

# Settlement history determines regional development

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In many countries, including but not limited to Russia, frontier regions, populated more recently than the country's core territory, tend to lag behind in terms of socio-economic development. This phenomenon can be explained by legacies such as state formation in remote regions and the autonomy traditionally enjoyed by new settlers, according to Roberto Foa (Harvard University) and Anna Nemirovskaya, senior research fellow of the HSE Laboratory for Comparative Social Research (LCSR).

Most countries have historically extended their areas by encouraging people from core regions to migrate, either voluntarily or otherwise, into new territories described as the 'frontier' and settle there. In Russia, frontier territories include Siberia and the Far East, as well as the country's northern areas.

American historian Frederick Turner's frontier theory is well known to historians and anthropologists. Yet until recently, no empirical testing of his theory has been undertaken from a sociological perspective using survey data and socio-economic statistics.

Studying frontier zones as sociologists, Nemirovskaya and Foa examined the reasons why frontiers differ in terms of local culture and socio-economic development from other regions of the same country which have followed more conventional patterns of state formation. Several theories exist to explain this phenomenon, but according to Foa and Nemirovskaya, none of them provide an exhaustive answer.

The study used data from the World Values Survey (WVS) and other published statistics, indices and ratings, focusing on four countries: Russia, the U.S., Canada, and Brazil. The findings are presented in *Governance*.

## **Gigantic Frontier Territories**

Originally, frontiers were understood as vacant areas suitable for development far away from the country's centre. In their paper, Nemirovskaya and Foa list some of the key features of frontiers, such as distance from central government, low population density and relatively recent arrival of new settlers.

In the U.S., examples of frontiers include Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas and Missouri. Likewise, frontier zones are found in Brazil and Canada, and certainly in Russia with its expansive territories of Eastern Siberia, the Far East, and the Russian North.

Most frontier territories of modern-day Russia are still sparsely populated compared to the country's central regions and are characterised by higher suicide and crime rates and lower socioeconomic development.

## **No Simple Explanation**

Several theories attempt to explain frontier zones' ongoing lower levels of public order and deficient public goods provision: internal resettlement, costs of monitoring and enforcement, varying degrees of socioeconomic modernisation, specific types of social capital, ethnolinguistic diversity, and the relationship between settlers and the indigenous population. However, Nemirovskaya and Foa find these explanations insufficient.

Thus, it can be argued that Siberia historically experienced an inflow of 'poor quality' human capital, such as convicted criminals. However, it is only part of the story. Between the mid-19th century and the communist revolution of 1917, active colonisation of the frontier, boosted by the Trans-Siberian railway construction, raised its population from 4 to 22 million. "Based on the Soviet-era statistics, according to historian and geographer Pavel Polyana, while forced relocation campaigns brought some 6 million people to the country's east in the 1920s to 1940s, a flow of volunteers also migrated from Central Russia to Siberia in the hope of a better life. In fact, such voluntary migration was encouraged in the 1950s to support the government's efforts to develop Siberia," says Nemirovskaya.

The theory that the administrative centre can have a hard time maintaining control over remote locations may be valid; however, according to the study's authors, it fails to fully explain variations in territorial development. Indeed, frontier effects are observed in all types of countries, including those where administrative processes are universally effective regardless of local circumstances.

## **The Power of Local Social Institutions**

A key finding from Nemirovskaya and Foa's analysis is that local governance institutions may contribute to frontier-specific effects. In most cases, settlers arrived in new lands long before administrative institutions such as health care, education and law enforcement authorities. Thus, newcomers to frontier zones enjoyed more freedom compared to residents of other parts of the country, which also explains why frontiers have traditionally attracted smugglers and other criminals resisting government control.

Even today, governance in frontier areas is often below general public administration standards, leading to lower fiscal capacity, and increased

economic crime and corruption, according to the authors' findings, inter alia, from regression modeling.

The study found that local attitudes also contribute to frontier territories' unique path of development. By relying on their own resources, frontier settlers have developed a strong sense of autonomy. According to surveys, people living in areas which used to be sparsely populated tend to support right-wing parties and politicians making populist and patriotic statements. Thus, the Russian frontier locals are more likely to vote for the LDPR.

Other phenomena which the study's authors attribute to frontier residents' sense of autonomy include lower levels of law and order and lower public goods provision.

**More information:** Roberto Stefan Foa et al. How State Capacity Varies within Frontier States: A Multicountry Subnational Analysis, *Governance* (2016). [DOI: 10.1111/gove.12190](https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12190)

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