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**“ETERNITY SMELLS OF OIL”  
THE OIL AND THE KHANTY: RESISTANCE OR OPPORTUNISM?**



The author of the paper shows how differently oil mining affects the Khanty who live in different Western Siberia state administrative districts. According to the opinion taken in the international anthropology, extraction of raw materials within the Russian “mining course” is able to give rise to conflicts and create “crude domination”. The author agrees with Florian Stammer’s opinion that the concept of conflict cannot describe the current situation in the West Siberian region (the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Area or “Yugra”; the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Area) for a number of reasons. The examples given by the author show that oil-industry workers’ presence did not result in conflicts for the Khanty of the Tomsk region. The reason is that mentioning oil industry in the local discourses means, first of all, a possibility to survive, and secondly, because the forced migration the Khanty’s “lost generations” met with the oil miners as early as Stalin era. Oil industry did not cause any fundamental changes for the Khanty, it just became another manifestation of the dominant society majority. Thus the relationship between the majority and the minority in the Tomsk region is not a conflict one in spite of oil industry dominance in the region’s life.

*Keywords:* the Khanty, the Ostyaks, indigenous peoples, traditional way of life, oil mining, strife, coexistence policy.

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Yegor Letov, the front man of the legendary Russian punk band *Grazhdanskaya Oborona* wrote perhaps his most famous song “Russian field of experiments” («Русское поле экспериментов») in 1988 [Летов, Дягилева, Рябиков 1994: 71–74]. The refrain line of the apocalyptic text – “eternity smells of oil” («вечность пахнет нефтью») – expresses clearly the dependency that cannot be overlooked in any discussion of oil mining and Russia. What is more, the conclusion of the song about the dominance of oil tallies with certain theories of cultural anthropology concerning oil mining and the mining of raw materials in general. Below, an introduction of the salient role of oil is followed by an inquiry into the roles the mining of oil plays in West Siberia, in the life of the Khanty living in different administrative districts.

### **The Russia of the oil**

The extraction of oil and gas distinctly determines the economic – and political, social – position of Russia. [Considine–Kerr 2002] Russia is a decisive factor in the world’s raw material production, and the oil and gas sector has a nearly two-thirds share of the total Russian exports, a decisive income in the state budget.

In the hydrocarbon mining of the country the West Siberian area – where the target group of my research, the Khanty live – plays an outstanding role. The largest mineral oil mining area – producing 48,8 % of the country’s total output – is the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Area [KhMAO] or “Yugra”, which places second in producing natural gas; the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Area [YaNAO], by contrast, is second in oil mining and first in gas production.

This oil dependency is also reflected by the role ascribed by the Russian government to this economic sector. That, in turn, has a clear influence on the general views of the Russian population. Elena Myskova cites a magazine article of 2013 celebrating the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of oil mining in Siberia. The start of oil extraction is hailed in the article as the most important event in the history of Russia, as the second – and finite – conquest of Siberia by Russia: after all, the territory was not integrated in the blood circulation of Russia before the parent country had discovered it as an oil province. Oil mining – the article claims – has had its heroes and discoverers, and has in fact produced the elite of today’s Russian society, too. [Мыскова 2016, 85] Oil miners themselves grasp every opportunity to hammer in that they are the country’s bread-givers, nourishers. [Новикова 2014, 178] This attitude to oil mining stressing its heroic, indispensable aspect also determines the public discourse. In this discourse the indigenous small ethnic groups of West Siberia including the Khanty have no place, their interests are dwarfed by those of the national economy.



## The anthropology of oil

The anthropological literature highlighting oil mining expressly speaks of dominance and resultant conflicts. Oil mining usually dominates the economic, political and social life of the states that live by oil extraction, pushing all other interests into the background. Andrea Behrends' and P. Reyna's book, which determines our contemporary approach to oil, holds that the "oil curse" or "raw material curse", which could bring harmony and wealth to the local people only causes trouble and tribulations and generates fighting for the resources [Behrends–Reyna 2011]. To illustrate how the "oil curse" works they use the simile of a birthday game of Mexican origin, *picata*. Sweets are hidden in a paper puppet hung up somewhere and the children have to destroy it by beating it with sticks to get hold of the sweets. The point to the metaphor is that there are diverse ways to play the game. In the most extreme case all kids begin hitting the puppet at once and when it crumbles, each grabs as much candy as they can. This is open fighting practically without rules, any forms of polite conduct, all fighting all, hitting and pushing, and at the end the celebrated person might even be left without any sweets. In another case, the parents may regulate the case accurately: spelling out beforehand how many pieces of candy should be had by everyone at the end, or how many would be the largest or smallest amount, or the possibilities of the participant might be defined differentiated, too. In the same way, in the fight for oil there may be a broad spectrum of the access to the gain from extraction, diverse power relations may arise without rules, ranging from a war of all against all to the regulation of the intricate structure of access by different groups [Behrends–Reyna 2011].

Oil usually results in "crude domination" [Behrends–Reyna 2011, 4], that is, one group ensures its share of the produced wealth even by fighting, and rudely, directly intervenes with the life of the subordinated groups, not shrinking from threatening their existence either. In Behrends' and Reyna's view, this dominance is determined by the oil itself, for it is the oil that sends the groups to fight for the distribution of the produced wealth, hence a correlation evolves between a system of social relations and a natural resource. This "commodity determinism" [Watts 2008, 30] calls for a new anthropology, oil anthropology, the scope of which is to examine the conflicts evolving around oil. In Günther Schlee's opinion [Schlee 2011], however, it is wrong to confront "resource-based conflicts" against the presumed "identity-based conflicts", for both designations have as different starting point, the questions they raise differ. The "resource-based" approach focuses on "what are people fighting for?" – it being about the object of fighting, while the question of an identity-based approach is "who is fighting against whom?" – it being about the subjects of fighting. He says that although the outstanding significance of the raw material underlying the conflicts is undeniable, it does not determine friend and foe by itself, as there are intricate connections between the processes of fighting for resources and the processes of identification, and only focusing on the resources we will not fully understand the interpersonal alliances, competitions or conflicts.

## The forms of oil domination: the case of West Siberia

As the *picata* metaphor has shown, diverse forms of adversities, suppressions and deprivations may evolve owing to oil extraction. Apparently, the effect of the "oil curse" heavily depends on the political establishment and economic stability of the given country: where the economy is more vulnerable, the political system authoritative, the fights are sharper than in economically and politically balanced states [Behrends–Reyna 2011]. Oil might even lead to interstate conflicts or wars as the example of the Gulf region demonstrated in past decades. Most frequently, however, the conflicts remain within a state's borders by increasing corruption, the financial gaps between certain social strata, the access to political rights, and they may even escalate to civil wars like in the African oil republics. The "crude domination" might entail political suppression under the seemingly peaceful surface: though no lives are claimed but certain social groups are negatively affected and resistance movements may also arise. By contrast, one may find systems in which no overt opposition or protests are generated and local communities coexist with oil mining without open conflicts, although oil profoundly determines their lives.

In Florian Stammer's view [Stammer 2011] the West Siberian region is one of the areas where oil mining does not entail open conflicts. The reasons are deep-lying and multiple. One is that among the aborigines of the region land has always been used in a flexible system in which – independently of the strong local ties of kinship groups – the occupation of a certain area could be the subject of negotiated agreements. That implies – he claims – that the fundamental aim of the local resistance movements has not been the chasing away of oil miners but the reconciliation of the interests: they wished to create a system

which satisfied both parties and let them also have some gain, causing the least damage to them and their environment. What's more, the conflict solving strategies of the local native groups have always preferred elusion than open conflicts [Golovnev 2000]. Another important cause for the lack of conflicts – in Stammler's view – is the public spirit of the local population capable of subordinating their individual interests to the interests of the collective, the national economy. Its foundation is the ideology of the Soviet Man based on the ideology of common interests, common sufferings and patriotism, which was considerably successful and is still effective in the "Rossiyanin" ideology. Consequently, attacking the interests of the state is a morally dubitable strategy for the local elite. Besides, the state is in command of means that can be deployed to resolve or cover up occasionally arising conflicts<sup>1</sup>.

Though the Stammler study concludes that in West Siberia – especially in comparison with other areas – oil mining is without conflicts, it is worth adding some subtler hues to this statement from history. First, it must be made clear that in the anthropological literature the terms "aborigines" and "Khanty" are used rather peculiarly. It is namely obvious that stratification within the Khanty society has been enhanced along the oil-mining related interests [Новикова 2014: 264–268; Молданова 1995; Вигет – Балалаева 2014: 52–59 1996]. A part of the Khanty chose cooperation instead of possible resistance, their strategy of subsistence being the acceptance of compensations paid after the profit from oil extraction, while another part moved to town and thus left behind the oil-caused conflicts. That said, the anthropological literature still basically only understands the interests of the forest-dwelling Khanty most sharply involved in conflicts with the oil miners as general Khanty interests, and use both "Khanty" and "aborigines" to designate those who preserve their traditional way of subsistence. To remind of this contradiction, hereafter I am going to put these terms in quotes in all justified cases.

The beginning of mining in the 1950s entailed major changes in the life of the native people. So far, despite earlier economic interventions—logging and collectivisation – they could mostly pursue their traditional activities for living, in a relatively healthy ecological system, with slight external interference. At first, the oil miners could expropriate any land without limitation to use it "to the benefit of the homeland" without the indigenous native people having any say, and all signs of resistance were condemned as nationalism [Вахтин 1993, 60-67].

Changes arrived with the weakening of the Soviet system: utilizing the atmosphere of thawing during Gorbachev's politics, the local minorities of the region became the pioneers of minority policy-making and their struggles were always connected to oil mining. On 20 April 1988 seven Siberian native writers, including the Khanty Eremey Aypin and Roman Rugin, wrote a letter to Gorbachev, listing 13 problem points, one of them being compensation for the industrial areas [Sangi 1996]. In 1989 organizations to safeguard minority interests cropped up one after the other in West Siberia; the "SamotlorPraktikum" conference was also held in 1989; the "First congress of the small ethnic groups of the North" convened in 1990. One of the most essential demands of the latter was the legislative definition of the right of these peoples to pursue traditional economy in their dwelling places. Grassroots initiatives of resistance followed in quick succession in the HMAO area: the manifesto of Eremey Aypin in 1989; the first road-blocking demonstration along the Konda river in 1990, followed by one along the Varyogan in 1990 and the protest along the Tromagan river incurring grave retaliations in 1993. There was a threat of armed resistance in Russkinskoe also on the Tromagan river in 1991. The most famous protest including the erection of a chum outside the Khanty-Mansiysky parliament building was in April 1995, preceded by similar actions in Nizhnevartovsk and Varyogan in 1992. The demonstrators in Iyantor even sent a protest note to the UNO in 1993. A major protest was held by the Num-to lake in 1996, with a reindeer offering and reindeer sacrificed for that-time leaders of the state and the autonomous area [Вахтин 1993, 60–77; Mandelstam-Balzer 1999, 146–172, Вигет-Балалаева 2014, 44–48; Новикова 2014, 46–59 and 268–280].

The protesters earned temporary success sometimes and none at other times, but on the whole it is undeniable that they added the local indigenous groups to the political map of the country. They managed to create a ritual idiom to put their protests through which was comprehensible for the "Khanty" and "visible", understandable and sufficiently ethno-specific for the local majority society. The chum became the central symbol, which is no longer the most common dwelling place of the Khanty yet is suitable to become the emblem of the Khanty culture. Besides being a symbol of the conflict, a chum by a blocked road or outside the decision-makers' building also offered the chance of a solution: tea was served in the chums inviting all

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<sup>1</sup> It is an important part of Stammler's argumentation that there is no direct connection between the democratic system of a state and the degree of the peacefulness of extraction.



parties to discuss the conflicts and try to work out solutions. The other basic symbol was the reindeer, thanks to the reindeer sacrifice by the Num-to lake, organized by Yury Vella.<sup>2</sup> By offering reindeer to the state and regional leaders they aimed to get them interested in actions against oil mining damaging the area, so that they could really act with responsibility as a “true” leader should – the organizers of the action claimed. The action was a failure on several counts: the fate of the calves of the sacrificed reindeer ended tragically, and besides, the leaders misunderstood the rite as a flattering present by their subjects [Новикова 2014, 277–279; Leete 1997 and 1999]. In Natalia Novikova’s view the peaceful road-blocks and the road itself are similar symbols, and she also identifies it as an important tool of protesting that during negotiations or court hearings the Khanty express their opinion by keeping silent<sup>3</sup>.

In this period in which the central power was unambiguously on the decline, not only grassroots actions arose against the interests of oil mining, but the regional leaders also often took a stance against mining – and indirectly against Moscow – either by torpedoing industrial ventures or by issuing local orders that were capable of expressing and defending the interests of the native people. That was how the HMAO was fighting against its role as “a domestic colony” [Forsyth 1992]. Parallel with that, the state legislation was also changing, which highlighted the questions of land ownership and self-government as the crucial issues of the aborigines [Новикова 2014; Вахтин 1993, 64–66; Вигет-Балалаева 2014, 44–48]. It is at the same time undeniable that in several cases the regional administration got round the central rules passed in the interest of the local people, often by re-drawing the borders of the administrative areas which could considerably influence the chances of a local referendum [Mandelstam-Balzer 1999, 146–172; Новикова 2014, 268–280].

The Putin administration has developed strong centralization. After the *Yukos* case the overwhelming majority of oil extraction went to a few state firms. The federal legislation started eliminating the rights of the natives by amending certain acts, making the assertion of their interests. Moreover, nearly all regulations were removed from the regional and moved to the federal level, which also shrank the self-governing and interest asserting potential of the province. To designate this new system in the research literature, Natalia Novikova and Yury Vella coined the term “oilism” [Новикова 2014]. “Oilism” means the fusion of the power and the oil business; its main features are the identity of the interests of the state and the oil miners, and the adoption of state functions by the oil mining firms, their leaders strongly influencing local politics.

“Oilism” fundamentally defines the financial status and everyday routine, legal status and political possibilities of both the oil miners and the aborigines [Мамонтова 2015; Новикова 2014, 182–215; Саксингер et al. 2014; Stammler 2010 and Wiget–Balalaeva 1997 and 2014]. Now that the Khanty are practically without power and may rightly fear of retaliations entailed by their resistance, the hidden political behavioural forms termed as the everyday forms of resistance by Scott are upgraded<sup>4</sup>. Such stealthy resistance strategies include the refusal by the Khanty living close to oil fields to learn the Russian language; the pursuit of hunting and fishing by poaching, ignoring the local rules; sabotaging the work of the oil miners. In the new oil-centric discourses revitalising, nativist tendencies also appear, and many convert to neo-protestant churches<sup>5</sup>.

The interests of the oil miners – and the state collaborating with them – as well as those of the “aborigines” are practically irreconcilable. One reason is that the “natives” and the oil miners interpret concepts like land, domination, tradition, future utterly differently. Moreover, the interpretations are not only different but one interpretation aims to invalidate, suppress the other. Both parties regard the given area as theirs: the Khanty claim that the land that alone can support them have belonged to them for ever, while the oil miners have conquered it heroically for themselves, and not only themselves, but for the good of the state. In this set of relations, the natives regard the oil miners as their main rivals, while they are not part of the oil perspective, and if they are, they are merely disturbing factors in the way of the heroic work of the rivals. “The oil miners are still convinced that they are indispensable in the social, economic and political system of Russia, and this belief prevents them from feeling solidarity with the local communities, their neighbours” [Мыскова 2016, 98–99].

<sup>2</sup> Forest Nenets poet, political activist (1948–2013).

<sup>3</sup> This cannot be a successful strategy, as it is meaningless and unnoticed by representatives of majority society, the oil firms and the state apparatus (Новикова 2014, 281–293; Христофорова 2006; Песикова 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Scott uses this term to describe forms of resistance that keep up the semblance of hegemony while as basically hidden but systematic, openly not coordinated, individual actions they mobilize masses; essentially, this form of resistance means that the participants ignore certain measures of the central power (Scott 1985; 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Вигет-Балалаева 2014: 59–67.



## The oil of Tomsk region

As seen above, Stammler's statement about the presence of oil without conflicts in the West Siberian region, in the KhMAO and YaNao areas, is not adequately justified, as there have been open conflicts, too, and the connection between the oil people and the Khanty is still determined by an antagonism around oil in the centre. This, however, does not apply to the Khanty living in Tomsk province without fail. As the following case study is to reveal, the attitude of the native people substantially differs from that of the population living north of them.

Oil extraction in Tomsk province started to yield considerable results a few years later than in the north. Production began in the first gas well in April 1962, and the first oil pumps started work in the summer of the same year [Евсеева 2001, 203–206]. This is also indicative of the raw material rates in the province: natural gas production is more significant than oil mining. The oil and gas output of Tomsk province is only a fragment of the yields in KhMAO and YaNAO. Consequently, this sector plays a far smaller role in the economic life of the area. In spite of all this, in the northern parts of the province where oil mining is concentrated, it has just as dominant a role as in KhMAO and YaNAO.

In my case study<sup>6</sup> instead of the “Vasyugan Khanty” term used by research literature I am going use the term “Ostyak” which is used by themselves, too, in Russian discourse and is the most widespread designation of them in public discourse. The main reason is that it can be interpreted as a way-of-life category to which the impoverished, marginalized, at times lumpenised population belong, not unanimously only used as an ethnicity's designation [Nagy 2015]. The term “Russian” is the polar opposite, meaning the representatives of majority society for the “Ostyaks”, usually without ethnic differentiation.

The analysis centers on Ozernoe settlement, which lost its permanent autonomous status in 1973 and was attached to Novy Vasyugan as its externality 40 km away from it. Though it had no permanent residents, the male members of the Ostyak families who had moved to Novy Vasyugan regularly went out every week or month to their native village to hunt and fish, to provide a basic living for their families. In the seventies five houses of the village had regular visitor. In 1979–81 oil mining also made test borings in the village. The oil well generated great hopes, but with that-time technology it could not be exploited, so production was put off. It has not started to this day, though regular rumours have been spreading about a serious oil firm having bought site in 2012.

As the exploratory boring was done by the Novy Vasyugan based oil prospecting company, some of the workers were acquaintances of the villages. The buildings of the firms were set up not far from a villager's house, between the village and forest [Nagy 2018]. Five barracks were transported on sledge runners to the spot, and a separate building housed the kitchen and the dining room. A water pipe from the lake was also installed. The employees worked by the “vahtoviy metod” (shift-labour), taking turns fortnightly. They were transported by choppers as the village had no road negotiable by amphibian vehicles, either. The boring tower was about 50 m high and determined the village scape. After the termination of the work the barracks were moved away, the tower pulled down, the well covered by concrete so that it could be activated any time.

Oil miners did the exploratory boring with the consent of the local people. To be more precise, the permission was asked for the placing of the barracks in the village so that no forest would have to be cleared for them. The Ostyak man living closest – whose garden and hayfield was the site earlier – agreed to this without ado, and also agreed that the workers might gather firewood in the forest around the site. The request was an act of courtesy by the oil minors, for in 1979 it was hard to imagine that an oil well would fail to come about or the oil miners would be without fuel because the natives did not give permission for them to work there.

The relationship between the oil miners and the Ozernoe villagers was peaceful and balanced. Some of the oil workers were expert in fishing, so they were allowed to fish in a section of the lake where the villagers did not lay their nets. They lent them nets and even allowed them to use their boats but expected them to borrow them personally and return them to where they found them. The oil miners were no rivals at fishing, because only a few older miners grasped the possibility and there was little free time, nor did they really need the fish as the kitchen provided for them. None but one tried to hunt in the surroundings. Recollections reveal that the oil miners observed the agreements and even respected the villagers' warning that the sacred pine tree in the village was untouchable for people.

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<sup>6</sup> I have done fieldwork among Khanty people in the northern part of Tomsk province, altogether for some two years, from 1992 to this day.



The Ostyaks also made use of this contact. In the canteen they regularly bought tea, bread, flour, sugar, oil, so they didn't have to carry them from Novy Vasyugan. Sometimes they ate warm meals there, when they had no time or mood to cook, and regularly purchased bakery goods they could not produce. They often offered cigarettes, vodka to each other, and drank up the stock often together. They rarely paid with money, but exchanged goods for fish or meat with the cooks.

The greatest gain from the presence of the oil miners were the transport possibilities to be used by the Ostyaks. Around the same time choppers and caterpillar amphibians, *vezdehods* also appeared to ensure the transport of oil miners and their technology. In the socialist era petrol and working time were not strictly accounted for, so the Ostyaks regularly hitched a ride in the oil people's vehicles. The profit of a ride was the barter relationship that evolved between the Ostyaks and the Russians. The overwhelming majority of Ostyaks lived in poverty even by local standards, so they had no transport vehicles and many could not drive. In this way they could get from Novy Vasyugan to Ozernoe much quicker: it took fifteen minutes in a chopper what usually was a two days' walk; on the other side, they could transport the spoil – fish, meat, fur, collected wild herbs, mowed hay – in commercial amounts to the larger settlement to sell. It was indispensable to be able to support their families. On the other hand, it was in the pilots' interest to stop over in Overnoe: for a ride they could get sacks of fish, pine nuts, buckets of blueberry, several kg of meat, even fur for a "cap". As they worded it, they tried to "feed" the pilots, shower them with presents to give them an urge for a detour: an Ostyak woman dubbed the making of dried fish "producing the fare". The same mutual gain connected them to the *vezdehod* drivers. Each Ostyak had their Russian acquaintances – up to the mid-2000 years – who had vehicles, liked touring the wilderness and were ready to take their Ostyak friends with them. They paid for the petrol and allowed their friends to stay in their houses and hunt in their hunting area. They also gave them meat and fish. The drivers usually wanted to return earlier than they, so it was important to make them stay: "You have to treat them well, least they should yearn for home too early." They cherished contacts with such Russians, visiting them regularly to know about their plans. The importance of transportation is best revealed by its lack, by the cessation of this possibility. From the early 2000s the pilots had to account for every km strictly, so "feeding them", "producing the fare" became useless, similarly to paying money. Landing for private purposes was out of the question. It aggravated the situation that the collapse of a bridge made the trip of *vezdehods* (cross-country vehicles) dangerous and no one undertakes the risk. As a result, today the aim of hunting and fishing is to produce enough to support the family. Mowing the hayfield is no use, either.

Not only the vehicles but also the roads of the oil miners were used by Ostyaks and are still used by them. Going to Ozernoe, first they walk along a concrete road connecting two oil wells before they take the *profil* leading to the village. These *profils* are clearing, paths cut for the prospecting of resources in the area; they were the only paths negotiable for the *vezdehods*. *Profils* are usually straight as a bowstring, not adjusted to the relief: they cross swamps, rivers. Earlier the Ostyak paths between the two settlements were adjusted to the geographic endowments, going on higher ground evading the swamps. Now the Ostyaks gave up walking on "hard" ground with dry feet for the comfort of ready *profils* not requiring maintenance, because – though walking along the paths may be easier and faster, some are even shorter, they need continuous care because the forest quickly reclaims them. The *profils*, on the other hand, are so broad, the vegetation so deeply uprooted, that reforestation will take a long time. This is even despite the frequently heard opinion in conversations that clearing *profils* is condemnable as they cut up of the forest. However, I also met with the view that these roads were not detrimental but useful as they allow the forest to breathe.

As mentioned above, the oil miners took away the bulk of the technology and the barracks. Still, an immense amount of things remained: parts of the well, material of the servicing buildings, stock of logging and firewood, which the Ostyaks tried to use up without fail. Of course, the logs and chopped firewood have run out, but the metal parts are still used as weights on fishing nets or to press dried fish, some are built into outside ovens, or used as props for buildings. The oil miners left several pieces of furniture, mainly iron beds which are still used by the villagers.

When the oil well was in operation, the Russian husband of a single Ostyak woman joined the oil miners. His family lived in Novy Vasyugan, but he still went out to the village to hunt. The local Ostyaks did not want to work in oil mining, although they had earlier experience. Only one of them had never worked with oil miners, but none of them stayed long at a work place. This was put down by Vladislav Kulemzin, who also knew the villagers very well: he was doing ethnographic fieldwork here when one of them joined the oil people: "[...] he abandoned hunting he had been familiar with since his childhood and got a job at the oil well. [...] 'I've had enough of trampling the snow' – Pavel explained. A year and a half later he returned

to his customary work with the words ‘however well you feed a wolf, it will keep yearning for the forest’ and he never left it again” [Кулемзин 1996, 252].

The so-far painted, almost embarrassingly positive picture is, however, more complex; the Ostyaks namely also had some negative experiences of the oil miners. These unfavourable experiences were practically all related to environment pollution. The exploration of the oil site caused them direct damage. There was considerable oil pollution in the lake. A 4-5 cm thick oil slick was floating on the surface, it was hard to row in it. The mud painted their boats black. It caused an immense loss of fish: their fins were damaged and discoloured, their eyes whitened, they floated half-dead or dead in the water. The feathers of wild ducks picked up oil and they could hardly fly. The fish caught that year in the lake were not eaten, even the bear searching among the dead carcasses did not eat them. In spring the highwater washed the contamination into the forest: locals claim this saved the lake from final perishing because the oil settled on the trees and vegetation, and though for years it could be seen there, less was washed back into the lake. The impact of the pollution can be felt to this day: the last water quality check which I know of (1992) still demonstrated oil pollution, and since the mass fish deaths hardly any carp has been caught in the lake. Besides the lake pollution, there was other damage to the villagers. While the oil miners were working in and around the village, the noise was immense and it frightened off the game who retreated farther. The elk evaded the lake for the oil slick and did not wade into eat water plants, unlike in other years. The sylvan birds, grouse suffered too, by picking up oil-stained pebbles. They could not spit them out, so their gizzards blackened, the birds dried out, their meat was no longer edible. When the oil miners left, even grass failed to grow for a long time; the first hay mowing was more than ten years later.

Despite obvious damage, the Ozernoe villagers remained on good terms with the oil miners, as they regarded the pollution as mistake or carelessness, which they remedied to their satisfaction. They noticed the ecological damage, responded to it, talking about it suggestively to this day, without any direct conflict emerging.

Since oil mining did not cause less damage, was not more circumspect, did not choose subtler method than elsewhere, nor was the attitude of the oil miners to the local Ostyaks different, the cause for the lack of conflicts must be sought outside oil mining. The first reason is the outstanding importance of oil mining for the region and more closely for Novy Vasyugan housing their families. Similarly to everyone else, they thought that Novy Vasyugan depended for its survival to this day on oil mining in general and on a certain oil prospecting firm in particular, unlike several vacant villages in the neighbourhood. The economic possibilities of Novy Vasyugan clearly depend on the oil sector.

After the war the economic prospects of the settlement was hopeless despite attempts to try several branches of production. Agriculture could not evolve beyond household plots, the kolkhoz of the village was closed down even before the war. In addition to tree-felling, the manufacturing cooperatives (dress- and shoe-making, furniture and brick production) and the hunting cooperative (*promkhoz*) played the greatest role. Apart from its main profile of hunting and fishing, the latter specialized during the war for the collection of Siberian pine resin and herbs, and even ran a blue fox farm for a few years. The importance of the settlement gradually decreased after the war owing to the dwindling turnout and the extraordinary distance from any centre. In 1956 the institution of the *kommendatura* afflicting masses of displaced people was abolished, so a large part of the population moved back to their native territories. As a result, the settlement lost its status as district centre in 1959 and its territory was attached to the Kargasok district. Similarly to many settlements, the disappearance of the village was prevented by the start of exploration for oil in their neighbourhood in the fifties, and the first well began to produce in 1964. The village of Novy Vasyugan was chosen for the centre of the highly successful oil prospecting company founded in 1955, as a result of which the oil sector did not only complement the economic palette but became the central economic sector around which the entire economic and social life of the village was organized. The demographic indices changed for the better, the population of Novy Vasyugan began to grow, this time chiefly thanks to the specialists settled here from other oil producing areas. The oil research firm (*ZNGRE*)<sup>7</sup> assumed part of the functions of the *promkhoz* and supported the social sphere of the settlement. They had a lion’s share in rebuilding the, drilling drinking-water wells. In addition, it ran a kindergarten, subsidized the running of the school and health centre. The efflorescence of Novy Vasyugan was coincidental with the most successful period of *ZNGRE*, and the local people still recall the firm closed down in October 2003 with heartfelt nostalgia.

<sup>7</sup> ZNGRE (Western oil and gas research expedition. Западная нефте-газовая разведочная экспедиция.)



Though the *ZNGRE* was wound up, the settlement is still clearly dependent on oil mining. The great majority of the population are employed in the neighbouring oil fields around Pionerniy and Igol or by subcontractors of major oil mining companies. What guarantees the involvement of the Novy Vasyugan inhabitants in the oil industry is the paved road that connects the settlement with the two mentioned oil centres. The road was built by oil firms in the late 1980s. Apart from the state sphere and retail trade, there is hardly any job in the settlement without any ties to oil. It is inherent to the practice of “oilism” that the mining companies also perform some state or local government tasks. The oil firms carry on considerable sponsoring activity as well, e.g. *YUKOS* financed the construction of the church in Sredny Vasyugan, *GAZPROM* built the new school in Mildjino, *TomskNeft* donates large sums to the running of the Novy Vasyugan library and school. Such high-priority state projects as aiding, supporting the war veterans, are also assigned to them. *Tomsk Neft* is in charge of the concrete road between Pionerniy and Igol passing by the settlement, they do regular maintenance, ploughing the snow, and the checkpoints along the road are staffed by their security firm.

Both the inhabitants and the leaders of Novy Vasyugan reflect upon the prospect of the settlement’s survival despite its extraordinary isolation and huge distance<sup>8</sup> from the centres, which can clearly be attributed to the oil mining sector. It follows that the leaders of oil firms have great influence in the local government, and the aldermen of the settlement are often accused of representing the interests of the oil miners as against the population, too. It was a symbolic manifestation of oil dependence, of the hierarchy between resources, that on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of *ZNGRE* one of the streets of the village was renamed from “Kolkhoz street” to “Oil explorers’ street”. The mayor of the village in the early 2000s – the former principal of the local school – said in a public speech that “the future of the settlement coincides with the future of oil mining.”

The second reason why the oil miners did not become as stigmatized here as in the areas more to the north is the form of the conflicts with the majority society. There are antagonisms between the locally indigenous minority and the incoming majority society in Tomsk province, too. They are normally latent conflicts, owing to the Ostyaks’ use of weak resistance strategies, the Scottish everyday strategies of resistance. As quiet resistance to the norms, system and assimilating efforts of the majority society, a great part of the Ostyaks did not adopt the way of life offered by the majority and – mainly the men – kept going back to their native village to pursue their former economic activity. In childhood several of them had escaped from school and sneaked back to their parents in the woods in winter, walking sometimes 20 km in moccasins. At that time, they still used Khanty as a secret language to speak about Russians in their presence. Ignoring prohibition and sanctions by the authorities, they helped the forcefully deported people; they tried to evade compulsory delivery and made attempts to sell fur on the black market. It can be seen partly as a similar strategy – and partly their ignorance of state bureaucracy – that a single Ostyak in Ozernoe had a gun licence in a village of hunters and fishers, and only he asked for a permit which game could be hunted. They ignore state regulations on limitations of fishing, on the start or end of hunting seasons. To dodge the centrally set prices – after all, acquiring gain to the detriment of the state is a game played by all employees in Russia – they stretch the delivered sable furs so that they should look larger. Along the Vasyugan river the right of usufruct of “the clans’ hunting grounds” is not legislated, so the whole territory is state owned and the game warden issues permits of lease annually. Only one of the Ozernoe villagers rented the areas that belonged to him by Ostyak law, the rest hunting on “no man’s land” for lack of legal regulation. This “native law” proved sometimes stronger than the official lease system. The game warden offered an Ostyak man, an excellent hunter who had moved out into Ozernoe, to rent the areas next to the village. The hunter was outraged, arguing that he had no right to appropriate the land that had always belonged to the families living there, and they should have that land officially, too, of anyone. He insisted on this view although no other ground was offered to him and he had to go on hunting on other people’s ground with their permission.

The above-said reveals that the Ostyaks also resist – in their stealthy, quiet manner – to the majority society and the state, but the targets of this resistance are very rarely the oil miners. Most often the Russians are named as the source of the hegemony against which they protest. They formulate the conflict in ethnic categories, although its ethnic content is actually strongly questionable. In Russia the use of ethnic categories – in politics, public discourse – is so wide and strong that most conflicts including the gap between majority society and marginalized groups are most easily interpreted with their help.

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<sup>8</sup> Across the fields the distance is 260 km from Kargasok, the district centre, and 555 km from Tomsk, the centre of the province.



The development of this idiom of conflicts goes back to historical reasons. The land along the Vasyugan river was part of the former Narimi Kray, one of the target region in Stalin's policy of ethnic deportations. Between 1931 and 1946 tens of thousands of Russians condemned as kulaks, as well as Germans, Latvians, Lithuanians, Estonians, Altay Turks were resettled in the Vasyugan region for their ethnicity, which radically changed the demographic relations of the area within some fifteen years. By the end of the thirties, the Vasyugan Khanty became a negligible minority in their former native region, their villages were abolished or filled up with relocated people. By the time of the appearance of oil mining in the area, the Ostyaks had already been a tiny minority in the sea of an overwhelming majority: the opposition dates from far earlier than in the areas to the north where the radical change in the traditional way of life was indeed caused by the influx of oil miners. Consequently, oil mining cannot be the metaphor of the conflict between the hegemonic newcomer majority – most of the Russian nationals also disenfranchised until 1941 and most of rest of the ethnicities until Stalin's death – and the “aboriginal” minority, for this conflict was just a new aspect or form of the two groups' antagonism, without entailing any basic changes. Moreover, through the improvement of the so-far deteriorating existential conditions in Novy Vasyugan, the native Ostyaks too experienced advantages, not only disadvantages, in the new situation.

Along the Vasyugan, the oil miners were thus “welcomed” by the “shattered generation” the emergence of which more to the north was principally the outcome of the encounter with oil mining. [Вахтин 1993: 46-49] The shattered generation of the Vasyugan was no longer able to interpret the new situation adequately and to act as a homogeneous community of interests: they did not respond to the new challenges concerted and did not represent their own interests unanimously.

In Novikova's view, there are two crucial questions of the legal regulation of oil mining – and hence the legislation on the situation of the minorities – in West Siberia: land ownership and self-determination. When the oil miners appeared along the Vasyugan river, the majority of the Ostyaks had no longer owned, and often no longer used their former “clan lands”, and were even forced to abandon their villages or share them with the mass influx of representatives of majority society. In other words, land ownership had become indifferent by then. Nor was the question of self-government seriously raised, because at the time of the change of the political system when such questions cropped up their society – as seen above – had already been atomized, dissolved, they had no common interests to stand up for.

There wasn't and isn't political capital in the shattered, mostly assimilated Ostyaks, as they are mostly “invisible” in public and political discourses, [Nagy 2015] and the representatives of the local power practically deny their existence.

In this situation, the Ostyaks did not thematise the question of oil mining in detail: they did not want – and could not – resist to it, they didn't want to live by it, and didn't want – nor had the chance – to build their economic strategies on compensations. They simply wanted to pursue their old economic strategies under the changed circumstances, even in the shade of the oil well, as much as possible. They tried to adapt to the new situation as they had to adapt to all conditions, in an opportunist manner, which is not alien to the economic strategies of hunting societies in general.<sup>9</sup>

The picture presented above concentrated on a single settlement (Ozernoe) and a generation, the “shattered generation” of the Vasyugan Khanty. Spatially, I think, this picture is generally valid along the entire territory of the Vasyugan river, but in time it cannot be generalized. The members of the “lost generation” are no longer alive or active, and the discourses with the oil miners are not dominated by them. The younger generation has more options. Infinitesimal is the number of those who, accepting the oil miners and avoiding the conflicts like the previous generation, try to continue the earlier traditional Ostyak economic strategies. There were attempts to rally the Ostyaks into a community of interests on the model of the political involvement and economic practice of the northern areas, to ensure the fishing and hunting possibility. The leader of the *obshchina* represented an active, critical, environment-conscious policy relying clearly on the earlier successful practice of the northern provinces, and he tried to formulate their interests by thematising the oil miners. Other Ostyaks act on the strategy that most local young and middle-aged inhabitants choose, irrespective of ethnicity: they try to get a job in and around oil mining. Their efforts are independent of their ethnicity, but their chances are not: thinking in ethnic categories, the oil firms are reluctant to employ Ostyaks, and when employed, they do less qualified work. Most often they are the first to be laid off when there is a staff cut. The statistics of the district reveals a saliently high unemployment rate among the local indigenous minorities. Another career model – lumpenisation – is largely attributable to

<sup>9</sup> To the opportunism of the hunters, see: Sahlins 1972 and Ingold 1980.



these shrinking existential possibilities. By today, a considerable part of the Ostyaks have been marginalized, their earlier settlement ghettoized.

## Summary

As the above-said has demonstrated, Yegor Letov is on the whole right declaring that “eternity smells of oil”. The largest oil and natural gas fields of the country are under the studied areas – first of all KhMAO and YaNAO – and the future fate of the country directly depends on the efficiency of the raw material sector. In this situation the fate of the Khanty living here – and that of the entire territory – is directly determined by “oilism”, the oil industry also taking on state duties. It is confirmed by international anthropological literature that the mining of raw materials directly influences the life of the groups living in the area of extraction, and “raw materials being a curse”, it chiefly causes problems and conflicts. I think Florian Stammler’s statement that in West Siberia the concept of conflict is ill suited to describe the situation for diverse reasons is not tenable, because, for one thing, before the re-consolidation of central power there were serious public clashes, and also, because a part of the Khanty still clearly adopt the everyday strategies of resistance to this day. The case study detailed above reveals that for the Khanty in the Tomsk region – i.e. for the Ostyaks – the presence of the oil miners did not generate conflicts, despite the resultant ecological damage they did not overlook. There are several causes for that. Firstly, oil mining in local discourses appears as the token of the survival of their settlement, hence it influences their lives positively, too. Secondly, the oppositions between the native Ostyaks and the dominant majority society cannot be described with the metaphor of oil mining, for due to the mass deportations under Stalin the society of the Ostyaks had already been dissolved in the enormous masses of the relocated people by the time the oil miners appeared. The oil miners were met by the “shattered generation” who were unable to unanimously interpret the new situation and formulate their collective interests. Unlike for the Khanty in KhMAO and YaNAO areas, oil mining did not bring radical changes in their life, but it was a new aspect of the presence of majority society in hegemonic position. In short, the majority – minority relation is not a “resource-based conflict” in the area of Tomsk province, although the life of the region is expressly dominated by oil extraction. That is why Yegor Letov was not quite right.

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**Золтан Надь**

«ВЕЧНОСТЬ ПАХНЕТ НЕФТЬЮ».

НЕФТЬ И ХАНТЫ: ПРОТИВОДЕЙСТВИЕ ИЛИ ПРИСПОСОБЛЕНИЕ?

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В своей статье автор показывает, какое разнообразное влияние оказывает добыча нефти на хантов, живущих в разных государственных административных округах Западной Сибири. По сложившемуся в международной антропологии мнению, добыча сырья, в рамках принятого «ресурсного курса», способна порождать конфликты и создавать «сырьевое господство». Автор считает, что утверждение Флориана Штаммлера, о том, что в Западной Сибири (Ханты-Мансийский автономный округ-Югра; Ямало-Ненецкий автономный округ) понятие конфликта не применимо для описания текущей ситуации. Представленные автором примеры указывают на то, что для хантов Томской области, присутствие нефтяников не приводило к конфликтам. Причина этого в том, что нефтяная промышленность предстает в местных дискурсах, прежде всего, как возможность для выживания, а также потому, что из-за вынужденного переселения «потерянное поколение» хантов встретилось с нефтяниками уже в сталинскую эпоху. Для них нефтяная промышленность не вызвала принципиальных изменений, она была лишь очередным проявлением доминирующего общественного большинства. Таким образом, взаимоотношения «большинства» и «меньшинства» в Томской области не являются ресурсным конфликтом, несмотря на то, что нефтяная промышленность превалирует в жизни региона.

*Ключевые слова:* ханты, остяки, коренные народы, традиционный образ жизни, нефтепромыслы, конфликтность, стратегии сосуществования.

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