

Indigenous Activism in Russia: What's Next?

Of over 190 ethnic groups inhabiting Russia, 40 are classified by Russian legislation as “small-numbered indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and Far East” and thus recognised for their unique way of life and the need for an exclusive set of laws to protect it. As can be deduced from such a classification, these peoples, altogether numbering around 250,000 individuals, inhabit vast territories of the Russian Arctic and Siberia. Even in this area, known for its harsh climate, exceptional richness in natural resources and a very low population density, so-called small-numbered Indigenous Peoples constitute a minority and live surrounded by larger ethnic groups; although in some remote rural districts they do at times account for the majority of the population.

By Nikita Bulanin - November 1st, 2020

The colonisation of Siberia by the Russian State started in the 16th century and was mostly complete two centuries later. The conquest of the territory, which corresponds to three-fourths of today's Russia, wasn't always smooth. Conflicts between advancing Russians and Indigenous populations, ranging from smaller skirmishes to all-out wars are well documented. However, once the conquest was over, the interests of the Russian state and non-indigenous migrants in these territories were mostly limited to taxation and trade.

Although in some areas the arrival of Russians resulted in the depletion of wildlife (fur tax was the key form of taxation of the Indigenous population of the Russian Arctic and Siberia) and migrants brought alcohol and formerly unknown diseases that resulted in the decimation of some of the groups, to some extent Indigenous Peoples continued exercising effective control over the large swathes of land in the region. However, the October 1917 Bolshevik revolution symbolised the beginning of the end of this relative autonomy of Indigenous Peoples.

Indigenous Peoples and the Soviet State

The revolution led to a massive overhaul of the whole structure of Russian society, as well as its economic and political model and, though not immediately visible, these changes eventually reached even the most remote corners of the Russian Arctic and Siberia. On one hand, this period was characterised by a greater attention of the state to Indigenous affairs, including bringing formal education and healthcare infrastructure to some remote communities of the country, and organising food supplies to prevent winter hunger gaps that were part of life for many peoples of the Russian Arctic since time immemorial. On the other hand, the ideological rigidity of the Soviet state and its social and economic model meant that Indigenous Peoples, whose culture was seen as primitive, were expected to change in accordance with the aspirations of the ideologues of the new state to fit into the new society. Many nomadic communities were forced to adopt a sedentary way of life, while their children were forcefully separated from their families and placed in boarding schools. At the same time, authorities introduced control over hunting and fishing, and confiscated land for infrastructure and industrial developments. Throughout the Russian Arctic reindeer herders were forced to join with their reindeers' *kolkhoz* (collective farms) and many saw their reindeers expropriated.

The Soviet Union was not only a state devoid of any form of formal opposition, it was also one where atheism was part of the official ideology; hence, Soviet authorities were especially harsh towards spiritual and tribal leaders. In the first decades of Soviet rule many Indigenous leaders were arrested and perished in prisons and labour camps. Eventually Indigenous decision-making mechanisms were replaced with those of the Soviet state and tribal leaders with the elite whose allegiance was with the Communist party and not with its peoples.

Unsurprisingly such an aggressive push for change wasn't received with much enthusiasm by Indigenous Peoples. Many regions with a significant Indigenous population saw armed confrontations between Soviet authorities and Indigenous communities, including the Kazym rebellion in 1933-1934 when, in response to the forced separation of Indigenous children from their families and spiritual insensitivity of Soviet authorities and their local

agents, a community of Khanty people rose against Soviet authorities. The rebellion left around a dozen dead on both sides and was brutally suppressed by security forces. Similar uprisings of Indigenous Peoples against Soviet authorities took place from the 1920s to the 1940s in Yamal, Chukotka and Yakutia.

Another characteristic of the Soviet period was the expansion of extractive industries and industrialisation in the Russian Arctic and Siberia. Throughout the Russian Arctic, state companies, often with the use of forced labour, initiated large-scale mining of gold, nickel, uranium, coal and other natural resources. The exploitation of oil and natural gas fields in western Siberia started in the late 1950s and two decades later the region was transformed into one of the major producers of hydrocarbons in the Soviet Union.

To facilitate the steady supply of workers for extractive sites and processing plants, new cities and settlements were built in close vicinity, which is how cities like Norilsk, Vorkuta and many others were founded. The establishment of large urban centres throughout the Russian Arctic and Siberia led to dramatic shifts in regional demographics with the proportion of Indigenous Peoples in areas of their traditional habitation becoming lower and lower. For example, in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Region the total percentage of Indigenous Peoples (Khanty, Mansi and Nenets peoples) dropped from nearly 20 per cent in 1939 to under 3.5 per cent by 1979.

Although the development of the extractive, processing and industrial infrastructure and urban centers in Russian Arctic and Siberia was often built on Indigenous Peoples' lands and territories, the economic and spiritual value of these lands for them was rarely considered by authorities. The highly centralised structure and ideology-heavy nature of the Soviet state did not allow much space for Indigenous Peoples' self-determination.

The political liberalisation of the late 1980s created a space for debates around the history of the Russian colonisation of Siberia and relationship between Indigenous Peoples and the Soviet State. This period saw the birth of the Russian Indigenous movement and emergence of vocal leaders who, among other issues, raised critical questions about the origins of the deep social crisis affecting Indigenous communities in the Soviet Union and ongoing

discrimination, as well as the poor environmental record of extractive and industrial facilities in the Russian Arctic and Siberia.

Neoliberalism, Russian Style

Political reforms in Russia coincided with a major economic crisis that led to the near disappearance of the social welfare system and worsened already serious social crises in Indigenous communities. The government responded to the collapse of the state-controlled economy at the end of the 1980s with drastic economic reforms which included the privatisation of state-owned industrial and extractive assets, among other reforms. Most of these assets quickly accumulated in the hands of a relatively small number of people, often referred to in Russia as *oligarchs*. The arrival of Vladimir Putin to power some two decades ago diverted the privatisation trend and led to the re-installment of state control over the most lucrative and strategically important assets, including gas, oil and banking.

The economic development model of post-Soviet Russia is based on the intensive exploitation and export of Russia's many natural resources, a large proportion of which are located on Indigenous Peoples' lands. The geographic isolation of many extractive sites and resource processing facilities led to the establishment of a model where the companies that own these assets are transformed into a near sole authority in the areas of their operations. Such companies directly or indirectly are responsible for the wellbeing of entire cities and their residents, are guarantors of most of the jobs, often run their own social welfare systems, control local media and even run their own security apparatus. Often, they are surrounded by an entourage of non-governmental organisations whose purpose is to give an impression of wider public support of these companies' operations. The municipal authorities in such cities are entirely dependent on the good will of the companies "in charge", while state agencies, including law enforcement, work hand-in-hand with the company in charge of the city. Unless a major disaster catches the attention of the media and the public responds, the state tends to ignore irregularities.

Such a case is that of Norilsk, the scene of a recent disastrous [oil spill](#). The city of Norilsk is under de-facto full control of one of the world's major producers of nickel, Nor Nickel. Norilsk is known to be one of the most polluted cities in the world, responsible for [more](#)

[than half](#) of all sulfur dioxide emissions in Russia and twice the emissions as that of the United States. The company's control over the area can be illustrated by the fact that when, after the spill, environmental activists, accompanied by a prominent Russian politician, [tried to take water samples](#) from the areas affected by the spill to Moscow for chemical analysis, they were denied boarding of the scheduled flight on orders of Nor Nickel's security service.

Many principles of Soviet industrialisation and exploitation of natural resources, including the very utilitarian and often barbaric treatment of the environment and complete disrespect of Indigenous Peoples' rights and interests, remain unchanged after the collapse of the Soviet regime. One aspect, however, has changed. The post-Soviet integration of Russia into the local economy means that today many foreign-based companies have their business interests in Russia. For example, French multinational Total [owns](#) 19.4 per cent of Russia's gas producer Novatek, along with interests in a number of other energy projects, while British BP [holds a 19.75 per cent](#) share of Russia's largest oil producer Rosneft.

Indigenous Activism in Russia: Harassed, Threatened and Exiled

Ever since political dissent became possible in Russia, Indigenous rights defenders have played a key role in exposing the abysmal environmental record of Russian extractive companies, inactivity of state agencies in enforcing environmental regulations, encroachments on Indigenous Peoples' lands and territories and the effect these have on the traditional way of life and wellbeing of Indigenous communities. For example, for over a decade since the early 2000s Shor Indigenous activists have been drawing the attention of Russian public and authorities to the disastrous environmental and social impacts of coal mining on their ancestral lands in Kuzbass in southern Siberia; while the Association of Indigenous Peoples of Evenkiya Arun have documented and [protested](#) the poorly regulated, large-scale logging activities on Indigenous lands in Evenkiya that were in part responsible for the [disastrous 2019 fires](#) in Siberia.

While these protests remain at the local level, they cause mixed reactions from authorities who ignore such protests while at the same time attempt to persuade protest leaders to calm down. However, when public opinion starts to show sympathy towards defenders' demands and when the news reaches national or international media, pressure on

defenders increases and sometimes includes threats and even violence. The leaders of the Shor protests have often received threats and some have had their houses burned.

State law enforcement normally does little to protect defenders and investigate cases. On the contrary, often linked to the perpetrators via corrupt practices, they sometimes use force, threats and harassment against Indigenous Peoples' activists. It is only when public opinion pressure reaches the most influential people of the country, especially the president, that local authorities start to show some sort of action and solidarity with defenders; although often it is more symbolic and temporary.

In Russia, where for the past two decades the government has been boosting the power of secret police and other security agencies, while at the same time tightening the grip on civil society and likening human rights work to spying for the foreign nations, defenders' activism is a challenging and often risky enterprise. The very concept of human rights defence work is understood today by many Russians and certainly by Russian authorities as something unpatriotic.

This means that defenders often can't expect support and sympathy from authorities and are left to themselves. Those raising the issues of the right to self-determination are accused of secessionist sympathies, while defenders who reach international platforms to expose Russia's abysmal human rights record are treated with open hostility. In 2014, a number of Russian Indigenous activists travelling to the International Conference of Indigenous Peoples, including recognised expert on Indigenous Peoples rights Rodion Sulyandziga, have been [prevented](#) from leaving the country. The prevention methods employed varied from passport control officials damaging activists' travel documents to road police subjecting travellers to extensive and numerous security checks. While some activists managed to arrive at the conference with only a few hours' delay, others had to go through a lengthy process of having new documents issued.

Several Indigenous activists from Russia, including the president of the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON) Pavel Sulyandziga and its vice-president Dmitry Berezhkov, have been [harassed and threatened](#) by Russia's infamous secret police FSB and had to claim political asylum abroad. Shor Indigenous rights defender Yana

Tannangasheva, who at the 93rd session of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in August 2017 openly accused the Russian government of inaction in the face of gross violations of Indigenous Peoples rights, was subjected to a massive smear campaign at the local and national level. She was later forced to resign from the school where she worked as a teacher and following a series of threats was forced to leave Russia with her family.

Harassment of Indigenous Peoples' rights activists by Russian authorities is not limited to Russian nationals. In 2019, German activist and expert on Indigenous Peoples' rights in Russia Johannes Rohr was handed a [50-year ban](#) from entering Russia. Rohr's case was just one in an expanding list of human rights activists whose visits to Russia were found to be "threatening national security" by the FSB and is very much in line with an ongoing smear campaign against defenders in Russia.

Two decades into Vladimir Putin's presidency the once vibrant Russian Indigenous movement has been reduced to a small number of activist groups and organisations that are on the brink of survival. Draconian laws enacted in 2012 regulating the activities of civil society organisations engaged in activities deemed political by the government and the harassment of civil society organisations by authorities has made it next to impossible to discuss issues of a truly critical nature for Indigenous Peoples in Russia, such as the expansion of extractive activities on their territories or the effective absence of a genuine Free, Informed and Prior Consent (FPIC) process in Russia.

Formerly a vocal defender of Indigenous Peoples' rights, RAIPON came under pressure from authorities and was eventually placed under the control of the ruling party United Russia. A whole score of Indigenous organisations were forced to shut down, among them the Center for Support of Indigenous Peoples of the North, accredited with various UN agencies and whose director is a current member of the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The majority of the organisations that survived limit their focus to non-sensitive activities, such as support of traditional arts, oral culture and social assistance, and are often funded by the very companies that are actively engaged in the dispossession of Indigenous lands, pollution of their land, air and waters, and destruction of their livelihoods.

No Reasons for Optimism

Just like in many other corners of the globe, Indigenous Peoples in Russia have long been suffering at the hands of various forces eyeing their lands. It first began with the expansion of the Russian state that subjected formerly independent Indigenous Peoples to taxation, then it was the Soviet state that forced its social and state model upon Indigenous Peoples. Today it is mostly private business that goes hand-in-hand with the Russian state in its agenda to extract resources stored on Indigenous Peoples' lands and territories. Ever since the first encounters between the Russian and Indigenous Peoples, the rights, interests and needs of the latter were rarely taken into consideration.

Indigenous Peoples' opinion about the innovations and initiatives affecting their lives was almost never genuinely consulted. While the first 10-15 years following the liberalisation of the 1980s offered a window of opportunity to raise the voice of Indigenous Peoples in Russia and to give them an opportunity to decide for themselves, this was quickly destroyed with the arrival of Putin as president. As Russia continues following its course on deepening the international political isolation of the country, including disregard of internationally recognised human and Indigenous Peoples' rights, it is difficult to see how this situation will improve, despite very brave and bold struggle of a number of Indigenous activists and communities.

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