



EU-RUSSIA CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM ГРАЖДАНСКИЙ ФОРУМ ЕС-РОССИЯ

A Massive Oil Spill in Siberia Is Not Only about Environment: It Is Also about Indigenous Peoples of the Russian North

Joint Statement by the Board and the Working Group “Environment” of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum

The Board and the Working Group “Environment” of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum are deeply concerned about the news from the Northern Siberia, where a collapsing storage tank near the city of Norilsk leaked some 21,000 tons of diesel fuel into the Ambarnaya and Daldykan rivers on 29 May 2020¹. This massive oil spill not only harms the environment in the Arctic but also endangers the livelihoods of indigenous peoples². Therefore, we believe this is the highest time to pay attention of the international community to the situation of the indigenous peoples in the Russian North, which has been steadily deteriorating for decades.

It is not the first time industrial giants in the Russian Arctic are responsible for environmental damages and suppression of local populations. In 2016, the Daldykan river was already polluted by one of the plants of Norilsk Nickel³, the world’s biggest producer of nickel and palladium, which is again to blame for the latest leakage. Now, as reported by the Environmental Rights Centre BELLONA collaborator, who interviewed the local activist and deputy Gennadi Schukin, leader of the community of dolgans, a Turkic indigenous people, there is a threat that reindeers might be not surviving the winter, once they cross the river with an oil film; likewise, the local population would not be able to sell reindeer meat with diesel oil smell⁴.

The collision of the interests of indigenous peoples and those of energy companies in other regions is not less heavy. So, the multiannual fight of Sergei Kechimov, a guardian of a holy lake in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous District, with the Oil Company “Surgutneftegaz” for the preservation of the environment for indigenous peoples in the region ended up with a court conviction in 2017, and only a nationwide amnesty spared him a corrective labour sentence⁵. In 2015, Sergei Nikiforov, an Evenki activist from the Amur Region, who was opposing the “Petropavlovsk” Group of Companies plans for gold mining near the settlement of Ivanovskoe, was originally sentenced to five years in close confinement and later released in 2017⁶.

¹ See, e.g., www.euronews.com/2020/06/04/russia-oil-spill-putin-declares-state-of-emergency-over-pollution-in-arctic-circle for more information on the incident

² See <https://arcticwwf.org/newsroom/news/major-diesel-fuel-leak-in-russian-arctic-threatens-vulnerable-rivers-lakes-wildlife-and-indigenous-peoples>

³ See www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/12/russian-metals-firm-admits-spillage-turned-river-blood-red

⁴ See <https://bellona.ru/2020/06/05/na-vosstanovlenie-okruzhayushhej-sredy-posle-razliva-v-norilске-ujdet-minimum-10-let> (in Russian)

⁵ See www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/17/reindeer-herder-oil-excavators-siberia

⁶ See www.transrivers.org/2015/1615

Besides, the practice of the infamous “foreign agents” legislation⁷ has been also applied to prominent NGOs of indigenous peoples, like the Centre for Support of Indigenous Peoples of the North (later liquidated by the court decision⁸) or the Foundation for Development of Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples “Batani”. Some of the activists, like Pavel Sulyandziga, who was protecting the rights of indigenous peoples, also being their advocate in struggles with big businesses, and who served at various positions at UN institutions, were forced to leave Russia⁹.

All abovementioned cases were the consequence of the 2013 removal of the protection status from the Russian legislation from lands where indigenous peoples hunt, fish and herd¹⁰. However, the suppression of indigenous peoples has been happening on different fronts. For instance, the latest plans for the unification of the Arkhangelsk Region with the indigenous Nenets Autonomous District¹¹ (and even additionally with the Republic of Komi with a strong national elite) also goes in line with depriving indigenous peoples of the autonomy.

The Board and the Working Group “Environment” of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum demand from the Russian authorities to thoroughly investigate the latest massive environmental incident in the Russian North and to secure that such situations would not be repeated. Furthermore, we request to review the amendments to the Russian legislation made in 2013 and ensure that the activities of the industrial companies on the lands of indigenous peoples would be done only in consultation with them and with preservation of an appropriate due diligence procedure. Finally, we demand to stop criminal persecution of activists and to repeal the “foreign agents” legislation.

The Forum Board and Working Group “Environment” also call up international institutions, such as the Council of Europe, the European Union and the United Nations, to closely examine the situation of indigenous peoples in Russia and to demand from their Russian counterparts the observation of the related national and international norms.

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Contacts:

Pavel Havlíček, Board Member, EU-Russia Civil Society Forum/ Association for International Affairs (Prague, Czech Republic); pavel.havlicek@amo.cz

Anatoli Lebedev, Coordinator, Working Group “Environment” of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum/ BROCC – Bureau for Regional Outreach Campaigns (Vladivostok, Russia); swan0741@gmail.com

The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum was established in 2011 by non-governmental organisations as a permanent common platform. At the moment, 182 NGOs from Russia and the European Union are members or supporters of the Forum. It aims at development of cooperation of civil society organisations from Russia and EU and greater participation of NGOs in the EU-Russia dialogue. The Forum has been actively involved, inter alia, in the questions of facilitation of visa regime, development of civic participation, protection of the environment and human rights, dealing with history and civic education.

⁷ For more information on the term and the application of the legislation, see the statements by the Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum of [10 October 2012](#), [11 June 2013](#), [10 June 2014](#), [23 July 2014](#) and [20 January 2015](#)

⁸ See www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/centre-support-indigenous-peoples-north-forcibly-closed-down

⁹ See <https://tinyurl.com/ycrdz6f5>

¹⁰ See www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/17/reindeer-herder-oil-excavators-siberia

¹¹ See <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2020/05/28/a-hotspot-in-the-polar-circle>