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In Russia's Bashkortostan, Fresh Tensions Grow Over Planned Copper Mining Site

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The Kyrktytau mountain range. **visit-bashkortostan.ru**

Public discontent is brewing in Russia's republic of Bashkortostan over a government-backed plan to develop copper mining deposits in the Kyrktytau mountain range.

The fresh tensions come after Bashkortostan, a republic in Russia's Volga-Ural region, was rocked by protests and sweeping repressions unparalleled for wartime Russia last year.

While politicians and loyal bloggers wage a campaign to promote the alleged benefits of copper mining for the regional economy, locals appear ready to risk repression and arrests to protect their scenic Indigenous lands from irreversible ecological damage.

The 60-kilometer-long Kyrktytau mountain range is located in Bashkortostan's eastern Abzelilovsky and Beloretsky districts.

Part of the Ural Mountains, the Kyrktytau range is situated along the banks of the Bolshoi Kizil (Olo Kyzyl) river, forming a picturesque landscape that makes the range and its surroundings one of the most attractive spots for outdoor tourism in the republic.

Rich in copper deposits, the range has long been eyed for development by the Russian Copper Company (RCC). The mining giant is owned by Forbes-listed billionaire Igor Altushkin, who is under Western sanctions for aiding Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Rumors of RCC's plans for copper extraction on Kyrktytau initially surfaced in the media in February 2019, prompting a public petition calling on President Vladimir Putin to halt the project and amend the federal-level law on mineral extraction licensing.

Environmental activist Eduard Kadyrov, who launched the petition that received over 7,000 signatures, had warned that mining works at Kyrkty tau could bring toxic waste to the Bolshoy Kizil and Maly Kizil rivers, which supply drinking water to the nearby town of Sibay and the industrial hub of Magnitogorsk.

Kadyrov also warned that mining could pollute the nearby lake Yaktykul, one of the top tourist attractions in Bashkortostan and a designated natural monument.

RCC's plans were seemingly put on hold following a 3,000-strong protest in the Abzelilovsky district's capital, Askarovo, in September 2020, which was inspired by the earlier success of Bashkortostan's Indigenous rights and environmental movements in defending the sacred Kushtau mountain from an extractivist company.

But in April this year, Salavatskoe, an entity linked to RRC, confirmed that the company obtained a license for exploration and mineral production at Kyrktytau near the rural settlement of Salavat-sovkhoz.

In a video address posted on Salavatskoe's VKontakte page, company head Tagir Bakhtigareev said that preparations and final approval for mining works could take "several years" and would require "presenting the final works plan to residents and holding public hearings."

"Important: the license was granted by the federal authorities. Any attempts to approach the republic's government [about this project would equate to] making it political," Bakhtigareev warned, vowing to "develop a project that meets the strictest environmental standards."

Bakhtigareev also dismissed environmental activists' warnings of irreversible river pollution as "unfounded," referencing the company's prior experience running similar projects in the neighboring Chelyabinsk region, one of the country's most polluted regions.

His promises did little to placate the growing discontent among residents of the Abzelilovsky district and prominent environmental and Indigenous rights activists, who believe the mining works are due to start way sooner than the company promises.

"Whether perfect [in meeting ecological standards] or not...we simply don't need...a mine. We need nature, we need health," a local woman from the village of Burangulovo said at a public meeting between residents and representatives of Salavatskoe on Monday.

Her speech prompted loud applause from fellow residents.

"I understand that this meeting is a formality. I know that all those who came here and spoke out will be harassed [by the authorities]," another local woman said in a passionate speech delivered in the Indigenous Bashkir language.

"I just have one question: are you so thirsty for money that this land is *the* thing you need? Are you not scared of being cursed by the people you are planning to harm?" she added, drawing another round of applause.

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The locals' fears of "harassment" by the authorities are not unfounded.

Last year's protests in support of Indigenous activist Fayil Alsynov — whose imprisonment was linked to the campaign against gold mining in the same area of Bashkortostan — sparked the largest political trial in modern Russian history.

Accompanied by a widespread smear campaign against activists and supporters, the arrest of more than 80 Bashkir men and women in the so-called "Baymak case" instilled fear among many of the republic's residents, emboldening the authorities to bring back the widely unpopular plans to develop Kyrktytau.

Some Kyrktytau defenders are already feeling the pressure.

The founder of one of the most popular online communities in defense of the mountain range was taken in for questioning by the police last month, RFE/RL's Volga-Ural service Idel.Realii reported, citing information posted in the group.

"[The authorities] seem to have found out that there are a huge number of people [in this group], and for them this is a potential danger — they are afraid that all this will result in some kind of 'uprising'," Idel.Realii cited a post in the closed group as saying.

On Thursday, activists announced the cancellation of the planned protests in defense of Kyrktytau without naming an official reason for the decision. At least 300 people were expected to attend the rally near the villages of Kazmashevo and Amangildino in the Abzelilovsky district.

While last year's protests in support of Alsynov saw a wide range of public figures coming together to stand up to the authorities, in the case of Kyrktytau, the government and developers it backs have been seemingly ahead of the activists in pulling many popular local bloggers and influencers on their side.

"The Russian Copper Company... skillfully amasses public support for its activities," popular political pundit Ural Baybulatov said in a Telegram post.

"Even you, dear subscribers, environmental defenders [and other] concerned citizens of Bashkortostan are becoming accomplices in this PR campaign by liking, commenting and reposting [content promoting the mining project]," he added, referencing a swath of videos by popular Bashkir bloggers that promote the economic benefits of copper mining.

Though most experts agree that the eastern districts of Bashkortostan suffer from economic underdevelopment and poverty, many believe that a prosperous future could be achieved without the mining business.

“For several decades now, private businesses have been extracting natural resources in Bashkortostan’s Urals in a predatory manner, leaving behind around 2 billion tons of mining waste, rivers and lands polluted with heavy metals and unreclaimed open pits, the ‘wounds of the Earth’,” ecologist Alexander Veselov wrote on VKontakte.

“At the same time, this part of the republic still remains economically depressed, with almost no industrial development beyond mineral extraction,” he added. “So perhaps what Bashkortostan’s Urals region truly needs is a government program for land rehabilitation, rather than new open-pit mines.”

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