



<https://icpr.international/>

**For the attention of the UN Special Rapporteur
on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation**

Input for the preparation of the 2025 reports to the UNHRC and the General Assembly

The situation of Indigenous Peoples in Russian Federation

**By Anti-Discrimination Centre Memorial Brussels and International Committee of Indigenous Peoples
of Russia**

January 2025

Contents

Summary

Repression against activists defending the rights of Indigenous peoples

Promotion of the official position of Russian authorities through the UN institutions and mechanisms created for Indigenous peoples

Impact of the war on Indigenous communities

Summary

In Russia, special legislation protects only 47 small Indigenous peoples included into a special register (less than 50,000 people). The Indigenous peoples of the Russian Federation remain one of the vulnerable groups of the population, and their physical survival, preservation of their traditional way of life, culture, and languages are threatened by constant factors (globalization, russification, environmental problems, etc.). According to the data of the last population census (2021), over the past decade, the number of 67% of them has decreased, and some are on the verge of extinction. The standard of living of Indigenous peoples who lead a traditional lifestyle is significantly lower than the average for the country or their regions of residence.

In recent years, the Indigenous peoples of Russia have been negatively affected not only by global crisis events such as the pandemic, climate change, or global economic problems, but also by human rights violations related directly or indirectly to Russia's military aggression against Ukraine. Conscription and the imposition of contract service have mostly affected the poorest regions of Russia, precisely those where ethnic minorities live, thus they disproportionately suffer from mobilization. The participation of Indigenous peoples in the war, which threatens their physical survival, is rather forced and explained by economic reasons: a contract with the Russian army is becoming almost the only opportunity to earn money, pay off debts and loans. Receiving huge payments for participation in hostilities improves the economic situation of families in the short term, but the absence of men and/or their death/injury has catastrophic consequences for Indigenous communities, including in terms of the traditional economy and lifestyle.

At the same time, environmental risks caused by the destruction of traditional territories also continue to take place. The Indigenous peoples of Russia continue to suffer from the activities of mining companies, such as coal mines, alluvial gold mining, and oil spills. The sanctions imposed on the export of Russian coal and other energy resources have not led to a reduction in environmental damage, which negatively affects the ability to engage in traditional economic activities. Repression against civil society, including the application of legislation on "foreign agents" and "undesirable organizations", has made it almost impossible for the activity of ecological and environmental organizations, whose agenda is closely linked to the problems of Indigenous peoples and their traditional territories. As a result of the sanctions, foreign mining companies

have left Russia, while they used to apply standards of social responsibility and environmental safety to a greater extent than the Russian companies that replaced them.

Criminalization of civil activism and human rights activities of Indigenous peoples has become the most sensitive issue of recent times, relevant to all aspects of the life of the Indigenous peoples of Russia. In 2024, both the activists who were forced to emigrate and those who remained in the country and their formal and informal organizations and groups were recognized first as "extremists" and then as "terrorists", and were included into the respective state registers. This entails criminal prosecution and leaves no practical opportunity to participate in public activities guaranteed by law, including in making decisions concerning Indigenous peoples, insisting on their position when interacting with government agencies or businesses, and fully participating in public discussions.

Repression against activists defending the rights of Indigenous peoples

In the last decade, defenders of Indigenous peoples' rights, as the whole civil society in Russia, faced introduction of repressive legislation and practices (the laws on "foreign agents", "undesirable organisations" etc.) Persecutions against anti-war protesters also targeted them, and a number of Indigenous activists had to emigrate.

In 2024, the repressive practices have escalated. At once, in July 2024, 55 organizations were included in the list of "extremists", being declared by the Ministry of Justice as "structural units" of the non-existent "Anti-Russian separatist movement" – that, in its turn, was recognized as "extremist" and banned by the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation on June 7, 2024. Thus, both based in Russia and abroad, both formal and informal organizations and groups that promote the agenda of anti-colonialism, various kinds of emancipation, and the rights of national minorities found themselves in the register. Among them, there are the Aborigin Forum, an informal all-Russia network of activists of indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East, the expert group [Indigenous Russia](#), the International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia ([ICIPR](#)). The latter was created by forcibly emigrated activists after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion to Ukraine; this group is well-known for its uncompromising anti-war position.

The inclusion of the indigenous organizations in the register of "extremists" has already caused an acute reaction. The International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia immediately issued [a statement](#), and, together with the Indigenous Russia and the Batani Foundation, [appealed to UN bodies](#) – both the highest and specialized on protecting the rights of indigenous peoples (the appeal has been supported by more than 100 organizations and activists from around the world). [The statement](#) by ADC Memorial and the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders emphasizes that the Russian authorities have used tried-and-tested tactics to criminalize an entire group: previously, a non-existent "international LGBT movement" was invented by the Russian authorities and declared "extremist", also with some "structural units"; and completely real repression followed immediately against LGBTI representatives. Now the real danger of criminal prosecution threatens representatives of indigenous peoples, especially those who continue to live in Russia.

The organizations included in the register associate this new round of repression, inter alia, with their advocacy activities at the UN venues. [The statement](#) of the International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia lists some previous "milestones": the session of the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Geneva in 2022 – and following blocking of the organization's website; the session in 2023 – and following recognition of the Committee activist Pavel Sulyandziga as a "foreign agent"; the recent session in July 2024 – the accusations of involvement in the separatist movement and the recognition as an "extremist organization".

In December, 2024, under the decision of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation (22.11.2024, № АКПИ24-898с, in force since 28.12.2024), dozens of organisations/groups again with the titles/agendas related to anti-colonialism and the rights of minorities, were included in the Federal List of Organisations recognized as terroristic. As in the case of the "extremist" list, they were declared as "structural units" of a "movement" Forum of Free States of post-Russia (*«Форум свободных государств постРоссии»*), while this is just a "platform for discussions", as the participants of this community define themselves. Anyway, among the "terrorist organisations" there are several leading Indigenous groups, like International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia (acting in exile) and Aborigin Forum, informal community of experts and activists (*«Международный комитет коренных народов», Объединение «Абориген Форум»*). Besides, on the list there are "Alliance/Coalition of Indigenous Peoples" (*«Альянс/Коалиция (коренных народов)»*) and "Association of Indigenous Peoples of the Russian Federation" (*«Ассоциация коренных народов*

Российской Федерации»), both unknown; but such titles might be related to any Indigenous groups, it is quite similar even with the legally recognized loyal NGO of Indigenous peoples RAIPON (Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of North).

In these circumstances, any participation in public, human rights, and political activities in the field of Indigenous peoples' rights can be outlawed, which opens up a huge field for manipulation by business structures and state authorities, as well as imposing further repressions on the Indigenous activists and just ordinary Indigenous population.

Promotion of the official position of Russian authorities through the UN institutions and mechanisms created for Indigenous peoples

Formally, many executive bodies of the regions of the Russian Federation have established structural divisions for Indigenous peoples, coordinating the implementation of regional programs. Councils of representatives of small Indigenous peoples have been formed under the heads and governments of the regions. Independent institutions of ombudsmen for the rights of Indigenous peoples have been established in the Kamchatka and Krasnoyarsk Krays, the Sakhalin Region, the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) and Buryatia. However, the actual participation of Indigenous peoples in matters directly related to them is limited.

Independent activists who had to emigrate or just stop their activity being at risk of repressions are being replaced by loyal representatives of Indigenous NGOs, which are in fact funded by the state and mining companies. At the international level, representatives of Indigenous GONGOs (state-dependent NGOs) promote the positions of the Russian authorities and lobby for the lifting of sanctions against Russian businesses. See for more details the [report](#) of the Inter-National Committee of the Indigenous Peoples of Russia "RAIPON: from a nation-based change agent to a weapon of state-controlled propaganda."

The control upon the RAIPON is ensured not only through government pressure and the introduction of loyal leaders there, but also through the financing of the association by large mining companies, in particular Norilsk Nickel. See also the [investigation](#) by Arctida, Verstka Layout and 7x7 "They work for the benefit of the elite." How the Association of Small Indigenous Peoples became an instrument of enrichment and lobbying", highlighting the dependence on business structures and lobbying in favor of large companies, affiliation with the United Russia party and government agencies, corrupt ties of officials who make money on the topic of Indigenous peoples. The report emphasizes that through the public statements of loyal representatives of Indigenous peoples at the UN, the lifting sanctions against Russian companies is being lobbied.

Using its historical significant presence and influence in the UN bodies related to the Indigenous peoples, manipulates the international institutions of representation of indigenous. Russian propaganda is being articulated by loyal indigenous figures, while independent activists are prevented from entering international platforms and are being discredited.

The most recent examples are from the last session of the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Geneva, July 2024). Several activists from Buryatia and the Republic of Sakha were not allowed to participate (first they were registered, but later refused, with the explanation of a "technical error") – [their statement was read out](#) by Yana Tannagasheva from the International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia, who raised the problem of Russia's negative influence on the UN structures. While her speech at the session back in 2022 provoked [an aggressive reaction of a representative](#) of the Russian mission, in 2024 this very representative went further and accused the activists in "abusing the status of indigenous peoples in this room", in living abroad in separation from their communities, in receiving support from Western countries – "former colonial powers" and broadcasting their policies, and finally called for inspecting the UN fellowship program for minorities, that allegedly educate "racists and chauvinists."

Demagogic arguments about other "colonial powers" and maintaining the image of Russia as an "anti-colonial" power in the eyes of other indigenous peoples of the world (in Africa, Latin America), accusing indigenous activists themselves of "chauvinism" – all this is an attempt to discredit the movement of indigenous peoples of Russia at the international level, and to present in principle opposite positions (a pro-government one – of the loyal activists, and a critical one – of the independent figures) as an internal "quarrel", where "both are indigenous – these and those".

The independent activists who were forced to leave Russia complained that they could not sign up to speak at the session of the Expert Mechanism in 2024, although many times the floor was given to the Russian delegation and loyal representatives of the Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far

East (RAIPON). Meanwhile, the RAIPON cannot adequately represent the indigenous peoples of Russia, since it has lost its independence and has taken a completely pro-state position, including [open support](#) of the invasion to Ukraine, changing the Constitution of the Russian Federation and Putin's nomination for a new term.

Impact of the war on Indigenous communities

Since the full-scale invasion to Ukraine by the Russian army, indigenous peoples have been involved in this war. Moreover, Russian propaganda created a fake discourse of "fighting Ukrainian Nazism" and actively highlighted the participation of representatives of ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples in the war, which served as proof of the "unanimity" of the Russian population and at the same time involved ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples in the mutual responsibility of the war. Thus, a false image was created and promoted in the information space of groups of the population that were completely loyal to the regime and did not belong to the ethnic majority.

Meanwhile, the participation of indigenous peoples in the war is largely forced and is due to the decades-long situation of their vulnerability. Although the law gives indigenous peoples the right to alternative civil service (Article 2 of Federal Law No. 113-FZ of July 25, 2002), it is quite difficult to achieve this right during the mobilization period.

The "partial mobilization" announced in Russia on September 21, 2022 disproportionately affected the poorest regions of Russia, where ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples live, which may further affect the reduction of their numbers (see the [study](#) by A.Bessudnov, "Ethnic and regional inequalities in the Russian military fatalities in the 2022 war in Ukraine").

Despite the fact that formally the mobilisation has been finished, a lot of indigenous communities are affected and still have to conclude contracts with the Russian army, as the military service is becoming almost the only opportunity to earn money, pay off debts and loans.

Example: According to media [reports](#) (April 2024), so many men were mobilized in the village of Sedanka (Tigilsky municipal district, Kamchatka Kray, the majority of the population are Itelmen, Koryaks and other indigenous peoples) that the governor announced the need for practical assistance to families (in particular, provision of firewood they need for survival).

There are no disaggregated statistics on the wounded and dead. Moreover, in the fall of 2024, Rosstat stopped publishing data on deaths from external causes. Information collected by anti-war activists testifies to the disproportionality of losses among representatives of indigenous peoples. On the web-site of [Indigenous Russia](#), the open data on Indigenous representatives dead in the war are collected; the list counts hundreds of names, including representatives of small-numbered Indigenous communities at risk of extinction.

The consequences of removing a large number of men from indigenous communities are catastrophic both in the short term and fundamentally. The remaining family members are forced to survive in difficult conditions; the most dramatic is the risk of physical death of native speakers of unique endangered cultures is accompanied by the ruined connection of generations, transmission of traditional knowledge and language skills.