

The Social Transformation of the Cities and Regions in the Post-communist Countries



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Projekt został sfinansowany ze środków Narodowego Centrum Nauki przyznanych na podstawie decyzji numer DEC-2011/01/B/HS4/03234 oraz ze środków Wydziału Nauk Geograficznych i Geologicznych UAM, a także Instytutu Geografii Społeczno-Ekonomicznej i Gospodarki Przestrzennej UAM

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ISBN 978-83-7986-025-8

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Printed by:
UNI-DRUK

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Modern processes of regional integration of the Great Altai countries under socio-economic transformation¹

Key words: the Altai, transboundary nature, factors of interaction, issues of socio-economic, environmental and cultural cooperation.

Geographically, the Altai or the Great Altai, being a transboundary macrogeosystem, is considered by the representatives of different sciences in different contexts and boundaries.

From the standpoint of the Kazakh geologists (Great Altai 1998): “the Great Altai is a linear Hercynian fault-folded structure, formed synchronously in place of a large deep mobile belt of northwest direction between two more stable land masses, the West Siberian platform in the north and the Kazakhstan continent in the southwest (Altai type of juncture and accretion)” and the region includes the geodynamically related by their origin belt geological structures of Rudny Altai, Kalba Narym, West Kalba and Zharmasaurara on the territory of Kazakhstan, Russia and China at the junction of two ancient continents (Great Altai 1998).

In Brockhaus and Efron Encyclopedic Dictionary the Altai is considered as mountain system within different physical and geographical boundaries. While Pallas included Altai with the highly branched Altai mountainous outskirts of Central Asia (starting from longitude 100–160° East) (by Ferro) from the Junggar plain near Lake Zaysan to the Sea of Okhotsk, while Alexander von Humboldt significantly reduced its borders and treated it as mountains located between longitude 100° and 126° East extending about 1,500 km to the upper reaches of Orkhon and Selenga rivers and surrounding the sources of Irtysh, Ob and Yenisei rivers.

¹ The research was supported in the research project of the Department of Earth Sciences N13.3 “Bioclimatic potential of the Altai region...”.

The “Great Soviet Encyclopedia” describes Altai (in Turkic-Mongolian Altai “altan” means golden) as Asian mountain system, located in the USSR, China and Mongolia. It extends from the north-west of the West Siberian Plain (longitude 81° East) to the south-east up to the Gobi plains (longitude 106° East), and it is more than 2000 km long. The Altai consists of highly dissected ridges, which form watersheds of the Ob, Irtysh, Yenisei and the rivers of the closed drainage basin of Central Asia. The highest peaks rise in the western part (M.Belukha – 4506 m). The Altai is divided into proper Altai, or the Soviet Altai² and the Gobi Altai and Mongolian Altai (Great Soviet... 1989).

The later literature sources consider the Altai as a part of Altai-Sayan mountain country, “the Altai mountain ranges spread out like a fan open to the north-west, between the sublatitudinal Saylyugem ridge and the submeridional Chikhachev and Shapshal’sky ridges. Considerable areas are occupied by highlands and Chulyshman and Ukok plateaus. There are a lot of intermountain depressions of different shape and size which are found at different altitudes, e.g. Chuiskaya, Kuraiskaya, Uimonskaya etc. (New Russian... 2004).



Fig. 1. Administrative-territorial boundaries of the Great Altai

² The old name, currently it is called Rudny and Gorny Altai.

The “Great Altai” entered geopolitics in the late 90s, when Russia joined the integration of the Central Asian countries of post-Soviet orientation initiated by China.

Experts note that in the 90s of the twentieth century “among the most geopolitically important boundary regions of the Russian Federation became Republic of Altai and Altai Krai that formed its Central Asian border. These administrative units are the part of the Great Altai, which also involves Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China, Bayan-Ulgii and Hovd aimaks of Mongolia, East Kazakhstan oblast of Republic of Kazakhstan (Oktyabr’skaya 2004). We maintain this attitude and realize the Altai as a “transnational” natural system which combines predominantly mountainous areas of four countries, China, Kazakhstan, Mongolia and Russia, and the six subjects of development (East Kazakhstan oblast of Kazakhstan, Altai okrug of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (XUAR) PRC, Bayan – Ulgii and Hovd aimaks of Mongolia, Republic of Altai and Altai Krai of the Russian Federation (Fig. 1).

The analysis of the current functioning of transboundary geosystems of the Great Altai as well as their interaction allowed us to reveal the key factors of regions functioning.

The typical factors are as follows:

A. Natural ecological factors

- Similar natural and climatic conditions, which show different altitudinal manifestation in the mountains of the Altai; in steppe conditions of Altai Krai and Eastern Kazakhstan, they refer to genetically unified natural system with the increasing aridization of climate from the north-east to south-west;
- High biodiversity and its conservation;
- Rich and varied natural resource potential of water, forest and mineral resources, food and medicinal herbs, as well as game and recreational resources;
- Sufficiently high level of environmental well-being of the territory.
- B. Natural and economic factors:

Predominantly agrarian type of economy, animal husbandry in mountainous regions and grain crop production in the steppe ones;

High proportion of special protected natural territories in the boundary mountain areas of all regions;

Excessive plowing of steppe areas, decline of farming and as a consequence soil fertility;

Low level of industrialization in the boundary regions;

Occurrence mostly of the first cycle mining plants.

C. Socio-ethnic factors:

- Multiethnic population, with a significant share of the Kazakh population in all the boundary regions;
- Intensification of identification of the nationality of indigenous ethnic population;

- Tolerance of cultures and religious tolerance of the local population;
- Lack of wide ethnic conflicts;
- High percentage of children in the age distribution;
- Low level of socio-economic development and the absence of significant stratification of society in transboundary regions.

Among the atypical factors of regions development are the following:

- asynchronous modern processes of socio-economic development, in particular, fast economic growth in China including the western Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region and the continued decline in production in other Altai regions;
- asymmetry in territorial development, introduced at Soviet times, when large smelters and power plants for the development of mineral resource base of Rudny Altai were concentrated on the territory of modern Kazakhstan. After the collapse of the USSR the economic ties in the supply of raw materials, the demand for finished products, and joint operation of infrastructure were broken;
- high density and growth in the number of small cattle in Mongolia and China with the drop of these indicators in the Altai regions of Russia and Kazakhstan. Replacement of small cattle breeds and species in Mongolia, where in the western aimaks the sheep population is replaced by goats to meet the increasing demand of Chinese businessmen for fluff and wool;
- changes in flock structure, when in Republic of Altai, Altai Krai and East Kazakhstan the proportion of cattle and horses has increased significantly, while in the southern Hovd aimak (Mongolia) it decreased under progressive desertification processes;
- growth of animal load per unit of grassland area in Mongolia leads to the increase of pasture digression, at the same time in Republic of Altai and in the steppe regions of Altai Krai and East Kazakhstan the restoration of pastures takes place alongside with livestock reduction. The exception are country pastures with a high level of degradation;
- change of sectoral occupational structure in Mongolia, the occurrence of mining cooperatives;
- increase in the share of imported and private capital in all regions of the Great Altai, but the forms of their participation are different. In Mongolia, the expansion of Chinese business is observed. This is evidenced by the development of mineral deposits by the Chinese workers in Western Mongolia. The produced raw material is exported for processing in Xinjiang Autonomous Region. The participation of foreign capital in Kazakhstan has another algorithm: up to 92% of the Kazakhstan plants and equipment belong to the foreign and private capital however the maintenance is conducted by the Kazak specialists. In the Russian economy the share of foreign private capital makes up 57%, but the most common is a public-private partnership, particularly, at the national and regional enterprises of strategic function;

- high population density in mountainous regions of East Kazakhstan and low concentration in mountainous regions of the Russian Altai;
- different strategies of Altai regions development: industrial development in East Kazakhstan, Altai Krai and China, and recreational and environmental paths of development in Republic of Altai and Mongolian aimaks; with the development of the international integration, the processes of internal disintegration in the regions of Great Altai occur between the Russian and Mongolian regions. In Russia, these processes are shown in clear opposition of the government and the population of Republic of Altai to the initiatives introduced by Altai Krai, including the economic ones. In Mongolia, these processes are observed mainly in socio-cultural and inter-ethnic relations.

On this basis, we can identify the main problems of cooperation among trans-boundary areas of the Great Altai in socio-economic, environmental and cultural fields.

In the field of socio-economic cooperation:

- Peripheral character of economy in Altai regions, most of them function as a mere supplier of raw materials. As a result, Altai regions are characterized by low level of additional product formation, low income and, finally, low quality of life;
- Different directions for the development. Active policy in the region is implemented by China, using a combination of different strategies of development from the strategy of “partisan war” through the “focusing” (concentration on profitable industries) to various offensive strategies such as “capture of vacant space”, “cost leadership” and “constant attack”. Thereby, the concept of creating of “East-Central Asian economic zone” or “Interstate zone of accelerated economy development” developed by the scientists of the Committee on Science and Technology of Xinjiang is successively implemented.
- Asynchronous development, when the regions differ in rate and dynamics of development. China's offensive strategy exerts influence both on the rate and the structure of the neighboring regions;
- Difference in demographics lead to different demographic and migration policies of different countries, the attitude towards migrants and integration processes;
- Difference in the institutional frameworks of different countries of the Great Altai lead to the distortions in the intra- and inter-regional cooperation processes.

In the field of environmental cooperation:

- difference in regulatory approaches and principles of formation and implementation of environmental policies in different countries of the Altai;
- transport of pollutants, in particular, air pollutants in the Kazakh-Russian regions; the actual and, what is more important, predicted excessive water with-

drawal from the Kara-Irtysh; deterioration of hydrological conditions of the Irtysh that reduces the potential for water use in Central and East Kazakhstan, and Omsk oblast of Russia;

- change in the flock structure due to a substantial increase in the share of goats in the small cattle flock in Western Mongolia, dictated by the pressure of the financially reliable market of China, leads to increased degradation of pastures in the western aimaks of Mongolia;
- rapid development of tourism in the Altai regions leads to the increase of anthropogenic load on the territory, and the reduction of landscape and biological diversity in the Altai ecosystems.

In the field of cultural cooperation:

- the existence of visa regime between individual states of the Great Altai;
- the lack of direct air and rail communication between the regions of the Great Altai.

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