

The Local Perspective: Interviews with Sakha in the Viliui River Region¹

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From 1996 to 2000, my research partner Dr. David R. Marples and I embarked on a project entitled "Yakutsk-Sakha and the Siberian North-East: Resource Development, Environmental and Health Issues."² A major component of the project was an extensive program of interviews in the towns and villages along the Viliui River region, which I conducted in the winter of 1996 and the summers of 1997 and 1998 (see Espiritu 1998, 1999a and 1999b). I interviewed over 80 Sakha living along the Viliui River about their health, lifestyle, quality of life and access to medical care. One of our goals was to provide a survey of the social-health situation in the republic from the grassroots as compared to the level of the authorities. In addition, I interviewed local government officials in Viliuisk to provide the regional/district perspective to republican questions.

I conducted open-ended interviews using 27 questions as a basic guideline to determine how these residents viewed resource development and the environmental situation. I began the interview process in the winter of 1996 in the city of Viliuisk and in the town of Verkhni-Viliuisk. Twenty-three interviews with health care professionals were conducted over a seven-day period. In the summer of 1997, I returned to this area, and within a two-week period interviewed 83 respondents in Viliuisk, Verkhni-Viliuisk, Suntar, and Suldukar. The following summer, fifty more interviews were collected in Viliuisk and Niurba, with most of the interviews in Viliuisk being obtained from the city government. The latter were held to ascertain how a small regional city copes with economic crisis at both the republican and federal levels. In total, 156 interviews were conducted, each averaging 45-60 minutes in length. Of these, I discarded 18 because the interviewees were unresponsive or because of

other factors (such as a supervisor or another person of authority walking in and observing the interview, thus making the interviewee nervous or affecting the way in which they answered questions).

I also carried out interviews in the Viliui River Basin with individuals with children. They ranged in age from 20 to 70 years. Those with children were selected because they make up a major segment of the population and also because they would have a wider range of demands on health care and social services, whether this be pediatric care, family planning, general medical care for themselves and their children, daycare, child care allowances, or medicines. The interviews demonstrate that this category of mothers and fathers provides rich information and experience regarding health care and social welfare. The wide age range also enhances the study because it gives insights into the health situation both in the Soviet period and at the present. The older interviewees provided a picture of local conditions prior to the construction of hydroelectric dams, diamond mines, and missile testing.

The general results are divided here into categories: health, health care delivery, and the environment, leaving aside the team's findings on resource development and the economy because of space limitations.

Health and Health Care Delivery

Over the past forty years, the Viliui River Basin has been developed for its diamond resources at the mouth of the Viliui River at Mirnyi. Hydroelectric dams followed in the 1980s and 1990s. Because of such sources of environmental problems, many residents in the Viliui River region believe that their state of health is in decline, and that incidences of cancer are rising dramatically. Indeed, a majority of those interviewed believe that many of their ailments, from cold to influenza, from gall bladder disease to Hepatitis A and B, derive from environmental causes. While there were similarities in some of the ailments that seemed to be most

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worrisome for men and women, there were also gender differences in what were deemed to be common ailments and their related causes. A large majority (80%) of those interviewed suggested that they and their children were more often sick with a common cold or influenza because the air was not as pure as it used to be and that the water they drank was contaminated. Despite the practice of obtaining drinking and cooking water from lakes around the Viliuisk city area rather than the Viliui River, Viliuisk residents still named the impurity of the water they consumed as a potential source of increased incidence of disease.

At the health care administrative levels, all across the Viliuisk River Basin, there was resignation among the physicians that nothing much could be done to improve the health situation without a significant injection of money from the government of the Republic of Sakha. There were, however, a few individual health care givers, both nurses and doctors, who in their own way attempted to educate the population on disease and illness prevention. This was most notable among the physicians in Viliuisk and Verkhni-Viliuisk who worked in the Family Planning clinics. While most of the therapeutic procedures they performed were abortions, they also perceived that they were at the front line of educating their elementary school and especially high school age population on birth control and HIV infection. By all accounts, it appeared that these health care professionals went into the schools to inform students about family planning. Nonetheless, for the most part in these areas, sex and sex education remain taboo topics.

Overall, a majority of the interviewees felt that their health was getting worse, especially in the period since the collapse of the Soviet Union. This perception coincides with another, namely that the health care system as a whole has deteriorated or has not kept up with technological advances of treatment and cures for ailments and diseases. Suffice it to say that 98% of those questioned about the health care system argued that it was in a very poor state because of the lack of funding, lack of free access to medicines and vaccines, lack of access to the newest technology, and the difficulties involved in traveling to the large, medically and technologically equipped hospital in the city of Yakutsk.

Prior to the collapse of the Soviet regime, patients did not have to pay for medicines, medical procedures or examinations, and patients and families could fly to Yakutsk at reasonable rates.

The collapse of major industries and the economic downturn has rendered the health care system dependent on imported medicines. These have to be paid for in hard currency, and donations of medicines and medical supplies to such remote regions are relatively limited. The opening up of the market in the Russian Federation has made travel for medical attention expensive, if not impossible for most families. Many of those I interviewed indicated that their predicament is exacerbated by the fact that their salaries are not paid on time and are often in arrears of six months to more than one year.

The Environment

All the interviewees with the exception of those who worked for the Ministry of Nature Protection and the diamond mining industry regarded the environment of the Viliui River Basin as the worst in all of the Sakha Republic, owing to the heavily polluted water coming from the Markha River, a major tributary of the Viliui. Initially, the toxic wastes were dumped indiscriminately into the Viliui and Markha rivers. All the respondents cited the depletion of fish stocks (particularly the Karras, the national fish of the Sakha) and low water levels as an indicator of the effects of pollution. Residents of the city of Viliuisk were transporting their water from nearby lakes, using blocks of ice in the winter months for their water needs. They were also using the Viliui River for cooking, drinking, and bathing. Though the residents recognize the dangers that they face, most indicated resignation to the situation, arguing that they cannot do anything about it other than boil their drinking water.

Although there was resignation among many respondents regarding the pollution of their environment, most were aware that better environmental practices, such as finding environmentally sound ways of developing resources and using the land, could improve the ecology. A minority of those interviewed (about 10%) believed that any kind of resource development was dangerous, and about the same number advocated a return to traditional Sakha economies defined by pastoral farms, hunting, fishing, and gathering. This group maintained that activities such as mining, forestry, harvesting, exploration, and extraction of minerals merely served the needs of the republic and the federal government, and that the latter were "raping Mother Earth."

The image of the Earth as Mother is particularly prevalent in the conception of the world held by the Sakha people. The environment is placed within the larger context of Sakha spirituality and cosmology. All those who chose to talk about traditional Sakha views regarding the environment (37 interviewees) associated the environment with spirituality, arguing that any disturbance of the environment, most notably mining, digging, deforestation, and damming of rivers, is a sin against the Earth and against Sakha beliefs. However, only a minority (5 respondents out of the 37) suggested halting or reversing these activities altogether. The remainder, including the larger group which did not talk about traditional views on the environment, suggested that it was imperative to develop natural resources not just for revenue and job creation for the unemployed (the majority of whom were between the ages of 16 and 25), but also because the residents of Sakha needed to develop as a people socially and economically.

Conclusions

The problems faced by the Republic of Sakha are acute. In the health sphere, declining life spans and very high rates of infant mortality and infectious diseases give cause for concern. The countryside is impoverished, living standards have fallen markedly, and there are some critical situations in gold mining settlements that have basically been abandoned with the closure of the mines, but where much of the local population has remained.³ The Republic has suffered above all from the financial crisis that continues to affect the Russian Federation, and which has rendered the federal system a liability since the Fall of 1998. Because of its (almost devoted) adherence to the federal system, the Republic of Sakha has borne the brunt of the consequences of its collapse. Despite the recent boom in the oil and gas industry globally, it is difficult to determine at this point whether the fledgling oil and gas industry, also found in the Viliuisk Region, will have a discernible effect on the Sakha economy. A resource-rich region, it is today reliant on the one industry in which it has retained a portion of the control (diamonds, and 20% of the total), as other resources fall into decline.

The euphoria of sovereignty has clearly dissipated. Politically the main gains have been derived by representatives of the Sakha rather than

other groups within the Republic. Migration of skilled personnel, especially Russian managers, in addition to stagnation and decline in the developed industries such as gold and coal extraction, have contributed to the economic malaise. Unemployment is growing and has led to a rise in violent crimes, and drug and alcohol abuse. To some extent, the Republic of Sakha is a microcosm of Russian society as a whole, but it has taken on a more extreme form because of its remoteness and the difficulties of living in an Arctic climate. The government response has been to work through a number of ministries and departments to try to develop grassroots responses to the various problems pervading the rural communities, particularly alcoholism.

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³ In 1998, for example, nine settlements in Oimiakon, Aldan and Ustr'-Maiskii ulus were officially liquidated.