

# On Siberia native land, oil doesn't take 'no' for an answer

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"All of our territory sits on top of oil," says 26-year-old Stepan Sopochin, whose family is indigenous to the Siberian Khanty-Mansi region.

Two companies are keen to expand production nearby, he said.

"We have Lukoil coming up from the south telling us to move north, but in the north, Gazprom Neft is expanding, telling us to go south."

"They will squeeze us out," said the father of two young children.

He sits in the family's traditional one-room wooden hut as several dozen reindeer roam outside, digging the snow for lichen, their main source of winter food.

Every April the family moves their 250-strong herd north to a less wooded area where snow melts quicker, exposing fresh grass for calving females.

But this year, their only spring pasture is busy with construction vehicles and trucks hauling road-building materials and pipes.

The flurry of activity comes as Gazprom Neft—the oil arm of state-owned energy giant Gazprom—is developing a new oil field called Otdelnoye.

Sopochin is not against all oil: six oil fields already operate on his kin's land and he, himself, works as an engineer at one of them, but he said Otdelnoye is going ahead without their consent.

The situation is typical for the Khanty-Mansi region, where oil production is key for the Russian economy but disrupts the traditional way of life and fragile ecosystems.

Russian law gives minority indigenous groups priority over land to use for traditional purposes, but they cannot sell it and, in practice, they are powerless to stop big oil projects.

Only after Moscow grants them the right to drill do companies approach locals on compensation, whose amount is rarely independently assessed, experts and locals say.



Stepan Sopochin speaks during an AFP interview amidst his reindeer herd outside Kogalym in the Siberian Khanty-Mansi region

"It's like the train goes first and then they lay the tracks," said Natalia Proskuryakova, a lawyer, who advises the Sopochins and other indigenous families in the region.

## 'Nowhere left to live'

Contacted by AFP, Gazprom Neft said it had accommodated the Sopochins by "significantly changing the infrastructure plan" at the site.

The company said it had gone through all necessary steps to start development.

Iosif Sopochin—Stepan's 58-year-old father and head of the family—said he did not believe he was being unreasonable.

"We understand we must help the government, but we're against this field because we have nowhere left to live," Iosif said.

"There will be oil spills and our reindeer will stray onto production areas and roads," he warned.

"There will be poachers, fishing, hunting and killing of deer."

Twice he has declined to sign a compensation contract—required before development can start—but road construction began anyway, he said.

He called the oil company's current offer —35 million rubles (about \$612,000, 560,000 euros) shared between his family and five others to be paid out over 24 years—a "handout" that he would be ashamed to accept.

In a symbolic protest, the Sopochins in February erected a traditional rawhide tent at the site, only to be called in by police to explain why they were impeding development.

"You might think I'm crazy, but when I last left the pasture, I hugged the trees," Iosif said. "I said goodbye and told them that I don't think I can

protect them."



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### **'No way to stop'**

On a satellite image, the Khanty-Mansi region is a stark landscape dotted with pine forest and lakes. This is where the Khanty have traditionally made their living herding, trapping, fishing and picking berries.

But zooming in, it is easy to see the white oil pipes spreading over the northern territory.

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Mansi region produced about 240 million tonnes in 2016, over 40 percent of the country's total production.

But the wilderness is suffering, with trees rotting as roads disrupt water circulation and reindeer herds thinned by poaching, contamination and road kills, the Khanty say.

A gas flare-shaped monument stands outside the main local city of Kogalym, which has grown to over 60,000 inhabitants since 1980, displacing the indigenous people.

Only around 4,500 indigenous Khanty and Mansi people still live traditionally and most end up agreeing to oil projects even when they are categorically against them, said regional lawmaker and writer Yeremei Aipin.

He called the Sopochnins' situation "ubiquitous".

"Access for [oil companies](#) is being eased," he said. "Now legal norms are being changed so that even protected parks are open to development."

Greenpeace said in a petition recently that Russia's energy companies disregard environmental norms.

The officially reported figure for annual oil spills in Russia is 50,000 tonnes but the real total is 1.5 million tonnes, the environmental campaign group claims.

Oil companies offer compensation but underestimate damage to the environment and the indigenous way of life, said US anthropologist Andrew Wiget, who has studied the Khanty for over 20 years.

In 1998, Wiget calculated the value of all natural resources needed for an

average Khanty family to live off in a year at 120,000 rubles (then \$16,000), while all compensation was only half that.

When a family wants to prevent an oil project going ahead, "there is no mechanism to stop it," he said.

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