

# Bringing Your Work Home:

Shock Economic Transition and Shifting Values in the Ural Mountains and Appalachia,

1991 – 2008

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# Abstract

The shock economic transition of the Ural Mountains region of Russia from communism to capitalism, as well as the transition of Appalachia from a steel and coal to service economy, resulted in difficulty navigating new work structures, the importation of new value systems, and renewed debate about the moral economy. This thesis evaluates and compares the reactions of both ordinary workers and high-level decision makers during both transitions, and charts the rise of nationalism in both communities. The research involved garnering first-hand accounts of transition, including original interviews with Western advisors to the Kremlin and Appalachian community members. In addition to interviews, a large-scale letter-writing project allowed Appalachians to express their political beliefs in free form. The thesis also relied on World Bank reports, Appalachian Regional Commission documents, media analysis, and business case studies, particularly in the energy industry. In the Ural Mountains, the experience of disorientation after economic transition was elevated into a national mission under Putin, who blamed foreign influence for the problems facing the Urals after economic collapse. However, in Appalachia, the collapse of the steel industry was largely treated as a regional ailment in an otherwise economically healthy country. The election of Donald Trump was in many ways an attempt to assert the importance of the problems faced by Appalachia.

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## Conclusion

*Whoever does not miss the Soviet Union has not heart.*

*Whoever wants it back has not brain.*

Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin

The same could be said about Appalachian steel. The transitions of Appalachia and the former Soviet Union provide fertile grounds for study, more so because of their surprising similarities than their obvious differences. Both populations had a robust moral identity around their working lives before the transition, and both experienced the transition at least in part as a loss that went far beyond a change in material circumstances. The Soviet industrialist and the blue collar worker alike, it had been their labor which not only *gave them an identity and a purpose and a sense of being part of a national mission or a shared national experience* but which also *made them good people*. To Appalachians, steel work, patriotism, and masculinity became, at least in memory, synonymous – and as my thesis has shown, the loss of the first has meant a loss of all three and sent many people on a search to replace them that continues today.

It is in this void where Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin both gained power, seeking to restore feelings of belonging, tradition, and cultural continuity. In Appalachia, an exploration of defensiveness regarding regional poverty and moral worth, as well as fears of cultural and economic erosion at the hands of foreign governments, demonstrates how deeply interwoven personal values, global politics, and economic reality have become following the collapse of industry. Similarly, in Russia, Putin's most compelling anti-Western arguments focuses on the erosion of traditional Russian values of patriarchal family life, Orthodox faith, and genuine friendship. Together, the narratives of Appalachia and Russia help to illustrate one of the most

concerning risks inherent in economic transition, and one that no amount of mathematical modeling can account for. As old value systems are destroyed and new ways of life emerge, the existential search for a fundamental, moral identity no longer centered on one's labor can and does often manifest in extremist nationalism and anti-globalism.