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Input for the Research of the UN Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

The Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Conflict and Post-Conflict Situations: The Case of the Aggressive War of Russia against Ukraine

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The specifics of the conflict involving Indigenous peoples in modern Russia

In February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion to Ukraine, openly continuing the anti-Ukrainian aggression started back in 2014, which the Russian authorities have for a long time denied. During the eight years preceding the invasion, Russia annexed Crimea and, as a result of the hybrid war, actually seized a significant part of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions of Ukraine, creating there puppet unrecognized republics. At the time of submission of this input, about 20% of the territory of Ukraine remains under Russian occupation; They are subject to a harsh totalitarian regime and many repressive laws, which have been adopted by Russian lawmakers. All the traditional territories of the recognized Indigenous peoples of Ukraine – Crimean Tatars, Krymchaks, Karaites – have been occupied; some other territories are also affected, for instance many settlements of the North Azov Greeks were completely destroyed by Russian aggression.

The authors of this input have previously informed various UN bodies about the unlawful policies of the Russian authorities towards ethnic minorities, migrants, and LGBTI+ (state racism, xenophobia, and support for nationalist groups), which led to open military aggression against Ukraine and did not meet proper opposition in Russian society.

In this regard, the situation of the Indigenous peoples of Russia has its own specifics. On the one hand, the peoples of Russia who do not belong to the Russian ethnic majority are experiencing racism and xenophobia, which in recent decades have formed the general background of the social atmosphere in Russia and remain at a high level, and in recent years, according to some estimates, have been growing. On the other hand, small Indigenous peoples (up to 50 thousand people) are protected by special legislation, and Russian propaganda plays the card of special "care" for small Indigenous peoples, although they suffer from the activities of mining companies, globalization, and insufficient support measures, remaining one of the most vulnerable and poor groups of the Russian population. The measures of special protection for Indigenous peoples are purely performative, lacking any robustness. For instance, Russia claims to observe the right to FPIC, yet Indigenous peoples in Russia neither are nor have ever been asked to give or withhold their consent prior to the granting of exploiting licenses for resources within their territories.

Besides, the propaganda narrative of "nation unity" excludes any discussion about the colonial nature of Russian politics in the past and present, while the protection of the rights of Indigenous peoples has been criminalized. The Russian authorities deny not only the existence of a conflict between colonized peoples and government/government-affiliated businesses, but even the conflict between Russia and Ukraine (it is officially forbidden to call what is happening a "war"), while the peoples of Russia are involved in this war, dying in it, suffering from its consequences. Thus, in the current situation, the conflict can be considered both the unresolved consequences of the colonial policy of the Russian Empire, the USSR and the modern Russian Federation, and the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which the Indigenous peoples of Russia are heavily involved in and disproportionately suffer from.

Russia's aggressive war against Ukraine and its consequences for the Indigenous peoples of Russia

Threats to the physical existence of Indigenous peoples and their preservation as cultural and linguistic communities

Conscription and the imposition of contract service have mostly affected the poorest regions of Russia, namely those where ethnic minorities and Indigenous peoples live, therefore they disproportionately suffer from mobilization. For Indigenous peoples, participation in the war threatens their physical survival, as the mobilization of a large number of men of working age and their death/injury in the war creates a real risk of reducing the number of Indigenous peoples.

During the war, military personnel get used to violence; returning to civilian life, survivors suffer from post-traumatic disorders and other mental problems. For family members of soldiers returning from the war, the risk of becoming victims of domestic violence and other violent crimes increases. At least 1,000 murders and serious injuries committed by Russian military personnel after returning home or on vacation have already been recorded in Russia ([Verstka investigation](#), December 2025).

The departure of men to war creates an excessive burden on women in traditional communities, given the extreme climatic conditions of the places where Indigenous communities live and the need for hard physical labor to ensure minimum living standards (harvesting firewood, traditional farming methods, etc.).

The increase in Russia's military budget and economic isolation as a result of sanctions have led to economic stagnation and a decrease in the overall standard of living in the country, especially in remote regions where Indigenous peoples live. Being one of the poorest groups of the population before the war, Indigenous peoples suffer disproportionately in the current situation. This naturally affects the situation of individual families and children in these families.

The mobilization, death, and disability of men have fatal consequences for Indigenous cultures, as men are the bearers of traditional knowledge in the fields of hunting, fishing, and reindeer farming. The exclusion of men from traditional activities disrupts the transmission of traditional "male" knowledge from generation to generation, especially in small communities.

Increasing environmental risks and negative impact on the climate, termination of international cooperation

The Russian authorities have been using the occasion of the war to demolish the few remaining mechanisms enabling Indigenous peoples to influence decision-making regarding their lands, territories and resources. This includes a new regulation that restricts participation in Ecological Expert Reviews (экологические экспертизы) to hand-picked accredited experts, virtually excluding any independent voices. Lacking the legal preconditions, most crucially, the recognition of Indigenous peoples as collective rights-holders with inalienable rights to their lands, territories and resources, there were no genuine FPIC processes in the country even before the full-scale aggression. The current climate of fear and intimidation means that no person will feel safe voicing objections against industrial projects and such objections are very unlikely to get duly recorded and reported.

Due to the sanctions, international and foreign mining companies that had higher environmental standards stopped working in Russia. Their place has been taken by companies from Russia and countries such as China, known both for their disregard for nature conservation in traditional territories and for ignoring the interests of the local population.

Indirectly, Russia slows down decision-making on the climate agenda by promoting a pro-government point of view at the international level, through controlled and loyal organizations of the Indigenous peoples of Russia (funded by the state and mining companies, in particular, Norilsk Nickel), as well as through increased interaction with the Indigenous peoples of the Global South. At the same time, due to repression, independent representatives of the Indigenous peoples of Russia are deprived of the opportunity to speak in UN bodies that are specifically designed for Indigenous peoples (the Expert Mechanism, the Permanent Forum, etc.) or are related to the Indigenous and climate agenda (in particular, the implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity). Those of them who still manage to attend international meetings often face verbal aggression from representatives of the Russian Federation and other agents of Russian influence in the international arena.

Indigenous peoples have lost the expert support of human rights defenders, environmentalists, anthropologists, and foreign foundations, as they themselves are under attack or expelled from the country.

Indigenous peoples do not have information support or the opportunity to speak out about their problems in the media, since military censorship is in effect in Russia.

The ties of Russian Indigenous peoples with the international community of Indigenous peoples, including related peoples separated by state borders (Saami, Inuit, Aleuts), have practically ceased.

Repressions against defenders of Indigenous peoples' rights

Criminalization of civil activism and human rights activities of Indigenous peoples has become an extremely sensitive issue of recent times related to Russia's military aggression against Ukraine and related to all aspects of the life of the Indigenous peoples of Russia and Ukraine, especially on the issue of the right to any form of self-determination. Back in 2014, after annexing Crimea, Russia banned the Mejlis, the self-governing body of the Crimean Tatar people that had existed in Crimea since the independence of Ukraine. Within the country and within territories under its effective control, Russia threatens any expression of dissent with lengthy jail sentences, at the same time it advocates within the UN system for the exclusion of any Indigenous representatives based in third countries, outside its control.

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" (as part of a non-existing ("Anti-Russia separatist movement"), and later as "terrorists" (as non-existing "sub-structures" of a discussive platform "Forum of Free States of Post-Russia" recognized as a terrorist organization), and were included into the respective state registers. Indigenous rights' activists appeared to be in the registers, including Aborigen Forum, International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia, Indigenous Russia.

It was the state's response to anti-war protests and attempts by activists from ethnic minorities and Indigenous peoples to initiate a public discussion about contradictions that had been hushed up for decades: discrimination, colonization, lack of real autonomy and federalism, and the state's crimes against the peoples in the past and present.

The risk of criminal prosecution 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.

In fact, only activists who have been forced into exile can openly speak out in defense of Indigenous peoples, but they face attacks and harassment even on international platforms designed specifically to represent Indigenous peoples. Thus, after speaking in July 2022 at the 15th session of the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples on behalf of the International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia, Yana Tannagashova was verbally attacked and intimidated by a diplomat from the Permanent Mission of Russia to the United Nations. Four UN Special Rapporteurs responded to this incident (Ref.: AL RUS 15/2022, October 6, 2022).

The repression affected people with an anti-war position, activists fighting in the regions against destruction of local self-government or for the preservation of natural territories.

Rafael Mammadov, a 24-year-old student, has been in the Murmansk pre-trial detention center since May 2025 on charges of participating in the Forum of Free States of Post-Russia "terrorist organization", to which he has nothing to do. He ran a small historical and cultural telegram channel "Free Lapland", where he spoke out against the war. He faces up to 20 years in prison (art.205.5 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation).

Aruna Arna, a mother of three children and a leader of protests against the liquidation of local self-government and business construction in the Altai Republic, was charged in September 2025 under Part 2 of Article 205.2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation ("Public propaganda of terrorist activities on the Internet", up to 7 years in prison) and is in custody.

Dozens of criminal cases were initiated against residents of the Baymak district (Republic of Bashkortostan) who protested in 2023-2024 against the work of mining companies and environmental pollution (accused in mass riots and violence against a government official), hundreds of protesters were administratively convicted.

In December 2025, repressive legislation was massively applied against Indigenous activists, including journalists and human rights defenders, who spoke not only at the local level, but also in relevant UN bodies. At least 17 activists in different regions of the Russian Federation (in the Altai Republic, Tomsk, Murmansk and Kemerovo regions, Altai and Krasnoyarsk Krais, the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), Moscow and St. Petersburg) were searched on suspicion of involvement in the Aborigine Forum, an organization classified as "extremist" and "terrorist". Data storage devices, computers, and telephones were seized from them. These people face up to 20 years in prison.

All these cases are related to the participation of activists in various forms in the UN bodies on the rights of Indigenous peoples. Thus, in the Murmansk region, Valentina Sovkina, a well-known activist of the Saami people, a member of the UN Permanent Forum on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, was searched. She was forced to leave Russia and published a statement (December 23, 2025) saying:

"We have to call a spade a spade: this is not a fight against terrorism, this is political revenge. This is a direct punishment from the state for the fact that representatives of Indigenous peoples dare to contact the UN, talk about violations of their rights, participate in the work of international bodies and tell the truth about what is happening in Russia. The Russian government is purposefully criminalizing the very idea of cooperation with the United Nations. Today, the space for free and independent opinion has been practically destroyed in Russia. Any criticism, any dissent, any independent social activity is severely suppressed. It is especially cynical that the attack is aimed at the most vulnerable — the Indigenous small-numbered peoples of Siberia and the Arctic, who are not socially protected, live in remote villages, in difficult conditions, have no political weight and are invisible to the "big society". Our peoples cannot defend their rights except through international law. And that's why we're being punished today."

Two female activists were taken into custody after the searches on charges of participating in the activities of a "terrorist organization" (Part 2 of Article 205.5 of the Criminal Code, 10-20 years in prison). One of them is Daria Egereva, a representative of the Indigenous small-numbered Selkup people. She is a member of the UN Coordinating Body on Indigenous Issues; since 2023, she has been co-chair of the International Indigenous Peoples' Forum on Climate Change; in November 2025, she spoke at the annual Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Climate Change (COP30) in Brazil.

Leading international human rights organizations have already come out in defense of Daria Egereva. Thus, the International Indigenous Peoples' Forum on Climate Change (IIPFCC) condemned her arbitrary arrest and demanded her immediate release. In its [statement](#), the Forum called on all States parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and all allies of Indigenous peoples to show solidarity in order to:

1. Publicly and privately call for Ms. Daria Egereva's immediate release and the dropping of all charges against her, which constitute an illegal retaliation for her legitimate and peaceful participation in COP30 and other UN processes.
2. Acknowledge and register this complaint as a case of intimidation and reprisal connected to participation in UNFCCC processes under the Code of Conduct for UNFCCC Events, and keep the IIPFCC informed of steps taken.
3. Raise this case without delay with the Government of the Russian Federation through appropriate diplomatic channels, stressing that criminalizing a UNFCCC Indigenous Co-Chair as a 'terrorist' is incompatible with the UNFCCC Code of Conduct and with Human Rights Council resolutions/determinations.

Conflict resolution and reconciliation processes in a post-conflict situation

In the current context of Russia, the initiatives on overcoming the conflict belong not to the state, but to civil society, while the state denies the historical problems of colonialism and systemic discrimination against minorities and persecutes activists who try to highlight such sensitive issues of independence of Russian regions, effective federalism, and self-determination of ethnic groups.

In April 2025, representatives of the Indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation and Russian civil society (all forced to emigrate due to political persecution and/or anti-war position) signed the [Orcas Island Declaration: A Statement of Reconciliation and Respect](#) (named after the meeting place – the territory of Lammi, an Indigenous people of North America).

This document was developed with the participation of representatives of Indigenous peoples, activists of the Russian opposition, human rights defenders, experts and lawyers, based on the experience of other countries in overcoming the colonial past (in particular, the Resolution of the U.S. Congress S.J.Res.14 (2009-2010), formally apologizing to Native peoples for treaty violations, forced displacement, and the destruction of their cultural traditions; Final Report (2015) of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission established in 2008 in Canada under the Indigenous Residential Schools Reconciliation Agreement (IRSSA), recommendations for the restoration of the rights of Indigenous peoples, including recognition of the cultural genocide against these peoples; Report (2023) of the National Truth and Reconciliation Commission "Sannhet ogforsoning" (Norway) confirming the Norwegianization policy towards the Sami, Kven and Forest Finns, with subsequent proposals for recognition and compensation; the work of the Reconciliation Council in Australia, launch of the

independent organisation Reconciliation Australia, and development of the Uluru Declaration from the Heart (2017), calling for recognition of Indigenous rights in the Constitution.

The Orcas Island Declaration calls on Russian society to recognize the mistakes of the past, to objectively and honestly assess the colonial policy that the state has pursued for several centuries against various peoples inhabiting the territories of modern Russia (primarily the most vulnerable small-numbered peoples), and to begin the reconciliation process based on the principles of international law, primarily on the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The initiators of the Declaration have created a permanent platform for dialogue between representatives of the Indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East and Russian civil society. As first steps, it is proposed to:

- To carry out continuous monitoring of violations of the rights of Indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East and provide assistance in their protection, as well as to provide the results of this monitoring to the UN, other international organizations and other interested parties.
- To coordinate academic, educational and expert activities to analyze the consequences of colonial policy, restore historical memory and study the problems of Indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East.
- Develop legislative initiatives and draft regulatory legal acts aimed at restoring the rights of Indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East.
- To involve in the discussion a wide range of participants from among representatives of the Indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East, Russian civil society, scientists, politicians, human rights defenders, activists, journalists, and also to hold meetings, consultations and other events aimed at promoting reconciliation and restoring justice.

The participants in the Declaration are aware that currently, under the conditions of a de facto dictatorship, residents of Russia cannot freely carry out their declared activities due to the risk of repression. However, it is already necessary to shape the country's future based on the principles set out in the Declaration. In a future democracy, the following steps have been announced to recognize the rights of Indigenous peoples:

- Establishment of a parliamentary commission to examine violations of the rights of Indigenous peoples, regardless of the statute of limitations.
- Preparation of a national report on colonization and violations of the rights of Indigenous peoples, similar to documents prepared in Canada, Norway and Australia.
- Establishment of an independent body to consider Indigenous peoples' claims on land and cultural rights.
- Adoption of a law recognizing the rights of Indigenous peoples to their ancestral lands and natural resources.

The participants express their readiness for cooperation and consistent work to achieve the goals of reconciliation, recognition of historical justice and ensuring the rights of the Indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East.