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The problem of maintaining the Vepsian identity in the context of the activities of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council

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Abstract. The authors of this article focus on the problem of the activities of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC) in the context of maintaining the Vepsian identity. It's important that Veps, being a people of Euro-Arctic, are recognized as an indigenous ethnic group of Barents region by BEAC. The authors analyze all aspects of Council policy of maintaining the Vepsian people. Although the structure of Council includes The Working Group of Indigenous Peoples (WGIP), the authors argue that too little attention has been paid to the Vepsian issue, compared with Nenets and Saami problematics. Beyond that, a reader is informed about strengths and weaknesses of the BEAC activities in this direction. Finally, article gives recommendations on improving the efficiency of BEAC policy with regard to the Vepsian ethnic group.

1. Introduction

Today, the Arctic Region is one of the key platforms for international cooperation, serving to an increasing degree as a platform for states, international governmental and non-governmental organizations with interests in various fields: sustainable development, ecology and natural resources management, mineral exploration and extraction, research, international security and strategic arms issues.

One of the most pressing Arctic-related issues is the preservation of *indigenous small ethnic communities* (ISEC). Climatic conditions, peripheral economic development, environmental and many other factors have a specific impact on peoples and on the preservation of their identity in the context of contemporary globalization processes.

Looking at the preservation of the CMS through the prism of international institutions, special attention is drawn to the activities of the Barents/Euro-Arctic Council of States (hereinafter referred to as the Council).

The Barents Regional Council (hereinafter referred to as BEAC, Council) was founded on 11 January 1993 following the signing of the Kirkenes Declaration [2]. The Council is composed of the European Commission, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. BEAC is a forum for intergovernmental cooperation on issues related to the Barents Region. The Barents Euro-Arctic Region itself was introduced into the political lexicon in 1992 and includes, according to BEAC, the regions of Norway (Nurlan, Troms, Finnmark), the Russian Federation (Murmansk, Arkhangelsk Region, Republic of Komi, Nenets Autonomous Okrug and Republic of Karelia), Finland (Lappy, Pohjois-Pohyanmaa and Kainuu) and Sweden (Westerbotten and Norrbotten).

In addition to the goals and objectives of the organization, the official website of BEAC lists the Barents Region indigenous peoples. Note that the Council uses the term «Indigenous peoples» (IPs),

including the Nenets, Sami and Veps [9]. Defining the problem of indigenous identity preservation as the most complex, the activities of regional organizations are certainly necessary in addressing this issue. In our opinion, among the indigenous peoples mentioned in the SER documents, it is worth paying close attention to the organization's policy on Veps conservation, given the small size of this ethnic group relative to the other indigenous peoples of the Barents region. This is manifested in the natural, socio-economic characteristics of the Veps and their close neighborhood with large peoples such as Russians and Karelians.

2. Contemporary situation of the Vepsian People

The first mention of Veps dates back to the middle of the VI century AD. According to the sources, Veps (previously – «Vyes») took an active part in the formation of the Ancient Rus. Language of Veps is Vepsian, belonging to the Baltic-Finnish branch of the Finno-Ugric language family. The traditional confession of Veps is Orthodoxy.

Historically long contacts with the Slavic population and other Finno-Ugric peoples led to gradual assimilation of Veps and compression of their habitat. Already by the XVIII century, after the founding of Petrozavodsk and St. Petersburg in 1703, the influence on the identity of Veps began to strengthen by gradual incorporation of their traditional residence's territories in socio-economic processes of north-western regions of the Russian Empire.

The traditional habitat of the Veps comprised large territories between Lake Ladoga and Lake Onega, generally belonging to the eastern part of modern Leningrad Region, the southern part of the Karelian Republic and the western borders of Vologda Region [13]. Nowadays the territory of Veps residence is limited by three main areas, each of which has its own local dialects of Veps language: northern (widespread in Karelian settlements of Prionezhye, the most important of which is Sheltozero settlement), middle (lower reaches of Oyat' and Kapsha rivers) and southern (upper reaches of Lid' river) [14].

As regards the number of Veps, over the past few decades a sharp decline in the number of Veps has been recorded: in 1989 their number was 12142, in 2002 the All-Russian census recorded 8240 people calling themselves Veps. According to different estimates, this is due to processes that increase the Veps' assimilation. The first place is given to the predominant use of Russian as the main language in everyday and business communication, the increasing economic activity of Veps in the Leningrad and Vologda regions and the Republic of Karelia.

According to the All-Russian Population Census 2010 (the last one conducted so far in the Russian Federation) the number of Veps was 5,936 people, of which 3,423 (57.6%) live in the Republic of Karelia, 1,380 (23.3%) in the Leningrad Region and 412 (6.9%) in the Vologda Region [7]. It should be emphasized that the share of Veps in the population of the regions is rather low: 0.53% in Karelia, 0.08% in Leningrad Region and 0.03% in Vologda Region. Thus, today the search for effective mechanisms to preserve the number of this ethnic group appears to be the most difficult problem. It should be noted that the majority of Karelian Veps lives outside their historical area - in the capital of the Republic of Karelia – Petrozavodsk. Lack of objective and relatively recent demographic data is one of the problems that does not allow to reflect the real situation of Veps today.

In our opinion, the main problem for the preservation of Veps is the preservation of their own language and culture as the basis for the self-awareness of any nation. State support in this area is a priority in addressing this problem.

It should be noted that Veps do not have de jure their national administrative and territorial units, subjects in Russia. However, the Veps language, along with Karelian and Finnish, has state support in the Republic of Karelia, not having the status of the state language on the territory of the Republic [3]. There are Veps national settlements in Babayevsky District of Vologda Region. There are no such administrative and territorial entities in the Leningrad Region.

3. BEAC policy in the context of resolving the problem of indigenous peoples in the Barents Region: Veps

In addition to the Russian federal and regional authorities, the issue of the conservation of Veps and other ISEC in Russia is included in statements of Barents/Euro-Arctic States Council (BEAC).

The Working Group of Indigenous Peoples in the Barents Euro-Arctic Region (WGIP) is responsible for indigenous peoples' issues within the framework of States of the Barents/Euro-Arctic Region Council. On the basis of its activities, it develops documents, the so-called Action Plans for Indigenous Peoples in BEAC, intended to last for a specific period of time and reflect the key areas of work towards indigenous peoples. Analyzing the official website of BEAC, we would like to emphasize that the WGIP action plan or program for indigenous peoples has not been published. The action plan for 2016-2018 was found among the documentation on the BEAC website [1]. In this plan, the main WGIP activities are based on six issues: 1) Business Development; 2) Language and media; 3) Health and social issues; 4) Environment; 5) Culture; 6) Political cooperation.

Considering the negative trends associated with the traditional employment areas of the CMS, the most important fact is that fewer and fewer representatives of active age groups (in particular, young people) remain in their traditional places of residence. This is explained by the fact that traditional employment areas are being eliminated. The WGIP plans to correct this situation, which is respectively reflected in the plan. The section «Business» mentions the development of reindeer herding education in the Norwegian commune of Kautokeino, as well as in the Lovozero area and Naryan-Mar in the Russian Federation. In addition, there is cooperation with the Institute of Circumpolar Reindeer Husbandry and the EALLU Arctic Indigenous Youth project, in the context of Far North peoples' development of traditional crafts. These formats are directly related to Nenets and Sami issues, thus raising the question of the WGIP policy regarding the employment of Veps [8].

The next issue, on which BEAC focuses, is the problem of preserving indigenous languages. In order to support the languages of the Barents Region CMS for 2016-2018, it was planned to introduce toponyms in Indigenous peoples, develop various useful applications, local broadcast media, etc. Within the Council, there are also some statements related to the ethnocultural sphere, among which there is an idea of agro-tourism, i.e. the creation of various types of tourist sites, predicated on traditional knowledge and lifestyles of Indigenous peoples.

Following the results of the official BEAC website analysis, it should be concluded that WGIP activities are not currently supported by the plan that would cover a period from 2019 to the present.

The latest action plan concerns the period of up to 2018. The question arises as to what currently supports the WGIP activities. In addition, there is some controversy over the timing of the plan: either one document is valid only until 2016, or 2016 is placed in two plans of different periods at the same time. It should be added that the last document (2016-2018) was approved in 2017, which also raises some kind of a doubt about the quality of the WGIP's work.

The text of the Program 2016-2018 itself (under «Economy») includes the period of 2017-2019. Thus, it is difficult to presume, for how long the program will actually last. Besides that, when comparing the provisions of both programmes, one can clearly see the elements of copying/replication.

From 2019, Norway took over the presidency of BEAC - since then, the Council's priorities have changed. For example, cooperation in the areas of health, interpersonal communication and education have been chosen as the main areas of activity until 2021 [11]. Separately, the plan notes that the Council is interested in listening to indigenous issues, to work closely with WGIP. Besides that, a forum of Indigenous peoples of the region is planned for 2021. This forum could be a promising platform for Veps, which would allow the representatives of them to highlight their problems in greater depth.

Having studied BEAC documents, we notice that Veps are practically not mentioned separately from other Indigenous peoples, but more often refer to the concept of ISEC, which considers all indigenous peoples of the North living in the Russian Federation. This leads to the fact that Veps cannot have a significant impact on the policy of Council; therefore, there is no possibility of attracting effective tools from the organization to solve the problems of this ethos.

It should be noted that the Working Group on Indigenous peoples of the Barents Region included a representative of Veps, Daria Shvetsova, who participates in various activities on the BEAC platform, in particular, the Working Group on Environmental Issues[12].

In August 2019, Evgeny Foteev, the main representative of Veps community in BEAC, participated in a meeting of representatives of Indigenous peoples at which financial issues facing WGIP were discussed [5]. Key among them is the opportunity to finance the participation of Indigenous peoples representatives in the UNPFII (UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues), which may allow to make their problems more widely known.

Since 2019, BEAC has been trying to stimulate and promote cooperation between the Nordic States and the Russian Federation. At the initiative of two organizations – «Civil Society and Human Rights» and «The Open Call», grants are provided for projects involving representatives of seven regions of North-West Russia and European partners. One of the project themes is IP, which includes Veps. The list of regions participating in the program includes the Leningrad Region and the Republic of Karelia, which are Veps's living areas, so this platform can be used by Veps representatives to obtain funding for their projects [10]. In our opinion, BEAC not so much offers certain kind of projects to solve the problem of indigenous peoples conservation and, in particular, Veps, but encourages the activity of the representatives of interested groups and structures themselves.

In our opinion, the thesis that the issue of indigenous peoples preservation was not raised by Council in the context of Veps issues before 2019 is a mistake. The BEAC steps during 2018 are visible. For example, a project of the «Voice of Generations» studio was developed for students of Veps origin to support and study the northern dialect of the Vepsian language. In the course of the project, participants learned to work with professional techniques and learned about ethnographic topics. Also a film was created, which is devoted to the occupation of Veps territory in Prionezhye by Finnish troops. Besides that, a collection of modern Vepsian literature was published, and in January 2018 students of Moscow State University interviewed indigenous people about their quality of life. The Karelian and Vepsian Language Resource Centre has been operating since October 2018 and is funded on a permanent basis from the state and national budgets. Seminars and other events have been held at the centre [4].

If we look back at the main activities of BEAC with regard to indigenous peoples and Veps in particular, it should be noted that the Council pays the greatest attention to striving to preserve the cultural values of the people, especially local dialects. There is reason to believe that, at least during Norway's presidency of the Council, these Veps priorities will not change.

4. Evaluation of BEAC policies in the context of Veps conservation

Based on the analysis of the activities of the Council of the Barents/Euro-Arctic States with regard to Veps issues, the weaknesses and strengths of the Council's Veps policy should be identified in order to make recommendations for positive changes in this direction. In our view, the following provisions should be considered among the weaknesses of the policy: 1) BEAC's support to the activities of individual activist groups «outweighs» proposals for the creation of specific projects, in particular for Veps; 2) Lack of attention to Veps issues (more emphasis on Nenets and Saami); 3) Veps issues are eroding among the «progressive» agenda (health, interpersonal communication and education), as well as among the problems of other peoples in the region, given that their situation is more stable than Vepsian; 4) The problem of the lack of representation of Veps in the Leningrad and Vologda Regions and their organizational structures in BEAC; 5) The lack of a clear understanding in maintaining a balance between the development of agro-tourism and the identity of the Vepsian culture.

Let us look at the strengths of Council's IP policy, which are manifested in the various activities of the Council and WGIP in particular: 1) Sensitivity to complex problems, which provides an opportunity to build an «information bridge» between different areas of BEAC activity for indigenous conservation policies; 2) Interest in the maintenance and acquisition of the Veps's cultural heritage; 3) The preservation of BEAC as a platform for raising awareness and representation at the international level on current Veps issues; 4) Awareness of the need to develop infrastructure and stimulate business activity to address the problems of socio-economic development in the Barents Region; 5) Involvement of the Council of BEAC Member States in the work on indigenous issues in the Russian Federation; 6) Conducting activities aimed at preserving Vepsian language and culture.

5. Recommendations to improve the effectiveness of BEAC policies in the context of Veps conservation

In our opinion, there are several possible mechanisms that can be used by BEAC to solve the problem of Veps identity loss.

With regard to the documents concerning the problem of Veps people's preservation, it is necessary to specify more clearly and thoroughly the goal and objectives, as well as the ways of their implementation by BEAC. This will help define concrete steps within the framework of the organization's policy on Veps preservation. Besides that, criteria for evaluating the Council's activities in this context are necessary.

The first mechanism is to increase the number and content of cultural events of different scales, demonstrating traditional crafts, everyday life, national costumes and the history of the people. For this purpose, it is necessary to stimulate, at the national and international levels, entrepreneurship in the Vepsian territory, support traditional crafts, their integration into the tourism and recreational economy, thus indirectly preventing the migration of young people to other zones of intensive assimilation.

The second mechanism is to focus on language (cultural-linguistic) and educational programs for Veps: to the existing programs in the region, new ones should be added, the development and implementation of which, in our opinion, can be successfully ensured by Finland. Finnish activities can be effective not only in preserving the Karelian identity, but also Veps' one. This would be useful for sharing experiences and bringing in new tools for language and culture preservation.

The third mechanism requires the development of comprehensive programs for socio-economic development in areas with high Veps populations, including the development of unique industries to the region.

The fourth mechanism is the establishment of international cooperation between Veps organizations on the proposals outlined in Veps's language and culture development projects. Establishing a basis for closer cooperation and a balance between the interests of the representatives of Vepsian communities and BEAC seems to be the most logical and promising.

The possibilities of Council make it possible to recommend to the participating countries a list of measures for timely identification of the socio-economic situation of indigenous peoples by establishing a permanent commission of the three subjects of the Russian Federation (with the support of BEAC) to monitor quantitative and qualitative characteristics (the indicative method) of the Veps situation. In such a case, an additional target «platform» for addressing Veps's problems should be established within BEAC.

6. Conclusions

Veps, being the smallest among the Indigenous peoples of the Barents Region, are members of the Barents/Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC), but are relatively poorly represented in its provisions. It seems that the representation of Veps is formal and this ethnos is included in the BEAC only because of the coincidence of their habitat with the territory of the Republic of Karelia as one of the Council's regions. This underlines the contradictory nature of the policy towards Veps on the part of BEAC as an international platform for equal interaction.

In the context of localization of Veps, the authorities of the Republic of Karelia cannot independently solve the problem of preservation of this ethnic group based on the peculiarities of socio-economic processes and part of global trends in the region, including urbanization.

Language and culture determine the identity of peoples. These are the areas that need to be supported based on the trends of cultural assimilation of Veps mainly among the Russian population of both the Republic of Karelia and Leningrad and Vologda regions. These subjects of the Russian Federation should be involved in the Council policy in solving the problem of Veps identity preservation.

In our opinion, it is the attraction of considerable attention to Veps within the framework of the international agenda that is the most realistic and feasible task for the subsequent dialogue within the framework of BEAC. It is necessary to clearly formulate the goals and tasks within the framework of the policy of BEAC in relation to Veps.

High performance in solving the problem of Veps conservation requires the adoption of comprehensive measures, balanced steps, which, among other things, could further involve such international actors as the Russian Federation (federal and regional levels of government), BEAC member states and other international organizations in the discussion and real activities of the Council. Close contact with Veps associations, Russian and international business representatives is necessary.

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