



COVID-19 in Russia. The impact on indigenous peoples' communities.

Aborigen-Forum position paper. July 2020

Aborigen Forum is an informal network of 42 independent experts, activists, leaders, and indigenous organizations from 21 regions, the Russian Arctic, Siberia, and the Far East.

The mission of Aborigen Forum is to protect and realize indigenous peoples' rights by tracking and analyzing legislation, monitoring the state of land rights, national and international partnerships, and dialogue with authorities at all levels.

Aborigen Forum Secretary
Gennady Schukin

Indigenous peoples in Russia

Two-thirds of Russia's territory are the Arctic, Siberian, and the Far East regions, a home for forty-five indigenous minority peoples, with approximately 280,000 members, which equals roughly 2% of the population of these regions or 0,2% of the entire country. Their traditional livelihood based on fishing, hunting, reindeer husbandry, sea hunting, and gathering. More than two-thirds of them continue to live in rural areas where these activities are indispensable sources of food and income. Due to their traditional livelihoods, most of the Indigenous peoples of the Russian North, especially those who preserve a nomadic way of life, usually need much more territory for subsistence than other populations. Indigenous Peoples in Russia remain one of the poorest parts of the population. Their social and economic development, as well as their life expectancy, is far below the national average.

Indigenous peoples' health in Russia is far worse than the health of the country's general population. Social diseases are widespread in the indigenous communities in Russia, including alcoholism and tuberculosis (TB). For example, the TB rate in regions where indigenous peoples live is 9,5% higher than the Russian average, and in some regions like Chukotka autonomous okrug, it is higher twice. The mortality rate from TB, which is 4,5 times higher than the Russian average, is even more eloquent factor of the poor condition of the health system at the remote regions where indigenous peoples live.

The COVID-19 influence on indigenous peoples of the Russian Arctic, Siberia and Far East

The Russian state healthcare system has been restructured during the last 15 years, and a large number of small medical facilities located in rural areas were closed by authorities for "better governance" and "better access to medical service". The remote villages of the Russian Arctic, Siberia, and the Far East, where most indigenous peoples live, became the most sensitive to the closure of the medical facilities due to the size of the territory, harsh climatic conditions, and the low transport accessibility.

The COVID-19 pandemic hit Russia at the end of March 2020. Russia's under-funded healthcare system was poorly prepared for a surge in coronavirus cases: protective equipment such as

masks and gloves is often lacking, and there are not enough beds and other necessary equipment and medical supplies for intensive-care patients especially in remote rural territories. A lot of medical care workers reported that they are poorly protected from the virus and do not receive the required salary payments from the state.

The Russian Federation is a vast country that has weak and expensive transport linkages between regions. That prevented the quick spread of the virus in remote territories of the Russian Arctic, Siberia, and the Far East where indigenous peoples live. However, later it was brought to the Northern regions in abundance by the workers of industrial companies who are regularly coming to traditional lands of indigenous peoples riched by natural resources for extracting oil, gas, and other raw materials.

The local authorities in remote areas, where indigenous peoples live, had no resources to react appropriately to the virus spread. The federal government tried to react to the remote regions' needs and send military field hospitals, organized by the Russian Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Emergency Situation. Such hospitals were organized in Zabaikalsk, Krasnoyarsk, Murmansk, and some other regions. However, in some cases, these efforts led to the higher spread of viruses in remote areas where indigenous peoples live. For example, the mass virus infection in the Kamchatka region started among constructors of the new military hospital who were invited by the Ministry of defense from other regions of Russia.

There were several cases around the Russian Arctic where the virus spread in restricted access industrial camps of the oil and gas companies. For example, in the Murmansk region in the construction camp for the new liquid natural gas facility of the NOVATEK company near Belokamenka village on May 11 was officially registered 2045 coronavirus infected of 2,416 total affected in whole Murmansk region. Similar cases were registered in several other northern regions including the Krasnoyarsk Krai (gold-mining company "Polus" camp near Eruda village), the Yamal region ("Novatek" company LNG project in Sabetta), Yakutia Republic ("Gazprom" company Chayanda natural gas project), Kamchatka peninsula (shift workers of fishing companies).

The industrial companies rather quickly responded to the virus's spread in their field camps, they closed the connections between their workers and residents of the nearby local settlements and strictly limited the entry and exit from the industrial camps. At the same time, companies did not stop the work at their industrial sites, and their workers share in their social networks that inside the industrial camps, companies did not comply with the virus safety measures during the work. Thus, the COVID-19 spreading in the extractive companies' industrial camps continues to be the primary source of the virus spread in the Russian Arctic regions. There were also at least three officially recorded cases in the Russian Federation when the virus spread among remote indigenous communities in the Tyva Republic, Khabarovsk Krai, and Yamal autonomous okrug.

At the beginning of April, the head of the Tyva Republic announced that the first case of the COVID-19 spread in the Republic was registered in remote village Yrban in Todzhin municipal district where Tuvin-Todzhin indigenous people live whose traditional economy is the hunting and forest reindeer herding. The tourist from Krasnoyarsk krai who previously visited the Moscow region came to Yrban village for fishing. There he infected all family members in whose house he stayed for a night, including four grown-ups and four children.

Bogorodskoye village located 870 km from Khabarovsk at the Russian Far East. This is the center of the Ulchi municipal district where live about 3000 thousand people. The leading traditional

economy of the Ulch indigenous people are fishing and hunting. The most important species for them traditionally was salmon, which they fish in the Amur river. At the beginning of April, there registered first COVID-19 patients. The primary source of the virus spread in Bogorodskoye became the municipal hospital. According to local media, local health workers were poorly protected because they lacked personal protective equipment. At least 146 persons were infected. At least three persons, including a worker of the local hospital, died. The authorities sent the mobile group of the medical workers there, closed the village for quarantine for several weeks, and organized a total disinfection of the local public premises. However, medical tests for neighborhood villages were not delivered. The quarantine regime has been lifted in Bogorodskoye in the middle of May.

At the beginning of July, Yamal autonomous okrug authorities reported that the COVID-19 was registered among reindeer herders in the tundra. All those who came into contact with the COVID-19 patient were isolated and taken to the regional center Salekhard for quarantine in a specialized hospital. At the same time, the medical worker of this hospital, who is also the indigenous person, reported that she was infected in the middle of May from other medicians who took COVID analyses among workers of the natural gas extraction center Sabetta during the COVID outbreak in April. She made a video where she blamed the Salekhard infection laboratory's leadership is not providing the safety measures during the work with COVID tests and manipulates with the test results to cover up the spread of the virus in the Yamal region.

There are no other registered cases of COVID-19 in indigenous communities in Russia. The problem is that Russian authorities have no disaggregated data on indigenous peoples on virus spread as well as on other important indicators concerning the indigenous peoples' life and development.

At the same time, many indigenous persons' messages in social networks inform that their settlements or families have COVID-19 cases. For example, in the middle of June, Elena ETTYNAGIRGINA from Chukotka in her Facebook published an appeal to the governor of the Chukotka autonomous region on a problematic situation in Neshkan village in which she mentioned that there are COVID-19 cases in Chukotsky municipal district including death cases.

Indigenous elders in general are under the greatest risk due to the devastating impact of the virus on older persons as well as because of the extremely small number of some indigenous peoples in Russia. There are indigenous peoples in Russia with only a few elders who can speak their languages, like Itelmens in Kamchatka. In case of loss of these elders, such peoples are under the risk of losing their whole cultures. In the case of indigenous peoples, this is aggravated by the fact that all generations often share a common household, which facilitates the spread of the virus, like in Yrban village in the Tuva Republic. This problem is aggravated by the weak health care system in rural and remote areas as well as by social isolation faced by indigenous elders and disabled due to a lack of support services in remote rural villages.

The influence of the response measures on indigenous peoples

The virus pandemic also negatively influences the indigenous communities indirectly. For example, in Yamal, the local reindeer herders discussed the impossibility of buying food and essential goods in local villages during the spring. Usually, nomadic reindeer herders visit cities and settlements during their annual spring migrations to the summer pastures in the North to buy food and other basic goods, including medical supplies. However, this year regional authorities restricted the entrance to settlements for the reindeer herders afraid of their contacts with the shift workers of the gas and oil industries and spreading the virus infection in

the tundra. Reindeer herder also used the opportunity of the annual celebration of the Reindeer Herder Day (Den Olenevoda) in spring to visit urbanized areas to buy the food and supplies and sell some own products like fish and reindeer meat. But this year, the Reindeer Herder Day was canceled because of the COVID-19 situation, which put reindeer herders in a problematic situation of shortage the food and other essential goods. This situation aggravated the unusually warm weather during the winter, which did not allow to build winter snow roads to some villages for the supply of the goods.

The other problem of the COVID-19 response measures became legal acts that do not allow people from one district to visit another because of the quarantine restrictions. There were several messages from indigenous hunters and fishers who reported that authorities do not allow them to go to other municipalities where they have traditional hunting or fishing grounds.

There were also several messages from the regions where indigenous peoples live, including Kamchatka and Khanty-Mansiysk regions, that indigenous communities involved in the touristic business on the local level have suffered because of the COVID-19 as no tourists come there this spring.

The negative impact of the virus on indigenous peoples can also be judged by indirect signs. For example, in the Khanty-Mansiysk region when the local volunteers who provide the low-incomes families by food during the quarantine received several requests from indigenous families who said that they have a shortage in food because of the prohibited connections between indigenous communities and urbanized areas.

The ability of indigenous peoples to receive the state's compensation benefits is weak because of the lower education level, insufficient access to relevant information, and poor infrastructure in remote villages. It is also worth to say that a substantial stake of indigenous peoples' representatives works in traditional economies and informal sector without engaged in official employment. These groups are unable to claim unemployment benefits or apply for any other kind of financial assistance from the state, which only extends to those on the official payroll.

The traditional for Russia gender distribution of employment among indigenous peoples also gives its input into the unequal allocation of the state's compensation benefits in indigenous communities. In Russia indigenous women are more involved in economic sectors which financed by the state budget by one or another way like working in communities' schools, kindergartens, administrations, medical facilities, while less urbanized indigenous men more involved into traditional economies outside settlements, like hunting, fishing, reindeer herding. In the situation of the "self-imposed isolation" declared by President Putin, persons who officially work for state have much more chances to receive compensation payments than those who have no official employment or work for themselves.

The introduced quarantine measures have also severely disrupted indigenous-owned businesses in communities, their economic development, and their trade relations with buyers of the indigenous peoples' traditional goods like fish and reindeer meat, which put them at risk of falling deeper into the economic isolation. Decisions on quarantine measures in Russia, which were developed in a top-down manner with no consultations with affected communities, also violated the freedom of movement, which is for many indigenous peoples, especially for nomadic ones, more essential than for the population of urbanized areas.

A significant challenge became for indigenous communities the policy of distance learning in schools introduced by Russian authorities this spring as a COVID-19 response measure. Online

education became an insurmountable problem for many indigenous children in remote rural areas due to limitations with internet access, lack of communication devices, high price for communication services, and lack of school personnel experience. Many remote indigenous villages have no Internet connection. For example, about a third of schools in Yakutia was forced to continue offline education after the federal government issued an order on distance online school education. Some economically developed regions, like Yamal rich by oil and gas, where Nenets indigenous people live, were able to provide school laptops for every school student. In others, they were forced to use phones or visit schools to receive papers.

The government's COVID-19 response measures are increasing the regional inequalities between indigenous groups in different regions of the country in general. For example, school children in Yamal during their forced break in school learning, received "emergency quarantine food packages", which could be comparable with best experiences in Western countries. In Karelia Republic, which is not so economically developed and where live Veps indigenous people, the school "food packages" were much more modest.

We could also consider several special response measures of the Russian authorities with the aim to protect and support indigenous communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Yamal, local authorities helped to provide food and essential goods for the remote villages and pay additional payments for reindeer herders to support them during the COVID-19 breakout. Regional authorities also decided to provide subsidies to indigenous communities involved in touristic business "to modernize basic infrastructure" and create alternative touristic programs for the local Yamal residents who will not be able to leave the region for summer vacations because of the COVID-19 restrictions. Moreover, local volunteers published a leaflet on virus danger and prophylactic measures on the Nenets language.

In Khabarovsk Krai reacting to the emergency in Borodskoye village, regional authorities sent the medical troop to help the local hospital in fighting the virus and organized the total disinfection of the local public premises.

In Kamchatka, the indigenous communities, reacting to the reduction of the touristic flow from other Russian regions and from abroad, decided "to refocus the touristic activities on internal tourism" and provide cheaper programs for residents of the Kamchatka cities who are also not able to leave the peninsula for summer vacations. In several regions including Taimyr region local authorities sent additional mobile medical troops for remote villages for checking the health of the indigenous residents including the testing for COVID-19.

With regards to special COVID-19 measures towards the indigenous peoples, the federal government limited itself by sending a letter of information to the regional authorities about the danger of the virus pandemic for indigenous communities. In this letter, the Russian Federal Agency of Ethnic Affairs (FAEA) stated that due to the remoteness of indigenous peoples' communities, their low social mobility, and demanding access to relevant information and public services, there is a health threat not only to separate persons but also for the small numbered indigenous peoples as a whole entities. In this regard, the Federal Agency asked the regions' authorities to pay attention to sustainable communication with remote indigenous communities, to monitor their health status, essential goods supplies, and access to public services, including medical services and distance learning for schoolchildren.

Also, Russia prepared a report on COVID-19 in the Arctic regions for the Arctic Council. They mentioned there the potential difficulties for indigenous peoples who may suffer from virus

under conditions of natural isolation of indigenous communities in the High North and the lack of the immune resistance.

At the same time, authorities tried to use the COVID-19 anti-crisis measures, to promote their own political agenda with pay no attention to indigenous peoples' opinions and their free, prior, and informed consent. For example, in the middle of May authorities of the oil-rich Nenets autonomous okrug and the economically weak Arkhangelsk oblast signed the agreement of merger of these two constituent entities of the Russian Federation into one broader region. They argued this initiative by falling of the oil prices on the world's market because of the COVID-19 crisis. According their argumentation, both regions come to an unfortunate economic situation, and only the process of merging the regions could save the local economy. Regional authorities declared to the process of merging between two regions without any consultations with Nenets indigenous people as well as with other non-indigenous population.

Conclusions

In general, the remoteness of the indigenous territories became the great advantage of the local indigenous communities during the first phase of the COVID-19 spreading in Russia. However, at a later stage (for example, during the potential second wave of the virus), the remote indigenous communities' closed nature could become an aggravating factor that promotes the virus spreading among the local population.

As indigenous communities could not be isolated from the main society forever, the governments should urgently elaborate the policy packages to strengthen the health care systems in indigenous communities and, in the case of Russia, restore the medical facilities in remote rural areas according to the modern requirements of the disease prevention. Authorities should include fully indigenous communities into the response packages of economic support, considering that many resource-producing economies, including Russia, fill their state budgets through trading by natural resources extracting on indigenous territories. To implement such actions, governments must include indigenous peoples into the elaboration process of such strategies with full respect of their right on free, prior, and informed consent. To implement such measures effectively, states must gather all necessary information about indigenous peoples' development in a disaggregated manner and provide adequate, timely, and accurate information about their actions and response measures to indigenous communities.