Indigenous Cosmopolitans, Ecological Defense, and Activism in Russia's Arctic

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Introduction

Rodion Sulanzandiga, then Vice President of RAIPON, the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia and The Far East, reminded me in summer 2012: “Russia has the biggest Arctic and the most serious stake in the Arctic. This is bound to influence indigenous peoples, and our politics.” This presentation, based on long-term anthropological fieldwork, expands on his thesis by examining diverse levels of indigenous politics, ranging from cases of community devastation and assimilation to impressive cultural and social revitalization. While focus is on “indigenous cosmopolitans,” I argue that the most effective urban indigenous leaders are those whose lives are deeply intertwined with their original forest, tundra and river bank homelands. Conclusions also stress the socio-political conditions that make some groups more successful than others in defending their social, ecological and cultural interests.

In Spring 2013, the first fracking operation, run by Gazpromneft Razvitiye on Yamal was successfully completed. In Summer 2012, transport ships without ice breakers were able to pass through the Northern Sea Route earlier than ever before. And in November 2012, Russia’s federal government suspended RAIPON, the main umbrella organization that defends the rights of indigenous peoples. While it was reinstated in March 2013, this was done with blatant government pressure to change their leadership and direction. These events are all correlated. In the past decade, the pace of Northern land claims and grabs related to the energy and mining industries has accelerated, causing indigenous people increased strife, including illegal expulsions from lands they have considered their use-right family and clan territories for centuries. This in turn has led to an unprecedented pace of indigenous urbanization in Siberia and the Far East, so that by some estimates as many as 45% of self-identifying indigenous individuals are today
urban, so called “asphalt Natives,” living in cities or medium sized population centers. Indigenous leaders well understand the connection between increased development, increased pressure against their activism, and increased urbanization.

Many levels of indigenous self-identity and contestation are reflected by the growing numbers of groups (from 26 to over 41) qualifying for membership in RAIPON since the Soviet Union collapsed. RAIPON has over 41 member group associations, representing a total of about 300,000 Natives. By legal definition, its member ethnonational groups must be under 50,000 in population; other indigenous peoples of Siberia and the Far East who are more numerous have their own “republics,” and are thus not qualified to be part of RAIPON. While RAIPON has had its troubles with authorities, continuing beyond November to March 2013 when it was suspended, it remains the most viable and organized umbrella group to protect indigenous peoples’ rights. Two other somewhat competing organizations also represent indigenous peoples, as recognized in Moscow: the Association of Indigenous Communities (Obshiny), and the Reindeer Breeders’ Association.

One of RAIPON’s urban Moscovite lawyers, Shor leader Mikhail Todishev, explained to me in the 1990s that indigenous people dislike, even despise, being called ‘minorities’: “We much prefer to be called by our own specific ethnonyms or, if we are to be categorized, we prefer being called ‘korennye’ (indigenous) or ‘aboriginal,’ like the Australian Native peoples.” This correlates with the importance and prominence of the Canadian term First Nations for its indigenous peoples. It is logical because “minority,” as a general category, can easily be geographically relative and historically shifting, for example when indigenous groups have been a “majority” in their self-defined homelands. Thus it is important to stress the shifting and situational nature of ethnodemographics and politics over time, and how this has effected changing definitions and perceptions of “indigeneity.”

Recent legal constraints on the definition of indigeneity in the Russian Federation are reviewed here before discussion of some specific cases. I begin with several chilling
cases in diverse regions that show a pattern of how and why indigenous people have been
driven to urban environments, for “push” (forced migration) as well as “pull” (urban
attraction) reasons. I then turn to the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) in the Far East, a
relatively positive case with still serious problems, where I have done the majority of my
periodic fieldwork since 1986. Analysis focuses on strains of ethnic interaction created
by development, rather than on “urbanization” per se. Implications for civil society in the
“Federation of Rossiia” are also discussed.

**Definitional Battles and Why they Matter**

In the current duma of the Russian Federation, efforts have been underway since
at least the 2nd Putin presidency to revise the laws that govern indigenous peoples, in
order to make the definitions as narrow as possible so that “lgoty,” legal dispensations,
apply to as few as possible in Native access to hunting, fishing, forests, and land. This
especially restricts those who have moved to towns and cities of their regions, and who
may want to return periodically to their families in their shrinking homelands. It limits
their options (literally and psychologically) for returning to indigenous territories, and
becomes an assurance that there will be as few competitors as possible for land
ownership claims. In addition, probably because of shrinking budgets, Soviet-style laws
on affirmative action for education have all but disappeared. In the Soviet period, the 26
officially recognized ‘small-numbered’ peoples had a range of privileges that were meant
to entice them into “civilization” and showcase them as self-identifying illustrations of
Soviet Progress (compare Balzer 1999; Slezkine 1994).

A 1996Yeltsin administration law focused on special rights for those who lived in
“territories of traditional land use.” The main logic behind this law (drafted by RAIPON
lawyers and sociologist Olga Murashko) was that it did not single out any particular
ethnonational groups. If Russians lived in “territories of traditional land use,” and
practiced hunting and fishing, theoretically they could benefit. However, stress was on
Native groups within the under 50,000 threshold, and especially those “recognizing
themselves as independent ethnic communities.” A newer 2011 draft law has considerably more restricted language, so that an indigenous person must:
1. Follow traditional ways of life – hunting /fishing /reindeer breeding;
2. Live in the place of one’s documented ancestors; and
3. Know one’s native language.

As will become clear, each of these points is controversial, and the law was still being debated in Spring 2013. According to some RAIPON insiders, it may be one of several factors explaining why increased political pressure has been put on RAIPON. Many indigenous people practice more than a stereotyped “traditional way of life,” and some are involved in trading, mining, energy industry and other activities that require continual contact and travel across traditional villages and camps and urban centers. Like many others across the North, they may operate at various levels of a globalizing economy and still consider themselves Native. They also are coping with notorious “primitive people” image problems, pressures of local authorities to render them into local “brands” to attract a tourist industry, higher rates of alcoholism and lower life expectancy (compare Axelsson et al 2011).

The language restriction is particularly sensitive, since the 45% of Native Siberians who are now “urban” have far fewer opportunities to know their native languages or to study them. Many lost their Native languages in the Soviet period, although some Khanty pray in Russian that their “clan lands” not be overrun by energy companies. Some indigenous language recovery programs have been more effective than others. In a few places some nomadic schools have been revived, where there are qualified indigenous teachers who have “returned to the forest” after schooling in cities and urban centers (compare Mestnikova 2010; Ulturgasheva 2012).

In sum, newer legal definitions provide little room for self-identity, at a time when an influx of outsiders has already destabilized indigeneity. The laws are supposed to correct abuse of the system, for example too many Russians or people of mixed marriage backgrounds gaining free access to hunting and fishing resources that the state
would like to control. Indeed, some Native lawyers are worried about Russians who claim Native identities or buy documents for “ Igoty.” In any case, a new 2012 Law on Hunting is unprecedented in its restrictions against Native access and licensing. But much worse has been happening in the North, mostly away from “civil society” critique or ability to correct abuses. The following cases go far beyond critical issues of language loss, Native alcohol and health problems, and concerns about exploitation (“when will the Natives dance?”) in the growing tourist industry.

**Cases and Voices: Driving People off their Lands, Snowmobiles and Mines**

“Native homes have been burned in suspicious fires, even arson in whole villages” confided one urban indigenous activist in 2012. When I requested clarification and specifics, s/he explained that in Narym, where Sel’kup and Khanty live, “a special division (otriad) of arsonists came and burned a village in one night in order to drive indigenous people off their land, so that energy exploration could be continued in the area without indigenous interference...” This kind of crime must involve collusion with local authorities, and therefore indigenous families have had little safe legal recourse and little chance for muckraking publicity. Instead, they have been forced into housing in the regional center, where authorities hope they will become assimilated and acculturated without turning themselves into a special “cause célèbre.”

A more high profile case, because it involves murder accusations, has been in the press in the past year and may reach the International Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. This is the “Dylacha” jade mine case, pitting a wealthy Evenki mine collective in Buryatia against officials, including intelligence officers. Local Evenki explain that they have long mined jade in the region, and that reindeer breeding was not their sole occupation before Sovietization. The Evenki community claim that an “obshina” managed to get rights to mine jade in the 1990s, although access to subsurface resources by Native people is rare. Their mine director suspiciously went missing in Fall 2012, and the business ombudsman for Russia, Boris Titov, was brought in to try to mediate the case. Local competitors accused the Evenki of tapping an illegal jade vein,
and of failing to pay taxes. The mining collective was subjected to a hostile take-over by the well-connected head of the local FSB, who was able to enlist highly placed allies in Moscow against the Evenki. The whole case destroys stereotypes that all Evenki are reindeer breeders, and tests the way Native ownership can potentially be defined, or, ideally, negotiated, to include more than “traditional land use.”

Yulia Yakel, a mixed ethnic lawyer who travels often from Khabarovsk to Moscow, has an Amur River community leader Nanai husband. In 2011, she described to me their shock as a legal case was brought against their community that revoked their lucrative fishing rights on clan lands they had long considered undisputedly indigenous. Their local fishermen got into trouble for using snowmobiles from a base “village of the town type” to get to their special, legally designated “place of traditional land use.” A local (female) judge told the community that they needed to travel there “on reindeer or by canoe” to maintain their legal status. These particular Nanai (a Tungusic-speaking group related to the wide-spread Evenki) had never owned or herded reindeer, and thus they were horrified not only by the implicit corruption of the judge, but also by her ignorance. They appealed, but lost the case in a higher court in Moscow, and have no money to take the case further. Members of the community still use their snowmobiles, used by Native people throughout the North, but are nervous that they will be caught and fined on their own clan territories. The lands themselves may well be auctioned to the highest bidders, unlikely to be Nanai. This kind of pressure adds to the stress on any young person in the community weighing whether to stay in the homeland or move to an urban center. While the Amur River is not the “Arctic” according to any of the various definitions of the term within Russia, this case has become known among indigenous leaders throughout the North, and has created ripple effects of fear concerning the instability of “territories of traditional land use.”

On Yamal peninsula, undisputedly Arctic territory, two groups in 2011 faced off across a river, Native and non-Native. Someone in the local Nenets group shot in the air, telling people perceived to be strangers to get off their land. They were answered with jeers: “It is not your river any longer...” And then the non-Natives, Russians and others
associated with local energy development, called for their friends, who were policemen. The police later testified that several in the Native group had aimed and shot directly at the new rightful “owner” of the land in question. The land was in dispute after an “auction” that was held without local consultation. Such interethnic tensions have resulted in court cases that create misery on all sides, and festering resentment well beyond “normal” strains of consensual, selective modernization. Those same Nentsy families may well have a TV in their chum, and relatives who work in the energy industry. But they resent that their children are forced to leave their lands and reindeer breeding traditions before they are ready, and that they have had little choice in how, when and where development is planned, for example the Bovanenkova-Utkha gas trunkline megaproject in Yamal-Nenets. During some of the GAZPROM planning, negotiations with local communities did include plans for “reindeer corridors” enabling reindeer in theory to relatively easily bypass the pipelines, but, according to several consultants, they have turned out to “break up the reindeer routes in very disruptive ways.”

In 2010, sociologist Olga Murashko conducted a comprehensive 3-4 hour survey on what Nenets reindeer breeders in Yamal are concerned about in areas where energy projects – oil and gas – are well underway and effecting reindeer breeding. (Nentsy numbered 44,640 in the 2010 census, an increase over 2002.) The survey results rated Nentsy complaints: 1) increased alcoholism; 2) dogs biting energy workers and sparking interethnic fights; 3) education, including skilled technical training, has been difficult to obtain despite promises of better access; 4) traditional lands access and familiar reindeer paths have been disrupted because of the new urban centers, roads and pipelines; 5) non-local energy workers have been maliciously trespassing or trashing graveyards and other sacred sites; 6) feelings of isolation, with a sense that venues for expression and grievance recourse have been shrinking. In many of the respondents’ views, their local indigenous association “Yamal Potemkam” (Yamal for Our Descendants) and the national level RAIPON have not been doing enough and have been rendered impotent by local and federal-level development politics. In addition, they consider that their local government (administrative and parliamentary) has not been doing enough, although the
head of the local parliament has been Sergei Kharyuchi, a prominent Nenets, who was until recently the head of RAIPON. These feelings of powerlessness, presumably meant to be calmed at the recent RAIPON Congress in March 2013, significantly and symbolically held in Salekhard, the capital of Yamal-Nenets, instead were exacerbated.

**Searching for positive cases: The Sakha Republic?**

Has the vast Sakha Republic (the size of India) provided better conditions than other constituent parts of the Russian Federation, as its propaganda claims, for its indigenous peoples? The answer may be affirmative, but they still have a long way to go. Officially recognized indigenous groups are Chukchi, Yukaghir, Even and Evenki, as well as “old-liver Russians,” and the Dolgan, a mixed Sakha-Evenki-Russian group on the Taimyr border. The slim majority “titular” Sakha (Yakut) numbered 466,492 out of a total of 958,528 in the republic in the 2010 census. Since Evenki have the largest number of indigenous “minority” representatives (in 2002, 18,232 or about 2% of the population; and in 2010, 21,008), their community “zemliachestvo” representation in the capital is also relatively substantial. Among the reasons for cautious optimism have been renewed efforts at the republic level for teaching indigenous languages in the schools and in after-school programs, as well as enabling certain groups to have their own, legally designated regions at various levels (raion, ulus, nasleg), with Native-administered regional centers. Official bureaucracies such as the Department of the Peoples of Sakha Republic (Yakutia) and Federal Relations (downgraded from being a full Ministry during the first Putin administration) are also significant. In Sakha Republic, an experienced, sympathetic Sakha, Afanasy Migalkin, heads the Ministry, with representatives of other ethnonational groups of the republic below him. This is somewhat comparable to the U. S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, and to Canada’s Ministry of Indian and Aboriginal Affairs - where the overwhelming majority of officials are Native.

Enabling environments for multicultural growth in the cities and towns of the republic have been crucial for diverse semi-organized zemliachestva and associations to exist. They are usually poorly financed, however, surviving on volunteer enthusiasm and
funding. Using informal networks, they tend to stimulate constant attention to various mini-homelands—“news from home.” Far from condemning what some disparagingly call “ulus mentalitet,” I see it as encouraging cultural richness and harmless non-chauvinist patriotism. Another trend, for those who can afford it, is an informal shuttle diplomacy—with many return trips back to the homeland from the capital (compare Beier 2009). Some of the top indigenous leaders living in Yakutsk manage to get home at least yearly for the haying season, for life process rituals, and for annual reindeer festivals. Wherever people meet in the city, at weddings, birthdays, curing centers, and universities, diverse figures such as “tamada,” curers and teachers help link people from the same regions so that they can help each other. The sub-text of this is that they are often connecting people from specific ethnonational groups. These are important social entré mechanisms for newcomers to cities and towns.

Some indigenous groups in Sakha Republic have also transcended their disadvantaged statuses by finding other, farther reaching, bases for community solidarity and sanctioned political activity. Thus recent post-Soviet politics have been characterized by new levels of self-organization and consolidation. Examples include the Reindeer Breeders Association; Natives of Nizhne Kolyma; Association of Indigenous Peoples of Sakha; and active participation in Moscow-based RAIPON projects. Broadening in a different way have been the politics of cross-border communication and solidarity, whether within Rossiia or beyond it. Examples include the Even of Sakha and Magadan; the Chukchi of Sakha and Magadan; Evenki of Sakha and China; and a less predictable Yukaghir friendship with a Forest Finn that has turned into concrete, productive projects through the Snowchange Cooperative. This process becomes a somewhat paradoxical multileveled globalization politics for cultural defense. Indigenous peoples’ annual meetings at the United Nations and in the Northern Forum are also good examples of this dynamic.

These cases of networks, outreach and communication at multiple levels must not mask attention to land expropriation and ecological devastation that have been proceeding in Sakha Republic, as GAZPROM, ROSENERGO and ROSHYDRO have
moved in with megaprojects in the past decade. In Northern Sakha Republic, Even and Yukaghir were concerned in 2012 that their Tiksi (a Northern Sea Route port town) public airport access is closing, so that air traffic can be focused on new infrastructure for GAZPROM, not on indigenous communities’ supplies. The most notorious example of a megaproject influencing indigenous communities is the oil pipeline that President Putin ordered to be diverted from the Lake Baikal area, after public protests. Re-routed into mountainous terrain and then along the Lena River, in order to eventually supply energy to China, it has proved to be extraordinarily dangerous, with at least three spills into the Lena River publicly acknowledged, caused by technology that has incompletely tunneled the line. Multi-ethnic ecology activist groups have sponsored public information and protests, and have gotten in trouble with their “Save the Lena” campaign. In addition, one activist told me in 2012, “GAZPROM is buying up all the land that Even and Evenki reindeer breeders use, that they need.” This fit with information I had been given earlier.

“With renewed plans to auction off our lands to the highest bidders, we are once again in danger of the collectives (obshiny) being left with nothing,” bitterly complained Afanasy Koriakin in 2010 in Yakutsk. Afanasy, an Evenki elder, had been head of the ulus of Zhigansk, Sakha Republic, before moving to the capital, Yakutsk. He was doing everything he could from his prestigious, retired urbanized position in the city to help his fellow Evenki back home. His lessons were significant. First, Evenki loyalties are continually defined by the connections of urban kin back to their “small homelands” elsewhere in the republic and beyond. Second, for Evenki the main problem continues to be land and how to manage it. The framing of Evenki concerns about “identity” was interrelated with those of “homeland” and its loss. Third, ethnic tensions are implicit, with potential to be activated or calmed, depending on interethnic contexts. Any “highest bidders” in the latest round of land grabs were likely to be Russian businessmen “outsiders” or perhaps non-local “Yakut,” rather than Evenki. The business plan Afanasy referred to was massive and sophisticated, involving 10 large reindeer herds, a legal designation as a “territory of traditional land-use,” and a bank loan plan managed with coordination between village and urban Evenki representatives who originally came from the village Menkerz and its surrounding lands. They had hoped to name their base, and
the *nasleg*, “Evenkiia.” But this was thwarted when officials, including former Sakha president Mikhail Efimich Nikolaev, said that their land plan was “illegal,” and “secessionist.”

A relatively more positive example of recent Evenki business success, contrasting with the Dylacha jade mine case, has been an Evenki *obshina* given a license to participate in a gold mining conglomerate (“artel”) in the Niuringri region, beginning in 2014. Sixty percent of the start-up capital comes from a republic fund to enhance Evenki well-being in compensation for losing lands to the planned Kankun hydroelectric dam, and forty percent comes from an existing gold company inexplicably called “Yantar,” based in the Evenki Iengra district (*nasleg*). The new director is Nikolai Aribalov.

Evenki leaders based today or previously in Yakutsk are often women, including former II Tumen deputy Avgusta Marfusalova and young activists of the Evenki Association of Sakha Republic (Yakutia) Ezhana Vasilieva and Aitalina Alekseeva. As Gail Fondahl (1998) and others have pointed out, a by-product of Soviet education was that women tended to go further in school than men, and thus they became more ready mediators and interlocutors with Russians and Sakha. In addition, Andrei Issakov of Yakutsk has chaired the youth wing of RAIPON, gaining recognition for his people at the Moscow level. Other impressive Evenki leaders include Anatoly Chomchoev, a general in the Soviet army and current head of the Yakutsk Energo company. Interested in solar energy, he is one of the many Siberians whose opposition helped postpone (halt?) the horribly misnamed Evenki Hydro-Electric Power station that would have flooded large parts of Evenki territory within Krasnoyarsk on the Yenisei River.

Evenki leaders in Sakha Republic consider their top priorities to be land, ecological balance, political status, and the need to stabilize or reverse Sakhaization and Russification trends. They are working through dispersed local *obshiny*, town and city “zemliachestvo” organizations, and cultural associations at all levels. Against considerable odds, they have had occasional victories, such as the recognition of the Zhigansk Evenki National *ulus*, the Olenek National district, and the Iengra Evenki
National nasleg. These victories are especially notable because they counter a Russian Federation trend to “consolidate” small nationality-based regions. But territorial recognition in itself does not indicate full measures of self-rule and self-confidence. For that, creative businessmen-activists such as Afanasy Koriakin should be given more opportunities. Indeed, some argue that cognitive skills of reindeer breeders, adapting to situational uncertainty, are congruent with those of businessmen.10

In January 2013, Uliana Vinkurova, former Sakha parliamentarian, sociologist, originally from Northern Sakha Republic (Sredne-Kolyma) gloomily accessed the implications for Sakha Republic’s indigenous peoples of recent political and economic pressures: “The issue is not just the bureaucratic fight [over RAIPON], but that social trauma has gone deep, that there has been a destruction of the will to live.” After mentioning several suicides in families that I know, she added: “There is a sense of hopelessness, that one cannot do anything to put right one’s fate. That everywhere those who live with nature are being hemmed in, herded into smaller territories. We must change this atmosphere, turn around the despair. There seems to be a threshold, whereby quantity [of suicides] has become quality: they can’t take it anymore [tak zhit’ nel’sia]. As the new generation is coming along, some are dying and some are rebelling. It has been 5 years since our Sakha Republic Declaration of Native Peoples – people had high hopes. We are trying to balance the competing claims.” “Balance” means protection without paternalism, the ability to provide for indigenous nomadic families’ basic resource needs, and the right of young people to move back and forth between rural and urban environments without feeling they have been driven off their land (compare Ulturgasheva 2012).

Conclusions: How Many times do People Have to Cry “Crisis” Before They are Heard?

Native urban leaders with international experience have repeatedly emphasized to me, including in May 2013 after the demoralizing near-loss of RAIPON, that effective leadership matters more than almost anything else in the chances for Native communities
to recover from Soviet and post-Soviet pressures, and to guide collaborative participation in development. Enabling conditions for Native communities to flourish with flexibility, in rural, urban, and everything in between venues, are also crucial. Leadership cannot exist in a vacuum, without resonance, especially when people are being forced off their lands and losing their airports. As RAIPON spokesman Dmitri Berezhkov analyzed in December 2012 after RAIPON was suspended: “Indigenous peoples… are involuntary contenders and unwanted competitors in the vast expanses of the Arctic.” Rodion Sulanzandiga, when asked in 2012 whether Sakha Republic could be a model, explained: “There are relative degrees of attention to indigenous rights and ecological problems. The main places that have some track record of attention to indigenous concerns are Yamal, Khanty-Mansiisk, and yes, Sakha Republic. These are all places with some wealth to share. Other areas are much more depressed – such as the reindeer breeding Todja community in Tuva.” In other words, occasionally the “trickle down” of energy wealth can be harnessed to help Native cultural and ecological projects.

A major indicator of rare indigenous political success inside Russia is Native parliaments, or quotas inside existing regional parliaments. Valentina Sovkina, the dynamic and articulate head of the Saami parliament, based in Murmansk, affirmed in 2011: “places that have allowed a Native parliament best enable indigenous voices to be heard, and development to be somewhat cooperative.” But this means only the Saami, Khanty and Mansi are models, and sadly, since 2012 the small, token Khanty-Mansi parliament, based in Khanty-Mansiisk, has been threatened with a downgrade to committee status within the okrug parliament. In Sakha Republic, efforts to enable a stable quota for indigenous representatives in their parliament, Il Tumen, have thus far failed, despite the valiant efforts of Evenki representative Andrei Krivoshapkin.

When analyzing urbanization, relative degrees of “indigeneity” should be acknowledged, as well as multiple identities, situational identities and fluctuating defense of one’s people. Ethnicity is fluid and relational, as many theorists have pointed out (eg. Barth 1969; Anderson 1991; Appadurai 1996). It matters greatly whether you have republic boundaries to defend and to imagine your community within – Altai, Buryatia
(though gerrymandered), Sakha, Tuva, and Khakassia – or just *okrug* level boundaries (eg. Khanty-Mansi) -- or no official land-based status. Homelands and state definitions influence and can validate identity, encouraging a functioning federal ethnonationalism that is not chauvinist.¹³

Potential “indigenous cosmopolitan” models outside of Russia include the Inuit of Canada, where the territory of Nunavut (meaning “Our Land”) has a flourishing capital, Iqaluit (formerly Frobisher Bay), a democratically elected founder-lawyer president, and a Native parliament. Farther South, the Inuit community in Ottawa has been struggling with urban life, with some, albeit more limited, success: “As transnational spaces evolve and communities are constructed in urban centers, new forms of Inuitness emerge. These are not disconnected from Inuit cultural and linguistic practices, and political claims to Arctic sovereignty. Indeed the Inuit ethnoscape is changing and Inuit are an important part of this transformation.”¹⁴

To enable new forms of indigeneity and empowerment, a dynamic civil society is crucial. In Russia, for those groups with little official Federal territorial support, the importance of umbrella groups like RAIPON is growing stronger – and indeed the recent threat to their existence drew frequently in-fighting indigenous activists closer to solidarity with each other. They are threatened particularly when they have advocated against specific excesses of GAZPROM, ROSENERGO, and ROSHYDRO. RAIPON’s NGO status has been in effect converted into a beholden GONGO (governmentally organized non-governmental organization). The recent NGO law that stipulates registration of NGOs as foreign agents when they receive money from abroad is also alarmingly relevant, because they receive money from a “Scandinavia Fund.” Serious broader threats include the lack of fair elections of regional leaders (in republics or Russian-based *oblasty*) – after they were abolished in 2004, reinstated under President Medvedev with filters, and recently again constrained. The abolishing of lower level territories, “*okrug* amalgamations,” also has not helped. Cases of Komi-Permyak, Ust-Orda, and Aga have been polarizing and radicalizing non-Russians.
Another set of civil-society-related ramifications derives from President Putin’s 2012 announcement that regional leaders are responsible for keeping interethic relations “tolerant” in their republics and oblasts. This has revealed interethnic tensions in some regions. In the Sakha Republic it may have more productively resulted in greater official attention to problems of “small-numbered indigenous people.” For example, eight Evenki communities received compensations in a 2013 decision for lands taken by the Kankun hydroelectric dam, in a controversial decision that is supposed to extend for the next twenty years.

Increasingly more individuals and groups are being put into “opposition” and “dissident,” to use a (neo) Soviet word, categories. This is not how they define themselves. Certainly long established groups like RAIPON or Memorial, or Helsinki Watch do not see themselves as “traitors” or “separatists.” But a strategic chill is being applied by the state on various emblematic, targeted actors – and the indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East as represented by RAIPON– are examples in a long line of others recently. A Native Sakha leader and ecology activist, who frequently travels throughout the republic, has been advocating that indigenous people with grievances, whether group or individual, must stop taking every obstacle they encounter as an insult directed personally at them, but rather refuse to receive words or deeds from “ethnic others” as insults. This may be a noble and self-empowering idea whose time is overdue. However, a broader perspective analyzing potential social change in Russia must acknowledge that one of the hallmarks of civil society is how it handles its indigenous peoples.

1 This estimate comes from the July, 2011 report of Elena A. Pivneva at the IX Congress of Ethnographers and Anthropologists of Russia in Petrozavodsk, Karelia.

2 My Sakha colleague Uliana Vinokurova defines “minorities” as those peoples who are relatively politically defenseless (email 5/16/11). See also U. A. Vinokurova (2011); and Donahoe et al (2008). In Russia, legally “minorities” are guaranteed rights in the 1993 Constitution, and in numerous documents asserting Progress. But the documents themselves can belie their own propaganda, for example one submitted to the Council of Europe in 2010 affirming the “preservation of ethnic identity of the peoples of the Russian Federation” on page 12 while blatantly reporting the abolition of national district names on page 200. (“Third Report submitted by the Russian Federation pursuant to
Article 25, para. 1 of the Framework Convention of National Minorities” to the Council of Europe, 9 April 2010


4 This data comes from 2010-2013 interviews with indigenous leaders at the Moscow and local levels, but is too sensitive to name the interlocutors.

5 Olga Murashko presented the results of this survey in July, 2011 at the IX Congress of Ethnographers and Anthropologists of Russia in Petrozavodsk, Karelia.

6 Department premises share space with the Association of Indigenous Peoples of Sakha, as well as a club house. The building complex was lobbied for by Even linguist Vasily Robbek and Andrei Krivoshapkin with President V. Shtyrov. For Sakha Republic Scheme 2020 plans that include indigenous peoples’ development, see www.sakha.gov.ru/sites/default/files/story/files/2010_10/114/shema2020.

7 Afanasy continued his tirade: “If the authorities would only let us handle our own economy, our own ‘business plan’ for a successful reindeer breeding base at the level of a nasleg (unit within an ulus), we could begin selling reindeer products on a larger scale, and living better. We were beginning to do this, but we were blocked [starting in the 1990s]... then about 73% of us were Evenki in our own nasleg.”


9 Gail Fondahl (2003)

10 Adam Mickiewicz University (Poznan) scholar Ivan Peshkov, studying growing Evenki nationalism and cross-border contacts with China somewhat optimistically concludes: “The northern Evenki play a special role in the cultural-integration process, since they have preserved their traditional culture, they inhabit exceptionally vast territories and they participated in socialist modernization selectively.” http://asiandynamics.ku.dk/pdf/Indig_abstracts. Compare Fondahl and Sirina (2003); and Anna A. Sirina (2008-9).


13 Anthropologists, grappling with diverse understandings of “indigeneity,” understand it as contextual and a matter of degree, much as older linguistic ideas of “emic” (insider) and “etic” (outsider) views have become “problematized.” See especially the scholarship of Orin Starn (2011: 179-204) and Marisol de la Cadena (2007; 2010: 334-370). See also Axelsson et al (2011); Balzer (2006; 2010); Comaroff and Comaroff (2009); Beier et al (2009); Dean et al (2003); Donahoe et al (2008); Forte (2010); and Neizen (2003).


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