



**Input for a Thematic Report  
of the UN Expert mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples  
“The Rights of Indigenous Peoples to their traditional Economies”**

**The case of the Russian Federation**

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

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## 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.

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.

## **National legal protection mechanisms for the traditional economy of Indigenous peoples**

Special guarantees of the right to traditional economic activity of Indigenous minorities of the Russian Federation are provided in the relevant laws: "On Guarantees of the Rights of Indigenous Minorities of the Russian Federation" (since 1999), "On general principles of organizing communities of Indigenous minorities of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation" (since 2000), "On territories of traditional nature use of Indigenous peoples of North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation" (since 2001). At the strategic national level, the draft Concept for the Sustainable Development of the Indigenous small-numbered peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation for the period up to 2036 (2024) states the goal of **"Supporting traditional economic activities and crafts of the small-numbered peoples of the North"**, namely:

- a) creation and development of industrial and technological infrastructure of traditional economic activities of small-numbered peoples of the North;
- b) promotion in the domestic and foreign markets of goods, works and services produced within the framework of traditional economic activities of the small-numbered peoples of the North;
- c) development of the tourism industry in places of traditional economic activity of the small-numbered peoples of the North;
- d) training of personnel for the implementation of traditional economic activities of the small-numbered peoples of the North;
- e) modernization of local generation facilities, expansion of the use of renewable energy sources, liquefied natural gas and local fuels in places where traditional economic activities are carried out by the Indigenous peoples of the North;
- f) providing grant and other financial support to small and medium-sized businesses engaged in traditional economic activities of the small-numbered peoples of the North, developing interregional cooperation, lending and leasing;
- g) state support for the development of reindeer husbandry, veterinary measures and breeding work to improve reindeer breeds;
- h) implementation of economic measures aimed at stimulating creation of new jobs in the places of traditional residence of the Indigenous peoples of the North.

Russia has approved the state program "Socio-economic development of the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation" (2021) and the Program of state support for traditional economic activities of Indigenous small-numbered peoples of the Russian Federation carried out in the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation (2021). Various regional documents are also in force: laws (such as, for example, the Law of the Kamchatka Krai dated 06/22/2010 No. 477 "On State support for reindeer husbandry in the Kamchatka Krai"); programs such as "Young Reindeer Breeder" (from 2020) in the Republic of Sakha; strategic documents such as the "Concept of Sustainable Development of the Indigenous small-numbered peoples of the North of the Sakha Republic for the period up to 2035", and others.

The priorities and tasks outlined in these documents include the development of international cooperation, investment projects with foreign participation, and the development of ties between the Indigenous peoples of the Russian Federation and the Indigenous peoples of other Arctic countries – all this is currently not possible in the context of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, sanctions, and state propaganda of hostility to other countries.

An acute problem for Indigenous peoples, whose economies are tied to their traditional places of residence, remains the uncertainty of the right to lands and the resources located on these lands. Russian legislation on small Indigenous peoples does not recognize their ownership rights in relation to traditional territories. The Federal Law "On Guarantees of the Rights of Indigenous Small-numbered Peoples in the Russian Federation" (Article 8) establishes only the right to use lands of various categories free of charge in places of traditional residence and traditional economic activity, necessary for carrying out their traditional economic activities and engaging in traditional crafts, and the right to participate in monitoring the use of lands of various categories. The Land Code (art.39.10, paragraph 13) sets the term for such gratuitous use of land – 10 years. Land rights and property rights are generally protected as individual rights by civil and land legislation. Some additional guarantees unrelated to the special status of Indigenous peoples are provided by

environmental protection legislation. Federal Law No. 49-FZ "On Territories of Traditional Nature Use of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation" (dated 05/07/2001) creates certain, albeit limited opportunities for securing the rights of Indigenous peoples to land. However, in the absence of a specific mechanism for its application, the authorities act arbitrarily. The legal status of sacred sites has not been determined, and their alienation in favor of mining companies harms not only the environment, but also the spiritual culture of Indigenous peoples.

Federal Law No. 209-FZ "On Hunting and Conservation of Hunting Resources" (Article 19) allows Indigenous peoples to hunt freely (without permits) in order to carry out traditional economic activities in the amounts necessary for personal consumption. However, Article 25 of the Law states that land and forest plots are leased solely based on the results of auctions for the right to conclude hunting agreements. There are no exceptions to this procedure for tribal communities of small Indigenous peoples.

The uncertainty of the abovementioned rights leads to the fact that representatives of small Indigenous peoples, even within the territories of their traditional residence, cannot use land and resources for the purposes of the traditional economy free of charge. If such territories are seized for industrial or other needs, it is difficult for Indigenous peoples not only to influence such decisions based on the principle of free, prior and informed consent (FPIC), but also to receive compensation provided by law.

### **Examples:**

In the **Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug**, only the lands of reindeer collective farms (heirs of Soviet kolkhozes) are legally assigned to Indigenous peoples. A much more common form of reindeer husbandry remains in uncertainty – these are private family and tribal communities that carry out nomadic grazing according to informal customs. It is difficult to protect the rights to traditional lands in these conditions. (See E. F. Gladun, S. Nisten-Haarala, S. A. Tulaeva, O. V. Zakharova, *The Economy of Indigenous Peoples in the Arctic Regions: Traditions and Transformations (on the Example of Russia, Finland, and the USA)*, *Economic Sociology*, vol. 23, No. 3, May 2022).

The results of auctions for the right to use hunting grounds in the **Kamchatka Kray** show that the tribal communities of small Indigenous peoples are unable to compete with other applicants. At the same time, the aborigines have conducted traditional economic activities on the hunting plots put up for auction, which is fraught with conflicts between the users of the plots and accusations of poaching. There are other formal obstacles to the realization of the right to hunt: for example, every hunter must have a hunting permit, which must include a mark indicating that the hunter belongs to Indigenous peoples. In reality, it is almost impossible to obtain such a mark, and hunters from among the small Indigenous peoples are often subjected to administrative fines or even brought to criminal responsibility. ([report](#) of the Ombudsman for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples of the Kamchatka Kray for 2022).

## **The problem of the participation of Indigenous institutions in the management of natural resources and decision-making related to their traditional economy**

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 for the following reasons.

Firstly, the activities of independent activists and defenders of the rights of Indigenous peoples are criminalized. The Russian authorities' repression against civil society has escalated over the past decade, and such forms of persecution as recognition as a "foreign agent" have also affected Indigenous organizations. After the outbreak of Russia's war against Ukraine, the persecution intensified and in 2024 it reached the point that the leading formal and informal groups of Indigenous activists were first listed as "extremist" organizations (Aborigin Forum, International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia, Indigenous

Russia), and then as "terrorist" ones (Aborigen Forum, International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia).

Secondly, independent activists 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: transformation from an independent agent of change into a tool of state 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.

In these circumstances, any participation in public, human rights, and political activities in the field of Indigenous peoples' rights, including those related to the right to a traditional economy, can be outlawed, which opens up a huge field for manipulation by business structures and state authorities.

Apart from the problem of criminalization, Russian legislation, although not formally enshrining the principle of FPIC, provides some opportunities for Indigenous communities to participate in decision-making processes and manage their territories and resources. However, in practice, land is seized in favor of mining companies without the required approvals or through their falsification.

#### **Example:**

Near the settlements of the Indigenous small-numbered Shor people in the Republic of Khakasia, on the legally recognized territory of traditional residence, the development of gold mining sites began without any information and permission from local residents. Suddenly, heavy machinery began to work, deforestation began, access to hunting grounds, berry and mushroom picking sites, and a checkpoint was blocked. For more information, see the [ADC Memorial report](#) "Indigenous peoples of the Taiga are suffering from river gold mining" (2021).

## **The problem of the effectiveness of existing types of traditional economy of Indigenous peoples in modern conditions**

Sociologists define Russia's state policy towards Indigenous peoples as "paternalistic", aimed at "conservation" of traditional culture, including in the aspect of the traditional economy, which to a certain extent seeks this "conservation" (at least in some regions and for some types of traditional economy). This means that the state plays a major role in shaping this policy, subsidizes the traditional economy (in particular, unprofitable types such as reindeer husbandry) and at the same time does not grant Indigenous peoples broad autonomy, restricts Indigenous peoples' participation in decision-making on issues that directly concern them, and restricts their rights to use land. It does not give broad powers to institutions and self-government bodies of Indigenous peoples. Indigenous activists often say that this approach turns Indigenous peoples into a "folklore nation" and exotists them, while the traditional economy and, consequently, the identity of Indigenous peoples is in crisis. At the same time, some expert reports suggest that the paternalistic policy of the authorities creates a "dependent attitude" towards government support among Indigenous peoples, and that they prefer not to take the initiative, including seeking new ways to develop the traditional economy.

Meanwhile, in the post-Soviet period, the state suppressed the entrepreneurial potential of Indigenous peoples in those industries that could be profitable (unlike, for instance, reindeer husbandry, which is subsidized in all countries where it exists). This can be seen in the example of changes in legislation and practices related to fishing. As a result, large enterprises that are not related to Indigenous peoples receive super profits in the Russian Far East; the priority right of Indigenous peoples to plots and quotas covers only the so called "traditional fishing" for personal needs, while economic associations of Indigenous peoples are deprived of preferences and cannot compete with major players; huge formal obstacles are created to apply for plots and quotas; there are examples of raider intrusion into fishing communities in order to take advantage of

the benefits of Indigenous peoples. Experts note that Indigenous communities, being in fact a special sector of the regional economy, are not classified in the legislation as either agricultural producers or small businesses, which limits their access to participate in economic activities.

It can be concluded that Russia's state approach to the rights of Indigenous peoples lacks an understanding that without delegating broad rights and independence to Indigenous structures, without developing their self-government and respecting sovereignty, one cannot expect either initiative or fair relations between Indigenous peoples and extractive businesses with incomparable economic power. In fact, Indigenous communities leading traditional lifestyles find themselves completely dependent on government subsidies and unstable compensations from businesses, which may be enough only to survive, but not enough to invest in the development of the traditional economy and its transition to a qualitatively different level.

Objective statistical indicators show that the standard of living of Indigenous minorities who lead a traditional lifestyle and/or live in the territories of traditional residence remains significantly lower than the average for the region of residence or the country as a whole.

### **Examples:**

There are about 47.5 thousand Indigenous persons in the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug (8.8% of the Okrug's population; among them, the Nenets are the most numerous - 29 thousand people, or almost 6% of the total population of the Okrug). More than 19 thousand people (41.0% of the total Indigenous population, or 3.6% of the total population of the Okrug) are engaged in traditional nature management - reindeer husbandry, fishing, hunting (data from the Government of the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, 2021). The total income of members of reindeer herding families is on average 33% lower than the subsistence minimum in Russia. Only about 25% of nomad families have housing in villages (2017 data). [Source:](#) E. F. Gladun, S. Nisten-Haarala, S. A. Tulaeva, O. V. Zakharova. The economy of Indigenous peoples in the Arctic regions: Traditions and Transformations (on the example of Russia, Finland, and the USA) // Economic Sociology. Vol. 23. No. 3. May 2022.

Reindeer husbandry in the Krasnoyarsk Kray is unprofitable, and in reality, government subsidies for current expenses and loss coverage are becoming a key source of income for reindeer farms. The percentage of the Indigenous population engaged in reindeer husbandry in the north of the Krasnoyarsk Kray is insignificant (in the Taimyr municipal district -7.5%, in Evenk municipal district – 6.8%, in Turukhansk municipal district – 6.2%). Official statistics (Krasnoyarsk Statistics Service, 2020 data) show that the average salary in agriculture (where reindeer husbandry is taken into account) in the northern macro-region was only about 30% (31.7 thousand rubles) from the average for the macro-region (approx. 102 thousand rubles) ([Source:](#) Nataliia P. Koptseva and Olga S. Nagaeva. Traditional Economy of Indigenous Peoples of the North in the Krasnoyarsk kray. 2023).

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

Obviously, the traditional economy reacts in one way or another to modern conditions – the introduction of scientific achievements and new technologies into the lifestyle of Indigenous peoples, climate change. Indigenous peoples use and will continue to use mixed models of economic activity, combining natural farming, market relations and government subsidies.

### **The government policy regarding traditional economic activities of Indigenous peoples should:**

- contribute to the preservation of the traditional economy as an important part of Indigenous culture and identity and a condition for the socio-psychological well-being of Indigenous communities, even if it is economically ineffective;
- support the adaptation of the traditional economy to modern conditions, create economic mechanisms to increase the success of Indigenous peoples in economic activities and their sustainability;
- Ensure the full participation of Indigenous peoples at all levels of decision-making on issues that concern them, including the traditional economy.

### **Among the strategic and specific government measures, the following can be suggested:**

- Development of institutions for the representation of Indigenous peoples in decision-making bodies on economic issues and self-government in the territories inhabited by Indigenous peoples.
- Strict monitoring of compliance with the principle of FPIC in matters of rights to use land and resources for the purposes of the traditional economy, including in matters of compensation for damage caused by extractive industries.

- Improvement of legislation and practices to ensure the rights of Indigenous peoples to resources extracted within the framework of the traditional economy (reindeer husbandry, hunting, fishing, etc.): elimination of contradictions, based on feedback from Indigenous peoples and expert opinions; simplification of procedures; provision of information.

- Maintaining/granting preferences to Indigenous peoples in the framework of economic activities, including support for their business initiatives.

- Infrastructural support for territories traditionally inhabited by Indigenous peoples (transport, roads, processing plants, communications, Internet, distance education).

- Promotion of goods and services produced within the framework of the traditional economy; at the same time, it is necessary to avoid promotion of stereotyping image of Indigenous peoples. Decisions on the commercialization of elements of Indigenous culture and the development of such areas of economic activity as ethno-tourism, ethno-parks, the external representation of rituals, customs, folklore, and the sale of souvenirs should be made primarily by the Indigenous peoples themselves.