



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

By Aborigen-Forum, Centre for the Support of indigenous Peoples of the North, Arctic Consult and Batani foundation.

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic hit Russia at the end of March 2020. That was later than for most European countries and gave the Government time to prepare adequately for the health and economic crisis. Russian authorities implemented some measures to prevent the spread of the virus, including closing the border with China, but have failed to stop the infection, which started from big cities that linked closely with European capitals and resorts.

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 being riched by natural resources for extracting oil, gas, and other raw materials.

Over some time, the virus had come to remote indigenous territories. However, there were not many disease outbreaks in indigenous communities, fortunately, because of the quarantine measures for the workers of extractive industries who are not able to visit nearby villages. At the same time, extractive companies did not stop the work and failed to implement adequate preventive measures against the epidemic, so industrial projects continue to be the primary source of the COVID-19 in Russia's Northern territories where indigenous peoples live.

The health care system in Russia was not prepared well for the virus spread. It was also reformed recently by the Russian Government, which resulted in a catastrophic reduction of the medical facilities, especially in rural and remote regions, which are home for indigenous peoples.

The response measures implemented by the Russian government put some indigenous communities in a stressful situation because of the cut connections between different parts of society. According to the numerous independent researches, the state economic support of Russian citizens during the forced quarantine downtime was not adequate. Its receiving was

hampered by numerous bureaucratic obstacles that were especially difficult for vulnerable groups, including indigenous people.

Even during the COVID-19 crisis, some state officials tried to use the response measures to promote their own political agenda, while violating free, prior and informed consent of indigenous peoples and their right on self-determination, which is the long-time trend in today's Russia.

In general, the outbreak of COVID-19 became a severe threat to the sustainable development of indigenous peoples of the Russian Arctic, Siberia, and the Far East. The remoteness and transport isolation of indigenous communities became an advantage during the first phase of the COVID-19 spread but could be aggravating factors in the future.

Indigenous Peoples in Russia.

Two-thirds of Russia's territory are the Arctic, Siberian, and the Far East regions, which are 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. Apart from the extractive industries, the most distinctive trait of the economies of those regions is the continuing importance of the indigenous peoples' traditional economics, which was and is the most essential historically established component of the northern ecosystems. Many indigenous communities continue to live a traditional nomadic or semi-nomadic way of life and develop their traditional systems of communal resources management and mutual support. These systems have allowed them to survive in some of the world's harshest climate conditions for centuries.

According to Russian law, they are called "Indigenous small-numbered peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation." This is a collective term for peoples "numbering less than 50, 000 people; living on ancestral lands, maintaining the traditional way of life, economic activities and crafts and perceiving themselves as separate ethnic groups".

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.



Figure 1. The map of the small-numbered indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation. Source - The Center for the support of indigenous peoples of the North

The impacts and challenges of COVID-19 to indigenous peoples' wellbeing and sustainable development

In the first-time virus appeared in Russia on 31 January 2020, when two Chinese citizens in Tyumen (Siberia) and Chita (the Russian Far East) tested positive for the virus, with both cases being contained. Early prevention measures of the Russian Federation included the closing of the border with China and delivering the group of the Russian citizens from the Chinese Wuhan by the air military transport. Later in March, several Russian tourists brought the infection to Moscow from Italy and Spain.

Since 28 March, President Vladimir Putin declared "A non-working period" which had been extended twice and lasted up till 11 May. During this period, the Russian Federation closed its international borders and declared additional safety measures, including canceling public events, closing schools, theatres, and other public facilities. By 17 April, cases were confirmed in all regions of the Russian Federation. Russia was relatively late in suffering a severe outbreak of COVID-19, but now has become the country with the fourth-most cases in the world, after the United States, Brazil, and India. According to official figures as of 14 August, Russia has 912,823 confirmed cases, 729,411 recoveries, and 15,617 deaths.

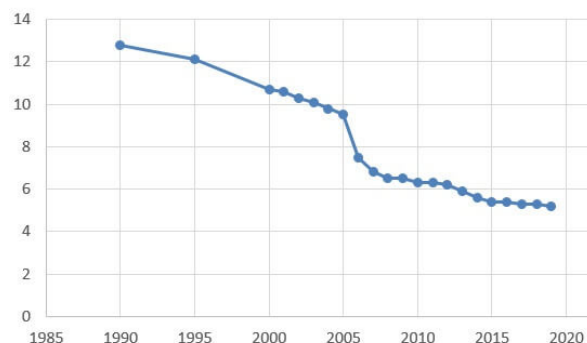
Figure 2. New COVID-19 cases in the World (14 August 2020 TOP 10 countries)

All	Europe	North America	Asia	South America	Africa
#	Country, Other	Total Cases	New Cases	Total Deaths	New Deaths
	World	21,299,899	+240,622	761,626	+4,907
1	USA	5,466,941	+51,275	171,334	+919
2	Brazil	3,275,520	+45,899	106,523	+959
3	India	2,525,222	+65,609	49,134	+990
4	Russia	912,823	+5,065	15,498	+114
5	South Africa	579,140	+6,275	11,556	+286
6	Peru	507,996		25,648	
7	Mexico	505,751	+7,371	55,293	+627
8	Colombia	433,805		14,145	
9	Chile	382,111	+2,077	10,340	+41
10	Spain	358,843	+2,987	28,617	+12

Russia's under-funded healthcare system, which was restructured several years before the crisis, was poorly prepared for a surge in coronavirus cases: protective equipment such as masks and gloves were often lacking, and there were 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.

Since 2004, the Russian government organized the healthcare reform "to strengthen the effectiveness and improve the governance" of the state's healthcare system and reduce the "non-effective" medical settings. There was much criticism concerning this reform among experts, but one of the biggest challenges was the shutdown of the medical institutions around the country. According to the State Statistic Agency, the general amount of the hospitals which were closed in Russia from 2005 till 2018 is more than 4 thousand (9479 in 2005 and 5257 in 2018).

Figure 3. Decreasing of number of hospitals in Russia (1990-2020)



The largest number of closed medical facilities are located in rural areas. If in cities there were closed about 25 % of the total number of the hospitals, in rural areas there were closed about 75 % of the total number. Remote areas of the Russian Arctic, Siberia, and the Far East where mostly indigenous peoples live become 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 of the indigenous communities. Thus in one of the villages in Chukotka, Amguema the local hospital was liquidated in 2016 and authorities transferred the country doctor to the hospital in another village Egvekinot, which is 90 kilometers away and according to local residents, it takes from 6 to 12 hours to get there in the winter time because of the constant snowdrifts.

Considering the fact that in the Russian Arctic about 80 percent population lives in cities and among indigenous peoples of the Russian Arctic in cities lives only about one-fourth of their general number we can conclude that the medical care reform in Russia which has been implemented by Russian authorities since 2005 affected the indigenous population of small villages in the remote regions of the Russian North worst.

We must also consider that 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 in the remote regions where indigenous peoples live.

Figure 4. Decreasing of number of hospitals in Russia (2005-2018)

	2005	2010	2015	2016	2017	2018
В городских поселениях						
Число больничных организаций	5820	4959	4397	4351	4297	4275
из них негосударственные	286	216	239	263	268	309
из них частной формы собственности	...	110	176	203	236	252
Число коек в больничных организациях:						
всего, тыс.	1365,9	1186,1 ¹⁾	1060,1 ¹⁾	1041,0 ¹⁾	1026,9 ¹⁾	1018,7 ¹⁾
из них в негосударственных организациях	32,1	20,2	21,8	22,2	23,0	24,4
из них частной формы собственности	...	3,4	12,1	12,7	14,6	16,5
на 10 000 человек населения	130,3	112,5	97,6	95,5	93,9	93,1
Число центральных районных больниц ²⁾	1046	1027	829	815	809	801
Число районных больниц ²⁾	148	112	230	242	225	224
Число участковых больниц ²⁾	40	18	4	9	6	5
В сельской местности						
Число больничных организаций	3559	1349	1036	1005	996	982
из них негосударственные	7	8	6	3	6	10
из них частной формы собственности	...	5	4	2	5	7
Число коек в больничных организациях:						
всего, тыс.	209,5	153,4 ¹⁾	161,9 ¹⁾	156,2 ¹⁾	155,8 ¹⁾	154,1 ¹⁾
из них в негосударственных организациях	0,3	1,6	2,3	1,3	2,4	2,6
из них частной формы собственности	...	0,68	0,6	0,2	0,6	0,8
на 10 000 человек населения	55,6	40,9	42,7	41,4	41,5	41,3
Число центральных районных больниц ²⁾	688	727	597	573	563	560
Число районных больниц ²⁾	119	79	185	183	183	194
Число участковых больниц ²⁾	2591	382	65	59	52	42

The internal messages from inside the Russian medical community showed that the healthcare system was generally weak prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic. If big cities like Moscow reacted fast to the new challenge, the local authorities in remote areas, where indigenous peoples live, had no resources to respond appropriately to the virus spread. The federal government tried to react to the remote regions' needs and sent their military field hospitals, organized by the Russian Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Emergency Situation. They built such hospitals in Zabaikalsk, Krasnoyarsk, Murmansk, and some other regions. However, in some cases, these efforts led to the higher spread of the virus. For example, the mass virus infection in the Kamchatka region started among constructors of the new military hospital invited by the Ministry of defense from the other areas of Russia.

The other source of the virus spreading in regions where indigenous peoples live were tourists from Europe, South East Asia, or central parts of Russia. But the primary source of the COVID-19 in regions of the Russian Arctic, Siberia, and the Far East became the shift workers invited by large industrial companies for constructing new business facilities or extracting natural resources. There were several cases around the Russian Arctic where the virus spread in restricted access industrial camps of the oil and gas companies. In some regions, these camps became the primary source of the local COVID-19 infection.

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 areas 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).



Figure 5. Field hospital in Krasnoyarsk krai. Photo credits RIA Novosti

The industrial companies rather quickly responded to the virus's spread in their field camps and 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. This influenced the general statistics in these regions. For example, in the Murmansk region in April, about 70 % of the total infected were under 45 years old.

Fortunately, those regions of the Russian Arctic, Siberia, and the Far East where live indigenous communities have pore transport connections with the large urbanized areas in Central Russia. There at least two officially recorded cases in the Russian Federation when the virus spread among remote indigenous communities in the Tyva republic and Khabarovsk Krai.

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.

There are no other officially 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, wellbeing and development. The other problem is that according to independent researchers, the statistical data on COVID-19 in Russia is manipulated by authorities due to political reasons.

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 Ettytnagirgina 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.

Figure 6. The appeal to Chukotka governor from Facebook



There is much evidence that indigenous peoples around Russia are affected by COVID-19, but as Russian medical authorities have no disaggregated data on indigenous peoples, we cannot identify exact numbers. To show the picture, we tried to gather several statements of indigenous persons infected by COVID-19 in different regions of Russia, including the testimony of the author of this report – Gennady Shchukin.

Boris Sulyandziga, Indigenous youth representative, Moscow

I am a representative of Udege indigenous people from the Far East but now live in Moscow. My mother went to a hospital in May for a planned stomach surgery. After the surgery operation, she stayed in a hospital for rehabilitation. And after several days, she was put into the "red zone" for COVID-infected patients. We think that she infected in the hospital.

She stayed in the hospital for a week, and during this period, she didn't receive any treatment for COVID-19. She just stayed in the "red zone," and after eight days, they discharged her from the hospital. Me and my brother met her at home and were also infected by her.

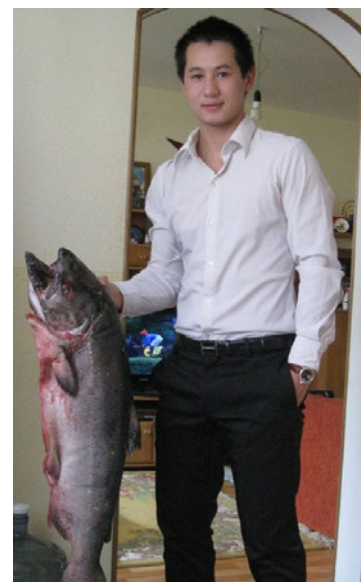


Photo credits - Pavel Sulyandziga

My brother and mother officially registered in the Moscow health system as COVID patients. They were not allowed to leave home for two weeks. According to the Moscow authorities' official order, they had to download a particular app to their mobile phones, which tracked them 24/7. Time to time, authorities asked to send them a photo from the phone. If a COVID patient was not at home, he could be fined up to 50 thousand rubles (680 US dollars). At least one of my friends was fined for 15 thousand roubles (200 US dollars) for going to a grocery store without permission from the government.

I live in a separate apartment. When I was infected, I didn't officially register in the health system. Authorities don't help people with treatment but could fine significantly if people don't follow their orders.

My mother and brother survived the disease rather easy - several days of elevated temperature and a lost sense of smell were their only symptoms. But I was ill to a terrible extent. The temperature was about 40, and I almost didn't eat for about a week. The only action I could do is stay in bed and go for a toilet. I didn't leave my apartment for almost a month. Now I am fine, and my test is negative, but that was rather scary experience in my life. I registered in the state system as unemployed but didn't receive any compensation.

**Ekaterina Khudi,
Indigenous medical worker from Yamal**

My name is Ekaterina Khudi. I am 35 years old. I want to tell you about the story which started on 15 May.

Our hospital supervisor - Ludmila Bikbulatova (the head of the virus testing laboratory of the Salekhard regional hospital in Yamal), sent several medical workers to test shift workers in Sabetta (the place of the most prominent Russian LNG project in Yamal, operated by the NOVATEK company). They were infected there (during the COVID test works). Nobody followed the quarantine requirements in our hospital when they returned from Sabetta.

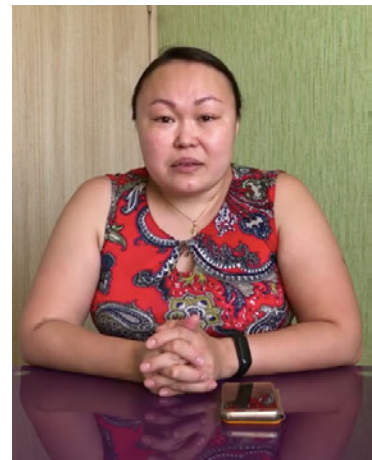


Photo from Indigenous Russia web-page

I worked in a hospital's express laboratory as a shift medical worker, but I didn't know what was happening there. Later, I found out that Bikbulatova knew that our colleagues who returned from Sabetta were infected (by COVID-19), and they contacted with us who were not affected. And after a while, we had started to be ill by COVID. Several of my infected colleagues recovered from sickness after a couple of weeks. Some of them returned to work, and some went to the summer vacation.

My story began on 15 May. I came from work to home at about 8 PM, and I felt myself bad. I discovered a sore at my chest, and after an hour, my chest began to burn. The next morning, 16 May I telephoned for a doctor who came to me. I also found several sore places at my head. The temperature became high, about 37,5 degrees. My bones, joints, muscles had started to hurt. The doctor appointed some drugs for me, and I used it for several days.

After several days I returned to work on 26 May, but there they measured my temperature, and it was 37,5 degrees, so they sent me back home for a sick leave. While I was on sick leave, I started having pains in my joints, bones, muscles again. There were also severe sweating and fatigue.

On 1 June, I was declared healthy and returned to work (in hospital), where I only spent one day. In the evening, when I returned home, my temperature became high, and I felt pain in my body again. I called for an ambulance, and they took my children and me urgently to the hospital. When we stayed in the hospital, my eldest son also has a high temperature, and he also has pain in his joints, bones, and muscles. I begged doctors to start a course of treatment, but as we received once again the negative tests for COVID-19, they said that we were not subjects for treatment. So they sent me back home even though I couldn't eat that time as I felt terrible and could only drink water.

So they sent us back to home for a sick leave till 12 June. And the doctor who came to check me at home said that I have no real sickness symptoms, so she wanted to hospitalize me to a psychic clinic for checking my mental condition. She also appointed me for several tests, including the gynecological one, helminths test and ultrasonography of my stomach and thyroid body.

12 June, my sick leave was finished once again, and I prepared to return to work. I had a shower, and after that, my temperature became high again. I started feeling unbearable pain in my head, muscles, and joints. I called for a doctor again, but when she came to me, she started the conversation by blaming me for eating some cold food intentionally to induce a high temperature. At that time, I lost my sense of smell and felt intense pain in my body. A bit later, the temperature became high - about 39,4 degrees, vomiting started, and I started to choke. They took me to the hospital again and made a computer tomography. It showed that 20 percent of my lungs are affected by the disease. Later they received my COVID test positive.

Today it is 51 days during which I am on sick leave. I have partial paralysis of my legs, and I partially lost my speaking ability. I don't know will I restore my life skills in the future. And I want to ask our governor Artyukhov - How long all this shame will continue in our hospital? All people know what terrible things are going at our hospital but everybody silent.

Gennady Shchukin, Indigenous elder, Taimyr

I am a resident of the Taimyr region, and I also become infected by COVID-19. At the beginning of June, I became ill by massive pneumonia. I tested myself for the COVID virus in a local clinic in Dudinka (the Taimyr regional center in the Russian Arctic). The first test was negative. But after that, I became feeling bad, and they took me to the hospital. There I made another test and, after several days, became feel asphyxia and a guy - the patient from my hospital ward, called a doctor.



Photo credits - Dmitry Berezhkov

The medical staff reacted immediately, and they put me in a resuscitation department. I spent four days connected to a ventilator. I was conscious and heard everything, but I couldn't breathe freely and panted like a bear after a long run. The doctor said that I have a positive COVID test only when I was in the resuscitation department. After these four days, I spent a week in the hospital and two weeks in quarantine at home. Now I have returned to work.

The local hospital in Dudinka was not overcrowded, and we received all the necessary medical treatment. They even used a pharmaceutical drug usually used against AIDS. According to our information, we have about 50 persons in Taimyr (not including Norilsk) who were infected COVID-19, and according to rumors, two persons died.

Concerning indigenous peoples, we are afraid of course that the virus will hit the indigenous villages. They have a difficult situation with the necessary medicines and especially with qualified personnel. We also fear that it could affect reindeer herding brigades.

The regional administration controls the helicopter transport connection with remote indigenous villages. They organize a discussion with industrial companies - subsoil users to limit contacts of rotation workers with the local population. But of course, it is challenging to implement these requirements in reality. Of course, there are some contacts as reindeer herders need to buy food and other supplies, and for that, they sell their products like fish or reindeer meat.

The regional administration closed the city for contacts. For example, for several days, they organized a security post on the road between Dudinka and Norilsk. The security guards there checked the drivers' temperature. But after several days, they removed the post, and now there is free communication between cities. We have no restricted local legislation to visit settlements for the reindeer herders. However, the authorities talked to them and asked them not to visit villages and cities to avoid the spread of the virus.

In the hospital, I was not the only indigenous representative who was COVID infected. But we don't know how many indigenous persons were affected as the territorial health department has now disaggregated data on indigenous peoples.

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. Indigenous elders who are often the last remaining bearers of traditional knowledge have a crucial role in teaching and transmitting indigenous languages and traditions to future generations. 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 Urban 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 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 prohibited 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.

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.

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.

Description of the impacts, consequences and challenges of response measures on indigenous peoples' wellbeing and sustainable development

President Putin and the Russian Government declared several times the measures to combat the crisis, including the financial measures of support of the Russian citizens and business. In addition to the closure of borders with other states, the Russian Government banned public events and free walking in the Russian cities since the end of March. Since then, the Russian citizens only allowed out to buy food or medicines or to walk pets up to a radius of 100 meters from their homes. Residents of the capital and several other Russian regions were also required to apply for a digital pass before using their cars or public transport. To ensure that shops do not run out of food, on 2 April Russia, which is the world's top wheat exporter, decided to restrict cereal exports.

A distinctive feature of the Russian quarantine measures, during which most public activities were banned, became the introduction of the "Non-working days" and "Self-imposed isolation" regimes that do not exist in the Russian legislation. These regimes were introduced by the special presidential decree and further by several extraordinary legal acts of the federal and regional governments instead of the legit and well-recognized "The Quarantine" and "The State of Emergency" legal frameworks which were existed in the Russian legislation before.

According to the "Non-working days" and "Self-imposed isolation" modes workers who were not involved in sensitive and critical public services and production (like medical workers, food producers or police officers), must to "self-isolate" themselves at their homes but with a continuation of paying full salaries by their employers. According to experts in the field of labor legislation, this was done by the government in order do not bear financial obligations to the Russian citizens for almost two months of their forced lockdown.

In this situation, workers who receive the state's salaries or work for big corporations did not receive too much harm as their employers continued to pay them salaries during the lockdown. However, this quasi-legal regulation introduced by the special decrees of President Putin and regional governments affected the small business extremely negatively, including entrepreneurs and their employees. The small business owners were not able to pay salaries as their business was stopped, and their workers did not receive any payments.

The Russian Government did not support the small business and the general population of the country except for several modest steps like postponing some obligatory tax payments, payment of 10 thousand rubles/130 Euros till families with children, restructuring of home mortgage loans, and some others financial instruments. Those businesses which not fired staff will receive the financial support from the state in the future and only according to the lowest state's rate (12 310 rub/160 Euro per worker per month as a subsistence rate) which is not cover the real salaries in most sectors of the economy (not to mention other obligatory operative payments, such as rental of premises, payments for utilities, payment of loans, etc.)

A lot of businessmen also note that they will not be able to receive the state's financial support in the future as they will have to bankrupt their business because of the economy crushing. Thus, millions of workers and small business entrepreneurs around the country did not receive salaries from their employers or any payments from the state.

At the same time, all stakeholders mentioned significant bureaucratic obstacles to receive unemployment benefits or another state's payments as well as the tendency of the bureaucrats to reduce the obligatory state's payments to people. There are a lot of cases around the country when people were not able to receive the promised state's payments or received severely reduced payments than officially promised by the Russian government.

The ability of indigenous peoples to receive the state's compensation benefits for the lost revenues is even lower 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 (see the picture).



Figure 7. The "quarantine food packages" for schoolchildren in Karelia (Photo credits - Ilya Pahomov) and Yamal (Photo from Dmitry Artyukhov's VKontakte page)

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.



Figure 8. An officer of the Ministry of Emergency Situation disinfests a school building in Bogoroskoye village (Khabarovsk Krai). Photo credits - press service of the Main Directorate of the Ministry of Emergency Situations of Russia in the Khabarovsk Territory

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 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. But the report's content to the Arctic Council remained unfortunately unknown to the general public as it was not published online.

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. Local residents, both indigenous and non-indigenous, started the protests around Nenets okrug against the process of union, despite the prohibition of the mass gatherings in the region because of the COVID-19 quarantine measures.

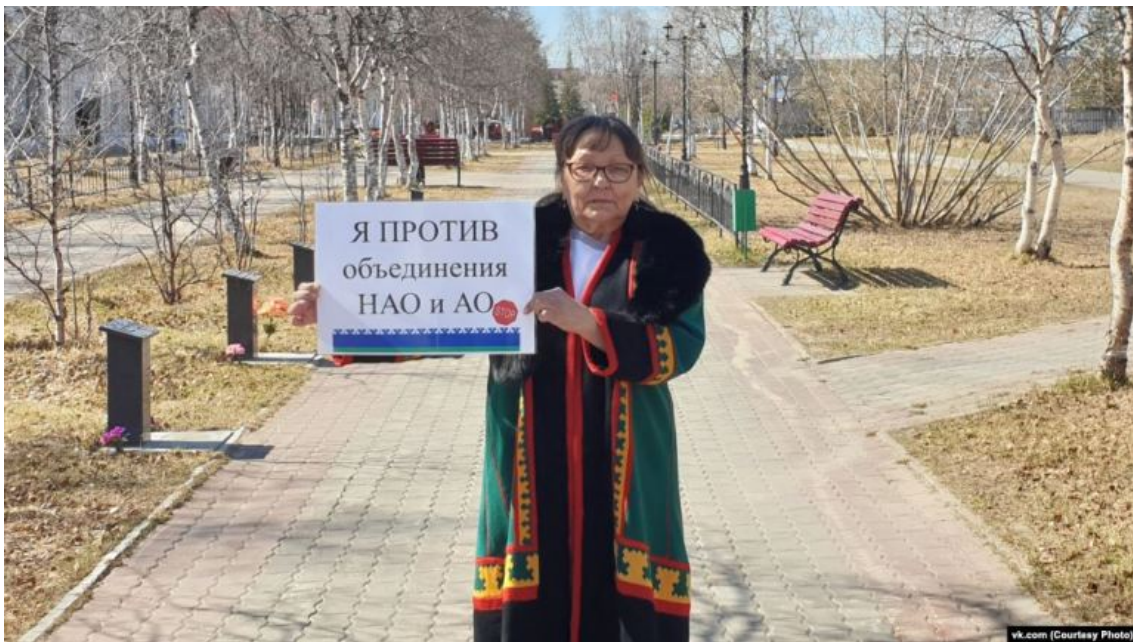


Figure 9. Nenets woman protests against the merging of Nenets autonomous okrug and Arkhangelsk oblast. Source of the photo Ekaterina Kurbangaleeva's Facebook page

After several weeks of confrontation, authorities declared that they "postpone the process" of political merging of two regions and start "to work out a joint program of the economic and social development".

Nenets indigenous people make up about 18% of the regional population in the Nenets autonomous okrug, which is a rather good percentage for Russia. However, according to independent researchers, the main power which pushed the authorities to step back became the mass protests of the non-indigenous population of the regional center Naryn-Mar as those people would lose their oil incomes in case of the regions' union.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Indigenous peoples of the Russian Arctic, Siberia, and the Far East is a vulnerable group that did not suffer much from the COVID-19 directly because of the remoteness of the traditional indigenous territories. At the same time, indigenous communities in Russia were hit by the

pandemic indirectly, also because of the challenges connected with the response measures implemented by the state.

The virus spread reflected negatively on the indigenous peoples' sustainable development agenda and added additional challenges in the process of implementation of their collective rights on lands, resources, economic development and self-determination. In combination with other negative global factors like economic crisis or climate change, it could be a significant threat to the very existence of whole indigenous cultures, for example, in the case of small numbered indigenous peoples.

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 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.



Figure 10. Indigenous cultural celebration in Kemerovo. Photo credits - The press service of the APC

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<https://rg.ru/2015/04/14/optimizacya-site.html>
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<https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2019/11/04/82612-proval-optimizatsii-zdravooxraneniya>
65. В России от коронавируса погибли не меньше 186 медиков — смертность среди них в 16 раз выше, чем в других странах. Исследование «Медиазоны»
<https://zona.media/article/2020/05/19/martyrology>
66. Военные развернут лагерь на тысячу человек для заразившихся сотрудников золотодобывающей компании «Полюс» <https://echo.msk.ru/news/2645803-echo.html>
67. Полевой госпиталь в Красноярском крае передали Федеральному медико-биологическому агентству России
<https://tvzvezda.ru/news/forces/content/20205201821-yvz4T.html>
68. Коронавирус выявлен у 3 тыс. вахтовиков в Якутии https://www.znak.com/2020-05-03/koronavirus_vyyavlen_u_3_tysyach_vahovikov_v_yakutii
69. Вспышка на Крайнем Севере. Что происходит с вахтовиками месторождения в Якутии, где говорили о 3 500 зараженных коронавирусом
<https://zona.media/article/2020/05/11/gazpromvir>
70. Чаяндинское месторождение полностью вышло из карантина
<https://www.interfax.ru/russia/711172>
71. В Усть-Большерецком районе коронавирус выявили у 29 рыбаков, приехавших на путину - Все подробности:
<https://www.kam24.ru/news/main/20200603/74786.html#sthash.ISGws7ao.dpuf>
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<https://kam24.ru/news/main/20200602/74760.html#sthash.KI5sJ913.dpuf>
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<https://www.chita.ru/news/146513/>
75. «Какой там урок?». Учителя и школьники о проблемах дистанционного обучения во время карантина <https://zona.media/article/2020/04/07/school>

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https://vl.aif.ru/society/kak_vynesti_takoe_bezumie_eksperiment_udalennoe_obucheni_e
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78. Житель Красноярска заразил коронавирусом восемь жителей Тувы
<https://baikal24.ru/text/09-04-2020/099/>
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<https://amurmedia.ru/news/933881/>
80. С хабаровского райцентра снимают карантин <https://todaykhv.ru/news/health/26692/>
81. Очаг коронавируса в Богородском Хабаровского края удалось локализовать
https://hab.aif.ru/health/ochag_koronavirusa_v_bogorodskom_habarovskogo_kraya_udalos_lokalizovat
82. Нас просили не паниковать: жители Богородского рассказали о реальной ситуации в селе <https://www.dvnovosti.ru/khab/2020/04/16/113260/>
83. Изоляция на краю света <https://takiedela.ru/2020/04/izolyaciya-na-krayu-sveta/>
84. Карантин по коронавирусу сняли в селе Богородское Хабаровского края
<https://tass.ru/obschestvo/8478313>
85. Предприниматели-ханты рассказали, что несут убытки из-за коронавируса -
<https://indigenous-russia.com/archives/3914>
86. В Карелии детям из малоимущих семей выдали сухой паёк из гнилого картофеля, маргарина и двух сосисок <https://mstrok.ru/news/v-karelii-detyam-iz-maloimushchih-semey-vydali-suhoy-payok-iz-gnilogo-kartofelya-margarina-i>
87. Артюхов выделил около ₽150 млн на поддержку тундровиков и их тестирование на COVID-19 https://www.znak.com/2020-05-13/artuyhov_vydelil_okolo_150 mln_na_podderzhku_tundrovikov_i_ih_testirovanie_na_covid_19
88. Ямальские школьники получают вместо школьных обедов продуктовый набор
<https://regnum.ru/news/society/2899466.html>
89. Кочевники ЯНАО пожаловались на голод из-за пандемии коронавируса -
<https://ura.news/news/1052428538>
90. «Мы – самая уязвимая и бедная категория»: кочевники Ямала опасаются, что не переживут пандемию - <https://n24.ru/novosti/2020/04/23/kochevniki-iamala-opasaiutsia-chto-ne-perezhivut-pandemiiu/>
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92. Когда COVID-19 придет в тундру -
<https://www.uralinform.ru/interviews/society/325656-kogda-covid-19-pridet-v-tundru/>
93. Далеких мест не бывает. «Коробки добра» доставили представителям коренных малочисленных народов Севера в Сургутский район <https://indigenous-russia.com/archives/4300>
94. Субсидии и пиар: регионы поддержат этнотуризм коренных народов в условиях пандемии - <https://indigenous-russia.com/archives/3937>
95. На Ямале создали памятку о коронавирусе на ненецком языке <https://indigenous-russia.com/archives/2304>
96. Екатерина Худи о коронавирусе на Ямале – “Мне подделывали анализы, сделали инвалидом за 50 дней” - <https://indigenous-russia.com/archives/4782>

97. Северное влияние: COVID-19 может оказаться опаснее для народов Арктики
<https://iz.ru/1016936/anna-ivushkina-mariia-nediuk/severnoe-vliianie-covid-19-mozhet-okazatsia-opasnee-dlia-narodov-arktiki>
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<https://www.uralinform.ru/news/society/328355-jiteli-arkticheskikh-raionov-mogut-ne-vystoyat-pered-koronavirusom/>
99. Ученые спорят о влиянии пандемии COVID-19 на жителей Севера
<http://ttelegraf.ru/news/uchenye-sporjat-o-vlijanii-pandemii-covid19-na-zhitelej-severa>
100. Меморандум об объединении Архангельской области и НАО. Полный текст документа <https://indigenous-russia.com/archives/3444>
101. Ассоциация КМНС Якутии получила ответ на свое обращение из Архангельска: принято решение – процедуру объединения отложить
<https://indigenous-russia.com/archives/4262>