

On the Impact of the Russian Aggression against Ukraine on Indigenous Peoples in Russia

In the early hours of February 24, the Russian military build-up along Ukraine's northern, eastern, and southern borders finally erupted into a full-scale war against Ukraine. Russia's aggression has already claimed the lives of tens of thousands of people, both among the civilian population, military, and paramilitary groups. It has pulverized Ukrainian cities, destroyed Ukrainian infrastructure and further resulted in the largest refugee crisis in Europe since World War II. Additionally, it exacerbated the ongoing food crisis in the Global South, increased pressure on Europe's economy and launched an extended economic recession in Russia.

While the war itself has no declared Indigenous dimension to it, it will certainly have serious repercussions on Ukraine's and Russia's indigenous peoples and the international Indigenous movement.

It is difficult to predict how the conflict will evolve and what impact it will have on the survival of the current political regime in Russia. Predictions range from the consolidation of the regime of Vladimir Putin, over full autarchy as in North Korea, to a coup by discontent elites and popular uprising eventually leading to a democratic transition and/or territorial disintegration of the Russian Federation. The present document is not seeking to explore any of these scenarios. It rather looks at some of the already visible consequences of Russia's war in Ukraine for the Russian Indigenous Peoples and beyond. Further, it explores short and mid-term political and economic consequences of the war on indigenous communities in Russia.

Methodology

This report was initiated by several human rights organizations: the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), the Society for Threatened Peoples (STP), the Institute for Ecology and Action Anthropology (INFOE) and the International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia (ICIPR). To prepare the report, a group of authors from these organizations used open sources and interviewed indigenous rights activists both located in and outside Russia. However, the report's authors could not reveal the interviewees' real names, fearing for their safety.

Context

Ever since the election of Vladimir Putin to the presidency in 2000, the Russian government has been busy silencing all independent and critical voices that have flourished in the country in the first decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The first victims of this political choice were large media holdings and independent political parties.

After the return of Vladimir Putin to the presidency in 2012, the Russian government turned its attention to civil society organizations. Draconian laws enacted since 2012 regulate the work of organizations engaged in activities deemed political by the government. The constant harassment of these organizations by the authorities have made it next to impossible to discuss issues relating to Indigenous Peoples rights in Russia truly critically. A particularly worrisome aspect is the expansion of extractive industries on Indigenous Peoples' territories without their Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC). Critical voices find it increasingly difficult to voice their objections.

As a result, today, the once vibrant movement of indigenous activists in Russia has been reduced to a handful of people. They need to be extremely careful about what they say and do as anyone who openly questions the political and economic choices made by national and sub-national authorities is at risk of criminal prosecution. A number of prominent [Indigenous rights defenders left the country](#) fearing for their own as well as for the safety and freedom of their loved ones. Some of those who chose to stay in Russia are experiencing arbitrary criminal prosecution initiated by the state or extractive business.

The war in Ukraine has provided the Russian government with a new opportunity to further shrink an already very limited civic space in Russia. Soon after the start of what they insist is a “special military operation”, Russian authorities introduced various restrictions on the right to freedom of expression and association.

On March 4th, less than 1 week after the start of the war, Russian authorities approved amendments to Russia's administrative and criminal code which now effectively criminalizes not only the expression of anti-war positions, but even the very use of the word *war* in specific circumstances. On March 23, Russia's parliament adopted amendments expanding the ban on criticizing the armed forces and all Russian government actions abroad. Additionally, Russian authorities insist on Russian media only sharing information provided or channeled by the Ministry of Defense on the war in Ukraine.

The penalties for committing the offense of “discrediting Russian armed forces”, including public calls for the armed forces to be withdrawn or to stop fighting ranges from hefty fines to long prison sentences. As of today, the number of people being prosecuted or investigated for committing one of the newly introduced offenses is alarming. Many of them are journalists, civil society activists or political leaders.

Additionally, according to a new draft law likely to enter into force by the end of the year, to be recognized as a "foreign agent", it is sufficient to establish the fact of "foreign influence". It can be the receipt of any amount of money or other kind of support from abroad, which can be directly or indirectly related to foreigners, or Russian organizations. If the person subjected to this "influence" is simultaneously engaged in political activity, he automatically becomes a ready-made "foreign agent". All people, including indigenous activists, who write public texts of a political or non-political nature, will then be at risk of being recognized as such.

Soon after the outbreak of the war, Russian authorities went on a spree of extrajudicial closures and blocking of the last remaining large independent media outlets in Russia and Russian-language media based abroad. The last free notable news outlets were Radio Echo Moskv, an influential radio station that was closed on March 1, formally by its own Board, and the newspaper Novaya Gazeta. The latter's editor-in-chief, Dmitry Muratov was awarded the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize. The newspaper initially tried to adapt to the new rules, but ended up suspending its activities in Russia, succumbing to the ongoing pressure by the government's media watchdog Roskomnadzor. It launched, however, its European namesake Novaya Gazeta Europe based in Latvia. Further, the only remaining independent TV station operating from within Russia, TV Rain (*Telekanal Dozhd*) ceased operations on March 4. Therefore, the media that are still operating in Russia, do so by almost entirely avoiding the topic of the war in Ukraine, or by accepting the rules imposed by the government and are, hence, relying completely on the information provided by the government. Finally, authorities are further blocking access to Facebook, Instagram and Twitter and considering the idea of blocking YouTube.

On March 28, a Moscow court declared 'Meta Platforms Inc.' an extremist organization and banned it in Russia. As such, its applications, such as Instagram and Facebook, which have many personal and informational pages of activists, political refugees and foreign media, are also declared extremist. For example, Indigenous and political activists are forced to remove all applications from their phones when crossing borders, in order for them not to be found in case of an inspection by the FSB.

As of today, Russian independent journalism exists mostly in the form of citizen journalism (private Youtube channels, Telegram channels etc.). Some Russian media continues its work from abroad, but is only accessible to Russian users via virtual private networks (VPN). To use VPNs, however, one needs access to these networks, understanding of its importance and the capacity to use it. It is, therefore, not very widely used especially in remote areas where indigenous peoples live.

Thus, by the end of March, the Russian government established a near-complete monopoly on the narrative around the ongoing war in Ukraine. Mostly politically very interested and urban citizens have the means of accessing independent information about the conflict in

Ukraine and its political, economic and environmental dimensions. However, the disinformation is also partly self-imposed. Evidence from Russians abroad shows that many continue to consume and believe Russian state media propaganda, although they have access to independent media.

Yet, the reality of the overwhelming majority of people living in remote areas like the indigenous communities of Russia is that they have no access to the internet, let alone the skills to avoid restrictions on access to information imposed by the government. An indigenous man from Kamchatka who wishes to stay anonymous for security reasons says: "We use only TV to receive information in our village. Mobile Internet is expensive and very slow, so we primarily use it for texting with relatives and friends. To surf on the Internet, you have to drive around half an hour from the settlement closer to the seashore. We do not use VPN or anything. My grandson, who lives in the city, told me I could use it now, but I do not know how to. I am not too familiar with all this computer science, and he said besides that, the government is blocking most VPN-services today."

However, the state also resorts to very different means. Formerly a vocal defender of Indigenous Peoples' rights, the Russian Association of the Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON), came under full control of the regime in 2013. At the time, Grigory Ledkov, an MP for the ruling United Russia party, was imposed as its president. To this day, he remains president of the organization and claims the monopoly to represent forty-one Indigenous Peoples of Russia.

On first of March, RAIPON released an [address](#) to the Russian president expressing its full support to his decision to start the "special military operation" in Ukraine. Thirty-three regional members of RAIPON, many of whom work for government bodies, signed the document. On March 3, the Association of Finno-Ugric Peoples of the Russian Federation also signed an [open statement](#) by the Leaders of Federal National and Cultural Autonomies and Civil Society Institutions expressing their support of the Russian leadership.

In response to RAIPON's statement, on March 10th, seven exiled indigenous activists from Russia [announced](#) their decision to create an alternative organization to RAIPON, the International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia (ICIPR). Due to the risk of repression, the exiled activists behind ICIPR have no possibility to visit their home communities. They continue, however, to give a voice to their indigenous brothers and sisters who chose to, or were forced to, stay in Russia and who continue their activism less publicly.

Ever since the creation of ICIPR, RAIPON has invested a lot of resources in trying to discredit the newly established organization and its individual members. They do so by making public [statements](#) questioning ICIPR's legitimacy and [accusing them](#) of discrediting the Russian army.



Impact of the war on Indigenous Peoples in Russia

Indigenous soldiers in the Russian Army

The Russian Army has been known for centuries as a place where human dignity is worth nothing. In the 18th and 19th centuries, when Russian peasants were conscripted into the army, they were mourned by the village community as if they had already died, since the chance to see them alive again was, even in times of peace, small. So why are there no large anti-war protests in Russian urban centers today? Because in these centers, the war can be easily overlooked. The Russia fighting and dying in Ukraine is a very different country from the Russia known to ordinary Russians whose overwhelming majority no longer consists of peasants but of urban dwellers. It is mostly rural, from remote regions and ethnically non-Russian. As in many countries, it is the poor and marginalized whose seemingly only chance to make a decent living is to accept a job in the army.

Russian media [reported](#) that the overwhelming majority of Russian soldiers fighting in Ukraine are not coming from large urban centers of western Russia, but from smaller and [poorer](#) localities in Siberia, Volga region and the Caucasus. The percentage of Indigenous Peoples and ethnic minorities among Russian soldiers who are fighting and dying in the war is disproportionately high. In many smaller towns and cities of the Russian Arctic, Siberia and the Far East, contract military service is one of the very few paid jobs available and it is better paid than many other public jobs. Those who fight in Ukraine receive additional bonuses. It was [reported](#) that the average salary of a soldier who fights in Ukraine is around 200.000 Rubles per month, whereas in March 2022 the average salary in, e.g. the Tyumen oblast where Khanty, Mansi and Nenets Indigenous Peoples live, was around 61.000 rubles. Considering that the Tyumen oblast is Russia's leading oil and gas extraction region, the average salary in remote Indigenous villages is much smaller.

Some Indigenous activists from Russia informed the authors of this report that recruitment of soldiers goes without providing them with realistic information about what to expect in the army. As that, the Russian government severely limits information about human losses and the brutality of the war in Ukraine, many people sign contracts without understanding the dangers they are getting themselves into.

Given the [high fatality rate](#) in this war, one can tell that Indigenous Peoples are paying a disproportionately high price for the war waged by politicians in Moscow. While the [death rate](#) is remarkably higher among ethnic minorities, many of those who come home alive will likely suffer from injuries, post-traumatic stress disorders and long-term mental health problems. Yet, Russia's healthcare infrastructure in remote areas where most Indigenous Peoples live has very limited capacities to address these issues.

When the extent of the crimes committed on occupied Ukrainian territory were made public, there was an attempt to *racialize* the brutality. In Russian social media portrayed these crimes

as committed by [“savages” from remote corners of the empire](#), thus characterizing Indigenous soldiers as people who, by cultural traits, are more prone to violence. Such an interpretation of the events was trending not only among the Russian, but also among the Ukrainian public.

While the investigations by Ukrainian authorities into these crimes are ongoing, it is too early to say who exactly committed the horrific crimes against Ukrainian civilians. However, even if Indigenous soldiers had committed these crimes as part of the Russian Armed Forces, one needs to be aware of the racist narrative propagated by such stories as well as the socio-economic dimension that pushes young Indigenous men into the army. Such narratives distract from those higher up in the hierarchy actually responsible for the war crimes and disregards the fact that many indigenous men join the military to provide for their families.

Indigenous Movement and Human Rights Situation

For many years, the Indigenous peoples’ movement in Russia has been divided. On the one hand, there was RAIPON, a large umbrella organization of Russian Indigenous peoples whose public appearances since 2013 has been mostly reduced to rubber-stamping the government’s decisions. On the other hand, there was Aborigen Forum, which had been created in response to the “unfriendly takeover” of RAIPON by Vladimir Putin’s United Russia party.

However, with the outbreak of the war, this division got an additional dimension: the one about one’s attitude towards the war. This problem exists both inside the country as well as internationally. The cross-border dimension is particularly evident in the case of the Sámi who live in both Russia and the Scandinavian countries. The war in Ukraine here has meant that almost all cooperation of the Sámi Council has stalled. The Council is the Sámi’s cross-border cooperation body. It is currently struggling to stay functional as the Russian side has followed orders to endorse the war and has withdrawn from the body, even though the Council has not publicly denounced the war. On March 13, the Sámi Council issued [a press release](#) regarding the suspension of the activities of the Arctic Council, which does not even mention the word “war”.

Another people settling cross-border are the Yupiq who live in Chukotka and Alaska. Anna Ottke, the head of the indigenous peoples’ association of Chukotka, which also represents the Yupiq, is a member of Russia’s Federation Council where she has voted in breach of international law to authorize Russia’s aggression. The Inuit Circumpolar Council which i.a. represents Chukotka’s Yupiq has also voiced its concern over the suspension of the activities of the Arctic Council in [a press release](#) without denouncing or even mentioning Russia’s assault on Ukraine.

In addition, the Indigenous movement is increasingly divided in Russia itself. Widespread disinformation and the difficulty of accessing independent information in remote regions, among other things, is leading to a split in the movement. With laws becoming ever more repressive, Indigenous activists are under growing threat. Authorities pressure communities and activists to comply otherwise they must fear prosecution.

According to Indigenous sources, the communities are also sometimes misused for propaganda purposes. This happened, for example, on the Kola Peninsula, where members of a community were invited to a meeting by local authorities under false pretenses and then staged for social media purposes with military symbolism. This is emblematic of the fact that Indigenous peoples in Russia are not seen as independent citizens with rights and needs, but increasingly as accessories or even troublemakers who do not deserve to be genuinely represented. This is just illustrated by RAIPON, where only Indigenous voices are being heard that conform to the political line of Vladimir Putin's United Russia Party.

As critical Indigenous voices increasingly have to fear persecution, they can no longer sufficiently stand up for their rights and criticize the government and state-related companies. This has a direct impact on their human rights in Russia, as the erosion of resistance likely will lead to a deterioration of the situation.

Economic Situation during and after the War

Since the first hours of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Western governments, one by one, announced economic sanctions against Russian government agencies and institutions, businesses, politicians and other individuals. The sanctions led to severely restricted financial transactions between Russian entities and their foreign counterparts, to the freezing of the government's financial assets abroad, limited the transfer of technological know-how, and complicated Russian exports, aviation and shipping. It is estimated that the volume of sanctions imposed on Russia is the highest ever imposed on any nation in modern history. The sanctions introduced by governments were quickly followed by foreign businesses' own initiatives to leave the Russian market, to suspend production in Russia and to close Russia-based retail outlets.

In a globalized country like Russia, this led to immediate economic consequences perceived by many within Russia, but also beyond its borders. Initially, it provoked panic among the population and spikes in prices for essential goods. While, by now, prices for many goods have stabilized, the long-term effects of the sanctions are difficult to estimate. It is expected that by the end of 2022, the Russian economy may shrink by as much as 20 percent. Meanwhile, Russia is already experiencing shortages of some essential supplies, like medicines.

In a situation of the highest tension between Russia and the West since the Cuban missile crisis, it seems obvious that the Russian government would prioritize maintaining its military, both technologically and financially, over providing economic support to vulnerable populations. The Indigenous Peoples of Russia are among the most vulnerable groups of the Russian population. Dispossessed of their lands, they are excluded from decision-making when it comes to resource extraction and the development of other industrial activities on their territories. Therefore, many Indigenous communities live on already meager state welfare as their sustenance is increasingly coming under pressure. Today, these groups may face an even greater socio-economic crisis similar to the one they experienced in the early 1990s. At that time, when the collapse of the Soviet Union led to a breakdown in food supply chains and social services, some parts of the Russian Arctic experienced high levels of food insecurity as a result.

With the closure of Western markets, the Russian government is tightening its focus on the Indian and especially the Chinese market. While Chinese and Indian businesses are interested in Russian raw materials and the Russian market in general, due to the sanctions, they are not ready to go as far as to risk their presence on the much more lucrative Western markets. Hence, so far, they have been rather hesitant in responding to the Russian government's generous invitations to enter its domestic market in order to replace Western suppliers.

Because of the state of the Russian economy, one could expect that the government will drop already very limited and ineffective environmental and human rights regulations for the extractive industries. Thereby, they make sure their produce is competitive on the Asian markets. In fact, there are indicators that this has already started to take place. In mid-April, opposition politician Julia Galyamina [wrote](#) that Yakutia authorities have issued an authorization to start logging in one of the last primeval forest areas in Siberia for its future export to China. The forest in question is on the traditional territory of Evenki Indigenous Peoples for whom the forest is the essence of their traditional lifestyle and spiritual culture. In addition, the environmental impacts of logging in this area will almost certainly have severe impacts on Indigenous Peoples living downstream too.

This same logic applies to the Russian mining giant Nornickel. So far, the company has been relying heavily on the European market to sell its metals much needed in the green economy transition. With the imposed sanctions on Russia and increasing supply chain instability, the company is at risk of turning its back on Europe with a new focus on Asian markets. While dependency on exports to Europe was one of the last levers human rights and environmental activists had at their disposal to improve the situation of Indigenous Peoples in Russia, the sanctions regime is making the situation increasingly difficult. It is no secret that, e.g., Chinese firms and investors care less to not at all about international environmental and human rights standards. Evidently, a shift in the focus towards the Chinese market would most probably lead to even more limited Human Rights and Environmental Accountability of Russian extractive companies and their new partners.

Cross-border Contacts and International Cooperation

As already mentioned, the war affects cross-border contacts in different ways. One example is the division among the Sámi people, whose cohesion and fruitful cooperation are endangered by the consequences of the war. However, the Yupiq, Inuit and Aleut face similar issues.

Another big challenge relates to international cooperation. As previous work in international bodies such as the Arctic Council or the UN has shown, participating in international fora is of great importance for the Indigenous Peoples of Russia.

Extractive industries, global warming and geopolitics endanger the fragile regional environment and negatively affect the livelihoods of Indigenous peoples. In the Arctic, for example, as the near-permanent ice breaks up, there are emerging opportunities to exploit mineral resources and to open up new maritime routes. The Arctic Council was established as an institution in which the Arctic's eight nations, Indigenous communities, and NGOs were able to work on sustainable environmental development and protection. Altogether, the Arctic Council enhanced a constructive dialogue and engagement between the Arctic nations, Indigenous peoples, civil society and businesses. Despite all problems and challenges the Council has faced, its work in fostering peaceful cooperation in the Arctic has been noteworthy.

Given the challenges Indigenous Peoples face, it is crucial to involve them in the related debates and processes. The growing demand for minerals needed in the transition to a greener economy led to increasing industrial pressure on Indigenous territories. With their livelihoods and ecosystems being endangered, Indigenous voices need to be heard and respected in the international arena. This can only happen if Indigenous leaders can speak out freely about their concerns and stand up for their rights both domestically and internationally.

Due to the war in Ukraine, the work of the Arctic Council is currently paused and speaking out at the UN has become extremely dangerous for critical Indigenous voices from Russia. Any opposition to the government can be punished as a criminal offense. However, it is now more important than ever to have constructive cooperation that can address the challenges of climate change, human rights, businesses and geopolitical power relations. It is precisely the most vulnerable who are relying heavily on an intact environment to provide them with sufficient sustenance and to live out their culture. International cooperation, transparency and the respect of standards and norms are vital to the protection of minority groups so that their rights are monitored and upheld by national and international parties.

Unfortunately, RAIPON, the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, is among the last Russian organizations present in the international arena with a legal standing.

The organization also figures among the permanent participants in the Arctic Council. However, since RAIPON has been forcibly aligned with the Russian government, it can no longer be considered a legitimate representative of the Indigenous Peoples of Russia. The organization exclusively promotes the interests of the government. Consequently, Indigenous leaders who do not comply with its views are persecuted and discredited.

Therefore, RAIPON became an instrument of the Russian government. The organization is misused to demonstrate unity and to deny the problems that Indigenous people face in Russia.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Indigenous Peoples in Russia are in many different ways affected by the Russian war in Ukraine. The impact is economic on the one hand and political on the other. Concerning economic aspects, Indigenous Peoples living mostly in remote areas specifically suffer from inflation, food insecurity, and a lack of social services. All these problems are likely to be amplified by the war in Ukraine, which in some cases can already be seen. Another economic aspect is the push to expand the extractive industry and lower associated social and environmental standards. With Russia increasingly devolving into a war industry and turning towards Asian markets, it must be expected in the future that human rights will be worth even less than they already were.

When it comes to politics, one big challenge is disinformation and the lack of access to independent media. Indigenous Peoples in remote areas often have not even access to the internet, let alone the skills to avoid restrictions on access to information imposed by the government. Additionally, Indigenous activists increasingly face repression and illegalization as criticizing the state and related companies becomes ever more dangerous in light of the war. Critical Indigenous activists are seen as a threat to economic development and state security. They are declared foreign agents. The Russian state, together with RAIPON, is making every effort to cut off the international contacts of these activists and to silence their voices in the international arena. The example of the Sámi illustrates very well how the war has driven a wedge into fruitful international cooperation. The Sámi example illustrates well how the war has driven a wedge into fruitful international cooperation while the crackdown on the newly formed ICIPR stands for the discrediting of critical indigenous voices in the international arena.

On behalf of ICIPR, IWGIA, STP, and INFOE we urge:

the Russian government:

- to immediately stop the aggression in Ukraine.

- to stop the criminalization and persecution of Indigenous environmental and human rights activists and to let them speak out freely both domestically and internationally.
- to mitigate economic and social impacts of the war on indigenous communities and remote areas in general.
- to stop disinformation, including about the military service, and especially in remote areas.

to the international community:

- to no longer accept RAIPON as an independent Indigenous voice.
- to not look away and continue to monitor and to draw attention to the injustices faced by Indigenous peoples in Russia and offer support.
- to offer Human rights defenders, including Indigenous activists, unbureaucratic and fast support in the case they have to leave Russia and seek asylum abroad.