



“The Turks Of Siberia and the Growing Geopolitical Importance of the Region”

■ Ayşe Gülsüm ÇALIK*

Sibirya Türkleri ve
Bölgenin Büyüyen Jeopolitik Önemi

Abstract

Since its foundation, the Muscovite State has continuously expanded its territory, thus bequeathing the largest territories in the world to today's Russian Federation. The most significant achievement of this expansion process, which commenced in the fifteenth century, was undoubtedly the annexation of Siberia. This vast region, comprising roughly one-tenth of the world's territory, provided the Russian Empire with substantial economic and military advantages, and initiated a new historical era for the Turkic peoples living there. Initially defined by Russian authorities as a 'remote region', Siberia evolved into a vital economic resource base and an important determinant in shaping Russian national identity through the 'Back to the East' strategy. Siberia's increasing importance has significantly impacted the Turkic populations, both positively and negatively. The study examines the Turkic peoples in Siberia during the twenty-first century and investigates how the region's increasing geopolitical significance has influenced them, focusing on Russia's historical trajectory toward its “Return to the East” (Поворот российской политики на восток) from a historical perspective.

Keywords: Siberian Turks, Siberia, Russia, geopolitics, Organization of Turkic States



SORUMLU YAZARLAR/CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

Ayşe Gülsüm ÇALIK
E-posta/E-mail: aysegulsumcalik@gmail.com



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*Dr. ORCID:0000-0003-3450-7451 aysegulsumcalik@gmail.com

Özet

Moskova-Rus Devleti kurulduğu günden itibaren topraklarını sürekli genişletmiş ve böylece günümüz Rusya Federasyonu'na dünyanın en büyük topraklarını miras bırakmıştır. On beşinci yüzyıla kadar götürülen sürecin en önemli kazancı hiç şüphesiz Sibirya'nın ilhak edilmesi olmuştur. Sibirya'nın, dünya topraklarının yaklaşık onda birine denk gelen geniş coğrafyasının Rusya İmparatorluğu'na katılması, imparatorluğa ekonomik ve askerî açıdan önemli avantajlar sağlarken, bölgede yaşayan Türk halkları için de yeni bir tarihsel sürecin başlangıcını oluşturmuştur. Başlangıçta Rusya tarafından “uzak bölge” olarak tanımlanan Sibirya, “Doğuya Dönüş” stratejisi kapsamında hem ülkenin ekonomik kalkınmasında bir “kaynak üssü” hem de Rus kimliğinin şekillenmesinde önemli bir belirleyici unsur haline gelmiştir. Sibirya'nın giderek artan önemi, bölgede yaşayan Türk halklarını hem olumlu hem de olumsuz yönde etkilemiştir. Çalışma temelinde yirmi birinci yüzyılda Sibirya Bölgesi'nde yaşayan Türk halklarını merkezine almakta ve Rusya'nın “Doğuya Dönüş” (Поворот российской политики на восток) idealine giden süreci tarihsel perspektiften inceleyerek bölgenin artan jeopolitik öneminin Türk halklarını ne şekilde etkilediği sorusuna cevap bulmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sibirya Türkleri, Sibirya, Rusya, Jeopolitik, Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı





Introduction

The region now known as Siberia encompasses the area from the Ural Mountains in the west to the Pacific Ocean in the east, bordered by the Arctic Ocean to the north and Mongolia, Kazakhstan and Manchuria to the south. Covering approximately thirteen million square kilometers, Siberia represents about one-tenth of Earth's surface, comprising almost all of North Asia. It covers most of the Eurasian landmass, from the Ural Mountains in the west to the Pacific Ocean in the east and from the Arctic Ocean in the north to the Kazakh and Mongolian steppes in the south. In this context, the phrase "if Siberia were a country, it would have the area of the largest country in the world today, replacing Russia" is widely used to describe the region. From west to east, Siberia is usually divided geographically into three regions. Western Siberia is the territory stretching from the Ural Mountains to the Yenisei River, where most of the known Russian oil and gas reserves are located. Eastern Siberia covers the plateau from the Yenisei River to the Lena River. The area defined as the Russian Far East is the easternmost region stretching from the Lena River to the Pacific Ocean.¹ Siberia can also be divided from north to south. The northernmost region is the tundra area stretching from the Arctic Ocean to approximately the Arctic Circle. The sparse settlements in this area have increased in recent years due to intensified development policies. This is a result of the direct link between the increased use of the Northern Sea Route through the Arctic Ocean and the development of the region. This area, which also has a separate definition as the Arctic Region, has started to gain importance at the global level with the melting of glaciers in the ocean and increased access to underground resources.² Today, the region is home to more than sixteen million people.³

Although the first contact of the Russian people with Siberia dates back to the ninth century, the importance of the region was realized after Yermak and his troops annexed Siberian lands.⁴ The trade in furs, salt, golds, diamonds, and minerals from the forests of the Ural Mountains and Siberia was the main source of the economy of Moscow and the early Russian Empire from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. The Moscow Company,⁵

¹ Allan Wood, *The History of Siberia: From Russian Conquest to Revolution*, Routledge, London 1991, pp. 30-35.

² Volkan Özdemir, "The Geoeconomic Potential of Siberia and the Russian Far East for the Russian Federation", *Turkish Studies* 13, no. 3, 2018, pp. 543-556.

³ President of Russia (2023) Decree on approval of the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation. Moscow: The Kremlin. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70811>.

⁴ Siberia was first conquered by the Russian commander Yermak Timofeyevich in 1580 and the conquest was completed in 1778. The conquest of Siberia was carried out not by the Tsar's regular army but by the Cossack commander Yermak Timofeyevich and his troops. The main purpose of the conquest, which took place without the knowledge of Ivan the Terrible, was the search for commercial resources, and Yermak was initially considered guilty for conquering Siberia without the knowledge of Moscow and was ordered to return to Moscow. In the following periods, with Yermak's increasing power and the understanding of the importance of the region, the Tsar's army seized the conquered Siberia and the colonization process began, see D. N. Collins, "Russia's Conquest of Siberia: Evolving Russian and Soviet Historical Interpretations", *European Studies Review* 12, no. 1, 1982, pp. 17-44.

⁵ The Moscow Company was founded in London in 1555 by Captain Richard Chancellor. The company is considered to be the first example of a political-commercial corporation in history and the forerunner of the transnational corporations that became widespread in the twentieth century. Diplomacy and commerce were intertwined as the Moscow Company was backed by the Russian Tsar and the British King. The company bought flax, furs, beeswax, timber, tar, whale oil, etc. from Russia and sold cloth, sugar, paper, salt, luxury goods, and later military supplies from England. With the company, trade between Russia and Britain was realized at the highest level and it maintained its monopoly position until the 1660s. Alexander Gorokhovskiy, "Trade and Diplomacy: The English Merchants in Sixteenth Century Russia", *Economic Review* 18, 2004, pp. 63-83, and A. F. Meyendorff, "Anglo-Russian Trade in the 16th Century", *The Slavonic and East European Review* 25, no. 64, 1946, pp. 109-121.



established in London to trade goods from the region, expanded the volume of trade, especially through barter with British merchants. Mark Bassin,⁶ a specialist on Russian geopolitics, in his study of Russian colonization in the Far East and Siberia in the seventeenth century, explains: 'Although Moscow, unlike Spain, did not have abundant gold resources with its newly acquired territories, it did have the most important fur resource of the seventeenth century with its Siberian colony and was influential in European trade with the Moscow Company'. Siberia's underground resources contributed to the industrialization of the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century and the development of Soviet industry after the 1917 revolution. In the twentieth century, the types of products extracted from the region changed, but the region continued to be seen as the main remote resource center⁷.

As a result of the realization of the economic importance of Siberia, investments have increased in order to maximize the benefits of the region and to better exploit its underground resources. The most well-known and important of these investments is undoubtedly the Trans-Siberian Railway Line. The line, which was only begun in the late nineteenth century and completed in 1904, initially ran between the cities of Moscow and Vladivostok, with a length of 6,000 miles. The population movements to the region in the twentieth century, both in terms of the forced industrialization of the 1930s and the transfer of political prisoners,⁸ were only made possible by the existence of the Trans-Siberian Railway line. Providing administrative connectivity in the cities it passed through, the line played a highly functional role for Moscow in terms of controlling the region and organizing economic activities.⁹ With the expansion of the line to the south in 1956, Moscow and Beijing, the capital of China, were connected by rail. Apart from being Moscow's most important investment in the region in the historical process, this railway is also important for its socio-economic contribution to the development of the cities along the line.¹⁰

The importance of Siberia for Russia has continued to grow in the twenty-first century. Its first importance is, of course, that it is the country's economic 'resource base'. The region already holds more than 80% of the Russian Federation's natural resources. Siberia provides 93% of Russia's total gold production, over 95% of its diamond production, 83% of its aluminum, 72% of its coal, over 50% of its cellulose, over 90% of its natural gas, over 70% of its oil and over 40% of its electric power.¹¹ The Sea of Okhotsk in the region is one of the richest fishing grounds in the world, producing more than 10% of the world's fish catch, and Lake

⁶ Mark Bassin, "Inventing Siberia: Visions of the Russian East in the Early Nineteenth Century", *The American Historical Review* 96, no. 3, June 1991, p.780.

⁷ Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, *The Siberian Curse: How Communist Planners Left Russia Out in the Cold*, Brookings Institutions Press, London 2004, p. 30 and 45.

⁸ The Gulag (*Glavnoye Upravleniye Ispravitelno-Trudovoykh Lagerey - General Directorate of Correctional Labor Camps*) camps date back to 1919, became widespread under Stalin, were reduced in number after Stalin's death, and were completely closed in 1960. Most of the Gulags, which encompassed around 30,000 labor camps, were located in the northern regions of Russia, where harsh living conditions prevailed, resulting in the deaths of around 20,000 prisoners due to working conditions. The most important known work on the Gulag is produced by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, see Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, 3 vols, vol. 1 and 2 trans. T. P. Whitney and vol. 3 trans. H. Willets, Harper & Row, New York 1974-78; cf. Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, Doubleday, New York 2003, and Tomasz Kizny, *Gulag: Life and Death inside the Soviet Concentration Camp*, Firefly, Richmond Hill, Ontario 2004.

⁹ James Forsyth, *The History of Siberia, from Russian Conquest to Revolution*, 1991, Routledge, London 1991, pp.55-60.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Wishnick, The Power of Siberia, Ponars Euroasia, no 332, 2014, https://www.ponarseurasia.org/wpcontent/uploads/attachments/Pepm332_Wishnick_August2014.pdf

¹¹ V. E. Seliverstov, "New Model for Siberia's Development: Exploring the Contours and Feasibility", *Regional Research of Russia* 14, 2024, pp. 331-345.



Baikal accounts for about 20% of the world's freshwater resources.¹² In addition to its natural riches, the region's importance is augmenting as a result of climate change. The use of the Northern Sea Route, which passes through Russia's territorial waters and connects rivers in Siberia (Yenisei, Ob, Khantanga, Lena, Yana and others), is increasing every year. Especially with the increase in transportation between the rivers in the region and the route, access to the region is increasing and the potential of the region is gaining importance in the international market. Trade and shipping, also known as Nordic transport, is multiplying every year due to the changing weather in the region and the melting of the northern glaciers.

In addition to its economic and commercial dimension, the other importance of Siberia for Russia is its impact on national identity. The conquest of Siberia and the country's expansion into North Asia constitute the main component contributing to national identity as Russia is perceived as a great power between the West and Asian countries. The internal and external development of Siberia is carried out by the Russian state under the logic of great power. Siberia represents Russia's great power dilemmas between strategic security concerns and economic opportunities, between international cooperation and national control.¹³

In the study, firstly, the Turks and Turkic peoples living in Siberia will be explained and the importance of the region for them will be analyzed. In the second part, the increasing geopolitical importance of the region in the historical process will be analyzed and the policies implemented in the region will be discussed. In the third section, the threats and opportunities awaiting the Turkic peoples as a result of Russia's increasing importance to the region will be discussed in detail. In the conclusion and recommendation section, suggestions for the future vision of the Turkic peoples of Siberia will be presented. Due to the limitations and scope of the study, the history of Siberia and the process of its conquest by Russia, which is the subject of the field of Siberian history studies, are not included, but it aims to address in detail how the increasing geopolitical importance of the Siberian region in the twenty-first century impacts the Turkic peoples.

Turkic Peoples Living in Siberia

The geography defined as the Siberian region is undoubtedly not only important for Russians, but has also been important for Turks since ancient times. As a result of his studies, Zeki Velidi Togan¹⁴ states that the Turks came to south-western Siberia as early as the second century BC. The Great Turkish Khaganate, which lasted from the fifth century to the thirteenth century, ruled in Siberian lands and many peoples, lineages, tribes and tribes lived under its rule. İlyas Topsakal¹⁵ also emphasizes that until the sixteenth century, the history of Siberia could only be learned from Russian sources and therefore, in-depth studies on ancient Turkish culture could not be made. Siberia, which was a Turkic homeland in previous centuries, is now composed of approximately 20% Turkic peoples. Siberia became part of the Russian Empire from the seventeenth century onwards and became a predominantly Russian-inhabited area, mostly as a result of forced migrations. However, this transformation does not diminish the importance of the region for Turkic peoples as Siberia is the homeland of the Turks as a result of archaeological excavations.¹⁶ For all these reasons, the region has a founding importance for

¹² "Siberian Turks", <http://www.taunty.org/siberian-turks/>, December 9, 2016.

¹³ Wood, p. 68.

¹⁴ Zeki Velidi, Togan, *Umumi Türk Tarihine Giriş*, Enderun Kitapevi, İstanbul 1981, pp. 2-4.

¹⁵ İlyas Topsakal, *History of Siberia from the Beginning to 1917*, Ötüken Neşriyat, İstanbul, 2017.

¹⁶ Giray Saynur Derman, "A General Evaluation on Siberian Turks", *Siberian Studies (SAD)* 4, no. 9, 2016, pp. 15-40.



Turkish identity and formation. For the same reasons, understanding and preserving the Turkish language, culture and heritage that has existed in Siberia from the past to the present has become important for the Organization of Turkic States and Turkey in particular. Contrary to the fact that Siberia is not given much importance in identity formation by the Turkic states, it is seen that the importance given to Siberia by Russia is increasing with each passing year. Accordingly, especially after 2014, it is seen that Russia has started to engage more in the Asian-oriented perspective. This situation, together with the concepts of 'Siberianization' and 'Back to the East', has both increased investment in the Siberian region and made it more important in terms of Russian identity construction.

Siberia was the first homeland of the Turks and today Siberian Turks continue to live on these lands. Among the Siberian Turkic peoples in this geography, Saha, Tuva, Khakas and Altai Turks live in republics named after themselves. The fact that the regions where these peoples live have gained the status of republics is important in terms of the fact that as a result of this status, these peoples have gained the right to make their own constitution and to recognize the language of the people who named the republic, that is, the language of the title as the state language.¹⁷

In terms of Turkology, the region outside of Idyl-Ural, Turkestan and the Caucasus is called Siberia and the Turks there are called Siberian Turks. Although the region was conquered in the seventeenth century, the main Russian population was concentrated in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In parallel with the increase in Russia's exploitation activities in the region, the Turkish population decreased while the Russian population began to increase. Between 1882 and 1900, 1,3 million Russians migrated to Siberia and over time the Russian population spread throughout Siberia and became the majority.¹⁸ The total number of Siberian Turks is around 1,5 -1,9 million and they are divided into Yakut, Tuva, Khakas, Altai, Shor, Dolgan tribes, Siberian Tatars, and Siberian Bukharans. When we look at the population of the Turkic peoples living in the region, Yakuts 478,100, Tuvans 263,934, Khakassians 72,959, Altaians 70,800, Shors 12,888, Dolgans 7,885, Siberian Tatars 6,779, Teleuts 2,643, Tofas 761 and Chulim people 355 people¹⁹.

¹⁷ Anthony Haywood, *Siberia: A Cultural History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010, p. 223.

¹⁸ Ercan Alkaya, "Siberian Tatar Turks and Their Language", *Turkish Studies: International Periodical For the Languages, Literature and History of Turkish or Turkic* 3, no. 7, 2008, pp. 1-16.

¹⁹ Arif Akbaş, "Sibirya'daki Türk Kökenli Halkların ve Diğer Küçük Grupların Sosyolojisi", *Anasay* 27, 2014, pp. 165-187.



Source: Lewis Martin "Siberian People", *GeoCurrents*, 12 March 2022, <https://www.geocurrents.info/blog/tag/siberian-peoples/>

In Southern Siberia, within the Russian Federation, there are three Turkic republics, the Republics of Tuva, Altai, and Khakass, as well as various Turkic communities of diminishing numbers. The main difference between the first of these republics, the Tuvans, is that they have a majority of up to 82% of the population in their republic. Secondly, the Altais have a population of around 30% in the Altai Republic. Finally, the Khakas have a population of around 11% in the Republic of Khakassia and have become a minority in their homeland as a result of the migration policies implemented by Russia. There are also Turkic communities in Southern Siberia other than those in these three republics, including the Shors, Tofas (Karagas), Chulim Turks.²⁰ The geography in which the Turkic peoples of Siberia live has become more important both with the rapidly increasing effects of climate change and with Russia's ideal of a return to the East, which will be explained in the next section.

The Importance of Siberia for Russia

Russian scientist Mikhail Lomonosov wrote in the eighteenth century that "Russia's power will grow with Siberia and the Arctic Ocean". The accuracy of this prediction, which was made at an early date, is being understood with each passing year. In fact, the Siberian region has not only made Russia a great power for centuries with its richness in energy and underground resources, but also made it the largest country in the world with its geographical size. As of the twenty-first century, Siberia has come to the forefront as Russia's gateway to Asia, both for its geopolitical importance in terms of trade routes and for its impact on Russian identity through the concepts of 'Back to the East' and 'Siberianization'. In the previous chapter, the underground riches of Siberia and their contribution to the Russian economy were explained. In this section, the projects realized in Siberia and especially Russia's policy of opening to the East are discussed.

The region historically identified as Siberia constitutes a significant cornerstone of the geographical, cultural, and historical foundations of Russia's great power status. A chronological examination of Russian history, spanning from the era of the Knezdome to the Tsardom, and from the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation, reveals that the aspiration to

²⁰ Peter Golden, *The Turkic Languages*, Routledge, London 2021, pp. 15-35.



be a great power has profoundly influenced both domestic policies and foreign relations. In this context, one of the most pivotal historical events shaping Russia's national identity is undoubtedly the conquest of Siberia and the subsequent expansion into Northern Asia. Asian Russia has played a crucial role in shaping national identity, positioning Russia as a great power bridging the West and Asian nations. Within this framework, the internal and external development of Siberia has been managed by the Russian state through the lens of 'great power logic'. Similarly, the inherent dilemmas faced by Siberia reflect broader challenges within Russia itself. The region epitomizes great power paradoxes, ranging from economic opportunities versus strategic security concerns to balancing international cooperation with national sovereignty.²¹

Another role of Siberia that is as impressive as its economic and geographical importance for Russia is its role in the movement known as Eurasianism in Russian identity. It is a known fact that Eurasianist movements were effective in the European/Eurasian debate, which constitutes the main point of the debates on Russian identity and civilization, during the periods when Siberia's importance increased in state policies. 'Siberia has been positioned in the context of the debate on whether Russia is European or Eurasian: If Russia is European, then Siberia somehow does not belong to Russia; but if Russia is Eurasian, then Siberia seems to be part of Russia'. With the twenty-first century and the concept of Russian civilization becoming more widespread, the importance of Siberia has increased and the concept of Eurasianism has been extended to the 'Eurasian bridge' between Eastern and Western cultures.²²

The region, often referred to as Asian Russia, constitutes the historical, cultural, and geographical bedrock of Russia's status as a great power, distinguishing it from Western countries. Under President Putin's leadership, Russia has endeavored to shape its national identity as Eurasian, intertwining the notions of great power status, a multicultural and bi-continental nation, and economic integration. Conversely, it is frequently asserted by Russian elites that Russia's historical and geographical context ensures its continued status as a great power. Consequently, Siberia is perceived as a valuable national asset. From the Russian standpoint, the characteristics of a great power are primarily dictated by geopolitical imperatives.²³

In the thirty-five years since the collapse of the Soviet Union until 2024, Russia has shifted the center of its policies to the eastern region three times. The first, between 1996 and 2001, was driven by geopolitical concerns; the second, between 2002 and 2013, by economic factors; and the third, gradually from 2014 onwards, but more precisely with the 2022 Ukraine War, by a combination of both geopolitical and economic dynamics, which is referred to as "Turning East". After 2022, Russia has been subjected to economic sanctions imposed by Western states, while on the other hand, it has been isolated from the international arena, including the Russian intellectual community, and has been completely turned into the 'other'. In this context, Russia has sought both a new energy market and a new identity. At this point, Siberia

²¹ Valerii Efimov, "Siberia and The Russian Far East in the 21st Century: Scenarios of the Future", *Journal of Siberian Federal University, Humanities & Social Sciences*, 2017, p. 571

²² Vladimir Baranovsky, "Russia: A Part of Europe or Apart from Europe?" *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs)* 76, no. 3, 2000, pp. 443-58.

²³ Seliverstov, pp.331-345.



has become the most important region to come to Russia's aid.²⁴ It creates an alternative energy market to the West, especially due to its geographical proximity to Asia-Pacific countries and China, whose economic energy needs increase every year. China stands out as Russia's most important partner in the development of Siberia and 'Back to the East'. Projects that have emerged as a result of partnerships include the development of large hydrocarbon deposits and infrastructure works in Eastern Siberia; gas supply through the Power of Siberia pipeline and oil supply through the Eastern Siberia-Pacific Ocean pipeline. Power of Siberia²⁵ is noteworthy as it is the first major project between the two countries in the region.²⁶

The most important part of Russia's economic expansion into Siberia takes place in the Arctic, which corresponds to the east of the region. It is estimated that this area has the region's highest oil and gas reserves. In addition, the Northern Sea Route (NSR), which is used at least six months of the year due to global warming,²⁷ is developing in accordance with the transportation of raw materials and cargo to the Asia-Pacific region. The route, which also provides Russia with the opportunity to become a maritime power, increases its importance²⁸ with projects carried out in partnership with Chinese and Russian companies.²⁹ The Yamal LNG (liquefied natural gas) project is the first indication that the Arctic is suitable for investment and has started to maximize profits despite changing climatic conditions. Designs for the project began in 1997 and accelerated in 2002 when Gazprom took over, but management was later transferred to Novatek. On December 3, 2008, the Yamal LNG project was officially inaugurated and started operations in 2017. The Yamal Peninsula, which has the largest natural gas reserves in Russia, was connected to the rest of the country with the opening of the Obskaya-Bovenkovo railway line in 2010 as part of the project. The Yamal port was connected to the GDR and the airport to other countries. In 2020, 99.25 billion cubic meters of gas was produced from the peninsula, equivalent to more than 20% of Russian natural gas, thanks to increased technological capabilities and investments. By 2030, this share is expected to exceed 40%.³⁰

Vostok Oil, another important project in the diversification of Russia's investments in the region, is the largest oil project. The project, which is planned to combine the most important

²⁴ Liu Fenghua, "Russia's 'Turn to the East' Policy: Evolution and Assessment", *Chinese Journal of Slavic Studies*, 3, no. 2, 2023, pp. 247-262.

²⁵ With the commissioning of the Power of Siberia, Russia has started selling large quantities of pipeline gas to China. Until recently, all Russian export gas pipelines went west to Europe. The first gas pipeline to the Asia-Pacific region was the Power of Siberia line. The Power of Siberia pipeline runs more than 2,200 kilometers from the Chayanda gas field in the northern region of Yakutia to the Russian border with China. The fact that the pipeline crosses under the River Amur and enters China is considered an engineering feat and a sign of the two countries' success in joint business.

²⁶ Elizabeth Wishnick, https://www.ponarseurasia.org/wpcontent/uploads/attachments/Pepm332_Wishnick_August2014.pdf

²⁷ The Northern Sea Route (NSR) is a vast shipping route, approximately 2,900 nautical miles long, passing through three archipelagos, Novaya Zemlya and the New Siberian Islands, through the Bering Strait, connected by 58 straits, and encompassing inland seas such as the Kara Sea, the Laptev Sea, the East Siberian Sea and the Chukchi Sea (Kon, 2011). Unlike other sea routes in the region, the entire GDR is located within Russia's exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Moreover, Russia recognizes the route as a national sea route on historical grounds (Russian Institute of Maritime Studies, June 28, 2022).

²⁸ Some of the other projects Russia is planning jointly with China in the region include Arctic LNG, Far Eastern LNG, Vladivostok LNG, Sakhalin LNG-2 and Ob LNG (Ministry of Energy of Russian Federation, "Russian Fuel and Energy Complex", <https://minenergo.gov.ru/en/russian-fuel-and-energy-complex>, 02.10.2024).

²⁹ Alexander Sergunin, "The Northern Sea Route Development: The Russian Perspective" in *Arctic Maritime Logistics: The Potentials and Challenges of the Northern Sea Route*, ed. by I. Ilin, T. Devezas, and C. Jahn, Springer, London 2022, pp. 283-303.

³⁰ Luca Diaconescu and Mirela Elena Mazilu, "Perfect Geopolitics and Strategies to Maintain Russia as a World Power", *Journal of Public Policy and Administration* 5, no. 2, 2021, pp. 37-43.



deposits in the North, is estimated to produce 50 to 100 million tons of oil when it operates at full capacity. China and India, the most important partners of Vostok Oil, are also involved in the project. In the project, the importance of which is emphasized especially by India, it is planned to carry out the shipment of oil through the North South Transport Corridor.³¹ Russia's rail transportation in the Arctic is developing as rapidly as the sea transportation. Undoubtedly, the cost of oil, natural gas and underground resources to be extracted from the Arctic is higher than in the west of Siberia due to the climate, but it has also been seen that this cost can turn into profit with the success achieved in Yamal. For this reason, Siberia's opening to the Asia-Pacific is expected to accelerate, especially with the effect of the connection established in relation to the sea route. In this context, the foreign policy document published in 2023 declared the Arctic and Siberia as regions of primary importance.³²

On the other hand, Russia also faces what geographer Michael Bradshaw calls the 'Siberian dilemma' and some experts refer to as the 'Siberian curse'. In the most general terms, this threat refers to the dilemma faced despite the region's enormous reserves, emphasizing both low population density and still high costs.³³ Cities in Siberia have to contend with both the extra cost burdens associated with the conditions created by extreme cold weather and the remoteness from the center for much of the year. Although the government provides relief packages for the people living in the region, including additional aid, food and housing supplements, it is unable to prevent out-migration. On the other hand, despite the Russian state policy of encouraging migration to the region, the distance of the cities from the center is the biggest obstacle to social and economic interaction.

Russia's 'Back to the East' (*разворот на Восток* or *Поворот на Восток*) policy is currently one of the most popular topics in the international diplomatic and academic communities. Between 2012 and 2018, a six-volume series of reports was prepared for the Valdai Club by influential foreign policy experts. The reports are considered the cornerstones of Russia's Siberian policy, especially since Sergey Karaganov is considered the architect of the concepts. Due to the scope of the study, the last published report will be discussed in more detail in the next section as it includes other peoples living in the region.

Siberia is at the heart of Russia's policy, which has been in effect for nearly a decade and has evolved from a return to the Asia-Pacific region to a return to the Eastern world, and is characterized by three main features. The first is the growing geopolitical importance of the region. In the aftermath of the 2014 Ukraine crisis, the economic sanctions imposed on Russia by the West led Russia to turn to the Asia-Pacific as a new trade and energy market. Secondly, the 2022 Russia-Ukraine War and the West's total rejection of Russia as the 'other' led Russia to turn inward, i.e. to Siberia. The third and final feature is China's growing influence both for Russia and on a global scale. Sino-Russian strategic cooperation has acquired a unique character, both in terms of breadth and depth, compared to Russia's partnerships with other

³¹ The North South Transport Corridor project was first agreed by Russia, India and Iran in 2000. It aims to ship oil from St. Petersburg to Iranian ports and from there to Mumbai. It is estimated that this new transport corridor will enable the shipment to take place in half the time of the traditional route, the Suez Canal. Russia aims to strengthen its energy cooperation with India by integrating oil from its northern region into this route ("Russia-India trade route through Central Asia moves forward", Nikkei Asia, March 12, 2024, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Russia-India-trade-route-through-Central-Asia-moveforward#:~:text=The%207%2C200%2Dkilometer%20International%20North,and%20from%20there%20to%20Mumbai>).

³² President of Russia (2023) Decree on approval of the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation Moscow: The Kremlin. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70811>.

³³ Hill and Clifford, 2004, p.35.



countries. This goes both ways, with Russia not wanting to be financially and technologically dependent on China, and China avoiding Russia's monopoly position in the energy field.

We have already noted that Siberia has become increasingly important in Russian identity. Sergey Karaganov describes this situation with the concept of 'Siberianization':

Siberia strongly reinforced the best in the Russian character - cultural and national openness, plus strength of will, Russian freedom and immense courage. Siberia was ruled by people of dozens of nationalities intertwined with the local population. And of course collectivism was impossible to survive, to defeat space and the elements without mutual assistance. This is how Siberia was created. As a result of the concentration of the best in the Russian people, Russian Russians, Russian Tatars, Russian Buryats, Russian Yakuts, Russian Chechens and the list goes on.³⁴

As can be seen from the definition, the Turkic peoples living in the region are considered under the Russian identity and Russia's return to Asia, that is, to its 'essence', is tried to be gathered under the concept of Siberianization. According to this project, Russia's Return to the East is considered on a more global scale rather than a regional project that prioritizes the development of Russia's Far East, and diversifying industrial production and trade and strengthening the economy are not its only goals.³⁵ In Russian academic circles and policy decision-makers, Back to the East is accepted and articulated as a project designed to help Russia build its political and civilizational identity in the new world. The spread of the concept, which was at the center of the construction of Russian civilization, ushered in a new era for the Turkic peoples in the region.

Future of Turkic Peoples Living in the Region

The importance of Siberia for Russian geopolitics and the Russian economy is increasing every year. In this direction, while many new investments are being made in the region, new policies are being implemented that will also affect the Turkic peoples. So how are the Turkic peoples living in the region, which is the ancestral homeland of the Turks, affected by this situation? Of course, when answering this question, it is important to objectively evaluate both the positive and negative aspects. As seen from the investments made in Siberia, it is understood that the region will gain more importance in the future, its infrastructure, industry and living conditions will improve. Turkish peoples also benefit from the efforts to increase the population in the region and the economic support packages provided to the inhabitants. For this reason, increasing the importance of the region in material terms benefits the inhabitants of the region in terms of both job opportunities and better living conditions. An example of this is Yakutia. The industrial development of the Arctic and northern regions of Yakutia began in 1935 with the development of coal production in the region. In the 1960s, diamond and gold mining became widespread within the borders of Yakutia. Today, diamond and gold mining remains one of the most important industries in Yakutia. The impact of the twelve projects initiated in the last decade in connection with the growing geopolitical importance of Siberia is remarkable. According to a study published in 2023,

³⁴ Oleg Barabanov and Timofei Bordachev, "Toward the Great Ocean, or the New Globalization of Russia", *Valdai Discussion Club Analytical Report*, 2012, p. 15.

³⁵ Oleg Barabanov and Timofei Bordachev, "Toward the Great Ocean: People, History, Ideology, Education Rediscovering the Identity", *Valdai Discussion Club Analytical Report*, 2018, p. 23.



increased industrial development and the emergence of new job opportunities are the most important positive aspects.³⁶

The railway network being built to the north extends to Yakutia, strengthening the region's ties with the internal centers. In the near future, the railway network aims to reach the areas where precious metals and precious stones are mined, reducing production costs and improving infrastructure. The Valdai Report explains that the people of the region do not see the developments as a threat as follows:

It is appropriate to start by making the idea behind the Return to the East a more or less coherent concept on a national and individual level. There is a built-in sense that the region is developing at the expense of its people. Some locals simply fear competition from outsiders. This is particularly dangerous because this attitude has the potential to slow down the entire Back East program. Moreover, people are voicing their attitudes so loudly that it makes the region less attractive to its neighbors in terms of cooperation or investment.³⁷

On the other hand, despite the increase in economic investments and incentives in Yakutia, education and health services are gradually deteriorating, the transportation system between small cities in the region is still not fully provided, and social life continues to be isolated compared to other regions in Russia.³⁸

Increasing geopolitical importance of Siberia threatens Turkic peoples in terms of language and culture. As a result of the Russification (or Sovietization) policies implemented during the Soviet Union, the peoples of the region have struggled with many difficulties to preserve and maintain both their language and culture. Although the second most widely used language in Russia today is Turkish, it is understood from the Russian Federation Security Strategy document adopted in 2021 that it has started to develop security policies on language and culture under the title of "Protection of Traditional Russian Spiritual and Moral Values, Culture and Historical Memory". Article 89 of the document emphasizes that the Russian language and culture are under threat and mentions that the peoples living in Russia in general have certain duties in this regard. At the same time, the support and protection of the Russian language as the official language is also addressed under the same heading. However, both the culture and language of the Turkic peoples living in the region are under threat. The fact that the Yakut language in Siberia is in the category of vulnerable languages is one of the most important indicators of this situation. Undoubtedly, an important factor in this is the migration of younger generations from the region. However, other reasons are the insufficient literacy rate, the difficulties caused by the dispersed life, the lack of educational materials and instructors in the local language, the lack of lawyers to defend the cultural rights of the local people, and the little importance given to the region by the Turkish states. At this point, more presence of the Organization of Turkic States³⁹ in the region will make a big difference. As in the purpose of its establishment, preserving the Turkish language and transferring it to the

³⁶ E. I. Burtseva, A. N. Sleptsov, A. N. Bysyina, "Industrial Development of the Territories of the Arctic Zone of Yakutia and Ethnological Expertise of Investment Projects", *Arktika i Sever*, no. 51, 2023, pp. 52-72.

³⁷ Barabanov and Bordachev, 2018, p.18.

³⁸ N. Chiryayeva, "Strategic Analysis of Economic Development Tendencies in the Arctic Zone of Republic Sakha (Yakutia)", *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science* 459 2020, s. 20.

³⁹ The Organization of Turkic States is a fairly new organization, first established in 2009 with the Nakhchivan Agreement signed between Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkey under the name of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States. In 2021, at the eighth summit held in Istanbul, the organization took its current form with the participation of Turkmenistan as an observer member. At the same summit, the Council decided to change its name to the 'Organization of Turkic States'.



future has a decisive importance in Turkish identity building. At this point, just as Russia has increased the importance it attaches to Asian identity under the concept of Siberianization, Turkic states may have the chance to show their loyalty to Siberia, their homeland, and to the Turkic peoples living in the region without migrating despite the harsh living conditions. The preservation of Turkic languages in the region should be considered as an indicator of Siberia's cultural richness rather than interference in Russia's internal affairs. With its high potential, Siberia is becoming increasingly important in the new world order. For this reason, granting the Turkic peoples in the region the right to delegates in the Organization of Turkic States could be an important start.

It is essential to explain the situation of the Turkic peoples in the context of the Back to the East and Siberianization concepts. It is crucial to first answer the questions of how the Turkic peoples are seen and addressed in the concepts that are considered to be the basic structures of the construction of Russian civilization, and then to understand the cultural and geopolitical aspects of Russia's return to the East in order to understand the problems and/or benefits that the Turkic peoples will face in the future. The existing multi-ethnic structure of Russia is considered as a central meeting point for Asia and Europe in the future. At this point, Siberia and its peoples are particularly analyzed and taken as an example. The Trans-Baikal Territory is also considered a shining example of cultural symbiosis of numerous social groups with different religious identities that have learned to communicate successfully in a multi-ethnic structure. It is envisioned that this will be used to include Tatarstan and Bashkortostan in the Return to the East, creating a successful system of interaction and understanding not only economic or ethnic but also cultural elements in their policies. This is explained in the following words:

The vast territory conquered by our ancestors allows us to become a first-class Eurasian power. We are witnessing the transformation of Siberia and the Russian Far East from a burden and an afterthought in the conflict with the West into a fundamental asset for the country's economy, defense, spiritual and cultural revival. Russia is beginning to use all the space that history has given it.⁴⁰

With the increasing importance attached to Siberia, where Turkic peoples live in large numbers, both in terms of identity and political dimension, a new era has entered. In this period when the changes in the international conjuncture and the transition to a multipolar world system are more loudly stated, the geopolitical importance of the geography and the culture of the Turkic peoples living in Siberia, which they try to preserve and maintain despite the difficult conditions, is also increasing.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Siberia, which has become increasingly important in geopolitical, economic and identity issues in the twenty-first century, has a unique role for both Russia and the Turkic peoples. As the homeland of the Turks, the region has supported Russia economically and commercially for centuries with its underground potential and has been a resource base. However, as of 2014, another role has emerged within the scope of the Back to the East policy, which is the construction of Russia's Asian identity centered on Siberia. In this context, relations are being strengthened by developing joint projects with many countries, especially China. While the use of successful projects such as Yamal LNG and the Power of Siberia increases the life

⁴⁰ Oleg Barabanov and Timofei Bordachev, 2018, p. 8.



opportunities of other peoples of the region, such as Turkic peoples, it also brings some threats. The most important of these threats is the preservation of languages and cultures. The increasingly geopolitically important role of the Siberian Turks could lead to stronger relations with the Turkic world. Closer ties between the Turkic states of Central Asia and Anatolia and the Turkic peoples of Siberia could foster cultural, economic and diplomatic cooperation. This could create new opportunities for regional security, trade and cultural interaction.

Turkic groups in the Siberian region offer an important economic and political opportunity in line with the geopolitical interests of the Organization of Turkic States. Siberia is rich in large natural resources, minerals and energy reserves, as well as the vast territory of Russia. These resources can create a great opportunity for economic cooperation for the member states of the Organization. It is possible for Siberian Turks to cooperate with the Organization of Turkic States and take part in projects that will accelerate economic development in the region. For example, joint investments in energy and natural resources can be made among the Turkic States. Moreover, Siberia's proximity to China could be a gateway for Turkey and other member states to economic opportunities in the Asia-Pacific region. The Turkic peoples of Siberia are generally a minority in Russia's ethnic structure and are struggling to preserve their cultural identity. In this context, the Organization of Turkic States can contribute to the preservation of the ethnic identity and culture of these peoples and make their voices heard on international platforms for the protection of the linguistic, cultural and social rights of the Siberian Turks. As a result, the spirit of social solidarity can allow these peoples to enjoy greater support and cultural rights.

In the light of the above information, Siberia is of great importance not only in terms of regional but also global geopolitical strategy. By increasing its interest in this region, the Organization of Turkic States can make Siberia's strategic position more visible at the global level. At this point, the growing Chinese economic and population influence in the region may create opportunities for the Organization of Turkic States. Siberian Turks have historical and cultural ties with the Turkic world. Closer relations of these peoples with the Organization of Turkic States since its establishment can help strengthen the Organization and increase the solidarity of the Turkic world, and strengthen cultural, commercial and diplomatic ties with the Turkic communities in Siberia. The member states of the Organization can cooperate with these communities in Siberia in many areas such as cultural projects, educational agreements and research.

This study concludes that the struggle of the Turkic peoples living in Siberia alone against the threats posed by the new geopolitical environment will be insufficient to protect their language and culture. The protection of the Siberian Turkic peoples, who have already encountered a population crisis, through studies (dictionaries, books, documentaries, etc.) within the Organization of Turkic States can be an important start. In addition, the presence of a delegate from each of the peoples in the region in the organization is important for their legitimacy. It is seen that serious studies have been carried out only in the field of Siberian Historical Studies in Turkey, and that the subject of regional languages and the field of international relations are lacking at this point. With joint projects with the peoples of the region, Siberia, the homeland of the Turkish people, can be better understood and contribute to the strengthening of Turkish identity formation.



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