State of Uncertainty

Educating the First Railroaders in Central Sakha (Yakutiya)

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Abstract

In July 2019, the village of Nizhniy Bestyakh in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutiya), the Russian Far East, was finally able to celebrate the opening of an eagerly awaited railroad passenger connection. Through analysis of rich ethnographic data, this article explores the “state of uncertainty” caused by repeated delays in construction of the railroad prior to this and focuses on the effect of these delays on students of a local transportation college. This college prepares young people for railroad jobs and careers, promising a steady income and a place in the Republic’s wider modernization project. The research also reveals how the state of uncertainty led to unforeseen consequences, such as the seeding of doubt among students about their desire to be a part of the Republic’s industrialization drive.

Keywords

economic development, education, infrastructure supply, planning, railways, Russia, uncertainty, youth

When I came to the village of Nizhniy Bestyakh in April 2015 to do fieldwork, I happened to be the only guest at Anya’s guesthouse. “What are you doing here?” she asked. “I want to study the railroad development and its effects on the people,” I responded. Amused, yet skeptical, Anya replied, “I am afraid you won’t find anything to study here, the railroad is not really working. Everybody prepared for the opening, the young got educated and now . . . nothing.”¹

While the existence of railway connections may be taken for granted in some parts of the world, few places today offer the opportunity to observe the installation of a new railway line. One such case is the Amur-Yakutsk Mainline (AYaM) in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutiya) in the Russian Far East. The idea of constructing a railroad to link the Republic of Sakha to the southern lines—the Trans-Siberian Railway and the Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM)—first arose in the 1930s, as a way to overcome distance and to enable the extraction of the Republic’s rich natural resources.² Yet the construction of the AYaM has been characterized by lengthy delays. Although freight trains had been running

on this section since 2014, the promised passenger service—which would generate many more jobs and opportunities than the freight service—was delayed for a further five years.³ It was July 2019 by the time the railroad passenger connection between Nizhniy Bestyakh—the village at the heart of this article—and the south of the Republic of Sakha was finally opened. The delays generated a state of uncertainty in the community of Nizhniy Bestyakh, as individuals and institutions—such as the transportation college this article focuses on—were oriented toward the opening of that passenger connection in 2014.

The Republic of Sakha (Yakutiya)⁴ covers 20 percent of the territory of the Russian Federation. The two largest population groups in the Republic are Russians and indigenous Sakha (Russian designation: Yakut). The latter are the dominant linguistic group in the central regions of the Republic of Sakha. The Republic supports the federal budget through the exploitation of its abundant natural resources. This is why the development of railroad infrastructure and the transformation of local society are a priority for the Russian government.⁵ However, this development has triggered fears that precious *taiga*⁶ forest environments and rural ways of life could be destroyed. These continuing fears are informed by the difficult center-periphery relationship (between the Russian state and the Republic) and prior experiences of Russian companies exploiting the Republic's resources. Very often, local rural populations have been left with distorted landscapes and polluted rivers, while large financial gains have gone elsewhere.

Nizhniy Bestyakh had a population of 3,638 in 2015.⁷ It is located in the Megino-Kangalasskiy *Ulus* (District) and lies on the great Lena River, on the opposite bank to the city of Yakutsk—the capital of the Republic. Nizhniy Bestyakh sits at the junction of various roads and the Lena shipping route. As a result, the village has become a hub and gatekeeper for goods and the transportation of those goods. The AYam railway spur therefore provides an essential new link between the central and the southern part of the Republic of Sakha and Russia's major east-west rail routes, and it is therefore a transformational development for the region. Because of this potential, the railway had huge significance in the minds of local residents long before it actually opened.

This article explores the state of uncertainty caused by the lack of progress with construction, and particularly focuses on Nizhniy Bestyakh's transportation college and its students. The college is tightly related to the development of the railroad because it was established (in 2011) specifically to prepare the necessary personnel for the operation of the railroad. The delays in construction had a tremendous impact on the college students, who had been lured to the region by the promise of stable incomes, secure jobs, and the prospect of becoming part of the drive to modernize and industrialize the Republic. The students had mostly come from distant—largely rural—parts of the Republic

Figure 1. Map of the AYaM region. Map by Alexis Sancho-Reinoso. The number in brackets indicates the year of opening of the railroad connection.

of Sakha, and they became disheartened as the infrastructure developments slowed down and not all the promised job placements materialized.

This article proposes the notion of a “state of uncertainty” to conceptualize the situation of the students, who found themselves in a liminal phase of waiting while being educated for the promised jobs that failed to be created on time. I argue that “states of uncertainty” frequently occur during the realization of infrastructure projects when there is a significant mismatch between promised outcomes and what happens in reality, including the failure to meet planned deadlines. The article elaborates first the reasons behind the state of uncertainty that the college students experienced. Second, it asks what the state of uncertainty afforded to the students and how they coped with that condition. Additionally, the paper shows how the Russian state, the Republic of Sakha, and Yakutian Railways organized and carried out the recruitment and preparation of personnel for the new Amur-Yakutsk Mainline. Finally, the study analyzes how the students perceived and performed their ascribed role as the first cohort of railroaders in the central part of the Republic of Sakha.

The data for this article were collected between August 2014 and October 2015⁸ in the village of Nizhniy Bestyakh, as well as in the capital, Yakutsk, and its environs. This was a particularly critical time because of the expectation and uncertainty around the construction and opening of the passenger rail route. This article provides an ethnographic account of the transportation college and the village during this period. The data were collected by deploying a grounded-theory approach and by applying a set of ethnographic methods including: participant observation in the village, the college, and beyond; ten interviews with residents, four interviews with teachers and directors of the transportation college, eight interviews with politicians, and three interviews with representatives of Yakutian Railways; two focus group sessions with eighteen students of the transportation college; and around fifty informal conversations. During my fieldwork, it was completely unclear when the passenger connection would open, and therefore the field material reflects the uncertainty experienced at that time by the students and other local residents. This article was submitted as a draft around the date of the opening of the passenger line. While it was not possible to return after that point to conduct further field research, I followed the situation via online sources, in order to keep up to date with the situation.

State of Uncertainty: Theorizing Infrastructure and Human Responses to Indeterminate Futures

Railroads are a type of transportation infrastructure and have the capacity to transform entire societies by powerfully reconfiguring people’s living condi-

tions and life chances, “knowledge and discourse.”⁹ Railways configure new material and social relations,¹⁰ and once installed, beyond their capacity to carry people and goods, railways have the power to transport ideologies and new ontologies.¹¹ They produce “novel configurations of the world,”¹² such as—in this case study—learning how to professionally and socially perform railroading. Brian Larkin introduced the notion of “poetics” to refer to infrastructure’s ability to reach out beyond its technical function,¹³ form subjects, and produce social effects.¹⁴ I consider education, careers, and biographies to be examples of these infrastructural “poetics.” Penelope Harvey and Hannah Knox refer to the “enchantment” experienced by people in response to the impact of new infrastructure.¹⁵

Since the nineteenth century, infrastructural developments have been “conduits of power”¹⁶ and, as such, a key focus of government activity, where “sociality, governance and politics . . . , and institutions and aspirations are formed, reformed, and performed.”¹⁷ Having its advent in the Enlightenment period, the concept of “infrastructure” is tightly interrelated with the “evolutionary ways of thinking”¹⁸ of states and the idea of directing specific social groups towards certain economic sectors, by which states would gain greater profits. Larkin argues that infrastructure is “intimately caught up with the sense of shaping modern society and realizing the future.”¹⁹ Roads and railroads do not just hold the promise of a region’s economic development, but, as Dimitris Dalakoglou argues, roads are “formidable element[s] of a completely new sociocultural condition.”²⁰ For example, the development of the railroad played a major role in the history of the colonization of North America.²¹ Jonathan Matusitz even depicts the railroad as a “way of perceiving the world and a means whereby the world could be ruled.”²² Nikhil Anand, Hannah Appel, and Akhil Gupta argue that infrastructures are state-driven “technologies,” through which “development, progress, and modernity” can be expressed.²³ A number of scholarly contributions to railroad research have further informed this study, including research on the relationship between human movement, employment, and railroads in Siberia and the Russian Far East.²⁴

This article explores and develops the concept of a “state of uncertainty” in the context of infrastructure developments. A “state of uncertainty” is created when there is a mismatch between promises (for instance, the promise of completed infrastructure within a particular time frame) and reality (be it delayed construction or the failure to implement a project altogether). A “state of uncertainty” may have a powerful impact on the actions and the mental state of people caught up in it. I distinguish between “uncertainties” and a “state of uncertainty.” The “state” implies a stronger temporal component than “uncertainties.” The notion of a “state of uncertainty” refers to a liminal phase characterized by an indeterminate temporal framework, while at the

same time being a condition of not knowing what to expect and not being able to plan effectively for the future. Furthermore, a “state of uncertainty” is a temporal condition characterized by a collective or individual deficiency of information that generates a sense of “in-betweenness” and the feeling of being in limbo.

A “state of uncertainty” is one of the unplanned consequences when infrastructure developments fail to materialize as expected. Infrastructure developments are, unsurprisingly, often accompanied by uncertainty, as they hold the potential of great opportunity and transformation. The notion of “uncertainty” often features in studies of infrastructure development.²⁵ Harvey and Knox, for example, describe local people’s “radical uncertainty” caused by new road construction in the Peruvian Andes.²⁶ Harvey, Jensen, and Morita recently claimed that “infrastructural formations always to some degree remain out of sync with each other—they may also run in parallel or even work against one other.”²⁷ I argue that, when promises and reality are out of sync, a state of uncertainty is likely to set in and it can engender a state of emergency for individuals or groups.

Life is full of uncertainties. Andy Alaszewski states that “all societies have to cope with uncertainty, the essential unpredictability of the future and account for past misfortunes.”²⁸ Elizabeth Cooper and David Pratten point out that “uncertainty” is likely to appear when there is a “lack of absolute knowledge, the inability to predict the outcome of events, or to establish facts about phenomena and connections with assurance.”²⁹ In this context, Cooper and Pratten relate uncertainty to “indeterminacy,” “ambivalence,” “confusion,” “doubtfulness” and “hope.”³⁰ Sandra Calkins characterizes “uncertainty” as “the lack of assurance, the principal openness and indeterminacy of the future.”³¹ Uncontrollability is another important quality inherent in uncertainties.³² Cooper and Pratten state that “[u]ncertainty is a social resource and can be used to negotiate insecurity, conduct and create relationships, and act as a source for imagining the future with the hopes and fears this entails.”³³ Calkins argues that “uncertainty” offers people the chance to “pragmatically cooperate and [people] seem to agree on what is happening” or it may lead to “fear” and “conflict.”³⁴ Individuals confronted with uncertainty are forced to react to that situation, which demands reflexivity and sometimes “experimenting.”³⁵

This article considers the railroad construction from southern Sakha to Nizhniy Bestyakh as a key element of the center-driven aspirations for the industrialization of the Republic, and how this was perceived among students from mostly remote rural communities being educated to become the first railroad workers in central Sakha. Central to the study is the effect that delayed construction and the resulting “state of uncertainty” had on the students themselves and their view of their own role in the modernization of their Republic.

The Transportation College and the Promise of a Bright Future

The Amur-Yakutsk Mainline (AYaM) development transformed the entire village of Nizhniy Bestyakh, even before the passenger connection was opened, because of the establishment of institutions such as the transportation college, and the multitude of promises that were made. These promises ranged from economic upswings to new jobs and comfortable housing. The promise of modernity, connectivity, and prosperity aroused a lot of anxiety about environmental damage, an influx of migrants, and the prospect of change, but also created an atmosphere of enthusiasm and, indeed, “enchantment.”³⁶ The railroad development plan, produced by the government of the Republic of Sakha, anticipated the transformation of the village into a bustling city of twenty thousand people by 2020.³⁷ By 2015, the population was still less than four thousand people, but Nizhniy Bestyakh had become the district center of the sparsely populated Megino-Kangalasskiy *Ulus* (District). For centuries, the local economy has been dominated by small-scale agriculture and forestry.³⁸ Nevertheless, the local official responsible for economic development explained in an interview that the district had recently been refocused on new transportation and industrial sectors.³⁹ Russia and its predecessor—the Soviet Union—have often transformed and engineered entire societies through the powerful tool of infrastructure development.⁴⁰ The Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM), finalized in the 1980s, was intended to populate and industrialize Eastern Siberia and the Russian Far East. During the Soviet era, the Republic of Sakha experienced a historic “wave” of turning peasants into industrial workers. Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov cynically called these attempts by the Soviet government to turn hunter-gatherers, pastoralists, and peasants into “modern” citizens the “gift of modernity.”⁴¹

A major element of the infrastructural and social transformation of Nizhniy Bestyakh and the entire region was the establishment of the transportation college, which would educate and produce personnel to perform the tasks vital to the operation of the railroad.⁴² Since the railroad was a completely new phenomenon in Central Sakha, there were neither railroaders nor corresponding educational facilities before 2011. There was also an educational program that aimed to prepare schoolchildren for a future with a fully operational railroad. Months before the college opened in September 2011, it intensively promoted its new educational facility in order to recruit potential students. This was also actively supported by the government of the Republic of Sakha (*Il Tumen*). Advertisements in newspapers, online, and on TV were solely based on promises about the modernization of the Republic and generated hype around a still-small village.⁴³ Education in the college was presented as a free ticket to a guaranteed job on the railroad as well as a satisfactory stable income. For example, a popular news platform informed its readers that Nizhniy Bestyakh alone would require twelve hundred railroad

workers.⁴⁴ On the day the college opened, the government of the Republic announced that, by 2015, they would require more than four thousand railroad specialists.⁴⁵ Indeed, the promise of a stable job and a good life sounded attractive for young people in the Republic of Sakha, given the fact that in 2010 the unemployment rate among young people between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine was as high as 41 percent⁴⁶ in the Republic as a whole, and even higher in rural areas. The advertisements and promises were successful, and around 750 young people applied to the college in the first year, a teacher explained. In the first year, the majority of applicants even had to be rejected, owing to the college's limited capacity. The promises were still reflected in the students' answers in 2015, when I spent time in the college in 2015 and asked them about their motivation for studying there. They usually said the railroad was *perspektivno* (promising) and repeated the promise-narrative of development, modernization, and the career opportunities on the railroad, as if they wanted to hold on to an illusion and all the promises that had initially attracted them to the college, even while acknowledging that the schedule for the developments and the creation of job placements would not be met.

The college became the mediator between the Russian government—and its grand plans for the industrial transformation of the region—and the col-

Figure 2. Advertisement for the transportation college, photo was taken by the author in April 2015.

lege students. As such, the college became a major site for the transformation of the—mainly rural—youth into railroad workers. Particularly in the early days, the students, the college, and the Republic had high expectations. Yet while the students expected others to fulfill their promises, during the opening ceremony in 2011, the President of the Republic, Egor Borisov, stated in his address to the students, “[T]he destiny of the branch to which you will dedicate all your working life will entirely depend on you.”⁴⁷ In a similar way, Georgiy Borisov, the director of the college, explained in 2015 that the students had the great chance to found a tradition of railroading in their families, and they would therefore be remembered as pioneers.⁴⁸

The Russian government and the Sakha government have financed education at the college,⁴⁹ and as a major site of the promised industrial and social transformation, the college was equipped accordingly. When I first visited the college in 2014, I was astounded by the building, its size, and its comfortable interior. At that time, it was by far the most prominent building in the village and therefore itself had become a monument to the repeated modernization promise. The college offers its students a modern student residence with central heating and running water, as well as a fitness room and a sports hall—amenities that students who grew up mostly in small villages were not used to, given that small villages in the Republic of Sakha usually do not even have sewers or hot running water. “We did everything to allow them to adapt quickly,” explained the college director.⁵⁰ One would assume that these modern, well-equipped spaces would also contribute to the students’ motivation to adapt to a new lifestyle and become proponents of the promised new modern railroad era themselves. The glossy floorings are alternately decorated with large traditional Sakha designs and railroad tracks, which materially depict the intended confluence of Sakha ontology and industrialization. The soundscape is noticeable as well, as breaks are signaled by the sound of an accelerating locomotive. “They should get used to that,” a young Sakha teacher commented during one of my visits to the college.⁵¹

During my fieldwork in 2015, 239 male and 42 female students from twenty-one different districts of the Republic were studying in the college.⁵² Before they took up their studies, a majority of the students had never seen a train in real life.⁵³ According to the college, 95 percent of the students identified themselves as ethnically Sakha.⁵⁴ The college offered five disciplines, one in the automobile sector (car maintenance and repair) and four in the railroad sector: the organization of freight carriage, management of railroad transportation, railroad construction and maintenance, and technical maintenance and repair of locomotives and wagons. The education involved theoretical classes and practical training, and employed computer simulations and other learning devices to help the students imagine real tasks such as driving locomotives, loading cargo, or parking trains. By 2015, Nizhniy Bestyakh and its community had widely integrated the college and were using its spaces for all

kinds of public events. At the same time, local authorities presented the college as a major showpiece and as evidence of the successful modernization of Central Sakha, even though the initial enthusiasm had, for some, already turned to disenchantment.

An Infrastructural State of Uncertainty and the Chronology of Delay

In the early days of the college, it enjoyed great popularity. However, for the study year 2015/16—when I did most of my fieldwork—75 percent fewer young people applied to the college than in the first year. What had happened? According to the initial plans of 2004, the railroad should have been fully operational by 2013,⁵⁵ and all the construction and institutions related to the railroad were oriented to that date. While the transportation college and the neatly designed railroad station were opened on time,⁵⁶ one major element of this “infrastructural formation”⁵⁷—the passenger service—was not. When I started my investigations in the summer of 2014, the freight connection had just been opened and the former Minister of Finance of the Republic, Aleksandr Kugaevskiy, told me that the passenger connection would open in 2015.⁵⁸ When I went back for further research in spring 2015, it emerged that Transstroy, the company responsible for the passenger connection, had gone bankrupt.⁵⁹ While Transstroy and the Russian Federation blamed each other, the construction was abandoned and gossip regarding what had happened to all the money gripped the village. The college had produced the first cohort of railroaders by 2014, but the construction was severely delayed by unforeseen difficulties during construction on permafrost and related additional costs. Transstroy’s bankruptcy also meant the financing was suddenly completely unclear. Additionally, not only was the budget badly calculated and questionable, the proposed timeframe and the ambitious plans for the rapid industrialization and transformation of the region and its population had turned out to be unrealistic. No matter who I asked about the passenger connection, nobody knew any new dates. The teachers and students were especially helpless: “We were told the opening would happen in August 2015, now it is October and it turns out the information was false.”⁶⁰ Although he himself had to cope with the confusing and ambivalent situation of uncertainty, Stepan, a student from Olekminskiy District faced annoying questions from friends and family: “Everybody keeps asking when the passenger trains will start running. Do they think that I study at the train station or what?”⁶¹

Owing to the delayed opening of the passenger service, a limited number of jobs were created in 2015 and 2016. Yakutian Railways had promised 120 new jobs after the finalization of the construction activities and the full operation of the Nizhniy Bestyakh railway station.⁶² By 2015, the station should further-

more have been expanded by a huge transport and logistics center creating sixty additional jobs.⁶³ Yet continued delays meant that not all of the college's first graduates were able to find jobs on the railroad as initially promised. No passengers meant fewer trains to be monitored, driven, and repaired. It also meant stations did not need to be fully staffed. "When the station in Nizhniy Bestyakh starts working, the majority of our graduates will stay here, because there will be more jobs,"⁶⁴ explained the director of the college. By 2015, the second cohort of railroad students had become restless as they realized that reality was no longer in sync with the promised developments and jobs. In that phase of complete uncertainty, newspaper articles continued to praise the endless prospect of railroad development,⁶⁵ in order to promote optimism and confidence, until President Borisov announced in October 2015 that the passenger trains would not be operating in the near future.⁶⁶

The director of the college acknowledged that Yakutian Railways was doing its best to employ the graduates who wanted to work elsewhere in the Yakutian Railways network, but jobs could not be created, especially in and around Nizhniy Bestyakh station.⁶⁷ My analysis of conversations with eighteen students in October 2015 shows that seven of them planned or intended to work on the railroad and four of them stipulated that they wanted to work in Nizhniy Bestyakh. Those four students were in the first or second years of their studies and therefore still had some time left until they actually required these jobs. Nevertheless, they expressed doubts about whether they would be able to work in Nizhniy Bestyakh.⁶⁸ One of them was Ol'ga from Yakutsk, a first-year Russian student of the discipline "organization of freight carriage and management of railroad transportation"—the only discipline open to female students. She was passionate about the idea of a career at the station in Nizhniy Bestyakh, as she liked her studies and the proximity to her home town was important. In order to pursue such a career, she told me, one needs to start as a freight clerk, prove oneself at the job, and pass exams to one day become a duty yardmaster—the most lucrative position in her profession. She still hoped for a quick finalization of the railroad, yet she was uncertain about her chances in the job market, as without the passenger connection much fewer clerks were needed. If she could not start her professional career in the railroad sector, she thought it would be feasible to work in Yakutsk in another professional field and to return to the railroad later, but she preferred to start her career immediately after graduation. At that time, she did not consider leaving for other regions in the Republic of Sakha or in Russia, as she wanted to live *blizhe k gorodu* (close to Yakutsk).⁶⁹ Three other students said that they preferred to work in Nizhniy Bestyakh or very close by.⁷⁰ As stated already, Yakutian Railways tried to offer jobs to graduate students, but they were often in the south of the Republic of Sakha, where the railroad was fully operational. More than half of the students who intended to work for the railroad wanted to work in Nizhniy Bestyakh. Vladislav Gorokhov, a young teacher, explained

that a majority of their students did not want to settle down in the south of the Republic of Sakha, in cities such as Neryungri, Tommot, or Aldan—places where the railroad was established at least a decade ago. The south of the Republic of Sakha is commonly known as being different from the central regions, as the majority population is Russian. “You know, the south is *russskaya zemlya* (Russian land),” he said. A majority of their students have problems imagining themselves living and working there because life there is different.⁷¹ As mentioned above, 95 percent of the students were Sakha in the study year 2015/16 and therefore Sakha was the native language of most of the college students. Sakha is a Turkic language with no similarity to Russian. Pursuing a career on the railroad requires living in a sphere exclusively dominated by the Russian language. Only three students said they were ready to work in the south. Aleksandra, a student in her third year of study told me that she was originally from Buryatiya, later moved to Neryungri, and she was ready to go to Neryungri again for work.⁷² Two students with a Sakha background stated that they could imagine working in Tommot or Aldan (in the south).⁷³ While other students expressed plans to study in other parts of the Russian Federation, no student planned to work on the railroad outside of the Republic of Sakha.

In the study year 2015/16, the majority of students (281 in total) at the transportation college came from places further away from railroad tracks, as only forty-six students (15.97 percent) originated from a district connected to the railroad.⁷⁴ For those students, it was theoretically possible in the future to stay in their home region and work for the railroad. However, 113 students (39.27 percent) came from districts that were very far away from a railroad connection. For example, four college students were from Allaykhovskiy District (1,300 kilometers northeast of Yakutsk by air) and ten students were from Suntarskiy District (650 kilometers west of Yakutsk by air).⁷⁵ Flights within the Republic of Sakha (for example from Yakutsk to Nyurba or Suntar) usually cost more than flights to Moscow, which would make regular visits impossible should they find work on the railroad. As Anand, Appel, and Gupta claim, any infrastructural future builds upon a certain past.⁷⁶ For many students from rural villages, the divergence between their childhood and youth in the *ulusy* (districts) and their present and future life as industrial railroad employees felt overwhelming, the director of the college explained. He added that the college regularly faced the problem that students preferred to return home after graduation,⁷⁷ despite diminished economic prospects in rural areas and a tendency toward rural exodus.⁷⁸ Moreover, there was a preference for work in familiar sectors over a career on the railroad.⁷⁹ The teachers, as well as the college director, claimed that for their students it was hard to accept a career in the transportation industry, as their parents and grandparents had pursued other professions, although the college tried to convince them to pursue careers in the transportation industry.⁸⁰ As the college director said:

“Some of our students intend to work not in the railroad sector, but in other economic sectors. They think that the railroad is not theirs.”⁸¹ Students who were considering returning “home” could apply the skills they had acquired in the college and take up other jobs or live from farming. Students from rural areas often help out on their families’ farms, which requires a lot of time, particularly during summer. These activities are incompatible with a career on the railroad, one teacher explained, since the railroad company stipulated when the workers took free time and holidays.⁸² One example of a potential returner is Vadim from Olekminskiy District, 600 kilometers away from Nizhniy Bestyakh, whom I met in the college. He expressed his doubts about his chosen path and made clear that he did not like the railroad work so much and was considering returning home after graduation.⁸³ Thus, the lack of jobs due to the delay was not the only problem, but also the students’ identification with their potential future roles as industrial workers.

Yakutian Railways also began to notice that not every student was suitable for work. For instance, Anatoliy Shsherbak, the manager responsible for personnel at Yakutian Railways, based in Aldan, said that “it was not always possible to turn locals into professional railroad workers.”⁸⁴ The government and Yakutian Railways had anticipated that the young people would quickly adapt to industrial work. During their studies and internships, they realized that work on the railroad was harsh, and it became apparent that not all students would be mentally or physically equipped to cope with the strict schedule and the very long working hours. This highlights the challenges that the government, the college, and the railway company faced in their mission to transform the rural Sakha youth into successful railroaders and an economically more productive workforce for the state to exploit. The director of Yakutian Railways claimed that the students required the “rough education of a railroader, a healthy lifestyle and severe discipline.”⁸⁵ Additionally, students found out that the starting salaries were as low as 5,000–6,000 rubles for a welder and 15,000–17,000 rubles for a logistics manager,⁸⁶ compared to the average wage in Central Sakha of 30,000 rubles in 2015, which further reduced their enthusiasm for their future profession.

The state of uncertainty also offered contingencies to the college students, namely to reconsider their path and search for alternatives. For example, Dzhulustan from Amginskiy District was in the third year of his studies and said he would seek employment in Nizhniy Bestyakh. He was doubtful whether he would have a chance, but he planned to work in a transportation company in the capital Yakutsk as an alternative plan.⁸⁷ Indeed, the college provides the students with knowledge that is useful beyond the railroad network, such as logistics, electrical installation, welding, turning, or repair work. The transportation college supplied Yakutian Railways with workers, but a majority of the graduates went into the army, worked in similar professions, or went to university, according to the director of Yakutian Railways, Vasilii

Shimokhin. This was related not just to the delays and the state of uncertainty they had caused, but also because the railroad did not meet the wishes of every student. “It won’t be easy to anchor this workforce,”⁸⁸ he observed, referring to the exodus of graduates to other fields of activity. Pursuing a higher education was mentioned by a third of the eighteen students I engaged with in the group discussions and informal conversations.

The unfinished railroad connection and a smaller job market than initially expected were not the only reasons for students’ motivation to pursue a further higher education qualification, but also the prospect of better payment and working conditions. The college provides *srednoe obrazovanie* (secondary education), which will allow the graduates to go to university directly after graduation. For example, Aleksey, a Sakha student of the discipline “technical maintenance and repair of locomotives” told me that he did not like his internship in Aldan and therefore planned instead to study at university later.⁸⁹

As the schedule became more and more out of sync with promises and plans in 2015, it became more difficult for the college to keep up the narrative of the success of the railroad and the good reputation of the college in the village as well as to motivate their own students to consider the railroad a trustworthy employer. The director of the college saw a direct relationship between the full exploitation of the railroad—and therefore the realization of the promises—and the belief in the railroad as a future path for the young people of the Republic of Sakha: “I hope that when the railroad is fully operational and the passenger trains are running . . . our indigenous population will accept the railroad as an employer. Currently, I do not feel it.”⁹⁰

My research shows that neither the college students nor the college authorities, residents or politicians doubted the finalization of the railroad and the increased demand of personnel in the future, but the delays caused uncertainties about their temporal dimension. A “state of uncertainty” replaced the promises and expectations, and to escape it, the students began to consider other alternatives. The railway company and the college were confronted more and more frequently by frustrated young people who had rejected the dream of the dazzling new railroad era also because they had decided the railroad was not their destiny. I carried out my fieldwork during a phase of collective disenchantment among the students, as the narratives of modernization and an abundance of well-paid jobs—promoted by promises and advertisements—had fomented impossible expectations, yet students’ lived experiences had failed to meet those expectations.

Conclusion

In this article I have used the concept of a “state of uncertainty” as a conceptual lens through which to analyze the conditions of students at the trans-

portation college in Nizhniy Bestyakh, the Republic of Sakha, as they wait for the much-delayed Amur-Yakutsk Mainline to be completed and long-awaited jobs to be created. Following Anand, Appel, and Gupta, I have discussed the railroad as a powerful “technology of government,”⁹¹ through which the promises of “development, progress, and modernity”⁹² have gripped the village of Nizhniy Bestyakh. Although the railroad would not be fully operational until July 2019, long before then it was permanently influencing people living and working in Nizhniy Bestyakh by affording new social situations and by being a key topic for internal reflections and community gossip, creating both expectation and anxiety. The transportation college became a major site for the intended transformation of an agricultural society into an industrialized one, a place where modern professions were taught and students were meant to internalize industrialized modes of working and capitalist working temporalities. The students were expected to become not only the future railroad elite, but also role models for the new industrial generation as the first Sakha railroaders. The students were initially lured by a multitude of promises, including modernization, prosperity, and connectivity. Yet, the construction delays and the failure of promised jobs to materialize engendered a state of uncertainty among the students who had to find ways to deal with the situation.

In this article, I argue that major infrastructure projects such as the stated construction of the AYAM have great potential to generate a state of uncertainty, and this should be considered in the planning of similar infrastructure developments among other risk aspects in an impact assessment. The state of uncertainty around the AYAM development was caused by several factors, which might be partially characteristic for other grand infrastructure projects. After a phase of collective enthusiasm—or “enchantment”—following great promises, disenchantment set in as the development stalled as a result of over-ambition, poor planning, and poor financial management. In 2015, when I did most of my fieldwork, it had become clear that expectations had become impossible to fulfill in the near future. The state of uncertainty was generated by different types of failure on the part of the planners, investors, and project proponents: the risks of potential delays were insufficiently assessed and addressed, and in some cases may have been deliberately overlooked. In part, the state of uncertainty also came about because of a failure in communication. In Nizhniy Bestyakh, the risk of a delay of construction works was always there, but it was not communicated to ordinary citizens or to the college students.

In this article, I have focused on the effects of these delays on the students of the transportation college in Nizhniy Bestyakh. States of uncertainty force people to question their situation; in this case, it forced the students to question their role in a situation that was externally produced by a giant state-led project. On the one hand, this obscure situation was uncontrollable, as individual students knew that they could not accelerate the construction and

bring forward the opening of the passenger connection. On the other hand, the college students in Nizhniy Bestkyakh were not passive observers of an uncertain situation, rather they took the opportunity to reflect on their future and their chosen career paths. The majority of the young people were not particularly angry or frustrated, but actively started looking for other career opportunities. Nevertheless, as most of the young people came from economically weak rural regions, the disappointment induced by the failed promises was clearly noticeable.

For many students, their experience of internships in the railway industry was additionally confusing. The students were academically capable of learning the professions, but for some students it was significantly more difficult for them to internalize industrialized working modes. For many students, the difference between the occupations of their parents and the railroad work even aggravated the feeling of uncertainty about their chosen career path. This revealed a flawed assumption on the part of the planners—that young people brought up in rural districts could, through education, be transformed into the vanguard of a new industrialization drive in the Republic, in line with the aspirations of the Russian Federation and its president. The construction of the railroad was meant to create the conditions for values and potential to be transferred from the center and enable an outlying region to become more center-like. And yet the state of uncertainty triggered doubt among the young cohorts about their suitability and desire for this industrial future. This undermined the transmission and fulfillment of external values and aspirations, exposing weaknesses in the overall project to industrialize the Republic of Sakha.

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Notes

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