

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Who are the indigenous peoples in Russia?

The Russian Federation is home to more than 100 different peoples. Of these, 41 are legally recognised as “indigenous, small-numbered peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East”; others are still striving to obtain this status, which is conditional upon a people:

- having no more than 50,000 members;
- maintaining a traditional way of life;
- inhabiting certain remote regions of Russia;
- identifying itself as a distinct ethnic community.

A definition of “indigenous” without the numerical qualification does not exist in Russian legislation.

The small-numbered indigenous peoples number approximately 250,000 individuals in total and thus make up less than 0.2% of the Russian population. They traditionally inhabit huge territories stretching from the Kola Peninsula in the west to the Bering Strait in the east, covering around two-thirds of the Russian territory. Their territories are rich in natural resources, including oil, gas and minerals and they are heavily affected by large energy projects such as pipelines and hydroelectric dams.

Legal framework in Russia for indigenous peoples

The small-numbered indigenous peoples are protected by Article 69 of the Russian Constitution and three federal framework laws: 1) On the guarantees of the rights of the indigenous small-numbered peoples of the Russian Federation (1999); 2) On general principles of the organization of communities [obshinas] of the indigenous small-numbered peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of Russian Federation; and 3) On Territories of Traditional Nature Use of the indigenous small-numbered peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation (2001). These three framework laws establish the cultural, territorial and political rights of indigenous peoples and their communities. Implementation of the aims and regulations contained in these laws has, however, been complicated by growing political pressure and several subsequent changes to natural resource legislation and government decisions on natural resource use in the North.

Russia has **not** ratified ILO Convention 169 and **abstained** from voting in the UN General Assembly on the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.



Reindeer herder in Evenkia - Photo: Alexander Afanasiev

Indigenous organization in Russia

The Russian Association of Numerically Small Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East (RAIPON), established in 1990, represents 41 indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East. RAIPON's mission is to protect their rights at the national and international level.

Current problems

Although the economic situation of the Russian Federation has developed substantially over the past 10 years, the indigenous peoples in Russia remain extremely poor and their social and economic situation, as well as their life expectancy, is far below the national average.

In the Taimyr region, in the north of Krasnoyarsky Kray, income from the sale of hunting, fishing and reindeer herding products amounts to approximately 4,100 roubles a month while the minimum subsistence for this region in 2010 was 11,313 roubles. Commodity prices in the Russian north are extremely high. Reindeer herders in Tukhardskaya and Noskovskaya Tundras and Karaul village earn 3,000-4,000 roubles a month while the average monthly salary in the region is approximately 30,000 roubles.

With regard to human and civil rights over the last 10 years, the human rights situation in the country, including that of the indigenous peoples, has become worse and civil society has come under increasing pressure regarding its political freedom. Today, the political work of RAIPON is continuously monitored and pressure on individual indigenous human rights

defenders is increasing. This tendency towards restricting the human rights of Russian citizens and civil society organizations is alarming.

Indigenous peoples live on lands rich in natural resources, such as oil and gas, water resources, minerals and coal. Instead of providing development for the indigenous population, the increased interest in natural resources on the part of the Russian state, as well as both Russian and foreign companies, puts increasing pressure on the indigenous peoples and their traditional livelihoods.

RAIPON's response

Defending the national legal framework

The legal advocacy group coordinated by RAIPON has, since 2001, managed to defend the three vitally important framework laws enshrining indigenous rights in Russia. Additionally, RAIPON has succeeded in defending indigenous rights in the ever volatile legal environment of the Russian Federation.

Targeting international fora

RAIPON addresses international human rights mechanisms such as the UN treaty bodies and the UN Human Rights Council. In 2008 and 2009, this delivered positive results in the form of recommendations to and commitments by the Russian government to respect and realise indigenous peoples' human rights. These mechanisms also serve as platforms facilitating dialogue between RAIPON and high-level representatives of the Russian administration.

Evenkia hydroelectric dam

Both the state and Russia's largest hydropower company, RusHydro, remain determined to substantially expand hydropower in Siberia and the Russian Far East, which is the homeland of the majority of Russia's indigenous peoples. According to a new "territorial planning scheme of the Krasnoyarsk Territory", covering the basin of the Yenisei River and running until 2030, the plan is to construct seven new large hydropower plants. If these plants are built, approx. 2.11 million ha. of land will be flooded.

One of these projects is the Evenkia Hydroelectric Power Plant, which, if built, will produce the world's largest artificial lake, covering 9,000 square kilometres, will deprive up to 7,000 indigenous Evenks of their homelands and livelihood and submerge one million hectares of virtually untouched pristine forest.

In 2008, more than 2,000 Evenks signed an open letter to then President Putin, urging him to stop the project. They were supported by indigenous organizations, environmental NGOs, some local authorities and even the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), which in 2008 asked Russia to withdraw its support for this project after receiving alarming reports from indigenous organizations. In 2009, during the Universal Periodic Review of the Russian Federation, Denmark, for example, referred to CERD's recommendations and urged Russia to implement them.

Despite information in 2010 that RusHydro had shelved its plans to construct the Evenkia dam, RusHydro announced in November 2011 that the project was undergoing approval at various levels. This came as a surprise to many who had strongly opposed the dam, and RusHydro later retracted the statement and conceded that ultimately, the decision to build the dam would have to be taken by the state authorities and not the company. The environmental impact assessment procedures are nonetheless ongoing, although the company has failed to reach an agreement with local stakeholders.

Regional capacity building

Legal seminars have evolved into a flexible and effective instrument, allowing RAIPON to respond to challenges emerging in individual regions, such as land-rights issues, oil pipeline construction, oil extraction or construction of hydroelectric dams. Through these seminars, local activists have been trained to act on the political arena in their regions, and to give their input into discussions about industrial projects and other relevant issues, and regional authorities have been made aware of RAIPON's concerns.

Regional empowerment

In various regions, indigenous information centres have emerged, consolidated themselves and hugely improved the capacity of indigenous peoples to respond to political challenges in their regions and to threats to their land rights and livelihoods. One example is the information centre "Lach" which plays a leading role in defending indigenous peoples' right to natural resources, particularly fish, and monitors upcoming oil developments on the West coast of Kamchatka.

National network and awareness raising

Through the network of information centres, RAIPON's award winning website (www.raipon.org) has developed into a unique resource for indigenous peoples in Russia. It is updated daily with news received from the regions and offers access to a wealth of material on indigenous peoples in Russia.

Weekly news is disseminated by means of various mailing lists that keep a broad variety of readers in Russia and abroad informed of current developments and stimulate discussions among indigenous youth and leaders on a broad range of issues.

The journal "The Living Arctic" is published biannually and is distributed even to very remote settlements which have no regular access to the outside world. It is especially significant for those regions which are not connected by electronic communication and it has a strong focus on rights-related issues.



Yamal–Nenets Autonomous Okrug - Photo: Kathrin Wessendorf

RECOMMENDATIONS TO INTERNATIONAL DONORS

- To maintain the commitment to promoting respect for indigenous peoples' rights and to place renewed focus on the situation of indigenous peoples in the Russian Arctic.
- To keep indigenous peoples in Russia as a priority in strategies targeting indigenous peoples and the Arctic region.
- To emphasize support to indigenous peoples in Russia as an important contribution to good governance, human rights and democracy.
- To take a human rights-based approach to supporting indigenous peoples in Russia.
- To consider the indigenous peoples of the whole Russian North as a specific target group rather than focusing and providing support only to indigenous peoples in the European part of Russia, which already receives the most financial support from European countries.
- To strengthen the role of RAIPON as a national umbrella organization. The link between international, national, regional and local work is crucial and it is only possible to influence political developments and decision-making at all levels through a strong umbrella organization with active organizations and members at all levels.

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