

Manufacturing Indigenous Legitimacy

Russia's Architecture of Captured Indigenous Representation and International Propaganda

Introduction

Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON) was once regarded as the principal representative organization of Indigenous Peoples in the Russian North. Today it operates within an entirely different political logic.

Through leadership capture, financial dependency, close partnerships with extractive industries, and state-directed diplomatic programs, the organization has been transformed into an intermediary through which the Russian state projects carefully managed narratives into international institutions.

This transformation has profound implications that extend far beyond Russia. The capture of Indigenous representation demonstrates how authoritarian governments can preserve the appearance of participation while systematically eliminating independent voices. Rather than excluding Indigenous Peoples from international governance,

the state has learned to speak through organizations that no longer represent them.

Today RAIPON stands accused of becoming a de facto arm of the Kremlin, more a mouthpiece for state interests than a champion of Indigenous communities. Moreover, it has evolved into one of the most strategic tools utilized by the Russian state to advance its geopolitical agenda under the banner of Indigenous representation.

This transformation is particularly visible on the global stage, where Russia leverages RAIPON to portray itself as a benevolent state actor defending Indigenous rights, while simultaneously co-opting Indigenous institutions to reinforce state narratives and economic interests. This report examines how a once-independent Indigenous platform was co-opted into a state apparatus, and the urgent implications of that shift.

The Russian state's strategy is not designed to strengthen Indigenous diplomacy. It is designed to ensure that Indigenous diplomacy remains politically predictable.

DIPLOMACY BY DESIGN:

The co-optation of RAIPON was not the endpoint of Russia's approach to Indigenous diplomacy—it was its foundation.

Once independent Indigenous representation had been brought under political control, a second phase began: the construction of an institutional ecosystem capable of reproducing, legitimizing, and exporting state-approved Indigenous voices. Rather than relying on a single organization, the Kremlin developed a mutually reinforcing network linking government agencies, extractive corporations, educational initiatives, expert platforms, and international appointments. Together, these institutions manufacture the appearance of Indigenous participation while ensuring that those who speak publicly remain politically reliable.

This ecosystem performs several functions simultaneously. It trains future Indigenous representatives, funds organizations willing to cooperate with state priorities, produces “expert” knowledge supporting extractive development, and places carefully selected individuals into international institutions where they speak with the authority of Indigenous representatives while rarely challenging Russian domestic policy.



A Ministry-funded finishing school for loyal Indigenous 'diplomats' tasked with exporting Kremlin narratives.

What appears externally as a diverse landscape of Indigenous participation is, in reality, an increasingly integrated system of managed legitimacy.

The School of Indigenous Diplomacy, PORA, corporate partnerships with Nornickel, and appointments to international expert bodies are not isolated developments. They are components of a single architecture designed to replace independent Indigenous advocacy with state-managed representation.

The following sections examine how this architecture functions in practice.

The School That Trains Consent

With RAIPON firmly under state direction, the Kremlin moved to occupy Indigenous voices on the international stage – by filling them with loyalists and effectively manufacturing “approved” Indigenous voices for international consumption.

The School of Indigenous Diplomacy is perhaps the most sophisticated institution within Russia’s new architecture of Indigenous governance. Publicly presented as a program that prepares Indigenous youth for international engagement, it instead functions as a pipeline through which carefully selected representatives are trained, credentialed, and deployed into international forums.

The School was established through a partnership between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), the Federal Agency for Ethnic Affairs (FADN), RAIPON, MGIMO (Moscow State University of International Relations, run by MFA), and the mining corporation Nor Nickel. Together these actors created an institutional mechanism through which Indigenous participation is managed.

The School operates under the direction of Alexey Tsykarev, a non-Indigenous state-hired official and former member of the UN Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP) tasked with shaping diplomatic compliance. Under his leadership, the School recruits and internationally positions cadres who reliably advance state and corporate narratives under the banner of “Indigenous diplomacy.”

The School’s funding model reveals its

political purpose. State budgetary resources channeled through MFA structures, substantial corporate contributions from Nor Nickel (one of RAIPON’s largest donors, with documented transfers exceeding 54 million rubles in recent war years alone), and RAIPON’s organizational infrastructure together — ensure that the curriculum, participant selection, and international placement of graduates remain under effective state-corporate control.

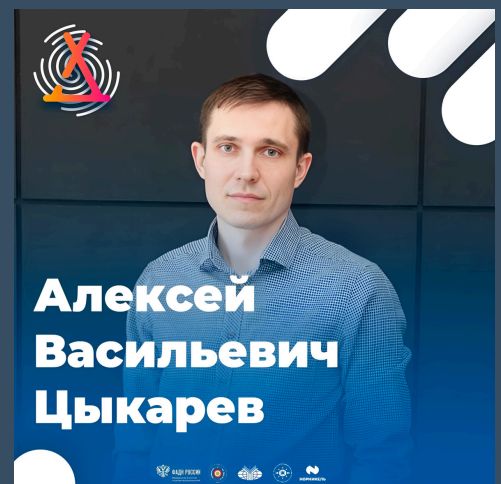
The School ostensibly aims to educate Indigenous youth in international diplomacy. However, behind its educational facade, it operates as a grooming ground to train carefully selected individuals and create a reliable cohort of “Indigenous diplomats” who will occupy or influence positions in international forums and serve as spokespersons for state-sanctioned narratives in international forums.

The School teaches a carefully curated narrative of Russia’s Indigenous policy— one that emphasizes partnership, sustainable development, and constructive engagement while systematically omitting political repression, the erosion of Indigenous rights, environmental destruction, and conflicts over extractive development. Graduates are positioned to speak the language of partnership, sustainable development, and “constructive engagement” — precisely the vocabulary required to neutralize scrutiny in the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII), EMRIP, the Arctic Council (prior to its effective paralysis), CBD processes, and related mechanisms.

Graduates of the School are frequently part of Russian delegations at the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, where they echo state positions, organize side-events, and meet with key international stakeholders, including the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. These activities help legitimize Russia's Indigenous policies, despite mounting evidence of co-optation and environmental exploitation. Instead of airing grievances about land grabs or cultural suppression in Russia, the trained "diplomats" emphasize examples of successful cooperation and redirect attention toward challenges faced by Indigenous Peoples elsewhere.

The School's influence now extends beyond training. Tsykarev's own appointment to the Global Steering Committee of the GBF-CALI Process under the Convention on Biological Diversity further illustrates how School leadership has become embedded in international governance structures. In this role he moderates discussions on "Indigenous priorities" in CBD forums, often alongside Russian state negotiators such as Alexander Shestakov, a long-standing figure in Russian biodiversity diplomacy, former WWF-Russia roles, and head of delegation elements in CAFF and CBD processes.

Tsykarev's own trajectory is telling: One of Russia's most visible figures in international Indigenous diplomacy, Alexey is a human rights expert from the Republic of Karelia. Between 2013 and 2019, he served on the UN EMRIP, including as Vice-Chair and Chair. From 2020 to 2022, he was appointed an independent expert to UNPFII, representing Eastern Europe, Russia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus. In 2018, Finnish authorities denied Tsykarev a visa on the grounds that his entry posed a threat to national security. Estonia subsequently adopted the same position, likewise refusing him entry for national security reasons. Today, his program, under the banner of empowering Indigenous leaders, "grooms Indigenous diplomats as Kremlin puppets on the international stage."



This is not capacity-building in the service of self-determination. It is the institutional production of politically reliable Indigenous diplomacy. Independent Indigenous organizations have accurately described this process as **Indigenous-washing** — the manufacture of authentic-looking Indigenous voices whose legitimacy derives from state and corporate patronage rather than community accountability.

The School therefore represents a new form of soft power. Rather than excluding Indigenous peoples from international diplomacy, Russia increasingly occupies Indigenous diplomatic space with representatives whose participation strengthens state legitimacy while limiting international scrutiny of domestic repression. By occupying Indigenous voices with its own proxies, the Kremlin not only amplifies its message but also prevents the emergence of any alternative Indigenous discourse from Russia on the world stage.



Коренные малочисленные народы России. Школа общественной дипломатии

ШЕСТАКОВ АЛЕКСАНДР СЕРГЕЕВИЧ



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КАРПЕНТЕР КРИСТЕН



Бинота Дамай





Corporate Patronage: How Nornickel Bought Legitimacy

The School of Indigenous Diplomacy does not operate in isolation. Training politically reliable representatives requires more than a curriculum—it requires sustained financial support, institutional protection, and incentives for long-term loyalty. That role is performed by Russia’s largest extractive corporations, foremost among them Nornickel.

One of the Arctic’s most notorious industrial polluters has systematically purchased legitimacy through strategic sponsorship of captured Indigenous structures.

Nornickel (Norilsk Nickel) stands as the central corporate pillar of Russia’s Indigenous co-optation architecture. As the world’s largest producer of nickel and palladium, the company operates vast mining and metallurgical complexes across Indigenous territories in the Russian Arctic and sub-Arctic. Its environmental record includes the 2020 diesel spill that contaminated rivers and wetlands near Norilsk, repeated heavy metal pollution affecting reindeer herding and traditional livelihoods, and ongoing degradation of lands belonging to Dolgan, Nenets, Evenk, and other Indigenous Peoples.

Nornickel’s role extends far beyond corporate philanthropy. Nornickel has invested heavily in laundering its reputation through Indigenous institutions. It is one of RAIPON’s largest financial backers, with documented charitable transfers to RAIPON-linked foundations exceeding 54 million rubles in the two years following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine — the single largest corporate contribution during this period. These funds flow not only to RAIPON directly but also through parallel structures such as KMNSOYUZ (the Union of Indigenous Peoples “SOYUZ”), which receives Nornickel support and in turn channels resources to initiatives associated with School of Indigenous Diplomacy leadership.

This investment generates multiple political returns. It sustains recruitment pipelines for future Indigenous representatives, reinforces narratives of partnership and sustainable development, supports lobbying efforts against international sanctions, and provides legitimacy for consultation processes that many Indigenous observers describe as



procedural rather than substantive.

Widely condemned for its devastating environmental impact across the Arctic, Nornickel does not stop promoting itself as a champion of the “green economy.” Recent activities include coordinated lobbying campaigns calling for the removal of international sanctions, as well as greenwashing initiatives designed to rebrand the company’s image under the sustainable development framework.

This patronage buys several strategic returns:

- Institutional co-optation and recruitment pipelines: Nornickel funding helps sustain RAIPON and KMNSOYUZ structures that recruit and credential participants for the School of Indigenous Diplomacy.
- Greenwashing and “sustainable development” optics: By sponsoring “Indigenous diplomacy” training and events, Nornickel positions itself as a partner in Arctic sustainability while its core operations drive extractive expansion.
- Political influence and sanctions lobbying: Corporate resources support platforms that project an image of harmonious state-corporate-Indigenous relations, aiding efforts to normalize Russia’s position internationally and lobby for sanctions relief.
- Procedural theater on FPIC: Nornickel has organized or participated in “Free, Prior and Informed consent” processes (e.g., in Tukhard) that independent observers describe as tightly controlled consultations rather

than genuine community decision-making. Figures linked to Nornickel-funded structures play prominent roles in these processes.

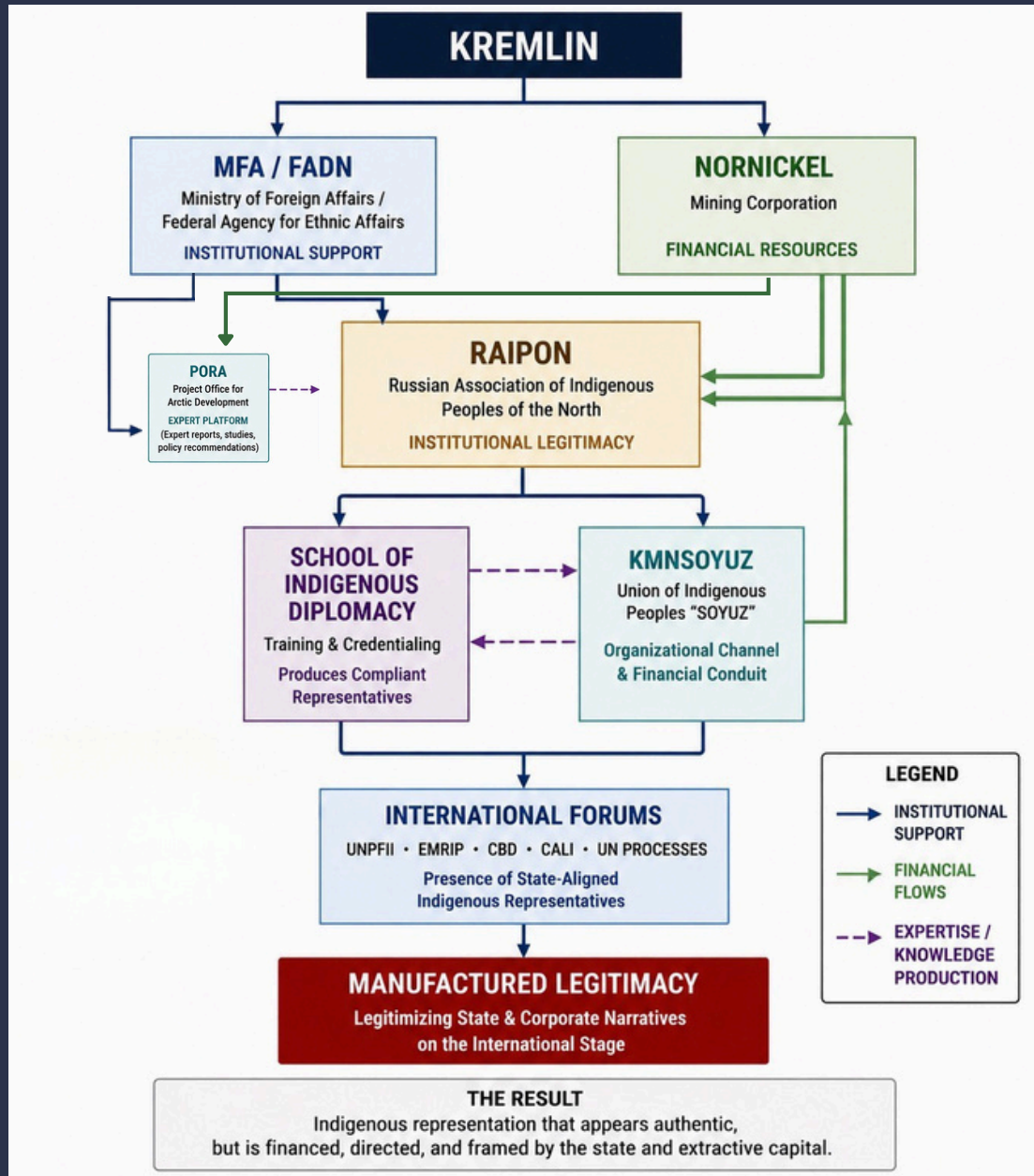
While Nornickel’s operations continue to threaten Indigenous lands, waters, and traditional economies, its sponsorship ensures that the dominant “Indigenous” voices in international forums rarely raise these issues. The company’s funding creates a closed loop: it pollutes Indigenous territories, funds the organizations that claim to represent those territories, and deploys trained spokespeople who emphasize partnership over accountability.

This is not corporate social responsibility. It is the purchase of manufactured consent and the conversion of extractive capital into diplomatic soft power.

Pollution and Patronage | Greenwashing by Nornickel



"THE MACHINERY OF MANUFACTURED CONSENT"



The diagram illustrates how the Russian state has built an integrated ecosystem that produces, finances, legitimizes, and projects state-aligned Indigenous representation. At its center is RAIPON, supported institutionally by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the Federal Agency for Ethnic Affairs (FADN), while receiving financial backing from Nornickel, one of Russia's largest extractive corporations. Through affiliated structures—including the School of Indigenous Diplomacy, which trains politically reliable Indigenous representatives, and KMNSOYUZ, which serves as an organizational and financial conduit—this network prepares and deploys state-approved voices into international forums. In parallel, PORA supplies the “expert” knowledge that frames extractive development as compatible with Indigenous interests. Together, these institutions create a closed system in which state coordination, corporate funding, managed expertise, and international appointments reinforce one another, producing manufactured Indigenous legitimacy while marginalizing independent Indigenous voices and masking political repression, environmental destruction, and the erosion of Indigenous rights.

Expert Knowledge in Service of Extraction

While the School produces representatives, PORA produces expertise. Together they manufacture both the messenger and the message.

The Project Office for Arctic Development (PORA / ПОРА) and its Expert Council function as a parallel knowledge infrastructure. Founded in 2017 and operating across Arctic regions, PORA facilitates collaboration between businesses, academia, and government to advance Arctic “development.” Its expert networks supply “scientific” framing that presents large-scale mining, infrastructure, and resource extraction as necessary, modernizing, and compatible with Indigenous interests. These expert narratives marginalize evidence of environmental degradation, displacement, and rights violations while providing the authoritative-sounding justification for continued extraction.

These platforms operate in close proximity to state agencies (including the Federal Agency for Ethnic Affairs, headed by Igor Barinov, a former FSB colonel) and corporate actors such

as Nornickel. They produce reports, expert assessments, and policy recommendations portraying industrial expansion as fully aligned with Indigenous rights.

Together with the School of Diplomacy, these organizations demonstrate that authoritarian governance relies not only on suppressing independent institutions but also on production of a parallel new “expert” ecosystem centered on relocating Indigenous issues into frameworks that are compatible with state priorities and extractive development under the appearance of professional expertise.

Knowledge production in this context is not politically neutral. It supplies the intellectual architecture that allows captured diplomatic voices to claim that industrial expansion on Indigenous lands represents mutual benefit. When combined with the School’s trained spokesperson and Nornickel’s financial patronage, it completes a powerful triad: compliant representatives, legitimizing expertise, and corporate resources.



Occupying International Institutions, Emptying the Voice

The final stage of this architecture is the international projection of managed legitimacy.

Figures emerging from or closely connected to the RAIPON ecosystem increasingly occupy influential positions within international institutions. Antonina Gorbunova, who serves as Executive Director of KMNSOYUZ embodies the concentration of power within this network. KMNSOYUZ was established in 2020, ostensibly to support ethno-tourism and traditional economic activities among Indigenous communities. In practice, it functions as a Nornickel-backed parallel structure to the co-opted RAIPON.

Documented flows show Nornickel resources supporting KMNSOYUZ, which in turn subsequent transfers from KMNSOYUZ structures to initiatives associated with Alexey Tsykarev and the School of Indigenous Diplomacy, creating a direct financial pipeline from the mining corporation through the captured Indigenous apparatus to the training and international placement of state-aligned representatives.

Antonina Gorbunova now also occupies the position of chief administrator of RAIPON while simultaneously serving as a member of the UN Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP). This dual role concentrates significant institutional power in a single figure whose organizations are deeply embedded in the state-corporate funding network.

Her participation in EMRIP allows a figure embedded in the state-corporate-Indigenous patronage network to speak with UN authority on Indigenous rights issues while the domestic record – arrests of activists, expansion of extractive projects without genuine consent, and suppression of independent voices – remains unaddressed.

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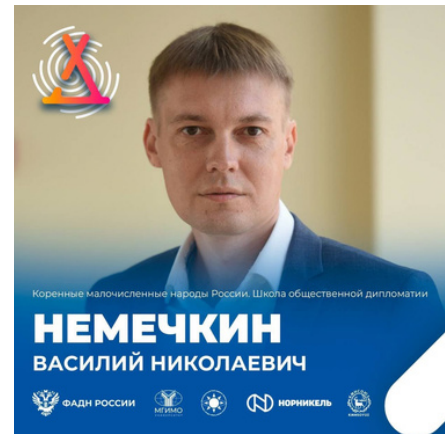
...between 2021 and 2025, Nornickel provided KMNSOYUZ with 91.8 million rubles (63% of its total budget), while KMNSOYUZ paid Alexey Tsykarev 21.1 million rubles for “expert” and consulting services...

Arctida, 2026

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The pattern extends beyond EMRIP. School-linked and RAIPON-endorsed figures appear regularly in Russian delegations to the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and engage international stakeholders. In CBD processes, Tsykarev's role on the GBF-CALI Steering Committee places him in moderating positions alongside state negotiators such as Alexander Shestakov, creating coordinated Russian messaging on biodiversity and Indigenous issues.



V. Nemechkin, KMNSOYUZ

By occupying these institutional spaces with carefully managed representatives, the architecture does not merely supplement Indigenous participation – it crowds out and delegitimizes alternatives. Genuine community concerns are replaced by scripted performances of partnership. International bodies receive polished narratives of progress while the land and its defenders pay the price.



G. Kutzenko, LIENIP

UN Permanent Forum 2026, RAIPON and I. Barinov (FADN) and V. Nebenzya, a Russian diplomat and the current Permanent Representative of Russia to the United Nations



Conclusion

The School of Indigenous Diplomacy, Nornickel's financial patronage, PORA's expert infrastructure, RAIPON's organizational authority, and the strategic placement of affiliated individuals within international institutions do not represent separate initiatives. Together they constitute a closed loop of manufactured consent, and form an integrated architecture designed to manufacture Indigenous legitimacy.

Domestically, this architecture disciplines representation. Independent Indigenous organizations are weakened, marginalized, or criminalized, while cooperation with the state is rewarded through institutional access, funding, and international visibility. Internationally, the same system exports carefully managed representatives into United Nations mechanisms, biodiversity negotiations, Arctic governance, and other multilateral forums, where they project an image of partnership while remaining largely silent on political repression, environmental destruction, and the dismantling of Indigenous rights inside Russia.

The significance of this model extends well beyond the Russian case. It demonstrates that contemporary authoritarianism does not necessarily eliminate civil society or Indigenous participation. Instead, it increasingly seeks to reorganize them. Independent institutions are replaced by politically reliable alternatives that preserve the

appearance of representation while fundamentally altering its purpose.

This is precisely why the Russian case matters internationally. What is presented as Indigenous participation increasingly functions as an instrument of state diplomacy. What appears to be community representation — often reflects state and corporate interests. And what is celebrated as inclusion can, in practice, become a mechanism for excluding the very voices international institutions were created to protect.

The greatest danger is therefore not that Indigenous peoples disappear from international governance. It is that they remain visibly present while their political independence quietly disappears. Continued acceptance of RAIPON-endorsed figures as authoritative “Indigenous voices” from Russia — without parallel, robust engagement with independent, exiled, and community-based actors — perpetuates the very capture the Kremlin seeks to normalize.

Protecting the integrity of Indigenous participation now requires more than opening seats at international tables. It requires ensuring that those who occupy them remain accountable to Indigenous communities rather than to governments or corporations. Without that distinction, international institutions risk legitimizing not Indigenous self-determination, but its managed substitution.