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Bolotova, Alla

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### 3 Leaving or staying?

## Youth agency and the liveability of industrial towns in the Russian Arctic

*Alla Bolotova*

All that surrounds us is the mining enterprise.  
[Всё, что нас окружает – это ГОК].

(female, 32, Revda)

#### Introduction

All my friends have a similar opinion: we should get out of here. However, the opportunity to leave is a different thing. The desire to leave is one thing, and the possibility to leave is another thing.

(male, 29, Kirovsk)

These words were said to me by a young miner in a single-industry town in the Russian Arctic. In northern industrial communities, most young people ponder how to leave their hometowns (Vakhtin and Dudeck 2020). The idea that youth must migrate to big cities for a successful life is not confined to the Arctic, however. In many areas around the world, the massive outmigration of young people from peripheral communities has become commonplace and normalized (e.g., Corbett 2007; Leibert 2016; Farrugia 2014). Across the Arctic, the large-scale outmigration of youth is a reality not just in Russia, but across all circumpolar countries. In the industrialized Russian Arctic, the expectation that young people will move away after finishing school is widespread even in towns with economically profitable and stable working enterprises. This outmigration of local youth is widely supported by all generations, it is simply in the air: parents, relatives, schoolteachers, older friends all repeat the narrative.<sup>1</sup> This widespread orientation to outmigration is connected to the history of Soviet industrial towns in the North that were settled and populated by work migrants from all over the Soviet Union. Consequently, a “culture of migration” endures in the public discourse that urges young people to move away (Ali 2007; Horváth 2008, see Komu and Adams, this volume).

There are two main reasons usually cited with regard to youth outmigration: the lack of job opportunities and limited possibilities for education (Stockdale 2002). These factors are also important in northern mono-industrial towns, though the main problem in these towns is not a shortage of jobs, but, rather, a small variety of available choices. Nevertheless, as was

expressed by the mining worker cited at the beginning of this chapter, not all young people who want to leave have an opportunity to do so, and even some of those who have left might return to their hometowns later, after living elsewhere for a period of time. Every young “stayer” has wrestled with the decision to stay or to leave their northern hometown multiple times over their life course and are adept at dealing with the complexities of leaving/staying within the local “culture of migration”. While the amount of research on outmigration and migrants is rather large, the staying process and agency of “stayers” are still understudied (Schewel 2020). In the migration discourse, staying is often portrayed negatively, being associated with passivity, traditional values and expectations (Stockdale and Haartsen 2018).

The aim of this chapter is to analyze the migratory decisions, life choices and agency of stayers and returners, exploring them in the contexts of specific circumstances, structural constraints and opportunities in single-industry towns in the Russian Arctic. The chapter asks the following question: what are the historical roots and current reasons for the “orientation toward leaving” common among the young generation in the urbanized Russian Arctic? What kind of choices do stayers make when they decide to stay or to return to their hometowns, and how do processes at the town’s main enterprises (town-forming companies, see Adams et al., this volume) influence these decisions? The contribution focuses, in particular, on the agency of stayers and explores staying as a process, showing it through a series of ethnographic vignettes on the following issues: gendered work in mining; self-employed entrepreneurship; and urban activism.

This chapter is based on two months of ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted for the WOLLIE research project in several mono-industrial towns in the Murmansk Region,<sup>2</sup> as well as on my previous long-term fieldworks in the region.<sup>3</sup> These towns are all connected to stable mining industries and situated next to deposits of different mineral resources: iron, apatite, and rare earth minerals. The population in these towns varies from 7,900 people in Revda to 26,206 people in Kirovsk (Rosstat 2020), and all the cities studied have experienced a high level of outmigration in recent decades (Monogoroda Arkticheskoi zony RF 2016). The corpus of interviews ( $n = 85$ ) consists of unstructured in-depth interviews with young people aged between 18 and 35,<sup>4</sup> supplemented by interviews with representatives of local administrations, the town-forming companies and other important community institutions. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. In order to protect the privacy of interviewees I changed the names of most of the participants, with the exception of two urban activists who allowed me to mention their names in publications (Nastya and Valera, who appear in the section “Activism and liveability in single-industry towns”).

### **Peripheralization and agency of youth in declining communities**

Massive outmigration of youth from the shrinking industrial towns in the Russian Arctic is linked with the global phenomenon of peripheralization,

which is especially strong in circumpolar contexts (Heleniak and Bogoyavlensky 2015; Heleniak 1999; Bjarnason and Thorlindsson 2006; Rasmussen 2007; Martin 2009). Uneven spatial development is one of the most urgent contemporary global challenges (Smith 1984; Brenner 2004, 2019). Due to peripheralization and economic polarization, the number of spatially disadvantaged localities continues to increase (Kühn 2015; Haase et al. 2014; Martinez-Fernandez et al. 2012; Weaver et al. 2016). Declining industrial communities exist in various places in Russia and former Soviet republics (e.g., see Pelkmans 2013), as well as in other countries around the world (e.g., Lansbury and Breakspear 1995; Robertson 2006). Declining cities not only lose their population, but also experience a decrease in investments and state support and service cutbacks, which can cause a cycle of decay. The social development of cities in decline is characterized by accelerated ageing and the loss of the working-age and better-educated population; the so-called “brain drain” (Haase et al. 2014). Public infrastructure, such as schools, health services, or public transport, is often reduced so as to cut the costs of maintenance. Moreover, urban shrinkage causes material consequences (e.g., abandonment and vacancy, deteriorated buildings, spatial marginalization) that diminish community liveability and foster a sense of resignation and powerlessness (Ringel 2018; Mah 2012).

Declining peripheral cities have a rather negative image in public discourse (Kinder 2016; Béal et al. 2017). In the media, shrinking cities are usually portrayed as “problematic” sites with a high level of deprivation that, in extreme cases, leads to a stigma of “dying cities”: places without resources inhabited by deprived people or the “losers of society” who cannot escape (Bernt and Rink 2010). This stigmatization influences the self-perception and self-respect of these localities.<sup>5</sup> In short, material losses in such communities are almost always accompanied by a loss of dignity and self-worth.

As result, in declining towns, many residents of different ages view the possibility to move out positively. As noted above, employment deficits and lack of education are the most powerful driving forces pulling youth away. However, it is important to look beyond these structural constraints and address questions of youth agency in making migratory choices. Kerilyn Schewel emphasizes a mobility bias in research, arguing that migration theories neglect the countervailing structural and personal forces that restrict or resist “drivers” of migration and lead to different immobility outcomes (Schewel, 2020). There is an increasing trend in migration research to focus on non-migrants, or these who stay put (Gray 2011; Fernandez-Carro and Evandrou 2014; Hjalm 2014; Mata-Codesal 2015; Preece 2018). These researchers are aiming to rethink immobility and see staying as an active process, in which stayers are considered not as passive observers of their fates, but as active participants (Stockdale and Haartsen 2018).

The process of staying is as nuanced and diverse as the process of migrating and the decision to stay is made multiple times over an individual’s life course (Hjalm 2014; Stockdale and Haartsen 2018). This decision is made under a particular combination of structural influences on the agency of

actors who may respond to the same forces in different ways. The processes, experiences and perceptions of staying depend largely on the degree of (in)voluntariness. Immobility can be experienced either as a burden or as an achievement (Mata-Codesal 2015). Therefore, researchers make a distinction between immobility as a nuanced choice (“stillness”) versus a product of constraints (“stuckness”) (Cresswell 2012). An involuntary immobile is a person who would like to move but lacks the ability and means to do so, and therefore feels stuck or left behind (Carling 2002; Stockdale and Haartsen 2018). Desired immobility is a consequence of conscious decisions of individuals to attach themselves to places. This choice is based on a complex combination of social, emotional and material factors (Hjalm 2014; Mata-Codesal 2015).<sup>6</sup> However, agency still exists in involuntary immobility. Saba Mahmood defines agency as a capacity for action that is created and enabled by relations of subordination (Mahmood 2001). Here I explore the agency of stayers in the multiple ways in which young people make choices about life, choosing different paths and shaping their life course trajectories in particular contexts. Institutional regulations, structural opportunities and constraints, individual (and family) agency, and emotions are related and intertwined, influencing the way young adults take control of their lives (Evans 2002, 2007).

Despite a large number of involuntary immobile young people in declining peripheral communities, there are also young people who make a conscious choice to stay and who have become activists in the urban life of their cities. These active young citizens are involved in various projects intended to create new initiatives to improve the city’s liveability. In general, in each marginalized peripheral city, there are some people actively struggling with abandonment, the loss of local services and facilities and trying to create various local initiatives to make the cities more viable (Corcoran 2002). Such bottom-up initiatives can create jobs, albeit usually in small numbers, improve physical space, stabilize the sense of community, and bring spirit and hope to the communities.

In studies of urban liveability, emphasis is often put on the economic aspects, examining urban life within the narrow framework of the city’s physical dimensions, particularly infrastructure, urban services and economic growth, but paying less attention to local cultures, community bonds and the associational life of communities (Ho and Douglass 2008; Kong 2009). Studying urban initiatives of youth in declining northern cities, I follow researchers who argue that liveability should not be reduced solely to the material or economic wealth of cities (Ho and Douglass 2008) and that more attention should be paid to the social relations, community life and human agency needed to make a city liveable for different social groups, including youth.

### **Soviet single-industry towns in the Arctic and their post-Soviet transformations**

How did a local “culture of migration” (see Komu and Adams, this volume) form in northern industrial towns? Research shows that individual migration

decisions are always deeply rooted in local contexts and practices. To understand the historical roots of the “orientation toward leaving” common for young people, I briefly explore how the towns were built from scratch during the Soviet period and how they have changed over time.

Before the Soviet period, the Russian Arctic was scarcely populated. Today, it boasts the most industrialized and urbanized polar territory in the world, containing 72% of the circumpolar Arctic population (Rasmussen 2011). During Soviet industrialization, numerous new mining towns were built from the ground up near rich deposits of valuable mineral resources. In the Murmansk Region, where this study was conducted, the first new industrial cities were founded in the 1930s and, to a large extent, they were built by forced workers: Gulag prisoners and exiled peasants (Shashkov 2004; Bolotova and Stammler 2010; Bolotova 2014). After the death of Stalin and the dissolution of the Gulag system, even more new cities were built; however, they were populated by voluntary migrants from all over the Soviet Union, attracted to the North by material benefits.

During the second (voluntary) wave of industrialization, northern single-industry towns became prosperous multi-ethnic communities of work migrants in which the town-forming company was the “owner” of the city and structured practically all community institutions, controlling not only industrial production but all other spheres of life. Even housing, health care, sport, and culture functioned as provisions of the enterprise. In other words, work constituted the whole life of individuals and also took the central social position in urban life of the communities.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, all northern mining communities went through drastic changes caused by the radical social and economic transformations occurring across Russia. At this time, the state subsidies to northern single-industry towns were reduced significantly. All communities faced the radical modernization of their local industrial enterprises and the large-scale restructuring of their economic and social spheres (Pilyasov 2013, p. 3). In the Murmansk Region, most town-forming companies were privatized and came under the control of large corporations. In some cases, the owners of the main enterprise have changed on several occasions. This radical change from prosperity and stability to post-Soviet uncertainty and crisis in many northern industrial towns caused large-scale outmigration and downsizing, including the case study cities in the Murmansk Region. Between 1989 and 2019, for example, the population of Kirovsk decreased by 39.8%; Revda by 42.5%; and Kovdor by 46%.<sup>7</sup>

Today the town-forming mining companies are mostly managed from the outside: the top managers who make decisions usually reside in other places and visit these towns only occasionally; consequently, they do not have personal connections to the localities. In contrast to the initial Soviet-era development of company towns in which social and cultural life was integrated with economic development, the post-Soviet enterprises have become less active in the local community life. The large companies that succeeded the former state enterprises routinely try to minimize their social burdens and

avoid additional expenses. There have been several stages of restructuring and neoliberal reorganization of local enterprises aimed at increasing productivity and reducing operational costs through the implementation of outsourcing and subcontracting strategies. This has led to a decrease in social benefits and lower salaries for workers (Suutarinen, 2015). The restructuring has also entailed a radical reduction in the numbers of workers since now the efficient operation of mines needs less workforce than before, because of the automation of various processes and changes in mining technologies. For example, in Kirovsk the Apatit company fired more than 2,000 employees in 2013 and 3,000 more in 2014. The fired workers were either moved out of the company into subcontracting companies, retired or migrated to other places. As a result, the total number of the company's employees dropped from 11,600 in 2012 to 7,100 by the beginning of 2015 (Didyk 2015, p. 4). This continuous restructuring has led to further degradation in the employment conditions of mining workers. Workforce reduction tendencies influence most the weakest groups in the local communities. Young people are especially vulnerable to the changes, because of their lower qualifications at the start of their working life. Working pensioners and young women are also especially in danger under these conditions of ongoing neoliberal "optimizations and restructuring", due to the age and pregnancy discrimination practiced by employers.

Despite the successful internationalization of the mining enterprises, these single-industry towns built during the Soviet period are still very much rooted in the Soviet past. This rooting continues to shape the lives of contemporary youth and influences their migration decisions and life choices.

### **Staying or leaving?**

Young people living in northern industrial cities routinely face the question of whether to stay or leave many times throughout their lives, especially at major turning points of their biographies, e.g., finishing schools, getting married, becoming parents. At these life points, people frequently and ubiquitously discuss ideas and plans to move out—from casual conversations in the streets and bars to more serious conversations with friends and family. Those who have no plan to leave at least have to wrestle with the idea of moving elsewhere in the future. This is exacerbated because many of the young people in northern industrial cities grow up in highly mobile families of former work migrants who regularly travel outside their home regions since people working in the North have rather long vacations.<sup>8</sup> As a result, many northern residents develop attachment and connections to both their northern homes and their regions of origin (Liarskaia et al. 2020; Bolotova et al. 2017). In other words, most young people who grow up in the North are used to travel and are mobile from early childhood. Furthermore, it is common for northern youth to encounter many people from older cohorts who have left but return to visit. Consequently, their aspirations for the future are formed in an environment in which outmigration and mobility constitute important parts

of their life worlds. A high level of spatial mobility from an early age and exposure to a “culture of migration” prepares young people in the northern towns for outmigration.

However, outmigration is rarely an individual choice. Rather, it is a shared decision, formed in the local social worlds of young people, where moving out is largely supported by older generations. In many cases, the future outmigration of a young person is planned and prepared in advance by older members of the family. Such a paternalistic approach to youth is relatively common in Russia, and this decision is not primarily an economic choice for securing the parents’ future in old age, but more a result of strong family ties. Parents of school-aged children typically already try to buy apartments for kids in their future places of education, planning their relocation in advance.

There is a massive purchase of apartments for children here. Everyone wants to go somewhere, mostly to St. Petersburg. [...] I have many acquaintances, whose children are only ten years old, but they already bought an apartment in St. Petersburg. One of my friends has two kids, the first is six years old, the second just turned one, and she already bought an apartment in St. Petersburg, and they are already saving money for the second apartment.

(female, 35, Kovdor)

After finishing school, young people in northern industrial cities are faced by a lack of post-school educational opportunities in their hometowns. The existing options of post-secondary education in northern towns provide a very narrow choice of professions, the majority of which are related to mining. In fact, the orientation to mining starts even in primary school education, because many town-forming mining companies actively support mining-oriented education in the towns where they operate. For example, in Kirovsk and Apatity the town-forming company Apatit (belongs to the PhosAgro chemical holding company) sponsors specialized education and training through their so-called PhosAgro classes, which provide privileged educational conditions for children who choose to study in these classes. Employing a variety of benefits, the company stimulates children to study mining-related subjects, such as chemistry, math, physics and computer science, and pushes them to enter technical universities to obtain professions that are in demand at the company. Such narrow specialization is not interesting for many of today’s young people, so youth with interests other than mining often seek opportunities in other places.

The spectrum of jobs available in northern cities is also very limited and often restricted to mining. Young women have especially limited job chances since mining in Russia is traditionally a male-dominated industry with a masculine occupational culture. Job opportunities for young women are available mostly in traditionally female-dominated sectors, such as different types of services, healthcare, administration or education. Gender differences in the labour market significantly influence the life trajectories of young women



who leave in larger numbers than men. “There are no big prospects in our city. All the girls either go to work in shops or kindergartens. All other spheres are occupied” (female, 16, Revda).

Despite the general importance of the economic drivers of outmigration, there are also other factors beyond economic rationalities that influence young people’s life choices. Youth living in northern industrial towns often complain about a lack of recreational opportunities in hometowns, boredom,<sup>9</sup> and the Soviet appearance of urban space in their localities: “Of course all my friends are going to leave! It is too boring here. And there are no good cafes and museums as in St. Petersburg” (female, 17, Kovdor). In some localities, the material decay of the infrastructure and the urban environment contributes to the negative image of their home localities in the eyes of young people. They are lured by big cities and are sensitive to the stigma of declining cities common in the public discourse. “All that we want is to go to St. Petersburg. We want to try something new, and if we do not succeed, we will return here” (female, 15, Kirovsk). In short, the future is largely perceived to be elsewhere, not in the hometown.

The majority of young northerners have a definite answer on the question of whether they will leave or stay after they graduate from schools: “we should get out of here”. In addition to the lack of jobs and educational opportunities, other factors also have a significant influence on young people, e.g., the attraction of big cities, the negative images of declining cities, a “culture of migration” and their parents’ opinions. This begs the question of why some young people, who are also embedded in the northern “culture of migration”, do *not* migrate in this age of pervasive migration or put off their relocation to the distant future? Staying also requires agency and this is a complicated decision made many times in the life course of individuals. Below I explore empirically the varying lived experiences of immobility, considering a variety of situations and paths of stayers, from involuntary immobility (Carling 2002), or “stuckness” (Cresswell 2012), to conscious decisions that the North will be their place of residence and local activism.

### **Stuckness: “*Nothing can save this place!*”**

Involuntary immobility is the situation in which an individual wants to move, but lacks the ability and/or means to accomplish this relocation. In marginalized and disadvantaged communities, many young people express a desire to leave; however, many of them cannot organize the move and are kept put by various structural constraints. The story of Sergej from Revda (21) is a good example of a person who got “stuck” in his hometown. He works at the local prison as a dog handler. Sergej does not like his job, which he describes as emotionally difficult and physically hard due to the long shifts. For a long time, Sergej has been dreaming of moving out of Revda:

I do not like it here because there is nothing to do in Revda. There are two things: nothing to do in Revda and I am not happy with the job. If

Revda would suit me, then I would work there, okay. But these two factors! And in the end, it is very sad here, ideally, I want to leave [...].

At the same time, Sergej is very attracted by the local natural environments, often spending time in the nearest mountains, but this does not reconcile him with his situation:

Nature is very beautiful here, I like it a lot. I do not cease to admire the landscapes of Revda and the Murmansk Region in general. There are very few such settlements where you could leave your house and see two mountains right in front of you. This, of course, is beautiful, and the air here is excellent, but it only makes up for a bit that there is nothing to do at all.

Most of Sergej's close friends have already left, either to Murmansk (the region's major city) or to St. Petersburg: "Literally all my peers are gone now, only a few stayed here. You enter into such a situation that you make good friends with the current 11th-grade school graduates, but very soon they will also leave." Sergej tries to plan his future move; however, he does not have any professional education because he started to work immediately after he served his mandatory term in the army. This lack of education limits his work opportunities:

I do not want to work at our mining enterprise. There you can work either on the surface or in the underground mine, but in the underground, you can die. Once every couple of years, an incident occurs that someone was crushed there or the stone plate fell, or gas exploded, so it is really very dangerous there. And if you work on the surface, the salary is very low. The compromise is to work at the grocery store, where salaries are a bit higher. And that's all, I don't know where else I could go here without education.

In addition, Sergej's parents would find it difficult to support his further education and relocation, and his salary is insufficient to cover anything other than basic living costs. He feels "left behind" and stuck in his hometown because of the high level of youth outmigration. Despite all these difficulties, Sergej still hopes to leave one day. He is thinking about how to get a professional education in the future. He fosters active connections with his old friends who have already moved, exploring different options and opportunities for relocation, and thereby trying to increase his chances to migrate.

### **Working in mining as a life choice**

An orientation toward mining is very common in mining towns, especially among the male population. Many young people simply follow the familiar life strategies of their parents; while others use the numerous mining-related

educational and career opportunities provided by town-forming companies. Some people might still consider outmigration as a possible choice for the future but chose to stay for their current life stage. “Frankly speaking, I would actually go to St. Petersburg, if I had something there: some kind of ‘airbag’, like an apartment, or for example, good work with a high salary. To go there having nothing is not for me. Here I have a good job, a salary, an apartment. To throw away all of this and leave for somewhere else—no, of course not” (mining worker, 24, Kirovsk/Apatity). Working in mining and staying in hometowns provides young people with a kind of stability and standard of living that they would be unable to maintain in big cities.

However, this kind of immobility can also be viewed as temporary. For example, changes in the town-forming companies might significantly influence the life plans of young people and push them towards outmigration. In this case, moving is a direct reaction to reorganization processes at the company: “The policy of the [town-forming] company has become quite inadequate. [...] Highly qualified people are leaving, I don’t know where, they are just leaving. Some of them go to work at subcontracting companies, others just leave the city” (male, mining worker, 29, Kirovsk). This growing precarity, instability and insecurity at the workplace influences young people when they make decisions to leave or to stay.

### **Women’s paths in mining cities**

Mining in Russia is still a very male-dominated industry, which causes particular difficulties for young women seeking employment in cities dominated by extractive industries. Many young women experience gender discrimination, such as when hiring managers in mining companies give preference to male candidates, even if the female applicants have higher qualifications. The emphasis on mining at schools also stimulates young girls with other interests to relocate to receive a broader education and subsequently more possibilities.

I plan to go to St. Petersburg to study there and I will stay there if it will be possible thereafter. I think there are not many opportunities in our town. All opportunities are connected to working in mining, associated with mining professions. I do not know yet what I want to do, but I definitely do not want to work in the mine.

(female, 15, Kirovsk)

Because life circumstances change, it is common for girls who go away after school to later return to their hometowns. Some come back to take care of sick parents, others because of a relationship with somebody from the hometown, or because it proved too difficult to survive in a big city. Upon returning, they often they face the problem of finding a job in the mining city. For example, Maria (35) from Kovdor went to study law in the regional center Murmansk, but later got married and returned to Kovdor to live with her

husband. She finished her study through remote education, got a lawyer's diploma and gave birth to her first child. After maternity leave, she started to search for a job.

And then I went through all the troubles and ordeals that were ever possible in a small mining town for a female lawyer. It was impossible. I experienced so many problems, I cried so much! You should understand, it was simply unreal. But I was fighting and knocking at all doors.

The first job she was able to get after she received her law degree was the job as a cleaner at the local court. She was told that the cleaning would not take much time and after she finished these main tasks, she could help the judge and other court personnel with their duties to get some practical experience in jurisprudence. Maria agreed and this was indeed her first practical step in becoming a professional lawyer. Later, she succeeded in getting several other jobs as a lawyer in local companies; however, she was also demoted on several occasions:

I really liked the work of a lawyer, and I was very good in it. At my last workplace, everything was wonderful with the job, and I was happy working there, also the salary was OK. But then, at some point our main mining enterprise began to dictate conditions again, making a series of workforce reductions and reorganizations. This time they cut half the engineers and other qualified personnel, so again, I was laid off and lost the job. All in all, I had just four years of normal calm work at one enterprise and two years at another enterprise. Laid off here, laid off there, in the end, it put me at a low ebb. For me, it was a real blow.

This example demonstrates the particular vulnerability of women in mining cities with limited opportunities for other jobs than mining.

### **“Forced” entrepreneurship**

In the conditions of growing precarity caused by short-term contracting and job reductions at town-forming mining companies, some young people have switched to self-employment, opening up new small businesses. In this way, declining job opportunities and limited alternatives in hometowns push young people toward entrepreneurship and self-employment. Many of them have no prior experience of entrepreneurship and had never dreamt about owning a business. Yet they were “forced” to try a new strategy by a combination of life circumstances and structural constraints (Oakley 2014). Below I consider several examples of how young entrepreneurs exercise their agency and how they make choices in the conditions of single-industry towns.

At one point the lawyer Maria from Kovdor, whose job search was recounted in the previous section, decided that she cannot continue searching for wage work in her city:

Once I told myself: “Damn, that’s enough, I can’t stand it all anymore. It’s humiliating for me to go looking for a job here”. At that time, I already understood that I am a pretty good specialist, I already had a lot of experience in the legal sphere. But I knew I had to change something. Then I began to think about what to change, what would I do if I worked for myself. In one month, I decided that I would completely change professions. I planned to open a business, but I did not want to get involved in jurisprudence. I just started looking for what I would be very much interested in doing. And I was always interested in girls’ things.

Maria decided to open up a small-scale spa and beauty salon, where she could carry out various beauty treatments for women. Her main idea was “to create a space for women where they could rest”. Maria went to Moscow to get a professional education in cosmetics and, with the financial help of her husband, succeeded in starting up a spa. For several years, she combined working at her spa with a part-time salary job as a lawyer at one of the subcontracting mining companies. Later, she decided to quit the law job in order to focus entirely on her spa. The spa became relatively successful, even though Maria thinks there is no potential for further growth in Kovdor because in a mining city not many women are interested in this kind of treatment and relaxation.

Another case of “forced” entrepreneurship can be observed in the example of the married couple Sasha and Lena (both 29) from Kirovsk. They grew up in workers’ families in which the men were working in the mine while their wives worked at various service jobs, such as cleaning, house painting and mail delivery. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Sasha’s mother started her own business and became quite successful. Now she owns a small sewing company producing jackets. Sasha and Lena met when they were studying pedagogy at the university in Apatity. Later, despite having a higher pedagogical education, Sasha worked at a wide variety of jobs. This included a post with the town-forming company Apatit, which he later lost due to cuts after a company reorganization. Sasha then decided to start his own business, though his wife did not support this decision:

She had an idea that I have to work at the mine. You know, her parents were there: her father worked as a shaftman, her mother was cleaning and working with wood there. In other words, she did not believe at all in entrepreneurship. She was crying. But I said, no, I want to try and will get it working, everything will be fine.

According to Sasha, his main example was his mother, who became an entrepreneur in the difficult 1990s while his father continued working in the mine and earned much less. Sasha had always liked his mother’s lifestyle and wanted to follow her. After he got cut from the Apatit company, he registered at the job centre as a job seeker. Because he was unemployed, Sasha was able to get a state subsidy to open up a new private business. After two years of operating a fairly successful photo-printing company, Sasha received an

invitation to return to the Apatit mining company. At this point he decided to close his small business and accept the offer because he was missing the stability of salaried work. His wife Lena, who at that time was on the maternity leave, decided to continue his photo-printing business and registered the individual entrepreneurship in her name. By that time, she had become convinced that being an entrepreneur had advantages compared with work in mining. Subsequently, Sasha quit the mining job and now the couple owns two small private businesses: one printing photos and one organizing events and activities for children. They are thinking about moving out of Kirovsk in the distant future, but are afraid to lose the social connections, support and networks that they have developed in Kirovsk. Consequently, they have not yet taken any concrete steps toward moving.

These ethnographic vignettes reveal that young adults living in mining cities choose self-employment and entrepreneurship not as a first choice, but as a response to the growing insecurity of wage work at the mining enterprises. While many young residents of mining towns chose outmigration as an alternative to labour market insecurity, some of those who stay become self-employed through what can be termed “forced” entrepreneurship. This kind of shift requires a great degree of agency from a young person because of the numerous structural constraints and the scarcity of opportunities and state support available for young entrepreneurs in Russia.

### **Activism and liveability in single-industry towns**

How do young people who chose to stay in their hometowns participate in the development of the urban environment and contribute to the improvement of the liveability of northern cities? In general, urban civic activism is not particularly common in peripheral towns in Russia. Furthermore, inhabitants of single-industry towns are often portrayed as especially passive and lacking in civic engagement, expecting the state and the town-forming companies to solve all local problems. Below I explore youth civic activism using the example of one of my case study localities to focus on how young active “stayers” try to make their cities more liveable.

Kirovsk is a very popular destination for skiing tourism as it is situated next to the Khibiny Mountains. During the last decade, Apatit, the company which operates the town-forming mining operations, made large investments in the development of a ski resort in Kirovsk. Still, local youth often continue to complain about a lack of leisure opportunities in the city as the new ski facilities are mostly oriented towards tourists and visitors. Recently, loosely organized groups of young urban activists have become more visible in the public sphere of Kirovsk. They have initiated new projects to contribute to the development of the urban environment of Kirovsk according to their own needs. These initiatives are mostly apolitical in an institutional or state-centred sense, aimed at small improvements in living conditions at the local level, but they provide important alternatives to the mining industry and outdated Soviet-style activities. They also bring more diversity to the urban

environment and public space. Some young people create new tourism and leisure opportunities oriented to both local residents and tourists. Others organize citizen groups and bottom-up events that improve the liveability of the city, such as volunteer networks to help elderly or poor people, informal civic groups to promote recycling, artistic groups to initiate music festivals, and sports competitions and adventure races. Below I consider two of these civic bottom-up initiatives in particular, namely the organization of a recycling initiative and the creation of a new open space for youth. In my analysis, I focus on the intentions and life choices of the individuals who initiated the projects rather than on the actual development of the initiatives, in order to demonstrate how a young person who grew up in a mining city may become an urban activist.

### ***Recycling***

Environmental issues are among the most topical for youth across the globe, including the Russian Arctic. Young residents of Kirovsk are significantly more environmentally concerned than older generations, though interaction with the environment during leisure time is very important for the majority of northern residents (Bolotova 2012). Two major factors contribute to the rising popularity of “green values” among the northern youth: the active use of the internet, which increases their awareness of global environmental concerns; and the high level of spatial mobility. Currently, one of the most pressing environmental issues in Russia is the problem of waste management. The current system of waste management is mainly oriented to landfill disposal of waste, with a low level of waste processing. There is almost no recycling infrastructure across Russia and many of the existing landfills are reaching their capacity limits. Young people concerned about environmental problems are increasingly dissatisfied with this situation. In different places in Russia, young environmental activists have organized grassroots groups to popularize recycling and selective collection of waste, as well as to pressure the authorities to establish recycling infrastructure. Recently, one such group was formed in Kirovsk.

The group was initiated by Nastya (28), who is a self-employed entrepreneur producing handmade polymer clay jewelry and accessories. Nastya was born in Kirovsk and lived there for most of her life, only travelling beyond the city for summer vacations. She never wanted to relocate from her hometown because she does not like big cities and hot weather and feels very comfortable in the North. She studied economics at the university in Apatity and then received some work experience as an accountant at the city administration. Then she shortly worked at the town-forming company Apatit, but quit because she did not like the stressful work conditions there. She established a small business developing her hobby and became rather successful, selling her handmade jewelry over the internet. About five years ago, Nastya became very environmentally concerned when she started to read a lot of information on the internet about environmental problems:

When I became interested in environmental issues, recycling, and the current condition of the world, I first became very depressed. I realized that while there are maybe enough resources for me, already my children will not have enough, and my great-grandchildren will live on a landfill.

After some time, she decided to do everything that she could in her private life to reduce the amount of waste she created. She discovered several small companies in the Kirovsk-Apatity agglomeration that were interested in obtaining separated waste: metal, plastic and paper. With her father she started to collect and transport the separated waste produced by their family to these companies. Later Nastya invited her friends to join the initiative, proposing a free transportation service organized by her father. In just one year, there were already 12 families collecting separated waste along with Nastya's family.

I want to do at least something that is in my power to improve life in this city because I live here, I communicate with these people. I think it is comfortable and pleasant to live in a nice cozy place, and not at a landfill. I try to participate as much as possible in everything.

After several months, a loosely organized group of volunteers formed around Nastya and her family. They started to organize regular street events open to the public to collect separated waste from the residents of the Kirovsk-Apatity agglomeration. Announcements of these public events are published on the local social media where volunteers are also recruited for each particular event. For Nastya, this activity became a priority in her life and she is going to continue this work: "Now I have changed my priorities, I decided to do what is vitally important for me and leave aside everything else. Weddings, birthdays, other things can wait, nature is more important for me." Nastya has a feeling of personal responsibility for the processes that are going on in her community and she tries to do everything that she can at the local level to solve the problem she is worried about. Together with other volunteers, she has also initiated negotiations with the local administration in Kirovsk, hoping to create institutionalized structural opportunities for selective collection of waste, but the negotiations are still ongoing.

### *Open space for youth as "third place"*

One of the most common complaints of young people in northern industrial cities is the lack of modern leisure facilities. The outdated urban environment of these cities is indeed still very much rooted in the Soviet past and lacks places for informal public life. Recently, in a range of different northern cities, active young people have started to create new types of youth clubs similar to what Oldenburg has called "third place[s]" (Oldenburg 1989). Third places are informal, open to everybody and participants themselves organize the events they find interesting. Such grassroots initiatives have appeared in



northern industrial cities because local youth need public gathering places which are free from the strict control and formal rules of official institutions.

In Kirovsk, a new open youth club was created by Valera (25), supported by a partner and a group of friends. Valera was born in Apatity, but moved to Kirovsk with his family when he was a child. After school, he studied at a vocational training institution and started to work as a truck driver at the mining company Apatit. Despite earning a lot of money in his young years, he soon realized that he does not like this job: "It was very difficult for me to work there. This was the Central mine and the conditions of work were the most dangerous there: this mine is high up in the mountains, there is always snow and it was always dark. And there were the most sophisticated transport vehicles in the area, it was hard to work on them." Valera quit this job, and, following a period of unemployment, found a new job as a truck driver at a subcontracting company while also starting to participate actively in community life.

My friend inspired me to become active in the community life and I got involved in volunteer work. We were helping at different events, we watched and learned how to organize them. Then we started to propose different projects and applications and in the end, my activist's life supplanted the main job: I travelled to various youth forums and had to ask for additional unpaid vacations, so after one year I got laid off at work.

With his friend, Valera started to initiate commercial projects in the field of creative industries because he did not want to continue working for the mining industries. They bought a franchise and started to organize cinema quizzes in the region, which soon became very popular. They also continued to participate in large national youth forums and various programs for youth, acquiring the skills needed for activism, such as grant writing, project management, team building, etc. In parallel, Valera met an entrepreneur who owned a hotel in Kirovsk and who had an empty basement space at the hotel where he wanted to establish a new public space for tourists and local residents. Valera agreed to renovate the space and to create an open space there. Presently, in this small basement space, there is a combination of social and commercial activities, providing both free and paid events, such as film screenings, small concerts and festivals. Over time, a core group of young people have started to hold regular gatherings at this place, but there are always new people coming for activities of interest. For one public festival, Valera tried to get support from the Apatit company and the local administration because he needed prizes for the winners of the competition. However, he did not succeed: "There is a youth organization at the Apatit company and they are open for communication, however, they only want to support workers of the company." Support of the town-forming company is usually crucial for the existence of new social initiatives in industrial cities, but this

project has continued to thrive without it, cooperating instead with other businesses and individuals interested in the development of the local community.

These cases of civic urban activism of young people demonstrate how active young people can become engaged in community development in northern industrial cities. Despite the widespread passivity in these communities, some young activists are able to organize new initiatives and projects that solve local problems and also attempt to make their industrial towns more liveable for youth.

### **Conclusion: staying as agency?**

In the Russian Arctic, even the successful economic transformations of town-forming companies in mining towns have not been followed by correspondingly successful social transformations. The cross-generational perceptions of the localities vary considerably due to their different experiences. The older generation contributed to the rise of the towns and was actively engaged in city construction and development; through this process, they developed strong social ties and connections to the localities. In contrast, among the modern youth a feeling of decay and uncertainty pervades, even in towns with economically stable mines. The majority of young northerners dream of moving to big cities; still, many of them cannot leave due to a complex combination of social, emotional and material factors. Embedded as such in the home region and their localities, young people have to deal with the complexities of leaving/staying: first, during their transition to adulthood, and then multiple times over their life course. Often staying put in a declining industrial city is perceived as a failure, as being “stuck” in place as the world moves on (see Komu and Adams, this volume).

In the social sciences, attention is mostly paid to youth outmigration from the North and its drivers, while immobility and the agency of those who stay put are rarely investigated. This chapter contributes to the understanding of how young adults who stay in the North find their ways, experience control in their life and exercise personal agency in the particular structural conditions of northern single-industry towns. In the end, staying also requires agency, though the perception of this situation can vary significantly depending on the degree of (in)voluntariness. To better understand youth agency in the formation their futures, it is important to explore “how youth construct for themselves their actions, resistance, and imaginaries in relation to both their present situations and desired futures that are historically, socially, and culturally embedded” (DeJaeghere et al. 2016, p. 20). In this sense, this chapter is an attempt to focus on staying as an *active process*, through which young northerners make their own migration decisions and life choices responding to structural forces. This in-depth qualitative perspective on young people staying in northern industrial cities enriches the current research dominated by scholarship on outmigration from the North.

## Notes

- 1 Similarly, in many rural areas the outmigration of youth is an expected step in the life course of a young person (Easthope and Gabriel 2008; Abbott-Chapman et al. 2014; Nugin 2014).
- 2 These towns were: Revda; Kovdor; and Kirovsk.
- 3 This publication was supported by the WOLLIE project, funded by the Academy of Finland, decision number 314471. It is also partially based on results gained in the framework of the earlier project “Children of 1990s”, funded by the Russian Science Foundation under grant no. 14-18-02136 (2014–2016).
- 4 I use a broad age range for defining youth, with 35 as the upper limit to follow current tendencies in Russian legislation. Recently, the State Duma of the Russian Federation adopted the first reading of the law "On youth policy in the Russian Federation" in which the upper age limit of youth is 35 (<https://rg.ru/2020/11/11/gosduma-odobrila-proekt-o-povyshenii-vozrasta-molodezhi-do-35-let.html>, accessed 21.12.2020).
- 5 E.g., see Pilkington 2012 on relationships between discursive production of place and its perception by young people in an arctic city Vorkuta.
- 6 For an analysis of staying as an expression of agency in the context of the northern regions see, Khlinovskaya Rockhill 2010.
- 7 Calculated by the author based on Rosstat 2020; Vsesoiuznaia perepis' naseleniia 1989.
- 8 Compared with the more temperate regions of Russia where a standard vacation period is 28 days, the minimal duration of vacation in northern regions is 52 days and employers are obliged to pay for travel expenses for their employees once every two years. The tradition to bring children for vacations to more southern regions appeared in Soviet times when northerners regularly travelled either to the Black Sea or to visit relatives in other regions.
- 9 Similar complaints are common in northern Finland, see Komu and Adams (in this volume).

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