

Their Ancestral Traditions Under Threat, a Village in Russia's Far East Stands Up to Gold-Mining Giant

Tyanya residents' chances of blocking Nordgold's next venture in their mineral-rich region are slim. Activists say they have no choice but to try.

By [Leyla Latypova](#)

May 30, 2024



Nordgold

A small Indigenous community in Russia's Far East republic of Sakha (Yakutia) is challenging a gold-mining giant owned by Russian magnate Alexei Mordashov in what they deem a last-ditch attempt to preserve their traditional livelihoods.

Residents of Tyanya, an Evenk village of about 470 people in Sakha's southeastern Olyokminsky district, this month called on President Vladimir Putin and the republic's head

Aysen Nikolayev to bar Nordgold from developing a fourth mine in the area.

“We, both young and old, wish to continue our traditional way of life and pass these skills on to future generations of our people. And this is only possible if we conserve nature,” said the [open letter](#) signed by some 164 village residents.

The letter states that unchecked gold mining leads to deforestation and water pollution, while airborne chemical dust particles from the mines settle on moss eaten by reindeer, shrinking the community’s traditional reindeer-herding grounds.

Though their chances of blocking Nordgold’s latest venture in their mineral-rich region are slim, activists say that the residents have no choice but to try given the existential stakes.

“Calling for Putin’s help, this letter might look naive amid the invasion of Ukraine, but this is a cry of despair...these people simply have no other option,” said Sargylana Kondakova, co-founder of the Free Yakutia Foundation, Sakha’s largest anti-war and Indigenous rights movement.

“They don’t want money or anything of the sort, they simply want this predatory plundering of their land to end,” Kondakova, who is based in Australia, told The Moscow Times.

Formerly nomadic Tungusic-speaking peoples native to North Asia, Evenks were subjected to forced sedentarization, collectivization and Russification under the Soviet authorities, policies that fueled their population decline.

Today, there are fewer than 70,000 ethnic Evenks worldwide. More than half of them live across Russia’s Siberia and the Far East where some still attempt to sustain themselves through traditional practices.

Embed:

“These people live off fishing, hunting and reindeer herding in its traditional form, aided by only a few modern technologies like snowmobiles. Their lifestyle is very similar to that led by previous generations,” said Stefania Kulaeva, a human rights activist and expert at the Brussels-based Anti-Discrimination Center (ADC) Memorial.

“This difficult life in extreme climatic conditions is certainly deserving of respect and support, especially given its importance for preserving the planet,” she added, noting that Indigenous land use practices are widely hailed as “the most nature-conserving and planet-friendly way of managing resources.”

With the nearest town located some 280 kilometers to the north, no paved roads or internet access, Tyanya’s residents have been able to preserve their ancestors’ secluded traditional livelihood, but Nordgold’s expansion has increasingly loomed over their community.

Nordgold [opened](#) Tabornyi, its first open-pit mine near Tyanya, in 2007. It has since expanded its work in the area to two additional mines, Gross and Tokko, which produce over 20 tons of gold per year combined.

Forced to [scale down](#) its foreign operations due to Western [sanctions](#) over Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Nordgold set its sights on developing a fourth mine in Sakha, Vrezannoe.

"Gold extraction by open-pit mining can pollute territories located tens and even hundreds of kilometers away," said Ilya Shumanov of Arctida, an NGO producing expert analysis and investigations on the Russian Arctic. "It is the cheapest and most dangerous for the environment."

While extraction industry giants like Nordgold are required to submit reports on the environmental damage inflicted by their operations, official documents are unlikely to reflect the real picture, according to Shumanov.

"We shouldn't solely look at numbers and reports ... but also at how residents are actually suffering," Shumanov told The Moscow Times.

Nordgold's public reports on the environmental, social and governance (ESG) impacts of its operations inadvertently reveal efforts to conceal its turbulent relations with the Indigenous people of Tyanya, according to Ekaterina Zibrova, a specialist in diversity, equity and inclusion at The Wits Center for Diversity Studies in Johannesburg.

"They write very specific things about their social support work in Burkina Faso and Guinea and show very concrete numbers. ... What do they [write](#) about [mines in] Russia? Just that they 'offered monetary support to low-income families'," Zibrova explained, noting that reports withhold specifics on how Nordgold supports local communities in Siberia.

"This illustrates the narrative of concealing what is happening in Siberia and the north of Russia, which derives its legacy from the Soviet era," Zibrova told The Moscow Times.

"The world can look into what is happening in Guinea because it is far more open and more accessible than the north of Siberia — no one knows what kind of people live there and no one, of course, has heard of Evenks," she added.

The Moscow Times has sent a request for comment to Nordgold.

Though Nordgold [claims](#) it maintains friendly relations with Tyanya's residents and gives back to the community through social and financial support programs, its standoff with local Evenks dates back years and was once led by community leader Arsentiy Nikolaev.

In 2020 Nikolaev, then also a deputy in Sakha's parliament, was placed under house arrest on charges of bribery and extortion brought against him by Nordgold. He died at age 63 in November 2021 from an unspecified illness.

Locals [maintain](#) that the case against Nikolaev, which warranted the involvement of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB), was retaliation for his attempts to defend the interests of Indigenous people and believe that his house arrest contributed to his untimely death.

"This community is quite well-known in Sakha for its protests. Everyone in the republic knows how they fought, everyone knows that their leader was arrested on fabricated charges," said Kondakova of Free Yakutia.

“There is no one like them in other districts of the republic, though Sakha is large and there are many other [extraction] companies working there,” she added.

Following Nikolaev’s passing, his daughter Viktoria Nikolaeva took over as the local community leader, though her name was strikingly absent among the signatories of the latest letter to Putin.

But not everyone in the community thinks that standing up to extractive companies is the best path forward.

“From my grandmother and relatives in Yakutia, I have heard that we [locals] should work for these companies to achieve career goals, that this is a good opportunity for us,” said a former employee of Nordgold’s parent structure Severgroup whose ethnic Sakha family hails from Tyanya.

“The logic is often: if these natural resource companies are extracting from our land anyway, they should create employment for us,” they told The Moscow Times, requesting anonymity out of fears of legal action by the company.

Meanwhile, in its initial reaction to the open letter, Nordgold [labeled](#) signatories “foreign agents” and “extremists,” a move that infuriated the Evenk community and even warranted [condemnation](#) from a regional deputy from the ruling United Russia party.

The company has since [amended](#) the statement.

Related article: [In Russia’s Dagestan, a Landfill Upends Villagers’ Livelihoods as National Garbage Crisis Spirals](#)

“How could they call us, the indigenous people of Tyanya, whose sons, brothers and husbands are protecting their motherland in the special military operation [in Ukraine], ‘foreign agents?’” news outlet Sakha Day [quoted](#) local resident Zhanna Poluektova as saying.

“Why does ... Nordgold distort facts and portray us as deceivers?” Poluektova continued. “All 164 residents signed the letter personally because we have no other choice. We are being driven out of our own native territories where the company is opening new mines and destroying the environment.”

Locals’ support for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and for Putin himself — which residents repeatedly highlight — has made some members of Russia’s liberal opposition [question](#) whether the community’s struggle is worthy of their support.

Others argue that it is “naive” to expect Putin to act against the interests of his protege Mordashov.

But expert Zibrova, an ethnic Evenk herself, said she believes that expressing loyalty to Putin is the community’s only option in an environment where virtually all anti-Kremlin dissent is repressed.

“These people are stuck between two overpowering systems. On one hand, there is the state

that pressures you, takes your men away [to the war] ... doesn't develop the infrastructure and fosters further isolation. On the other, there is this business, which comes and takes things away and keeps digging further into your land," said Zibrova.

"When you find yourself in a situation of oppression and violence, then even realizing that these are two sides of the same coin is very difficult," she added.

Kondakova of Free Yakutia voiced a similar view.

"This fourth mine will be put into operation no matter what," she said. "But this [initiative] ... shows other people in [Sakha] that the environment is still being destroyed and no one will defend their rights except themselves."

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/05/30/their-ancestral-traditions-under-threat-a-village-in-russia-as-far-east-stands-up-to-gold-mining-giant-a85269>