were successful; however, during the third, obstacles arose that were unforeseen by the project's authors and provide a good illustration of the difficulties in transferring the experience of other countries to the Far North. One of our consultants described it:

They [the Canadians] are great, of course. But it's hard to do here. They organize summer camps for children in their villages, but in our villages it's difficult: there's no funding. It's hard to convince people to support it because the village isn't equipped for it. The money they allocated can't be transferred here, unless you bring it on yourself. Information about the project hasn't reached the people at all. The program went well in Provideniia, but had to be scaled back in Chaplino, and they didn't even make it to Sireniki. When they first came with this proposal, I couldn't understand what on earth they wanted from us.



Fig. 3 The village of Ungazik (Novoe Chaplino), 1990. Photo: Nikolai Vakhtin.

Well-funded international projects encountered the lack of a proper banking system in Chukotka. Even if the money could have been brought in “in the pocket,” transferring it from the *Yupik* account to the village administration's account for hiring teachers and preparing courses would have been impossible. Without proper financial relations, a useful project turned into an order from a “higher authority” to the village administration to do additional work for free. The “information network” also proved inadequate: local newspapers, radio, and television channels, which were supposed to disseminate information about the courses were either unable or unwilling to do so. Thus, the infamous Soviet hierarchy of territories based on access to benefits – in this case, access to non-governmental educational programs – was main-

tained unchanged: what had worked well in the district center of Provideniia shrank in the nearby village of Novoe Chaplino and failed to reach the slightly more remote village of Sireniki. The “Indigenous” villages again found themselves at the very bottom of the hierarchy, even in the case of a program that was directly addressed to the Indigenous population.

But even in the difficult conditions described the NGOs of Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) residents found ways to achieve quite tangible results (Krupnik and Vakhtin 1995):

Example 3. In November 1992, a border guard ship entered Tkachen Bay and dumped a large quantity of fuel into the water. A few days later, the carcasses of birds killed by the pollution began washing up all along the bay’s shore. Previously, residents would have, at best, complained to the state farm office, and the state farm and village council would have reported the incident to the district party committee. Now, things were different. Five village residents, eyewitnesses to the incident, drew up a report, which was sent to the district environmental protection inspectorate (fish inspectorate) and to the State Committee for Ecology (Ministry of Environmental Protection). A commission arrived and confirmed a serious contamination of the bay. Over one hundred village residents signed a collective letter to the chairman of the Chukotka Okrug Council of People’s Deputies, informing the authorities about the incident.

In response to this appeal, the Chukotka environmental prosecutor’s office initiated legal proceedings. A claim for material damages was filed against the military unit; the military prosecutor was advised to consider holding the perpetrators accountable; ultimately, they were fined. This was the first time an *Indigenous community* had successfully held the all-powerful military accountable, although it brought the village nothing but moral satisfaction: the financial impact was zero – both because the fine in no way covered the damage caused and because, following the mysterious logic of the financial and tax systems, the money went not to the budget of the directly affected village, but to the district budget.

The situation in neighboring Yakutia was largely similar; however, the comparison helps highlight the unique features of ChAO. In Yakutia the Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North of Yakutia was organized on December 12, 1989. The first Constitution of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) (1992) included provisions to protect the rights of Indigenous peoples. It was established that the Constitution protects and ensures their rights, including the legal ownership and use of land and resources.

As in ChAO, economic reforms in Yakutia were implemented “from above.” Yakut consultant’s accounts of this process are very similar to those we heard two years later in ChAO. However, unlike ChAO, residents of the cities and towns of northeastern Yakutia were already clearly aware of the central government’s mistakes in organizing new economic structures by 1993. Thus, our consultants in Cherskii (a town in northeastern Yakutia, on the border with ChAO) explained to us in detail why the creation of

obshchinas based on ethnicity was a mistake, “if not a deliberate policy aimed at pitting peoples against each other.” Consultants from the Yakut village of Andriushkino made the same point, claiming that the ethnic principle of creating *obshchinas* “killed the entire village, split it along ethnic lines.” Yakut people who had lived their entire lives in the “Indigenous” villages north of the Republic felt humiliated because the *obshchina* was ethnic (Yukaghir), so they had to ask for a permit to travel across the *obshchina* territory. “I feel insulted, and so does my family,” a consultant said (Vakhtin 1993).

While our consultants in Yakutia complained that the new economic systems had been introduced with errors, people in ChAO that same year spoke only of *the need for future changes* and the lack of any. Let’s compare the statements of the heads of two village administrations: a mostly Chukchi village Rytkuchi and a Chukchi-Eskimo village of Uelen. From Rytkuchi:

The state farm still exists; there are no new economic forms. Two brigades are planning to transform into farms, but it’s very difficult for farmers to fully recoup their expenses. There are no transportation links. A separate bank is needed: it’s too expensive for each “farm” to maintain a full-time accountant; the bank must be district or inter-district. It would be possible to find competent people for such a bank, but will there be honest ones? (Vakhtin 1993)

From Uelkal:

[The director’s of a limited liability partnership’s] trouble²¹ is that he’s a former Komsomol activist and has completely replicated the district committee’s management system: one-man rule, a circle of favorites to whom he slices a piece of the power pie (warehouse manager, personnel department, etc.), and contempt for the people. [...] Taxes are paid to the district, from there they are redistributed and returned to the village. The local village budget should be formed from taxes – but taxes aren’t returned from the district; only crumbs are returned. Collecting taxes in the village is impossible: there is no mechanism. We are a government without authority. (Ibid.)

Attempts at change: School and everyday life

Similar phenomena were observed at this time in school education, and here, as with the *obshchinas*, the primary actors were not only the indigenous population. The school system in ChAO during Soviet times differed little from other parts of the country: it was highly centralized, and all schools were required to follow a uniform curriculum. With the exception of the teaching of native languages – Yupik or Chukchi – these curricula lacked any “ethnic” elements. Only a few enthusiastic teachers,

21 Name in the original. In November 1992, a Limited Liability Partnership “Uelkal” was founded in the village. Its activities included fur farming, fur harvesting, industrial fat production, and walrus hunting. Plans included a bone carving workshop and a pelt processing facility.

on their own initiative, supplemented the standard curriculum with rudimentary information about the region's natural environment and history.

In the late 1980s, the situation began to change (Krupnik and Vakhtin 2002: 22ff.). I present in abbreviated form the story told by of one activist of school reform, Igor Zagrebin, a Russian geography teacher and, at the time, director of the village school of Novoe Chaplino:

[In 1990] we decided to develop a local history program [...] it's not just about knowledge of the region's nature or history; it's also about the language. We found an [officially approved] curriculum that made this possible. The teachers themselves developed the programs. We created everything ourselves – all the teaching aids, all the visual aids.

Zagrebin then talked about specific changes in the primary and secondary school programs, and continued:

The general idea of the program was to bring the curriculum as close to the village life as possible without losing the academic level. We also tried [...] to introduce the Yupik and Chukchi languages in the same number of classroom hours as Russian. [...] now [1995] it is very difficult economically to keep the school afloat. [...] At the end of the 1980s, everything suddenly came to life in the schools, and now all this has ended." (Krupnik and Vakhtin 1995)

Compare the village of Rytkuchi:

The district committee opposed the creation of a purely ethnic (Chukchi) class with good training, they told us: "It's scary to raise even one class of educated locals: they, if they unite, they will issue an invoice to us" [*meaning*: for all we did to them]. (Vakhtin 1993)

This attempt to adapt the school curriculum to the realities of life in an Indigenous village was initiated by the school's Russian principal and carried out by Yupik and Chukchi teachers. With the departure of many Russian teachers in 1995, twelve of the school's sixteen teachers were Indigenous. Thanks to international connections, most of the Yupik teachers gained experience in teaching their native language and culture through special exchange programs with Alaskan schools. In 1995, Igor Krupnik and I wrote:

Changes in attitudes toward education were perhaps the most encouraging thing to witness in Chukotka in the summer of 1995. Of course, the financial situation in the education system is very dire, but we believe improvements are possible. This is facilitated by the changing ethnic composition of rural teachers and their unanimous belief that existing programs are recognized by district [educational] administration, who are trying to provide them with all possible assistance. (Krupnik and Vakhtin 1995)

It's interesting to understand the motivations of the Russian school principal and the local (Yupik) teachers in this process. Zagrebin used the word "relaxation of the curriculum": while in Soviet times all school activities were predetermined and strictly controlled, the political and social processes that began in the late 1980s dramatically increased uncertainty, and, with it, hope. Many teachers left; those who remained were unwilling to continue teaching according to the old curricula and sought to use the opening window of opportunity to give their work new meaning.

In addition to teachers who implemented new forms of education, there were entrepreneurs who invented new forms of economic activity. Journalists of ChAO also made attempts to change the situation in the district for the better, trying to use the newspaper *Sovetskaia Chukotka*, published by the legislative branch (first by the Council of District Deputies, later by the Duma of the ChAO) as a tool for agitation for new forms of social life.

Both *Sovetskaia Chukotka* and our field materials contain numerous examples of how residents of the ChAO found new opportunities in a situation of increased uncertainty (see Gray 2000: 33). Here are a few examples:

A certain *Zaitsev* started a private farm – he raises geese, ducks, rabbits, has built a greenhouse²² and successfully sells meat and vegetables. A certain *Samsonov* opened a private news agency, providing clients with statistical information. The journalist comments: "A native northerner, Chukotka is his homeland, and he has no plans to leave."²³ In the article "Good News," we read various success stories of producers and processors, whose work demonstrated that the district had reserves and, with vigorous effort, can become self-supplying in food. The article concludes: "We would be happy to publish interviews or articles about the initial successes of farmers and private entrepreneurs. Their experience should be shared with everyone. We must learn from each other and help each other survive these difficult times."²⁴

There are people (in Uelkal) who quietly go about their business: one breeds arctic foxes (already 30), another built a greenhouse and grows and sells cucumbers. A Master Sergeant of a local border outpost built a pigsty and keeps pigs – he already has 50 pigs, kept in exceptional cleanliness; he's a born farmer (Vakhtin 1993).

In Andriushkino (Yakutia) several people have created a private business: they hunt wild reindeer from snowmobiles and sell the meat. This meat is highly prized, and they earn good money, despite the long and hard work involved. Many families, including their children, participate in making souvenirs from mammoth ivory or reindeer antlers. (Ibid.)

22 *Sovetskaia Chukotka* 1992, January 25: 5.

23 *Sovetskaia Chukotka* 1992, February 11: 5.

24 *Sovetskaia Chukotka* 1992, June 18: 4.

After the economic collapse in ChAO, in the absence of wages and supplies, many were forced to return to their traditional occupations of hunting and fishing, as the only way to support their families. Hunters and fishermen also fell into this category of successful entrepreneurs. These entrepreneurs weren't a homogeneous group: for example, former Soviet officials and former party functionaries, even minor ones, had an advantage in privatization over those of lower ranks in obtaining loans, and, consequently, in developing their own businesses (Ibid.).

Thus, in the early 1990s in ChAO, as in neighboring Yakutia, an active movement began among the population, primarily Indigenous, seeking greater freedom in education and economic and business independence based on traditional crafts (in the case of ChAO, with international support). The leaders of this movement in ChAO were Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, who saw hope in the growing uncertainty for some improvement in their lives.

* * *

By 1996, these trends had given way to apathy, a diminished role for public organizations, and a fading conversation around the idea of public self-governance.²⁵ National associations, created in the early 1990s on the wave of a vibrant social upsurge (in Yakutia, with direct support of the republican authorities), began to rapidly lose their influence due to the lack of an independent financial base and legally established judicial status. In the 1996 Report, we noted:

[There has been] a sharp strengthening, even compared to 1995, of the role of the district executive authority. The district administration is constantly and persistently expanding its spheres of control, using primarily financial and administrative mechanisms. [There is] an undeniable crisis of confidence in the grassroots economic initiatives of the Indigenous population, and above all – on the part of the indigenous people themselves. (Krupnik and Vakhtin 1996)

The politics of the “higher echelons” played a significant role. One example: On October 11, 1990, the newspaper *Sovetskaia Chukotka* published an article, “The Grimaces of Privatization?” It told a story typical of the time. A representative of a Magadan company came to Anadyr to sign a contract for the privatization of several food service establishments. The newspaper's correspondent questioned the transparency of the negotiations, complained that the authorities weren't consulting with residents on this important matter, and concluded the article with the following sarcastic passage:

25 Which future will govern behaviour depends on “orientation,” an important term for Bryant and Knight's theory: “Orientations entail planning, hopes for the future, and imagination of the future; they also often entail the collapse and weakening of attempts to achieve the future: at this point, hope can turn to apathy, planning to disappointment, and imagination to fatigue.” (Bryant and Knight 2019: 19)

The impression was created that the district leadership... isn't planning to consult with the people: the "outsiders" from Magadan are already hard at work drafting contracts [...] Their efficiency and agility command respect, and the promised "mountains of gold" are tempting. But something also raises concerns: are Magadan businessmen trying to "cut down" what's "lying around" cheaply? [...] And if Alexander Viktorovich Nazarov [then Chairman of the Council] possesses accurate information that the people of Magadan are solely concerned with the welfare of the people of Anadyr, why didn't he deign to share this news with us, at least through the Council's newspaper? Why not, for example, hold an auction to see who will offer the most?! Isn't this just another attempt by the [Magadan] region to block Chukotka's independence by seizing control of the most important issues: supplies and food? The mayor of Anadyr is right: in this new privatization, we shouldn't rush into things. Denationalization mustn't turn into squandering!²⁶

Ten days later, a new article appeared in the newspaper:

Does a journalist have the right to their own opinion? [...] And what if that opinion diverges from the opinion of the district executive committee chairman? "That can't happen in the Council newspaper," says Aleksandr Viktorovich [Nazarov]. He declared this over the phone: "This Dobrotskaia must be fired immediately. The entire editorial board needs to be disbanded, and a new staff hired!" The receiver was choked with his voice. [...] It turns out he didn't like the article "Grimaces of Privatization."²⁷

Clearly, the chairman of the district executive committee (and future governor of ChAO) perceived the newspaper not as an independent source of information, nor as an ally in the construction of a new system of government, but as a dangerous enemy: he absolutely couldn't accept a situation in which he had to share power in the district.

* * *

Two periods clearly distinguished by the people of ChAO – from the late 1980s to summer of 1993, and from the fall of 1993 to the end of the decade – differ sharply in attitudes and expectations. While growing uncertainty in the late 1980s inspired hope for positive change among many people, the economic collapse of the early 1990s dashed many of these hopes – (Krupnik and Vakhtin 2002; Gray 2005).

Writers on this topic found a causal relationship between the liberalization of the late 1980s, the "shock therapy" of 1992, and the subsequent severe economic crisis that battered the country's population in general and the population of ChAO in particular. Western anthropologists who studied Siberia or other Russian regions were (and remain) consistent in their skepticism about the "shock therapy" strategy: unlike many politicians, they did not believe that the transition to a market economy would quickly

²⁶ *Sovetskaia Chukotka* 1990, October 11: 4.

²⁷ *Sovetskaia Chukotka* 1990, October 20: 4.

and effortlessly “cure all the evils (existing and imagined) of the ‘communist’ system” (Nielsen 2004: 10). They showed that contradictory processes were underway throughout the former USSR, and that simply applying abstract political schemes to a real situation could lead to unpredictable results, sometimes the opposite of what was desired.²⁸

However, can we be sure that it was the mechanism of self-regulating market, triggered by the policy of “shock therapy,” which led to the economic, political, and social crisis in ChAO in the early 1990s? Could it be that the “upper echelons” prevented this mechanism from working through conscious, systematic, and successful resistance, and that it was this resistance that ultimately led to the economic and social crisis?

The post-Soviet situation: A view from above

For obvious reasons, we could not obtain any interviews with senior officials of the ChAO administration, nor any first-hand information about their actions. We can only rely on materials from the local press (until 1993, the ChAO newspapers were still quite independent), stories (should we say, rumors) from local residents, and later publications such as (Gray 2000) or (Thompson 2008). However, these materials are sufficient to describe the actions of the then governor of the ChAO and his clique in the aspect of interest to us.

After August 1991, two main figures represented the “upper echelons” of ChAO: Aleksandr Nazarov, who held the highest post in the executive branch, and Vladimir Yetylin, who held the same post in the legislative branch.²⁹ Both were professional *aparatchiks*, members of the Communist Party, with experience in bureaucratic work in the party and in economics; each considered himself the “master of the district,” so conflict between them was inevitable. The situation in the district at that time was described as “dual power” – a term familiar to every Soviet schoolchild: it was the textbook description of the situation between February and October of 1917, when power

- 28 As Polanyi wrote in 1944, blind faith in a self-regulating market leads to the perception of all social change as normal. “It should need no elaboration that a process of undirected change, the pace of which is deemed too fast, should be slowed down, if possible, so as to safeguard the welfare of the community. Such household truths [...] were in the nineteenth century erased from the thoughts of the educated by the corrosive of a crude utilitarianism combined with an uncritical reliance on the alleged self-healing virtues of unconscious growth” (Polanyi 2001: 35).
- 29 Nazarov (b. 1951) was the Governor of ChAO from 1991 to 2000. From 1996–2000, he was an ex officio member of the Federation Council, from 1996–2003, the Chairman of the Committee on Northern and Indigenous Peoples Affairs, and from 2003–2009, an auditor at the Accounts Chamber of Russia. Etylin (b. 1944), born into a Chukchi family, served as party secretary of two state farms, secretary of the Chaunskii and first secretary of the Chukotka District Committee of the CPSU, second secretary of the Chukotka Okrug Committee of the CPSU, and a member of the Magadan Regional Committee of the CPSU. From 1989 to 1991, he was a People's Deputy of the USSR from Chukotka and a member of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR; from 2001 to 2003, a deputy of the State Duma of Russia from Chukotka. He was a founder of the Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East, and other public Indigenous organizations.

in the country was divided between the Provisional Government and the Soviets; this word could only evoke negative connotations in the minds of people.³⁰ Both “masters” vied for sole power: Nazarov was backed by the President, while Etylin was backed by the Supreme Soviet.

It’s unclear how this standoff, which lasted several years, would have ended without the events in Moscow in October 1993. On October 9, 1993, President Yeltsin signed a decree on the reform of representative bodies and local self-government.³¹ This decree mandated elections to the new bodies of power, and until then, “executive and administrative functions assigned [...] to the Councils of People’s Deputies [...] shall be carried out by the administration of the relevant constituent entity of the Russian Federation;” in the event of the Councils’ inability to perform their functions, these functions “shall be temporarily carried out by the relevant administration.”³²

Ten days later, the “small council” of ChAO’s District Council of People’s Deputies voted to implement this decree and delegated the corresponding powers to the governor. Then, on October 29, the governor incorporated the newspaper *Krainii Sever* (Far North) and signed a decree “On the termination of the editorial board of the newspaper *Sovetskaia Chukotka* (published on November 4). Two months later, the governor declared a state of emergency in ChAO³³ on the grounds of difficulties with mutual payments between enterprises supplying the district with heat, which “could lead to major industrial accidents and pose a threat to the life and health of the population.” The decree declared a state of emergency from December 23 for a period of thirty days. Its first paragraph emphasized: “The introduction of a state of emergency does not imply restrictions on the rights and freedoms of citizens within the district.” However, it further referred to Article 24, paragraph “g” of the Law of the Russian Federation “On the State of Emergency” (on measures to mobilize enterprise resources), and also required “strict adherence” to Article 22 of this law. Article 22 provided, among other things, a) a special entry and exit regime, as well as restrictions on freedom of movement within the territory where a state of emergency had been declared; b) increased protection of public order and facilities that ensure the vital activity of the population; c) a ban on meetings, rallies, street marches and demon-

30 Today, we understand that “dual power” in a democratic system means the separation of powers, one of the basic principles of a democratic society. Judging by the events of 1993 in Moscow when President Eltsin and the Supreme Soviet locked in a struggle for power, this was not the understanding in Russia of the time.

31 Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of October 9, 1993, No. 1617 “On the reform of representative authorities and local government bodies in the Russian Federation.”

32 The bitter irony is that Yeltsin’s decree, which destroyed representative power in Russia and transferred virtually unlimited powers to the President, was adopted “in order to ensure genuine sovereignty of the people and the implementation of the constitutional principle of separation of powers.”

33 Resolution “On the introduction of a state of emergency in the territory of the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug” dated 23.12.1993, No. 316 (KS, 28.12.1993).

strations, and other mass events; d) a ban on strikes; d) restrictions on the movement of vehicles, and their inspection. The governor, who remained the sole “master” of the district, took full advantage of all of these provisions.

Thompson described in detail (2008:100–102) what he called “sealing off” ChAO: restrictions on the entry of outsiders, primarily foreigners; refusal of foreign aid to the Indigenous population; strict control of the outflow of information from the district; tightening of border controls, as well as the inevitable errors and blind spots in governance in the absence of feedback from the population. His explanation is similar to mine: the “instinct to monopolize control and exclude competition from alternative ‘patrons’” (Ibid.:102). It was clear to the governor that indigenous communities and NGOs were not fully covered by the sphere of his patronage influence, which he interpreted as a potential threat to his authority. The limited success of some local organizations in establishing cooperation with private charities in Alaska and other regions reinforced this feeling (Ibid.:106).

A good illustration is the fate of the town of Beringovskii, a district center. In 1989, approximately five thousand people lived there, mostly working in the coal mines. By mid-1990s, living conditions became appalling: the town had no water, heat, or sewerage. To conceal this crisis, between 1997 and 2000, no outside visitors were allowed in, and local security agencies, by order of the district administration, were required to suppress any information about living conditions in the town, whether in letters or telegrams. Long-distance telephone service was also nonexistent. Residents attempted to transmit information about the disaster to Anadyr and Moscow, but to no avail (ibid.:102).

Thompson describes what was happening in those years in simple and crude terms (“mafia,” “thieves in law,” and the like): the then “elite” of the ChAO “greedily gnawed” at the district, not at all interested not only in its development, but even in the simple survival of the population; for the ruling group, the process of pumping resources out of Chukotka and transferring funds beyond its borders was “a strategy for ensuring their own departure from the district on the most favorable terms” (ibid.:107–109, and especially 123). Anyone who tried to interfere with this, or even had an opinion on what was happening that did not coincide with the governor’s, immediately found themselves “enemies,” subject to the governor’s wrath hurled at them by the repressive apparatus subordinate to him.

Opinions differ about the reasons for all this. Nielsen (2007) noted that the district continued to be dominated by Soviet-era relationships and structures, explaining this through the concept of *path dependence*. Thompson believed that the reasons lay in the lack of control over the ChAO governor in 1993–1997 when he received funds from the center and had the opportunity to “dispose of them as he wished, rewarding the loyal and punishing the dissidents” (2008:103). At the same time, it was important for the governor of ChAO and his inner circle to keep their subordinates in the dark about the principles and rules for budget allocation (Ibid.:105).

Whatever the explanation for such behavior on the part of the “upper echelon of the system,” it is clear that the people who belonged to it perceived the increased uncertainty of life both as a new opportunity for personal enrichment and as a threat to their power, and did everything to maintain *status quo*, retain control over the district and continue the usual patron-client relations, not only with the Indigenous but also with the local population.

Conclusion

Different population groups in ChAO responded differently to the social and economic crisis, the crisis of power, and growing uncertainty in the 1990s. How can these groups be defined?

Nielsen identified two distinct but parallel behavioral trends among the population of the Chukotka. The first, widespread, was a tendency toward passivity and helplessness; the second, characteristic of a small group (including some Indigenous persons) was a willingness to take initiative and act relatively independently within the existing political and administrative framework (2007:178). Patty Gray (2007) wrote about another group – the “Indigenous activists” – positioned between the dominant urban Russians and the Indigenous rural reindeer-herding population. These activists were part of the system: during the Soviet years, while near the bottom of the social hierarchy, they were higher than the Indigenous hunters or reindeer herders. Like everyone else, they were accustomed to receiving social benefits from the “upper echelons” and redistributing them downwards. During Soviet times, certain rules (scripts) defined these activists’ place in the system: they had to have the blessing of the party organs, and most often the initiative for their various activities came from above. Most activists were members of the CPSU. Well aware of the unwritten rules, they knew their role and the behavior expected of them. After 1991, these same people actively joined new activist movements. I suspect that subconsciously they wanted everything to remain as it had been, but only so that in the new situation they would receive more of the same good old (re)distributive power:

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, these individuals felt they were doing nothing so qualitatively different from what they had done in the Soviet period [...] they saw their own careers as a more or less seamless whole, and in their own minds, they were in the past, and continued to be, social activists, working as they always had to correct imperfections in society. (Gray 2007: 152; see also: Gray 2000)

The opposition “native – newcomer,” adequate to the description of the situation in ChAO in the first half of the 20th century, ceased to correspond to reality by 1990. Thompson’s book focuses on this. It begins: “One of the great untold stories of the Russian North lies concealed behind the unexamined belief that we understand who in these regions is native and who is only visiting” (2008: 3). The hierarchy of privileges

of newcomers over natives that existed during the Soviet era ceased to be absolute in the 1990s; survival and success now largely depended on personal efforts rather than ethnicity (Ibid.: 114). The experience of survival in the 1990s – in conditions when state power temporarily weakened – forced many newcomers to show initiative, to use the experience of the local population, and to adopt local subsistence practices. This gave rise to a sense of belonging among the newcomers, a practical and emotional connection to Chukotkan land (Ibid.: 115–116). We also wrote about this “new locality:”

Thousands of outsiders [*priezzhie*] left Chukotka after 1991 in search of a better life in other parts of Russia and in the newly independent states, and many others would be happy to leave but couldn't because they had nowhere to go. On the other hand, for many of those who stayed behind this was a free choice: they vowed to regard Chukotka as their legitimate native land [...] the very concept of one's “homeland” underwent a dramatic re-evaluation [...] One's “home” was indeed the place of one's birth, the area where one lived as a child, got married or simply spent critical years of one's life. It was this highly personal and emotionally loaded locality that quickly replaced the previous image of the former Soviet Union that spanned 10 time-zones and was always considered the ultimate ‘homeland’ for all Soviet people. The new “localism,” the changing perspective on one's regional loyalty was now grounded in strong personal bonds rather than in the former empire stereotypes. (Krupnik and Vakhtin 2002: 19)

These and other population groups, identified on various grounds and forming complex configurations, responded to the 1990s crisis in different ways. In conclusion, let us consider one possible model for typical scenarios of such reactions.

Since a crisis increases uncertainty, and uncertainty, in turn, not only reduces planning opportunities but also increases potential development opportunities, one can expect different population groups to choose different behavioral scenarios. For some, a crisis primarily means an expansion of the “range of possibilities,” while for others, it means a reduction in planning opportunities. The population of ChAO in the early 1990s is clearly structured along two axes:

- 1 *Indigenous – local – incoming population.* The operational difference between the local and the incomer population is the desire to stay or leave in a situation where such a choice was possible. For many locals, of course, the decision to stay may have initially been forced, but when in the early 2000s the situation in the ChAO changed, they had the opportunity to either confirm or reverse their decision.
- 2 *Upper – middle – lower echelon of the system.* I classify the “upper” group as officials of district and regional government bodies, enterprise managers, senior military officers, and so on. It is difficult to quantify this group, but I estimate that in ChAO it didn't exceed three or four hundred people. The “middle” group includes qualified kindergarten personnel, school teachers, doctors, cultural workers (“Houses of culture,” libraries, and others), senior employees of the village trading system,

and engineers – those who could be called the “village elite.” This group constituted an estimated 10 % of the population of the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug, or about fifteen thousand people in the early 1990s. The rest can be classified as the “lower echelon.”

Along these two axes, the population is clearly divided into groups. *Indigenous* representatives belonging to the “upper” and “middle” echelons sought to use the growing uncertainty to expand their sphere of activity and power. *Indigenous* representatives of the “lower” echelon initially attempted to exploit the emerging opportunities to escape the tiresome tutelage of the newcomers through creating Indigenous organizations, forming communities, and attempting to organize production and marketing. However, when it became clear that the economic crisis caused by the actions of the “upper echelons” would hinder the development of these initiatives, they quickly lost interest and joined the ranks of those who perceived the previous state of “stability” (simply put, stagnation) and dependence on the state as a blessing.

Representatives of the local population “middle echelon” generally perceived the increase in uncertainty as chance and tried to build something new, to some extent supported by the local residents of the “lower echelon.” The majority of people in the latter group – first of all, those whose decision to stay was forced – were passive and perceived the changes as a misfortune, that is, they behaved more like the indigenous inhabitants of the “lower echelon” (and later, as soon as it became possible, they left ChAO).

Finally, the *newcomers*, practically regardless of their “echelon,” treated the events as a disaster; virtually all of them left, having secured for themselves (to a greater or lesser extent, depending on their position in the power hierarchy) comfortable living conditions elsewhere.

This simple model describes not the behavior of individuals, but rather categories and types of possible behavior. Individuals could behave according to one scenario or another, contradict themselves in their assessments of events, and so on. Individual exceptions exist, for example when an Indigenous person belonging to the “lower” echelon unexpectedly behaves as if they belong to the “higher.”

Whether uncertainty was viewed as a problem or a resource, a threat or an opportunity, depends largely on which “echelon” of the system a person belonged to. If of the “higher” echelon, they were likely to view increased uncertainty as a threat and do everything possible to reduce it and restore stability. Those belonging to the “lower” echelon were much more likely to see growing uncertainty as an opportunity to change their (and others’) lives for the better.

In the ChAO, the “upper echelon of the system,” composed almost entirely of newcomers, found itself allied with the more passive portion of the population, which viewed the growing uncertainty as a threat and danger, not with the active portion, for whom uncertainty was an opportunity and a resource. Had the governor been someone who had been able to find support among the active portion of the population



Fig. 4 The first visit to Ungazik (Novoe Chaplino) from the American side, August 1990. The crowd coming to the square near the school; note the red slogans on the school building wall: Pioneers and Komsomol! Love your Soviet Motherland! – and below, in blue, “Welcome” in three languages, Yupik, Russian, and English (misspelled). Photo: Nikolai Vakhtin.



Fig. 5 Local people dance for the guests, Novoe Chaplino, 1990. Photo: Nikolai Vakhtin.

and seize the suddenly emerging opportunities, the fate of the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug in the 1990s could have been completely different.

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Figures

- 1 Settlers as a percentage of total population, 1887–2003. Source: Thompson 2008: 5.
- 2 Anadyr, the capital of the ChAO in 1980s. Photo from the family archive of Anastasiia Yarzutkina.
- 3 The village of Ungazik (Novoe Chaplino), 1990. Photo: Nikolai Vakhtin.
- 4 The first visit to Ungazik (Novoe Chaplino) from the American side, August 1990. The crowd coming to the square near the school; note the red slogans on

the school building wall: Pioneers and Komsomol! Love your Soviet Motherland! – and below, in blue, “Welcome” in three languages, Yupik, Russian, and English (misspelled). Photo: Nikolai Vakhtin.

- 5 Local people dance for the guests, Novoe Chaplino. 1990. Photo: Nikolai Vakhtin.