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# WINDOW ON EURASIA

by Paul Goble

## Diverting Siberian Rivers to Central Asia Would Threaten Planet, Russian Academic Warns

Vienna, June 16 – Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov's revival of the idea of diverting the waters of Siberian rivers to the increasingly parched countries of Central Asia would threaten not only those regions but the world with "ecological catastrophe," according to a leading Russian specialist on the environment.

In a comment to Rosbalt-Sever yesterday, Academician Vladimir Anikeev, chief ecologist at Russian Academy of Economic Sciences, said that Luzhkov's proposals, which involve selling the waters of the Ob to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, were so dangerous that prosecutors should consider bringing "criminal" charges against him.

In Soviet times, Moscow needed cotton, Anikeev noted, and consequently it drew down the flows of the Syr-Darya and Amu-Darya to the point that the Aral Sea has dried up and dangerous chemical flats have been created, places that threaten the lives of the peoples living around them ([www.rosbalt.ru/2008/06/15/494185.html](http://www.rosbalt.ru/2008/06/15/494185.html)).

Just sending more water to that region would not solve the problem, he said. Indeed, if nothing else is changed, it could compound the difficulties that region. And reducing flows into the Arctic Ocean, he added, could "violate the entire temperature balance of the planet," threatening not only Russia as a whole but places far removed from it.

Consequently, the Russian ecological expert said, he very much hoped that Luzhkov's remarks, like others the longtime Moscow mayor has made over the years, were simply a "populist" outburst and that no one in the Russian government would seriously try to realize them.

Meanwhile, Russia and other countries with northern territories face another and perhaps even more intractable challenge, one that Luzhkov's plan could exacerbate: the discovery that the rapid retreat of sea ice in the Arctic is leading to an even more rapid melting of permafrost in these countries ([www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/06/080610112628.htm](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/06/080610112628.htm)).

According to the findings of the U.S. National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR), "the rate of climate warming over northern Alaska, Canada and Russia could more than triple during periods of rapid sea ice loss," like the one this year, and thus lead to a far more rapid thawing of the permafrost there.

During such periods, the NCAR study found, "the rate of Arctic land warming is 3.5 times greater than the average 21st century warming rates predicted in global climate models," a finding that could mean, it continued that "autumn temperatures" along the Arctic coasts of Russia, Alaska and Canada could rise "by as much as" five degrees centigrade.

Such a rise, the American research team said, could create a "talik – a layer of permanently unfrozen soil sandwiched between the seasonally frozen layer above and the perennially frozen layer below," something that "allows heat to build up more quickly in the soil, hastening the long-term thaw of permafrost."

Not only does that threaten to release large amounts of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere thus accelerating global warming, but it means that the ground there will be increasingly unstable threatening all construction – pipelines, buildings, and other facilities – located in the north.

Because so much of the Russian Federation is in the traditional permafrost zone and because so much of Moscow's energy resources are located in it, the impact of these changes are likely to be felt in Russia and on those who rely on its petroleum exports even before they are felt elsewhere.

(For more details on this new research and its impact on Russia and the world, see David Lawrence, Andrew Slater, Robert Tomas, Marika Holland, and Clara Deser, "Accelerated Arctic land warming and permafrost degradation during rapid sea ice loss," *Geophysical Research Letters*, June 13, 2008.)

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## Russian Gas Development Threatens Survival of Northern Peoples

Vienna, June 11 – Two numerically small nations of the Yamal peninsula – the Nenets and the Khanty – who together form fewer than 40,000 people have written a letter to President Dmitry Medvedev detailing the ways in which Moscow’s development of gas fields there has put their future survival at risk.

In the letter, which is described in the current issue of “NG-Regiony” as the functional equivalent of a referendum about the impact of the development of gas fields, the representatives of these two small groups say that the corporation is undermining their ability to continue their traditional occupations of reindeer herding and fishing ([www.ng.ru/printed/211703](http://www.ng.ru/printed/211703)).

Their letter says that “in the region there are no conditions for the normal sale of the production of reindeer herding and fishing.” Instead, the companies pay the Nenets and Khanty far less than the cost of production, something that is increasing poverty, driving many from the land, and leading to the disappearance of their traditional cultures.

And, the letter continues, officials have failed to provide compensation to the local people or at least in amounts meeting the need of the relatively large families among these two people for Gazprom’s destruction of their pasturelands and fishing sites, even though federal law requires such subsidies.

But that is only part of the way in which the gas giant and the Russian government are victimizing the Nenets and Khanty peoples. An even graver threat comes from “the forced resettlement into villages of peoples of reindeer herders,” who traditionally have followed the deer from place to place.

In these towns, “people, lacking the chance of working have begun to drink and to die, and this is a direct violation of human rights,” the appeal to Medvedev continues, something they say they are ready to describe as “a manifestation of genocide in relation to the indigenous residents of the North.

“NG-Regiony” quotes ethnographer Konstantin Kuksin as saying that “if the problems the Nenets and Khanty now face are not resolved now, then 50 years from now they will disappear from the ethnic map of Russia,” a development which raises the question as to whether this is “not too high a price for Yamal gas.”

Three things make this letter noteworthy besides its obvious moral dimension. First of all, it is an indication that even the smallest and most isolated ethnic communities are now exploring ways to express their interests and concerns given that many of the traditional channels they had employed in the past have now been closed or are controlled by large corporations.

Second, by casting this appeal in terms of ethnic survival, the Nenets and Khanty are clearly looking to draw support from countries in the European Union, the primary consumers of Russian gas abroad and ones whose EU charter requires them to extend support to groups threatened with extinction.

And third, this appeal suggests that a large segment of the population of the Russian Federation really does have great expectations for change under newly installed President Dmitry Medvedev, expectations that the government’s failure to meet at least part way could trigger larger expressions of popular anger and possibly unrest.

## Siberia Could Become a U.S. State If Moscow Doesn’t Change Course, Russian Mathematician Says

Vienna, June 8 – A leading Russian specialist on mathematical models of development says that if Moscow continues its current policy of relying on the export of natural resources alone, Siberia could become part of the United States, the Far East part of Japan and China, and the Middle Volga, North Caucasus, and Karelia all independent countries by 2030.

In an interview in yesterday’s *Izvestiya*, Georgy Malinetsky, the deputy director for science at the Academy of Sciences Institute of Applied Mathematics, argues that earnings from the sale of oil and gas will not save the Russian Federation any more than a large nuclear arsenal saved the Soviet Union ([www.izvestia.ru/obshestvo/article3117125/](http://www.izvestia.ru/obshestvo/article3117125/)).

Indeed, he says, Soviet scholars like Academician Viktor Gelovani of the Institute of Systems Analysis argued during Gorbachev’s time that the USSR could survive only by choosing “the technological path,” something that would have allowed that country not only to continue to exist but to be a genuine world leader.

Now, Malinetsky says, Russia faces an even greater challenge: if it “does not want to be removed from the political map of the world, super efforts by the entire people and a breakthrough to a post-industrial society build on innovation are required. Otherwise, [its] production will stay uncompetitive and others will simply take ‘the pipeline’ away from Russia.”

Malinetsky says that scholars at his institute have made two geopolitical predictions for where Russia will be

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in 2030, one which assumes that Moscow will continue to follow the policies it is pursuing now and another which assumes that the Russian government will make dramatic changes both at home and in its dealings with the other post-Soviet states.

“If things go on as they are now,” the much-published specialist argues, “then, even without external interference, the disintegration of Russia into zones of influence of other civilizations is probable. China and Japan will divide the Far East. To America will go Kamchatka, Chukotka and Siberia.”

In addition, there will be Muslim “enclaves” in the Middle Volga and the North Caucasus, and some kind of independent formation north of St. Petersburg. He notes that this projection agrees with those made by the CIA and by other American researchers who see the Russian Federation disintegrating into five to eight countries over the next 10-15 years.

The other variant Malinetsky outlines would require the formation of a tighter union of the 12 former Soviet republics (The maps he provided “Izvestiya” show only Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania remaining completely independent.) “If super efforts are applied” – and they may include violence -- “it [will be] possible to reestablish on the Eurasian space” a “Soviet people.”

Pressed by Izvestiya to explain his pessimism given Russia’s current economic success, Malinetsky offers the following response: “Why do you forget the beginning of the 20th century when Russia and the world were assumed to have such glorious perspectives,” perspectives that the past century did not bring?

“Politicians frequently seek to calm the people as they would a child. But serious politicians will recognize the threats. Note how [Dmitry Medvedev,] the newly elected president [of Russia,] formulated his task: effectively administering the country in its current borders. In this obvious modesty is a [clear] recognition of the difficulties of the path.”

“Russia is falling behind the developed countries ever further – in science, in the social sphere, and in the structure of its economy.” And it has done so despite warnings: In 2001, Vladimir Putin asked the Academy of Sciences to develop a system for predicting catastrophes and another for making the transition from a raw materials exporter to an innovative economy.

The Academy did what it was asked, Malinetsky says, but “the assignments of the president were not fulfilled.” And he pointedly adds, “Rome died when the barbarians approached its walls and no one came to defend it – the men were too much diverted by the spectacles” that the emperors had used to try to keep the people happy.

High oil prices have convinced many they need do nothing. That already entails some fatal consequences: One of them, Malinetsky says, involves education “The demand for a first class education [in Russia] is falling,” with ever more students preferring “education lite.” And soon the teachers who received better training in Soviet times will be retiring.

Obviously, one of the reasons people make predictions about the future is so that they and others can try to affect the course of history. Malinetsky is no exception. He argues that Russians need not accept their fate as a people slated to disappear from the face of the earth but that to avoid it, they must act now.

Among the measures he calls for are restrictions on capital export, lending policies designed to promote innovation, investments in defense institutions that have long been a source of inventions, and a major effort to reduce income inequality and the level of poverty among Russians.

Those are all steps the Russian government has talked a great deal about over the last decade but ones that it has done little to actually promote. Perhaps Malinetsky’s vision of a Russia more than 50 percent occupied by the Americans will cause at least some in the Russian capital to move beyond talk to action in these and other areas.



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