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In Altai Republic, a Kremlin-Backed Government Reform Aids the Tycoons

Despite staging one of Russia's largest wartime protests, the peoples of Altai are set to lose political representation and, in some cases, their livelihoods.

By Leyla Latypova

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Hello and welcome to Regions Calling, a weekly newsletter by The Moscow Times that helps you stay up to date with the latest developments in Russia's regions.

This week, MT's Indigenous special correspondent Leyla Latypova zooms in on the southern Siberian republic of Altai, where nearly 2% of the entire population rallied against a local government reform last week. Despite the impressive turnout, residents are unlikely to see a reversal in their fortunes as their Indigenous lands are eyed for development by Kremlin-backed magnates.

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Regional deputies in Russia's republic of Altai on Tuesday passed a controversial law scrapping the two-tier system of local self-government.

The El Kurultai regional parliament's swift decision came just days after around 4,000 residents joined in a rare public act of defiance to protest the reform and demand the resignation of the republic's head Andrei Turchak.

"I think [the parliament's decision] is yet another reflection of how the authorities truly regard us," prominent Altaian political activist and human rights defender Aruna Arna said in a video address published shortly after the vote.

"We need to keep acting. This is just the beginning. We need to fight for our [rights]," she added.

Located in southern Siberia in a tri-border area with Kazakhstan, Mongolia and China, Altai is Russia's least populous ethnic republic with just over 221,500 residents.

Altaians, a Turkic ethnic group indigenous to the region, comprise 33.9% of the population, while Russians account for 56.6%, according to official statistics. The region's third-largest ethnic group, Kazakhs, make up 6.2%.

Despite its modest population, Altai has a vast territory of over 92,000 square kilometers — roughly the size of Hungary or Portugal.

Most of the republic is covered by the mountain range of the same name, which was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1998. This picturesque mountainous landscape, which carries a sacred significance for its Indigenous inhabitants, has made the republic a popular destination for domestic tourism in Russia.

Over 2.7 million tourists visited the republic of Altai in 2024, according to statistics maintained by local officials. This number is expected to grow by another 7% this year.

The republic's high tourism potential has put it on the radar of Kremlin-linked investors and tycoons, who have flocked there over the past decade in hopes of cashing in.

Moscow investors not only drove up land prices, making them virtually inaccessible for purchase by locals, but also appropriated the land using legally dubious schemes.

Like most other Indigenous groups inhabiting modern Russia's territory, Altaians are denied indigeneity within the Russian legal system.

Yet many of them still maintain a way of life that is largely dependent on direct access to land, including subsistence farming and animal herding. This means that Moscow's attempt to buy off local lands is existential for thousands of locals and their Indigenous livelihoods.

After the republic's previous leader Oleg Khorokhordin allegedly clashed with financial giant Sberbank, one of the region's primary investors, Moscow appointed veteran St. Petersburg-born technocrat Andrei Turchak as his replacement despite his lack of experience or personal

ties in the republic.

Turchak fell from grace with his new constituents less than one year into his tenure by enacting unpopular constitutional amendments that removed the mention of the region's "territorial integrity" from its foundational legal document.

His move reignited fears that the government might be preparing legal grounds for a possible merger of the republic and the neighboring Altai region into a single federal subject — a move that was already attempted in the 2000s, leading to mass protests.

Despite their nearly identical names, the republic of Altai and the Altai region have little, if anything, in common.

Related article: Kremlin-Backed Reforms Spark Protests in Russia's Altai Republic

With a land area of nearly 168,000 square kilometers, the Altai region has over 2 million inhabitants, over 93% of whom are ethnic Russians.

The potential merger of the two regions, therefore, would dramatically alter the standing of Indigenous Altai peoples, making them a small minority in the new majority Russian region.

It would also deprive them of an array of benefits guaranteed by the status of a republic, which include special status for the Altai languages and funding of projects dedicated to the preservation of said languages and Indigenous cultural traditions.

In an interview with The Republic Speaking podcast, Altaian lawyer Aysura warned that the potential merger of the two regions would trigger "mass layoffs of government workers" in the republic of Altai, leaving thousands without jobs.

The merger would also result in "infrastructural losses" for the republic of Altai's residents by drying up funding for local projects, said Aysura, who withheld her surname.

Though the local government reform, which essentially eliminates the rural settlement tier, seems to be a far less radical move than a merger of two federal subjects, its consequences for the republic's predominantly rural population will be no less noticeable.

The reform would essentially do away with the municipalities in rural settlements of the republic, merging them into larger entities.

As a result, hundreds of people who were directly elected to represent their rural communities would be pushed out of politics, fostering "political depopulation" and making it increasingly difficult for residents of rural localities to defend their interests within the government system.

In a passionate address to thousands of protesters on Saturday, human rights defender Arna called the residents' fight against the reform "the final battle" and hailed villages as the region's beating heart. The republic's capital, Gorno-Altaysk, with just over 65,000 inhabitants, is its only city, meaning the majority of the republic's residents live in villages scattered across the vast mountainous region.

“Today we are also talking about a possible dismissal of Turchak,” Arna said in the speech, the video recording of which has been shared in blogs and news outlets far beyond the republic.

“We all know who he *really* is. He is someone whom we didn’t elect. He is a person appointed to [rule] us,” she added as the crowd roared in approval. “We need to tell the Kremlin that we don’t want to have people appointed [to govern the republic], we want our own people in the government.”

Saturday’s rally in the republic of Altai marked the second-largest regional protest in wartime Russia after the 2024 Baymak movement in Bashkortostan.

A report released by the Interior Ministry put the number of protesters in Gorno-Altaysk at 1,000, while observers on the ground estimated a turnout of around 4,000 people.

After the event, its participants published a resolution outlining ambitious plans to dismiss regional deputies who voted in favor of the controversial reform and instituting an all-out boycott of United Russia.

Even so, the chances that this small but brave nation could stop the political forces and big business trying to swallow their region whole look very slim at best.

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