

Cross-border cooperation in the Altai interregion in the 21st century: results and development prospects

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Abstract. The article is devoted to the analysis of cross-border cooperation in the Great Altai, or the Altai Interregion, which unites six administrative subject of four states, within the framework of the International Coordinating Council “Our Common Home – Altai,” which have been established and functioning for sixteen years. The paper concludes that interregional integration helps the border areas of the Altai region to more effectively solve pressing development problems, more actively attract representatives of business, academic and creative groups, and expand the range of partnerships.

Keywords: Altai Interregion, integration, cross-border cooperation, sustainable development

1. Introduction

The Altai Interregion (or the Great Altai in another terminology) is unique in many respects, because within the framework of regional cross-border cooperation it affects the strategic interests of the four largest countries of Eurasia (Russia, Kazakhstan, China and Mongolia). More than that, modern political, socio-economic, and humanitarian contacts are largely determined by the unique nature and cultural heritage of the people living here. The purpose of the article is to analyze the results of cross-border cooperation in Altai, which has been carried out under the auspices of the International Coordination Council “Our Common Home – Altai,” with particular emphasis on the prospects for its sustainable development. Since its inception, the ICC-Altai has really helped restore the broken links of the regions of the Great Altai. The ICC-Altai is a consultative organization that addresses issues of mutual interest, sends recommendations to committee members, and interacts with central legislative and executive authorities. One of the functions of the committee is to initiate the processes of convergence of the national legislations of the four countries in the field of environmental safety, foreign trade, and customs regulation.

2. Materials and Methods

The materials for analysis are official documents prepared and published under the guidance of the International Coordination Council “Our Common Home - Altai”, as well as numerous collections of scientific papers, journal publications and monographs on various aspects of cross-border cooperation in Altai [1-3]. An important material for the final generalizations are also a variety of scientific studies of Altai scientists, carried out with the help of grant support from Russian and international funds. A

significant and very significant amount of information can be found on the official website of the International Coordination Council “Altai Transboundary.”

Textual methods for analyzing official documents and scientific materials related to international cooperation in Altai are complemented to the method of observation included. The authors of the article provide a unique perspective into the topic under discussion, because they were at the origin of the International Coordination Council “Our Common Home – Altai” in 2003. More than that, they are the scientific experts of the ICC-Altai. Also, for the past sixteen years, they have been leading the International Summer School of Students and Young Scientists of the Altai Region, one of the most long-term research and educational projects led by ICC-Altai [3]. The authors were able to directly observe the work of ICC-Altai for many years; to participate in solving problems that appeared in the process of cross-border interactions as scientific experts; to analyze objective and subjective problems that arise among government agencies, scientists and members of the public in four countries in the process of coordinating development plans, mechanisms for cooperation, and sharing experience in territorial management, especially in connection with the common task of transition to the sustainable development of the Altai region as a single biosphere territory. The personal and long-term involvement of the authors in the processes of cross-border cooperation in Altai gives them reason to believe that their scientific analysis is competent and objective, deserving the attention of the scientific community.

3. Results

First, the sixteen-year activity of the International Coordination Council “Our Common Home - Altai” can be considered successful. The Council managed to establish stable and productive relations between government bodies, scientific and educational institutions, as well as the public of six subjects of interregional Altai cooperation included in the council: Russian Altai Krai, Republic of Altai, Khovd and Bayan-Ulgi aimags of Mongolia, Xinjiang-Uygur Autonomous Region of People's Republic of China, as well as the East Kazakhstan region of the Republic of Kazakhstan [4]. Over the years, fairly representative transboundary political and scientific forums were held, which received wide public response; international scientific research was also carried out, recommendations were prepared and projects were initiated, within the framework of which important steps were taken on the sustainable development of Greater Altai, and as its individual national segments, and the region as a whole [5].

Practically at each of the meetings of ICC-Altai, held every two years in one of the six subjects of international regional cooperation. The meeting discusses priority issues of sustainable development of territories, ensuring environmental safety and health of residents. The topics of the problems of biosphere-cultural uniqueness and sustainable development of the Great Altai within the framework of the International Summer Schools of students and young scientists of the Altai region have always been and are of paramount importance [6].

In our opinion, one of the important conditions for the effective work of the International Coordination Council on the transition of the region to a sustainable development model was the final Resolution of the 2002 International Conference. At that international conference, the most important political decision was taken to establish the International Coordination Council “Our Common Home - Altai”, and a Resolution was approved, which set forth the main strategic goals of the union. In particular, the Resolution stated the following, “Ensuring environmental safety and a transition to a strategy of sustainable (noospheric) development on a continental and global scale imply the preservation of the unique natural and cultural potential of the South Siberian and Central Asian landscapes” [7, p. 110]. More than that, it goes further, stating that this is determined by “the unique natural potential of the Altai region, the relevance of ensuring the environmental safety of its inhabitants, as well as the ratification by most civilized countries in the framework of the Kyoto Protocol on treason climate change.” This protocol pays special attention to environmental aspects of management and environmental-economic mechanisms for the implementation of resource and energy-saving technologies” [7, pp. 111-122].

As systemic studies indicate, precisely formulated goals, corresponding to the objective potential of a sociocultural system, and not subjectively imposed on it from the outside, always ensure the sustainability and progressive character of the development of this system. This is fully true with respect to such complex transboundary biosociocultural systems, which in this case is the Altai Interregion.

Second, the experience of the International Coordination Council in Altai testifies, in our opinion, to the fact that transboundary cooperation becomes most effective and productive when it is multilevel, i.e. not only state authorities and economic structures, but the scientific and educational community, as well as public organizations. This provides contacts not only at the level of state elites and business elites, which often (especially the latter) do not have a holistic scientific understanding of the region in which they operate, but also at the levels of “scientific diplomacy” and “public diplomacy.” This allows the same government to more objectively take into account social needs, to respond flexibly and promptly to problems that arise, and, most importantly, to rely on creative initiatives and projects of ordinary citizens, i.e. in the full sense of the word, to be a power that, like is known to be the alienated will of the people, acting in its objective interests [8].

In the Altai Krai, the creation of the International Coordination Council was initiated by the scientific community, and the then regional leadership, headed by A. V. Surikov and A. G. Nazarchuk reacted and supported these initiatives. The university community of the four countries put forward and implemented the idea of holding an International Summer School for students [9], as well as the creation of the Council of Rectors of the Great Altai. The sports community put forward the idea of creating a project for organizing games in the open air, which would include traditional sports such as horse racing, folk wrestling, archery, etc. All these projects are being successfully implemented to this day.

Unfortunately, in recent years, communication between the authorities of the four subjects of the Altai cooperation and public organizations has become a bit less intense. Especially, unfortunately, this applies to the Altai Krai and East Kazakhstan, which negatively affected the overall dynamics of the development of cross-border cooperation in Altai. Many experts hope that soon there will be a buildup at a new level, including through the already justified themselves forms of dialogue between the state and the so-called “civil society” in relation to solving transboundary problems [10].

The following conclusion can be made: in cross-border, polysubject regions, such as Altai or Alpine, only mutual respect, mutual coordination, and mutual adjustment of the activities of various actors (from state bodies to local communities and public organizations) ensures the multilevel, flexibility and progressive nature of international cooperation.

Thirdly, as experience shows, in polysubject transboundary regions like the Great Altai, the economy can never act as a driving force for international cooperation. At its core, economics means making a profit and satisfying a particular, particular interest. Achieving a private economic interest may coincide with objective public interests, and may not coincide and even contradict them. Thus, the current cutting down of tape burs in the Altai Krai is advantageous to loggers, but is unprofitable for its population, since tape burs are the most important part of the biospheric stability of the region. The transfer of part of the flow of the river Ob to the northern regions of China is beneficial to the Chinese, but is objectively capable of undermining the environmental sustainability of the entire Ob basin. The modern economy is also based, first of all, on competition, and not on cooperation and mutual assistance, although the latter are often declared. The economy can become a locomotive, but only in bilateral cooperation, as an integrating and dynamic core, should have super-economic imperatives, i.e. values and goals, which certainly surpass the goals of material profit. The experience of the Great Altai shows that such values of transboundary interaction are ecology and human development, which is carried out primarily due to science, culture, and education. It is interesting that in these areas are implemented and carried out the most interesting projects of cross-border cooperation. Young people are drawn to them, leaders are born in them, capable of serving, not of dominating; to sacrifice something personal, rather than self-actualizing for the sake of satisfying exclusively personal ambitions [11].

Accordingly, a healthy environment, a healthy and cultured person, thriving art, science and education are those objective and absolute values that certainly unite people, countries and peoples. In general, these values and goals should be the priority of any transboundary cooperation. They are valuable in and of themselves, and (which is very importantly) they are able to set the vector for sustainable and “human-sized” development in the economic sphere.

The new mission of the International Coordination Council was to consider its council as a regional representative of the activities of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). In 2012 and 2014, the Altai Krai became the venue for the SCO Youth Forum. The ICC-Altai took an active part in the preparation and holding of events, presenting in the framework of forums the experience of cross-border cooperation in the Great Altai region.

4. Discussion

The above results can cause serious discussion, because even in some ICC-Altai policy documents it is the economy and economic interaction that are put in the first place. The cross-border tourism project “Golden Ring of Altai”, which implies the creation of tourist infrastructure in the territory of all subjects of cooperation, can be partly argued in favor of a humanitarian and economic approach, so that a tourist can travel without delay across all territories of the Great Altai or along its individual transboundary fragments. In addition, it is necessary to take into account that this project is not purely commercial, because it implies the presence of a tourist who is driven by super economic interest to get acquainted with the natural and cultural attractions of the Great Altai.

In 2018, in the city of Khovd (Mongolia), a meeting of the International Coordination Council was held, the key mission of the council was to review and agree on the draft Concept of the development of the ICC-Altai activities until 2025. B. V. Larin, the ICC-Altai Secretary, in his speech noted that the concept being developed determines development priorities and the main areas of work of the Council.

The purpose of the Development Concept of the International Coordination Council is to strengthen multilevel cooperation and mutual understanding between nations in the strategically significant Eurasian region of the Greater Altai. The decision to create a strategic document of international status is due to the need to update the goals, tasks and key directions of long-term socio-economic and humanitarian cooperation of the regions participating in the Great Altai.

The main areas of cooperation within the framework of the Concept:

- Development of economy and trade;
- Infrastructure development including transport networks;
- Cultural and humanitarian interaction;
- Rational use of natural resources and environmental protection;
- Cooperation in the field of territorial planning;
- Science and education;
- Tourism development (cross-border tourism in the Great Altai – a global brand);
- Security cooperation;
- Informational interaction.

5. Conclusion

Interregional integration helps the border areas of the Altai region to more effectively solve pressing development problems, more actively attract representatives of business, academic, and creative groups and expand the range of partnerships. No matter how the political conjuncture changes, the universal issues of international cross-border cooperation remain a top priority and do not lose their relevance.

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