

## Who Are the Indigenous Peoples of Russia?

Britnae Purdy | First Peoples Worldwide | February 19, 2014



There are over 100 identified ethnic groups in Russia. Of them, 41 are legally recognized as “Indigenous small-numbered peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East.” These are the only groups that are legally protected as indigenous peoples. To meet the requirements, a group of peoples must number fewer than 50,000 people, maintain a traditional way of life, inhabit certain remote areas of the country, and identify as a distinct ethnic group. Some groups are disqualified because of their larger populations, such as the Sakha (Yakuts), Buryat, Komi, and Khakas. Additionally, there are 24 larger ethnic groups that are identified as national identities or titular nations. These groups inhabit independent states or autonomous areas in Russia, but do not have specific protections under the law.

The smallest of these indigenous groups are the Enets (350 people) and the Oroks (450 people), while the largest are the Nenets and Evenkis, which both have nearly 30,000 members. Of the 41 peoples, ten have fewer than 1,000 members and eleven live beyond the Arctic Circle. At least 16 of these peoples have such small populations that they are considered to be endangered; at least eleven have been declared extinct. Though Russia’s indigenous peoples only make up 0.2% of the total population, or 250,000 people total, they inhabit about 2/3 of Russia’s territory.

The indigenous peoples of Russia are varied and diverse but they do have some characteristics in common: many are nomadic or seminomadic, practice animism, and have lifestyles based on hunting, gathering, fishing, and reindeer herding. The languages of the indigenous groups of Russia are numerous, but most of them belong to one of three main ethno-linguistic groups: Uralic, Altaic, and Paleo-Siberian.

Unfortunately, the indigenous peoples of Russia also share many common problems. Though Indigenous Peoples are protected under Article 69 of the Russian Constitution, the implementation of protective laws and regulations are often not adequately enforced or are complicated by government decisions regarding natural resource use in the North. There are currently 70 places of potential conflict between local groups and extractive projects – for example, nickel mining has intruded on many reindeer pastures and sacred sites.

In 2011 the Committee of the Federation Council on Northern Affairs and Affairs of Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples, the only federal legislation body specializing in Indigenous Affairs, was dissolved, along with several regional specialized government bodies. In 2012 Russia passed a law designating non-profits that accept foreign funding and participate in “political” activities such as Indigenous rights as “foreign agents,” subjecting many Indigenous organizing groups to more legal obligations and stigmatization. In 2012, the government suspended the activities of the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON). Founded in 1990, RAIPON represents 42 Indigenous groups in Russia and is a permanent member of the crucial Arctic Council.

In 2001 the government adopted a law “On the Territories of Traditional Nature Use,” the only serious attempt to ensure indigenous peoples’ land-use rights to the land on which they depend for subsistence. However, since the law has gone into effect not a single Territory of Traditional Nature Use (TTNU) has been established. Many indigenous groups also suffer from insufficient fishing rights – in 2008 an amendment to federal law removed provisions of priority for access to fishing grounds for indigenous peoples, and stipulated that they may only fish for their personal needs. This excludes *obshchinas*, or indigenous cooperatives – in many territories, the largest providers of income and employment for indigenous peoples. There are over 2,300 *obshchinas* across Russia. It is also very difficult for nomadic fishers to obtain licenses, and they face heavy fines for fishing without a license.

Unemployment in indigenous populations is 1.5-2 times higher than in the general Russian population, and incomes are 2-3 times lower. Indigenous peoples suffer from a lack of clean drinking water, inadequate food, and insufficient drinking water. These problems contribute to numerous health problems such as tuberculosis, viral hepatitis, intestinal infections, upper respiratory infections, and alcoholism. In the Indigenous communities of Russia, tuberculosis (TB), a health problem that is virtually nonexistent in developed nations, occurs at a rate of 3 times the national average. Maternal and child mortality is much higher in indigenous territories – in some territories, the mortality rate is several times higher than the birth rate. Because of these issues, life expectancy for indigenous peoples is 50 years for men and 60 years for women.

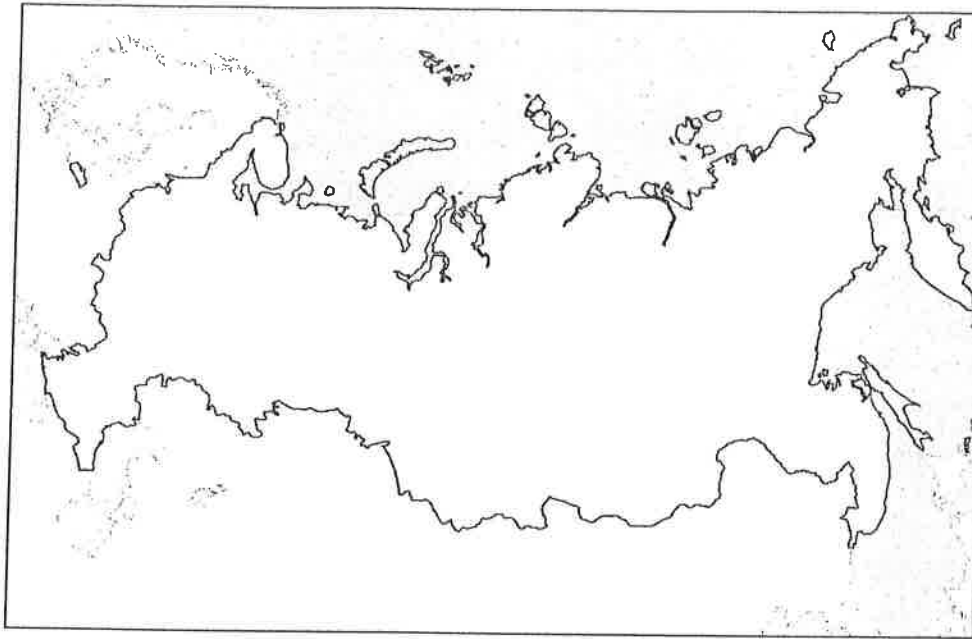
The indigenous peoples of Russia also face many threats to their traditional cultures. For example, today only 10% of Siberia’s tribal people live a nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle, compared to 70% about 30 years ago. Since 2002, the population of 24 of the Russian indigenous groups has declined, with only 10 increasing in membership. This is due primarily to a decline in self-identification with the tribe as well as assimilation with the Russian population. 90% of the population of Northern Russia has migrated there within the past two centuries, and patterns of forced promotion of the Russian language and culture have eroded many of the smaller indigenous cultures. The proliferation of Russian-language public schools and boarding schools and mass media such as newspapers, television, and radio produced in Russia has threatened Indigenous languages – there are now 148 endangered languages in Russia.

The problems facing the indigenous peoples of Russian are severe – but so is the will and resolve of the people. Having already survived incredible hardships – both environmental and political – the Russian Indigenous peoples evidently find great strength in their ancestors, culture, and ability to be both resilient and adaptive.

Source: <http://firstpeoples.org/wp/who-are-the-indigenous-peoples-of-russia/>  
Adapted by Christopher Hall, Davis School District (UT) for use with students.

# INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF RUSSIA

case study



Geography	Culture	Challenges/Threats

## OPTIC – Ethnicities

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### Image #1

Object	O	
Parts	P	
Texts	T	
Interpretations	I	
Conclusion	C	

### Image #2

Object	O	
Parts	P	
Texts	T	
Interpretations	I	
Conclusion	C	