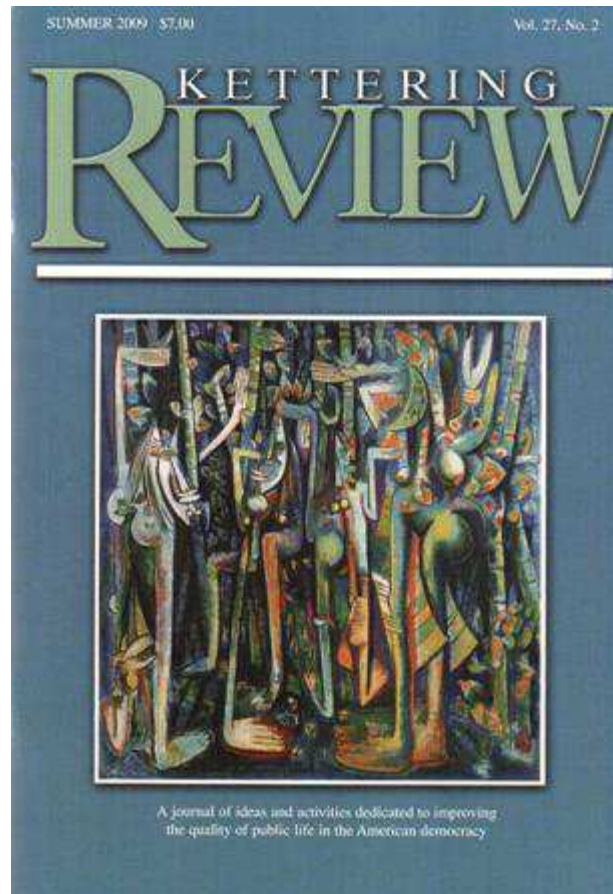


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Democratic Practices and Cultural Resilience: How a small people flourished under authoritarianism

For more than 500 years, the Pomore people, numbering even today not more than 10-15,000, have sustained a traditional way of life, primarily as fishermen on coastal seas and rivers. Over the past hundred years, especially during the collectivization of the 1920's and 1930's and again from the 1970's till the present time, the Pomore's way of life has been threatened with upheaval and even destruction.

The primary source of these threats were the actions first of the Soviet, and after 1990, the Russian state although some have arisen from international competition and declines in fish stock. The Pomore peoples, of course, were among hundreds of Soviet ethnic groups and thousands of communities to face these or similar pressures. What makes their story of particular interest is that the Pomore were among the very few peoples of Russia to adapt to these stresses in ways that enabled them not only to survive but at times even to thrive, while maintaining the essential features of their traditional way of life, both economic and cultural.

How was this possible? What were the qualities of these communities that enabled their successful adaptation? A key insight has emerged in recent years from a number of areas of inquiry, particularly evolutionary biology and community development which suggests that the Pomore's responses to economic and social stress may illustrate the adaptive power communities acquire through self-organizing.

We do not imply, nor did we find, that there was any explicit recognition or application of the theory of self-organizing among the Pomore. Rather, we suggest that certain qualities or characteristics of this community created an environment in which citizens from varied segments of the community could identify and engage their concerns, develop and choose among alternatives, and mobilize people and resources to implement their decisions, even in the face of attempts to force the community in different directions by a highly authoritarian central state. This informal kind of community decision making process is sometimes called "organic politics."

Patterns of self-organizing create the essential framework within which non-formal yet highly adaptive citizen politics can arise. So let us begin by identifying what appear to be core characteristics of self-organizing communities. We may then detail the series of external stresses, or crises that the Pomore have faced across time, noting self-organizing traits where evident and how they contributed to the Pomore's effective adaptation.

A FUNDAMENTAL characteristic of self-organizing communities is dense, overlapping, non-hierarchical, essentially informal connections among citizens in a community. Self-organizing communities have no single leader who makes all decisions. Rather, at the heart of self-organizing systems are dispersed networks of interaction. Networks are informal, non-structured and non-hierarchical. They form naturally from on-going familial, social and economic interactions. Connections are formed among and across networks as a result of the forces of competition and collaboration, resulting in the constant negotiation of relationships. As various networks of citizens continue their conversations, a shared sense of purpose may arise, though there would almost never be a formal statement of goals or mission. Rather, common perspectives take shape, though they are continuously subject to change.

What, then, is the role of leadership in self-organizing communities? Formal leaders certainly exist, but they do not monopolize decision-making. Neither does a small, coherent but informal leadership group. Rather, leadership, in the sense of taking the initiative, encouraging discussion, informally negotiating or building alliances with others, tends to be highly dispersed. Such leaders emerge at the nodes of networks and are often invisible to outsiders, as well as to “institutional” politics, yet they are vital agents in enabling effective self-organizing.

At the intersection between the self-organizing community and institutional politics, organizations, hierarchical organizations, may form. But, these are often cross cutting, with many levels and sorts of web-like interactions and channels of communication. The most influential “organizations” in citizen politics often will not be formal, nor will they be highly visible. What gives self-organizing communities real power is their inherent capacity for continual adaptation. The lack of formal structures, missions and obligations means that behaviors, actions, strategies and processes can be revised continuously as a result of on-going citizen interaction. The self-organizing system of politics continuously adapts to changing stimuli, needs, and opportunities.

Citizens in self-organizing systems are not, however, so changing and formless as to be unable to act. Rather, through continual, multi-layered, web-like interactions, focused around issues of common concern, citizens appear to develop an implicit obligation to assist others, which can be called a covenantal reciprocity. This, in turn, may be related to the desire to assure oneself the benefits of getting assistance. Mutual reciprocity, mutual implicit undertakings appear to be a key to action in self-sustaining communities. These motivations to participate in self-organized networks are essentially intrinsic, based on self-interest, and the need for social contact all humans share.

Self-organizing networks identify who talks with whom in a community. The more hierarchical these networks that is the more they are dominated by the few the more resistant communities may be to change. The less adaptive they become. The Pomore’s relationship with the Soviet/Russian state is a good example of such

hierarchical networks, which tend to be formally institutionalized, and governed by norms and practices that exclude meaningful participation by local communities or ordinary citizens. In a very real sense, the story we tell here illustrates the challenges such hierarchical networks confront in seeking to impose their will on a self-organized local community.

Of course, the Pomore were, by and large, an exception in Russian and Soviet history. Yet as we read into the scanty evidence, still we can “feel” that large segments of this community were engaged in on-going, overlapping, informal and formal conversations about how to respond to the challenges they faced. In each of the episodes we present, available evidence suggests strongly that decisions about what were the real problems the community faced, and about what their options were all emerged from widespread, near-continuous conversations engaging large segments of their community.

When it came to making decisions, many of the episodes we relate below suggest that the community consciously and collectively confronted and worked through difficult choices among things the community valued highly. While we have little evidence of the places and rules for formal community decision-making, we are able to infer from clear evidence of widespread community involvement in implementing them that whatever the formal procedures, the decisions reached engaged, recognized responded to and reflected widely-held community values. The clearest evidence of this is the wide community participation in carrying out their decisions. In short, self-organizing in the form of dense, informal networks, having many conversation and idea “leaders,” creates the essential supporting framework for responsive, adaptive organic politics. So, let us now turn to illustrative episodes from the history of these remarkable, resilient people.

FROM at least the 16th century until the late 1920s, the social and economic life of the Pomore, as of most people in rural Russia, was organized by the mir. The mir, which means both "community" and "world," was responsible for deciding major questions in the life of the community, from who will be drafted into the army, to the assigning and re-assigning plots of land to assure that each family could survive, to collecting taxes and payments to the landlord. Life in these small, closely-knit, ethnically homogenous communities, naturally created strong 'bonding capital.' That is, each member of the community tended to develop and share strong attachments to her community, its way of life and its geographic location, or place. While each "mir" had a formal leader, participation by all members in community meetings was normal and expected. Decisions tended to emerge following lengthy discussions.

Such attachments were further strengthened among the Pomore by the fact that for most of their history their way of life, primarily as fishermen, was highly profitable, even though not evenly distributed. The requirements of off-shore and in-shore fishing, by and large, determined the way fishing was organized. The nets

used even on low-tonnage boats were quite large, requiring several people to handle them; this meant that fishing required a group, a brigade, or a cooperative. The collective character of the work defined its organizational form. Thus, already from the middle of the 19th century the practice emerged whereby well-off Pomore who owned boats and nets hired fishing cooperatives or “artels” to man them and conduct the catch. Particularly among the small cooperatives, this practice reinforced the sense of community and would become a source of strength, helping to frame choices as well as motivating widespread participation in affairs as the Pomore community adapted to changes imposed on their way of life during the 20th and early 21st centuries.

Throughout their history, although fishing was their primary economic activity, the Pomore simultaneously engaged in seal and walrus hunting; farming; animal hunting; gathering mushrooms and berries and forestry, shifting from one activity to another with the change of seasons. In the 19th century, fishing was carried out in several different ways. The basic form was cod fishing off the shores of the Murman region, for which many Pomore people came from all around the White Sea. The cod season began in May and concluded at the beginning of autumn. However, the Pomore began to gather in March and returned home only in the late fall, spending the extra time exchanging news, rebuilding friendships, discussing community wide-issues, and arranging marriages, in short, building the strong informal networks that enabled a highly adaptive organic politics.

In spring, there was the seal, seal pup and walrus hunt, in-shore fishing, and fresh-water fishing in the rivers. For off-shore fishing, the Pomore traditionally utilized low-tonnage rowed or sail boats. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Russian state encouraged the formation of cooperatives that were independent of the boat owners, giving them credits for the construction of their own fishing craft and the purchase of fishing gear.

The Pomore formed such cooperatives for winter ice fishing and for fish processing. Knowledge was passed from the older to the younger generation. Seasonal codfishing, their most important economic activity, for the Pomore was much more than a livelihood. It was deeply colored by the sense that their catch was close to a sacred harvest that could only be undertaken during specific times of the year. These religious overtones were reflected in certain exorcisms and rites undertaken during the harvest. This suggests some of the values that enhanced community cohesiveness.

Such are the main qualities and values of the Pomore's traditional way of life, values they would struggle to maintain in the face of recurrent challenges. Throughout this story, the observant reader will note the suggestive correspondence between traits of this community and the qualities of a self-organizing community which, by creating an enabling framework, made it possible for its citizens to exercise some meaningful control over their collective destiny.

THE rise of capitalism in Russia in the last quarter of the 19th century and competition from Norwegian fishermen created the first challenge to the Pomore's traditional way of life. However, the Pomore adapted to these stresses with little impact on their old ways of life and fishing. For example, while the Norwegian fishermen moved from small boats and nets to much larger trawlers, thus beginning their role as promoters of modernization of the fishing industry, the Pomore resisted change and stayed with their customary boats and fishing equipment. This was not mere "conservatism."

Rather, resistance to modernization reflected their relationship with their environment. Protecting the harvest of the sea was not only essential to the survival and welfare of their community, but even more, it was a sacred duty. They regarded trawlers, working year-round and taking much larger catches, as "rapacious." However, they did not resist all change. Rather they adopted and adapted ideas that were consistent with their traditions.

The most profound transformation of the Pomore fishing communities took place at the end of the 1920's and beginning of the 30's with collectivization. This transformation, of course, took place across the entire Russian countryside. The Soviet authorities attempted to eliminate, root and branch, the traditional mir and associated ways of life. They were determined to restructure agriculture, forestry, fishing and all other uses of nature on a purely utilitarian, industrial basis. To this end, the mir was destroyed by force and in its place were created collective farms.

Practically all of the fishing collective farms on the Onezhski peninsula in the White Sea (the basis of this study) appeared in 1930. What distinguished the collectivization experience of the Pomore was their long-established tradition of cooperative fishing, which made adaptation to the collective farms somewhat easier for most Pomore.

Nevertheless the process was painful. Initially, nearly the entire adult population was coerced into joining collective farms. Whereas formerly individuals were free to join or leave any fishing or other cooperative, to own their own boat and equipment, and accumulate their own capital, the collective farms forcibly incorporated all of the community's private productive property and then required everyone to work under its direction. Former boat owners and others somewhat better off than most, with any who resisted, were forcibly deported to Siberia where most perished.

Although these collective farms were primarily fishing enterprises, the state nevertheless imposed upon them substantial new agricultural obligations. As one resident noted, "At that time we had the State Planning Agency as well as special obligations imposed by the Party." They were required to raise new kinds of crops and to develop animal husbandry, none of which were part of their traditions. In addition to their climate-appropriate crops, such as rye and legumes, the collective farms were obliged to grow other vegetables, including potatoes and chickens and swine were added to their historic practice of raising horses, cattle and sheep.

Adapting their traditions to the new structures, all of this agricultural work was carried out by organized groups, or brigades that often included children.

Even the traditional practices connected with fishing were gradually transformed in the collective farms. Already by the end of the 30's and beginning of the 40's, boats with internal combustion engines were appearing, but the Pomore continued to use the traditional sail and rowed boats, although their numbers declined. Some of the larger motorized boats even began to trawl, using long nets, making them more profitable than the traditional practice of seasonal fishing with hand nets and other gear.

Nevertheless, the trawlers had a limited range, as did those fitted with sails, none being suited to venture more than 40 miles from shore, even in good weather. As a result, their catches were limited. As the boats returned to shore, the catch was processed by hand and made ready for delivery to state agencies. Given these limitations, in spite of the attempt to "industrialize" fishing, the total annual catch was still small enough that it did not damage the fisheries potential, preservation of which was connected by the Pomore with their own survival physically and as a people.

Evidence suggests, then, that the Pomore were able to adapt to the profound transformations in formal structures while still retaining much of their traditional way of life. The methods of fishing, for example, for the most part, were little changed; work continued to be undertaken cooperatively. Only the captain and mechanic on the larger boats, having undergone specialized training in the city, were hired employees; the rest of the crews continued to learn their trades from the older generation, who in the process passed on their values of respect for the sea and its resources. Of course, much of the sacred belief structure related to the sea and its bounty moved to the periphery of consciousness, seeming to give way to more utilitarian views, especially among the young. However, even among these, as they report today, in times of danger and stress the old beliefs often found new life.

Forced to expand the range of their agricultural activity, in the first instance their crops and animals were used to provide sustenance to the Pomore themselves. In part, this occurred because, due the lack of adequate transport and resulting high costs, selling agricultural products always resulted in losses. Still, irrespective of losses, the Pomore were obliged to fulfill their state quotas for agricultural goods. Fishing, however, remained highly profitable, enabling the community to cover these losses.

As before, while part of the collective farm engaged in off-shore ocean fishing, others continued the tradition of in-shore and fresh-water river fishing, and these not simply during work time, but in free time as well, not only for food, but because of who the Pomore were as a people – those who fish. Thus, although the community could not directly challenge production and other orders, they found ways to preserve much of their traditions.

This fact contributed significantly to the Pomore's ability to sustain many elements of their traditional way of life, in sharp contrast to the vast majority of Soviet villages and collective farms.

GEOGRAPHIC isolation influenced the character of daily life, but it also favored self-organizing activities, enabling effective adaptation to economic stresses. Most of the Pomore settlements were distant from the principle areas of habitation. They lacked permanent transportation links. Transport to urban centers was a seasonal affair – by water during summer, overland once the winter frost hardened the soil.

They were not connected to the electrical grid, nor did they have radios or telephones. However, many of the Pomore settlements did have their own diesel electrical generators providing power a few hours each day. A vignette from the period of the Second World War paints a sharper portrait than mere description of the stresses the Pomore endured at a time when most of the Pomore men lost their lives in battle. Hear the voice of a woman who was 23 when the Germans invaded Russia:

“In the spring, we planted for thirty days straight. My whole body reeked of horse sweat. Then, we went to the forest and cut wood for the collective farm and for ourselves. Then, it was off to distant fields to cut, rake and bale hay. In the fall, all over again. In summer we plant then dig potatoes, then carry and store the autumn hay. Winter we lived on the road, eating whatever we could find, and we fished near and far, sometimes living on a boat for a year, with little to no food.”

This isolation from the outside world encouraged intensive and constant contact among the Pomore people, strengthening their sense of identity, and the local networks and multiple sources of leadership that made possible survival of their culture and traditions throughout the darkest period of their history.

To protect and promote their profitable fishing industry, multiple Pomore collective farms created their own associations. These associations provided the formal means through which, following manifold, overlapping discussions among citizens, decisions for the entire community were reached, respecting when and where they would fish, how big a catch they would seek, where and how they would sell the catch, and respecting the purchase and repair of fishing boats. This structure proved so effective for the Pomore that it continued to function until the end of the 1990's. That the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 had virtually no noticeable impact on the organic politics of the community is further evidence of widespread support for these processes.

The 1970's and 1980's had been in fact a period of economic and social flourishing for many Pomore collective farms and villages. The basis for this upturn was two-fold. First of all, fishing remained very profitable and the fisheries were still bountiful. Second, in contrast to all of the years from the 1930's through the 1960's when the Soviet state through its pricing and taxation policies effectively

confiscated all profits, in the early 1970's, the state introduced a new taxation policy which left most profits in the hands of the collective farms for investment into their industrial and social infrastructure. These were the good times, as the chairman of a Pomore collective farm recalled:

"The trawlers were filled with fish, agriculture produced abundant harvests, we had many cattle. Our farm was profitable and gradually we began to improve our physical infrastructure. We built one farm, and then another. We built a repair garage, a boiler for hot water and central heating, and even a kindergarten. The Soviet state even began to help us with the kindergarten, but this was the very first time the state provided us any support whatsoever in 50 years."

At the same time, citizens were still able to take an active role in making the decisions that affected the entire community. For example, according to the bylaws of the collective farm, decisions on construction were to be made by the general meeting of all members, i.e. all adults on the farm. A collective farm chairman described this process:

"There was always debate and discussion, and they took place at any time. This is a democratic process. This is the way we made decisions, make them now, and will make them in future. Of course, you expect me to say that as a leader this interferes with my work, but no, it does not interfere. It is only through debate and discussion that we come to see the strong and weak sides of any argument or proposal. That is, there is always the question, and I always ask it of myself, is the decision you are making right or not? That's where debate and discussion come in. We only benefit when there are many proposals, many ideas. In fact, we only suffer when people take a passive attitude to one or another question."

IT often happens that decisions taken to improve the well-being of a community in the short-term may lead to highly negative, even disastrous long-term consequences. Such was the case with the decision by the Pomore collective farms to engage in large-scale, ocean trawler fishing in the 1980's. In the short term, the increased catches paid for the rapid development of the Pomore countryside and for the collective farms that had become the basic social and economic institutions of Pomore society. However, in combination with the political and economic transformations following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the consequences of this decision posed profound threats to the very economic foundation of the Pomore peoples' traditional way of life.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought in its wake profound new challenges to the Pomore's traditional way of life. These included rampant inflation and the disappearance of domestic markets for most products. Former large state farms were privatized, with many quickly going bankrupt. Collective farms lost what little state benefits they had enjoyed. But perhaps the greatest threats to the survival of the Pomore were the imposition of fishing quotas in the mid-1990's, and the appearance of large, politically well-connected commercial fishing companies,

headquartered in urban areas, such as Murmansk and Arkangel'sk, bidding at auctions for larger quotas of ever-scarcer fish.

Many non-Pomore fishing communities caved in to the pressure, selling their quotas outright to the conglomerates, or attempting to transform themselves into commercial enterprises, abandoning their collective social life. The Pomore, however, overwhelmingly chose a different path, adopting strategies they hoped would make it possible to compete profitably while preserving their culture and identity. These strategies seem to have emerged from diverse parts of the Pomore community.

Multiple, overlapping channels of informal communication helped build a broad consensus behind them, ensuring active support in their implementation. Indicative of self-organizing qualities and organic politics at work is the wide array of mutually complementary strategies eventually adopted. What made these strategies complementary, what appears to have given them coherence, is how each of them contributed in important ways to sustaining the core values of the Pomore's traditional way of life, while adapting to externally imposed economic stresses.

We can identify three main strategies adopted by the Pomore in response to the stresses of the mid-1990's. The first involved the choice of how they would organize their social and economic life. This was not a simple question. For the first time in their history, the Pomore people not only had the freedom, but they now had the responsibility to decide what kind of social and economic order they wanted to live under. At all other times in their history, their choices had been limited to adapting to changes imposed upon them. This time they had a real chance to make fundamental choices about their individual and collective future. The choice would create a profound test of the enduring strength of the values underpinning the Pomore's traditional way of life in the face of modernizing pressures from without.

This fundamental choice was one made possible by end of the Soviet and the emergence of the capitalist system. It involved three real options. First, they could retain the collective form of organization, the collective farms. Second, they could dissolve them, as was happening all over the country, and let each individual, each family, make its own way in this new world as best they could. Third they could reorganize the farms directly into commercial fishing enterprises, abandoning the money-losing social obligations of the collective farms, seemingly the most competitive option.

The Pomore resolved to keep their collective farms. For the Pomore, this seemed the only responsible, if not the only possible decision. Consistent with their ancient traditions, going back to the Mir, the community as a whole, through the form of the collective farm, decided to maintain its responsibility for the welfare of each of its members, providing thus for the poor and the sick, and sustaining an educational system, as well as developing infrastructure - such as electricity, roads, and community facilities - even though none of these services was profitable.

Unless the community itself undertook these responsibilities, such services would simply cease. This meant that their economic strategies had to be sufficiently profitable to cover these costs under conditions of fishing quotas and growing competition.

In actuality, there were good economic reasons for the Pomore to continue to retain their collective farms. First, their historically rooted, vibrant tradition of cooperative activity and decision-making, as well as the continuing profitability of fishing meant that, unlike most farms in other parts of the country, they remained economically viable. Second, in contrast to other Soviet collective farms, they had never been dependent upon external support. They had long experience managing their own affairs. They were able to invest in new equipment, or infrastructure only out of their own income. In addition, they met most of their own needs for food, by growing their own vegetables, and animals, including dairy cows, and through fishing.

This relative economic independence protected them to a large degree from the economic storms ravaging most of the rest of the country, and provided a foundation for adaptation as the reforms of the 90's began to impact them. Third, the mirror image of their cooperative instincts meant that the sense of individual entrepreneurship that would lead to the loss of good minds from other institutions did not occur among the Pomore to any significant degree.

WHILE to the outside observer this choice may seem conservative or parochial, even regressive, in fact it not only made possible the survival of the Pomore as a people and as a community but also supported a complex of highly creative and effective strategic responses to the new realities facing them. Rather than accepting enticing offers from large holding companies to sell their fishing quotas for significant amounts of money, the Pomore, directly resisting government pressures and motivated by the widely-shared desire to preserve their traditional life and culture, decided to compete head-on, but in ways consistent with their values. To this end, they formed direct partnerships in foreign countries to sell their fish at far higher prices than offered domestically. They joined multiple Pomore farms into larger associations to combine quotas and gain greater pricing influence in the market.

They reduced the losses from agriculture by abandoning tractors and returning to horse power. They sought greater efficiencies by turning some agricultural functions over to private families within the collective farm. Finally, they opened new lines of work, such as lumber production, to compensate for decreasing incomes from fishing. It seems unlikely that such intricately interconnected and complex decisions, decisively influencing the very survival of the Pomore as a distinct culture and people could have been made by only elites.

Throughout the 1990's these strategies proved highly effective. Working with foreign partners in the late 1990's enabled the Pomore not only to repay all

outstanding debts within two years, utilizing the European practice of cash pre-payment up to 80% of the value of anticipated catches, but as well to improve management and fishing results by hiring specialists and acquiring, through credits offered by foreign partners, new and larger boats capable of long-distance off-shore fishing.

Forming associations enabled them to purchase at auction sufficient additional fishing quotas to make these boats economically efficient. These two steps provided the resources to sustain and improve the daily life of their community. While new to the current generation of Pomore, in fact these foreign ties represented, in large measure, the rebuilding of centuries-old ties, ties interrupted by the Soviet state in the 1930's.

Even in difficult economic times, the Pomore have acted in ways to assure support for their community and their way of life. For example, they have now organized fish processing plants near the city of Arkhangelsk, quite distant from their community – an enterprise that employs hired local labor from the city, but whose profits bring additional income to help support those Pomore with limited work opportunities in their own villages. The profits also support such services as education, electrical production and roads, as well as economically unprofitable activities in agriculture and in-shore fishing. And, even today, every Pomore engages in fishing for his own needs; the elderly, grown men and women, and even small children. Fishing for the Pomore is not only a tradition. It is the essential component of their identity as a people.

Today, however, the Pomore's traditional way of life continues to be under great pressure. In 2004, the Russian government declared the resources of the Barents Sea a federal resource, and reduced fishing quotas by more than 50%. One new strategy available to the Pomore consists of utilizing their recently acquired status as an officially recognized small ethnic group to take advantage of special quotas and other privileges available to such groups. However, this recognition was achieved by urban Pomore seeking to recover their identity, and building ties with Pomore fishing communities has been a slow, if promising, process.

Detailed evidence of self-organizing qualities among the Pomore remains sketchy; yet the overall pattern of this community's successful adaptive responses to multiple, profound economic stresses over nearly a century suggests that many elements of self-organizing and effective organic politics have been at work. People have engaged with each other out of a strong sense of community. Multiple informal networks have enabled these widely separated communities share concerns and develop effective alternatives in changing times.

Dispersed leadership appears to be at work in the multiple but complementary actions of the community as a whole. Decision-making, according to reports, has nearly always emerged from wide participation and extensive discussion. What appears in this case to have encouraged and sustained all of these self-organizing activities, however, was a tradition of cooperation, within the context of widely and

deeply held values and traditions by which the Pomore define themselves and which give them their identity. This reality invites us now to question how central such commonly held values and a common ethnicity may be to the emergence and sustaining of self-organizing qualities and effective organic politics.

BIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION:

All of the original research upon which this article is based was conducted by Ivan Kulyasov and Antonina Kulyasova, Scientific Researchers at the Institute for Independent Sociological Research at St. Petersburg University. See, Кулясова Антонина, Кулясов Иван, Трансформация природопользования в Поморье на примере рыболовецких деревень Онежского полуострова Белого моря. (Kulyasova Antonina, and Ivan Kulyasov, "Transformation of the use of natural resources among the Pomore on the example of the fishing villages on the Onezhski peninsula of the White Sea."

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