In Russia’s coal country

Giovanni Pigni
13 December 2017

The Russian region of Kuzbass is entirely dependent on the extraction and export of coal. But the environmental toll of coal mining there is heavy. Despite some resistance by local communities and indigenous peoples, there appears to be no will among the authorities to slow the spread of coal extraction, which has already devastated several towns and villages in the region.

As we travel around the surroundings of Novokuznetsk, in the heat of the Siberian summer, we come across endless green fields patched with boreal forests and small wooden villages. On the roads we witness huge dumper trucks loaded with coal leaving behind dusty trails as they pass by. Far away on the horizon, the cloudless sky is concealed by a layer of brown smog. ‘People here are used to breathing all the elements of the periodic table’, our taxi driver complains.

Located in the Siberian region of Kemerovo, Kuzbass (the shortened name of the Kuznetsk Basin) is home to 40 per cent of Russia’s coal production. Here, open-cast coal mines sprout like fungus, resulting in a devastating impact on the environment and the livelihood of nearby residents. Toxic coal dust contaminates the air and the soil, according to the Russian state monitor Rosprirodnadzor, has a pollution rate that is twice the national average. As the mines expand, forests die, fertile soil turns barren and the terrain slowly transforms into a lunar landscape.

It is no surprise therefore that life expectancy in the Kemerovo Oblast is three to four years lower than the national average, according to official statistics. The region also has the highest rate of occupational diseases, especially respiratory illness, in the Russian Federation.

A dirty business

When Yevgeny moved to the village of Starobachaty a decade ago, there was a potato field in front of his house. Since then, the neighbouring Bachatsky coal mine has increased in its activity and today the field has been replaced by a huge spoil tip. Yevgeny says he is no longer bothered by the occasional detonations which shake his house. Still, he will never get used to the coal dust which spews from the mine.
'When the wind blows this way, it is impossible even to go out. The dust gets in your mouth and in between your teeth,’ he says with a broken voice. ‘When the authorities come to inspect the situation, the mine suddenly stops its work. There is no more dust and no more noise. As soon as they are gone, it starts all over again.’ As Yevgeny recalls, the only environmental activists in the village were old pensioners who have passed away. As for himself, he does not have enough time to deal with the environmental problems. ‘When you are retired, then you have free time. But I have a family to feed.’

According to Ecodefence, an environmental organisation (which has been placed on the list of ‘foreign agents’ by the Russian Ministry of Justice), the situation of Starobachaty is just one of several cases of safety violations which should require mines to be separated from populated settlements. ‘The minimum thousand-metre distance established by law is not far enough. But even this modest distance is not respected!’ exclaims Anton Lementuyev, a local representative of Ecodefence. After receiving an education in mining engineering, Lementuyev refused to pursue a career in the coal industry when he realised that it was a dirty business.

According to local activists, coal mining companies cut expenses on environmental and safety measures in order to compensate for the huge costs of coal transportation. By opening mines next to populated areas, companies can use existing and accessible infrastructures without having to build new ones from scratch. ‘It would be possible to minimise the negative impact on the environment. But mining coal in an ecological way is expensive and the company owners are greedy,’ says civil rights activist Vladislav Tannagashev.

When asked to comment on the case of Starobachaty, the local authorities denied the possibility of violations stating that ‘if there were infringements, the coal company would have been sanctioned’. Activists dismiss these statements, condemning the alleged collusion between the coal companies and the Kemerovo administration led by Governor Aman Tuleyev, who has been in charge since 1997. ‘Tuleyev is the main lobbyist of the coal mining industry. He does not have any interest in hindering their activities,’ Lementuyev claims. ‘And even when violations are found, the fines are so small that the companies just pay and keep on violating the regulations,’ Tannagashev adds.

For the most part, Kuzbass residents are helpless when it comes to opposing the companies’ violations mainly because they are not fully aware of their civil rights. Lementuyev sarcastically remarks: ‘People write letters to President Vladimir Putin or Governor Tuleyev as if they were addressing Santa Claus.’

**We do not want to sell**

‘We made a decision. We will not sign any documents and there won’t be a mine here, we are categorically against it,’ exclaims Natalya Anisimova, a pensioner living in the village of Mencherep. In December last year the residents of Mencherep discovered that a new open-cast mine was to be built on the border of the village. Four parcels of land were to be confiscated for municipal and state needs, connected with the exploitation of the subsoil. Having obtained the exploitation licence, Stroipozhservis, a coal company, intends to purchase land from the residents. ‘We are not negotiating the land’s price, we
do not want to sell anything,’ adds Anisimova’s neighbour, Marina Satayeva. The two women are sitting in the veranda of a wooden cottage next to the shore of the Belovsky reservoir, an artificial lake which provides the water supply to a neighbouring power station. The lake – called ‘the pearl of Kuzbass’ by residents – attracts tourists from all over the region. The pensioners complain that the procedures regulating the emissions of the exploitation licenses do not take into account the needs of the local residents. ‘Nobody thought about the people living here,’ Satayeva says. ‘If the mine opens, where are we supposed to go?’

The main controversy lies in the fact that while the land belongs to private owners, the subsoil underneath is state owned. Therefore, authorities hand out exploitation licenses without involving the local residents in the decision-making process. After a licence is issued, residents are forced to find an agreement with the coal companies, who often do not hesitate to use their influence in order to impose their own conditions.

Anisimova and Satayeva are currently renting their land to a farmer who provides them with fresh products in exchange. ‘European sanctions have not affected me at all, since I have everything I need. But if they confiscate this land, where am I supposed to keep my cows? I will have to get rid of them,’ Anisimova worries. The two women are convinced the opening of the mine will have serious consequences on the local ecosystem, making further opportunities in the tourism sector impossible. ‘We want to prevent the mine from opening,’ Satayeva declares, ‘because once it will start working, our surroundings will quickly turn into a lunar landscape.’

The two women belong to a group formed by Mencherep residents opposing the mine. They show me a pile of letters: responses from authorities to their numerous appeals. Despite the authorities’ reassurances, according to which coal mining activity will take place ‘in strict accordance with current law’, the two pensioners remain deeply sceptical. ‘If President Putin does not help us by cancelling the licences with a special decree, then we will go to court,’ Satayeva concludes.

Slow extinction

Some scattered wooden ruins, which are about to be swallowed by the surrounding vegetation, are all that remains of Kazas – once a vibrant village on the bank of the Mrass-Su River. ‘It almost looks like as if the village never existed,’ says Aleksandr Tokmagashev, a former resident of Kazas and a representative of the indigenous people of Kemerovo, the Shors. In 2012 extremely unfavourable environmental conditions forced the residents of Kazas to sell their properties to the Yuzhnaya coal company. According to the official narrative, the sale happened on a voluntary basis. Yet, some residents claim that they were harassed by representatives of the mining company. ‘Now people say “you shouldn’t have sold your land, if you didn’t want to. You could have stayed.” But we actually received threats. People were scared. That is why they left,’ Tokmagashev says. He was one of the few residents who refused to sell his land. In the winter of 2013-2014 his house was set on fire, together with those of some other remaining villagers. The person responsible for the arson was never identified. Since then he has lived in a city apartment as his disability pension does not allow him to rebuild and repair his house.

The old Shor is stubborn, however, and refuses to sell his property, adding that he still
feels responsible for the land of his ancestors. He regularly visits the old cemetery next to the village where Shor tombs hide amidst purple lupines. His father, who fought in the Great Patriotic War, is also buried there. ‘What did my father fight for?’ he asks himself. ‘He built our house, left it to me as a legacy and now…’ Tokmagashev intended to pass on the house to his children, but the motherland, for which his father had fought, no longer exists.

Not far from the ruins of Kazas, the Shor village of Chuvashka is surrounded by three coal mines: Kiizassky, Seberginsky and Krasnogorsky. ‘They have been detonating and polluting our river. They are intentionally creating these conditions to force us to leave,’ complains Valentina Boriskina, a resident of Chuvashka, a Shor pensioner and activist. She welcomes us in her house where there is little evidence of the culture of her ancestors. On the kitchen table she has prepared Russian pancakes and tea.

‘The Russian colonisers erased our traditions, our customs and our language. They depersonalised the Shors,’ the woman tells us. Boriskina laments the ineffectiveness of the law on ‘Territories of Traditional Natural Use’ which is supposed to safeguard the Shors’ ancestral lands, but fails in practice. In 2007 Shors were deprived of the right of self-administration and their land was eventually designated for exploitation.

Boriskina believes the Shors to be the main victims of the industrialisation of the region. ‘Traditional skills like fishing, hunting and gathering are slowly being forgotten. Most young Shors leave the countryside and move to the cities, where they forget their language and traditions,’ she says. According to Boriskina, the destruction of their ancestral territories is leading to the slow extinction of the Shors as a nation: ‘Many of us become alcoholics. Others die working in the mines. We are children of nature. We should live on our own land.’

In August this year an organisation called the ‘Revival of Kazas and the Shor people’ submitted to the United Nation CERD (Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination) a report condemning the ecological crimes of Kuzbass coal companies which, according to the activists, are leading to the ethnocide of the Shor people.

The curse

Members of the local administration say the Shors’ situation is not as critical as the activists picture it. ‘These people only see the negative side of the issue. Saying that nothing is being done is just a way to get publicity,’ says Svetlana Dudkina, a representative of the Shors in the local administration. ‘Of course the law on territories of traditional natural use needs to be adjusted. But that requires time. For now we are cooperating with the coal mining companies to solve the Shors’ problems,’ she adds.

According to Dudkina, the coal companies are donating one and a half million roubles (around 20,000 euros) each year towards the preservation of the Shor culture. Thanks to the financial support from the coal industry, Shor entrepreneur Vladimir Bekrenev is developing ethnic tourism in the village of Chuvashka.
‘The more coal, the richer the Shors are!’ claims Bekrenev’s sister, a plump Shor with dyed-blonde hair, as she welcomes me into the ‘spiritual centre’ – a wooden yurt on the top of which flutters a white and light blue flag. Bekrenev explains that this is the national flag of the Shor, which was introduced two years ago.

Once inside, he invites me to sit on a wooden throne where guests are allowed to make a wish according to ancient Shor tradition. Next to the spiritual centre, Bekrenev runs an artisan workshop, where wooden items representing folkloric characters are mixed with Orthodox crosses and icons – they are all souvenirs for sale. Later, I walk with Bekrenev on the shore of the Mrass-Su River. From here we can see the Seberginsky mine where the entrepreneur worked for most of his life. When asked what he did to prevent the steady devastation of the Shors’ ancestral lands, he remains silent. After a long sigh, he finally says: ‘The Kizassky mine already started working. I don’t have the power to stop it.’ He came to the conclusion that an uncompromising fight against the coal mining industry is a useless effort. ‘We live on coal. Our ancestors chose to settle in the richest of all places. This is our curse.’

Today, Kuzbass is entirely dependent on the extraction and export of coal and other minerals. The lack of diversity in Kuzbass industry is reflected by a 2015 governmental study which placed the Kemerovo region as one with the highest number of monotowns in a difficult social and economic situation. What is worse, the price of coal has been steadily decreasing in recent years as demand from many western countries has declined as they move towards more renewable energy. Nevertheless, there is no indication that coal extraction in Kuzbass will let up. On the contrary, in the last 15 years extraction has increased by 40 per cent, while exports have almost tripled, according to the Russian department of state statistics.

‘Coal mining companies are just interested in maximising profits, with no regards for the consequences in the medium to long term,’ Lementuyev says. According to the activist, without a requalification of the industrial sector, Kuzbass will soon face a devastating economic crisis. ‘In approximately ten years, the coal companies will be forced to close their activities in Kuzbass. They will leave behind massive unemployment and a wasteland of pits and spoil tips.’

Published 13 December 2017

Original in English
First published in New Eastern Europe (November-December 2017)
Downloaded from eurozine.com (https://www.eurozine.com/in-russias-coal-country/)
© Giovanni Pigni / New Eastern Europe / Eurozine