

Establishment of a Social Support Network for Civil Initiatives in Reindeer Breeding

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Reindeer breeding practised and maintained by northern peoples represents a unique form of human adaptation to life in the extreme conditions of the North. This adaptation sustains all aspects of life in the North and is so perfect that it provides a basis for us to call it "civilization of the northern reindeer." As a form of interaction between human beings and nature, reindeer-breeding is an important part of the cultural and ecological heritage for all human kind. Russia leads the world in the number of domesticated reindeer. In addition, its indigenous peoples have the most advanced and varied traditions of reindeer breeding. Currently, more than 3,500 families (about 15,000 people) from among the northern aboriginal minorities maintain nomadic ways of life. Despite their small numbers, it is primarily this part of the northern indigenous population who retain the working skills, languages and cultures of their ancestors. It is possible to state that the loss of reindeer breeding would mean a disappearance for most of the national minorities of the North.

There are some ethnic groups (Nganasan, Ket, Tofalar, Yukagir) in Russia who have completely lost reindeer breeding over the past few decades. The recent crisis in reindeer breeding in Russia is connected to the fact that, during the USSR's planned-economy style of management, this branch of the

national economy totally depended on federal subsidies. Nowadays, the flow of such subsidies has ceased; thus, even the supply of primary emergency goods (food and medical supplies, ammunition, etc.) to reindeer breeders is interrupted. Russia, along with the rest of the global society, can quickly lose the unique ecological civilization of the northern reindeer. At the same time, the experience of Saami living in Norway, Sweden and Finland shows that many economic, social and cultural problems characteristic of the majority of reindeer-breeding nations can be successfully solved with the proper management of their society.

For the first time in history, representatives of the reindeer-breeding nations of the circumpolar region gathered together in September of 1993 in Tromsø, Norway. The host of this Festival was the All-Norway Union of the Reindeer-Breeding Saami. The participants of this Festival established a mutual Forum that was later developed into the World Union of Reindeer-Breeding Peoples. The aim of this Union was to support and develop the social and economic contacts born from the Festival.

The following persons were elected to the working group of the Reindeer-Breeders' Union:

Odd Erling Smuck - Norway, Saami;

Eremei Aipin - Russia, Hanti;

Maria Pogodayeva - Russia, Even;

Vladimir Egulen - Russia, Chukcha; and

Tom Gray - Alaska, Eskimo.

The working group of the Reindeer Breeders' Union organized and ran the first Congress of the Reindeer-Breeding Peoples, which was held in the city of Nadym, Yamal-Nenetski region (Russia). Activities of this Congress led to the establishment of the World Association of Reindeer Breeders.

The World Association of Reindeer Breeders unites reindeer breeders from all countries where reindeer breeding is practised. From the outset, the Association immediately faced many problems and difficulties. It is natural to presume that the Association needs assistance from governmental bodies to solve social problems in reindeer breeding, especially in Russia. Despite this, the established network of the Russian Union of Reindeer Breeders receives support of neither federal nor regional governments, since officials doubt the effectiveness of our actions and proposals even though it is principally our proposals that form the foundation for government decisions.

We learn from the experiences of social and cultural development of reindeer-breeding communities in foreign countries, where a harmonious interaction is maintained between social and private sectors of society, between government and business. It seems to me that there is no understanding in my country that no society can function without a “live” non-commercial sector.

Many cultural, scientific and commercial institutions in Russia take advantage of the grants provided by foreign foundations, but we are of the strong opinion that citizens of any country should receive assistance primarily from their own states. This, however, would be an impossible dream for the majority of reindeer breeders. It is difficult for us, reindeer breeders, not because we live in extreme climatic conditions, but because bureaucrats and others cannot or do not want to understand us. Meanwhile, it would only take a little time, perhaps another seven or eight years, and there will be no longer be any reindeer breeding in Russia. In that same period, we lost half of the number of reindeer that we had in the early 1990s.

Very elementary and natural things are required for development of this branch of the traditional economy: pastures, private reindeer, material and technical means (e.g., tents, portable stoves, guns, etc.). If reindeer breeders

continue to possess these constituent elements, they will be able to develop themselves and their economy, linking their historical traditions and skills with advanced achievements in science and technology.

Who leads this process is also very important. If these individuals are to be representatives of the dominant society, it will evolve according to those economic models that have been ill-founded in their consciousness. This would lead to the continuation of “industrialization” and pressures on the reindeer-breeding industry to meet the immediate demands of the market. This was possibly why, for more than three years at home, proposals I made “were not heard.” As president of the Union of Reindeer Breeders of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia), I had proposed to initiate a project called “The Bank of Reindeer Population,” which aimed to support an increased number of reindeer herders in the private sector.

Prior to 1929 (before the beginning of collectivization by the Communists), reindeer in Russia were bred entirely in private hands and their total number was about 2,202,700. In the same year, the quantity of reindeer in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) stood at 230,300. My grandfather used to have 700 reindeer in his family.

Today many reindeer-breeding communities have begun to promote traditional ways of self-government to provide themselves with foodstuffs so that their communities could survive in the very literal meaning. Traditional self-government is more than mere economics: it gives people dignity, strengthens relations in families and society, and leads to better understanding between generations. It creates that cultural layer that cannot be substituted for by anything. Our reindeer breeders need to reassess and comprehend their place in their own cultural heritage. This is a condition for their survival and revival as a people.

The World Association of Reindeer Breeders is a non-governmental

institution. The documents issued by the UN state that non-governmental institutions serve as an important basis for democratization of society, and we appeal to the global community to provide assistance for establishment and development of the regional networks of the Association of Reindeer-Breeding Peoples in Russia. It is true that we face elementary problems in reaching many reindeer breeders, since they live in remote areas, in the tundra or taiga regions, without any means of connecting to the mass media or other usual forms of communication, often hundreds of kilometres away from populated villages.

The role of women in the North in reindeer-breeding communities was always one of the utmost importance. In Soviet Russia, over the past seventy years, the government had a policy to eliminate the nomadic way of life, considering it to be socially and culturally retarded, as well as economically unprofitable. Such doctrine spelled huge disaster for the existence of many reindeer breeding nations. It ruined their families and forced women with children to stay in the villages, imposing upon them a lifestyle that represented a significant departure from their traditional and unique working skills, languages and cultures. Such changes hindered the passing on of these unique national characteristics from generation to generation. Now the question of whether women will return to taiga and tundra depends on the attention and assistance of the government to the reindeer-breeding industry: we have been separated from our roots and traditions for almost a century.

I come from the village of reindeer breeders called Topolinoye. Now my village is almost cut off from any transportation and communication facilities. It is only because of the help and financial support of the conference organizers and friends that I could come and take part in this important conference, and I am happy. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all my friends who provided me with assistance for my trip here, and also the organizers of this

Conference who have gathered us all here from all over the world.

Yes, we live in different parts of the world and we are different too, but we have one common role—women have been responsible for life and prosperity in the North for thousands of centuries. We are on the edge of a new millennium, and how it will be depends on us. I wish you all success, happiness and love, and I wish that all of us could run conferences for women in our own regions with such an agenda and program as is found at this conference. We have not yet realized our roles and potential in full measure, and we do not yet know how each one of us is skilful in her own way.

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