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Poverty and Remoteness Contribute to Ethnic Tensions in the Sacred Altai Mountains

An Interview with Vladimir Sabin, Member of Parliament, Altai Republic



In July 2002, MRD International Editorial Advisory Board Member Yuri P. Badenkov interviewed Vladimir Sabin, a member of the Telengit ethnic group who has held various public positions in the Kosh-Agach District of the Altai Republic and also served as the Republic's Minister of Ecology. Dr Badenkov first provides some background on current conditions in the Altai Mountains before posing direct questions to Vladimir Sabin. Ed.

Ethnic tensions are on the rise in the Altai Republic, as demonstrated in the comments made below by a responsible politician, who commands grassroots respect. So far, however, conflict has not reached an acute stage. "Traditional mountain issues"—poverty, unemployment, and isolation—are the underlying cause of this tension. These issues are a breeding ground for numerous conflicts. Many scholars and politicians believe that the model of reserving areas for traditional land use, provided for in Russian legislation, could help resolve social and economic questions upon compliance with certain requirements, thereby easing conflict. In any case, examples of similar approaches implemented in other regions of the world give reason for moderate optimism, a perspective shared by both the author and Vladimir Sabin.

The Altai—a mountainous region where natural, political, ethno-cultural, and religious borders cross—lies almost in the very center of Eurasia, on territory belonging to 4 countries (Kazakhstan, China, Mongolia, and Russia). Over the last 10 years, the Altai has been the focus of attention from ecologists as one of the world's most important eco-regions—the habitat of the snow leopard and a large big mountain goat known as the *argali*.

The Altai Mountains are doubtless among the few places in the world that remain largely unchanged by human intervention, even though this region was one of the centers of early human civilization. From here, the first migrants to North America crossed the Bering Bridge. It was here that the Turkic language arose and gave birth to the Altai family of languages that is widespread in Central Asia and the Far East.

The Altai has always aroused keen interest among scholars and the general public, especially with respect to socioeconomic development, environmental protection, and preservation of a special spiritual character well known to the Russian public. The roots of special reverence for the mountains and individual peaks arose from the culture, traditions, and beliefs of indigenous Altai populations. The Russian Old Believers, re-settlers with a belief in the existence of the legendary *Belovodye* (White Waters), made a further significant contribution to the cult of mountains and rocks. The religious doctrines of NK Roerich are also a part of the modern history of the Altai; his many thousand followers, living largely outside the Altai, place the mystic *Shambhala* in Central Altai. The great Altaian painter and poet Choros Gurkin, with his poetic deification of the "Khan-Altai," shaped modern indigenous perceptions of the Altai.

At the same time, against this backdrop of magnificent nature and spiritual wealth, the people of the Altai have for centuries been waging a severe struggle for conservation of their ethnic culture and traditions. The population is not homogenous but consists of groups of tribes—the Telengits, Kizhi-Altaitsy, Kumandintsy, Toubolary, and others linked by common territory and a 1000-year history of existence in the mountains, steppes, and forests of the Altai. These tribes, living in the northern territories of the Altai Mountains, were colonized by Russia in the early 18th century. The south and north macro-slopes of the Altai were periodically subjected to incursions by the Mongols, the Chinese, the Dzhung-hars, and the Kazakhs.

Ethnic tensions increase

Two peoples—the Altaic Telengits and the Kazakhs—inhabit the Russian part of the Altai, in the Kosh-Agach District. The latter migrated to the present-day Xinjiang District of the Altai and northwest Mongolia in the 1870s during the massive Kazakh migration from Dzhungharia. Both peoples are nomadic livestock breeders engaged in extensive cattle breeding



FIGURE 1 Mr Vladimir Sabin, politician and member of the Telengit ethnic group, pictured here in the Altai Republic, near the Mongolian border. The Tavin Bogdo Ula massif is in the background. (Photo by Yuri P. Badenkov)



FIGURES 2 AND 3 Ancient Telengit (left) and modern Kazakh (right) religious sites in the Altai Republic. (Photos by Yuri P. Badenkov)

under rather severe natural conditions: mountainous relief (2000–2500 m; the highest peak, Belukha, is 4506 m), severe winters (temperatures as low as -50°C), permafrost, and a short vegetation period. This is a classic example of survival under extreme mountain conditions. Isolation and dependency on economic and cultural centers located in areas with more favorable natural conditions give rise to acute social and economic problems. Even during the relatively favorable Soviet period of development (from the 1960s through the 1990s), when the state provided stable economic subsidies and social assistance in mountain regions, the basic standard of living remained relatively low. It should be emphasized that state subsidies accounted for nearly 100% of local budgets. This state policy, evenly applied to the entire population of the region, made it possible to preserve social stability, ensured by harsh administrative methods (through the system of Soviet-style collective farms).

After the disintegration of the USSR and the beginning of the transition to a market economy involving liberalization, resource capitalization, etc, life in rural areas of the Kosh-Agach District underwent dramatic change. This was apparent primarily in phenomena such as grass-roots impoverishment, criminality, and deteriorating social services. The status of the District itself also changed: formerly an “off-limits” border district (a Soviet model of “dead end territories,” closed to exchange and trade with adjacent countries), the Kosh-Agach District has now opened up for cross-border trade. This change in status coincided with the trend toward globalization and increased economic relations between neighboring

countries and regions. At the same time, the assistance provided by the state shrank significantly. The cumulative effect of these developments also became manifest in relations between the region’s 2 ethnic groups, as social tensions emerged between the Altaic Telengits and the Kazakhs. Several other factors were also responsible for these tensions:

- The Kazakhs turned out to be more fit for the advent of a market-based economy because of their mentality and specific features of national character.
- The Kazakh community, embracing Islamic values, showed much greater solidarity in surviving under the new conditions and confronting adverse influences (alcoholism, drugs, etc).
- Opening the borders for trade and cultural exchange with the transborder regions of Mongolia and Kazakhstan was an unexpected discovery for many members of the Kazakh Diaspora: the Kazakhs emerged as an absolute majority in the Central Altai Diaspora.

The last circumstance served as an important argument in establishing the Kazakhs’ national awareness and a catalyst in stepping up relations with the neighboring cross-border regions of Mongolia and Kazakhstan (the Altai district of China, populated by the largest group of the Altai Kazakhs, still remains closed to contact with the Russian side).

But what of the Altaic Telengits? The Telengit community proved to have less capacity for adapting to change than the Kazakhs. Because of their mentality and religious beliefs (the Telengits are pagans who worship the spirits of the mountains and woods, with whom they communicate



FIGURES 4 AND 5 Art brings people closer together: Telengit (above) and Kazakh (below) musicians play folk tunes. (Photos by Yuri P. Badenkov)

through a shaman), the Telengits are not active in trade or entrepreneurship, hoping to get support from outside (through state and international funds). This may be why the idea that the international community should provide moral and financial support for the culture and the natural environment of the Altai is so popular among the Altai population.

This naive hope has paralyzed the will of the Telengit community to some extent, generating disillusionment and inability to believe in the possibility of improving one's life through one's own efforts. The search for a way out of this critical situation is proceeding in one direction—that of state support. The 1999 Law on Guarantees of the Rights of Indigenous Minorities of the Russian Federation fulfills these aspirations to a certain extent because it provides for some federal benefits and support to groups that are granted the status of indigenous minorities after being included in the Federal List of Minorities. The Altaic Telengits managed to attain this status in 2000.

As might be expected, this action caused a response reaction from the Kazakh community of Kosh-Agach, which also raised the issue of obtaining indigenous status. Two Kazakh congresses (*Kurultais*) have been held, which demanded that the same rights granted to the Telengit community be granted to them. These demands also included the right to cross borders without a visa and an opportunity for the Kosh-Agach Kazakhs to obtain dual citizenship (in the Republic of Kazakhstan). All this resulted in increased tensions in relations between these 2 groups, which had existed peacefully in the Chuisk Steppe and the Altai Mountains for over 200 years.

These and other issues in the lives of the 2 Kosh-Agach peoples were the focus of a recent discussion with Vladimir Sabin, a Telengit by birth and a politician by profession. Vladimir Sabin has worked for almost 40 years in various public positions in the Kosh-Agach District. He has been Minister of Ecology of the Altai Republic and Chairman of the Budget Committee of the Republic's Parliament for the last 10 years.

Yuri P. Badenkov (MRD): Has the grant of indigenous status improved the living standard of the Telengits? And will granting of this status to one group result in increased social tensions in the Kosh-Agach District?

Vladimir Sabin: No, this has not actually improved the Telengits' lives. They have received a kind of moral satisfaction since the state has recognized their historical identity. The government of the Republic of Altai does not have the means to implement the law on indigenous peoples, so the law does not work. The society does not have reliable information on the benefits provided to the indigenous peoples under this law, so its attitude is negative. On the other hand, the Russkii Center and the Kazakh Birlik have also raised the issue of obtaining indigenous status, which runs contrary to the provisions of the law and is a subject of political speculation.

Another agricultural reform has been under way in the Kosh-Agach District since the early 1990s: the *kolkhozes* have been disbanded, and the idea of farms has been promoted. To the best of my knowledge, the process of restoring the community cooperative farms, based on principles different from the *kolkhoz*, is currently under way. What are the key principles of the reform (mono-ethnic, tribal, etc)? Is this reform causing additional tensions or even conflicts?

The reform in the countryside has boiled down to a liquidation of the *kolkhozes* on the ugliest terms. This has taken place in my native region, affecting the highest *kolkhoz* in the mountains, Kyzyl Maany (the Red Banner). It was carried out by visiting politicians from Moscow. The misfortune of a minority people living far from the capital and economic centers is that they become the focus of activities undertaken by unscrupulous politicians. With their help the collective farm was ruined, the livestock were taken away and sold for next to nothing to local politicians, and tensions have arisen among the people.

We are now pinning our hopes on the Russian Federation's Law On Areas of

Traditional Use of Nature by Indigenous Peoples and Minorities in the North and the Far East. Competent application of this law will make it possible to resolve land issues in extreme climatic conditions. It is true that against the backdrop of general impoverishment, the Telengits' position looks catastrophic: they are in no way fit for the new market conditions.

Against the backdrop of general poverty and psychological differences in adaptability to the new values of the market and to new relations, one can easily see a growing interest in the Kazakh community in traditions, including religious values. New mosques are appearing in Kosh-Agach, Zhany-Aul, and Tashanta. What is happening in this respect in the Telengit community? Is there a revival of interest in the values of Burkhanism? *(Burkhanism was a religious movement that emerged among inhabitants of the Altai in the early 20th century as a form of protest against their forcible Christianization, combining Lamaism and shamanism. The movement was suppressed by military force. Ed.)*

They become victims of fraud, their society is degrading, alcoholism and TB incidence are on the rise. The Kazakh community is protected against this by the rebirth of Islam and strengthening of the tribal ties with the Kazakhs of Kazakhstan, Mongolia, and China. Burkhanism cannot become a single religion for all Altai people, though the Ak-Dai beliefs of the Kosh-Agach Telengits have a lot in common with Burkhanism.

There are clear-cut signs of increased tensions in ethnic relations in the Chuisk Steppe and its environs. Many Telengit families are leaving the region, the Kazakhs hold more active positions in trade, and their ties with the Kazakh Diaspora in Kazakhstan, Russia, and Mongolia are increasing. The local authorities realize this and are taking some steps to reduce ethnic tension. A House of Friendship has been set up, historical and ethnographic museums are developing (a Telengit one in Kokory and a Kazakh

one in Jan-Aul, but there is no common lore museum in Kosh-Agach). What is the most important thing that should be done, in your opinion, to reduce tensions? In what areas do preventive measures need to be taken to avert the development of tension into conflict? And, finally, the idea of creating an international cross-border biosphere territory has been very popular over the last few years. Will the new status of the territory (and a program for its long-term development) help relieve the tension in the Chuisk Steppe and the mountains?

Population outflow to the northern regions of the Republic is a regular form of migration of mountain dwellers to the republican center. However, ethnic tension is indeed mounting. The Telengits of the Kyzyl Maany high-mountain *kolkhoz* cannot keep more than 2 cows in a household because one can store enough hay for the winter only in the subjacent Kazakh regions. A Telengit family keeps 4–5 times less livestock than needed for subsistence. The reason is a difference in the living standards of the Telengits and the Kazakhs, as well as the predominance of the latter in powerful local institutions.

Now that the Telengits have the status of indigenous people, they hope that the whole territory of the Kosh-Agach District will in future be classified as part of the protected territories covered by legislation governing traditional land use, which will become part of an international trans-border biosphere. In this context, the idea of building a motor road to China and moving livestock from Mongolia to Kazakhstan through the territory of the Russian Altai acquires more specific and practical meaning. However, discussion of this idea today is of a political, ideological, and religious nature.

The main thing is that conservation of the traditional land use by the Telengits will be protected by law, thus allowing an improvement in the minimum standard of living, guaranteeing survival, and respect for ethno-cultural dignity. Compliance with the norms of this law is not designed to infringe on the interests of the other peoples living here.

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