

Research Article

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Permanent temporality and imagined mobilities at the edge: Vocational youth in the Russian Arctic

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Abstract

This article explores how young people in Norilsk – Russia’s largest Arctic city and a global exemplar of industrial monotown development – negotiate their futures amid extreme environmental challenges, social isolation, and economic uncertainty. Drawing on 31 in-depth interviews with vocational students of industrial specialisations, the paper examines the ways in which youth navigate a unique “here” (Norilsk) versus “on the mainland” (the rest of Russia) divide that shapes both lived experience and imagined mobility. The analysis reveals that youth typically approach life in Norilsk as a temporary, but agentic strategy: they seek financial security and work experience locally before considering uncertain migration elsewhere. This calculated “staying,” termed “permanent temporality,” is influenced by limited educational and career opportunities, strong vocational pipelines, and family narratives that valorise the accumulation of a “safety cushion” prior to moving. While Norilsk offers predictability and stability, it is rarely seen as a place for long-term residence or generational settlement. The findings challenge assumptions of Arctic youth passivity or inevitable depopulation, highlighting instead the adaptive agency young people display in a context of structural constraint. The study situates these strategies between broader transformations in Russian education, shifting value attached to vocational and university pathways, and the specific vulnerabilities of Arctic urban environments. The article concludes by discussing the implications for regional policy, urban sustainability, and broader understandings of youth transition and mobility under conditions of global peripherality and rapid socioeconomic change.

Introduction

Youth transitions in the Arctic have become a focal point in contemporary polar research, marking a shift from metro-centric models of uncertainty and mobility to approaches that better capture the distinctive realities of remote, resource-dependent urban peripheries (Harris, 2015; Rozanova-Smith, 2021). Concepts such as “imagined mobility” – the perceived opportunity to construct a different future despite structural constraints (Cuzzocrea & Mandich, 2016) – are crucial for interpreting how youth in peripheral spaces negotiate agency. This is especially salient in Norilsk, Russia’s northernmost major city – a remote industrial Arctic monotown whose early development is tied to Soviet-era industrial priorities and forced-labour infrastructures of the Stalinist period – where young people navigate life at the edge of habitability while orienting themselves toward often uncertain prospects “on the mainland.”

The Russian context is marked by a strong cultural expectation that formal education serves as a key prerequisite for economic independence, rooted in Soviet-era centralised job allocation (Chernova & Shpakovskaya, 2023; Konstantinovskiy & Popova, 2017). Unlike more flexible models of adulthood transitions elsewhere in the Arctic and beyond (Karlsdóttir & Jungsberg, 2015), Russian trajectories position educational attainment not as one milestone among many, but as the defining gateway to adulthood (Chernova & Shpakovskaya, 2023; Nartova & Fatehov, 2021). Despite the growing popularity of vocational education and training (hereafter VET or vocational education), programmes that provide practical skills and job-related knowledge for specific middle-skill occupations or trades, such pathways remain stigmatised – especially among higher socioeconomic groups – a stigma linked in part to the post-1990s collapse of the VET system (Bessudnov & Malik, 2016; Walker, 2007; Walker, 2010).

In Arctic monotowns like Norilsk, this dynamic is especially acute: upward mobility is often imagined as passing strictly through university, even as the only locally “guaranteed” trajectory is to remain in the VET-to-employment pipeline (Maslova, 2011; Veselkova, Vandyshev, & Pryamikova, 2021). For many Arctic youth, mobility is imagined not just as geographical relocation, but as a life project – one involving risk, deferred reward, and elements of uncertainty (Laruelle, 2015; Rozanova-Smith, 2021; Zamyatina, 2017). Thus, what might appear externally as “stasis” – the decision to stay – is often an active, agentic response: young people “reduce

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uncertainty” by remaining on a familiar path only temporarily, saving resources and gaining confidence before eventually taking the leap (Laruelle, 2015; Sannikova, 2015). Yet because the “right moment” is repeatedly postponed, this temporariness can stretch and recur, becoming a durable mode of planning rather than a short pause. Here, “permanent temporality” refers to this condition: a sustained orientation to leaving that remains continuously deferred, so that the temporary becomes a lasting structure of biography. In this context, a dichotomous local narrative emerges: “here” (Norilsk) is constructed as a space of security and predictability, while “on the mainland” is imagined as uncertain territory – entailing both higher risks and the allure of wider opportunities.

In this context, youth agency often manifests as “negotiated stasis” – a deliberate but temporary embrace of certainty and stability as a prelude to eventual migration, once sufficient resources or experience have been amassed. Based on 31 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with VET students conducted during a field expedition to Norilsk in September 2024, the article contributes to debates on youth agency, future imaginaries, and changing conceptions of adulthood in the Russian Arctic (Rozanova-Smith, 2021; Shaparov, Sokolova, Magomedov, & Bhagwat, 2022).

Norilsk as an Arctic post-Soviet urban extreme

Norilsk exemplifies one of the world’s most extreme Arctic urban environments – geographically, socially, economically, and environmentally – as a “closed city” with travel restrictions and an industrial landscape dominated by Norilsk Nickel, one of the world’s largest producers of nickel and palladium and a key global mining and metallurgical company (Bronder et al., 2011; Vakhrusheva et al., 2025). It embodies the Arctic monotown archetype: a settlement sustained by one dominant enterprise, featuring limited job diversity (Pitukhina & Gurtov, 2022) and tight linkages between local vocational education and employer demands (Maslova, 2011; Veselkova et al., 2021; Zakharova et al., 2020).

Unlike typical Soviet industrial cities, Norilsk was built almost entirely by GULAG prisoners from the Norilag camp system (1935–1956), peaking at nearly 100,000 forced labourers (Borodkin & Ertz, 2003, 2005; Ertz, 2003). Assignment to the NKVD’s penal labour reflected civilian ministries’ reluctance for such hazardous work and the GULAG’s prowess in extreme conditions (Borodkin & Ertz, 2005). Under director Avraamy Zavenyagin (1938–1941), development rejected standard Soviet plans unsuitable for permafrost, favouring a permanent, ambitious city to support mining operations and retain post-camp workers (Borodkin & Ertz, 2005; Bolotova, 2021; Romanenko, 2025). This infrastructural legacy entails severe environmental costs, with Norilsk ranked among the world’s most polluted cities due to smelting emissions and spills (Vakhrusheva et al., 2025; Bronder et al., 2011).

Demographically, post-Soviet population fluctuations persist, with youth out-migration offset by rotational “vakhta” workers (Khoreva et al., 2018; Zamyatina, 2017). Youth face a clear post-schooling path: vocational training tailored to mining, leading to stable employment (Veselkova et al., 2021) – bolstered by northern bonuses and early retirement (Rozanova-Smith, 2021; Volgin et al., 2018) – though university access favours affluent families due to

tutoring needs and relocation costs. This VET pipeline ensures security but narrows choices, fostering predictability and enclosure.

Such institutional constraints shape mobility imaginaries and timing, rendering (non)migration both structural and cultural. Historically, residents viewed Norilsk as temporary high-wage “vakhta” before mainland relocation (Laruelle, 2015; Laruelle, 2019), with limited industries and higher education curtailing youth diversification (Maslova, 2011; Bolotova, 2021).

Thus, Norilsk provides a critical lens on Arctic urban modernity’s dilemmas – reconciling central planning legacies with mobility, uncertainty, and transformation (Bolotova, 2021; Veselkova et al., 2021; Laruelle, 2015).

Educational trajectories in Russian periphery

A distinctive feature of the Russian context is the overwhelming significance placed on educational attainment in shaping adulthood. While youth transitions in many Western and Nordic countries may flexibly combine professional, familial, and educational milestones (Tulimaa, 2021), in Russia the completion of formal education occupies a singular and non-negotiable place as the primary marker of adulthood and the prerequisite for economic independence (Chernova & Shpakovskaya, 2023; Nartova & Fatehov, 2021). This deep-rooted expectation is a legacy of the Soviet model, where a university diploma virtually guaranteed a secure job through centralised job allocation, and, in the turbulent decades since, has come to symbolise protection from socioeconomic crisis and uncertainty (Konstantinovskiy & Popova, 2017; Harris, 2015).

Despite these ideals, contemporary realities are more complex. Access to higher education is highly competitive and geographically uneven, and the growing popularity of vocational education has not diminished its stigmatisation, especially among higher-status groups (Bessudnov & Malik 2016; Minina, Yanbarisova, & Pavlenko, 2020; Walker, 2007; Walker, 2010). The collapse of the VET system in the 1990s eroded professional pathways for many, amplifying the symbolic and practical value of the university route even as it has become harder to obtain (Walker, 2007; Walker, 2010). In Arctic monotowns like Norilsk, this dynamic is especially acute: the path to upward mobility is imagined as passing strictly through university – even as the only locally “guaranteed” trajectory is to remain in the VET-to-industrial pipeline (Maslova, 2011; Veselkova et al. 2021).

For many Arctic youth, mobility is imagined not just as geographical relocation, but as a life project – one involving risk, deferred reward, and elements of uncertainty (Laruelle, 2015; Rozanova-Smith, 2021). The “mainland” is seen as a zone of opportunity and transformation, but also of vulnerability: unfamiliar educational and professional institutions, higher living costs, and social landscapes where networks must be rebuilt from scratch. Thus, what might appear externally as “stasis” – the decision to stay – is often an active, agentic response: young people “reduce uncertainty” by remaining on a familiar path only temporarily, saving resources and gaining confidence before eventually taking the leap to new arenas, when they feel sufficiently prepared (Laruelle, 2015; Sannikova, 2015).

This tension between imagined futures, structural constraints, and local educational systems is not unique to Norilsk but recurs among young people across the Russian North. It suggests that

education functions not only as a route of individual advancement but also as a collective structuring device through which families, communities, and entire towns negotiate risk, hope, and perceived limits of agency. To make sense of how such constraints are interpreted and negotiated in youth biographies, the next section draws on scholarship on imagined futures and, in particular, imagined mobilities.

Imagined mobility and youth agency framework

Building on youth studies, we focus on imagined futures – and specifically imagined mobilities – as an analytic lens for understanding how Arctic youth interpret opportunity structures and narrate agency under structural constraint.

The concept of *imagined futures* highlights how aspirations shape concrete decisions during adolescence, ultimately influencing the structure of future societies (Cuzzocrea, 2018). The most compelling contributions examine not only the temporality of future-oriented narratives but also multiple life domains simultaneously, such as work, family, education, and mobility. Within this framework, *imagined mobilities* have emerged as a particularly important dimension of imagined futures, especially for peripheral youth, by illuminating the role of agency (Cuzzocrea & Mandich, 2016).

The growing salience of mobility in youth trajectories is often explained through the “mobility turn” (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Younger cohorts, less tied by obligations and more attuned to technologies and opportunities, are increasingly able to compress physical distances in their life planning (Cuzzocrea & Mandich, 2016). Consequently, mobility is interpreted not only as a resource for transition to adulthood but also as an imagined dimension: the intention to move, anticipated relocations, and their directions (Cairns & Smyth, 2011). Imagined mobility frequently marks a turning point in life narratives where future plans take shape and aspirations are rendered attainable.

Imaginariness of mobility serve a dual function. First, they allow young people to explore alternative life scenarios and express latent needs, becoming part of Appadurai’s (2004) “capacity to aspire.” Second, they operate as a “cognitive and symbolic response” to the challenges of the local context (Cuzzocrea & Mandich, 2016), equating migration or relocation with the beginning of a new life and a way to transcend structural disadvantage (Cairns, 2014; Anđić, 2019). Thus, imagined futures and imagined mobilities are closely tied to two foundational dimensions of youth wellbeing: agency and reflexivity.

Agency is central to these discussions, as imagined futures reflect the distinctively reflexive capacity of modern individuals to design possible life scenarios and make choices among alternatives. Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1990) notion of reflexivity as an adaptive capacity, scholars show how individuals respond to discrepancies between expectations and lived experience by moving beyond habitual dispositions (Elder-Vass, 2007; Farrugia, 2013). Under conditions of change and instability, reflexive decision-making thus becomes increasingly significant. Importantly, in contexts of uncertainty and multiple possible “scenarios of the future” (Giddens & Pierson 1988:116, cited by Suckert, 2022), imagined futures are grounded not in replication of the past but in interpretation of present experience (Flaherty & Fine, 2001, cited by Suckert, 2022). These representations are constantly revised and may become resources for pursuing new aspirations. In this sense, the ability to imagine the future is not purely cognitive but a crucial

resource of agency, enabling young people to overcome structural constraints and orient themselves amid uncertainty (Coleman & Tutton, 2017; Cuzzocrea & Mandich, 2016).

For Arctic youth, analysing imagined mobility thus becomes an indispensable tool for understanding their specific pathways to adulthood. It highlights not only their capacity for agency and reflexivity under severe structural constraints but also the different logics underlying choices to remain in place or to envision futures elsewhere. Importantly, the decision itself – whether to stay or to leave – should not be seen as inherently more or less agentic. Rather, attention must be paid to how Arctic youth interpret and justify their choices, and to the categories that structure their reflexivity and agency in conditions of hardship.

At this intersection, the study of imagined mobilities connects policy concerns with sociological inquiry, offering a productive entry point for research relevant both to youth transitions and to sustainable development in the Arctic.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design anchored in contemporary sociological approaches to youth studies and Arctic social research. The aim was to capture the subjective experiences, strategies, and imaginaries of youth in Norilsk within the broader context of structural constraints unique to Arctic monotowns.

Study design and sampling

The research was conducted during a field expedition to Norilsk in September 2024 as part of the project “Educational and Career Expectations and Trajectories of Youth in the Russian Arctic Zone” at the Institute of Education, HSE University. The primary data consisted of 31 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with students enrolled in two vocational education colleges closely integrated with the local mining and processing industries. Participants were aged 16–20 and represented a range of vocational majors, predominantly technical (24 out of 31) and aligned with regional labour demand. These included mining and mineral extraction programmes (e.g. underground mining of mineral deposits; mining; mineral resource development/mining extraction), energy and electrical trades (thermal power engineering; electrician; electrical fitter), welding (welding production; welding technologies), mechanical and transport-related programmes (manufacturing/mechanical engineering technology; automotive maintenance and repair; auto mechanic), as well as information systems and pump equipment/maintenance. A smaller number of participants (7 out of 31) were enrolled in service and administrative programmes (culinary and confectionery; food production/technology; records management and archival studies; law). Purposeful sampling was used to ensure that participants represented a range of key variables: gender (with a balance favouring males in line with the gendered nature of vocational pathways in industrial Arctic contexts), specialisation, educational backgrounds, and rural-urban life histories.

Data collection

The interview guide was developed based on existing literature on youth mobility, education, and imagined futures (Cuzzocrea, 2018; Cuzzocrea & Mandich 2016). It covered themes such as socio-demographic background, educational and occupational choices, perceptions of life in Norilsk, attitudes towards migration, and the narratives that shape future aspirations. Interviews lasted from

45 to 120 minutes, were audio-recorded with participants' consent, and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Field notes and contextual observations supplemented the interview data, ensuring that both process and content elements could be triangulated.

Analytical strategy

A dual analytical approach was adopted, combining reflexive thematic analysis and narrative analysis – a contemporary strategy that recognises both the patterned regularity of social meanings and the singularity of lived experience (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Riessman, 2007). This allows for the integration of both structural social patterns and the narrative complexities of individual agency and identity.

The reflexive thematic analysis proceeded in several stages:

- (1) Familiarisation: immersive reading of transcripts and field notes to identify preliminary patterns and emotional tones.
- (2) Initial coding: line-by-line open coding, generating a broad palette of inductive codes capturing both surface meaning and underlying assumptions (Saldana, 2015).
- (3) Code grouping: aggregation of codes into candidate themes based on frequency, salience, and theoretical relevance (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
- (4) Theme review and refinement: iterative checking of candidate themes against raw data, seeking internal coherence and distinctive boundaries between themes.
- (5) Definition and naming of themes: final themes were explicitly defined and named using both emic terms from participant accounts ("here/mainland," "safety cushion," "guaranteed path") and analytic constructs ("permanent temporality," "imagined mobility").

Deductive elements were informed by a theoretical framework which prioritised mobility, agency, uncertainty, and structural constraint, while allowing for inductive discovery of novel categories particular to the Norilsk context. Coding reliability was enhanced through repeated comparison, memo-writing, and regular peer debriefing among the research team.

Complementing the thematic approach, a narrative analysis focused on the structure, sequence, and rhetorical strategies through which participants constructed their life stories and future imaginaries (Riessman, 2007; Saldana, 2015). Narrative mappings analysed how young people positioned themselves in relation to dominant local scripts ("we/they," "temporary/permanent") and how these scripts interacted with their accounts of choice, uncertainty, and hope. Special attention was paid to "turning points," "plotlines" of imagined migration, and the use of metaphors linked to Arctic conditions and occupational life.

Combining inductive and deductive logic, the analysis integrated patterned social processes (thematic regularities such as the "trap" of monotown life or the "calculated waiting" before mobility) with nuanced, contextually situated narrative forms. Reflexivity and sensitivity to participants' own meaning-making were prioritised, in line with current best practices in sociological qualitative research on youth in marginal spaces (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Saldana, 2015).

Standard ethical protocols for social research were upheld: voluntary participation, informed consent, assurance of confidentiality, secure data handling, and the anonymisation of transcripts and all quoted material. The study adhered to the

principles articulated in the ethical guidelines for sociological fieldwork in small or vulnerable communities. AI tools (Perplexity) were used to improve grammar and flow of the text.

Results: Youth agency at the edge

The "here" and "on the mainland" dichotomy

A core finding to emerge from both the thematic and narrative analyses is the centrality of the binary distinction between "here" (in Norilsk) and "on the mainland" (the rest of Russia) in how youth construct everyday realities and future imaginaries. While, geographically, Norilsk is embedded within the mainland, this local vernacular conveys collective experiences of isolation and detachment, produced by absent overland connections, extreme Arctic conditions, routine disruptions caused by blizzards, and the high economic barriers to travel.

This "here/mainland" dichotomy is more than an idiomatic expression: it structures young people's agency, acting as the principal axis along which aspirations, risks, and senses of belonging are articulated. Thematic analysis revealed that many participants describe "here" as a domain of relative security – guaranteed jobs, familiar cultural practices, strong social ties – while "on the mainland" is imagined as simultaneously desirable and anxiety-provoking, characterised by greater possibilities but also unpredictability and competition.

Narrative analysis indicates that this dichotomy also shapes young people's self-positioning in stories about the future. Some narrate Norilsk as a "waypoint," a necessary and agentic phase for gathering resources – especially economic – before venturing "there." The "mainland" thus serves as the locus of both imagined self-actualisation and profound risk, with anticipated threats ranging from economic precarity to social atomisation.

First-person accounts reinforce these themes, demonstrating how narratives of place are intertwined with identity and belonging:

"I was surprised, because it's so different. It's my first time this far north, I've never seen tundra before. So everything is surprising – the nature is different, the buildings are different, and the people are different too."

(Interview No. 10, Male, Major in Information Systems, 2nd year student)

Respondents often attribute greater cohesion and kindness to "people here," as contrasted with "people there," whom they see as more ruthless or atomised – yet also more independent and open to opportunity. It is within this web of comparison that imagined mobility is generated and negotiated.

Economic security and the "safety cushion"

A second principal theme is the orienting power of economic narratives – particularly, the pursuit of a "safety cushion" through accumulation of savings, property, or a guaranteed pension prior to any move south. Young people rarely reference specific income figures; instead, they employ comparative frames, pointing to "wages on the mainland" and underscoring the exceptional guarantees associated with Norilsk's industrial economy. Parental and intergenerational scripts reinforce this logic: the ideal pathway is to earn high Arctic wages, purchase an apartment or secure retirement, then leave for the uncertainty of life elsewhere.

*"Well, not moving too early. Maybe at 30 or 35, when retirement is close and so on. Actually, miners have a good [retirement age] – they usually retire at 45–47. So, up to about 45, maybe start your own business, develop it, and *then* move with peace of mind."*

(Interview No. 5, Male, Major in Mineral Resource Development, 1st year student)

Both inductive and deductive analysis confirm that economic security is not merely a rational calculus but is deeply cultural – a moral and existential hedge against anticipated hardship, grounded in regional history and shared social memory.

Navigating education: Meritocracy, vocational pathways, and success

A key insight, emerging from both thematic regularity and the narrative analysis of educational stories, is the way in which education is valued not simply for personal advancement but as a collective buffer against risk and a way of navigating the "trap" of monotown life. The experience of education in Norilsk is strongly bifurcated: school is often remembered as alienating – associated with repeated failure and negative labelling by teachers. By contrast, vocational college is narrated as a place where young people "finally experience success" – where professional identity, peer respect, and tangible achievement become accessible.

"I graduated as an excellent student without a single grade of three (satisfactory). My results here are much better. I'm almost an honor student. I hope to be one in the second year . . . In college, the specialists know the program very well, everything is clear. I understand and complete everything. [. . .] Here they focus more on students – they ask questions outside of tests and allow students to decide."

(Interview No. 24, Male, Major in Thermal Power Engineering, 2nd year student)

This pathway leads to ambivalent attitudes toward further education: while higher education is seen as essential for successful mobility "on the mainland," the lived success of college and labour is experienced as attainable, meaningful, and secure "here." The narrative of "guaranteed income" and a clear path of industrial advancement gives rise to the distinctive Norilsk form of "agentic stasis" – temporary, calculated staying, not out of inertia but as a strategy of staged mobility.

The temporalities of exit: Calculated waiting and intergenerational scripts

A final analytic theme is the temporal structuring of mobility decisions, which the present study terms "calculated waiting." Narrative and thematic analysis converge to show that virtually no respondent imagines Norilsk as a place for permanent residence, for themselves or future generations. Instead, staying is embraced as a provisional, fully agentic phase in which to accrue social and economic assets, with actual migration deferred – often for decades – until the risk calculus is perceived to tip in favour of exit.

"Dad flew in, then brought mom. And I was born here, and we live here. But dad says every year that next year we'll leave, but we never do."

(Interview No. 1, Female, Major in Law, 2nd year student)

This temporality is shaped by both local infrastructures (e.g. lack of new housing for non-working or retired people) and powerful family narratives. While strong social ties and lack of resources act as retaining forces, the distinctive Norilsk "vakhta"

logic – work as a form of temporary assignment, however prolonged – frames migration as an eventual and necessary step.

Through this combined methodological lens, the results illuminate how Norilsk youth enact "permanent temporality" within an environment of institutional constraint, material advantage, and profound uncertainty. Their stories reveal not passivity but a nuanced, reflective navigation of the possibilities and limits of agency at the Arctic's urban edge.

Discussion

This study's findings advance both Arctic studies and youth studies by illuminating how the intersecting forces of extreme geography, industrial legacy, and Russia's evolving educational and economic landscape shape the lived experiences and future trajectories of Norilsk youth – directly extending the Introduction's framing of "permanent temporality" as a sustained, deferred orientation to leaving that turns temporary strategies into lasting biographical structures. By foregrounding "permanent temporality" alongside the nuanced logic of "imagined mobility" – the perceived opportunity to construct different futures despite structural constraints – the research contributes new theoretical and empirical perspectives on agency, risk, and adaptation in Arctic urban peripheries, drawn from 31 semi-structured interviews with VET students. The Norilsk case casts a sharp light on the complexities faced by Arctic "monotowns" – resource-dependent urban settlements whose present and future hinge on a single industry and the policy legacies of centralised planning (Maslova, 2011; Bolotova, 2021; Romanenko, 2025; Zamyatina, 2025).

These insights build directly on the Introduction's emphasis on youth agency in peripheral spaces, corroborating and extending prior findings (Rozanova-Smith, 2021; Khoreva et al., 2018; Veselkova et al., 2021) by showing how the lack of viable alternative economic sectors and insufficient local higher education provision funnel youth into limited vocational pathways, reinforcing patterns of out-migration. Yet, rather than viewing this "outflow" as a mere symptom of decline, the findings highlight the strategic agency of "negotiated stasis" – a deliberate but temporary embrace of certainty and stability as a prelude to eventual migration – where youth accumulate economic and social capital before exit, thereby reducing uncertainty in line with imagined mobility dynamics.

This perspective crucially challenges deterministic models of Arctic "decline," foregrounding instead dynamic strategies of "calculated waiting" and flexible adaptation that resonate with the Introduction's portrayal of mobility as a risky life project of deferred reward. The analytic distinction youth make between "here" (Norilsk) as a space of security and predictability and "on the mainland" as uncertain territory entailing higher risks and wider opportunities adds nuance to the duality of urban Arctic identities observed in previous studies (Zamyatina, 2017: 59). Anchored in both infrastructural realities and symbolic boundaries, this duality deepens our understanding of Arctic identity, belonging, and social reproduction in the urban North (Romanenko, 2025; Bolotova, 2021).

Extending this to youth studies, the research complicates prevailing theories of transition by elucidating the distinctive configuration of risk, meritocracy, and educational value in the Russian Arctic, where formal education serves as the defining gateway to adulthood amid stigmatised vocational pathways. In contrast to Western and Nordic models that highlight individualised, non-linear passages into adulthood (Harris, 2015; Tulimaa,

2021), the Norilsk case underscores the enduring power of collective scripts, familial narratives, and institutionally “guaranteed” trajectories – within which even youth agency unfolds amid industrial economies and regional infrastructural constraints (Chernova & Shpakovskaya, 2023; Nartova & Fatehov, 2021).

The results further question basic assumptions regarding “aspirational migration,” revealing that for Norilsk youth, leaving is not simply about pursuing better opportunities but a carefully timed, resource-dependent act shaped by profound uncertainty “on the mainland,” as they negotiate agency in peripheral spaces. This logic is institutionalised in family stories, peer advice, and local professional cultures, reflected in the bifurcated educational experience young people report: school as a site of struggle, college as a locus of professional identity and success (Maslova, 2011; Sannikova, 2015). Analysis of migration motivations among Norilsk high-school students reveals contrasting patterns: while more academically successful students pursue ambitious goals, their choices reflect complex, personal perceptions of city-match rather than job or salary opportunities (Zamyatina, 2017). This underscores a distinctive relationship between Arctic populations and their urban environments, where locally shaped identities significantly influence migration aspirations (Zamyatina & Yashunskiy, 2015).

Perhaps most significantly, the research demonstrates how Arctic youth adopt complex, staged approaches to mobility and adulthood, consciously “postponing” migration and using monotown life’s safety and predictability to build a “cushion” against future instability – exemplifying “negotiated stasis.” This calls for a re-evaluation of passivity or “retention” frameworks (Cuzzocrea, 2018; Andić, 2019), as Arctic youth exhibit agency not only in eventual migration but also in strategic “staying,” aligning with the Introduction’s view of stasis as an active response to constraints.

By bridging Arctic urban studies and the sociology of youth transition, this study highlights the need for nuanced policy interventions – in vocational education, urban planning, and civic engagement – that account for the temporal, symbolic, and agentic strategies youth employ in negotiating uncertain futures. Education policy, in particular, should reckon with the dual realities of high aspirations and infrastructural constraint, supporting more flexible, context-sensitive pathways for rural and Arctic youth (Tulimaa 2021; Veselkova et al., 2021; Khoreva et al., 2018; Sharapov et al., 2022).

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