EU demand helping drive human rights abuses in Russia’s coal heartland

- Report reveals how coal mining in Kuzbass in southern Siberia has destroyed forests and villages and endangered the indigenous Shor people
- Almost 40 per cent of all coal exported from Kuzbass is bound for EU
- Leading Shor anti-coal activist seeks asylum after escalating threats and intimidation

May 3, 2018, Brussels - A new report by forests and rights NGO Fern and Coal Action Network reveals the devastation that the expansion of coal mining in the Kuzbass region of southern Siberia is causing to the area’s indigenous Shor people and the environment.

In 2017, coal production in Kuzbass rose by 6.2 per cent on the year before. Eleven of the top 22 countries that export coal from Kuzbass are in the European Union, despite some EU Member States’ increasing reliance on renewable energy.

The report, Slow Death in Siberia, shows how coal mining has destroyed forests, contaminated the air, water and soil in Kuzbass, and cites evidence indicating a rise in illnesses and health problems among those living near the mines. These include increasing cancers, tuberculosis and cardiovascular diseases and decreasing life expectancy.

At the heart of report are the testimonies and stories of the indigenous Shors, a Turkic people whose survival and beliefs are intimately tied to the nature around them, but whose ancestral lands and villages have been ravaged by mining, leading, many of them say, to the slow death of their culture and way of life. It’s estimated that in seven years, the Shor population of the region has declined by almost 50 per cent.

Those resisting the mines face serious reprisals.

Last week, Yana Tannagacheva - a prominent Shor activist who has campaigned against coal mining in Kuzbass for six years (and who is interviewed in the report) - fled Russia with her husband, Vladislav, who is also an activist, and their children. She said she feared for their safety following escalating threats and is now seeking asylum in an EU country.

“We have been facing continuing intimidation to make us stop our activism [against mining]. We didn’t because we are fighting for my people’s rights. But then they used another approach: targeting my children,” she said. “When the coalmen started to focus their intimidation on our children, we decide to flee our homeland.”

Tannagacheva explained that their children were followed to school and their music lessons, while she was threatened and under constant surveillance. Since fleeing, she says that the police have visited her parents looking for them.

In November 2016, Tannagacheva spoke of coal mining's disastrous impact on the Shor before the United Nation's Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD). She is a member of the civic organisation, Revival of the Kazas and the Shor people.

In September 2017 CERD issued a series of recommendations regarding the Shors' treatment in the area, including that "the State party [should] take effective measures to restore fully the rights of Shor people, in close consultation with Shor representatives and bodies." CERD cited the example of of Kazas, a Shor village destroyed to make way for mining in 2012 and the lack of a sufficient resettlement plan for its former residents.

The authors of today's report caught a small glimpse of what opponents of coal in Kuzbass face, when they were followed and then briefly held by the police during their time there; authorities also told owners of the hostel where they stayed they would close their business if they didn't leave.

**EU complicity: Who buys Kuzbass coal?**

While global coal production is in decline, in Russia it increased by three per cent in 2017 compared to the previous year. The country is now the world's third largest coal exporter. Kuzbass provides 59 per cent of Russia's total coal output and at least 76 per cent of Russia's coal exports are from the region.

EU countries combined represent Russia's biggest coal export market and most Russian coal imported into the EU is from Kuzbass.

According to the Siberian Customs Administration, in 2016 the three biggest importers of Kuzbass coal were: South Korea, Japan and the United Kingdom, while other EU countries featuring prominently were the Netherlands (6th biggest importer in the world), Germany (7th), Latvia (10th), Poland (12th), France (13th), Spain (17th), Finland (18th), Italy (19th), Denmark (20th), Slovakia (21st) and Belgium (22nd).

Anomalies in coal export and import figures are commonplace in the industry. That said, the Siberian export figures largely tally with overall coal data from importing countries, except - notably - in the case of the UK where there is a sharp unexplained discrepancy between import and export data. HMRC indicated they are confident in their figures. For Germany, the situation is reversed. Official national figures show that the country imported 16.3 Mt of coal from Russia in 2016. Which suggests that far more of its coal came from Kuzbass than the 7.75 Mt cited by the Siberian figures.

Fern's Daria Andreeva, co-author of the report, said: "What we witnessed in Kuzbass is a man-made disaster. And it is one which we are all indirectly responsible for due to not moving fast enough towards a low carbon economy."

"While nations claim to be protecting the climate by stopping burning coal years several from now, people on the ground in the Kuzbass and other mining regions suffer. Faster action needs to be taken immediately," added Coal Action Network's Anne Harris, co-author of the report.

Hannah Mowat, Fern's campaign coordinator said: "Destroying forests that billions of humans and animals depend on is a travesty — but felling them for the coal beneath is even worse, and a double whammy for the climate. The EU has committed to ending deforestation by 2020, and has also committed to protect the rights of indigenous peoples. Yet here is a devastating example where EU consumption is felling forests, as well as their indigenous defenders for one of the dirtiest products on earth — coal."

The UK and Germany spend millions of euros every year to protect forests and indigenous peoples, and yet they import coal that falls the very peoples and ecosystems they want to protect. If they are serious about achieving the commitments made in the Paris Agreement, as well as commitments made to end deforestation, they need to phase out fossil fuels now. Starting with coal."

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2 This growth was foreshadowed in January 2012, when Russia's then Prime Minister (now President) Vladimir Putin announced subsidies for the coal sector amounting to around €7 – 8 billion. "We must be able both to maintain and to significantly extend our presence in the market," he stated.