



## **The Russian – North Korean Borderland: A Narrow Border of Boundless Ambition**

Russia's border with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is its shortest: the length of the land border between the two states is less than 20 km. It divides countries with very different economic systems and political regimes; nevertheless, both states proclaim each other to be valuable partners and promoting far-reaching plans for the development of cross-border economic cooperation. Russia claims that boosting such cooperation can be beneficial for the entire region and, in particular, can contribute to resolving the protracted and dangerous conflict in the Korean Peninsula.

Is a border as short as the Russian-North Korean one significant? In what ways have major historical changes shaped the current border landscape and cross-border dynamics? How do sharp political and economic contrasts between the two countries influence cross-border interaction between them? What are the major challenges and opportunities for Russian-North Korean cross-border cooperation?

To deal with these questions, first I consider the key geographic features of the Russian – North Korean borderland and the key trends in its history. After this, I turn to cross-border cooperation issues, examining bilateral and multilateral issues separately. Finally, I examine the controversies and alarmist perceptions that hinder Russia-DPRK cross-border interaction by problematizing the amiability and reliability of the other side. A short conclusion sums up the key ideas of this paper.

## Geography<sup>1</sup>

Its border with the DPRK is Russia's shortest international land border. According to official Russian sources, its total length is 39.2 km, of which 17 km pass along the Tumen River (Tumannaya in Russian and Tumangang in Korean), while the rest divides the countries' territorial waters<sup>2</sup>. This area where Russia meets North Korea is partially forested and partially farmed. It should be also mentioned that a narrow stretch of Chinese land passing along the northern bank of the Tumen River separates Russian and North Korean territories for some 20 km, providing for a rather quaint configuration of borders between the three countries.

For Russia, its border with the DPRK is not only the shortest but probably the poorest in terms of cross-border transport communication. The territories of Russia and the DPRK are connected by only one railroad, crossing the border via the Friendship Bridge over the Tumen River. There is no automobile connection though its establishment (requiring a second cross-border bridge) has been discussed by the two countries for a long time<sup>3</sup>. Border control and customs clearance are carried out in the railway stations of the two towns adjacent to the border – Khasan in Russia and Tumangang in North Korea. The railway cross-border route is predominantly utilized by cargo trains, with only one passenger train from Ussuriysk to Pyongyang (supplemented by through-passenger cars from Moscow and Khabarovsk) operating irregularly. Russia and the DPRK are also connected by one airline route from Vladivostok to Pyongyang, flown twice a week by the only North Korean airline, Air Koryo.

One Russian and one North Korean first-level administrative unit are adjacent to the border.

The Russian unit, Primorsky krai, exceeds the entirety of North Korea in its area (164.7 thousand km<sup>2</sup> vs 120.5 km<sup>2</sup>). It is a relatively successful province by Russian standards, and is positioned as the country's gateway to the Asia-Pacific. As of 2010 its population was 1,956.5 thousand in which the share of ethnic Russians was 92.5 per cent and the share of ethnic Koreans

---

<sup>1</sup> For maps and images of the border, see the following: <http://taosecurity.blogspot.com/2015/02/where-russia-and-north-korea-meet.html> and <http://englishrussia.com/2014/12/08/this-is-where-russia-borders-with-china-and-north-korea/>

<sup>2</sup> *Rosgranitsa* (n.d.) 'North Korea [in Russian],' <http://www.rosgranitsa.ru/ru/activity/international/countries/kndr>

<sup>3</sup> See for example: Zakharova, L. (2014) 'Economic ties between Russia and North Korea: Heading For a Breakthrough,' *New Eastern Outlook*, June 4, <http://journal-neo.org/2014/06/04/rus-e-konomicheskie-otnosheniya-rossii-i-kndr-kurs-na-prory-v/>

was 1.0 per cent<sup>4</sup>. As of 2013 the province's per capita gross regional product was nominally \$ 9,714<sup>5</sup> (15.6 times more than the estimated North Korean GDP per capita<sup>6</sup> for the same year) and \$15,628 by purchasing power parity<sup>7</sup> (8.7 times more than the DPRK's GDP<sup>8</sup>). Nakhodka, the third largest city in Primorsky Krai, hosts one of two North Korean consulates outside Moscow. The only second-level administrative unit that borders the DPRK is Khasan district (the area of which is 4.1 thousand km<sup>2</sup>). Khasan specializes in fishery, mariculture, ship repairing, and tourism and, crucially, possesses three major international ports – Posyet, Zarubino, and Slavyanka. The small town of Khasan is the only locality situated at the border. Its population has been steadily decreasing during the post-Soviet period and was just 742 as of 2010<sup>9</sup>

The North Korean first-level administrative unit that is adjacent to the border is Rason special city, occupying a large area of 746 km<sup>2</sup> and consisting of the city district of Rajin and the county of Sonbong. As of 2008 the population of Rason was 197,000<sup>10</sup>, and it was finally detached from North Hamgyong province<sup>11</sup> in 2010. Since the 1990s Rason has been promoted as a free economic zone centered on the international seaport of Rajin, in other words, it has been designed as a free market enclave within North Korea's socialist system designed to attract investments from Russia, China, and other countries and to be the country's major maritime gateway. The town of Tumangang, with its railway station and border checkpoint, is the only settlement adjacent to the border with Russia.

---

<sup>4</sup> Rosstat (n.d.) 'Ethnic Composition of Population by Provinces of the Russian Federation [in Russian],' [http://www.gks.ru/free\\_doc/new\\_site/population/demo/per-itog/tab7.xls](http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/population/demo/per-itog/tab7.xls)

<sup>5</sup> Calculated by: Rosstat (2015) 'Per Capita Gross Regional Product by Regions of the Russian Federation in 1998-2013[in Russian],' [http://www.gks.ru/free\\_doc/new\\_site/vvp/dusha98-13.xlsx](http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/vvp/dusha98-13.xlsx); Audit.ru (n.d.) 'Average Weighted Rates of Currencies: U.S. Dollar,' [http://www.audit-it.ru/currency/sr\\_vz.php](http://www.audit-it.ru/currency/sr_vz.php)

<sup>6</sup> Calculated by: United Nations (n.d.) 'National Accounts Main Aggregates Database,' <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/snaama/selbasicFast.asp>

<sup>7</sup> Wikipedia (n.d.) 'List of federal subjects of Russia by GRP,' [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_federal\\_subjects\\_of\\_Russia\\_by\\_GRP](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_federal_subjects_of_Russia_by_GRP)

<sup>8</sup> Calculated by: Central Intelligence Agency (n.d.) 'Korea, North,' <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/kn.html>

<sup>9</sup> Rosstat (2011) '2010 All-Russian Population Census, vol. 1 [in Russian],' [http://www.gks.ru/free\\_doc/new\\_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis\\_itogi1612.htm](http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis_itogi1612.htm)

<sup>10</sup> United Nations Statistics Division (2009) 'DPR Korea 2008 Population Census National Report,' [http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/sources/census/2010\\_PHC/North\\_Korea/Final%20national%20census%20report.pdf](http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/sources/census/2010_PHC/North_Korea/Final%20national%20census%20report.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> The only Russian consulate outside Pyongyang is situated in the city of Chongjin that is the North Hamgyong's capital.

## History

The Russian Empire became the neighbor of the Korean Kingdom of Joseon in the second half of 1800s. Until that time, Russian expansion towards the Far East was contained by the Qing Empire, with the Treaty of Nerchinsk, signed in 1689 after a Qing-Russian military conflict, leaving the territory of the current Russian Primorsky krai under Qing control. Yet in the second half of 1850, following its defeat in the Crimean War, Russia intensified its expansion into Asia, taking advantage of the weakening of the Qing Empire as a result of the Opium Wars and Taiping Rebellion. In 1859 the Governor General of Eastern Siberia, Nikolay Muravyov-Amursky, insisted that Russia should take control over Posyet Bay on the Pacific shore to prevent its seizure from the weakened Qing Empire by the British<sup>12</sup>.

Combining military pressure with its intercession between the Qing Empire and European powers during the Second Opium War, Russian diplomats succeeded in “persuading” the Qing Empire to recognize the territory of the current Primorsky krai as a joint possession in the 1858 Treaty of Aigun and as a full Russian possession only two years later, in the 1860 Convention of Peking. According to the convention’s first article, “The borderline rests on the River Tumen Kiang,” more than 10 km “above its emptying into the sea”<sup>13</sup>. The borderline was further specified by Russian-Qing delimitation protocols of 1881 and 1886<sup>14</sup>.

Thus, Russia became a neighbor of the Kingdom of Joseon, a dependency of the Qing Empire until 1895. Despite cross-border trade between the Russian Far East and the Joseon’s Hamgyong province developing rapidly, the Joseon government was reluctant for some time to establish diplomatic relations with Russia, because of its self-isolationist policy and concern that Russia would seize some of its territory. However, bilateral relations were established in 1885 with Russia guaranteeing Korean territorial integrity, while a bilateral convention on Russia-Korea

---

<sup>12</sup> Kulinchenko, L. (2006) 'History of Settling the Territory of the Modern Khasan District by Russians [in Russian],' *Khasan-district.ru*, <http://www.khasan-district.ru/istoriya/istoriya/istoriya-osvoeniya-russkimi-ludmi-territorii-sovremennogo-chasanskogo-rayona.html>

<sup>13</sup> *Chinaforeignrelations.net* (n.d.) 'Additional Treaty of Peking (Beijing), 1860,' <http://www.chinaforeignrelations.net/node/234>

<sup>14</sup> Kireev, Anton (2011) *Far Eastern Russia's Border: Trends of Development and Functioning from the Middle of the 19th Century until the Beginning of the 21st Century* [in Russian], Vladivostok: Far Eastern Federal University Publishing House.

cross-border trade was signed in 1888<sup>15</sup>. Subsequently, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, increasing Russian activity in Korea became one of the main causes of the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-1905, which ended in Russian defeat and the Japanese annexation of Korea five years later.

The recognition of Russian sovereignty opened the way to Russian colonization of this scarcely-populated region (mainly by Tungus-Manchurian peoples). The region was granted the name Primorskaya oblast and came to be settled initially by soldiers and Cossacks, and subsequently by peasants. The territory adjacent to the border remained almost uninhabited for a long time, and from 1869 until the beginning of 1880s was protected by just a dozen Cossacks residents at the first Russian checkpoint, called Koreisky (Korean) Centry<sup>16</sup>. One of the main functions of this checkpoint was to protect Korean immigrants from cross-border raids by Honghuzi gangs from China.

Noticeably, establishing Russian rule over this territory boosted not only Russian colonization but also Korean immigration. In this light, the small Russian-Korean border area became the site for an increasingly intensive flow of migrants from Joseon, with its harsh feudal order and overworked land, to the Russian Empire, with its more liberal order and abundant land resources<sup>17</sup>. The first Korean immigrants began to enter Russia in the 1860s, despite the employment by the Korean authorities of increasingly harsh repressive measures (including the death penalty) to stop them. Increased Korean immigration received a mixed reception from the Russian regional administration as some high-standing officials considered it a challenge to Russian rule, although others didn't consider it a threat<sup>18</sup>. Overall, despite some restrictive measures (such as an 1886 law prohibiting Korean and Chinese immigrants to settle in borderland areas) the number of Korean immigrants grew steadily from 1,800 in 1869 to about 17,500 in 1893 and to 36,031 in 1907<sup>19</sup>. After Korea was annexed by the Japanese Empire at the beginning of the

---

<sup>15</sup> Kurbanov, S. (2009) 'Russia and Korea. Key Points of Russia-Korea Relations' History from the Middle of 19th Century until 20th Century [in Russian], *Koryo-saram.ru*, <http://koryo-saram.ru/kurbanov-s-o-rossiya-i-koreya-klyuchevy-e-momenty-v-istorii-rossijsko-korejskih-otnoshenij-serediny-xix-nachala-xx-stoletij/>

<sup>16</sup> Yershov, Dmitry (2010), *Honghuzi. Undeclared War. Ethnic Brigandage at the Far East* [in Russian], Moscow: Tsentropoligraf; Kireev. Op. cit.

<sup>17</sup> On reasons of Korean immigrations to the Russian Far East see for example: Selishchev, A. (2014) 'Russian-Korean Drama of 1860s,' *Koryo-saram.ru*, <http://koryo-saram.ru/russko-korejskaya-drama-vtoroj-poloviny-1860-h-godov/>

<sup>18</sup> Kim, German, *History of Korean Immigration. Vol. 1. From the Second Half of the 19th Century to 1945* [in Russian], Almaty: Daik Press.

<sup>19</sup> Kireev. Op. cit.

20th century, the immigration of Koreans to Russia intensified further as many Korean peasants were deprived of their allotments and the Russian Far East became a sanctuary for many active opponents to Japanese rule<sup>20</sup>. As a result, after the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, Koreans evidently outnumbered Chinese immigrants to the Russian Far East. Even the emerging Soviet totalitarian system and attempts to tighten border control didn't stop Korean immigrants in the 1920s and their number reached 180,700 by 1929<sup>21</sup>. In particular, the share of Koreans in Posyet district, adjacent to the border with the Japanese Korea, was about 90 per cent<sup>22</sup>. While suppressing 'bourgeois entrepreneurship', the Soviet authorities initially encouraged ethnic autonomies and Posyet district had the status of a Korean national district until 1937.

This process of Korean immigration to the Russian Far East was halted and then utterly reversed over the course of a single decade. In the first half of the 1930s, a system of tough border controls were introduced<sup>23</sup>, while in the second half of the same decade Koreans in the Russian Far East were framed as a dangerous Other that could seek to undermine the Soviet order by advancing the interests of the neighboring Japanese Empire. Finally, in 1937 these accusations resulted in the deportation of Koreans from the Soviet Far East to Central Asia: 171,781 Koreans were forcibly relocated by October 25, 1937<sup>24</sup>.

The end of World War II brought about changes in the political configuration and meaning of the Soviet Union's Far Eastern borders. In August 1945 Soviet intervention eliminated any land borders with Japan by eliminating the latter from a vast area of Eastern Siberia and the Far East. The USSR partially succeeded in imposing its order on the other side of the border, including the one with Korea. In 1948, before Soviet troops withdrew, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was proclaimed in the Soviet-controlled zone. The Soviet Union lent significant military and political support to the DPRK during the 1950-1953 Korean War, thus contributing to the DPRK's survival. After the war the Soviet Union rendered the DPRK significant economic assistance, contributing to the restoration and construction of many enterprises and to the development of transportation infrastructure.

---

<sup>20</sup> Kurbanov. Op. cit.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>22</sup> Kim. Op. cit.

<sup>23</sup> Kireev. Op. cit.

<sup>24</sup> Kim. Op. cit.

Intensifying USSR-DPRK cooperation, nourished by lavish Soviet assistance, quickly led to the development of railway infrastructure across the border for cargo transportation though a motorway was not built. By 1951 the Soviet Union had already finished constructing an internal railroad to the border, and a railway station of Khasan was opened in the same year. In 1952 the first trains started to operate across a wooden bridge over the Tumen River, and in 1954 cross-border railroad cargo traffic started. In 1959 a reinforced concrete bridge (the 'Friendship Bridge') was opened and a town of Khasan founded around the railway station<sup>25</sup>. By 1972 the USSR had built a railroad track to the port of Rajin whose gauge corresponded to that of the Soviet Union (1520 mm), unlike the standard width of the North Korean railroad track (1435 mm). From 1972 until the collapse of the USSR, the port of Rajin was actively used by the USSR for freight traffic alongside Soviet Union's own Far Eastern ports<sup>26</sup>.

Turning North Korea from a territory controlled by a hostile and dangerous Japan into a friendly (if not unconditionally reliable) state led to the resumption of a now limited and strictly controlled North Korean immigration. Shortly after the end of World War II, the Soviet Union started to welcome such immigrants for timber harvesting in several regions (primarily in Khabarovsk krai), but not in the USSR-DPRK borderland. In the 1980s the number of North Korean workers coming to the USSR exceeded 20 thousand per annum. As this occurred under bilateral agreements, North Korean workers lived in isolated settlements fully controlled by representatives (including security officers and guards of temporary jails) from the DPRK, and thus actually were residents of enclaves of the North Korean state order in the Soviet Union<sup>27</sup>.

The border itself underwent minor but important alterations in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. These changes were caused by that typical river border delimitation issue, changes in the course of the river. In 1985 the USSR and DPRK concluded a border treaty that, together with an intergovernmental protocol of 1990, the agreement on border regime signed in the same year<sup>28</sup>, and the additional Russia-DPRK intergovernmental protocol on demarcation of 2004, established

---

<sup>25</sup> *Rzd.ru* (2005) 'A Delegation of Russian Railways Will Take Part in a Meeting of the Russian-Korean Railway Border Commission to be Held on August 22-26 in the City of Rajin (DPRK) [in Russian],' August 17, [http://press.rzd.ru/news/public/ru?STRUCTURE\\_ID=656&layer\\_id=4069&id=32439](http://press.rzd.ru/news/public/ru?STRUCTURE_ID=656&layer_id=4069&id=32439)

<sup>26</sup> Kirianov, Oleg (2014) 'South Korea Has Received Russian Coal [in Russian],' December 3, <http://www.rg.ru/2014/12/03/ugol-site.html>

<sup>27</sup> See: Zablovskaya, L. (2008) 'DPRK-Russia-RK: The Exchange by Labour Resources [in Russian],' Demoscope.ru, <http://demoscope.ru/weekly/2008/0333/analit04.php>

<sup>28</sup> In 2012 it was replaced by the Russian-North Korean agreement on border regime.

a clearly demarcated borderline (using the middle of Tumen River as its baseline) and dividing the 12-mile coastal border zone. The treaty gave North Korea 16 out of 17 river islands<sup>29</sup> but affirmed Soviet control over the former island of Noktundo, which was an important historical site for Koreans (the location of a major battle between Koreans and Jurchens in the 16th century). Significantly, South Korea didn't recognize the loss of Noktundo and demanded Russia return the former island's territory<sup>30</sup>. It should also be noted that the Russian-Chinese-Korean border tripoint still remained undefined. This issue was settled by a trilateral intergovernmental agreement signed in Pyongyang in 1998 and specified by a border description protocol signed in 2002.

Since 1980, the USSR and then Russia has been concerned about the erosion of its bank on the Tumen. As the Korean bank was higher, the course of the river gradually shifted towards the Russian side and in the 2000s (when North Korea intensified bank protection works) posed a threat to Russian border protection infrastructure and to the town of Khasan. Despite the borderline having been clearly determined by the above-mentioned bilateral agreements<sup>31</sup>, the problem caused alarmist sentiments regarding the perceived threat of territorial loss among some regional politicians and public. Thus, the Russian federal government was prompted to subsidize and to launch levee protection works, which began in 2004 and were finished by early 2009<sup>32</sup>.

### **Bilateral cross-border cooperation**

In terms of cross-border interaction, the border between Russia and North Korea has changed its meaning dramatically in the post-Soviet period, turning from a border between two countries with largely similar state economies, rigidly authoritarian political regimes, and communist ideologies to a border of sharp contrasts that divides North Korean totalitarianism from Russian democracy (with the latter gradually transforming into authoritarianism though), state

---

<sup>29</sup> Kireev. Op. cit.

<sup>30</sup> Ivanov, Alexander (2008) 'Problem of the Noktundo island in mass media of South Korea [in Russian],' *Rauk.ru*, [http://www.rauk.ru/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=571:2011-04-02-15-18-59&catid=21:2011-04-02-15-18-59&Itemid=125&lang=ko](http://www.rauk.ru/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=571:2011-04-02-15-18-59&catid=21:2011-04-02-15-18-59&Itemid=125&lang=ko)

<sup>31</sup> In particular, the Article 2 of the mentioned 1985 border agreement clearly stipulated that "natural changes of the Tumannaya (Tumen) riverbed do not entail changes in position of... the borderline unless the contracting parties agree otherwise". See: Russian Embassy in the DPRK, "The USSR-DPRK Treaty on the Position of the Soviet-Korean borderline," [http://www.rusembdprk.ru/images/law-base/Document\\_08.pdf](http://www.rusembdprk.ru/images/law-base/Document_08.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> RIA Novosti (2009) 'Builders from Primorsky Krai Stopped Shifting of Tumen River's Bed,' 12 February, <http://m.ria.ru/eco/20090216/162218974.html>

socialism from market capitalism, and extreme poverty and economic stagnation from a rapidly developing economy.

As was mentioned before, the period from the late 1940s until the end of the 1980s was characterized by generally intensive bilateral cooperation. This cooperation rested on the ideological affinity between the USSR and DPRK (though the latter maneuvered between the socialist rivals of the USSR and China) and lavish Soviet finance and other support which increased the appeal of both ideology and the USSR in Pyongyang.

In the 1990s however, after the USSR collapsed and Russia became a democratic state with a capitalist market economy, bilateral relations deteriorated sharply as initially the USSR and then Russia developed its diplomatic relations with South Korea and curtailed economic assistance to the DPRK<sup>33</sup>. Moreover, in the first half of 1990s, Moscow's official rhetoric towards Pyongyang was largely in line with that of the U.S. North Korea was framed as an ideologically unfriendly state that posed a range of threats to Russia<sup>34</sup>. No wonder that in the first half of 1990s high-level diplomatic contacts between two countries were rare and no adequate legal basis for bilateral economic cooperation in these new conditions was created<sup>35</sup>. Bilateral relations improved somewhat in the latter half of the 1990s as Moscow decided to develop a more moderate and pragmatic approach towards its relations with Pyongyang and to take a more equidistant approach towards the participants of the Korean conflict that had been hoping to benefit from its mediation and reconciliation efforts<sup>36</sup>.

As for economic relations, the official Russian rhetoric of early 1990s was seemingly more moderate than its political rhetoric but actually even more subversive for the regime in Pyongyang. Instead of providing the DPRK with large-scale financial and other assistance, Moscow called for developing cooperation on pragmatic and mutually beneficial market basis and asked for the servicing of its large debt<sup>37</sup>. In other words, it stopped supporting the North Korean regime economically and called for the latter to accept the 'capitalist' rules of the game, a step for which

---

<sup>33</sup> Toloraya, Georgy (2002) 'The Korean Peninsula and Russia [in Russian],' *Mezhdunarodnaya zhishn'* 12.

<sup>34</sup> Vorontsov, Aleksandr (2002) 'Russia and the Korean Peninsula: Current Situation and Prospects [in Russian],' *Problemy Dal'nego Vostoka* 3.

<sup>35</sup> *ITAR-TASS* (1997) 'A Session of Russian-North Korean Commission to Be Finished in Moscow; Labour Force is the Main Item of the DPRK's Export to Russia according to Data of IBEC [in Russian],' October 14.

<sup>36</sup> See for example: Toloraya, op.cit; Vorontsov, op. cit.

<sup>37</sup> *ITAR-TASS – Planeta* (2003) 'About Economic Cooperation between the USSR and the DPRK,' *Kompas* no 43, October 22.

the DPRK was totally unprepared for due to the scarcity of its financial resources, lack of economic competitiveness and reluctance to endanger its totalitarian regime by launching internal market reforms. North Korea was not in any position to pay for its goods and services with hard currency and had a very narrow range of goods and services to offer Russian partners who, in their turn, had neither the money nor incentive to invest in a poor and unpredictable neighboring country in a time of severe economic crisis in Russia itself. Predictably, Russian-DPRK trade quickly collapsed from \$2,350 million in 1988<sup>38</sup> to \$600 million in 1992 and to \$85 million in 1996<sup>39</sup> (the overwhelming share of this post-Soviet trade was formed of Russian exports). In a similar way, railroad freight traffic between the two countries was also reduced dramatically, from 3,525.6 thousand tons in 1990 to 764.1 thousand tons in 1994, 230.4 thousand tons in 1999, and 68.4 thousand tons in 2002<sup>40</sup>. In 1996 Russian railways blamed their North Korean counterparts for the non-payment of \$20 million debt and the non-authorized exploitation of its rolling stock, stopping cargo traffic between the two countries for several weeks<sup>41</sup>. The trade turnover of Primorsky krai with the DPRK was tiny, valued at just several millions of U.S. dollars at the beginning of the 2000s<sup>42</sup>.

Yet some old economic ties survived the economic crisis and worsening political relations of the first half of the 1990s, while even a few new cooperative ties began to develop. Russia continued to supply some raw materials (coal, metal, oil), wood, fertilizers, equipment, and spare parts, for which the DPRK paid not only with money but also through the supply of its cheap workforce<sup>43</sup>. Both countries continued to provide each other with quotas for fishing in their respective territorial waters. In most cases, economic cooperation was driven now not by intergovernmental agreements and projects but by direct contacts between enterprises<sup>44</sup>.

As North Korea lacked both hard currency and competitive goods to pay for Russian goods and services, supplying Russia with its labor force in exchange for goods and services became the key form of bilateral economic exchange over the course of the 1990s and 2000s. This

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>39</sup> *ITAR-TASS*, A Session of Russian-North Korean Commission

<sup>40</sup> *Rzd.ru*, A Delegation of Russian Railways

<sup>41</sup> *Kommersant Daily* (1996) 'Foreign Affairs [in Russian],' May 14.

<sup>42</sup> *WebDigest.RU* (2015) 'The DPRK's Minister of Foreign Trade Paid an Official Visit to Primorsky Krai [in Russian],' August 22.

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>44</sup> *ITAR-TASS*, A Session of Russian-North Korean Commission

controversial exchange was considered as slavery by some of the Russian and Western media<sup>45</sup>, as workers received very small salaries by Russian standards, often had to work unpaid overtime and lived in desperate conditions under the control of North Korean officials, sometimes even getting no money for food until their work was completed<sup>46</sup>. While these accusations look largely reasonable, it should be also mentioned that work in Russia was prestigious for many North Koreans, as they had a chance to earn significant money by North Korean standards<sup>47</sup>.

In the 1990s and early 2000s there were some notably contradictory trends in North Korean labor migration. On the one hand, both the geography and the area of employment of such migrants widened noticeably. For virtually the first time since the early 1930s, the flow of North Korean immigrants to Primorsky krai resumed and North Koreans started to work in the region, primarily in construction, agricultural, and timber harvesting enterprises. Yet the total number of Korean labor migrants in Russia had decreased significantly by the end of the decade due to the tightened Russian immigration policy (especially following the introduction of a visa regime for North Korean citizens in 1997) and the diminishing importance of timber harvesting as the primary destination for North Korean unqualified labor. This was the result of both sharp public criticism (in particular, North Koreans were accused of the predatory exploitation of forest areas they worked in<sup>48</sup>) and the gradual automation of timber harvesting, which increased the demand for a qualified Russian workforce while temporarily decreasing demand for an unqualified North Korean one<sup>49</sup>, until construction subsequently replaced timber harvesting as the main field of North Korean workforce application.

At the very beginning of 2000s, shortly after Vladimir Putin came to power, bilateral Russian North-Korean relations improved dramatically. This partially led to mutual economic accommodation as both parties, at least at the discursive level, accepted each other's differences (Kim Jong Il even allowed Orthodox Christianity in his country) and started to find ways of boosting economic cooperation based on complementarity. Already in 2000 a new bilateral framework treaty of friendship, neighbourliness and co-operation was concluded and the first top-

---

<sup>45</sup> See for example: Inopressa.ru (2009) 'Slaves of Kim Jong Il at the Terminal Station of the Trans-Siberian Railway [in Russian],' August 3.

<sup>46</sup> Zabrovskaya, *DPRK-Russia-RK*

<sup>47</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>48</sup> See for example: Reznik, Boris (1996) 'North Korean Heroin Trail [in Russian],' December 17.

<sup>49</sup> Zabrovskaya, *DPRK-Russia-RK*

level visit during the post-Soviet visit occurred: Vladimir Putin's visit to Pyongyang. In response, Kim Jong Il visited Russia thrice, each time travelling by train: in 2001 he went to Moscow, while in 2002 he visited the regions of the Russian Far East. The number of other official visits, as well as of negotiations and agreements concluded, also increased substantially. As a result, bilateral trade turnover and the volumes of cross-border cargo traffic started to grow. While in 2004 the trade turnover between the two countries was \$146.3 million (of which the North Korean exports made up just \$7.8 million)<sup>50</sup> it reached \$209.7 million in 2006 (including \$20 million of North Korean exports)<sup>51</sup>. Similarly, cargo traffic across the DPRK-Russia border (almost entirely a one-way traffic of goods from Russia) increased from 68.3 thousand tons in 2002 to 106.4 thousand tons in 2005<sup>52</sup>.

After 2006 these positive trade dynamics reversed due to a combination of temporary but powerful factors, such as the worsening of bilateral relations for several years because of Russia's negative stance towards the North Korean nuclear program and her 2006 nuclear tests and the economic crises that Russia underwent in 2008-2009 and has been undergoing since 2014. In 2009 bilateral turnover fell to a record low level of \$45 million. In 2011 and 2012, turnover partly recovered, exceeding \$110 million for each of these two years<sup>53</sup>, but fell again after this to \$92,3 million in 2014<sup>54</sup>.

Stagnation in bilateral trade turnover (actually in Russian exports) since the late 2000s was compensated for by large-scale Russian investments and unprecedented increases in the annual quotas for North Korean workers. Russia has heavily invested in the reconstruction of the railway from the Russia-DPRK border to the port of Rajin (\$170.9 million in 2008-2014) and the construction of a cargo terminal in this port (\$108.7 million)<sup>55</sup>. The number of North Korean labor

---

<sup>50</sup> *Kommersant* (2005) 'Konstantin Pulikovskiy Has Arrived to Pyongyang [in Russian],' August 15.

<sup>51</sup> *Vl.ru* (2007) 'DPRK and Russia Will Restore Together the Railway from Khasan to the Port of Rajin [in Russian],' July 20, <http://www.news1.ru/vlad/2007/07/20/korea/>

<sup>52</sup> *Rzd.ru*, A Delegation of Russian Railways

<sup>53</sup> Barannikova, Anastasiya (2014) '65 Years of Friendship and Cooperation between Russia and the DPRK,' *Sluzhu Otechestvu*, <http://goo.gl/N7eGnY>

<sup>54</sup> *RIA.ru* (2015) 'A Minister: Trade Turnover between Russia and the DPRK Can Reach \$ 1 billion by 2020 [in Russian],' April 27, <http://ria.ru/economy/20150427/1061116591.html>

<sup>55</sup> Barannikova, op. cit.

immigrants allowed to work in Russia increased 2,3 times from, 21,6 thousand in 2011<sup>56</sup> to 49,7 thousand in 2015<sup>57</sup>.

In 2014-2015 Russia concluded with the DPRK two even more ambitious and costly investment deals (worth several dozens of billions each over the period of several decades) envisaging the modernization of North Korea's railways and electricity grid in exchange for access to deposits of rare and non-ferrous metals and supplies of coal<sup>58</sup>. Yet the unpredictability of Pyongyang's policy makes implementation of these deal complicated. In the beginning of 2016, Russia-DPRK political relations once again began to worsen after Pyongyang announced its successful hydrogen bomb test in January.

Among bilateral cross-border contacts that increased moderately after political relations between the two countries improved was tourism, overwhelmingly visits of Russian tourists to North Korea. Despite the generally low level of North Korean service and the serious restrictions on tourists' movements and activities like photography, trips to North Korea have some attraction for many Russian visitors as an exotic yet familiar experience, invoking a journey back to the USSR by time machine.

In the 1990s, when Russia-DPRK relations were cold, the DPRK accepted only a tiny number of Russian visitors, giving preference to communists. Since the 2000s, North Korea, in trying to earn more foreign currency, made some efforts to attract foreign (including Russian) tourists, relaxing some restrictions. As the overall level of service was low while prices were high and the visa application process remained cumbersome, unsurprisingly the number of Russian tourists visiting the DPRK with visas has remained tiny though: just some 200 visitors in 2014 according to official North Korean data<sup>59</sup>. Yet this data may not take into account the number of tourists from Primorsky krai entitled to visit the Rason area visa free and enjoy affordable prices (some \$300-\$400 for 5 nights in 2015) for beach holidays. According to data from Primorsky

---

<sup>56</sup> Sobolevskaya, Olga (2014) 'Immigrants Follow Investments [in Russian],' *OPEC.ru*, January 23, <http://opec.ru/1649543.html>

<sup>57</sup> Russian Embassy in the DPRK (2015), '[No Title, in Russian],' June 19, <https://goo.gl/g9LXHS>

<sup>58</sup> Kiryanov, Oleg (2015) 'Russia Will Modernize Electricity Transmission System in the DPRK [in Russian],' *Rg.ru*, January 24, <http://m.rg.ru/2015/01/24/kndr-site.html>

<sup>59</sup> *Vz.ru* (2015) 'Russia and North Korea Started Discussing Construction of a Pontoon Bridge between the Two Countries [in Russian],' April 26, <http://www.vz.ru/news/2015/4/26/742279.print.html>

krai's regional government about 4,000 tourists from the region visited the DPRK in 2014<sup>60</sup>. Thus Rason, attracting a relatively significant number of tourists from the Russian Far East because of its borderland position and liberal immigration regime, became for these tourists both a cheap recreation site and a window to 'another world' increasingly adjusting to 'capitalist' realities.

Regions of the Russian Far East, including Primorsky krai, made an active contribution to boosting bilateral relations. While symmetric cross-border contacts at the level of enterprise were not infrequent, contacts between Russian provincial officials with North Korean counterparts were remarkably asymmetric. Official delegations from Primorsky krai and other Russian regions visited Pyongyang many times to conduct negotiations with representatives of the North Korean governmental agencies, who, in their turn, also conducted negotiations in Vladivostok and Khabarovsk many times. Moreover, the governors of Primorsky krai, Yevgeny Nazdratenko and later Sergey Dar'kin, visited Pyongyang several times and personally met Kim Jong Il, while the Presidential Plenipotentiary Envoy to the Far Eastern Federal District<sup>61</sup>, Konstantin Pulikovskiy, established close friendly personal relations with the North Korean leader and already in 2002 was writing panegyric memoirs about meetings with him<sup>62</sup>. At the same time, symmetric official contacts at the level of regions or cities were rare: one can mention just several visits and official meetings at the level of the city administration of Vladivostok and their North Korean counterparts from the cities of Rason<sup>63</sup> and Wonsan<sup>64</sup> (sister city of Vladivostok situated in the southern part of the DPRK). The centralization of cross-border contacts by the North Korean side has been the key factor hindering Russia-DPRK cross-border cooperation by impeding potential joint initiatives at the regional and local levels.

Despite the geographical proximity of Primorsky krai to the border, its contribution to bilateral Russian-North Korean economic cooperation has been modest (around ten per cent of

---

<sup>60</sup> *Primorsky.ru* (2015) 'About Four Thousand Tourists from Primorsky Krai Visited North Korea in 2014 [in Russian],' June 24, <http://primorsky.ru/news/main/90154/>

<sup>61</sup> Far Eastern Federal District is a grouping of nine regions of the Russian Far East having its center in the city of Khabarovsk. Initially federal districts were created in 2000s as a part of centralisation process and presidential plenipotentiary envoys were influential political figures controlling governors in some respects. Yet federal districts gradually lost a large part of its initial importance upon time.

<sup>62</sup> Pulikovskiy, Konstantin (2002) *Eastern Express. Journey through Russia with Kim Jong Il* [in Russian], Moscow: Gorodets.

<sup>63</sup> Veka, Yekaterina (2015) 'About 4 Thousand Tourists from Primorsky Krai Visited Northern Korea [in Russian],' *Primorsky.ru*, June 24, <http://primorsky.ru/news/main/90154/?type=original>

<sup>64</sup> *Vlc.ru* (2009) 'Igor Pushkaryov: The Visit to the DPRK was The City of Wonsan Has Become the Ninth Sister City for Vladivostok [in Russian],' October 21, <http://www.vlc.ru/news/2009/16721/>

turnover as a maximum)<sup>65</sup> and North Korea never was among the region's top trade or investment partners. Still, cooperation did develop in several fields, such as the supply of fuel, vessels, fish, and foodstuffs to the DPRK (in its turn North Korean enterprises built several ships for their Russian partners<sup>66</sup>), the use of the North Korean workforce in logging, agricultural, and construction enterprises in the region, and several joint logging and agricultural enterprises<sup>67</sup>. Primorsky krai and Korea also cooperated in exploiting the port of Rajin for a joint cargo export project and during his visit in Vladivostok in 2002 Kim Jong Il even half-seriously offered to consolidate the ports of Vladivostok and Rajin and to appoint the head of the commercial port of Vladivostok, Mikhail Robkanov, as the head of the port of Rajin<sup>68</sup>.

Yet cooperation with this port was a controversial issue for Primorsky krai as Rajin competes with the krai's ports (especially with the ports of Posyet Bay) for both foreign cargo and even the business of some Russian companies that are not happy with the legal and fiscal regimes in Russia itself. In early 2000s the port of Rajin became a key base for Primorsky krai's main fishery enterprise, Dalmoreprodukt, as Russian customs considered its leased vessels as goods to be tolled<sup>69</sup>. The cooperation of Dalmoreprodukt with the port of Rajin didn't last for long, though, as the company went bankrupt in 2002.

The 2000s and 2010s were also characterized by a partial revitalization of humanitarian contacts between Primorsky krai and the DPRK, though such contacts were never intense and were still strictly controlled by the North Korean authorities. Korean artists came to Russia's Far Eastern regions (and vice versa) with concerts and exhibitions<sup>70</sup> while athletes went to training camps and warm-up competitions<sup>71</sup>. Several children's and youth groups travelled between North Korea and

---

<sup>65</sup> See for example: Zrpress.ru (2012) 'The Trade Turnover of Primorsky Krai with the DPRK Has Increased by 40,2% [in Russian],', August 20, [http://www.zrpress.ru/business/primorje\\_20.08.2012\\_55836\\_tovarooborot-primorskogo-kraja-s-kndr-uvelichilsja-na-40-2.html](http://www.zrpress.ru/business/primorje_20.08.2012_55836_tovarooborot-primorskogo-kraja-s-kndr-uvelichilsja-na-40-2.html)

<sup>66</sup> Vl.ru (2010) 'Vice Governor of Primorsky Krai Met a Deputy Head of North Korean Foreign Ministry [in Russian],', March 10, <http://www.newsvl.ru/vlad/2010/03/10/kndr/>

<sup>67</sup> Deita.ru (2005) 'North Korean Foreign Trade Minister Visiter Primorsky Krai [in Russian],', August 22, <http://deita.ru/news/politics/22.08.2005/41296-ministr-vneshnej-torgovli-kndr-posetil-primorje/>

<sup>68</sup> Maltseva, Olga (2015) 'Waltzing with Kim Jong Il: Part IV [in Russian],', May 28, *Travelreal.ru*, <http://travelreal.ru/azia/severnakya-koreya/vals-s-kim-chen-irom-chast-4>

<sup>69</sup> Kuten'kikh, Nikolay (2000) 'Ships Don't Come to Our Harbor [in Russian],', *Vladivostok*, March 16.

<sup>70</sup> See for example: Vl.ru (2012) 'The Selling Exhibition of Paintings "The Art of North Korea" [in Russian],', <http://rest.vl.ru/event/8472>

<sup>71</sup> See for example: Vl.ru (2007) 'Korean Badminton Players Will Encounter Opponents from Primorsky Krai [in Russian],', 31 October, <http://www.newsvl.ru/vlad/2007/10/31/badminton/>

Russian Far East for recreational and informational purposes<sup>72</sup>. Vladivostok Eparchy of the Russian Orthodox Church and informally the regional government of Primorsky krai patronize the Trinity Church in Pyongyang that was built on the personal initiative of Kim Jong Il, advanced during his visit to the Russian Far East in 2002<sup>73</sup>.

### Multilateral projects

As Russia and North Korea haven't been sufficiently attractive economic partners for each other, various options for incorporating third parties in order to enhance such attractiveness have been considered since the 1990s. These projects, if successful, could have challenged the fixity of the Russia-DPRK border through the development of the borderland area and of a transborder transportation corridor.

The first of these projects was the Tumen River Project, initiated by the DPRK, Mongolia, the Republic of Korea, Russia, and Japan (as an observer) in 1991 with the support of the United Nations Development Program. Initially the project considered the Tumen River as a focus of cross-border cooperation between Russia, North Korea, and China and a prospective major Asian transport communication hub. It was also anticipated that the project could bring together Russian and Mongolian natural resources with Chinese and North Korean labor resources and Japanese and South Korean capital and technology for the purpose of regional development<sup>74</sup>. Initially, the idea promoted was for the construction of a large international city jointly governed by Russia and China in the river's delta to serve as a core basis for multilateral cooperation<sup>75</sup>. However, the Tumen-focused aspects of the project didn't result in any breakthroughs because of political contradictions between the participating countries. In particular, Russia and North Korea were afraid that the multilateral development of the river's basin would lead to Chinese domination of the area and make the two countries' seaports increasingly unnecessary for the development of

<sup>72</sup> See for example: *Vl.ru* (2012) 'IV Asia-Pacific Youth Games Started in the "Ocean" Children Centre near the City of Vladivostok [in Russian],' August 28, <http://www.newsvl.ru/vlad/2012/08/28/games/#ixzz3k5Yz2hk8>

<sup>73</sup> *Drevo* (2014) 'Trinity Temple in Pyongyang [in Russian],' <http://drevo-info.ru/articles/25451.html>

<sup>74</sup> Pomfret, Richard (1998) 'The Tumen River Area Development Programme,' *IBRU Boundary and Security Bulletin Winter 1997-1998*, [https://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/ibru/publications/full/bsb5-4\\_pomfret.pdf](https://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/ibru/publications/full/bsb5-4_pomfret.pdf); *TED Case Studies* (n.d.) 'Tumen River Project,' <http://www1.american.edu/ted/TUMEN.HTM>; Shishlo, Aleksandr (1996) 'Creating an International Trade Zone in the Estuary of the Tumen River Will Include Russia in the Economic Integration in the North-East Asia, Experts from the IBEC Say [in Russian],' April 29.

<sup>75</sup> Sokolov, Sergey (1996) 'To Take Primorsky Region under Control without a Battle [in Russian],' *Itogi*, May 15.

China's north-eastern provinces. Russian concerns about the prospect of increasing Chinese influence in the basin of the Tumen River will be considered in greater detail in the next section. Unsurprisingly, in time the project's initial focus on the Tumen River became blurred and the project mutated into a broader program of cooperation between the participating countries<sup>76</sup>.

Almost simultaneously, in 1991, North Korea decided to establish the first capitalist market enclave in the country, called the Rajin-Sonbong (later Rason) Special Economic Zone. The project developed very slowly; only in 1995 did North Korea begin to actively advertise it to foreign investors<sup>77</sup>, and subsequently alienated them by changing the zone's legal regime and development strategy several times. While Russia was interested in the continued use of the port of Rajin for cargo shipments, it lacked money to invest in the zone. The zone became part of the sphere of Chinese dominance after 2005, allowing China's North Eastern provinces to gain cheap access to a Pacific port<sup>78</sup>. At the same time, Russia, as already noted, also secured stable access to the port of Rajin in 2014 by reconstructing the railway.

One of the main incentives of Vladimir Putin's policy of rapprochement with the DPRK was his design to open North Korean territory for transportation between Russia and South Korea. This would allow Russia to make the Trans-Siberian Railway one of the most attractive routes for Korean and other Asia-Pacific shipments, as well as export gas and electricity to a solvent South Korean market and possibly even repay Seoul a part of Russia's debt by contributing to the modernization of the North Korea's decrepit railway network<sup>79</sup>. Pyongyang would also benefit by getting its transport system modernized for free and receiving fees for transit across its territory.

Initially, the project developed very quickly after North Korea granted consent during Kim Jong Il's 2001 visit to Moscow. Already by 2002, Russian railroad specialists had examined the condition of the North Korea's railways and found many more problems than initially expected. Additionally, North Korea imposed some conditions (such as changing the initially agreed route

---

<sup>76</sup> *RIA Novosti* (2005) 'Malik: Russian Far East Has Potential for Cooperation [in Russian],' October 19, <http://ria.ru/world/20051019/41819356.html>

<sup>77</sup> Volynets, Aleksandr (1995) 'Free Economic Zones [in Russian],' *Kommersant Daily*, July 22.

<sup>78</sup> *Stratfor* (2012) 'Chinese Benefits from Investing in Rason,' February 22, <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/chinese-benefits-investing-rason+&cd=9&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=jp>

<sup>79</sup> Ivanov, Boris 'Trustful Partnership [in Russian],' *Gudok*, September 22.

for a longer one and using railway tracks both of the Russian and of the North Korean gauges) that increased the costs of the project even further<sup>80</sup>.

Some other issues also then arose. China lobbied for a shorter route passing via its territory while Russia insisted on the longer route via Primorsky krai<sup>81</sup>. In Russia itself some influential politicians opposed the project arguing that it could be disastrous for Russia's Far Eastern ports<sup>82</sup>.

Despite these contradictions, intensive negotiations over the project continued. Moreover, new transportation projects involving the supply of Russian gas and electricity to South Korea were discussed actively from 2003<sup>83</sup>. However, the sharp deterioration in North-South relations in the second half of 2000s made these projects highly risky for potential investors. Thus, the projects were eventually frozen, although they continue to be periodically discussed by experts when there are reasons for optimism about the future of the inter-Korean relations<sup>84</sup>.

### **Alarmist Sentiments and Controversies**

Restoring friendship and cooperation was not the only official or public discourse when it came to the DPRK-Russian border issues. This positive agenda was combined with mutual mistrust, alarmism, and specific concerns, some of them grounded while others were predominantly based upon rumors and speculation.

From the official North Korean perspective, uncontrolled contacts with Russia could undermine the existing internal order. Even in the Soviet period there were some ideological contradictions between the North Korean and Soviet Union's ideologies and the latter was considered 'revisionist' while the former was viewed as excessively personal (Moscow was rather critical of Kim Il Sung's personality cult). In the post-Soviet period contacts with Russians as representatives of the 'alien capitalist world' became potentially even more subversive for official

---

<sup>80</sup> Dubrovin, Denis (2003) 'Russia-DPRK: The Project of a Unified Railway,' *Kompas* 1-2, January 5.

<sup>81</sup> Zhunusov, Oleg (2002) 'A Plane is Good, a Ship Is Good also... [in Russian],' *Izvestia*, July 25.

<sup>82</sup> Zabrovskaya, Larisa (2003) 'Primorsky Krai in Russian-North Korean Trade and Economic Relations [in Russian],' *Problemy Dal'nego Vostoka* 4.

<sup>83</sup> See for example: *ITAR TASS – Russia* (2003) 'Russian Ambassador to the DPRK about Russian-North Korean Relations,' September 8.

<sup>84</sup> See for example: Vorontsov, Aleksandr (2015) 'Eurasia from Right to Left[in Russian],' *Globalaffairs.ru*, February 19, <http://www.globalaffairs.ru/number/Evraziya-sprava-nalevo-17314>

Pyongyang, and thus such contacts were restricted even though this contradicted the demand for broadening economic cooperation with a friendly country. The uncontrolled emigration of North Koreans was also considered a threat to national security and in this respect Russia could be considered a source of unrest as it was an attractive final or transit destination for some escapees. Finally, the North Korean authorities were very suspicious towards even authorized Russian economic activities near some country's shore areas: in particular, there were cases in which Russian ships sailing close to the cape of Musudan (a DPRK rocket launching site) were escorted to a nearby North Korean port for investigations lasting several weeks<sup>85</sup>.

From the Russian perspective, North Korea was unpredictable neighbor capable of unleashing dangerous military conflict near the Russian border, or of exploiting Russian vulnerabilities to its own profit. In the 1990s, Pyongyang was, not without reason, accused of attempts at luring Russian specialists in sensitive technologies<sup>86</sup>, illegally purchasing secret weapons by bribing Russian officers in Primorsky krai<sup>87</sup>, smuggling nuclear materials and technologies across the Russia-DPRK border<sup>88</sup>, organizing 'grey' or corrupt schemes of trafficking Russian raw materials for trifling sums<sup>89</sup>, arranging contract killings in Russian territory<sup>90</sup>, encouraging poaching in Russian territorial waters<sup>91</sup>, exploiting leased forest areas<sup>92</sup>, and, particularly, of organizing the large-scale traffic of heroin. It was argued that heroin was deliberately produced in the country to provide it with a source of hard currency. After 1989 there were several cases when large consignments of heroin or raw opium were seized at the border or already inside Russia (including at North Korean logging camps, viewed as important drug-

<sup>85</sup> Filippovskiy, Ernest and Ivanov, Andrey (2005) "Russian Ship Entered Secret Waters of the DPRK [in Russian]," *Kommersant.ru*, 20 December, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/636960>; Vl.ru (2008) 'The "Lidia Demesh" Ship Arrived to the Port of Vladivostok,' February 28, <http://www.newsvl.ru/vlad/2008/02/28/46694/>

<sup>86</sup> *Rossiiskaya gazeta* (1993) 'A Purge in the Russian Security Ministry Is not Going to Happen, [in Russian],' November 13.

<sup>87</sup> Lents, Yevgeniya (1995) 'Ideas of Juche Are Living and Developing [in Russian],' *AiF-Dalinfo*, December 13.

<sup>88</sup> *Zolotoy Rog* (1999) 'Governmental "Kindness" Puts Local Customs out of Business [in Russian],' October 29; *Regions.ru* (2003) 'Far Eastern Doctors are Afraid of The Threat of a Nuclear War [in Russian],' February 14.

<sup>89</sup> Reznik, Boris (1995) 'Mysteries of the House on Dikopoltseva Street [in Russian],' *Izvestiya*, August 23.

<sup>90</sup> In particular, North Korean special services were suspected of being behind the murders of a family of U.S. ethnic Korean missionaries in the city of Khabarovsk in 1995 and of a public affairs officer for information and culture from the South Korean Consulate General in the city of Vladivostok in 1996. See: Reznik, Boris (1995) 'Who Killed American Missionaries in the City of Khabarovsk? [in Russian],' *Izvestiya*, August 11; Vladivostok (1996) 'The Murder of South Korean Diplomat: Criminal Affair or Politics? [in Russian]' October 5.

<sup>91</sup> *Gudok* (2005) 'Thorns for the "Terney" Ship [in Russian],' December 20.

<sup>92</sup> Reznik, 'North Korean Heroin Trail'.

trafficking hubs by some in the Russian media<sup>93</sup>). The seizure operation conducted by Russian special services in 1994 was the most widely publicized. During the course of this operation, Russian officers pretending to be Russian mafia members having corruption ties with border guards apprehended two North Koreans with some eight kilograms of heroin near the border checkpoint of Khasan. It was noteworthy that the consignment of heroin was passed to drug traffickers by high-standing North Korean military officers on the DPRK's side of the border in plain view of the Russian officers participating in this special operation<sup>94</sup>. However, after 2000 and the improvement in Russia-DPRK relations, there have been virtually no publicized cases of consignments of North Korean drugs being seized in Russia. Instead, there were just small-scale seizures of diazepam (a psychotropic medication easily available in the DPRK but prohibited in Russia) tablets brought by North Korean workers<sup>95</sup>.

Apart from representing the DPRK as an unscrupulous actor ready to exploit Russian weaknesses to achieve its tactical purposes by any (including criminal) means, some authors went further in suspecting Pyongyang's geopolitical conspiracies. Some accused the DPRK of encouraging demographic expansion, maintaining that the numerous Korean labor immigrants, together with the returning descendants of repressed Koreans, could change the demographic balance in Primorsky krai, and ultimately detach it from Russia<sup>96</sup>. This conspiracy theory was supported even in some officially approved geopolitical textbooks, whose authors maintained that the 'actual' number of labor immigrants from North Korea to the Russian Far East was some 3 million<sup>97</sup>, even though official figures put it at between five and fifty thousand in various years. Another kind of conspiracy theory assigned to North Korea was as an accomplice in alleged Chinese plans to gain control over the estuary of the Tumen River in order to build a major port in the area and thus marginalize the ports of Primorsky krai (actually, it would be hardly possible to exploit such a Chinese port without Russian permission to use the river for navigation). This issue emerged during the course of the Russian-Chinese demarcation of the Tumen River in the 1990s,

---

<sup>93</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>94</sup> Gurko, Fiodor (1997) 'The Korean Syndrome [in Russian],' *Interfax-AiF*, June 16.

<sup>95</sup> See for example: *Vl.ru* (2008) 'A Citizen of the DPRK Was Apprehended with Potent Drugs, [in Russian]' March 28, <http://www.newsvl.ru/vlad/2008/03/28/kndr/>

<sup>96</sup> See for example the opinion of Major General A. Vassiliev quoted in: Zabrovskaya, Larissa (2003) 'Russian Koreans and Their Relationship with Ancestral Homeland (1990-2003) [in Russian],' *Problemy Dal'nego Vostoka* 5.

<sup>97</sup> See for example Komleva, Natalya (2008) *Fundamentals of Geopolitics* [in Russian], Yekaterinburg: Ural State University Publishing House.

leading to serious open conflict between the government of Primorsky krai (resisting any minor territorial concessions to China<sup>98</sup>) and the federal center (insisting that minor territorial concessions wouldn't allow China to build a port<sup>99</sup>). During the first half of the 2000s, when North Korean levee protection works accelerated the erosion of the Russian bank, some publicists framed the challenge as a Chinese-North Korean conspiracy aiming to broaden the river, shift the border, and ultimately allow China to build a large sea port in the area<sup>100</sup>.

North Korea was suspected of being not only a malevolent actor but also a potential source of disaster. The two most widely discussed catastrophic scenarios (sometimes combined) were an uncontrolled inflow of a huge number of refugees into Russia (as a result of hunger or of a war)<sup>101</sup> or an intra-Korean military conflict with the use of nuclear weapons near the border with Russia leading to the nuclear contamination of nearby Russian territory<sup>102</sup> and the occasional fall of missiles on Primorsky krai<sup>103</sup>. Among other catastrophic scenarios was the cross-border spread of epidemic diseases (e.g. cholera in mid-1990s<sup>104</sup>).

It is also noteworthy that alarmist representations framed some North Korean borderland territories as hotbeds of particular dangers. North Korean unpredictability was already a reason for extending some passenger and cargo transportation routes between Russia and Asian countries (especially with South Korea) in order that they bypass the DPRK's air space and territorial waters<sup>105</sup>. Similarly, the adjacent Hamgyong province was framed by alarmists as some kind of sinister terra incognita, a hotbed of potential dangers for Russia that included opium plantations<sup>106</sup> and secret military targets that might be attacked in the case of military conflict.

<sup>98</sup> See for example: Nazdratenko, Yevgeniy (1996) 'Fog over the Tumen River [in Russian],' *Trud*, May 16.

<sup>99</sup> See for example: Reutov, Aleksandr (1997) 'Unresolved Border Problems May Lead to Confrontation [in Russian],' *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, January 30.

<sup>100</sup> Buslayev, Vassiliy (2005) 'Billion of Rubles for Border Inviolability [in Russian],' *Yezhednevnye novosti*, July 15, <http://daily.novostivl.ru/archive/?f=ec&t=050715ec05>

<sup>101</sup> See for example: Mal'tsev, Aleksandr (1997) 'Borderlines are Drawn by Politicians, Border Guards just Protect Them [in Russian],' *Vladivostok*, April 1; Ostrovskiy, Andrey (2003) 'Will Refugees Stream into Primorye? [in Russian]' *Vladivostok*, March 7.

<sup>102</sup> Latypov, Dmitry and Lukanin, Mikhail (2009) 'Hiroshima for the Far East [in Russian],' *Trud*, May 26, [http://www.trud.ru/article/26-05-2009/141246\\_xirosima\\_dlja\\_dalnego\\_vostoka.html](http://www.trud.ru/article/26-05-2009/141246_xirosima_dlja_dalnego_vostoka.html)

<sup>103</sup> *Interfax* (2009) 'We Shoot It Down if It Comes [in Russian],' June 19, <http://www.interfax.ru/russia/86025>

<sup>104</sup> Beloivan, Larissa (1995) 'Departures of Russian Tourists to the DPRK Were Stopped because of the Outbreak of Cholera There [in Russia],' *ITAR TASS*, September 14.

<sup>105</sup> (2010) 'Russian Far Easterners are Closely Monitoring the Korean Conflict,' *Pyatyi kanal*, May 26.

<sup>106</sup> Lents, Yevgeniya (1996) 'DPRK's Governmental Programme: Opium for the Big Brother,' *AiF – Dalinfo*, November 27.

From the human security perspective, Russia periodically contributed humanitarian aid to North Korea affected by hunger and natural disasters<sup>107</sup> but, at the same time, assisted North Korea in committing grave human rights violations. As was mentioned before, the exchange of Russian goods and services for North Korean unqualified labor was typical of Russia-DPRK economic cooperation. Even worse, while there were many cases of North Korean refugees fleeing to Russia across the DPRK-Russian border (or via China) or defecting from North Korean logging camps in Russia, the majority of such refugees were routinely (though not without exceptions) extradited to North Korea (or to China, who also routinely extradites such refugees back to the DPRK), despite them being heavily punished and often sentenced to death for such attempts to leave the country. While officially Russia justifies its practice of returning North Korean refugees through its commitment to existing bilateral agreements<sup>108</sup>, one unofficial explanation emphasizes Russian reluctance to create a precedent of sheltering many refugees and thus provoking large-scale North Korean immigration<sup>109</sup>. In this case alarmist sentiments provide a justification for offering cross-border assistance to grave human rights violations in the DPRK.

## Conclusion

Despite its small length, the 17-kilometre Russian-Korean border does matter. Soon after it initially appeared, it emerged as a funnel for increasing Korean immigration to Russia. After World War II, the existence of this border aided the USSR in shaping the political configuration of the Korean peninsula and building a railway allowed the Soviet Union to offer stable economic support for the regime in Pyongyang. In the post-Soviet period the very existence of this border has become the grounds for planning large-scale transportation projects to open up Eurasian railroads for South Korea, as well as a major factor increasing the cost-effectiveness of such

---

<sup>107</sup> See for example: *Rg.ru* (2014) 'Russia Supplied the North Korea with 23 tons of Wheat as Humanitarian Assistance [in Russian],' December 25, <http://www.rg.ru/2014/12/25/pshenitsa-anons.html>

<sup>108</sup> See for example: Kholodov, Sergey (1998) 'Eastern Border [in Russian],' *Moskovskaya pravda*, May 28; *Vl.ru* (2010) 'A Fugitive from the North Korea was Kidnapped in Vladivostok [in Russian],' March 21, <http://www.news1.ru/vlad/2010/03/21/beglec/>; Podrabinek, Aleksandr (2014) 'Russia will Extradite Refugees to the North Korea,' *Imrussia.ru*, October 30.

<sup>109</sup> See for example: Kalachinskiy, Andrey (1999) 'Refugee Camps in Primorye? [in Russian],' *Novye Izvestiya*, December 2.

Russia-DPRK projects as the modernization of North Korea's transportation infrastructure in exchange for natural resources and the joint utilization of the port of Rajin.

While being a border of opportunities, the area between North Korea and Russia has historically also been an area of frequent and dramatic changes. Although the borderline itself has remained stable since 1860, the states, political regimes, and communities separated by it have changed many times. At various periods, relations between the neighboring states have been friendly, hostile, or cool, and the share of Koreans on the Russian side increased rapidly until the 1930s before being abruptly reduced to almost zero. Cross-border and borderland infrastructure was very poor until the 1950, rapidly developed after this before beginning to degrade in the 1990s. Dynamic and unexpected changes on both sides of the border will continue to shape cross-border interaction in the foreseeable future, particularly if the North Korean or Russian political regime undergoes serious change or if some ambitious cross-border project becomes a powerful driver for bilateral or multilateral cross-border cooperation.

Still, cooperation across the Russia-DPRK border remains weak, poorly diversified, and strongly constrained by North Korean insolvency, the lack of competitiveness of its goods, and the over-centralization of its decision-making processes, coupled with limited Russian investment opportunities. While at the level of official rhetoric friendship and mutual importance are stressed, this is mixed with latent sentiments of mistrust and alarmism towards one another. The small and unstable trade between the two countries (as well as that between Primorsky krai and the DPRK) testify that both sides have largely failed to find a means of efficient cooperation in new post-Soviet conditions. Bilateral official cross-border contacts remain remarkably asymmetric as the North Korean side is usually represented by central government officials, although this can slow down the decision-making process and suppress any local initiatives. Transport communication between the two countries was weak even in the Soviet period (as no motorway was built across the border) and has begun to degrade in the post-Soviet era. Large bilateral infrastructure development projects, if successful, could boost bilateral turnover for some time but at least moderate liberalization of the North Korean regime is needed to make this cooperation more diversified, inclusive, dynamic, and beneficial for borderland communities.

Serghei Golunov, Kyushu University