

## Indigenous Peoples of Russia: Enforcing EU Sanctions and Support of Indigenous Rights Defenders

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The rights and very existence of indigenous peoples and ethno-national groups in Russia are systematically suppressed by the highly centralized Russian regime. According to the official 2021 Russian census (which includes the population of annexed Crimea but not the territories occupied after 2022), the number of those officially classified as "indigenous minority peoples" is less than 310,000. The population of ethnic groups lacking their own full-fledged statehood (unlike, for example, Armenians or Kazakhs) within the Russian Federation stands at approximately 20 million. However, it is important to note that about 16.5 million people did not specify their ethnicity at all during this census. This oppression is not simply an internal problem; it has also become a major factor in the Russian state's external aggression, exploiting the resources and populations of colonized regions to wage war against Ukraine.

### Key Issues

- **Imitation of Federal Government:** Russia is a federal state only in its constitution, but in reality, it is a unitary state, where municipal self-government was virtually eliminated in 2025.
- **Economic Exploitation:** Extraction of resources (oil, gas, gold, diamonds) on the lands of indigenous peoples without fair compensation or consent.
- **Environmental:** Catastrophic environmental damage caused by state corporations and mining companies, which destroy the ancestral territories of indigenous peoples.
- **Systemic racism:** state-sanctioned discrimination in all spheres of society, including employment and education, escalating into crimes motivated by racial and national hatred.
- **Forced Russification:** systematic discrimination against the languages, cultures, and identities of indigenous peoples through the education system and propaganda, erasing of historical memories of mass, state-orchestrated repression.
- **Disproportionate mobilization:** low living standards in indigenous territories, compared to large cities, encourage the population to enter into military contracts and actively engage in forced mobilization.

### Mechanisms of Control

The Russian state maintains control over ethno-national groups through artificial economic dependence and harsh persecutions. Revenues from mineral extraction are distributed unfairly. For example, the Sakha Republic accounts for 25% of global diamond production, yet tax revenues do not remain in the region, but go to Moscow. Overall, more than 60% of all tax revenues collected in the federal subjects go directly to the federal budget. Moscow then redistributes these funds back as "subsidies," varying their size depending on the regions' loyalty, leaving 88% financially dependent on the federal center.

The resulting poverty forces indigenous peoples to consider military service as their only option. For many in regions like Kalmykia and Tuva, the army offers wages they cannot expect in the civilian sector.

The deprivation of regional economic autonomy is compounded by the lack of legal protection for indigenous peoples. In July 2024, the Russian Supreme Court ruled that 55 indigenous and ethnic organizations were designated as "extremist," effectively criminalizing the activities of this segment of civil society and their work preserving cultural heritage. This was followed in January 2025 by an FSB 'terrorist' listing of 172 entities, including many fictitious 'ghost' organizations invented to

facilitate arbitrary prosecution, and even Internet 'memes'. Furthermore, municipal self-government, under a law adopted in 2025, was stripped of its independence and integrated into the unified hierarchy of state power; it can no longer protect the rights of indigenous peoples to their ancestral territories.

Large private and state-owned corporations like Nordgold and Rosatom systematically ignore environmental regulations, polluting rivers and destroying sites sacred to indigenous peoples without obtaining the free, prior, and informed consent of local communities.

In the education system, the study of native languages has been reduced from two hours per week to one, and history textbooks have been rewritten to justify colonization as "voluntary accession" The State Ethnic Policy Strategy until 2036, signed by Vladimir Putin in November 2025, envisions erasing the identity of 95% of the country's population and replacing it with a "common Russian" identity based on Russian culture and so-called traditional values – Putin's doctrine based on a rigid hierarchy, patriarchal, religious dogmatism and collectivism.

The situation in the North Caucasus poses a particular problem, as the practical expression of these "traditional values" there is the de-facto extra-legal status of women, children, and LGBTQ+ people, who can be subject to so-called "honor killings" with the connivance or even support of law enforcement agencies.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine led to the culmination of this colonial policy. Residents of economically depressed national republics suffer a disproportionately high casualty rate; independent analysis indicates that a man from Tuva or Buryatia is many times more likely to die in Ukraine than a man from Moscow or Saint Petersburg.

## **Possible assistance from European institutions**

European institutions could officially recognize the designation of indigenous organizations as extremist or terrorist communities in Russia as political repression. This can be achieved through a European Parliament Resolution that would set a political precedent, as well as by updating the EUAA Country Guidance notes and COI reports to classify such prosecution as persecution rather than criminal activity.

Following its refusal to buy Russian gas, the EU could ban the import of raw materials (diamonds, gold, coal) mined on indigenous lands in violation of human rights and environmental protections.

The European Commission could recommend that migration authorities in EU Member States prevent the deportation of refugees from the North Caucasus back to Russia, where they risk torture and extrajudicial executions. To ensure this, the Commission could initiate an infringement proceedings at the ECJ against Member States that fail to comply with the EU Asylum Procedures Directive and the Charter of Fundamental Rights, and issue statements reinforcing that ignoring ECHR Rule 39 interim measures constitutes a breach of EU Rule of Law principles. Furthermore, it would be of substantial support if EU Member States developed special procedures for issuing humanitarian visas for indigenous activists, whom the Kremlin has designated as "extremists."

European structures could promote the inclusion of decolonial initiatives and representatives of indigenous peoples in all strategic discussions about the future of Russia and the sanctions policy directed against it.

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