



ANTI-DISCRIMINATION

Thematic Bulletin №81/2025

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DISCRIMINATION THROUGH ASSIMILATION AND MILITARIZATION OF CHILDREN

Protection of the rights of groups that are called “vulnerable to discrimination” in the language of modern international law is reminded about on certain dates, many of them in spring. Discrimination against women is discussed rather in March, the topic of discrimination against Roma is raised in April, while in May even two dates are very relevant – the Day against homophobia/transphobia and the Day of remembrance of the deportation of the Crimean Tatar people, who are discriminated against and persecuted by the Russian authorities in the 21st century.

The spring trimester ends with the Day of protection of children, who are often discriminated either as members of minorities, or in gender dimension, or simply as such – children always and everywhere have less rights than adults. Children’s rights as a concept have existed for a long time, but not always and not everyone perceived them as an essential part of human rights guarantees. The situation has begun to change recently, when the rights of children from Ukraine are taking up more and more attention in the work of professional lawyers and human rights defenders. It is important to put this issue in the context of dis-

criminatory attitudes towards children, whom the Russian authorities perceive as a tool for suppressing a group, often an entire nation. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has repeatedly noted the terrible practice of abducting Ukrainian children, indoctrinating them with militaristic and chauvinistic ideas through propaganda and extremely ideologized schooling, and using these children in war, after growing up under occupation or forced assimilation.

Often the situation is seen as an analogy with the actions of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle Ages, when the children of conquered Christian peoples were forced to become janissaries – Turkish infantrymen. But it seems more appropriate to recall another episode of the past, not so long ago and much more familiar, meaning the recruitment of children into the army of the Russian Empire. While normally recruits were adults, the minors were forcibly taken from those groups of the population who were suppressed and discriminated. The issue of Jewish cantonists is quite well known and studied; much less do we know about Indigenous peoples, Roma and children of participants in uprisings in Poland, Lithuania, Belarus and

Ukraine. Such children were recruited into the army from the age of 7, and died en masse, unable to withstand the extremely difficult conditions, stress, hunger and disease. Alexander Herzen wrote in “My Past and Thoughts” that he had never seen anything more terrible than the march of the unfortunate child soldiers: “Pale, exhausted, with a frightened look, they stood in awkward, thick soldier’s overcoats with hard collars, turning some kind of helpless, pitiful gaze at the garrison soldiers who roughly lined them up; white lips blue circles under their eyes – showed fever or chills. And these sick children, without care, without kindness, blown by the wind that blows freely from the Arctic Sea, went to the grave.”

The Russian authorities have now begun to persecute minorities again, as they are again taking children away from those who resist their imperial aggression.

There is a process of consistent and ever-increasing repression against Indigenous peoples; organizations defending the cultural, economic, political, and linguistic rights of national minorities are recognized as extremist, terrorist, and undesirable.

The first step was taken back in 2016, when the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar people was recognized as “extremist”. Human rights defenders protested at that time, calling it “a stage of the attack on the rights of the Crimean Tatars, and ethnic, cultural and political (based on political convictions) discrimination of the Crimean Tatar people.”

Eight years later, 55 organizations representing different peoples under the rule of the Russian Federation had been recognized as “extremist” at once: the activists were accused of “destroying the multinational unity and territorial integrity of Russia.” In a few months, they appeared to be “terrorist” organizations. Among the repressed groups there are representatives of small Indigenous peoples protected by special Russian and international law. Their human rights work had been completely arbitrarily labelled and criminalized.

Small indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation have recently initiated an important step towards recognizing the centuries-old violation of their rights by the colonialists. With the support of a number of democratic politicians, human rights defenders and journalists, they adopted a document declaring recognition of the mistakes and crimes of the past, reconciliation and respect, under the necessary condition of respect for the rights of Indigenous peoples in the future. Among other things, the authors of the Declaration noted “a coercive and mandatory system of boarding schools, which led to the destruction of family and cultural ties, forced assimilation, erosion of Indigenous identity, and the loss of native languages and traditions (commonly referred to as the issue of the “Stolen Generations”). This peace initiative found quick repressive response from the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation: the coordinator of the Declaration, the Batani Foundation, was declared an “undesirable organization”, for the demand of “recognition of historical justice and ensuring the rights of the Indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East,” were by.

Stefania KULAEVA

First published on the blog of Radio Svoboda (in Russian)

International Day of Children Victims of Aggression 4 June DISCUSSION ON THE PROTECTION OF THE RIGHTS OF UKRAINIAN CHILDREN IN GHENT

On June 4, 2025, Ghent University hosted a discussion on “Protecting the rights of Ukrainian children: prospects and challenges”. The event was organized by the Ukraine Plus Knowledge Centre (Eureast Platform, Ghent University) and Anti-Discrimination Centre Memorial Brussels and is dedicated to the rights of Ukrainian children in a situation of war and migration. The discussion aroused great interest: more than 40 participants included students, experts, representatives of the Ukrainian community and Belgian public.

Two leading experts from Ukraine spoke about the situation of children in war-torn Ukraine and violations of the rights of abducted children trapped in Russia.

Yevhen Zakharov, head of the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, a leading expert on the projects “Voices of War” and “Tribunal for Putin” (T4R), devoted his presentation to the legal aspects of the problem, in particular, to proving the war crimes of the Russian army and authorities against Ukrainian children (abduction, forced displacement, indoctrination and militarization) in the context of the Geneva Conventions and the UN Convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide.

Tetiana Semikop, head of the public movement “Faith. Hope. Lyubov” (Odesa), presented a profound overview of the war-related problems faced by Ukrainian children, as well as various services responsible for children’s rights protection. She talked about different categories of children and difficulties in obtaining education, providing qualified medical care, social and psychological support.

As an introduction to the panel discussion, an animated documentary “How I went to my sister” was shown; it is about the fate of a Ukrainian teenager from Donbas, who managed to leave the occupied territory and go to Europe.

The panel discussion focused on the situation of Ukrainian children, adolescents and youth in Belgium, in particular, their education and integration

into Belgian society, as well as their return and reintegration into Ukrainian society. Ukrainian students Lisa and Maria, who came to Belgium as minors and are now studying in Belgium, spoke about their vision of the situation and the experience of integration. In particular, they expressed their wishes for obtaining internships and employment in Ukraine with the support of the EU, to be able to apply the knowledge gained in Europe for the reconstruction of Ukraine. Pax Cristi representative Annemarie Gielen stressed that both the European Union and Ukraine need to make more efforts right now to prepare the return of children and adults to post-war Ukraine, and plan measures to support and integrate those who have returned. Merel Selleslach, a researcher at the Flemish Institute of Peace, noted that the planning of such measures was the focus of a study that the Institute has prepared for the parliaments of Flanders and the EU; it takes into account the opinions of various experts. Maria Yasenovska, an expert at the European Disability Forum, stressed that even greater support measures are needed for the return of people with disabilities, whose special needs must be taken into account by the EU authorities when discussing their return to Ukraine.

After the presentations of the speakers and panelists, a lively discussion with the audience took place. In particular, Yevhenia Lutsenko, Vice-President of ADC Memorial, Taisiya Nakonechna, an activist of the Ukrainian community, Oksana Kozlova, an activist of the Belgian Committee of the European Solidarity Network with Ukraine, expressed their questions and comments.

The event ended with a visit to a photo exhibition of young photographers from Ukraine who received their education in Belgium. The exhibition is symbolically called “Where is/was my Home”; in their works, the photographers reflect on their experience of emigration and integration and their ties with their native country.

The organizers of the event would like to express their special gratitude to the Ghent Ukrainian community for their help and to Taisiya Nakonechna personally for translating the speakers’ presentations.

THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN RUSSIA WERE DISCUSSED AT THE OSCE ODIHR CONFERENCE

The annual Conference on the Human Dimension took place in Warsaw from September 30 to October 11, 2024. Within the 10-day agenda, experts from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) and representatives of human rights organizations from 57 participating countries discussed the issues of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the OSCE region.

On October 8, 2024, at the plenary session “Tolerance and Non-discrimination”, on behalf of ADC Memorial and the International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia Mark Zdor spoke on the situation of Indigenous peoples of Russia:

“Indigenous peoples have lived on our lands for centuries. But with the Russian colonisation, our peoples are being oppressed, we have become a minority on our land, our languages and religion are disappearing, the habitat is being destroyed by the extraction of coal and other minerals. This year, we were declared extremists – this threatens years in prison for anyone who advocates for the rights of Indigenous peoples and doesn’t support the government. Those who support the government for money betray their peoples, who suffer from discrimination.”

On the same day, ADC Memorial and Arctida held a joint side event “Indigenous Peoples in Russia: violations of their rights by the state and mining companies, destruction of traditional habitat, criminalization of human rights activities.”

Ilya Shumanov, head of Arctida and the Russian branch of Transparency International in exile, identified two issues that have an essential impact on the lives of the Indigenous peoples of the Arctic.

The first problem is the substitution of the voices of real Indigenous activists and the promotion of the interests of the Russian government at the international level through pro-government NGOs of Indigenous peoples. First of all, it is RAIPON, funded by mining companies and lobbying for the interests of large industrial mining structures, including the lifting of international sanctions.

The second problem is coal mining in the Arctic by international business: the Australian coal company Tigers Realm Coal continues to do business with Rus-

sian officials and oligarchs, bypassing sanctions and destroying the environment in Chukotka. In 2023, TIG produced a record 1.6 million tons of coal, showing an increase of 56% in comparison with 2021.

Ilya Shumanov stressed the need to include independent representatives of Indigenous peoples in the decision-making process and monitor the influence of Russian indigenous GONGO on international institutions regarding the lifting of sanctions against Russia.

Mark Zdor, a native of Chukotka, a member of the International Committee of the Indigenous Peoples of Russia, spoke about the current situation of the Indigenous peoples of Russia sharing his personal story. As a student, he joined the Youth Council of the RAIPON, but left the organization in 2021 due to his disagreement with the pro-government policy of the organization and threats towards him for his participation in protest demonstrations. Mark told how independent Indigenous organizations were destroyed in Chukotka, and appealed to support activists who continue their work from abroad:

“Today, the International Committee of the Indigenous Peoples of Russia is in fact the only alternative to the RAIPON, and this obliges us to continue protecting the rights of the Indigenous peoples of Russia. The purpose of our Committee is to contribute to the preservation of the identity of the indigenous peoples of Russia. Despite the difficulties, we are looking for new ways to interact and call for cooperation with Indigenous activists and environmentalists. We appeal to the international community to support us in this work.”

Dmitry Berezhev, member of the International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia and editor of the Indigenous Russia website, focused on three issues in his speech:

The first is the war and the disproportionate number of dead soldiers belonging to ethnic minorities and Indigenous peoples, which is caused with a high level of poverty, and the inability to protect themselves from mobilization in places where Indigenous peoples live. At the same time, RAIPON supports the war, organizes the sending of products and drones to the front.

The second problem is the deterioration of the environmental situation after

the outbreak of the war due to a decrease in environmental standards, which also involves the structures of the RAIPON, since its representatives participate on behalf of Indigenous peoples in public hearings on business projects and support business.

The third problem is the use of Indigenous peoples, including the RAIPON, as an instrument of influence on the international agenda: both at the UN and in the Arctic Council, representatives of Indigenous peoples from the RAIPON are calling for the lifting of sanctions against Russia. At the same time, independent representatives of Indigenous peoples now, after 55 organizations of different minorities were included in the “list of extremists”, it has become almost impossible to speak at the international level, because it can be recognized as “extremism”. Due to the criminalization of independent organizations, assistance and interaction with representatives of Indigenous peoples in Russia is difficult.

In conclusion, **Olga Abramenko** spoke about the experience of ADC Memorial in protecting Indigenous peoples living in Southern Siberia and suffering from coal mining and alluvial gold mining (see two reports, 2020 and 2021).

The expert noted that in these regions the mining business is affiliated with the government; the principle of informed prior consent is not respected, while the Indigenous inhabitants of the territory must consciously approve or not approve the business activity on their territory; and loyal activists from indigenous peoples actually act against the interests of Indigenous communities. Since the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion in Ukraine, the situation in this territory has deteriorated even more: coal mining, despite its enormous environmental damage, continues, and the recognition of “extremist organizations” of indigenous peoples has actually criminalized human rights activities in this area.

Olga Abramenko gave an example of an environmental disaster staged by the industrial giant Norilsk Nickel in Taimyr (2020), which poisoned the territory of small Indigenous small peoples – Dolgan and Nganasan. It will take decades to restore the natural environment, which Indigenous peoples simply do not have: their lifestyle and culture bound with nature are rapidly disappearing and need protection here and now.

THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT DISCUSSED THE PROBLEMS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

February 4, 2025, the European Parliament hosted a discussion “Exploited Lands, oppressed peoples: discrimination and persecution of the Indigenous peoples of Siberia, the North and the Far East,” co-organized by Anti-Discrimination Center Memorial Brussels and Rasa Jukneviene, MEP from Lithuania. This meeting continued the cooperation between Ms. Jukneviene’s office and ADC Memorial, started on October 25, 2023, with the event in the EP “Opposition to Russian colonial pressure: voices of different peoples”. The discussion was led by Rasa Jukneviene and Stefania Kulaeva (ADC Memorial). The speakers were activists of the movement for the protection of the rights of Indigenous peoples Vladislav Tannagashev, a founding member of the International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia, and Mark Zdor, a native of Chukotka, a member of the ICIPR and an anti-war activist, as well as Dirk Schubel, Head of Russia division, EEAS, and Anastasia Crickley, an expert on minority rights (former Chair of the UN CERD and the EU Fundamental Rights Agency, the OSCE and Council of Europe expert on minority rights). Before the discussion, a part of the documentary “The Gold of Shoria” was shown.



nection of history with modern problems. She shared her personal experience of overcoming Russia’s imperial influence on the Baltic states, the struggle for the freedom of Lithuania, and thanked Ukraine for its courage in the struggle for independence and democracy currently taking place on the battlefields.

The ADC Memorial expert spoke about the protection of the rights of Indigenous peoples as part of anti-discrimination work, expressing support for activists of organizations (including the International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia), who were included in the lists of “extremists” and “terrorists” in the Russian Federation only for peaceful demonstrations in support of their communities. ADC Memorial unequivocally condemns such forms of repression of Indigenous human rights defenders and defenders of minority rights, expressing solidarity and support for their principled human rights and anti-war positions.

RASA JUKNEVICIENE

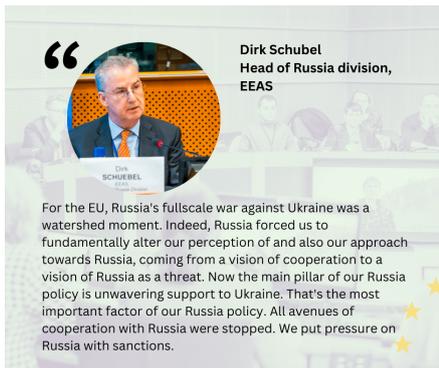
This is second time we are organizing together with our partners – Anti-Discrimination Centre Memorial Brussels. Last term of European Parliament we had had similar seminar or event on a very similar topic. And today we understand that every time is even more and more important to have at least somebody, to give platform to the peoples, to the nations. They are almost, I would say, forgotten in European continent or globally, but not themselves. And in the light of Russia’s war against Ukraine and against the all the whole democratic world, it’s even more important to try to understand the content of what’s going on within the Russian Federation, what does it mean – this largest as of territory state globally, with the peoples living there – oppressed peoples, not only small nations but also, I would say, Russians themselves. Without that it would be not possible to have clear strategy on Russia for the future of our European continent.

In their speeches, the representatives of the Indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East expressed their support for Ukraine and their protest against Russian aggression. They talked about how the Russian authorities are destroying the habitat of indigenous peoples, repressing those who dare to protest, and exterminating the male population of their native villages, mobilizing and turning residents into “cannon fodder.” Both the main speakers and other participants of the discussion noted the discriminatory nature of Russia’s national policy, the suppression of cultures, languages and religions of small nations. European Commission representative Dirk Schuebel also expressed support for Ukraine and all those, including activists from Russia, who oppose Russian aggression. He assured the audience of his readiness to support such initiatives. The MEP Rasa Jukneviene spoke about the resolution of the European Parliament calling for remembering historical responsibility and the con-



So, this short remarks for the beginning. I also would like to finalize, I would say, the important event happened two weeks ago in Strasbourg, during our plenary – for those who were not able to follow. We adopted a resolution on history, on how Russia is using history for disinformation in the light of this war, and there we were able to first time I think in the European Union legislative to send a very important message. A the European Parliament, we declared that we respond to the statement of

the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine (May 2023) on the ideology of “russism”, by condemning the nationalist imperialist ideology, policy and practices of the current Russian regime. We stressed the incompatibility of this ideology and policy and these practices with international law and European values. This resolution was on history, also related with the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and what happened in the past. This is, you know, uncondemned ideology, like communism, bolshevism, imperialism from Russian side. It happen so that today we have ideology which is mentioned by Kremlin themselves as “russky mir” (‘Russian World’). It means that the same ideology happened many hundred years ago, when those nations in Siberia, Northern Caucasus and other parts of today’s Russian Federation. It is the same ideology – it’s imperialism, it’s colonialism, it’s the last, I would say, country globally which has inside this colonialism approach. And this is what would be our testimonies here with those guests.



DIRK SCHUBEL

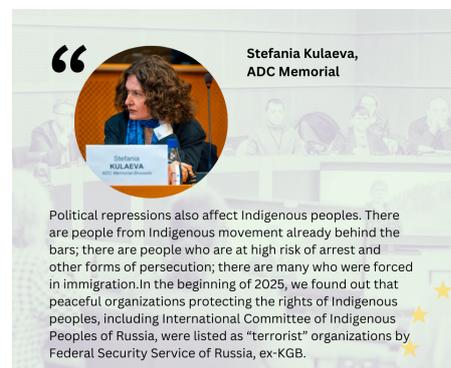
We believe that it is very important to draw public attention to the fate of indigenous peoples and the ethnic minorities globally but also in Russia in particular, taking into account also the context of Russia’s war against Ukraine and the overall very bad and ever deteriorating human rights situation in Russia. Let me start with a few words on the bigger picture if I may. For the EU, Russia’s fullscale war against Ukraine was a watershed moment. Indeed, Russia forced us to fundamentally alter our perception of and also our approach towards Russia, coming from a vision of cooperation to a vision of Russia as a threat. Now the main pillar of our Russia policy is unwavering support to Ukraine. That’s the most important factor of our Russia policy. All avenues of cooperation with Russia were stopped. We put pressure on Rus-

sia with sanctions. We work to ensure accountability for all the crimes to enhance our resilience now also against hybrid threats which is the latest and to support our partners around the world to deal with the consequences of Russia’s war.

Supporting Russian civil society, human rights defenders and independent media inside and outside Russia remains crucially important to the EU and it’s the key element of our Russia approach. Today external aggression and internal repression are linked with Russia’s war against Ukraine. The human rights situation, the state of democracy and the rule of law inside Russia has deteriorated even further. At the same time, the EU financial support for civil society, for independent media and for human rights defenders has not only been maintained, but it has increased since 2022. The EU continues to closely follow the developments and raise concerns via public communication, statements in multilateral bodies and fora. This also refers to the organizations working with Indigenous peoples of Russia. These communities had remained in the vulnerable position already before the 24th of February 2022, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine only exacerbated this situation. We see the Russian authorities’ efforts to unite the citizens of the Russian Federation under Russian flag against Ukraine and the West, whitewashing all ethnic differences and stifling Indigenous people’s identities. As the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Russia Mariana Katsarova, whose mandate was established at the initiative of the EU, emphasized in her recent report, that Indigenous peoples and national minorities have been disproportionately mobilized some by force to fight against Ukraine. As a result, some small numbered groups may face extinction from war casualties. On top of that, the Russian authorities try to restrict their freedom of association by banning under the guise of extremism legislation or labeling as foreign agent and undesirable organization, those organizations representing Indigenous peoples or ethnic minorities. According to Katsarova, 55 such entities recognized as extremist following the Supreme Court decision to ban the anti-Russian separatist movement, as they call it. At the same time, we see a surge of Indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities activities and recognition of their identity. Many of the activists had to relocate to Europe and to continue their fight from here. Some of them are present with us today.

Climate change and hence a strengthened exploration of the Arctic endangered the traditional ways of living of the Indigenous people’s communities, including harvesting, fishing, or hunting. So, the rights of Indigenous peoples are an integral part of the European Union’s human rights policy as it was confirmed by the Council Conclusions on Indigenous Peoples of May, 2017. In these Council Conclusions we underline a) the importance of addressing discrimination and inequalities, b) addressing the threats to and the violence against Indigenous peoples and individuals, as well as to Human Rights defenders, and c) further enhancing the opportunities for dialogue and consultation with Indigenous peoples at all levels of EU cooperation. The EU seeks to integrate human rights including the rights of Indigenous peoples into all aspects of its internal and external policies, cooperation and trade. Our rights-based approach to development encompassing all human rights is the main vehicle in our external action for integrating the support to indigenous peoples in the implementation of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development. In addition, the EU gives direct support to Indigenous people’s organizations and to civil society organizations working on Indigenous issues. The EU is committed to the implementation of the outcome document on the World Conference on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

As I mentioned already, in other discussions today earlier, we would be very happy to explore with you more potential avenues of our support to the Indigenous peoples NGO organizations working in or on Russia from inside or from outside.



STEFANIA KULAEVA

Thank you very much for co-hosting this event and for helping to give a voice to people who really have very big challenges and only growing challeng-

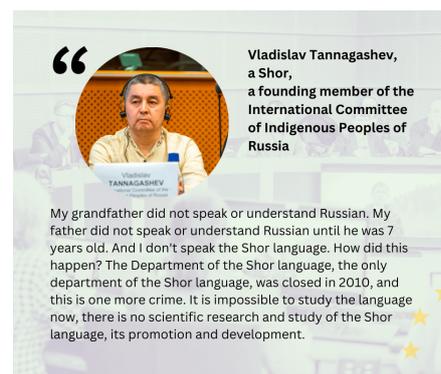
es every year. The situation is getting worse – the film we have seen was made a few years ago, and the situation as you could see looked already dramatic. But as we well know, since then it aggravated a lot through Russian aggression against Ukraine and the horrible war that broke out, that affected a lot indigenous peoples of Russia and small indigenous peoples. It also gets worse not only with excavation works, and we are quite unhappy that even the fact that some countries stopped importing coal from Russia, that hasn't helped yet to stop the whole industry.

I want to say a few words of how Anti-Discrimination Centre Memorial, our organization based in Brussels since 2013, how we came to these issues, how we came to this particular work and research. Opposing discrimination, first most of all ethnic discrimination, we were of course protecting minorities rights, and Indigenous people's rights belong to that. However, originally, we looked on it only from the point of view of discrimination, while for example environment was not so much our issue. But when we met the Tannagashevs and the Shor rights movement people, understood that destroying their environment is a form of discrimination. They face the fact that they can't live the traditional life. The industry destroys them economically but also culturally, as it destroys the language. We've heard from experts that um it is very bad for the bodies of Indigenous peoples to move to the cities, or to be forced to move to the cities, but it's also destructive for the culture. There is no place to educate children in Shor language, and being out of their villages they lose language, they lose culture, traditional work and crafts. All together it creates structural discrimination. Meanwhile, working on opposing the structural discrimination and destruction of environment, we understood that it is also a global issue. Excavation and using coal is destroying the planet, it is bad for climate. We've published two reports on that.

Later, except of the reports and except of all the advocacy connected to the reports, we decided to do some visual materials, and it became this film. The film is focused on Shoria, later Vladislav Tannagashev whom you could see in the film will speak about that. He was there saying goodbye to his family near the burnt house of his father-in-law. His own village was destroyed back in Soviet times, but also we've heard his name mentioned by the orphan girl whom he helped to restore her rights. Of course, we were for a while quite focused on this part of Southern Si-

beria, and now we see that the same problems can be found anywhere. For example, Chukotka – the next speaker Mark Zdor is from Chukotka, it's a place in Far East. Already now, in the last years, they also started to excavate coal – just now, when it is already a kind of damned fuel and everybody knows that is destroying the climate – new excavation work started in other parts of Indigenous peoples' places. In Khakasia, in Chukotka, against the sanctions – we know that Australian companies participate in that, and people are only in a hurry to sell the coal while it's still bought by some countries, first of all by China.

The next trouble that many of you could have known, that people who protest against the war are persecuted. Political repressions also affect Indigenous peoples. There are people from Indigenous movement already behind the bars; there are people who are at high risk of arrest and other forms of persecution; there are many who were forced in immigration; and there are people who are facing mobilization. The mobilization declared by Putin's government heavily affected indigenous peoples, and many of them had to flee, try to cross the border, try to hide in the forest, in taiga, but still many ended up in the frontline and lost their lives. All of us are strongly against the war, strongly against this aggression of Russia, and against all people involved in this aggression but it must be said that by this war the Russian government and authorities destroy not only Ukrainian people and villages and cities, but also some Russian population and peoples living in the Russian Federation now. And all this is also part of a story of our speakers. Later we'll hear about persecution faced by Mark Zdor as anti-war activist. And the final thing I want to say that already now, in the beginning of 2025, we found out that peaceful organizations protecting the rights of Indigenous peoples, including International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia, were listed as "terrorist" organizations by Federal Security Service of Russia, ex-KGB. I want to use this opportunity to say that we completely disagree and condemn this illegal and absurd declaration. We know that this list actually exists for very heavy criminal organizations, organized crime; and to put next to these dangerous violent groups these peaceful Indigenous rights' organizations who are trying to protect the environment, the language, the culture, the religion – it is another crime of the authorities in Russia.



VLADISLAV TANNAGASHEV

Thank you so much for coming here and attending this event. There is a proverb: it's better to see one time than to hear 100 times. I will not re-tell what happened with my people, with my family, with myself – I will speak more about what you've seen. You've seen with your own eyes how "Russian World" has come to our homeland. And if you don't want the "Russian World" to come to you, you have to become strong, you have to spend more money assisting Ukraine which is helping you by giving you time today, precious time which might save you in the future.

The Shors live in the south of the Kemerovo region, next to the Altai Kray, Novosibirsk region – just for reference. For centuries, it was our land, our ancestors lived there. In 1989, there were 16,000 of us, and a little over 30 years later, there were only 10,000 of us. This indicates that a blatant policy of extermination is being pursued against my people. One of the speakers said that Chechens were turned into "terrorists", that is, if they say "Chechen", and they seem to imply that this person is aggressive and evil. In our region, the word "Shors" is a humiliating insult. The Russians applied this to all minorities – that's how the word "Chukchi" also has an offensive synonym in Russia. The same is true for other peoples who live in Russia. My grandfather did not speak or understand Russian. My father did not speak or understand Russian until he was 7 years old. And I don't speak the Shor language. How did this happen? The Department of the Shor language, the only department of the Shor language, was closed in 2010, and this is one more crime. It is impossible to study the language now, there is no scientific research and study of the Shor language, its promotion and development.

I'll probably tell you a little bit about myself. As a child, I was embar-

passed by my nationality. When they talked about my nationality in front of me, I tried to make myself small so as not to hear, because I was embarrassed by the Shor words when my parents spoke in presence of other people. When I was in college, other pupils beat me up for being a Shor. When I was studying well, a Russian guy would come up and beat me, and he would say that it offended his Slavic nature: He doesn't feel very well when some Shor studies better than him. I'm just saying this so that you understand the situation of non-Russian peoples in Russia.

Russian nationality has ceased to exist after 2022 as a nationality, and it turns out that the European Parliament has indeed correctly drawn its conclusions: "Russism, Russian", is now synonymous with some kind of terrible sect that promotes war, murder, aggression, and hatred of all living things. Of course, there are Russians on the side of Good, and three are Shors, Chukchi, Chechens, and others are on the side of Evil – but they called themselves Russians in 2022. Do you remember when they broadcast those "I am Russian" videos? Guys of a different nationality came out and said: "Russian, I am Russian," that is, it looked like they did some kind of terrible ritual and joined this sect, in fact. That's all I wanted to say.

Thank you.

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Mark Zdor
a native of Chukotka,
a member of the
International Committee
of Indigenous Peoples of
Russia and an anti-war
activist

Perhaps the most famous Russian Indigenous political prisoner is Alexander Gabyshev. In 2019, Gabyshev announced a march to Moscow, protesting against Putin's dictatorial regime. He was detained by security forces and sent to a psychiatric institution for treatment against his wish. Memorial has recognized Alexander Gabyshev as a political prisoner.

MARK ZDOR

Ettyk tumgyturi! Gymnin nynny Tletegin.

Good afternoon! My name is Mark Zdor. I was born in the village of Neshkan, a Chukchi village of sea hunters and reindeer herders located near the Bering Strait. Traditional environmental management is the main means of survival for many people of my community. But more importantly, it is a

key means of preserving the identity of Indigenous peoples. Therefore, for us, nature conservation is not an abstract concept, but literally a matter of survival.

Environmental challenges in Russia's Indigenous regions

Unfortunately, our Committee must note that the Russian State ignores many threats to the traditional way of life of Indigenous peoples. In our region, the authorities sometimes not only ignore the problems of Indigenous peoples caused by the industrial development of Chukotka, but even act in partnership with industrial corporations in their confrontation with Indigenous communities.

Here are some examples. The history of the development of the Amaam coal deposit in the south of Chukotka was accompanied by a confrontation between the coal company and the local community named Altar. At first, the coal company tried to suppress the Indigenous community through the court. When this failed, the authorities provided such enormous administrative pressure that the members of the Altar community had no choice but to close their organization.

Another example is the Baim copper deposit. In the process of promoting the project, the authorities suppressed any attempts by the Indigenous peoples of Chukotka to express their concerns for a healthy habitat. At first it was a floating nuclear power plant in Pevek. The Indigenous people have feared a nuclear catastrophe. But their worries were suppressed by administrative resources. Then came the plans for the construction of a port at Cape Nagleynin. According to local residents and environmentalists, this project did not take into account the potential damage to the lands of traditional nature management. The suppression of the voices of the opponents of the project took place according to a well-established methodology. The authorities carried out administrative pressure, and law enforcement agencies conducted so-called investigations and threatened independent activists with criminal cases.

The situation is no better in other regions of Russia. Let me recall the story of Sergey Kechimov from the Khanty-Mansiysk Autonomous Okrug. He fought with the oilmen for his ancestral sacred land. The story ended with Kechimov dying of cancer under unclear

circumstances. There are other examples. You can find some of them on our website "Indigenous Russia".

The Indigenous peoples of Chukotka and the war in Ukraine

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been going on for three years now. Ukrainian and Russian soldiers are dying every day, but the worst thing is that civilians are dying.

Indigenous peoples are also suffering. By the end of the first year of the war, Russia had already undergone a "partial" mobilization. In Chukotka, many Indigenous people were forced to go to war in Ukraine. Some researchers estimate that up to 10 young people were mobilized from each Chukchi village. Chukchi villages have an average of 300 to 400 inhabitants. This means that in each village about 10% of Indigenous men of working age could be called up for mobilization.

The protests of Russian citizens, including Indigenous ones, are severely suppressed by the authorities. Recent well-known cases are related to Konstantin and Valery Ledkov, both natives of the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug.

At the same time, apparently fearing protests against mobilization, the Russian authorities changed their strategy. Now they are attracting people to the war with big contracts. According to indirect evidence and estimates of information from public sources, over 1,000 volunteers and conscripts left Chukotka for the front in the first two years of the full-scale war. This is about 10% of men of working age in the region. At least half of them are representatives of Indigenous peoples.

We also would like to point out fatal consequences for Indigenous communities. In fact, they are being deprived of their future. Families will not be created in Indigenous villages without young men, and traditional environmental management will disappear along with identity.

Persecution of Indigenous activists by the Russian authorities

I have already mentioned that the Russian authorities use administrative and criminal pressure against activists and leaders of Indigenous peoples and communities. All members of our Inter-

national Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia have been through such persecution. You can find information about our cases on the Indigenous Russia website.

Perhaps the most famous Russian Indigenous political prisoner is Alexander Gabyshev. In 2019, Gabyshev announced a marche to Moscow, protesting against Putin's dictatorial regime. He was detained by security forces and sent to a psychiatric institution for treatment against his wish. Memorial has recognized Alexander Gabyshev as a political prisoner.

Russian Indigenous activists and political asylum – the situation in Western countries

Our Committee is grateful to the European Union for the support of people from Russia who protested against the war and the dictatorial regime in Russia. Nevertheless, we must pay attention to the fact that Russian activists sometimes do not even have the opportunity to gain access to the EU mechanism for political asylum. Therefore, most of them are forced to hide from the persecution of the Russian authorities in countries such as Georgia, Kazakhstan, or Armenia. Proximity to the borders with Russia contributes to the high vulnerability of political activists.

There are also political asylum seekers among the Indigenous peoples. One of them is Andrey Danilov, a member of our Committee. He has been awaiting political asylum since March 2022. Refusal or non-granting of asylum implies a return to Russia, where activists will be convicted, and in prison they will be tortured and may even be killed.

I have only touched some of the problems and challenges of the Indigenous peoples of Russia. I thank the organizers for the opportunity to provide information about the situation of Indigenous peoples in Russia. We hope that the International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia will continue to cooperate with the European Parliament for the benefit and prosperity of our continent and the world.

Thanks for your attention!



ANASTASIA CRICKLEY

A number of years ago, when I was Chair of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, I had the honor and pleasure to meet some of the Shor people and some of the people from Kazas, and I am very concerned this afternoon to hear again your stories and to hear that things far from improving have got significantly worse in a number of instances. So, thank you very much for sharing that with us; it's really important that we are informed that and that we are informed not just about the general contours of your story, but also about the current realities that you face. It's just very helpful to know.

But I want to say really is that, as someone who has been involved in work with minorities for very many years and someone who myself although not a member of a minority have been in a minority position as an Irish emigrant in England and in the UK. I believe that what's really important is to acknowledge how minorities are treated, how indigenous people are treated at times of war, and I therefore have no doubt at all but to acknowledge the veracity of what you have been telling us.

Secondly, it seems to me that the importance of civil society cannot be underestimated, and I want to salute your courage and also the courage of Stefania and her colleagues in ADC Memorial who have brought so many of these issues to the for with such courage and such commitment over a long number of years. Civil society for human rights, for democracy and for all, but especially for marginalized and minority groups and Indigenous people is of crucial importance, and one of your colleagues reminded us very clearly of decoration on minorities and the UN decoration also on Indigenous peoples. But what I think is really important in what you've said, and what's really important to

move forward is that civil society is beyond just individual activist, it's beyond individual champions, and it's beyond individual defenders all of whom are absolutely crucial, but it also is about the collective effort of all the members of your community. And an approach also that for me needs to explicitly name Indigenous groups, Indigenous peoples and minority groups if we were to compare for example with women, you would say that unless women are named, our needs and our rights cannot be achieved, realized or met. And I think for civil society as well it's explicitly important that your needs and your

rights as minority peoples and as Indigenous peoples are named. So, from this point of view it seems to me that at this point in time of great importance is the since we're in the European Parliament at the moment, virtually or in reality, of great importance is the role that the European Union can play for example and maybe and it seems to me that as a new Parliament which has begun maybe a little while ago that perhaps it would be really important to look to guidelines on minorities, the EU guidelines on the rights of minorities and Indigenous peoples which is something some of us have been asking for a considerable period of time. This would be something for me, and I speak as someone who was Chair of the first Fundamental Rights Agency of the European Union. This is something which could go alongside a number of the other instruments that are available and indeed could also go alongside the legislation that's available within the European Union but that sort of guidelines could also be particularly important for the EEAS and for instruments that are operating outside of the European Union.

I think, in addition to my previous roles with the UN and with regard to the Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in particular it's really fundamentally important that all of the human rights mechanisms in Geneva are both familiar with your case but not only as something to be listed but as something around. Which action needs to be taken at this point in time. Thank you very much for taking the time to share your stories. As Chair of Minority Rights Group, we are familiar with a number of the issues in Minority Rights Group that you speak of. We're very lucky to have Stefania also as a member of the Board, and I commit myself to trying to support in any way I can the causes that you brought to our attention.

Well, thank you very much.

ADC MEMORIAL AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF RUSSIA (ICIPR) INFORMED THE UN BODIES ABOUT VIOLATIONS OF THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN RUSSIA

ADC Memorial and ICIPR inform the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders about the repression against independent defenders of the rights of indigenous peoples working in rural and remote areas in the Russian Federation and draw attention to the following problems:

- Criminalization of human rights work (inter alia, inclusion of Indigenous groups into the register of “extremist organisations”);
- Suppression of freedom of speech and association, violent suppression of peaceful protests, including those related to environmental issues closely associated to the agenda of Indigenous peoples’ rights;
- Substitution of independent human rights defenders by pro-government ones and the use of loyal Indigenous activists to promote the Russian agenda at the international level, including with the aim of lifting sanctions
- Obstacles in obtaining asylum in other countries by activists and defenders of the rights of Indigenous peoples forced to leave Russia (as in the case of Saami Indigenous people activists seeking asylum in Norway).

The authors of the input address the following recommendations to the Special Rapporteur:

- Pay attention to the destructive activities of the authorities of the Russian Federation on international platforms, in particular, in the UN and its relevant bodies related to the rights of Indigenous peoples (Expert Mechanism, Permanent Forum); prevent attempts by representatives of Russia to influence the selection of participants in international conferences from among representatives of minorities and Indigenous peoples.
- Call Russia to respect the rights of Indigenous peoples, including guarantees of freedom of speech, expression, association, and free and independent activity of human rights defenders.
- Call Russia to repeal repressive legislation on “foreign agents” and “undesirable organizations”.
- Urge migration authorities of the countries where defenders of the rights of indigenous peoples seek asylum to take into account the real risks associated with the criminalization of human rights activities by the Russian authorities, avoid both delays of the asylum procedure and extradition.

ADC Memorial and ICIPR informed the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Russia about violations of the rights of Indigenous peoples. Special attention was paid to the problem of the catastrophic consequences of involving Indigenous peoples in Russia’s criminal war against Ukraine, as well as the criminalization of indigenous activists and organizations (recognizing dozens of groups and organizations as “extremist” and then “terrorist” in 2024).

Two analytical materials were submitted to the UN Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples for its future consolidated reports: “Indigenous Peoples right to data, including data collection and disaggregation” and “The right of Indigenous Peoples to their traditional economies”.

The experts emphasize that ensuring the rights of Indigenous peoples to the traditional economy is impossible without the development of independent institutions of self-government and full-fledged, rather than formal/fake participation of Indigenous communities in decision-making. In order to implement the principle of free, prior and informed consent, it is necessary to fully inform Indigenous communities about the plans of mining companies to use traditional territories. The issue of data collection and disaggregation is directly related to the involvement of Indigenous representatives in Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine, since mobilization, military service, registration of the wounded and killed, and other military aspects require specialized recording and, accordingly, data collection and storage, in the case of Indigenous peoples – disaggregated, since they have special conditions of conscription.



One more report responds to the Special Rapporteur’s on the rights of Indigenous Peoples invitation for contributions to his upcoming thematic report, which will be presented at the 60th session of the UN Human Rights Council in September 2025. This report will examine how states identify and officially recognize Indigenous peoples. The Special Rapporteur has highlighted persistent challenges – including vague definitions, unclear terminology, and inadequate legal frameworks – that hinder the full implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and related international standards. His upcoming report aims to address these barriers, spotlight effective recognition practices, and propose strategies to rectify historical injustices.

Another submission is intended for the Special Rapporteur’s on the rights of Indigenous Peoples annual report to be delivered at the 80th session of the UN General Assembly in October 2025. This report will focus on the identification, documentation, demarcation, registration, and titling of Indigenous peoples’ lands. It will review legal and procedural frameworks, assess implementation obstacles, and highlight successful practices with the goal of strengthening Indigenous land rights globally.

In their contributions to both reports, ADC Memorial and ICIPR emphasize the growing repression of Indigenous activists and rights defenders in the Russian Federation. They underscore that the criminalization of Indigenous advocacy has rendered constructive dialogue between Indigenous communities and the state virtually impossible – a reality that gravely undermines both recognition and the protection of Indigenous rights.

THE BARENTS OBSERVER BEATS RUSSIA IN EUROPEAN COURT AND WAS ADDED TO RUSSIA'S LIST OF 'UNDESIRABLE ORGANISATIONS'



The team of journalists with the Barents Observer. From left: Georgii Chentemirov, Denis Zagore, Atle Staalesen, Olesia Krivtsova, Elizaveta Vereykina and Thomas Nilsen. Photo: Henry Patton,

ADC Memorial expresses solidarity with the independent journalists of the Barents Observer, who are being persecuted for their principled support of the rights of minorities, indigenous peoples of the North, and LGBTI+ people. Immediately after the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) ruled that there had been a violation of the right to freedom of expression (Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights), Russian authorities declared the publication an 'undesirable organization.' They explicitly linked this decision to the Barents Observer's cooperation with Russian defenders of indigenous rights—some of whom prosecutors have listed as Russian citizens in the foreign agents register or on the list of terrorists and extremists—as well as to so-called 'propaganda of non-traditional values,' the term Russia uses to describe the protection of LGBTI+ rights.

The Barents Observer:

The General Prosecutor's office on Friday morning announced that the journalist-owned media based in northern Norway is added to Russia's list of so-called 'undesirable organisations.'

"A significant part of the newspaper's materials have a clearly expressed

anti-Russian character," the Russian state authority writes. "The articles are aimed at stimulating protest motions among the population in north Russian regions, tighten anti-Russian sanctions [and] boosting NATO's military presence by our borders," the notice reads. Furthermore, the Barents Observer is "discrediting the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation." In addition, the newspaper's journalists are propagating "untraditional values," the General Prosecutor argues. The repressive Russian authority also underlines that the editorial staff of the Barents Observer includes Russian journalists in exile, among them people who are on Russia's so-called 'foreign agent' list and the list of "extremists and terrorists."

The announcement by the General Prosecutor is made only one day after the small Norwegian newspaper won a court case in the European Court of Human Rights against Russia's censorship agency Roskomnadzor.

The case 'Barents Observer vs Roskomnadzor' started after the censorship authority in February 2019 blocked the newspaper on Russian territory.

The Barents Observer first appealed the repressive measure in a Russian court. After a loss, a new appeal was filed and subsequently rejected by the Moscow City Court in January 2020. In

June 2021, the case was rejected by the Russian Supreme Court, whereupon the case was taken to Strasbourg.

The case has been supported by the Anti-Discrimination Center Memorial-Brussels. It has been run by lawyer Maksim Olenichev:

"In this case, the Russian authorities exercised censorship by demanding that the Barents Observer remove content they did not like under threat of blocking the media outlet's website. Information about LGBT people and indigenous peoples, whose rights the Russian authorities have been particularly active in suppressing in recent years, was the trigger for the authorities in the case. Such information, as disseminated by the Barents Observer, is sensitive to the Russian authorities because of the state-sponsored policy of homophobia and restriction of indigenous peoples' rights.

The court found that the Russian authorities had violated Article 10 of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and found that The Independent Barents Observer's right to freedom of expression had been violated. This means that such situations should not occur in a democratic state that respects the principles of human rights. This judgement has implications for all 46 member states of the Council of Europe: they must take into account the legal positions of the ECtHR, regardless of the state that was the defendant in the case," Olenichev adds.

Editor of the Barents Observer Thomas Nilsen believes cases like the 'Barents Observer vs Roskomnadzor' are important for democracy and press freedom in a future Russia:

"The ruling in Strasbourg might not have any direct implications for us today, but we still think it is very important for a future Russia that one day might come out of the darkness, and again chooses to follow the rule of law. In such a moment, journalistic freedom and a clear court decision that independent media like the Barents Observer can't be blocked for writing the truth, will help guideline the future."

*Read more at
The Barents Observer site*

BLAME IT ON THE ROMA

A human rights activist explains how discrimination and bigotry shape life in one of Russia's most vulnerable communities

Cherta Media (translation by Meduza) published an interview with Stefania Kulaeva on the situation of Roma in Russia:

In October 2024, a taxi driver named Elena Manzhosova was found murdered outside Chelyabinsk in the city of Korkino. When locals learned of the crime, they marched to the suspected killer's home, began breaking windows, and set fire to several nearby houses. The riot quickly escalated into an indiscriminate attack on the murder suspect's entire community: the Roma population living on Korkino's outskirts. In the aftermath of Manzhosova's tragic killing, city residents have demanded the illegal deportation of Roma community members, and state officials have partly obliged these bigotries by intensifying police raids on Roma settlements in the Chelyabinsk region and beyond.

To learn about the origins of negative stereotypes against Russia's Romanis, why members of this community often live in isolation, and why Russians often view them as illegal immigrants, Cherta Media recently spoke to Stefania Kulayeva, an expert at Memorial's Anti-Discrimination Center, who has spent more than 30 years advocating for the rights of the Roma population in Russia. Meduza summarizes Kulayeva's comments.

"At first, we gathered information about violations of Roma rights directly from the affected individuals," Kulayeva told Cherta Media, explaining how she once worked on a research project that brought her to more than 100 clustered Roma settlements. "I'd just walk up to people and say, 'Hello, tell me what's wrong here,'" she recalled. Through these interactions, Kulayeva learned firsthand accounts of failing education programs, police abuse, murder, and torture.

Later, she got involved in legal assistance to Roma communities, litigating to prevent the demolition of homes, helping people register their properties, and sometimes even arranging defense attorneys for Roma members falsely accused of crimes.



Residents of dense settlements have found themselves in a situation of structural discrimination, when one problem leads to another: it is not possible to bring water, electricity, and gas lines into an unregistered house, it is difficult for residents of such a house to apply for registration at place of residence and personal documents, it is not possible to receive mail, there is no access to social payments and medical assistance without a registration at place of residence, and children have trouble enrolling at school, which, in turn, leads to low levels of education, unemployment, and even greater poverty.

HOW RUSSIA'S EDUCATION SYSTEM FAILS THE ROMA COMMUNITY

Kulayeva has worked extensively with grade schools across Russia to find better accommodations for Roma students. "Children from [Roma] settlements often attend segregated classes with shockingly poor teaching quality and degrading conditions: tiny rooms, staggered schedules, and no sanitation or sports facilities," Kulayeva told Cherta Media. "And everything missing is readily available in classrooms next door where the 'white kids' study. It's like an apartheid system."

According to Kulayeva, schools exploit a loophole in Russia's regulations to separate Roma students like this, classifying their lessons as "special education." In theory, isolating Roma children is meant to give them the extra attention they need to "catch up" with their peers in Russian language proficiency. In practice, however, these students are denied a proper education in anything, ensuring their inability to matriculate at higher grade levels and raising the likelihood that they'll become dropouts at ages as young as 10.

Kulayeva recalled a visit to one "jaw-dropping" school in the Tambov region that claimed to provide nine years of education for Roma children:

It was a complete sham. The students were taught in a shack with two rooms and a wood-burning stove. The furnace operator taught algebra, geometry, physics, chemistry, geography, and English, while the janitor handled the other subjects.

When Russia's education system fails Roma children, it cultivates future parents who will question the utility of school for their kids, Kulayeva told Cherta Media: "Making education a priority should be the responsibility of the state. The state must understand that it is imperative for all children to attend school."

Asked about developing Roma students' Russian language fluency, Kulayeva reasoned that Roma children in elementary school should be taught in their native language, though she also urged educators to work toward integrating these students. "We explained [...] why segregation is harmful and why it's important to try, in any way

possible, to include the children in activities,” Kulayeva said, describing her work with teachers at “roundtable” events organized to coordinate education efforts related to Roma students.

RACISM AND JOB DISCRIMINATION

Kulayeva also criticized outsiders for failing to recognize the diversity of Russia’s Roma communities. “Journalists often illustrate stories about one Roma group with photos of another,” she complained, accusing reporters of “textbook racism” when they conflate groups who often adhere to very different lifestyles (for example, regarding community rules on drug use).

The discrimination Russia’s Roma members face today resembles past pogroms against Jews, said Kulayeva. This is especially true, she explained, when it comes to stereotypes about drug crimes:

Where there is demand, there will be suppliers, and such niches are often filled by those who, like Jews under the Tsar, were barred from working in other sectors. It’s the same here: the majority of Roma have nothing to do with drugs, though some, like in any group of people, use them and therefore possess them.

Kulayeva spoke extensively to Cherta Media about the limited job opportunities for Russia’s Roma community members due to a mix of ethnic bigotry, poor education, and language barriers. “Discrimination and the inability to find decent work have, in various eras, pushed different groups of people into illegal activities,” she explained, highlighting that the elusiveness of school diplomas for Roma students is especially disqualifying for legal employment. Even uneducated foreigners can leverage their past work experience to find jobs more easily than many Russian citizens in the Roma community, said Kulayeva.

A HOUSING CRISIS

In 1956, the USSR effectively criminalized the Roma community’s nomadic way of life, leading to a police crackdown that rounded up many Roma members and dumped them on allocated land.

“This abruptly shattered a centuries-old way of life,” Kulayeva told Cherta Media. However, these allot-

Most of the Roma population in the RF lives in dense settlements, which sprung up across the country in 1956, when a special law banning the nomadic way of life was adopted. In the years since, existing dense Roma settlements have burgeoned, and new ones have appeared. However, the absolute majority of dwellings do not meet basic household standards, and the houses and land on which these houses are located are not properly registered under current law.



ments didn’t grow with the Roma population, leading to increasingly crowded accommodations and greater reliance on shoddy home extensions. “The authorities provided no assistance in registering these homes, and the problems of overcrowding and safety in such settlements were simply ignored,” Kulayeva said.

In post-Soviet Russia, owning a home outside the country’s metropolises became prestigious, and Russians went looking for real estate to build new cottages. “This led to demolitions in the Roma settlements and the expulsion of their residents,” said Kulayeva.

RUSSIA’S ROMA AND THE INVASION OF UKRAINE

Following Elena Manzhosova’s murder, one of the criticisms Korkino residents made against the city’s Roma community has been to highlight the absence of Roma soldiers fighting in Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Kulayeva said this reproach isn’t unique to the Chelyabinsk area:

There’s a video from the Volgograd region where the administration summoned Roma representatives and began yelling at them: “Why is everyone fighting, and you’re not?” And these pitiful, crushed fathers and grandfathers of families answered, “Well, maybe you

could assign us to weave some nets instead.” I deeply respect that none of them said, “Sure, we’ll go fight.”

Kulayeva told Cherta Media that she suspects military recruiters have turned their attention to Russia’s Roma because they assume pillaging these communities of able-bodied men “won’t provoke any protests.” However, she pointed out that the education system’s abandonment of Roma students has put them largely out of the military’s reach since men are typically registered for the armed services in high school or later. “It turns out that the Roma are an excluded group in every sense,” Kulayeva quipped.

Full interview with Stefania Kulaeva on Meduza’s website

ROMA ON THE FRONTLINE: «WE ARE FIGHTING FOR UKRAINE» Stories of those who defend Ukraine and challenge stereotypes about Roma

As part of the annual events dedicated to International Roma Day – 8 of April, a discussion took place in Brussels focusing on the participation of Roma in defending Ukraine against Russian aggression. The event was organized by ADC “Memorial” with the support of the International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) and with the participation of the Ukrainian Center for Roma Studies of Kherson State University.

The main speakers of the meeting were Arsen Mednyk and Oleksii Panchenko – military veterans who joined the army voluntarily, and representatives of Ukraine’s Roma community.



Arsen Mednyk and Oleksii Panchenko

Since the very beginning of Russia’s aggression in 2014, thousands of Roma have been affected by the war: as civilians on temporarily occupied territories, as refugees trying to escape to safer areas, and as military personnel. Since February 2022, Ukrainian Roma have been sharing the hardships of war together with the other nationalities, defending their homes, families, and country on the frontline.

During the meeting, a documentary film was presented about the life of Arsen Mednyk – a veteran of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, who went through intense combat and suffered a serious injury. Despite the discrimination Arsen faced both before the war and at the beginning of his service, he became a commander of a storm-unit and shattered the stereotypes usually connected with Roma.

“I went to fight for my home, for my family. Later, I saw how the storm-teams worked – and I wanted to be one of them,” he said.

Another participant of the meeting, Oleksii Panchenko, emphasized:

“In battle, we are all equal – we drank from the same flask, shared a single can of stew among five people.”

Participants of the meeting in Brussels also discussed discrimination and crimes committed by Russian forces against the Roma population in the occupied territories of Ukraine (in Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions): killings, rapes, abductions, and extortion. Yanush Panchenko, an expert and human rights defender, called for these cases to be documented and made public:

“Many Roma are afraid to tell these stories because they hope to return

home. But silence does not protect. These stories must be heard.”

According to experts and media estimates, around a thousand Roma are serving in the Ukrainian Armed Forces in 2025. Their contribution is not only to the defense of the country but also to breaking down long-standing stereotypes. “Arsen, Oleksii, and other Roma who are fighting on the frontlines have done more in three years to combat discrimination and improve the image of Roma in Ukraine and Europe than anyone could have expected,” says Yanush Panchenko.

This publication contains three first-person testimonies:

Arsen Mednyk, who went to the front after the occupation of his hometown Bucha and became a commander, breaking stereotypes about Roma in the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

Oleksii Panchenko, a driver from Zaporizhzhya region, for whom the frontline became a place of equality and brotherhood.

Yanush Panchenko, a human rights defender and researcher who documents the stories of Roma affected by the war.

Their stories are not only about war but also about dignity, solidarity, and the right to be part of their country’s history.

«I WENT TO FIGHT FOR MY HOME»

The story of Arsen Mednyk

My name is Arsen. I went to the front because my family was under occupation – in the town of Bucha. This is my

hometown. My relatives, neighbors, and friends lived there – Ukrainians, with whom we were always close. I went to fight for my home and my family.

At first, I served in the Civil Defense in Kyiv region – in Bucha, Kyiv. The attitude toward me was initially distrustful. I am Roma, and I was not immediately accepted. But everything changed in the first battle. Then I showed that I could act decisively and be at the right place. My comrades and I survived, and after that, they began to treat me as an equal. I broke the stereotypes. They saw in me not a “Gypsy,” but a person.

Later, I saw how the storm-unit worked. So coordinated, like a single organism – I wanted to be part of such a team. By that time, my family was already safe, and I went to the military enlistment office and soon found myself at the training camp. Thanks to my experience and the support of a former commander, I quickly completed my training. There I received my nick-name – Baron. I had leadership skills, and I always spoke the truth, whether I was talking to a soldier or an officer.

I knew how hard it was for the officers of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and I respected them. They respected me as well. Once, there were large-caliber machine guns lying on the training ground, and no one knew how to set them up. I found a video on YouTube, studied it carefully, and set it up correctly on the first try. That earned respect, and people started to trust me.

Yes, I faced discrimination. One guy said: “Gypsies are fun people, but we don’t need them here.” But my comrades stopped him themselves. Without fights – they just explained. Since then – not a single word against me.

There was discrimination before the war, too. The police often stopped me — just because of my appearance. In the subway, in stores. I instinctively reached for my passport. When you live with this all the time — it weighs on you. But I went to the army not for those who discriminated against me. I went for the future. For the children. For the people.

When you know that your family could die, and you have a chance to protect them — you take up arms. That was my decision. And on the frontline, everything is different. There, it doesn't matter who you are. What matters is how you act. I became a commander after our commander was killed. The guys themselves said: "You're the commander. You weren't afraid, you went forward. It's safe for us to follow you."

But there were also terrible moments. One of them was the death of my friend Yura. He was only 22 years old. A tank shell pierced a tree, his bulletproof vest, and his body. He died right in front of my eyes — it was like losing a brother. He had no wife, no children, he was the last in his family line — it is genocide. And I will never forget this.

After I was wounded — shrapnel in my arm, loss of hearing, pain — an inner war began. Insomnia, memories, guilt for surviving. Only a conversation with a psychologist helped me begin to get out of it. Now, every day feels like a battle. But I hold on.

In the future, I want to return to my craft. I am a shoe repairman, a jeweler. I will work. And of course, I see my future only with Ukraine. This is my home.

Since 2014, the situation in the country has started to change. There was less lawlessness, less discrimination. And since 2022, people began helping each other. The main thing is to survive. And I see how attitudes towards Roma are changing. I told people: "You know me, I have never done anything bad to you — why do you judge me because of my ethnicity?" Sometimes it worked.

I believe that our contribution, the contribution of Roma on the frontlines, would change attitudes towards us. We are defending Ukraine. And I want us to be respected for this. Even a simple "thank you" is important. It helps to believe that we did not fight in vain.

ROMA ON THE FRONTLINE IS NOT A SENSATION, BUT A REALITY

The story of Oleksii Panchenko: volunteer, driver, soldier

My name is Oleksii. I am Rom, originally from the Zaporizhzhya region. Before the war, I worked all over Europe — as a truck driver, a mechanic. When the full-scale invasion began, I left the occupied territory on April 8. With us were a woman and three children. By April 15, I was al-

ready at the military enlistment office. I came there voluntarily, I accepted it as the only possible decision.

I served as a convoy driver, operating a large vehicle. We were often sent on evacuations, transportation missions. I was rarely stationed in one place, always on the move. It was hard, but it was important for me to be in the right place and to do everything I could.

Honestly, no one initially knew I'm a Rom — they didn't ask. Later, maybe they guessed — but no one said anything. Not in my unit, not in the battalion. When it eventually became known that I am a Rom, people were surprised. They even came over from other battalions — as if on an excursion.

But on the frontlines, everyone is equal. There, it doesn't matter who you are by nationality. In the trench, in the forest, while driving — everyone shares one can of stew, drinks water from the same bottle. I didn't feel any discrimination. We were a real team.

The warmest moment of my service was my birthday. We were on high alert, under threat. The guys went to the store, brought back a big cake, and two bottles of champagne. I was asleep in the KAMAZ truck. And when I woke up, there was the cake, my friends next to me, all alive. That was the best gift. Because there was death all around. Too much death — I don't even want to say how much. But that day, I will remember it forever.

My family still lives in the occupied territory. We constantly worry about them. When we were traveling through Vasylivka, a Chechen soldier stopped us at a checkpoint. He said, "Stay here — it will be fun." But I replied: "No, I'll go further." They checked us, looked at our documents, and we got through. There were many checkpoints, but we were lucky.

I didn't face discrimination personally, but I know it exists. I always tried to be dignified, to do my job conscientiously. And maybe that was felt. I had comrades who valued actions, not origins. We became true brothers.

In war, this is felt even more acutely — your life depends on the other person. And their life depends on you. There, everything is laid bare. Real values, spirit, determination. And nationality doesn't matter anymore.

ROMA ON THE FRONTLINE: WE ARE FIGHTING FOR UKRAINE

The story of Yanush Panchenko — human rights defender, researcher, and co-founder of the Ukrainian Center for Roma Studies at Kherson State University

I am Roma, and I have dedicated most of my life to working with the Roma

community — as an activist, researcher, and human rights defender. I know how discrimination works from the inside — not only because I have experienced it myself but also because I listen to the stories of others. People like Arsen and Oleksii.

When I entered university in Kyiv, my family told me: "You're going to live among non-Roma — don't tell anyone you're Roma." For a long time, I remained silent among students and new acquaintances. But one day I realized: hiding yourself means agreeing with other people's prejudices. I started to speak openly about my identity — and I saw that it changed attitudes. The professors began to take an interest, to show respect. I realized I could not only speak — I could represent our community.

Today, I work with those affected by the war — including Roma. I know of cases where Roma were abducted, tortured, held in captivity. A boy with a disability, a teenager, was taken to prison in Kakhovka. They forced him to dig, to bury bodies. A woman had to ransom her own son from the soldiers. My brother was detained because of messages found on his phone. These stories are an everyday tragedy that people are often afraid to talk about.

Roma remain silent — out of fear of losing their homes, the possibility of returning, or simply out of a habit of keeping to themselves. But we must speak out. Because the contribution of Roma to this war is enormous. In the first years alone, around a thousand Roma served in the Armed Forces of Ukraine. They have done more to break stereotypes than dozens of roundtables.

Remember in 2022, when Roma captured a tank in Lyubymivka? It became a meme — and at the same time, a real symbol. Our research showed that 55% of Ukrainians know about it, and many of them changed their attitudes toward Roma. That is the power of a real story.

But everything depends on whether these stories will be told. Will they be heard? Will they become part of Ukraine's history? These people have already done their part — they lost their health, and some lost their lives. Their input is no less than anyone else's.

I dream that after victory, Roma will be visible — in schools, in museums, on the streets, in parliament. Because they are already on the frontlines. And they are fighting for Ukraine.

Photos are courtesy of Yanush Panchenko

THE ECTHR RECOGNISED DISCRIMINATORY TREATMENT OF THE CRIMEAN TATAR POPULATION DURING THE RUSSIAN OCCUPATION OF CRIMEA

together with violations of the rights to life, to protection from torture, to freedom of conscience and expression, to protection of privacy, and to a fair trial

On June 25, 2024, the European Court of Human Rights (ECTHR) issued its judgment on the case of Ukraine v. Russia (re Crimea), on complaints from 2014 and 2018 concerning a pattern of human rights violations in Crimea. The 17-judge panel unanimously found Russia guilty of having violated 11 articles of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, Articles 1 and 2 of Protocol 1, and Article 2 of Protocol 4 to the Convention since the seizure of Crimea in February 2014:

The ECTHR recognized Russia's responsibility for the events in Crimea from the first day of the annexation, from 27 February to 18 March 2014 (date of signature of the "Accession Treaty" of the Republic of Crimea to the Russian Federation), and that Russia's "effective control" of Crimea was based on the military involvement of Russian armed forces in Crimea. The ECTHR also found that the claimed violations should be considered as violations of the International humanitarian law – The Fourth Geneva Convention (the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War), and quoted a number of provisions on the obligations of the "occupying authorities"/"occupying forces" to respect certain rights in the "occupied territory".

Margaryta Sokorenko, Ukraine's Representative on ECtHR Matters, said:

"This is the first case when an international court has found the Russian Federation responsible for the policy of wide-scale and systematic violations of a number of human rights and freedoms in occupied Crimea and Sevastopol. This judgement is unique, with the ECtHR recognising a number of violations for the first time in its jurisprudence – Russia's unlawful application of its legislation in the occupied territory; unlawful "courts"; enforced change of citizenship. This is particularly important as Russia commits all the same violations in any part of Ukraine under its occupation".

In the judgment, the Court stated that it had sufficient evidence of violations by Russia – in particular, reports by intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations, corroborated by witness testimony and other materials – to conclude beyond reasonable doubt that the cases of violations of the rights and freedoms of Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars living in Crimea were sufficiently numerous and interrelated to constitute a practice or system of violations.

ADC Memorial, together with Ukrainian and Russian human rights organisations, has documented violations of the rights of Crimean residents since 2014, including discrimination against the Crimean Tatar and Ukrainian population of the occupied peninsula. The reports were submitted to the relevant UN HRC Committees (Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, HRC, Special Rapporteurs, UPR), as well as informed the Advisory Committee of the Council of Europe about violations of the Framework Convention on the Rights of National Minorities by the Russian Federation. The persecution of vulnerable groups – LGBTI people, Crimean Tatars, Ukrainians – since the annexation of Crimea has been described in detail in our reports:

2016

Violation of LGBTI Rights in Crimea and Donbass: The Problem of Homophobia in Territories Beyond Ukraine's Control

2017

The Russian Federation: Violation of the Economic and Social Rights of Vulnerable Groups (pp. 17-22)

Racism, Discrimination and Fight Against "Extremism" in Contemporary Russia and its Controlled Territories (pp. 12-27)

2019

ADC "Memorial" submitted information regarding the situation in Crimea to the Committee on Elimination of Racial Discrimination

2020

The list of issues regarding access to fair trial and torture of representatives of ethnic and religious minorities (p.3)

2021

Discrimination and Persecution of the Crimean Tatar People in 2014-2021 for the UN Special Rapporteurs on Human Rights

An overview of the situation of some ethnic minorities in the region of Eastern Europe and Central Asia (pp.2-3) for preparing the report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights "Effective promotion of the implementation of the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities"

2023

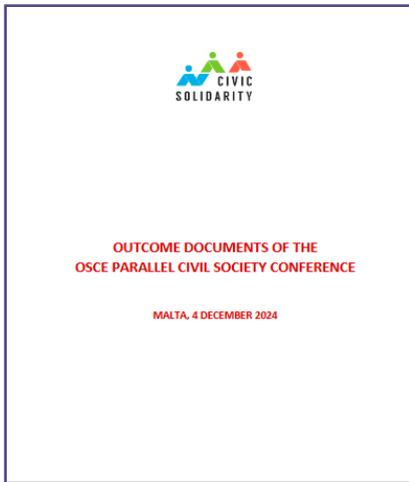
Joint report on the situation in Russia in the frame of the UPR: racism and discrimination based on ethnicity, migration status and citizenship (pp.4-6)

Racism in Russia: Report of ADC Memorial and International Committee of the Indigenous Peoples of Russia to the UN CERD (pp.8-11)

Following its expulsion from the Council of Europe on 16 March 2022, Russia has ceased communication with the ECtHR and has refused to enforce any ECtHR judgments. However, the ECtHR's legal judgement *Ukraine v. Russia (re Crimea)* will influence further policy towards Russia's aggression against Ukraine and judicial decisions on the other cases and lawsuits filed against Russia in international institutions (the ECtHR has received more than 7,000 individual complaints related to Russia's aggression since 2014).

The Court's judgement confirms that repression and discrimination in Crimea are part of a large interconnected campaign of political repression implemented by Russia in the annexed territory, aimed at stifling any political opposition to Russian policies in Crimea and entailed systematic violations of civil rights and freedoms.

MALTA DECLARATION: CIVIL SOCIETY ON PRIORITIZING HUMAN RIGHTS PROTECTION IN THE OSCE AREA



On 4 December 2024, the OSCE Parallel Civil Society Conference took place in Malta. The conference was organised by the Civic Solidarity Platform (CSP), a network of over a hundred human rights NGOs in the OSCE region. ADC Memorial expert spoke in a panel discussion on minority rights and contributed to the development of the conference’s outcome document.

The conference participants called for the reform of the OSCE, protection of civil society space, and mobilization to support Ukraine and resist Russian aggression:

“The OSCE suffers from acute diversion of positions of participating States on key matters of international relations and common security. This diversion created a dramatic situation of a lack of consensus as a direct consequence of the abuse of its decision-making procedures by a small minority of participating States which are at the same time the main violators of the Helsinki principles and the OSCE commitments. This has essentially paralysed and decapitated the organisation. The OSCE institutional framework relies on the foundational principles of the inviolability of borders, interconnectedness of all three dimensions of security, the binding nature of UN human rights norms, and the essential importance of multilateral cooperation in addressing common problems. These principles are underpinned by the recognition that the human dimension commitments “are matters of direct and legitimate concern to all participating States and do not belong exclusively to the internal affairs of the State concerned” and on the acknowledgment of civil society as a key partner in the advancement of the Helsinki principles and the implementation of OSCE commitments.”

ADC Memorial expert participated in the panel discussion “Discrimination

of and hate crime against vulnerable groups: A blow to the universality of human rights and the democratic fabric of our societies”. The panel addressed such issues as xenophobia, discrimination, and migrantophobia in Russia and the impact of Russian policies on other countries, as well as discrimination against minorities in the region. It also included migrantophobia and the growing influence of far-right political parties in Europe, the rise of anti-Muslim racism, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism in the OSCE region, and the persecution of LGBTIQ people in Russia and beyond. The discussion highlighted widespread discrimination, violations of minority rights, and the exclusion of vulnerable groups in many OSCE member states:

‘Russian government and its propaganda demonstrate aggressive and xenophobic attitudes to the people from other countries – first of all to Ukrainians, but also to migrants from Central Asia and Southern Caucasus, as well as to people from the so-called “collective West”, and at the same time support nationalistic and homophobic discourse towards peo-

The final documents of the conference have been published and include the Malta Declaration, which highlights the need to strengthen and reform the OSCE in times of crisis. It also emphasizes the importance of ensuring a greater role for civil society in upholding the Helsinki principles, protecting civil society space, and safeguarding security of human rights defenders, combating torture and enforced disappearances in both peacetime and conflict, the OSCE’s role in tackling climate change and environmental degradation as a multidimensional security crisis. For civil society representatives, it is evident that fundamental reforms of the OSCE are necessary. Participants emphasized that the OSCE should place particular focus on conflict prevention:

‘We emphasise that the OSCE focus should be on preventing conflicts. Disarmament, demilitarisation, reduction of military spending, curtailing the international arms trade and arms production, and eliminating nuclear weapons should be named as specific measures used to that end. The paragraph on this subject should also reflect the gendered, racialised, and



Photo by civicsolidarity.org

ple from Russia itself, targeting ethnic and religious minorities, LGBTIQ people, and even attacking the rights of women.

Russia exports these policies to other countries. Xenophobic and homophobic laws and practices are imposed not only on those under the control of the Russian regime, but also on neighbouring countries through political, ideological and economic influence, supported by local conservative (in some cases religious) groups and politicians. It concerns Georgia, Belarus and Kyrgyzstan which adopted discriminatory laws very similar to the Russian ones’.

other power dynamics as part of the root causes of armed conflict and violence, and highlight the role of imperialism, economic dominance, and resource extraction in conflict dynamics. Imperative for this paragraph is also the inclusion of a gender lens and support for movements that are working towards peace.

We see a strong need to include analysis of gendered power dynamics or patriarchy, because it is not enough calling for “gender equality” and participation of women for transformation of gendered power structures.’

ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE ADVOCATING WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN KYRGYZSTAN: TO BE CONTINUED

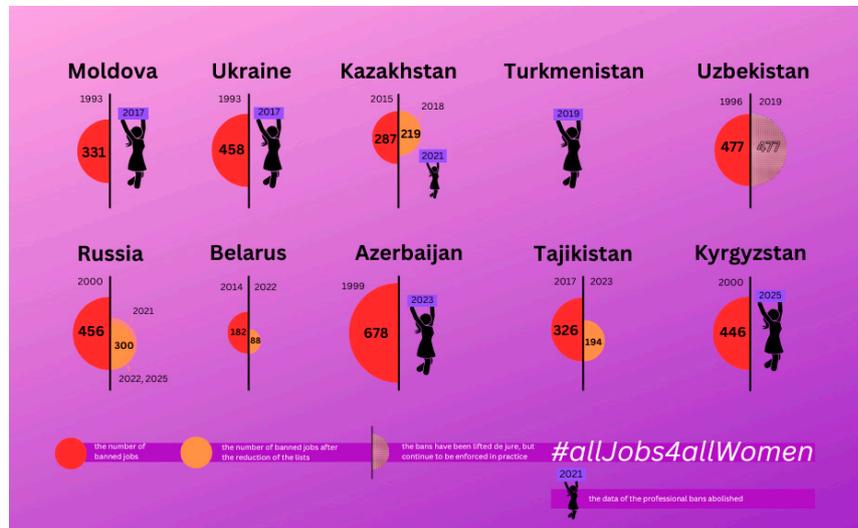
Joint press release of ADC Memorial and Bir Duino Kyrgyzstan
dated to the International Women's Day, March 8

The new Labor Code of Kyrgyzstan, which entered into force at the end of January 2025, generally lifted professional bans for women, while maintaining restrictions on certain professions only for pregnant and lactating women. This measure became a success of the campaign #alljobs4allwomen carried out by ADC Memorial and its partners and aimed at the abolition of discriminatory restrictions for women in employment (the so-called "lists of prohibited professions") and the long-awaited result of many years of efforts by the civil society of Kyrgyzstan.

The #alljobs4allwomen campaign was launched in March 2017. Thanks to the efforts of human rights defenders, almost all countries in the Eastern Europe and Central Asia region, where such lists existed, took some measures to ensure gender equality in employment.

Moldova (2017) and Kazakhstan (2021) demonstrated the best practices: discriminatory articles on the lists of prohibited professions were removed from the labor codes, while guarantees for pregnant women and mothers were strengthened. Ukraine (2017) and Uzbekistan (2019) abolished only the lists of prohibited professions as such, leaving a reference to them in the labor codes. Belarus, Russia and Tajikistan chose gradually reducing the lists of banned professions without changing the labor codes. Another option was to maintain professional bans only for pregnant or lactating women, as did Azerbaijan (2023) and more recently Kyrgyzstan (2025).

In Kyrgyzstan, the struggle to overcome discrimination against women in the labor sector lasted for many years. Activists and NGOs went to demonstrations to draw attention to the problem, launched an information campaign "Your profession is your choice." Human rights defenders have been engaged in advocacy at the international level, submitting alternative reports to the UN Human Rights Council under the Universal Periodic Report on Human Rights on Kyrgyzstan (in 2019 and 2024). The reports emphasized that the full-fledged employment of women in Kyrgyzstan, including through the abolition of 446 prohibited jobs and professions, would help reduce the dependence of the country's economy on external labor migration, where hundreds of thousands of Kyrgyzstanis are forced to go, among whom a significant percentage are women.



In 2021, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, analyzing the level of gender equality in employment in Kyrgyzstan, recommended not only to abolish the list of professions prohibited for women, as it was called for in the coalition report by ADC Memorial and a group of NGOs from Kyrgyzstan, but also to ensure women's real access to these jobs.

Thanks to the dialogue with civil society, the ideas of non-discrimination in employment were also accepted by the state bodies of Kyrgyzstan. Thus, in 2022, the Ministry of Labor, Social Security and Migration announced a draft regulatory act on the abolition of the list of professions prohibited for women:

"The list of jobs was adopted in 2000, and after 22 years, due to the socio-economic changes in the country, as well as the introduction of new technologies, certain types of work They have withdrawn from the scope of work related to severe, harmful and dangerous working conditions, and, consequently, have lost their relevance."

On November 22, 2023, the Constitutional Court of the Kyrgyz Republic, at the request of K.A. Tusucheva, deciding on the constitutionality of the list of prohibited professions, recognized restrictions on women's work as not contrary to the Constitution, but at the same time, the Court obliged the Cabinet of Ministers of the Kyrgyz Republic to ensure the reasonableness of the list of jobs, professions and positions with harmful and (or) dangerous working conditions in which the use of women's labor is prohibited:

"These guarantees are designed to protect women from the effects of harmful industrial factors, to support them during the crucial period of pregnancy and motherhood, and in the future – to provide them with the opportunity to combine professional and family functions, which is of great social importance. Gender equality should also be manifested in compliance with the principle of equal remuneration for work of equal value, according to which work is evaluated solely according to objective criteria, regardless of who performed it – a man or a woman."

The year 2024 brought two important legal innovations for Kyrgyzstani women: in May, Kyrgyzstan ratified ILO Convention No. 190 on the Elimination of Violence and Harassment at Work; and in December, the Jogorku Kenesh adopted a new Labor Code, implying restrictions only for pregnant and breastfeeding women.

ADC Memorial and Bir Duino Kyrgyzstan welcome the measures taken by the Government of the country to strengthen gender equality and comprehensively ensure women's rights. However, we cannot stop there – we must continue to fight discrimination against women in employment. Job refusals or dismissals due to a person's gender characteristics must be prevented; women must not be restricted in their career, vocational education, or their choice of employment, type of work, or profession. Women's professional choice should be supported, and legislation should be strengthened to protect the rights of women in employment.

THE FIGHT OVER BIRTH RATES IN RUSSIA

In Russia, 41 regions have now introduced a maternity allowance of around 100,000 rubles (approximately €1,070) for pregnant schoolgirls. Previously, this benefit was only available to university students. Officially, the money is intended to support girls in difficult life circumstances — not to encourage pregnancy.

Nina Ostanina, a government official responsible for family affairs, child welfare, and public safety in the Duma, has spoken out against promoting parenthood among school-aged girls. However, in practice, such financial support inevitably acts as an incentive for teenage pregnancies. Her colleague, Olga Pilipenko, who oversees education policy, believes the payments could encourage young women to choose childbirth over abortion. But realistically, a one-time payment of 100,000 rubles is far from enough to cover the short- or long-term costs of motherhood.

For families living in poverty, however, this amount can be a powerful incentive — not just for the young girls themselves, but also for their families. Early pregnancies, teenage marriages, and childbirth before the age of 18 are already widespread in some communities. Experts at ADC Memorial, for example, report that in closely-knit Roma communities, people often become grandparents by the age of 26–28 and great-grandparents by 40–45. This is not an exception — it is reality in many places.

This situation is the result of deep-rooted structural discrimination. Roma communities have historically been unable to escape limited access to education, high unemployment, poverty, and poor living conditions. But the state also plays a role — through neglect and a lack of targeted support for these communities.

There are well-established ways to prevent early marriage. Children who attend school regularly are less likely to marry or become parents at a young age. Later marriages tend to correlate with a positive school experience — consistent attendance, parental involvement, and integration into mainstream classes rather than being placed in so-called “Gypsy classes.”

Rather than tackling these systemic issues in a meaningful and sustainable way, the Russian state often opts for the easier route: either ignoring the problem altogether or reacting only when public outrage arises. When cases of early marriage or underage childbirth come to light, the authorities often respond by prosecuting the minors for allegedly “seducing” adults or punishing the parents for encouraging the behavior.

A recent case of child marriage in a Roma community in Astrakhan drew national attention. In response, Ostanina called for the parents of the underage couple to be prosecuted. Yet early marriage

and pregnancy are neither rare nor confined to Roma communities — especially in patriarchal environments.

Moreover, most Roma girls are unlikely to receive the 100,000-ruble maternity benefit at all. Their pregnancies often begin before they turn 18 — typically after dropping out of school or remaining formally enrolled without any real attendance or participation. For those who do attend school, a new subject called Family Studies has been introduced — part of a broader political campaign aimed at increasing the birth rate. The reasoning behind the course is framed in nationalist and demographic terms. At the official textbook launch, Ostanina explained:

“We used a term provided by professional demographers. They say that a special demographic operation is necessary to preserve our national sovereignty.” She added that this “special operation” would not take place on the battlefield but in society — by protecting and reinforcing traditional values. These values, she said, must be maintained not just in families but also in schools and public life. That, she argued, is why Family Studies was created.

Professional demographers, however, warn that simply “rejuvenating” the birth rate — that is, encouraging younger women to give birth — does not lead to any long-term increase in fertility. They point out that support for school-age mothers, though often cited in political discourse, is rare and mostly symbolic. Such cases are typically treated as emergencies, not as standard policy. “This has nothing to do with demography,” says demographer Alexey Raksha. “It’s just a complete discrediting of pronatalism — and of basic common sense.”

But can we even speak of common sense when the state’s apparent goal is to push women into motherhood?

Some officials have gone so far as to suggest that women should wear miniskirts to attract male attention. Others have proposed discouraging girls from pursuing higher education — or even abolishing abortion rights in certain regions. At the same time, regional governments are attempting to lure women of childbearing age into specific areas to boost local birth statistics.

Financial incentives are also offered to dissuade women from having abortions — only for the state to later remove their children and raise them in state institutions. There is no evidence that any of these strategies result in a real increase in birth rates.

Whether soft or coercive, all of these approaches share a single goal: to reduce women to one role — that of housewife and mother — with little regard for their autonomy, aspirations, or rights.

One might expect that in times of war, economic crisis, and labor shortages, Russia would finally abolish the outdated list of professions banned for women — as many other post-Soviet states have already done, including conservative countries like Uzbekistan. But Russia has chosen a different path: the list is being reduced only gradually and partially.

In December 2022, a draft law was introduced in the State Duma aimed at repealing Article 253 of the Labor Code — the legal foundation for occupational discrimination against women. This would have granted women access to higher-paying jobs and helped improve their pensions. But the proposal was ultimately rejected. The justification? The same logic used to defend most pronatalist policies: women must be protected for the sake of their fertility. The Duma’s Committee on Family, Women, and Children stated that removing employment restrictions for women would be “inappropriate,” arguing:

“Allowing women to engage in hard or hazardous labor would negatively affect their reproductive health and reduce their level of social protection — which, in turn, would harm the demographic situation of our country.”

As a result, women continue to be denied professional freedom — all under the guise of protecting their reproductive health — reinforcing the idea that their primary role is to bear children, not to participate in the economy.

And once again, everything is framed in terms of the “demographic situation” — a phrase repeated so often that it has lost all explanatory power.

That situation, by the way, is shaped not just by birth rates — which are poorly supported and heavily influenced by broader socioeconomic conditions — but also by death rates. And those are rising dramatically. Hundreds of thousands of men have been killed or permanently disabled by Russia’s war against Ukraine. Other contributing factors include rising alcohol consumption, a crumbling healthcare system, economic instability, and declining life expectancy.

Yet the government refuses to confront these underlying problems or reckon with the devastating human cost of war. Instead, it places the burden of the country’s demographic future squarely on women — waging a so-called “special operation” not on the battlefield, but against their autonomy, their free will, and their reproductive rights.

Olga ABRAMENKO
First published on the blog
of Radio Svoboda (in Russian)

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