Discussions on the need of developing the North in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century

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Abstract. At the beginning of the 20th century, the vast territory of the Russian Empire beyond the Arctic Circle was practically uninhabited. It was necessary to make the northern rivers navigable, and to explore these territories for mineral deposits. Deputies of the State Duma proposed constructing a canal between the Baltic Sea and the White Sea. The development of the economy of Siberia was closely linked with the development of the Northern Sea Route. However, the monarchical government considered this region politically unreliable, and most of the Duma deputies underestimated the importance of the North for the development of the country. The authorities forbade the development of local governments in this region. For the minority of the Duma deputies, it seemed unjustified that significant funds for transport development were invested in the “national outskirts”: Poland and the Baltic provinces. Meanwhile, Norway actively used the weakness of Russia in the North. Norwegian cities were developing fast attracting Russian fishermen to sell their catch there. Due to insufficient funding and underestimation by the authorities, the development of Russia’s North received no adequate support. The construction of the port of Murmansk began too late, after the outbreak of World War I.

1. Introduction
The State Duma, the legislative body of the Russian Empire, worked throughout the entire 11 years (from 1906 to 1917). Although deputies were elected for a term of five years, the First Duma and the Second Duma were dissolved by Emperor Nicholas II before the expiration of their term (two and three months respectively after the commencement of work). The reason for this was a serious conflict between the branches of government.

After the adoption of the new electoral law on June 3, 1907, the elections to the Third Duma of the Russian Empire were held in accordance with it. The legislative body became more loyal to the government and the emperor. In Tauride Palace in St. Petersburg (the seat of the Duma), deputies were engaged in disputes on priority directions in the development of the state.

2. Issues of developing Russia’s northern territories
At the beginning of the 20th century, the vast territory of the Russian Empire beyond the Arctic Circle was practically uninhabited. The only major city and port in this territory was Arkhangelsk. In 1913, its population was more than 35,000 people.
Ivan Tomilov, a deputy of the State Duma of the Russian Empire, represented the Arkhangelsk province in the country’s legislative body and was a member of the Toilers Group (Trudoviki). Speaking at the meeting of the Duma on March 8, 1910, he paid special attention to the great complexity of the development of the North due to the lack of adequate communications. “As you know, everyone who has not been to the North knows that there is only one railway to Arkhangelsk; the waterways are in a poor state, with the exception of the Northern Dvina, which is considered the main river in the North and is of major economic importance for the Arkhangelsk province.” [1, p. 88]

At the beginning of the 20th century, even the large rivers of the Arkhangelsk province were not explored sufficiently though they were the most reliable and most inexpensive transport arteries. Tomilov, in his speech, indignantly noted that “nothing is said about surveys on the rivers of the northern coast and in general of the northern rivers; only 3,000 rubles was paid to explore the lower reaches of the Onega River. It is high time we had this river navigable.” [1, p. 90]

In their speeches the deputies raised such questions as the Northern Sea Route, navigation along the northern rivers, and the problems of trade in Siberia. The vast territories of the country with a very weak system of communications were a serious impediment to the development of many regions. Deputies from the North-Western provinces had to admit that “Siberia has a lot of bread; they cannot plow the land there anymore because there is no one to buy bread, but in our Arkhangelsk province we get bread from Germany. This is not an isolated fact from newspapers; these are facts that are often repeated.” [1, p. 92]

To solve all these issues the Duma members put forward various projects. As is known, the White Sea-Baltic Canal was built by prisoners of Stalinist camps during 1931-1933. However, the possibility of the construction of a canal was discussed in the State Duma of the Russian Empire. The deputies proposed clearing the Onega River to extend the waterway. “Up the Onega, there are rapids; clearing them will cost a lot, but this expenditure will pay off if the Onega is connected to the Mariinsk System. If we have Lake Lacha connected to Lake Kubenskoye (it is only a few miles away) the Baltic Sea will be connected to the White Sea via the Onega.” [1, p. 90-91]

One of the most important issues in the development of the infrastructure Russia’s North was its defense capability. “We should not overlook the fact that there are no roads in the North. Now foreign states have no need of the North and, militarily, the lack of roads is not dangerous, but enhancing the whole region cannot be done in a year, and when they say: ‘This is where we are going to’, it will be late.” [1, p. 91]

The development of the North required considerable human resources. Organization and control presupposed a great number of professional workers. But there was a lack of them. “In the North, there is absolutely no railway control. There are no agents for it; there are only officials in the town of Vytegra and that of Kargopol. Even if there are such agents, they travel around very little. We practically do not see them at all with the exception for the Northern Dvina area.” [1, p. 91]

The North of Russia never knew serfdom or landlordism. Among the local population, trade (including foreign trade) always played a special role. One of the most important and debatable issues in the Duma was the creation of zemstvos in the Arkhangelsk province. However, the tsarist government in every way hampered any initiatives aimed at this. It did not want excessive autonomy of the local population. The deputies noted with indignation in their speeches: “What is the point in the vast territory of the Arkhangelsk province if there are only 400 thousand people living compactly at the rivers? Even at the Fishing Congress people spoke in favor of introducing zemstvos in our country, while the Ministry of Internal Affairs holds the population in its tenacious hands and rejects this idea. I do not know why they are afraid of it. If they introduced zemstvos the population could be well managed.” [1, p. 92]

In March 1912, the Duma deputies discussed a possibility of active research and development of Russia’s northern territories. “There are areas that cannot develop their industry. We should develop not only the forest and fish industry but the mining industry as well. But who will do it if there is practically no possibility to go there and explore? There have been scanty exploration surveys, but
even they prove that this land has enormous deposits of all kinds of ores. The fact is there is no overland communication there, and the ports are in a poor state.” [2, p. 1117]

Deputies representing the Russian provinces were annoyed that significant funds intended for transport development were invested in the so-called “national suburbs”. “It is shocking that the Baltic region, especially Poland, where communication routes are already arranged, has received a lot of money and still receives it. No funds are allocated for the roads in the Russian North.” [1, p. 88]

In the 16th - 17th centuries, the bulk of Russia’s trade with Europe went through the North, particularly, through Arkhangelsk founded in 1584. Since 1713, Tsar Peter I, by his decrees, began to curtail trade through Arkhangelsk, in fact sacrificing its interests in favor of the new Baltic port, St. Petersburg. These restrictions were in operation for almost 50 years – until 1762, when Catherine II assumed the throne and abolished them.

It was clear that one port was not enough for such a vast territory. In the Duma debate, this issue was also raised. “Think of the Lapland Peninsula, the shores of the Barents Sea or the Arctic Ocean in general. What port was built there? The only port you know is Arkhangelsk, and now they are ensuring free passage for vessels with a draft of 24 feet. This is the only port there, and other ports are in a state of nature.”[2, p. 1117]

The lack of a transportation system made mining virtually impossible. “Along the Murman coast, ore is mined near Norway, and there are mines on our side of the border. But there are no ways to our ports so that you can go and see what is there.” [2, p. 1117]

For supporters of the development of the Russian North, the main thesis was that this region would be profitable for the country in the future. “It is true, if there is such an attitude towards the North, it will sleep. After all, it influences the local population. The local population is only somehow making its way earning for their living. The North has never asked you for such help, and if you arrange it, it will give you only profit, and nothing else.” [2, p. 1122]

In St. Petersburg, they generally assumed that the problems of the development of the North were caused by difficult climatic conditions. But examples of its development by Russia’s neighboring countries suggested the opposite. The deputies of the Duma understood why Norwegians, who began to explore these areas later than Russian subjects, achieved such impressive results. “Look at Norway (a country near our border), at the city of Varda. When I was driving along the shore of the Arctic Ocean within the Russian domain, it seemed to me that nothing could be done here – wildness and nothing else. But as soon as the border of Norway came into view, you could see the difference: a Norwegian small fishing village near our border has turned into a comfortable town in a short time. There is electric light and the telephone – in a word, a full cultural life. And it already seems warm, and you can live there. Everything is arranged.” [2, p. 1117]

The answer to the question “Why did we not do it?” was as follows. “And who arranged it? The Norwegian city is built with our Russian money because our ports and fishing industry are not arranged and, as a result, our capitalists go to Norway where they bring their ships to anchor and sell fish. With our money, the Norwegians have built such a big city, have become rich, and cash in on it.” [2, p. 1117-1118]

The old port in Arkhangelsk could somehow cope with the tasks assigned to it, but at the beginning of the 20th century this was clearly not enough. “We should, finally, create favorable conditions to improve the ports. Now it is impossible for a ship with a large tonnage and with a big draft to enter a cove. There is no place to anchor. How can life develop there?” [2, p. 1118]

Considering the discussions in the Duma on the development of communication lines in the North, on the development of this region, it should be noted that these issues were lobbied very weakly. On the one hand, the monarchical government considered this region politically unreliable; on the other hand, most of the Duma deputies underestimated the importance of the North for the development of the country. This can explain the regular underfunding of most projects. One of the few supporters of the development of the North, deputy Tomilov said with indignation: “What I am talking about this region (and I cannot keep silent) is that the Government has not spent a ruble on it. It was proposed to
dole out only 1,370,000 rubles in five years to improve only the port of Arkhangelsk. Is such an attitude of the Government to this region acceptable?” [2, p. 1118]

3. The North of Russia from a military and international point of view

The argument about the need for the development of the northern regions of Russia was based not only on the possibility of obtaining additional profit on it. The issue of defense was also very important. “We have turned our back to the North as well as other regions... I am appealing to the Government: Do not be afraid to improve this region. It has been our native area, it is our stronghold, and you ignore it. Arrange what is possible for it, and you will never lose it.” [2, p. 1121]

There is no doubt if local initiatives had been presented and supported by the capital, the development of the North would have gone at a much faster pace.

Plans for a port city in the Arctic Circle, on the Kola Peninsula, appeared in the 1870s. The creation of such a city was associated with the desire of Russia to get access to the Arctic Ocean through the ice-free bay. But only in 1912 Russia became active in exploration of a suitable place for its location. The development of the region was hampered by the absence of an adequate transportation system. One of the deputies of the Duma noted: “As for the Murmansk Shipping Company, I have to say that there should be two or three ship voyages a week, but there is only one passenger voyage and one cargo ship voyage. These ships do not perform what they are supposed to. We have to postpone the transportation of goods and passengers because the shipping company is not able to cope with it.” [2, p. 3443]

For centuries, the Pomors inhabiting the Russian North used to fish in traditional ways. However, the realities of the 20th century were destroying this patriarchal structure. Deputy Tomilov noted that “the main reason for this decline is that, as I have already noted, there is no proper steam fishing fleet. As for Norwegians, they have steamboats. The Ministry of Transportation should pay attention to the lack of steamboats.” [2, p. 3443]

But fishermen could not afford to buy new boats. Firstly, it was very expensive, and secondly, such vessels were not built in the North of Russia. Consequently, in the opinion of the Duma deputies, it was necessary to organize financial support for the local population.

Local entrepreneurs would have been content with any option. The main thing was that the Russian Government did not fully realize the need for the development of this region. In 1912, deputies spoke of this as follows. “If it is necessary to develop shipbuilding in that region, then it should be organized in such a way that the coastal companies work in an artisanal way; they are able to do this, and this is more acceptable. It is necessary to provide duty free planks, to grant loans for the purchase of materials for construction as well as for the purchase of steam engines.

If this is unacceptable, then we can recommend that the Government build a state-owned shipbuilding plant there, open its shipyard and supply the industrialists with ready-made ships. In Norway, they have both methods; only we have nothing.” [2, p. 3443]

It cannot be said that Russia did not understand the importance of developing trade and fisheries in the North or did not see the danger of activating foreign competitors. However, a certain isolation of the ministries from the realities of local life brought to naught all the positive undertakings. The local shipbuilding support program had been operating for eight years by that time, but deputies rightly noted that “the Ministry of Finance may indicate that there is a law from May 24, 1904, designed to assist seamen in building boats. But the Ministry does not have the slightest idea that the credit in question is a merchant credit, because credits are given after the boat is built, when it is launched; therefore, only a wealthy person can build a boat.” [2, p. 3444]

Analyzing the speeches of the Duma deputies, it seems that some problems persisted for more than 100 years; particularly, the Norwegian ports provided more favorable terms to Russian sailors. “And when a boat is built, a seaman, having got the credit, goes to Norway for buying fish. Apparently, it ruins our fisheries. It brings nothing but harm. They will say that it helps the industry. Fine. But, in any case, the purpose of the credit is different.” [2, p. 3444]
Ivan Tomilov offered Russian officials to familiarize themselves with the neighboring countries’ experience of investing in enterprises. “We’d better learn from the Norwegian experience. Indeed, Norway, as a neighboring country, started to learn from us, but now they keep ahead of us, and we have to learn from them; and it is worth learning.” [2, p. 3445]

Representatives of the left factions believed that one of the main obstacles to the development of the North was the Russian monarchic system (although Norway was also a kingdom). But in Norway, there was a completely different model of interaction between the legislative and executive branches of the government. “In Norway, it is the government that is responsible for the representation of the people, and the Storting takes account of the people’s needs. And now, thanks to the actions of both the government and the Storting, the fishing fleet and merchant navy have achieved higher standards in Norway, and, consequently, this has improved the entire fishery population.” [2, p. 3445]

The deputies considered the successful experience of Russia’s neighbors that managed to turn extensive regions into an important source of income as one of the reasons for the need to develop the transport system. “The Norwegian government now sees fisheries as the main source of revenue. If Norway had not relied on fishing, it would not have risked separating from Sweden. And our Government, in an irresponsible way, completely violates people’s needs; it has not paid attention to this issue until now. It is not right; the Ministry of Finance should do something to change the situation, otherwise the entire venture will perish completely.” [2, p. 3445]

Among the deputies of the State Duma, there was a man with practical experience of polar research expeditions. It was Stepan Vostrotin, a Siberian public figure, a cadet, a polar explorer, a Yenisei province deputy of the Third and the Fourth State Duma. As early as 1894, Vostrotin, together with Captain Wiggins, sailed from Newcastle (United Kingdom) to the town of Yeniseisk across the Kara Sea. In 1902, Vostrotin published his well-known book The Northern Sea Route and the Chelyabinsk Tariff Reversal as a Result of Colonization of Siberia [3], where he showed, providing a large amount of factual material, that the overestimated tariffs were hidden behind a flimsy excuse – “protection from foreign influence”, and hindered the development of the Russian East and Russia as a whole.

Thus, as a Siberian entrepreneur, Vostrotin was well aware of the importance of the Northern Sea Route. In his speeches in the Duma, he somewhat idealized the past. “Just 300 years ago, our ancestors used this water path on a grand scale. It greatly facilitated commercial intercourse. But at the request of the Tobolsk voyevodas, who were afraid of losing duties, this sea route was closed under the penalty of death, even impalement, for anyone who would sail this sea route.

All trade relations died down; even the belief in the possibility of sailing this sea route had been lost until foreigners revived our hopes in the 1870s.” [2, p. 3463 - 3464]

The polar researcher had a very positive attitude towards cooperation and trade with foreign countries. Especially as an entrepreneur, he was interested in the development of trade in the Yenisei area.

4. Russia’s North and the Peter Stolypin resettlement reform
The impetus for the revival of the Northern Sea Route was the Stolypin resettlement reform. According to the memoirs of Ivan Tkhorzhevsky, assistant to the head of the Resettlement Department, “the sovereign power of great Russia was to be pulled tight – and with rails! And it was not enough to have the Siberian railway to achieve this vital goal. After all, it was the only railway the resettlement depended on!

I remember how the Resettlement Department, after transferring it from the Ministry of Internal Affairs to the Ministry of Agriculture, half in jest, half seriously begged to transfer it to the Ministry of Transportation.” [4]

It is clear that in addition to the development of the railway, it was necessary to use other ways of transportation of passengers and goods. Duma deputies noted that “the urgent need to restore the northern route was especially put forward by representatives of the Department of Land Management and Agriculture. They said that colonization and resettlement in Siberia were stuck in difficult
economic conditions because of the impossibility of selling our agricultural and other bulky and low-value products to foreign markets.” [2, p. 3449]

Siberian industrialists were attracted by profits that they expected to reap from European trade. A representative of the Forest Department in the State Duma fully consolidated with them. “Forests in the Yenisei province abound with great pine, spruce and cedar trees. They could sell and meet competition in the London market, but they have no access there because these forests are mainly located north of the Siberian railway and, thus, cannot get into the domestic market. The only way for them will open only with the establishment of a cheap sea route to the European markets.” [2, p. 3449]

Since it was practically impossible to export valuable timber, it was destroyed on the spot. “The Resettlement Department does not know what to do with the forests in the Yenisei province. To expand the area for colonization, loans for uprooting forests are requested, measures are even being taken to burn out these forests.” [2, p. 3449]

In addition, it was noted that in the lower reaches of the Yenisei River there were large deposits of coal and its properties and characteristics were not inferior to Welsh coal. The deposits of graphite were huge to come onto the Russian domestic market and thus drive foreign coal from the market.

The same representatives of the Department of Land Management and Agriculture pointed that the lower reaches of the northern rivers were rich in fish, but due to the lack of good salt and poor Siberian market, these resources were practically unexploited and new products were not brought to domestic market. “Establishing a cheap route will not only lower the price of salt but will open up the possibility of selling fish products to a wider foreign and domestic market. Arkhangelsk, which currently imports foreign fish, could get it from the lower reaches of our rivers.” [2, p. 3449]

Thus, the resettlement policy was directly associated with the development of the Northern Sea Route. “All measures should be taken in order to transport and deliver agricultural products to possible locations and to encourage both manufacturing and mining industry in the province. The latter could use a surplus of these agricultural products and provide the population with regular income.” [2, p. 3455]

Not only the Soviet Union was fixated on gigantomania. In Tsarist Russia, they also discussed various projects of turning the course of a river or connecting European and Asian waterways with canals. At the end of the 19th century the Ob–Yenisei Canal was built. It took eight years to build this relatively small canal and it cost the treasury about 3 million rubles in silver. (The Canal is 8 kilometers long; the system of shallow tributaries of the Yenisei and the Ob is more than 200 km. Since the middle of the 20th century the canal was abandoned.)

The Saratov province cadet Anatoly Dobrovolsky, a deputy of the Third and the Fourth State Duma of the Russian Empire from, in 1911-1917 taught a course on railroading at St. Petersburg Polytechnic Institute. He was a member of the Transport Commission. Dobrovolsky understood that the Northern Sea Route could function successfully if it was connected to the central part of the country by a well-organized railway service. He noted that “the railway connecting our network with Arkhangelsk, the only port for foreign relations, remains as it was before the war, i.e., a very weak narrow-gauge line. To our question why this route has not yet been improved, the Ministry of Transportation responded that there was no need for improvement at first and that therefore the Ministry initially assumed to use various measures should the need arise.” [5]

5. The Construction of the Murmansk Railway
On February 10, 1915 the Government decided to allocate the first loan for the construction of the Murmansk railway. Soon, works of enormous scale unfolded throughout its route [6].

Not only civilian workers (including foreigners, mostly Chinese workers), but also prisoners of war were used to lay the railroad tracks [7]. These works raised serious concerns in Sweden. There appeared suspicions that Russia was going to drive the railroad through the territory of Sweden to the Norwegian Sea. The vague statements of the Russian authorities about the termination of the railway under construction promoted fear [8, p. 156].
By all available means (political, economic, and diplomatic), the Russian Empire tried to attract the Entente Powers to cooperate in the construction of this railway. Britain and France provided financial assistance as well as construction materials and equipment. However, the activities of the Allies were not always successful. An example of this is the notorious contract to lay a 120 verst railroad track between the town of Kandalaksha and that of Kola (about 130 kilometers). It was given to a group of English businessmen headed by Lord Austin French [9].

By the beginning of 1916, the construction of the Murmansk railway employed about 70 thousand people [8, p. 159]. The exceptionally harsh living conditions led to high mortality rates. People died from various diseases, primarily from scurvy. The Naval Minister, Ivan Grigorovich, described his impression of this construction site in the following way. “This trip made a disgusting impression on me. It is evident that all the complaints that reached me were true. Workers and prisoners working on the railroad are poorly supplied; there is little care for them” [10].

Only by the end of 1916, this problem had been partially solved. This was due largely to the harsh realities of World War I. All measures aimed at improving and developing the transport system of the Russian Empire in the North lagged behind. The country was on the verge of a global crisis and the 1917 revolution. Thus, the Northern Sea Route started working only after the Bolsheviks came to power.

6. Conclusion
Discussions about the issues and possibilities of developing the northern regions of Russia were held in the Third and the Fourth State Duma of the Russian Empire. On the one hand, the monarchical government considered this region politically unreliable, on the other hand, most of the Duma deputies underestimated the importance of the North for the development of the country. The authorities also forbade the development of local governments in this region. Issues related to the development of the North were raised by a very small number of deputies. Among them were, particularly, representatives of the Arkhangelsk province and Siberia. They spoke about the lack of funding and support from the state for the development of railways and waterways, and the absence of serious geological studies. The lack of roads made this region dependent on the supply of food stuff and, above all, bread from abroad.

Duma deputies who recognized the importance of developing the North found it revolting that significant funds for transport development were invested in the “national outskirts”: Poland and the Baltic provinces.

In the State Duma, they proposed to start the construction of a canal between the Baltic Sea and the White Sea. But this was not done even at the project level. Russia’s neighbors, particularly, Norway, actively used the weakness of Russia in the North. Norwegian cities were actively developing, attracting Russian fishermen who sold their catch there.

The question of international cooperation and competition in the northern region caused disputes among the deputies. Serious changes began to occur there only after the beginning of World War I. By 1916, the construction of the railway to Murmansk was completed. This made it possible for Russia to receive help from its allies, Britain and France. But it was too late.

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