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RAIPON, Russian Indigenous Peoples, and the War in Ukraine: Pro-Kremlin Narratives and Voices of Dissent

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In a keynote address to a workshop on Russia's Arctic interests held in Victoria in February 2023, Dr. Pavel Sulyandziga, Chairperson of the Board of the International Development Fund of Indigenous Peoples in Russia (BATANI) and a Visiting Scholar at Dartmouth College, outlined the case of the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON). Although many people still think of the organization as one representative of the people who are forced by the Kremlin to espouse pro-government positions, he explained that it is *not* an organization of Indigenous Peoples but part of the structure of the Russian regime. Part of the RAIPON leadership is comprised of members of the Russian parliament who voted for the war to start and thus are guilty of war crimes. Some RAIPON leaders are also writing complaint letters against Russian Indigenous activists who have been detained for their opposition to the regime.

By nearly every metric, the Russian Federation is the largest Arctic state. Its vast Arctic territory covers approximately 9 million square kilometers. Its Arctic coastline stretches over 24,150 kilometres, extending more than halfway around the Circumpolar North. More than 2.5 million Russians live in the Arctic, representing nearly half of the global population living in the Circumpolar North – but less than 2 percent of the Russian population reside there. Activity within the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation generates between 12–15 percent of the country's GDP and, before the West introduced expanded economic sanctions in 2022, represented one-quarter of

Russia's total exports.¹ Accordingly, sustainable development of the region is amongst Russia's foremost national priorities, which also include "the use of the Arctic region as a strategic resource base" for socio-economic development, the "preservation of the Arctic as an area of peace and cooperation," protection of Arctic ecosystems, and the promotion of the Northern Sea Route as a major transportation artery.²

Given the region's immense resource base and economic potential, as well as Russia's limited ability to project military power after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow tried for years to avoid taking overtly aggressive steps in the Circumpolar North. Instead, its rhetoric described the "Arctic as a territory of peace" – messaging tailored for Western audiences. Following its illegal annexation of Crimea and sponsorship of the military conflict in southeast Ukraine in 2014, however, Russia's behavior in the Arctic changed. Re-militarization and provocative rhetoric replaced previously benign discourses and behavior. It has amplified this messaging since it launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

According to official statistics, Russia's Indigenous population is roughly 250,000 people (0.2% of the population) spread out across the country, with nearly 80,000 in the Russian Arctic.³ These communities are typically small, with economies based on fishing, hunting, reindeer husbandry, and gathering. Poverty is also endemic, with social and economic development, as well as life expectancy, far below the national average. Most territories inhabited by these peoples are, however, rich in natural resources, including oil, gas, and minerals, and while they typically do not benefit from this development, they are heavily affected by the projects. For its part, the Russian government considers the Arctic to be a strategic region for national development. During the past two decades, owing to the depletion of old resource deposits, development of new technologies, climate change and other factors, the Russian Federation launched a series of new mining and hydrocarbon projects in the Arctic, further pressuring Northern communities and threatening Indigenous peoples' existence.

Russia's laws and policies also systematically exclude Indigenous peoples with populations of more than 50,000 people. Larger Indigenous groups, such as the Yakut (Sakha) and Komi people, are instead labelled as "ethnic minorities" or "titular nations" – neither of which are legal categories. The Soviet era policy of *korenizatsiia* (nativization) established autonomous republics for large Indigenous groups in exchange for their incorporation into the political system and their

¹ Александр Козлов [Aleksandr Kozlov], "Арктическая стратегия учтет особенности каждого приполярного региона страны" ("The Arctic strategy will take into account the peculiarities of each circumpolar region of the country"), 13 November 2019, <https://arctic-russia.ru/article/aleksandr-kozlov-arkticheskaya-strategiya-uchtet-osobennosti-kazhdogo-pripolyarnogo-regiona-strany/>.

² Arctic Council, "The Russian Federation," 21 January 2022, <https://arctic-council.org/about/states/russian-federation/>.

³ These are representatives of 19 small-numbered Indigenous peoples, including Sami, Vepsians, Nenets, Khanty, Mansi, Selkups, Kets, Nganasans, Enets, Dolgans, Evenks, Evens, Yukagirs, Chukchi, Chuvans, Inuit, Koryaks, Itelmens (Kamchadals), Aleuts.

commitment to communist principles. Although Indigenous cultural expressions persist amongst these larger peoples, state-controlled definitions of Indigeneity are primarily about asserting control and influencing the expression and articulation of Indigeneity in terms favourable to the Russian state.⁴ This also means that RAIPON has never represented all of the Indigenous peoples in the Russian Far North.⁵

In the wake of Russia's expanded war of aggression against Ukraine, Russia's northern Indigenous communities have experienced a disproportionate degree of hardship. Given their small sizes, remoteness, and ethnicities, these communities have been particularly targeted by Russian mobilization efforts. This builds on decades of Russian state abuse, surrounding land use and resource development that has ignored local concerns and damaged traditional Indigenous territories. Arctic Indigenous leadership, in the form of the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON) has been coopted by the Kremlin and is now little more than a mouthpiece for government directives. Consequently, many Indigenous leaders have fled Russia – but these political exiles retain important networks inside Russia, where locals continue to resist state oppression. Nevertheless, while Russia has long paid lip service to Indigenous rights, the state's growing totalitarian tendencies and confrontation with the West has led to near total state control over regional representative organizations.

This NAADSN *Policy Primer* begins with a background overview of RAIPON and its transformation into a state-controlled organ in the early 2010s before analyzing its statements supporting Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Our analysis discerns that it has promoted three key narratives since February 2022: that RAIPON is a staunch supporter of the Kremlin and of President Vladimir Putin personally; that RAIPON is a strategic link between Russia and the so-called “newly acquired territories” (Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhian oblasts); and that RAIPON is the only legitimate representative of Russia's Arctic and Siberian Indigenous population. We then provide a short assessment of how the War in Ukraine has affected Russia's Indigenous peoples, despite Russian narratives claiming widespread Indigenous support for the war effort. The last section identifies voices of dissent associated with the International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia (ICIPR) and the “Indigenous Russia” (iRussia) information center. Our conclusions reflect on how political divisions amongst the Arctic states, dramatically

⁴ See, for example, Evgeniia Sidorova and Roberta Rice, “Being Indigenous in an Unlikely Place: Self-Determination in the Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (1920-1991),” *International Indigenous Policy Journal* 11, no. 3 (2020): 1-18; Anna Sharapova, Sara L. Seck, Sarah L. MacLeod, and Olga Koubrak, “Indigenous Rights and Interests in a Changing Arctic Ocean: Canadian and Russian Experiences and Challenges,” *Arctic Review on Law and Politics* 13 (2022): 286–311; and Cultural Survival, IWGIA, ICIPR, and Society for Threatened Peoples Switzerland, “Observations on the State of Indigenous Rights in the Russian Federation Prepared for the 44th Session of the Universal Periodic Review of the Human Rights Council,” 4 April 2023, https://www.culturalsurvival.org/sites/default/files/Russia_UPR_2023_Final_2.pdf.

⁵ Evgeniia Sidorova, “Circumpolar Indigeneity in Canada, Russia, and the United States (Alaska): Do Differences Result in Representational Challenges for the Arctic Council?,” *Arctic* 72, no. 1 (2019): 71-81.

exacerbated by the War in the Ukraine, are also reflected amongst and within the Permanent Participants to the Arctic Council.

The Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON)

RAIPON is a Russian public organization that represents, on the international and federal levels, 40 Indigenous Peoples in Russia comprised of 257,895 people (2010 census). The Association is organized into 33 regional and ethnic associations and authoritatively represents these peoples, whose territories in the North, Siberia and the Far East span 60 percent of the Russian Federation.⁶ According to the Arctic Council website, “RAIPON’s goal is to protect Indigenous Peoples’ human rights, defend their legal interests, assist in solving environmental, social, economic, cultural and educational issues and to promote their right to self-governance.” The blurb emphasizes that “RAIPON works with the State Duma and the Government of the Russian Federation regarding legislation related to Indigenous Peoples’ issues.”⁷

Background

RAIPON was founded in March 1990 at the First Congress of the Peoples of the North. It was originally named the “Association of the Peoples of the North of the USSR,” which brought together 26 Indigenous Peoples from the Russian North. On 24 November 1993, it registered with the Russian Ministry of Justice as a socio-political movement under the name “Association of Indigenous Small-numbered Peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation” (RAIPON). In July 1999, the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation re-registered the Association as an all-Russian public organization. RAIPON’s charter is available in Russian,⁸ as are its regulations on regional associations.⁹

The highest body of RAIPON is the Congress, which convenes every fourth year. In the period between Congresses, the current work of the organization is managed by a Coordinating Council

⁶ “Association. General information,” accessed on 20 July 2023, <https://en.raipon.info/association/index#common-information>.

⁷ “Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North,” accessed on 18 June 2023, <https://www.arctic-council.org/about/permanent-participants/raipon/>.

⁸ RAIPON, “УСТАВ Общероссийской общественной организации ‘Ассоциация коренных малочисленных народов Севера, Сибири и Дальнего Востока Российской Федерации’” [“Charter of the All-Russia Public organization ‘Association of indigenous and small numbered peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation,’”] accessed on 1 July 2023, <https://en.raipon.info/upload/iblock/bdf/bdf22fcd009457440e585ba26ee431d3.pdf>.

⁹ “Положение о региональных отделениях Общероссийской общественной организации ‘Ассоциация коренных и малочисленных народов Севера, Сибири и Дальнего Востока Российской Федерации’” [“Statue on regional branches of the All-Russia public organization ‘Association of indigenous and small numbered peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation,’”], accessed on 17 July 2023, <https://en.raipon.info/upload/iblock/f7e/f7e3ebb693cc51d8201a06ee2f024165.pdf>.

and a Presidium consisting of the President, First Vice-President and Vice-Presidents of the Association. The President of the Association is elected on the Congress by secret ballot on an alternative basis. All regional leaders of regional and ethnic associations, elected by their Indigenous Peoples groups in the regions, are members of the Coordinating Council.

RAIPON is categorized as a regional organization “based on the territorial and territorial-ethnic principle.” The Association website notes that “regional (local) members of the Association ... have organizational and financial independence,” with the Association maintaining “close links with its regional branches, coordinat[ing] their activities to implement the decisions of the governing bodies of the Association, and provid[ing] whatever assistance it can.” According to the website:

The RAIPON, in cooperation with the Chambers of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, the Government and the Administration of the President of the Russian Federation, federal and regional ministries and departments, participates in the work on legislation designed to ensure the rights of Indigenous Peoples, the preservation of their traditional way of life and the development of the economy. The Association's practice of partnership with relevant ministries, committees of the State Duma and the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation and presidential plenipotentiaries in federal districts is based on the conclusion of cooperation agreements and joint events at the federal and regional levels.

RAIPON is a Permanent Participant in the Arctic Council, where its experts participate in various working groups and Council programs. The Association also holds special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), is an active participant in the sessions of the UN Working Groups on Indigenous Issues (and worked on drafting the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples but abstained from voting on it and has not ratified it), as well as the sessions of the Commission on Human Rights and the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. It also has observer status in the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Committee on Intellectual Property and Genetic Resources, Traditional Knowledge and Culture of the World Intellectual Property Organization. In 1999, RAIPON received the UNEP international award for outstanding services to the protection of the nature of the Russian North – but under leadership very different than at present.

In August 2012, RAIPON (alongside other representatives of Indigenous Peoples of the Russian North) supported a demand to ban oil production in areas of traditional land use and called on all Indigenous Peoples of the Arctic to join with Russian representatives in this stance. Concurrent with discussions about a draft Arctic Council statement or declaration proposing that the Arctic be recognized as a “homeland – a vulnerable environment in need of protection” with a clear focus on the rights of Indigenous peoples, this triggered alarm in the Kremlin which saw this as a challenge to its concept of “homeland” and could advance the cause of Indigenous rights over intensifying plans for Russian Arctic oil and gas development.

On 1 November 2012, soon after Vladimir Putin's re-election to the Russian Presidency, the Russian Ministry of Justice announced that it was suspending RAIPON. Russian and Western sources differ on why this happened. According to a 1 November 2012 statement from the Russian Ministry of Justice, the organization's policies existed in conflict with Russian federal law, and the closure was ordered to amend these legal inconsistencies. On 8 November 2012, the Russian Agency of Social Information asserted that some of RAIPON's regional offices did not exist within legal confines, thus rendering the whole Association illegal. In a 14 November 2012 opening address sent to circumpolar Arctic officials, RAIPON's vice- President Rodion Sulyandziga explained that "from the moment of its establishment in 1990, RAIPON united, promoted and carried out its activities aimed at protection of the rights of 40 Indigenous peoples of the North...Those were years of hope for improvement of the situation in Russia connected with practical implementation of the rights of Indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East. Today this hope is down." He termed the forced shutdown "repressive" and "an act of intimidation and rude interference" also coming immediately prior to the 7th assembly of Indigenous Peoples planned for March 2013.¹⁰

Although the Kremlin did not offer any further explanations, scholars have pointed to certain aspects of Russian law that may relate to RAIPON's closure. One such law stated that any Russian NGO receiving foreign funding was required to register itself as a foreign entity. Because RAIPON had received foreign funding, this law could be applied against it. Furthermore, on 14 November 2012, *Rossiskaya Gazeta* (the official newspaper of the Russian overnment) published Putin's new law expanding the definition of high treason, which many Russian rights activists interpreted as making contact with foreigners a federal offence.¹¹

RAIPON leadership chose to push back, filing a critical report with the UN Human Rights Council in November 2012 which asserted that Russia had failed to live up to voluntary pledges to improve the conditions for northern Arctic residents in key areas such as land rights, food, education, health, work and self-determination.¹² The report also called on Russia to change its position on RAIPON, with Vice President Pavel Sulyandziga suggesting that Russian authorities increasingly viewed Indigenous peoples as a troublesome element to Russia's Arctic development goals and aspirations:

¹⁰ "Russian Indigenous Org Wants Arctic Council Support to Fight Shut-Down," *Nunatsiaq News*, 14 November 2012, http://www.nunatsiaqonline.ca/stories/article/65674russian_indigenous_org_calls_for_arctic_council_support_to_fight_shut-/ (link no longer active).

¹¹ Charles Digges, "Putin meets with new human rights council, offering dubious promises to roll back recent repressions," *Bellona*, 14 November 2012, <https://bellona.org/news/russian-human-rights-issues/russian-ngo-law/2012-11-putin-meets-with-new-human-rights-council-offering-dubious-promises-to-roll-back-recent-repressions>.

¹² "Russia stomps on human rights of its Arctic indigenous citizens: report," *Nunatsiaq News*, 26 November 2012, https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/65674russia_stomps_on_human_rights_of_its_arctic_indigenous_citizens_repor t/.

“There is an extensive hike in the level of industrialization in the north, and the Indigenous peoples are among the last barriers against the companies’ and state’s development of the resources. The authorities strongly dislike RAIPON’s extensive international engagement.”¹³ Sulyandziga also warned that Russian authorities may be attempting to establish “alternative organizational structures” that could replace RAIPON entirely. RAIPON Vice President Dmitry Berezhev also considered the unjustified suspension by the Ministry of Justice as “an attempt to divide the Indigenous peoples’ movement in Russia and replace it instead with a subservient organization willing to agree to decisions that are in fundamental contradiction with the vital interests of Indigenous peoples.”¹⁴ In turn, the Arctic Council’s Senior Arctic Officials and Permanent Participants that met in Sweden in November 2022 issued a statement of “concern about the absence of RAIPON from the work of the Arctic Council as a result of the decision taken by the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation to suspend the activities of RAIPON until April 2013 and as an interim measure request the Senior Arctic Official of the Russian Federation in close cooperation with RAIPON and the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation to facilitate, as appropriate, the fulfilment of RAIPON’s important role as a permanent participant in the Arctic Council.”¹⁵

Western coverage of the RAIPON closure has typically asserted that the Russian government acted to remove a barrier to achieving its northern aims.¹⁶ Ron Wallace and Ryan Dean concluded that the message from the Putin regime was clear: it would not tolerate independent opposition from Indigenous peoples that could reflect negatively upon or affect Russian northern developments in international forums. Nor would it allow any foreign funding.¹⁷ The leaders of five Arctic nations’ federal Green parties (Canada, Norway, the United States, Russia, and Finland), including Russian party Green Alternative chairman Alexey Kozlov, condemned the closure of RAIPON on 16

¹³ “Human Rights Groups and States Concerned Over Russian Suspension of RAIPON,” *Huffnews*, 26 November 2012, quoted in Ron Wallace, “The Case for RAIPON: Implications for Canada and the Arctic Council,” Canadian Global Affairs Institute, February 2013, https://www.cgai.ca/the_case_for_raipon.

¹⁴ “Russian indigenous group seeks letters of support,” *Nunatsiaq News*, 28 November 2012, https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/65674russian_indigenous_seeks_letters_of_support/.

¹⁵ Jane George, “Arctic Council officials call for reinstatement of Russian indigenous org,” *Nunatsiaq News*, 15 November 2012,

https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/65674arctic_council_calls_for_russian_indigenous_orgs_return/; Jane George, “Canada, Norway, Arctic parliamentarians want Russian indigenous org back at Arctic Council,” *Nunatsiaq News*, 16 November 2012,

https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/65674canada_norway_arctic_parliamentarians_want_russian_indigenous_org_back/.

¹⁶ “Greenlandic politicians slam Russia’s move to silence indigenous org,” *Nunatsiaq News*, 19 November 2012, https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/65674greenlandic_politicians_slam_russias_move_to_silence_indigenous_org/; Mia Bennett, “Why Did Putin Suspend Key Russian Indigenous Group?,” *Anchorage Daily News*, 24 November 2012, <https://www.adn.com/arctic/article/analysis-why-did-putin-suspend-key-russian-indigenous-group/2012/11/25/>.

¹⁷ Ron Wallace and Ryan Dean, *A Circumpolar Convergence: Canada, Russia, the Arctic Council and RAIPON* (Toronto: Munk-Gordon Arctic Security Program, Working Papers on Arctic Security No. 7, 2013).

November 2012, alleging that the real reason was to facilitate Russian access to the oil and gas reserves in Siberia. RAIPON had a history of challenging resource extraction projects in Indigenous homelands, theoretically incentivizing the state to replace the Association's existing leadership with one more agreeable to their aims. Shutting down RAIPON can also be viewed as part of a broader Russian campaign targeting NGOs, with RAIPON being a particularly valuable target because of the foreign funding it received (such as that from the Norwegian Barents Secretariat and the European Commission Directorate General for the Environment) and thus opening it to accusations of being influenced by foreign powers.¹⁸

Certain voices within Russia also offered dissenting opinions. Russian watchdog agency Bellona deemed Russia's actions as a continuation of the Kremlin's "war on NGO's," noting RAIPON's special consultative status in the UN Economic and Social Council and observer status in the Governing Council/Global Ministerial Environment Forum of the UN Environment Program. Furthermore, members of RAIPON's presidium were also members of the Russian Public Chamber, the UN Expert Mechanism in Indigenous Rights, the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, and the UN Working Group on Human Rights and Transnational Corporations. Anja Salo of the Norwegian Barents Secretariat noted that, "if RAIPON as an organization is shut down, it will have a serious impact on the Indigenous peoples in the Barents Region" with the consequence that Russian Indigenous peoples "will lack a common political voice."¹⁹ Similarly, Aili Kestketalo, Norway's leading Sami politician, was "shocked" by the decision which was "challenging the very foundation of international cooperation between Indigenous peoples."²⁰ All evidence suggests that this was the Kremlin's objective.

Members of the former RAIPON leadership who had been ousted included former Vice President Rodion Sulyandziga, who told *Novaya Gazeta* that the extraction of oil and gas resources, was a priority for the Kremlin in making the decision. "RAIPON [was] one of the last barriers to companies and states to the extraction of these resources," he explained, "and [it was] easier to use force, using selective justice, so as not to distract the extra energy, time and resources to negotiate with some Indigenous [peoples]."²¹ The shutdown was intended as intimidation and repression. Former RAIPON President Sergey Kharuchi condemned Sulyandziga's statements, but the latter found support from other former RAIPON leaders, including ex-Vice President Dmitry Berezhkov. Berezhkov stated that the closure was an "attempt to divide the Indigenous peoples' movement in

¹⁸ Ron Wallace, "The Case for RAIPON: Implications for Canada and the Arctic Council," Canadian Global Affairs Institute, February 2013, https://www.cgai.ca/the_case_for_raipon.

¹⁹ Charles Digges, "Russia strangles international indigenous peoples organization as war on NGOs continues," *Bellona*, 15 November 2012, <https://bellona.org/news/russian-human-rights-issues/russian-ngo-law/2012-11-russia-strangles-international-indigenous-peoples-organization-as-war-on-ngos-continues>.

²⁰ Thomas Nilsen, "Moscow staged RAIPON election thriller," *Barents Observer*, 3 April 2013, <https://barentsobserver.com/en/politics/2013/04/moscow-staged-raipon-election-thriller-03-04>.

²¹ Mia Bennett, "Why Did Putin Suspend Key Russian Indigenous Group?," *Anchorage Daily News*, 24 November 2012, <https://www.adn.com/arctic/article/analysis-why-did-putin-suspend-key-russian-indigenous-group/2012/11/25/>.

Russia and replace it instead with a subservient organization willing to agree to decisions that are in fundamental contradiction with the vital interests of Indigenous peoples.”²² Berezhkov also cited RAIPON’s international connections as an additional reason for its ultimate condemnation by the Kremlin.

While Moscow may have been truthful in identifying technical legal issues with RAIPON’s status as a Russian NGO receiving foreign funds, the official Russian narrative raises more questions than it answers. RAIPON had existed since the 1990s, so acting upon legal issues with the structure of the organization in 2012 appears opportunistic at the very least. The Kremlin tried to explain this by claiming in its 1 November 2012 statement that it had only then discovered the problem (while noting that it dated from 1994 onward). Nevertheless, addressing structural conflicts between the Association and federal law did not require a purge of RAIPON’s leadership. Instead, this draconian action aligns with the Western perspective that a new leadership, friendly to Putin, would allow the Kremlin to subvert RAIPON, allowing the government unimpeded access to the North and its resources. The state’s choice to act at the time and in the manner that it did lends credence to the idea that the alleged illegality of RAIPON was merely a pretext for the Kremlin to mount a broader campaign against the interests of Russia’s northern Indigenous peoples.

In the Russian media, a *Novaya Gazeta* editorial argued that RAIPON’s closure was associated with the organization’s lack of allegiance to the Kremlin. When Russian authorities consented to reinstate it in March 2013, it fell under new, pro-Putin leadership. Its new President, Grigory Ledkov, uncritically supported Putin’s northern agenda and promoted oil and gas development, which contrasted with the previously expressed desires of the organization’s leadership. As journalist Thomas Nilsen of the *Barents Observer* reported, the elected held at the end of the 7th Congress of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East in Salekhard proved a “thriller” and made RAIPON’s “long-lasting dispute with government officials highly visible.” During the first round of the leadership vote (with a winner requiring two-thirds of the vote), Pavel Sulyandziga (one of the most outspoken Indigenous rights activists in Russia) received 190 votes while Gregory Ledkov (from Naryan-Mar in Nenets Autonomous District who was elected as a deputy to the State Duma in December 2011 representing Putin’s United Russia party and “speaks in line with government structures”) received 137. In the second round, Sulyandziga receipt 200 votes and Ledkov 153. Nilsen recounts how, “after a pep-talk behind closed doors,” Sulyandziga withdrew his candidature – prompting about fifty delegates to leave the room and to refuse to continue voting. In the third round, with Sulyandziga out of contention, Ledkov received 232 out of 307 votes and women. One delegate told Kommersant newspaper that government officials staging the congress and election process clearly dictated the outcome, with Moscow’s representative at the congress none other than Duma vice-speaker Sergey Zheleznyak (the author

²² Wallace and Dean, *A Circumpolar Convergence*, 19.

of the “foreign agent” law requiring that NGO’s receiving foreign funding had to register as foreign agents).²³

This elicited strong international responses from the other Arctic states and Indigenous leaders outside of Russia. Thomas Axworthy, the President and CEO of Canada’s Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation, noted that RAIPON falling under the direct control of Putin’s government was concerning not only for Russian Indigenous peoples but for the Arctic Council as a whole, as the Russian state grew to have a much greater deal of influence over a Permanent Participant organization. Likewise, Norway’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Espen Barth Eide, argued that Russia’s actions undermined the basic tenets of circumpolar diplomacy. Because of RAIPON’s considerable significance both inside and outside Russia, the closure and restructuring of the Association, and the motives behind it, elicited much discussion.

As predicted, RAIPON’s role over the past decade has been reduced to rubber-stamping government decisions made in Moscow. The coopting of RAIPON has provided the Kremlin with semi-legitimate cover for its exploitative Arctic policies. It also provided a shield against criticisms from the West, as Moscow officials could point to an ostensibly independent Indigenous organization to respond to and rebut any criticisms. RAIPON also provides cover to allow Russia to criticize the West’s treatment of its own Indigenous peoples as an example of coercive colonialism, without fear that a subservient RAIPON leadership would apply this colonialism narrative to Russia.

Statements on the War in Ukraine

Following the outbreak of Russia’s full scale military aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the leaders and political elites of ethnically non-Russian areas/territories of the Russian Federation rushed to support Moscow in its decision to invade and affirm their loyalty to the Kremlin. Perhaps, the most notable role in this process was played by the leader of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov.²⁴ Despite unconditional support offered by Kadyrov, the role of the Chechen formations was, perhaps, most prominently seen in terms of information-psychological operations – this led many experts to refer to the Chechen Rosgvardiya as the “Tik Tok troops”²⁵ – rather than on the battlefield. In some ethnically non-Russian regions, such as Dagestan – that suffered one of the heaviest losses in the early stage of the armed conflict – initial enthusiasm was replaced by public protests against mobilization and open discontent.²⁶ Some other groups, like

²³ Thomas Nilsen, “Moscow staged RAIPON election thriller,” *Barents Observer*, 3 April 2013, <https://barentsobserver.com/en/politics/2013/04/moscow-staged-raipon-election-thriller-03-04>.

²⁴ “Кадиров пообещал Путину действовать в СВО до победного конца” [“Kadyrov promised Putin to fight in the SMO zone till the victory”], *Lenta*, 13 March 2023, <https://lenta.ru/news/2023/03/13/kadirovmeet/>.

²⁵ Джамболат Шалинский [Dzhambolat Shalinsky], “Тик-ток войска Кадырова: как устроены чеченские батальоны наемников” [“Tick-Tok troops of Kadyrov: how are Chechen mercenary battalions organized”], 12 August 2022, <https://theins.ru/politika/253212>.

²⁶ “В Дагестане вспыхнули протесты против мобилизации” [“In Dagestan protests against mobilization have

the Buryats – who also suffered considerable losses in the early stage of the conflict and were heavily (covertly) involved in the war against Ukraine since 2014²⁷ – played a crucial role in Russia’s full scale invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, limited anti-war protests took place in Yakutia/Saha.²⁸

In this regard, it is important to analyze main actions and narratives promoted by the Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation (RAIPON), the Russian national umbrella organization representing forty Indigenous small-numbered peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East as well as the Komy-Ishma people. A detailed analysis of actions by RAIPON leaders since the outbreak of large-scale war between Russia and Ukraine points to three main narratives:

Narrative One: RAIPON is a staunch supporter of the Kremlin and of President Vladimir Putin personally.

Almost immediately after Russia launched its unprovoked further invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, RAIPON leadership expressed its fully backing of the Kremlin. On 1 March 2022, the organization wrote an open letter to President Putin which, in addition to standard rhetoric accusing Ukraine’s political leadership of violating the rights of Russian-speaking people and espoused far-right ideology, highlighted historical ties between Indigenous and small-numbered peoples of North, Siberia and the Far East and Ukrainians – specifically highlighting inhabitants of Donetsk and Luhansk – who “dedicated their lives to the process of establishment of our regions.” The statement defined Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as “peacekeeping” and pledged to provide full and unconditional support for “the decision to defend rights and interests of the Donetsk and Luhansk Peoples Republics and security of the entire multinational Russia.” In full, the document read:



The RAIPON webpage has consistently promoted and bolstered Kremlin narratives about the war in Ukraine, with its logo on the landing page (“ZaRussia) indicating support for the war effort.

sparked”], *Moscow Times*, 25 August 2022, <https://www.moscowtimes.ru/2022/09/25/v-dagestane-vspihnuli-massovie-protesti-protiv-mobilizatsii>.

²⁷ Sergey Sukhankin, “Foreign Mercenaries, Irregulars and ‘Volunteers’: Non-Russians in Russia’s Wars”, 9 October 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/foreign-mercenaries-irregulars-and-volunteers-non-russians-in-russias-wars/>.

²⁸ “Протесты против мобилизации в России: в Дагестане - стрельба и скандирование ‘нет войне,’ в Якутии - хоровод” [“Protests against mobilization in Russia: in Dagestan – shootings and ‘no to war’ scansion, in Yakutia – dances”], *BBC*, 25 September 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/63029167>.

Dear Vladimir Vladimirovich!

“01” March 2022, No. 64 to the President of the Russian Federation V.V. Peaceful skies, the land of our ancestors and the safety of our children - nothing could be more important for every citizen of our planet. For everyone. Without exception. Regardless of nationality and mother tongue. The North, Siberia and the Far East of Russia remember with gratitude those who devoted their lives to the formation of our regions. Among them were natives of Ukraine, including Donetsk and Luhansk. For eight long years, with pain in their hearts, the natives of places far from these "hot spots" held out hope for the restoration of human rights in Ukraine and the equality of all citizens without exception. Peacebuilding is never easy. The All-Russian Public Organisation “Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation” supports your aspiration and the decision taken to protect the rights and interests of the inhabitants of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics and the security of all multinational Russia. We, the representatives of 40 Indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East, hope for a speedy mutual understanding to ensure peace and harmony.²⁹

On 4 October 2022, the RAIPON leadership released a statement approving the illegal and internationally-unrecognized referenda on the absorption of the “liberated territories” (Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhian oblasts) in the Russian Federation. The statement echoed Russia’s propagandist narrative about “Ukrainian people becoming a bargaining chip ... in the hands of the collective West,” and deliberately emphasized “a large number of Indigenous and small-numbered people, who have taken up arms ... to defend the country and its national interests.” Crucially, RAIPON’s Council of Elders supported Kremlin’s decision on “partial mobilization” as a means to “maintain security and territorial integrity of Russia.”³⁰ In effect, this meant that RAIPON’s political leadership not only fully approved but also sided with organizers and instigators of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine.³¹

²⁹ RAIPON, “Ассоциация КМНСС и ДВ РФ выступила в поддержку Президента нашей страны В.В. Путина” [“The Association of Indigenous Minorities and the Far East of the Russian Federation spoke in support of the President of our country V.V. Putin”], 1 March 2022, <https://raipon.info/press-tsentr/novosti/assotsiatsiya-kmnss-i-dv-rf-vystupila-v-podderzhku-prezidenta-nashey-strany-v-v-putina/>.

³⁰ RAIPON, “Совет старейшин поддерживает позицию Ассоциации коренных малочисленных народов Севера, Сибири и Дальнего Востока РФ” [“The Council of Elders supports the position of the Association of the Indigenous and Small-Numbered Peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East of the RF”], 5 February 2023, <https://raipon.info/press-tsentr/novosti/sovet-stareyshin-podderzhivaet-pozitsiyu-assotsiatsii-korennykh-malochislennykh-narodov-severa-sibir/>.

³¹ RAIPON, “Открытое заявление Координационного Совета Ассоциации КМНСС и ДВ РФ в поддержку проведенных референдумов о вхождении освобождённых территорий в состав России, а также решения Президента Российской Федерации” [“Open declaration of Coordination Council of the Association of KMNSS and DV FR in support of the referenda on entering of the liberated territories into Russia as well as the decision of the President of the Russian Federation”], 4 October 2022, <https://raipon.info/press-tsentr/novosti/otkrytoe->

Narrative Two: RAIPON is a strategic link between Russia and the so-called “newly acquired territories” (Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhian oblasts). In this regard, RAIPON’s leadership seeks to prove its loyalty to the Kremlin and assert its status as a strategic nexus between Russia and annexed regions through intensified humanitarian-cultural collaboration with the aforementioned territories. The following actions are illustrative.

First, RAIPON highlights intensified people-to-people youth contacts between Russian Indigenous groups and inhabitants of illegally-annexed entities. One example is an event celebrated on 4 May 2022 in Moscow that was titled “Children of the multinational Russia and the Donetsk Peoples Republic (DPR).” The gala assembled youth from ethnically non-Russian regions of the Russian Federation (including Indigenous and small-numbered peoples of North, Siberia and the Far East) and the so-called DPR.³²

Second, RAIPON has conducted outgoing humanitarian-cultural missions to the illegally annexed parts of Ukraine. Two specific events deserve attention. The first major event (6-9 February 2023) was a mission organized by RAIPON (according to a special statement published by the organization, the Yamal, Kamchatka and Altay regions played the key roles in preparing for the event) to the city of Mariupol controlled by the Russian armed forces and separatists from the DPR.³³ RAIPON’s website stated that this event was aimed at “rendering humanitarian help to the peoples of the DPR, LPR, Kherson and Zaporozhe oblast ... and strengthening ties between inhabitants of the liberated territories and public organizations and civil activists.” Another reported goal of the event was to “formulate an objective informational agenda, with the help of peoples diplomacy strengthening inter-regional and inter-ethnic relations.” RAIPON President Grigory Ledkov personally headed the delegation, highlighting its importance. Other activities during this event included:

- providing humanitarian help to the students of Mariupol State University.
- organizing a large cultural program in the city.
- participating in a roundtable discussion on “the role of the state national policy and public diplomacy in solving social-humanitarian challenges on the territory of the Donetsk Peoples Republic”.

zayavlenie-koordinatsionnogo-soveta-assotsiatsii-korennykh-malochislennykh-narodov-severa-s/.

³² RAIPON, “Дети коренных малочисленных народов приняли участие в празднике межнациональной Дружбы” [“Children of Indigenous and small-numbered peoples have taken part in the celebration of international friendship”], 5 June 2022, <https://raipon.info/press-tsentr/novosti/deti-korennykh-malochislennykh-narodov-prinyali-uchastie-v-prazdnike-mezhnatsionalnoy-druzhby/>.

³³ RAIPON, “Ассоциация коренных малочисленных народов Севера, Сибири и Дальнего Востока РФ организовала выездную гуманитарно-культурную миссию в город Мариуполь Донецкой Народной Республики” [“Association of Indigenous and Small-Numbered peoples of North, Siberia and the Far East organized an outgoing humanitarian-cultural mission in Mariupol of the Donetsk Peoples Republic”], 9 February 2023, <https://raipon.info/press-tsentr/novosti/assotsiatsiya-korennykh-malochislennykh-narodov-severa-sibiri-i-dalnego-vostoka-rf-organizovala-vyez/>.

- participating in a patriotic flash mob that consisted of unravelling a 100 meters national flag of the Russian Federation.

Another visit by a RAIPON delegation to Mariupol in February 2023 falls in the “humanitarian-cultural missions” category. The goal of this visit was to provide locals with traditional meals and cuisine of the Russian North. According to the statement published on the RAIPON website, the administration of the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Region was the major organizer of this event.³⁴

A third key action is proliferating ties with so-called DPR’s tertiary institutions, culminating in an exhibition on “Treasures of the North” hosted by the Mariupol State University from 22 March–5 April 2023, featuring a collection of Indigenous art, books, images, and other artefacts. According to RAIPON’s official statement, the main goal of the event was to showcase the cultural richness of the Russian North to professors, employees, and students of the university.³⁵

Fourth, RAIPON maintains contacts, through its donations of humanitarian aid, with Russian armed forces (including representatives of ethnically non-Russian peoples from North, Siberia and the Far East) who are participating in the war in Ukraine. For instance, in January 2023, the organization organized delivery of material aid for members of the Russian armed forces from the Far East taking part in the conflict.³⁶

Narrative Three: RAIPON is the only legitimate (and allegedly irreplaceable, due to its loyalty to the Kremlin) representative of Russia’s Arctic and Siberian Indigenous population. In this regard, RAIPON’s leadership carried out two important steps. First, on 28 March 2022, RAIPON published an important statement berating “forces residing abroad” – and coordinated by external, adverse to Russia forces – that “present themselves as true representatives of Russia’s Indigenous and small-numbered peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East.”³⁷ According to RAIPON’s statement, these dissident voices abroad sought to “curtail free development and sovereignty of Russia on its territories, including the Arctic, North, Siberia and the Far East that have been

³⁴ RAIPON, “Вспомним как это было Гуманитарная акция Ассоциации на территории Донецкой Народной Республики” [“Recalling how it was: Humanitarian action of the Association on the territory of the Donetsk Peoples Republic”], 13 February 2023, <https://raipon.info/press-tsentr/novosti/gumanitarnaya-aktsiya-assotsiatsii-na-territorii-donetskoy-narodnoy-respubliki/>.

³⁵ RAIPON, “В Мариупольском государственном университете прошла выставка «Сокровища Севера»” [“In Mariupol state university an exhibition titled ‘Treasures of the North’ has taken place”], 12 April 2023, <https://raipon.info/press-tsentr/novosti/v-mariupolskom-gosudarstvennom-universitete-proshla-vystavka-sokrovishcha-severa-/>.

³⁶ RAIPON, “Организации коренных малочисленных народов Хабаровского края доставили гуманитарную помощь землякам-дальневосточникам в зону СВО” [“Organization of indigenous and small-numbered peoples of the Khabarovsk Territory delivered humanitarian aid to fellow countrymen from the Far East in the SMO zone”], <https://raipon.info/press-tsentr/novosti/organizatsii-korennykh-malochislennykh-narodov-khabarovskogo-kraya-dostavili-gumanitarnuyu-pomoshch-/>.

³⁷ RAIPON, “Обращение коренных малочисленных народов Севера, Сибири и Дальнего Востока Российской Федерации” [“Address of Indigenous Small-Numbered peoples of North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation”], 28 March 2023, <https://raipon.info/press-tsentr/novosti/obrashchenie-korennykh-malochislennykh-narodov-severa-sibiri-i-dalnego-vostoka-rossiyskoy-federatsii/>.

populated by Indigenous and small-numbered peoples for centuries.” The statement also claimed that those individuals (“imposters”) who claim to represent Russia’s Indigenous population from abroad “have lost any connection with their native land and locals ... and thus have no moral and actual right to speak on behalf of our people”. RAIPON claimed to be the only organization within Russian society that speaks in collective terms for Indigenous and small-numbered peoples to advance their “sustainable development.” On 20 April 2022, RAIPON authorities posted an “Open Letter”³⁸ again accusing dissidents abroad (with specific reference to the iRussia website) of “spreading information and materials that are incurring damage on the reputation of the Russian Federation and discrediting its Armed Forces.” For the first time, this document explicitly spoke about RAIPON’s readiness to provide humanitarian aid to the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk Peoples Republics, again reiterating that the organization is the only legitimate one that speaks on behalf of Indigenous and small-numbered peoples “living between the Aleutian Islands to Murmansk.”

RAIPON leaders have also taken this message to international fora. In April 2023, Valentin Andreitsev appealed to the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues to not listen to the opinion of people who do not live in Russia, “but at the same time talk about how things are in the country.” He suggested that “people who left our country a long time ago, having lost all contact with the land of their ancestors and with their peoples, speak with unfounded criticism of the policy of the Russian Federation towards Indigenous peoples. In this regard, I recommend that the secretariat, in order to ensure the legitimacy of the representation of Indigenous peoples at the UN Permanent Forum, rely on the opinion of organizations that operate directly on the historical lands of their residence.” He also insisted that “in the Russian Federation, the institution of representation of Indigenous peoples exists and continues to develop, the foundation of which is regional and public organizations, such as the Union of Indigenous Peoples of Primorsky Krai.”³⁹ This includes directed campaigns seeking to delegitimize the Sulyandziga brothers.⁴⁰

In addition, while RAIPON is the only organization that represents Indigenous Peoples from the Russian Arctic, that does not necessarily mean that RAIPON is the unified voice of all Indigenous

³⁸ RAIPON, “Открытое письмо Координационного Совета Ассоциации КМНСС и ДВ РФ представителям коренных народов Севера, Сибири и Дальнего Востока РФ” [“Open letter of the Coordination Council of the Association of KMNSS and DV RF to the representatives of indigenous peoples of North, Siberia and the Far East of the RF”], 20 April 2022, <https://raipon.info/press-tsentr/novosti/otkrytoe-pismo-koordinatsionnogo-soveta-assotsiatsii-kmnss-i-dv-rf-predstavatelyam-korennykh-narodov/>.

³⁹ “Житель Приморья с трибуны ООН раскритиковал позицию релокантов”, [“Primorye resident criticized the position of the relocatees from the UN tribunal”], *Vesti Prim*, 25 April 2023, <https://vestiprim.ru/news/ptrnews/135385-zhitel-primorja-s-tribuny-oon-raskritikoval-poziciju-relokantov.html>. See also iRussia, “Валентин Андрейцев заявил о недопустимости представления интересов коренного населения России лицами, постоянно проживающими за границей” [“Valentin Andreytsev stated unacceptability of interests of Russian Indigenous peoples to be represented by persons permanently living abroad”], 29 April 2023, <https://indigenous-russia.com/archives/20767>.

⁴⁰ “Северный раздор. Как коренные народы Севера поссорились из-за ООН, компенсаций и своих прав”, [“The Northern feud. How indigenous peoples of the North argued because of the UN, compensations and their rights”], *Lenta*, 3 June 2021, <https://lenta.ru/articles/2021/06/03/severn/>.

Peoples from Russia. After the beginning of the war, Indigenous activists created several social media accounts (including on Instagram and Twitter, both of which are banned by the Russian government) to promote decolonization and publicly oppose the war. These groups appeal not only to small-numbered populations but also all Indigenous Peoples or ethnic minorities in Russia more generally. For example, the Instagram group “Asians of Russia” (131,000 followers) describes itself as an independent media of the Asian peoples of Russia. The group also proclaims 2023 as Russia’s Year of Decolonization. The group regularly posts discussions about the impacts of the Ukraine war on minorities, anti-Asian racism and invisibility of ethnic minorities in general.

This illustrates how Indigenous activism in Russia has taken a bottom-up approach and is surviving mainly through social media networks. The aim of these dissident groups is to motivate Indigenous peoples to continue their struggle against the colonial powers. One example of this approach is posting videos from public demonstrations undertaken by Indigenous activists against the war, such as the massive Sakha round dancing *ohuokhai* performed by Sakha mothers in 2022.

The War in Ukraine and its Impact on Russia’s Indigenous Peoples

In February 2023, Pavel Sulyandziga highlighted the disproportionate number of Russian Indigenous people who have been conscripted to fight in the War in Ukraine. On the Russian side, the number of Indigenous combatants in the war is proportionally higher than the number of ethnic Russians combatants. With mobilization criteria paying no respect to Indigeneity and the roles of men within those societies, recruitment has had deleterious effects on the cultures and traditions of Indigenous peoples in Russia.⁴¹ Furthermore, data sets (collected by a team of volunteers from the social media and other available sources) demonstrate large inequalities in the army mortality rates across Russian regions, with the highest mortality of soldiers originating from poor regions in Siberia and the Russian Far East and the lowest from Moscow and St. Petersburg.⁴² In short, the share of Indigenous peoples in the total number of deaths in the war appears to be disproportionately high, based on official Russian statistics and numbers provided by Russian scientists. Consequently, it is reasonable to conclude that the war in Ukraine has rendered Russia’s Indigenous peoples more vulnerable and has imposed a disproportionate burden and cost on them. This story is not well known in Russia owing to censorship.

A 2022 article by Umea University (Sweden) doctoral student Ekaterina Zmyvalova provides a helpful summary of how the war in Ukraine negatively affects the human rights of Indigenous small-numbered peoples of Russia. These include the right to freedom of expression, the right to enjoy their culture, and the right to life, liberty and security. Specific impacts include:

⁴¹ Ekaterina Zmyvalova, “The Rights of Indigenous Peoples of Russia after Partial Military Mobilization,” *Arctic Review on Law and Politics* 14 (2023): 70-75.

⁴² Alexey Bessudnov, “Ethnic and regional inequalities in the Russian military fatalities in the 2022 war in Ukraine: Preliminary findings from crowdsourced data,” *Demographic Research* 48 (June 2023), <https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/s43yf>.

- Russia’s growing disregard for its international legal obligations;
- the introduction of new sanctions against persons and organizations who do not support the Russian regime’s official discourses about the war, and increased pressure on Indigenous peoples’ representatives to strictly adhere to state messaging or face intimidation (like the Tannagasheva case noted in the previous section) and severe legal consequences;
- the active participation of Indigenous small-numbered peoples in the war due to socio-economic challenges facing their communities (including a lack of wage-earning opportunities compared to other Russian populations) and the absence of reliable and objective information about the war in Ukraine;
- a decline in international cooperation with the Indigenous small-numbered peoples of Russia (as it is hard for international organizations to trust Russian-based Indigenous people’s organizations because of their adherence to the Kremlin’s narratives about the war); and
- increasing constraints on Russian Indigenous peoples in participating in international decision-making, including the Arctic Council (given the decision by the seven like-minded Arctic states to suspend participation in Council activities involving Russia).⁴³

In a short update released in January 2023, Zmyvalova notes that, on the Russian side, the number of Indigenous combatants in the war is proportionally higher than the number of ethnic Russians combatants. “The Indigenous population is more vulnerable and on average of lower socio-economic status than ethnic Russians,” she notes, “hence participation in the war is financially more attractive for them.” Furthermore, activists note that mobilizing persons from areas “far from Moscow and St. Petersburg is a way for the Kremlin to reduce the draft’s impact on major cities, where the chances of opposition protests are higher.” Most Russian Indigenous populations reside in small settlements or villages, some of which have seen most of the male population mobilized. With mobilization criteria paying no respect to Indigeneity and the roles of men within those societies, recruitment has had deleterious effects on the cultures and traditions of Indigenous peoples in Russia.⁴⁴

Alexey Bessudnov, a sociology professor at the University of Exeter, released a paper in December 2022 showing ethnic and regional inequalities in mortality in the Russian army during the 2022 war in Ukraine. Based on a data set (collected by a team of volunteers from the social media and other available sources) containing the names of about 9,500 Russian servicemen killed in Ukraine from February to November 2022, he demonstrates large inequalities in the army mortality rates across Russian regions, with the highest mortality of soldiers originating from poor regions in Siberia and the Russian Far East and the lowest from Moscow and St. Petersburg. Some ethnic

⁴³ Ekaterina Zmyvalova, “The Impact of the War in Ukraine on the Indigenous Small-numbered Peoples’ Rights in Russia,” *Arctic Review on Law and Politics* 13 (2022): 407-414.

⁴⁴ Ekaterina Zmyvalova, “Rights of Indigenous Peoples of Russia.”

minority groups, in particular Buryats (a Mongolic ethnic group native to southeastern Siberia) and Tuvans (a Turkic ethnic group Indigenous to Siberia) are overrepresented among the fatalities compared to their share of the Russian population. Bessudnov suggests that ethnic fatality gaps are largely driven by socio-economic inequalities, with young men in poorer regions see the career in the military as more attractive.⁴⁵ In short, statistic evidence confirms that most Russian army recruits and conscripts come from peripheral regions where unemployment, drug addiction and criminality are rampant. Furthermore, the share of Indigenous peoples in the total number of deaths in the war appears to be disproportionately high, based on official Russian statistics and numbers provided by Russian scientists. Consequently, it is reasonable to conclude that the war in Ukraine has rendered Russia’s Indigenous peoples more vulnerable and has imposed a disproportionate burden and cost on them. This story does not appear to be well known or accepted in Russia.

Russian Narratives: Indigenous Support for the War Effort

The Russian news media cites examples of Russian Indigenous peoples supporting the “special military operation” in Ukraine as a demonstration of how “people of various nationalities” are assisting in the war effort. In January 2023, Russian media highlighted how the RAIPON regional organization in the Ulch District (Khabarovsk Territory) collected and provided humanitarian aid to fellow Far Easterners in the participating in hostilities in the zone of a special military operation, with stories emphasizing that “Communities of Indigenous minorities did not stand aside and provided financial and material assistance to collect humanitarian aid to fellow countrymen.” Reports said that the communities collected and sent “about a ton of high-grade smoked salmon and pink salmon caviar, first-aid kits, completed with hemostatic, disinfectant, antiviral and antihistamine drugs.” They also sent to “the fighters” a generator, heat guns, “handmade knitted socks, and letters from the Motherland from children from the village of De-Kastri,” with the AYI tribal communities bearing the main costs of transportation.⁴⁶

In his 2023 new year’s message, RAIPON president Grigory Ledkov expressed optimism, suggesting that: “The new year is not just the beginning of a new calendar, it is new beginnings, successes and victories. We look to the future with confidence and we have every reason for optimism - clear and specific plans for the socio-economic development of the Indigenous minorities of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation, real opportunities for their implementation!”⁴⁷

RAIPON has also held events designed to affirm the historical patriotism of Russian Indigenous peoples in support of Russia’s engagement in military conflicts. For example, the Association held

⁴⁵ Alexey Bessudnov, “Ethnic and regional inequalities in the Russian military fatalities.”

⁴⁶ RAIPON, “Организации коренных малочисленных народов Хабаровского.”

⁴⁷ RAIPON, “Поздравление Григория Ледкова с Новым годом” [“Georgy Ledkov is wishing everyone a Happy New Year”], 31 December 2022, <https://raipon.info/press-tsentr/novosti/pozdravlenie-grigoriya-ledkova-s-novym-godom/> (in translation).

a 28 November 2022 roundtable in St. Petersburg on “The contribution of Indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation to the Victory in the Great Patriotic War of 1941 - 1945: a feat at the fronts and in the rear,” which was time to coincide with the Day of Remembrance of the Heroes of reindeer transport battalions formed by Stalin’s 1941 decree. The roundtable had the explicit aim of instilling “civil-patriotic consciousness and national consciousness among young people” (формирования у молодежи гражданско-патриотического сознания и национальной) and a sense of “pride in their people and their country” (гордости за свой народ и свою страну).⁴⁸ The contest inviting young Northerners in Russia to submit stories about their families and peoples as part of a “Memory of Victory”⁴⁹ also fits with messaging designed to associate histories of Russian victory in the Second World War (the Great Patriotic War) with support for current military activities.

RAIPON President Ledkov has also adopted messaging aligned with the Kremlin’s charm campaign with Beijing. At the 18 November 2022 conference, he extolled how:

We need to strive to ensure that people are fully respected at the international and country levels. As President of the Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation, I cannot fail to mention the joint work in the field of preserving and preserving the identity of small Indigenous peoples. The basic principles of the national policy of the Chinese government towards small peoples are equality, cohesion, mutual assistance and joint prosperity of all nations. Unity and cooperation between different ethnic groups have helped to protect China as a single multinational state, so our states are very similar. I hope that Russian-Chinese friendship will continue to play an important role in strengthening ties between the peoples of the two countries. For my part, I want to say that we are always ready to continue working together in this direction and are open to dialogue and exchange of experience.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ “В Санкт-Петербурге состоялся круглый стол на тему «Вклад коренных малочисленных народов Севера, Сибири и Дальнего Востока РФ в Победу в Великой Отечественной войне 1941 - 1945 годов: подвиг на фронтах и в тылу»” [“Saint Petersburg hosted a round table on a topic ‘Contribution of indigenous and small-numbered peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East RF to the Victory in the Great Patriotic War 1941 – 1945: heroism on the battlefield and the rear’”], RAIPON, 28 November, 2022, <https://raipon.info/press-tsentr/novosti/v-sankt-peterburge-sostoyalsya-kruglyy-stol-na-temu-vklad-korennykh-malochislennykh-narodov-severa-s/>.

⁴⁹ RAIPON, “Итоги конкурса творческих работ «Молодые северяне о себе и своем народе – Память Победы” (“Results of the contest of creative works ‘Young northerners about themselves and their people – Memory of Victory’”), 25 October 2022, <https://raipon.info/press-tsentr/novosti/itogi-konkursa-tvorcheskikh-rabot-molodye-severyane-o-sebe-i-svoem-narode-pamyat-pobedy-/>. See also <https://raipon.info/press-tsentr/novosti/uspey-podat-zayavku-ostalos-7-dney-do-zaversheniya-priyema-konkursnykh-rabot-/>.

⁵⁰ RAIPON, “Григорий Ледков выступил на конференции «Новая эпоха, новый подход. Дух XX съезда КПК» посвященной обсуждению итогов съезда Компартии Китая” [“Grigory Ledkov spoke at the conference ‘New Era, New Approach. The Spirit of the XX Congress of the CPC’ dedicated to the discussion of the results of the Congress of the Communist Party of China”], 19 November 2022 (in translation).

Russian Indigenous Perspectives

The war has triggered different reactions amongst the 47 Indigenous small-numbered peoples recognized as such by the Russian State. Given the repressive situation prevailing in Russia, it is no surprise that most State representatives and State-controlled Indigenous peoples' organizations have supported the war in Ukraine. As indicated above, the RAIPON website is indicative of unabashed pro-Kremlin sentiment and messaging. Other representatives of Indigenous peoples have condemned the Russian Federation's aggression, with the iRussia website highlighting voices and narratives of dissent. Zmyvalova also notes several initiatives in specific Russian federal subunits arguing that Indigenous people be exempted from mobilization. For example, the deputy of the State Duma and former mayor of the city of Yakutsk, Sardana Avksentyeva (who is ethnically Sakha), has proposed that men belonging to officially-recognized Indigenous peoples should not be conscripted. Sergey Kotkin, the deputy of the State Duma from the Nenets Autonomous Okrug, has pledged to initiate a bill on the exemption of reindeer herders from mobilization, which regional governor Yury Bezdudny supports on the basis of the food security that reindeer herders provide in the region. In other cases, leaders of Indigenous peoples' organizations have advanced similar arguments for selective mobilization that excludes Indigenous men (such as Liubov Odzhal, the head of the Association of the Indigenous Peoples of the North of Khabarovsk Region).⁵¹

The Sámi represent a prime example of how the war in Ukraine had undermined cohesion amongst Indigenous peoples in Russia and their cooperation with international colleagues. Sápmi, the Sámi homeland, includes traditional territory in Russia, Finland, Sweden, and Norway. The open support for the Russian war in Ukraine by the Kola Sámi Association and the Association of Sámi in Murmansk Oblast (OOSMO) has triggered negative reactions from the international Sámi community. Consequently, the Sámi Council (the body which brings together representatives of all four Sámi countries) has put cooperation with Russian member organizations on hold.⁵² Given the substantial support that the Sámi Council has provided to Russian Sámi for cultural projects from this organization, suspension of their participation has a significant negative impact on the protection of Russian Sámi culture and language. It is also telling that Expert newspaper, run by pro-Putin editor Valery Fadeyev and partly owned by the oligarch Oleg Deripask, targeted Silje Karine Muotka, president of the Sámi Parliament in Norway, with fake news attributing comments to her that allegedly disparaged Russian Sámi exiles who had fled the country.⁵³

⁵¹ Zmyvalova, "Rights of Indigenous Peoples of Russia after Partial Military Mobilization," 73.

⁵² John Last, "The Ukraine War Is Dividing Europe's Arctic Indigenous People," *Foreign Policy*, 27 June 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/27/russia-ukraine-war-saami-indigenous-arctic-people-norway-sweden-finland/>.

⁵³ Dan Robert Larsen, Nils John Porsanger, and Lena Marja Myrskog, "Muotka beskriver russere som flykter fra landet som kriminelle [Muotka describes Russians fleeing the country as criminals]," *NRK Sápmi*, 28 November 2022, <https://www.nrk.no/sapmi/sametingspresidenten-beskyldes-for-hatytringer-mot-russiske-asylsokere-1.16192149>; "Sami politicians were hanged in Russian propaganda: 'Unpleasant,'" *Teller Report*, 30 November 2022, <https://www.tellerreport.com/news/2022-11-30-sami-politicians-were-hanged-in-russian-propaganda--%22unpleasant%22.H1b6mNvNwi.html>.

Freelance journalist John Last observes that, “throughout the war, Russian Sámi have had to reckon with some of their own community leaders offering full support to the same state and state-aligned companies that are devastating their communities.” While it is easy to judge these leaders for their offensive position, he quotes Pauliina Feodoroff, a Skolt Sámi activist from Finland, who explained how Russian Indigenous “people are really pushed to use their public voice for pro-Putinism.” Mikkel Berg-Nordlie, a Sámi historian at Oslo Metropolitan University, concurred that “we’re back to the point where it can’t be expected that people belonging to ethnic minorities in Russia express open dissent.” This limits the space for collaborative advocacy across Sápmi. Nevertheless, Tuomas Aslak Juuso, the president of Finland’s Sámediggi (national Sámi parliament), astutely notes that “[Russian] Sámi people have learned to manage with these kinds of regimes. They’ve been able to live and stay as Sámi. So I think the solutions are coming from inside themselves.”⁵⁴

Voices of Dissent

In March 2022, a group of prominent Russian Indigenous activists organized a new international organization, the International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia (ICIPR), intending to give a voice to the Russian Indigenous leaders who cannot express themselves freely without threat of imprisonment. The ICIPR released a letter on 11 March 2022 calling on international organizations to suspend recognition of RAIPON, and condemning Russian aggression in Ukraine:

WE – the undersigned representatives of the Indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East living outside of Russia against our will—are outraged by the war President Putin has unleashed against Ukraine. At the moment, the entire population of Ukraine is in grave danger. Old people, women and children are dying. Cities and towns of an independent country are being destroyed because their inhabitants did not want to obey the will of a dictator and a tyrant.

As representatives of Indigenous peoples, WE express solidarity with the people of Ukraine in their struggle for freedom and are extremely concerned about ensuring the rights of Indigenous peoples during the war on Ukrainian territory, including the Crimean Peninsula that remains illegally occupied by Russia.

As representatives of Indigenous peoples, WE are outraged by statements of the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON) on March 1, 2022 and the statement of civil society leaders on March 2, 2022 in support of the decisions of President Putin. Such public statements can only be considered as direct support for the military aggression against the Ukrainian people, and their signatories are accomplices of the murderers of civilians in Ukraine.

⁵⁴ Last, “Ukraine War Is Dividing Europe’s Arctic Indigenous People.”

WE believe that the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON) has become an adjunct of the Russian Government domestically and internationally. Once a leader in the protection of Indigenous Peoples' rights, it is today become an organization whose main purpose is to justify the actions of the Government and extractive companies that feed President Putin's regime and destroy the traditional lands of Indigenous peoples.

WE believe that the leaders of RAIPON—Grigory Ledkov, Alexander Novyukhov, and Anna Otke who signed the letter should be also treated as war criminals, not merely accomplices of the war, because they voted for military action as members of the Russian Parliament.

From now on, WE will consider any statements on any international platforms made by RAIPON and its representatives or by representatives of other organizations of Indigenous peoples which supported Vladimir Putin's decisions regarding Ukraine as falsehood and propaganda as their main purpose is maintaining the prestige of the Russian authorities at the international level.

WE call on any international organizations, nonprofit and intergovernmental, scientific, environmental, human rights and others, including institutes and branches of the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and the Arctic Council to ignore the statements of RAIPON representatives and spokespeople of other organizations which supported Vladimir Putin's decisions. Those statements are propaganda originating in the Russian political regime. We appeal to the international community to no longer consider RAIPON a legitimate representative of the Indigenous peoples of Russia.

WE also declare that we are withdrawing from all Russia-based organizations and networks of Indigenous peoples of Russia in which we were previously members. We announce the creation of a new, independent organization—the International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia.

Tjan Zaotschnaja – Itelmen

Dmitry Berezhkov – Kamchadal

Pavel Sulyandziga – Udege

Yana Tannagasheva – Shor

Andrey Danilov – Saami

Vladislav Tannagashev – Shor

Irina Shafrannik – Selkup⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Statement of the International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia, 11 March 2022, <https://polarconnection.org/international-committee-of-indigenous-peoples-of-russia/>

To highlight ongoing violations of Russia’s Indigenous peoples’ rights, several members of this group of exiled Indigenous activists established an information center called “Indigenous Russia” (iRussia) which regularly publishes information and reports on the violation of Indigenous rights in that country. The organization has an extended network of Indigenous contacts in Russia, providing information from the ground level. The group’s website ([https://Indigenous - russia.com/](https://Indigenous-russia.com/)) publishes news and analysis pieces in Russian and English, providing access to information for both Russian and international audiences. In July 2022, the Kremlin’s media censorship agency Roskomnadzor banned access to the website inside Russia on the grounds that it “violated the law”⁵⁶ (without revealing any laws that had been broken),⁵⁷ but the group continues to disseminate information to Russian readers using social networks and messengers, and the website content is available to a Russian audience through VPNs. The intended audience for English-language content includes international human rights institutions, international media, the UN, and state representatives who are engaged in supporting human rights.

In February 2023, the ICIPR released an extensive report on the first anniversary of Russia’s further invasion of Ukraine. This document, which we have attached as an appendix, provides poignant insight into the actions taken by the Russian state to suppress Indigenous voices in that country who promote their rights or criticize the government or industry. It also explains the coercive mobilization of Indigenous men into the Russian Army, the deleterious impacts of the war on Indigenous communities, the environment, human rights, and the media in Russia, as well as the deep polarization of the Indigenous movement. “Most remote Indigenous communities of the Russian Arctic, Siberia and the Far East are cut off from alternative sources of information other than state TV channels,” it concludes. “All the new repressive laws initiated by President Putin to intimidate the Nation, increase Russia’s isolation, and expel the last independent media, human rights, and environmental institutions from Russia are incredibly disastrous to the ability of Indigenous communities of the Russian Arctic, Siberia, and the Far East to defend their rights and provide information on violations of such rights at international venues, including the UN.”

Conclusions

Russia’s brutal and unprovoked war against Ukraine has dramatically affected circumpolar Arctic affairs, precluding cooperation through forums such as the Arctic Council and exposing radically divergent views held by Russians and people living in the seven other Arctic states. While the Kremlin accuses the West of unnecessarily dragging the conflict in Ukraine into Arctic affairs, it is telling that RAIPON – an organization created to represent Russian Indigenous peoples in the Arctic Council – has stridently supported Russia’s war of aggression. With the Russian state outlawing expressions of dissent within the country, it is not surprising that Russian Indigenous voices opposing Russia’s aggression and ongoing violation of Indigenous rights typically are

⁵⁶ “The Unified Register of Information Disseminated In Breach of Articles 15.3, 15.3-1 and 15.3-2 of the Federal Law No. 149-FZ,” accessed on 20 July 2023, <https://398-fz.rkn.gov.ru/topproviders/?entryKey=62bda0e270dcd#form>.

⁵⁷ Thomas Nilsen, “Repressive authorities block Indigenous Russia site,” *Barents Observer*, 18 July 2022, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/indigenous-peoples/2022/07/repressive-authorities-block-indigenous-russia-site>.

raised outside of Russia. Political divisions are also reflected amongst and within the Permanent Participants to the Arctic Council.

Indeed, the statements by RAIPON, Russian Sami, and Chukotkan organizations expressing unconditional support for the War in Ukraine show that their state identities as Russians trump their transnational Indigenous identities in the current era of geopolitical competition. As this report demonstrates, RAIPON (which is part of the structure of the Russian regime) is a tireless promoter of pro-Kremlin narratives that uncritically backs the Putin regime. This complicates our understanding of the roles that the Permanent Participants are expected to play in a circumpolar forum with a mandate that explicitly excludes military security issues – but is now divided over a war being fought outside of the Arctic. Rather than seeing the Permanent Participants as a bloc of Indigenous peoples’ representatives rooted in similar values, the divergent viewpoints of RAIPON, Sami from the Kola Peninsula, and Chukotkan Inuit from those held by Indigenous leaders in the other Arctic states indicates that circumpolar Indigenous identities cannot be assumed to imply a similar position on military aggression and violations of international law.

The spillover of Russia’s War in Ukraine has upset Indigenous peoples’ roles in Arctic governance more generally. “The actions of Russia in the Ukraine [have affected] Inuit: from our governance at the Arctic Council, to heightened Arctic security concerns, to an absence of communications with our Inuit family in Chukotka,” ICC Canada president Lisa Koperqualuk noted in a speech in Ottawa on 13 June 2023.⁵⁸ ICC messaging over the past year has acknowledged the challenges for circumpolar and broader international cooperation wrought by Russia’s brutal further invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and its ongoing war against that sovereign state. The 2022 ICC Declaration recognized “the increasing competition over the control of the Arctic, and the interrelated issues of climate change, marine vessel traffic, industrialization, militarization, and other activities that continue to threaten the well-being of our environmental, cultural, food, and socio-economic security.”⁵⁹ As ICC President Sara Olsvig and others have noted, Russian aggression has undermined the idea of “Arctic exceptionalism” – that the Circumpolar North is particularly conducive to international cooperation and can be managed apart from global geopolitical dynamics.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Quoted in Karen Kelly, “Arctic Peoples Harmed by Both Climate Change and War,” Carleton University Faculty of Public Affairs, 15 June 2023, <https://carleton.ca/fpa/2023/arctic-peoples-harmed-by-both-climate-change-and-war/>.

⁵⁹ 2022 ICC Declaration of the 14th General Assembly, 19-21 July 2022, <https://iccalaska.org/wp-icc/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/2022ICC-DECLARATION-1.pdf/>.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Kai Kornhuber, Kira Vinke, Evan Bloom, Loyle Campbell, Volker Rachold, Sara Olsvig, and Dana Schirwon, “The Disruption of Arctic Exceptionalism: Managing Environmental Change in Light of Russian Aggression,” German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) Report No. 2 (Washington: Wilson Center, February 2023), <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/The%20Disruption%20of%20Arctic%20Exceptionalism.pdf>.

Koperqualuk highlights that “ICC’s longstanding position for all circumpolar peoples — Indigenous and others — is to ensure the Arctic continues to be used exclusively for peaceful and environmentally safe purposes, and must not become the object of human conflict.” She observes that the like-minded Arctic states’ pause in involvement in Arctic Council activities involving Russia “has raised many questions about the future of peaceful co-operation in the Arctic. It means no formal work or meetings are being conducted, no projects that should have Russian involvement are presented. ... This is tragic: Russia controls a large part of the Arctic coastline, and continued communication remains an important peaceful means for Russia’s return-to-table one day, if and when the conditions are right.”⁶¹

This messaging aligns with that of the Government of Canada, which has committed alongside the other like-minded Arctic member states to consider “the necessary modalities that can allow us to continue the Council’s important work.” Nevertheless, Russia’s ongoing “flagrant violation” in Ukraine of “the core principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity, based on international law, [which] have long underpinned the work of the Arctic Council,”⁶² make any resumption of Arctic Council activities involving Russia difficult, as the regional forum must not be used as a way to legitimize Russia’s illegal behaviour elsewhere in the world or indicate that there can be a “return to normal” under current circumstances.

When asked what the right conditions for Russia’s return to the Arctic Council would be, Koperqualuk offered “no war” and “human rights are respected.”⁶³ She explained how ICC Canada strives to maintain informal relationships with Inuit living in the Chukotka region in Russia, who have less presence internationally owing to Russia’s war in Ukraine. “We are concerned about what’s happening to the Russian Inuit community,” she noted. “Even though national allegiances can be different, we will always treat them as family.”⁶⁴ Thus, although ICC agrees to the pause in participation in Arctic Council activities in which Russia is involved,⁶⁵ that does not prevent or preclude the ICC “from continuing a relationship with ICC Chukotka.”⁶⁵ Canadian Governor General Mary Simon’s statements about the importance of continuing “cross-polar collaboration while holding Russia accountable for its invasion of Ukraine.”⁶⁶

⁶¹ Quoted in Jeff Pelletier, “Russia could return to Arctic Council ‘when conditions are right’: ICC Canada president,” *Nunatsiaq News*, 15 June 2023, https://www.arctictoday.com/russia-could-return-to-arctic-council-when-conditions-are-right-icc-canada-president/?wallit_nosession=1.

⁶² US Department of State, “Joint Statement on Arctic Council Cooperation Following Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine,” 3 March 2022, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-arctic-council-cooperation-following-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/>.

⁶³ Pelletier, “Russia could return to Arctic Council.”

⁶⁴ Kelly, “Arctic Peoples Harmed.”

⁶⁵ Pelletier, “Russia could return to Arctic Council.”

⁶⁶ Dylan Robertson, “Governor General: Climate change, Indigenous issues transcend boundaries with Russia,” *CTV News*, 28 February 2023, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/governor-general-climate-change-indigenous-issues-transcend-boundaries-with-russia-1.6292122>.

In his February 2023 keynote address, Pavel Sulyandziga did not call on anyone to stop cooperating with Russia Indigenous Peoples, and instead promotes cooperation following the model of engagement during the late Soviet era. He did, however, call for excluding RAIPON as it is currently constituted and ensuring that it is not misconstrued or misrepresented as an Indigenous Peoples Organization. Challenging questions remain about how Russian Indigenous people living in political exile and their allies can support the small circle of Russian Indigenous leadership and activists (including some RAIPON members, but not the leaders) who are trying to do positive things for Russia and for its Indigenous Peoples without endangering these people.

Appendix: Report by the International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia (iCIPR) and the Anti-Discrimination Centre Memorial to the anniversary of the beginning of Russian aggression against Ukraine, 23 February 2023⁶⁷

Introduction

After Vladimir Putin's return 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 has made it next to impossible to openly and freely discuss Indigenous Peoples' rights, especially land rights and self-determination. A particularly worrisome aspect was the accelerating expansion of extractive industries on Indigenous Peoples' traditional lands, regulated and encouraged by the Government, without their Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) and paying neglect attention to the environmental standards.

As a result, today, the once vibrant Indigenous activist movement in Russia has been reduced to a handful of people. Those activists must be extremely careful, as anyone who openly questions the authorities' political and economic choices is at risk of criminal prosecution. A number of prominent Indigenous rights defenders left the country,¹ fearing for their safety. Some who stay in Russia experience arbitrary criminal prosecution initiated by the state or extractive industries.

After the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the repressive Russian legislation was much strengthened, and critical Indigenous voices fear persecution can no longer effectively stand up for their rights and publicly criticize the Government, its proxy organizations, and crony extractive businesses.

Indigenous soldiers in the war

The war's most direct and unfortunate impact on Indigenous peoples is the participation of Indigenous soldiers in the Russian army fighting in Ukraine. Many experts and mass media have repeatedly pointed to the disproportionate conscription of Russian ethnic minorities and Indigenous peoples into the army compared with the titular population of Russia. For example, according to the "Ethnic and regional inequalities in the Russian military fatalities in the 2022 war in Ukraine"² report, a soldier drafted into the war from Buryatia is about 100 times more likely to die than a resident of Moscow.

The other visible example is the drafting campaign in the Udege Indigenous community Gvasugi in the Russian Far East (Khabarovsk krai). According³ to the Russian Ministry of Defense, Sergey Shoigu, only about one percent (300 thousand persons) of the total Russian mobilization resource (25 million people) were mobilized. At the same time, in Gvasugi village, where only two hundred persons live, 14 men were mobilized.⁴ That consists of 11 percent of the total male

⁶⁷ "Influence of Putin's aggression against Ukraine on Indigenous Peoples of Russia", 23 February, 2023, <https://indigenous-russia.com/archives/30664>.

population of the village and about 30 percent of the mobilization resource (men who could be sent to war according to their age and other standards).⁵

Hundreds of deaths of Indigenous soldiers from Chukotka, Khabarovsk Krai, Tyva, Yakutia, and other Russian regions have already been confirmed.⁶ However, the total number of Indigenous soldiers' deaths is difficult to estimate as many Indigenous peoples in Russia have Russian names, making it impossible to distinguish them from non-Indigenous servicemen in open databases. The Russian Government does not publish reliable data on fallen soldiers and makes no statistics on Indigenous Peoples' share in its rare information reports.⁷

Most Indigenous Peoples officially recognized by Russia are numbered several thousand or even hundreds of people.⁸ So while any loss of life is a tragedy, for small-numbered Indigenous Peoples, it could be a question of their very survival. Tragically, many who return home alive will likely suffer from injuries and mental health problems. At the same time, Russia's healthcare infrastructure in remote areas where most Indigenous peoples live has minimal capacity to address these issues.⁹

In many poor remote areas where Indigenous Peoples live, even in the usual time, the military contract service was one of the few paid jobs available and better paid than many other public jobs. Today the Russian Government is attracting disadvantaged and underserved people for the war in Ukraine,¹⁰ promising them a salary several times higher than the average wage in the region while does not provide potential recruits with realistic information about what to expect in the war.¹¹

Still, a lot of male Indigenous Peoples' representatives attempted to avoid forced mobilization of the Russian army. While some tried to disappear into forests pursuing their usual traditional activities,¹² others had to leave Russia, which again will negatively reflect on the general statistics of their small-numbered nations.¹³

Influence of the war on the social and economic life of Indigenous communities

Since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, sanctions by Western governments were quickly followed by foreign businesses choosing to leave the Russian market.¹⁴ International trade links between Russia and the West based on the exchange of raw materials mined mainly on the lands of the Indigenous peoples of the Russian Arctic, Siberia, and the Far East for Western goods and technologies were almost destroyed during the war.

In an economy like Russia's one, closely linked to international trade, this led to immediate economic consequences felt by many within Russia. The country is already experiencing shortages of some essential supplies like medicines¹⁵ and aircraft¹⁶ produced by Western companies. The lack of such goods is hitting remote Indigenous communities especially hard, as many are only accessible by air transport much of the year and cannot receive high-level medical services in remote villages. According to our Indigenous informants' reports from Russia, their communities have already met with the problem of runaway inflation and rising prices of consumer goods, especially in remote villages which do not have year-round access to the rest of Russia, except by air transport.

The sanctions influence various aspects of Indigenous peoples' life differently in Russia. For example, Indigenous hunters in Siberia were unable to sell [pelts],¹⁷ while fur hunting is the basis of their traditional economies. The cause of the problem is that Russia has lost access to the European fur auctions, which were the primary consumers of Russia's furs.

In other regions, Indigenous communities met with the problem of a lack of access or high prices on the western-produced equipment,¹⁸ which has long been used in the daily lives of Indigenous reindeer herders, hunters, fishermen, including snowmobiles, off-road transportation, satellite communications etc.

The war and Russian extractive industry: lowering environmental and human rights standards

Using the "wartime" and sanctions pretext, Russian authorities and mining businesses are subsequently lowering environmental standards in the country to "support the Russian economy".¹⁹ According to the Russian Socio-Ecological Union (RSEU), this trend includes: reducing mandatory requirements for ensuring ecological safety; complicating access and depriving citizens of the right to participate in issues related to nature and habitat protections; reducing state oversight over the activities of environmentally hazardous facilities; reduction or cancellation of the legislative ban on economic development of protected areas and requirements for forest conservation; extension of deadlines for federal environmental projects and state programs beyond the responsibility of the current generation of officials.²⁰

One of the most dangerous tendencies is the intentional shrinking of the State Environmental Impact Assessment (SEIA) requirements. Aleksandr Fedorov, a member of the Russian Ministry of Natural Resources and Ecology's Public Council, mentioned several weakening procedures for the state environmental assessments initiated by state or business: reduce the scope of specific SEIAs, dilute the range of issues addressed by SEIAs, decrease the importance of SEIAs in decision-making; limit civil society participation during SEIAs and other assessments; depriving citizens of the right to organize their own public environmental impact studies.²¹

For example, in November 2022, in Lovozero village in the Murmansk region where Russian Sami live, the regional Government organized public hearings on changing the status of the Seydyavr State Nature Reserve.²² This Natural Reserve has created near Lovozero village around the sacred Seidozero lake, where several Sami historical and religious significance sites are located.

According to the regional Government, the main idea of the reorganization is the increasing tourist traffic to Seydozero and the possibility of rare-earth metals mining for Lovozero mining and processing plant on the Natural Reserve territory.²³ Expanding the potential of rare-earth metal mining became necessary for Russia due to Western sanctions on the supply of microelectronics, which Russia needs primarily to develop its military industry.²⁴ Thus, the reorganization of the reserve threatens by mass tourism on the sacred lake (to which the Sami themselves have limited access),²⁵ on the one hand, and pollution of the territory due to the expansion of mining operations in this area on the other hand.

The weakening of the SEIAs' procedures led to formalizing public hearings, now the almost only approach for local communities, including Indigenous ones, to participate in decision-making

regarding new development projects on their communal lands. Considering the Lovozero example, the local authorities gave only six days after the public hearings for local residents to study a rather complex, technical 170-page document of the Natural Reserve reorganization rationale and present their opinion.²⁶

Similar nominal public hearings procedures are applied to other Indigenous communities around the Russian Arctic, Siberia and the Far East, including among reindeer herders, who rarely have the opportunity to visit villages to participate in the public hearings.²⁷

The other significant tendency is escaping Western mining companies, investors and buyers from Russia and their replacement by Russian, Chinese, and other non-Western businesses. For example, this summer, president Putin raised the stakes in his economic war against the West and signed a decree that seized complete control of the Sakhalin-2 gas and oil project in Russia's Far East to force the oil Shell company out of Russia.²⁸ Today the Sakhalin-2 project operates by Russian natural gas state monopoly Gazprom which has been repeatedly proven to violate the rights of Indigenous peoples.²⁹

That means Russian Indigenous communities lost their opportunity to apply to Western mining businesses on international human rights and environmental standards, which they follow more thoroughly than Russian or non-Western companies.

The other challenge connected to the war is today's impossibility of organizing independent research on mining business influence on Indigenous communities or verifying the Russian stakeholders' information. The country is closed to international field visits. During the war, several international institutions, including the Initiative for Responsible Mining Assurance (IRMA) and the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, canceled their country visits.³⁰

Victimization of civil society institutions

The war in Ukraine has provided the Russian Government with a new opportunity to tighten an already minimal civic space in Russia. Soon after the start of the war, Russian authorities blocked the last remaining independent media outlets in Russia,³¹ Russian language media based abroad, and access to various social media outlets.³² The Government continues its destructive campaign to expel from the country the independent human rights, environmental and expert organizations that, in the past, have provided invaluable assistance to Indigenous communities in defending their rights to lands, resources, and self-determination.³³ As a result, the overwhelming majority of Russia's Indigenous population lost access to independent sources of information except for the government ones, while Indigenous communities lost the opportunity to apply for help from independent media and human rights organizations.

The criminal prosecution of Segey Kechimov could be considered an example.³⁴

Sergey Kechimov is a Khanty Indigenous person who lives with his wife near the sacred Khanty lake Numto in Khanty-Mansiisk autonomous region. This region is the most oil-rich in Russia. One of the biggest Russian oil companies, "Surgutneftegas," has been exploring and extracting oil near the lake since 2012.³⁵ Since then, Sergey Kechimov has been trying to protect Khanty's traditional lands against oil pollution near his reindeer herding camp. In 2017 after a conflict with

oil workers whose dog mauled his reindeer, Sergey Kechimov was sentenced by a local court for threatening oil workers.

In those days, Indigenous communities, independent media, human rights and environmental organizations were able to create a powerful public campaign to protect Kechimov's rights as a victim of authorities and the oil industry on national³⁶ and international³⁷ levels. Even though Sergey was finally sentenced, the sentence was relatively painless – 30 hours of communal work only.

But in December 2022, he was sentenced again for threatening oil workers with already six months of liberty restriction, and immediately after the court, he was again arrested by the local police, which brought an accusation against him for police disobedience.³⁸

Today the investigation against him continues, and nobody from human rights organizations or independent media can support him as there are no remaining such organizations in the region now. In 2022 Sergey Kechimov didn't receive any legal support or media attention, as well as support from his own community. While some local Indigenous organizations serve the interests of the regional authorities and oil companies,³⁹ others are intimidated by the recent strengthening of the repressive Russian legislation⁴⁰ and cannot support Sergey Kechimov in his fight.

Intimidation of [critical Indigenous voices]

Indigenous activists and Indigenous rights defenders also didn't avoid prosecution from authorities.

In February 2022, the next day after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Chukchi student Mark Zdor who studied at the St. Petersburg University named after AI Herzen, was arrested by the police after he, with his classmates, participated in the antiwar protest action in St. Petersburg.⁴¹ Mark was fined to 10 thousand rubles. Several days later, after the police came to his house to continue the investigation, he left Russia, fearing for his safety.

In May 2022, an Indigenous activist from Pevek (Chukotka region), Igor Ranav, was fined for his antiwar position (the exact perpetration was the phrase “Yes to the peace! No to the War!” / “Миру — Мир, нет, Войне!”), which he published on one of the social networks).⁴²

Several days later, the other Indigenous activist from Nenets okrug Konstantin Ledkov has also been fined for the second time for the phrase “Crimea belongs to Ukraine” / “Крым это Украина”.⁴³

In July 2022, during the session of the UN Expert Mechanism on the rights of Indigenous peoples in Geneva, a representative of Shor peoples, Yana Tannagasheva, made a presentation on violations of the Indigenous peoples' rights by coal companies in the Kemerovo region. After the presentation, Ms. Tannagasheva was approached by a Russian diplomat, who acted in an intimidating manner by asking for her name, phone number and her business card in a reportedly aggressive way. Numerous delegates of the session, including representatives of Indigenous peoples, NGOs, and the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous peoples, witnessed this incident.⁴⁴ The same Russian diplomat later approached the Secretariat of the EMRIP session, asking for information about the list of speakers, including the speakers' names and the organizations they represent.

Later during the session, several states and Indigenous delegations made statements condemning the inappropriate behavior of the Russian state representative just in the UN building.

Fortunately, Yana Tannagasheva received political asylum today in Sweden, where she had been forced to escape from Russia after years of intimidation by authorities and coal companies.⁴⁵ She is safe now and does not fear threats from the Russian side. But according to her, the Russian diplomat who threatened her during the EMRIP session didn't know that fact as he supposed she continued to live in her village in the Kemerovo region. In this light, the attempt to intimidate the delegate and receive personal data could definitely be considered a severe threat to any Indigenous activists who continue to live in Russia and trying to inform international human rights bodies about violations of their Indigenous rights.

Immediately after the incident, the International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia (ICIPR), the organization Ms. Tannagasheva is part of, issued a statement condemning the assault⁴⁶ on the website "Indigenous Russia" that is today become the only media that specialize in publishing information about violations of Indigenous rights in Russia.⁴⁷ Just after posting the statement, the director of Indigenous Russia received an email from the website's hosting provider, saying it had received a request from the Russian Government to remove the page from the Internet within 24 hours.⁴⁸

The other side of this problem is that Indigenous leaders and IP rights defenders in Russia are afraid now to express their opinion publicly, especially on the international level where RAIPON's and other Russian propagandists' voices are primarily heard.⁴⁹ Considering the latest restrictive wartime legislation according to which persons who critique the political regime and authorities could be imprisoned for a long term, the voice of Indigenous peoples in Russia is now at the lowest level since the Soviet Union.

Polarization of the Indigenous movement

Before Vladimir Putin came to his third presidential term in 2012, the Indigenous movement in Russia was more or less united behind the idea of protecting Indigenous rights and didn't afraid to confront the state or business if such rights were violated. The biggest Indigenous organization – the Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East (RAIPON),⁵⁰ which has regional departments in all regions where Indigenous peoples live, represented the interests of most Indigenous communities in Moscow.

But this organization came under the complete control of Putin's regime in 2013 after Russian authorities promoted Grigory Ledkov, a member of the Russian Parliament, to the RAIPON's leadership.⁵¹ After that, the RAIPON's role was primarily reduced to rubber-stamping government decisions institution.

In 2022 while some rare Indigenous activists or alliances protested against the war,⁵² RAIPON, in partnership with some smaller Indigenous organizations,⁵³ since the first days of the war, approved president Putin's operation against Ukraine.⁵⁴ In order to give the impression that all Russian ethnic groups supported the war, RAIPON joined with the authorities in numerous patriotic actions in remote Indigenous communities⁵⁵ and cities.⁵⁶

War propaganda became not the only concern of RAIPON in 2022. The other important activity became manhunting and reports to the authorities against those criticizing President Putin's policy. For example, it was Raipon's representatives who provided the authorities with information about the protest activities of student Mark Zdor, after which the police began to investigate him.⁵⁷

The other example is a decision of RAIPON's Coordinating Council in April 2022,⁵⁸ which applied to the Russian general prosecutor's office to check the website "Indigenous Russia" on extremism that finally came to a decision of the Russian authorities to ban access to the website from the territory of the Russian Federation.⁵⁹

Divided peoples

Indigenous peoples whose ancestral lands are divided by national borders suffer additional impacts of the war due to suspending their cross-border cognate ties. The cross-border dimension is particularly evident with the Arctic Indigenous Nations living in Russia and other Arctic countries.

For example, the war in Ukraine has resulted in a suspension of all cooperation between Russian and non-Russian members of the Sámi Council, the Sámi's main representative body.⁶⁰ The break followed an explicit expression of support by some Sámi leaders in Russia for the Russian Government's decision to launch the war against Ukraine.⁶¹ And although not all Russian Sámi organizations endorsed the Government on that issue, the decision to suspend Russian participation was made unanimously by the Executive Board of the Sámi Council, a body that consists of four people, one of [whom] is a representative of Russian Sámi.

In a similar situation are the Russian and foreign parts of the Aleut International Association and Inuit Circumpolar Council. While they didn't announce the break in cooperation with their Russian members officially, the actual contacts are extremely limited.

The growing isolation of the Russian political regime and escalation of its antagonism with the West will likely lead to a further reduction in transborder contacts.

Conclusions

Indigenous peoples in Russia are among the most vulnerable groups in the Russian population. Dispossessed of their ancestors' lands, they have minimal access to their traditional resources for hunting, fishing and other traditional economic activities. They are also excluded from industrial development decisions on their traditional territories. As a result, many Indigenous communities depend on the state's meager allowance for subsistence.

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russian Indigenous communities have been experiencing increased pressure from the state and businesses, which announced the war support as a main priority of the Nation's current development. While corrupt Russian bureaucrats and extractive companies, using the pretext of wartime, lowering environmental standards for accessing the Indigenous traditional lands, the Indigenous communities themselves suffer heavy losses due to the unprecedented drafting to the Russian army and the negative influence of the rapidly degrading Russian economy and living standards.

Most remote Indigenous communities of the Russian Arctic, Siberia and the Far East are cut off from alternative sources of information other than state TV channels. Unfortunately, due to the poor quality of life, many Indigenous soldiers and their families, drugged by propaganda, see military service as a tool to improve their economic situation.

Proved human losses among Indigenous peoples of the Russian Arctic, Siberia, and the Far East because of the war numbered today hundreds of lives. This is a particular disaster for small-numbered Indigenous nations for which the loss of any community member is a tragedy.

All the new repressive laws initiated by President Putin to intimidate the Nation, increase Russia's isolation, and expel the last independent media, human rights, and environmental institutions from Russia are incredibly disastrous to the ability of Indigenous communities of the Russian Arctic, Siberia, and the Far East to defend their rights and provide information on violations of such rights at international venues, including the UN.

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