

RAIPON Unmasked

From Indigenous Advocacy to International Statecraft

Prepared By : International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia

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Summary

RAIPON Unmasked: From Indigenous Advocacy to International Statecraft is the second part of a broader investigation into the transformation of the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON). Building on the findings of the 2024 report RAIPON: From a Nation-Based Change Agent to a Weapon of State-Controlled Propaganda [1], this report shifts the focus outward: from the domestic transformation of RAIPON to the international political value of the organization that emerged from it.

Blending academic analysis with the urgency of activist testimony, this report brings together long-term monitoring of Indigenous politics in Russia, analysis of official documents and public statements, financial and organizational records, documented violations, international participation, corporate partnerships, and collaborative research by Indigenous activists in exile and researchers. Together, we trace RAIPON's transformation from watchdog to mouthpiece, from movement to managed script.

Once regarded as the principal representative organization of Indigenous peoples in the Russian North, RAIPON today operates within an entirely different political logic. Through leadership capture, financial dependency, close partnerships with extractive industries, and state-directed diplomatic programs, the organization has been transformed not merely into an intermediary through which the Russian state projects carefully managed narratives into international institutions, but has been integrated into a broader architecture of statecraft—a coordinated ecosystem of government agencies, corporate partners, "expert" platforms, and diplomatic initiatives designed to recruit, train, legitimize, and project state-approved Indigenous voices. Rather than excluding Indigenous Peoples from international governance, the Russian state has learned to speak through organizations that no longer represent them.

In an international order increasingly shaped by geopolitical confrontation, resource competition, and pressure on multilateral institutions, this constitutes a warning for Indigenous advocacy globally. The RAIPON case demonstrates how easily representation can be weaponized and resistance labeled as extremism, and how quickly Indigenous rights can be reframed as security liabilities.

The defining feature of this moment is therefore no longer *"How do we uphold Indigenous rights?"* but

> ***When, how, and under what conditions rights are allowed to matter?***
>
> ***Who is speaking, under what conditions, with what freedom, with what risk, and toward whose future?***

Intended Outcomes

This report seeks to:

- ✓ Encourage international institutions to reassess the legitimacy of organizations that formally satisfy procedural requirements while no longer exercising independent representation;
- ✓ Inform UN officials, diplomats, donors, researchers, Indigenous organizations, and civil society about the misuse of Indigenous representation by authoritarian states;
- ✓ Equip Indigenous allies and human rights defenders with data and language to push back against co-opted narratives;
- ✓ Strengthen solidarity with Indigenous movement, activists, and scholars who continue to defend Indigenous rights despite political persecution, criminalization, and forced exile.

Rationale and Relevance

Why this report—and why now?

Growing International Visibility

RAIPON continues to maintain a seat at international forums despite its compromised status. Its presence in United Nations mechanisms, Arctic governance, biodiversity negotiations, and environmental diplomacy [2] lends undue legitimacy to state narratives, silences critical Indigenous voices, and distorts global understanding of Russia's Indigenous realities.

A Tool of Propaganda in a Time of War

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine made the political function of RAIPON considerably more visible. In 2022, the organization publicly rejected anti-war statements issued by independent Indigenous activists abroad and rushed to endorse Putin's "special military operation" in Ukraine [3]. The war accelerated the transformation of Indigenous diplomacy into an instrument of state foreign policy. Indigenous identity, environmental stewardship, and traditional knowledge are increasingly mobilized to legitimize state narratives abroad while concealing militarization, extractive expansion, and human rights violations at home. The language of Indigenous participation has become another channel through which the Russian state advances its geopolitical objectives.

Silence in the Face of Repression

The report is published at a moment when Indigenous leaders, environmental defenders, and scholars face arrests, criminal prosecution, surveillance, and forced exile. In 2024, Russia placed 55 organizations—Indigenous and minority-rights groups—on its extremist list by declaring them supposed "structural subdivisions" of the so-called Anti-Russian Separatist Movement [4].

The contrast between RAIPON's international visibility and its domestic silence became particularly stark in December 2025, when coordinated security service searched, interrogated, and detained 17 Indigenous activists across multiple Russian regions [5]. Rather than defend former members of its own movement or call for due process, RAIPON remained silent and later publicly distanced itself from those facing politically motivated prosecution. After more than a month without a statement of solidarity, a demand for legal safeguards, or even a defense of the principle that Indigenous advocacy should not be criminalized, RAIPON's leadership chose alignment with the state [6].

> **Silence here is more than absence. It reveals the boundaries within which representation is now permitted.**

A Crisis for the United Nations and International Indigenous Governance

This report comes at a time of profound uncertainty for international governance. The United Nations system, Arctic institutions, and multilateral environmental processes face growing geopolitical tensions, financial constraints, and declining international consensus [7]. As these institutions strive to preserve dialogue and participation, ensuring the legitimacy and independence of Indigenous participation is essential to maintaining the credibility of global Indigenous governance.

State–Corporate Alliances

Corporate power has become inseparable from this problem. Across the Russian Arctic, the same corporations expanding mining, infrastructure, energy, and critical-mineral projects increasingly finance Indigenous programs, consultations, expert assessments, educational initiatives, and international participation. These relationships are often presented as partnership and corporate responsibility. Yet they create a structural problem when companies whose projects directly affect Indigenous lands also help finance the organizations, experts, and representatives through which Indigenous consent and cooperation are communicated. This matters at a moment when Arctic resources—including critical minerals—are becoming increasingly strategic. Indigenous consent, sustainability credentials, and the appearance of partnership are themselves valuable political and economic assets. The question is therefore not simply whether corporations support Indigenous communities, but whether financial dependence alters who can criticize development, whose expertise becomes authoritative, and how consent is represented to the outside world.

Implications for Indigenous Scholarship

The capture of Indigenous representation is also a capture of Indigenous knowledge. As independent Indigenous organizations disappear, so too do opportunities for autonomous research and critical scholarship. International researchers increasingly encounter only state-approved experts, and institutions, producing distorted understandings of Indigenous realities in Russia. For Indigenous studies, Arctic research, and international policymaking, the consequences are serious: when the conditions under which knowledge is produced are ignored, scholarship can unintentionally reproduce the political architecture it seeks to analyze.

Replacement Institutions: Manufacturing State-Approved Indigenous Expertise

Reorganization of RAIPON has been accompanied by the creation and expansion of a broader ecosystem of state-managed institutions that increasingly occupy spaces once associated with independent Indigenous leadership and expertise. Among the most prominent examples is the School of Indigenous Diplomacy, established jointly by RAIPON and the Federal Agency for Ethnic Affairs (FADN), with financial support from major extractive corporations, including Norilsk Nickel [8]. A similar role is played by PORA (Project

Office for Arctic Development). Although publicly presented as an independent analytical center, PORA maintains close institutional and financial relationships with FADN and major industrial actors [9].

Together, these organizations demonstrate that authoritarian governance relies not only on suppressing independent institutions but also on constructing a parallel infrastructure of “expertise” that relocates Indigenous issues into frameworks that are compatible with state priorities and extractive development under the appearance of professional independence.

These structures do not simply replace one organization with another. Together they create a parallel ecosystem in which representation, expertise, funding, and international access increasingly reinforce one another. This is the deeper transformation examined in RAIPON Unmasked. The Russian state did not simply take control of an Indigenous organization. Around RAIPON, the state helped build an integrated system in which the representative, the expert, the funder, and the message increasingly come from the same institutional network.

The Russian state’s strategy is designed to ensure that Indigenous diplomacy remains politically predictable.

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, the Russian state has transformed the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON) from an independent Indigenous organization into an instrument of state governance and international influence.

What was once a platform for defending Indigenous rights has become a mechanism for managing Indigenous participation at home while projecting state-approved narratives abroad. Its objective is no longer simply to control Indigenous peoples, but to control who speaks for them, what can be said—and who the international community hears.

As Russia has become increasingly authoritarian, internationally isolated, and economically dependent on strategic resource extraction, the political value of Indigenous representation has grown.

Indigenous Peoples — and the institutions created to represent them — have become part of the state's legitimacy infrastructure. Their identities, cultures, and international standing are increasingly mobilized to demonstrate ethnic harmony, responsible Arctic governance, environmental stewardship, and compliance with international human rights norms, at a precise moment when independent Indigenous leaders are prosecuted and imprisoned.

The Russian case therefore offers one of the most advanced contemporary examples of managed indigeneity in the contemporary world: a system in which representation is not abolished but reorganized.

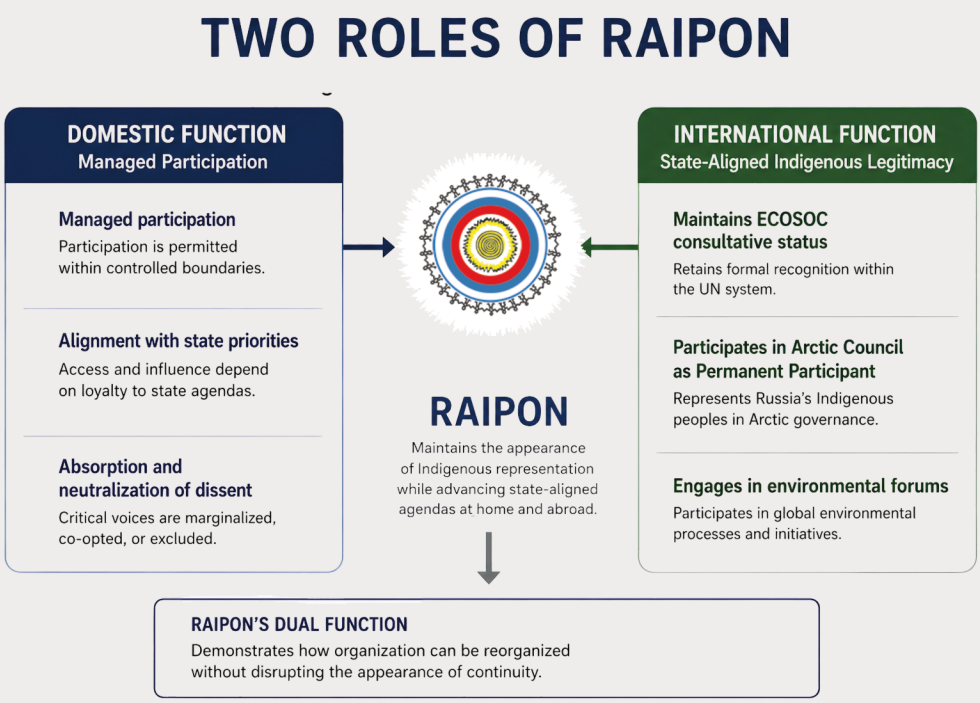
Understanding this transformation requires moving beyond the assumption that authoritarian governments seek simply to silence civil society. Representation can survive institutionally long after it has ceased to be politically autonomous. Preserving the institution may be more useful than destroying it because it remains politically valuable.

Today, RAIPON is a reconfigured institution capable of operating across two interconnected arenas.

Domestically, it structures a controlled Indigenous political space. Participation is permitted, but only within carefully defined political boundaries. Access to decision-making depends on alignment with state priorities, while dissent is marginalized, criminalized, or absorbed into state-managed institutions.



Internationally, this same organization operates as a vehicle of state-aligned Indigenous legitimacy. RAIPON retains consultative status within the United Nations system, participates in Arctic governance, and appears at international environmental and human rights forums as the recognized representative of Russia's Indigenous Peoples. To international audiences, this institutional continuity signals inclusion and stability. In practice, however, it masks a profound transformation in whose interests the organization now serves.



This dual function is sustained through a mutually reinforcing set of mechanisms. Leadership capture, institutional continuity, strategic partnerships with extractive corporations, state-sponsored diplomatic training, narrative discipline, and the systematic exclusion of independent Indigenous voices together produce an architecture of managed legitimacy.

The transformation is neither hidden nor accidental. Much of the evidence is public: financial transfers, cooperation agreements, organizational appointments, official curricula, public statements, UN interventions, and RAIPON's own responses to repression.

This report brings those fragments together. It documents how **a movement became an institution of managed participation; how extractive corporations became financiers of Indigenous representation; how new "expert" structures emerged around the state–corporate nexus; how selected representatives gained international authority; and how an organization once created to defend Indigenous Peoples remained silent when some of those Peoples' most experienced defenders were targeted by the state.**

> RAIPON now speaks loudly on the international stage. *This report asks what has happened to those it no longer speaks for.*

The Takeover

From Advocate to Apparatus

The Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON) was established in 1990 amid the political opening of the final Soviet years. It emerged not as an administrative appendage of government but as a movement: a nationwide platform through which Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East could articulate political demands, influence legislation, challenge extractive development, and enter international Indigenous diplomacy on their own terms.

For over two decades, RAIPON was capable of doing something that would later become increasingly difficult in Russia: disagreeing publicly with the state. It opposed aspects of oil and gas expansion into traditional territories, challenged the Ministry of Regional Development over its failure to protect Indigenous rights, and increasingly questioned the state's approach to Arctic development.

RAIPON served as an outspoken watchdog – advocating for land and resource rights, participated in legislative processes, challenged policies affecting traditional livelihoods, and built relationships across the international Indigenous movement. Its international standing grew alongside its domestic authority. RAIPON became a Permanent Participant in Arctic cooperation and obtained consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council in 2001 [10].

By the late 2000s, tensions between RAIPON and federal authorities were increasingly visible. The organization criticized failures in state Indigenous policy and challenged industrial expansion affecting traditional territories.

In November 2012, the Ministry of Justice suspended RAIPON's activities, formally citing inconsistencies between its charter and federal legislation [11]. The decision was serious enough to trigger concern within the Arctic Council itself. RAIPON's leadership at the time described the suspension as political and administrative interference in Indigenous self-government.

RAIPON amended its charter and resumed operations, but the decisive shift came at its Seventh Congress in April 2013. Pavel Sulyandziga led the early rounds of voting but withdrew amid reported pressure, while some delegates walked out in protest. Grigory Ledkov, a United Russia State Duma deputy, was ultimately installed as president.

A once-independent Indigenous movement was transformed into a stage-managed extension of state power—giving rise to a "stolen voice."

The organization survived.
Its political independence did not.

RAIPON was not merely an organization; it was a political actor. It:

- advocated for land rights and self-determination,
- played a major role in shaping Russia's domestic Indigenous legal framework, including the adoption of three foundational federal laws,
- challenged extractive expansion,
- and engaged actively in international Indigenous forums.

By the late 1990s and 2000s, RAIPON had secured:

- consultative status with ECOSOC,
- Permanent Participant status in the Arctic Council,
- and an active role in UN mechanisms including UNPFII and EMRIP.

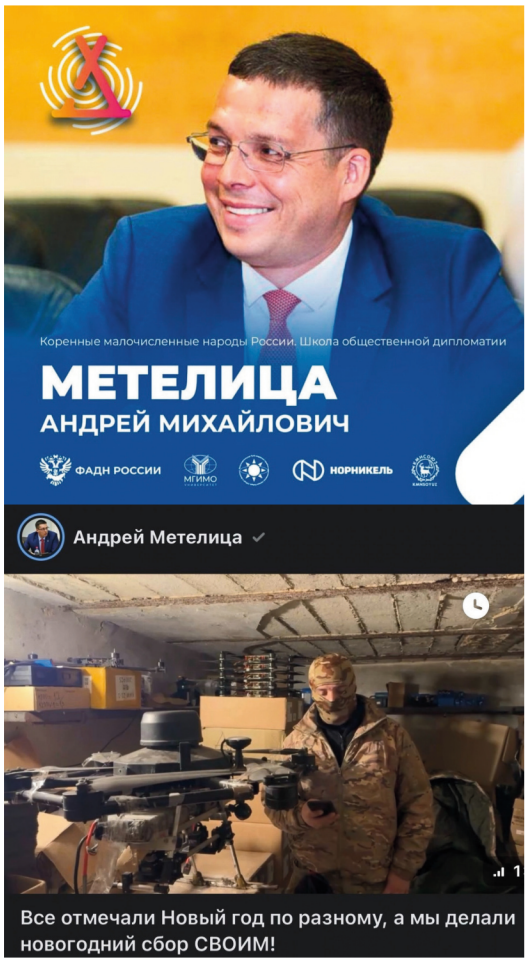
Over the following decade, RAIPON increasingly shifted from challenging state Indigenous policy to participating in its formulation and implementation. Cooperation with the State Duma, federal ministries, FADN, regional governments, and major corporations became central to its institutional identity.

The watchdog had been tamed.



By the 2020s, it had become a vehicle for channeling Indigenous participation into state-defined policy frameworks, participating in the development and implementation of state Indigenous policy, but always within Kremlin red lines.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine did not create RAIPON's alignment with the state, but it made that alignment explicit: in March 2022 RAIPON moved rapidly to open political support, its leadership endorsed the decisions of President Vladimir Putin, and in October its Coordinating Council publicly supported the Russia-organized referendums in occupied Ukrainian territories and the president's subsequent actions [12].



Top: Andrey Metelitsa, chair of the Kamchatka regional Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North and advisor to RAIPON president, participating in international Indigenous diplomacy as a finalist of the School of Public Diplomacy.
Bottom: Metelitsa participating in the collection and dispatch of drones intended for Russian forces fighting in Ukraine.

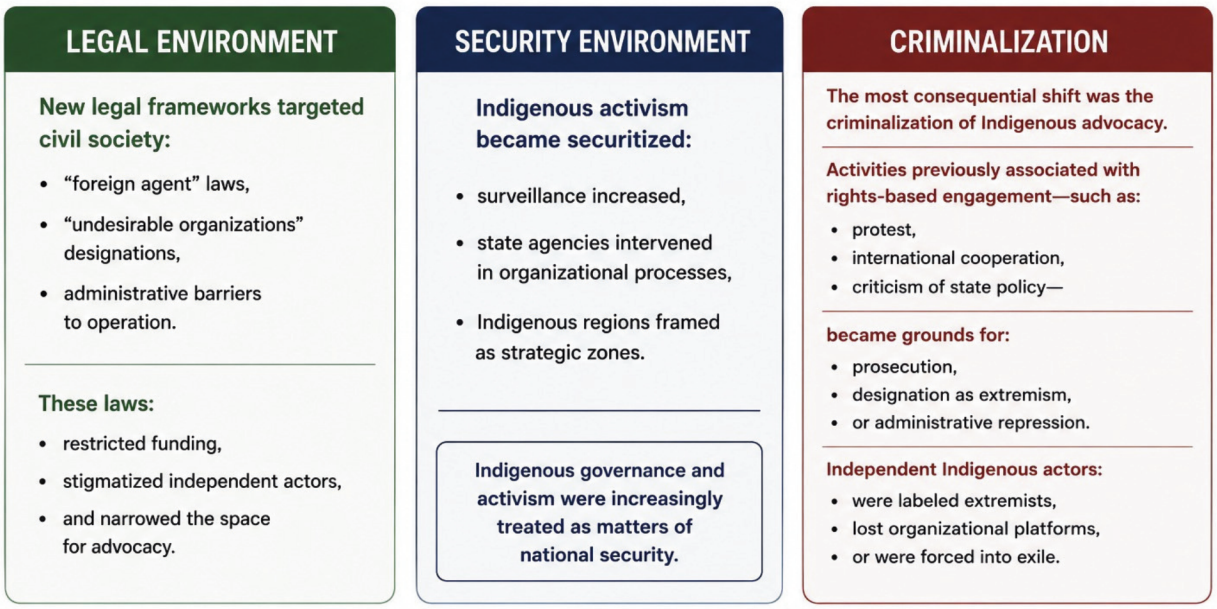
Enabling Conditions for Capture

RAIPON's metamorphosis from advocate to state apparatus unfolded within a broader reconfiguration of governance conditions in the Russian Federation, in which legal regulation, security framing, and the criminalization of dissent collectively reshaped the terrain of Indigenous political life.

First, legal mechanisms provided the instruments of intervention. Regulatory frameworks governing non-governmental organizations enabled a selective enforcement of compliance standards. These tools allowed the state to intervene in institutional governance while maintaining a formal appearance of legality.

Second, Indigenous governance became increasingly embedded within a security-oriented framework. As Arctic regions gained geopolitical and economic significance, Indigenous territories were recast as zones of strategic importance. This shift elevated the political sensitivity of Indigenous representation and created stronger incentives for state oversight and control. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine accelerated this shift. Wartime legislation criminalizing alleged "discreditation" of the armed forces, the expansion of "foreign agent" and "undesirable organization" regimes, sanctions confrontation, and an increasingly security-centered interpretation of international cooperation dramatically increased the cost of independent advocacy [13].

The third enabling condition was therefore the elimination of alternatives. The space for independent Indigenous advocacy narrowed significantly. Activities previously associated with Indigenous political engagement — including criticism of state policy, participation in international forums, and collaboration with external partners — became associated with legal and administrative risk. Activists reduced their public activity, left Russia, or continued working under the possibility that international cooperation itself might later be presented as evidence of disloyalty.



THE TAKEOVER OF INDIGENOUS REPRESENTATION IS NOT ONLY ABOUT CO-OPTING INSTITUTIONS—
IT IS ABOUT ELIMINATING ALTERNATIVES.

RAIPON CONGRESS 2025

On 25 April 2025, RAIPON marked its 35th anniversary [14]. The official Congress was compressed into approximately two and a half hours, a drastic departure from the multi-day gatherings of the past when Indigenous leaders engaged in genuine dialogue about the rights, development, and future of their communities.

Gone are the meetings once defined by debate, resolutions, and collective visioning. In their place, RAIPON's Congress has become a staged performance devoid of real discussion and stripped of substance, with scripted consensus replacing genuine dialogue.



The shortest Congress in RAIPON's history marked the longest distance yet from democratic Indigenous representation.



Today, there are no discussions of challenges, no consultations with grassroots voices, no debates — only a ceremonial endorsement of a predetermined president, Alexander Novyukhov, handpicked to maintain the illusion of democratic process. His selection simply replaces one political appointee with another, offering no meaningful shift for Indigenous communities [16].

What should have been a milestone moment of reflection and mobilization honoring decades of Indigenous struggle and resilience instead illustrated how far RAIPON had travelled from its origins as a movement capable of challenging power.

RAIPON'S VOICE:

MISSING

Perhaps the clearest evidence of RAIPON's transformation is not what it says, but what it no longer says.

Its silence is evident across every major challenge confronting Indigenous Peoples in contemporary Russia.

Once a force for legislative change and a shield for vulnerable communities, RAIPON has largely ceased to challenge state policy or defend communities facing political, environmental, and social injustice.

Silence on the Erosion of Rights

Russia still formally maintains a package of federal legislation protecting Indigenous small-numbered Peoples, communities, traditional territories, and traditional economic activities. Three foundational federal laws protecting Indigenous rights in Russia, crafted in the 1990s have either been left to atrophy or deliberately eroded: riddled with loopholes, stripped of protections, and emptied of enforcement. The problem is increasingly the gap between those guarantees and their practical implementation [15].

RAIPON once treated closing that gap as a central political task. Today its public agenda is far more closely oriented toward administrative cooperation, socioeconomic programs, cultural initiatives, registries, traditional economic activities, and state-defined development priorities.

Equally ignored is the new federal Concept for the Sustainable Development of the Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East until 2036, approved in May 2025 and effective from 2026, a policy document that retains formal rights language while leaving fundamental structural problems unresolved, including autonomous decision-making, territorial protection, and FPIC [16].

Indigenous policy is increasingly organized through a partnership model linking FADN, RAIPON, and major corporate actors [17]. Far from being hidden, this state–corporate–Indigenous nexus is openly institutionalized through formal agreements, joint programs, and public initiatives. Instead of expanding autonomous Indigenous decision-making, this architecture advances a paternalistic vision in which Indigenous Peoples are celebrated as cultural heritage rather than recognized as political rights holders.

Silence on Environmental Destruction

But the silence is loudest in the face of catastrophe. The "Map of Silence" exposes the geographic breadth of RAIPON's failure to act — where environmental devastation met only silence or complicity:

- Taimyr Peninsula (Norilsk, 2020): A catastrophic diesel spill polluted rivers and tundra in Nenets and Dolgan-Nganasan territories [18]. Rather than condemn Norilsk Nickel — one of the worst industrial polluters in the Arctic — RAIPON signed a cooperation agreement with the company shortly after the disaster [19].

- Kuzbass (Southern Siberia): Open-pit coal mines razed entire Shor villages [20]. While grassroots activists and independent NGOs fought back, RAIPON said nothing. Advocacy and appeals to international bodies came from local voices and NGOs— not from the national association.

- Yakutia (Sakha Republic, 2019–2021): Unprecedented wildfires devastated Evenki and Yakut communities, but RAIPON made no public statements, offered no support, and raised no concern in international forums [21].

- The same problem now extends to the next generation of extractive development. Polar Lithium—a joint venture between Nornickel and Rosatom—is developing the Kolmozerskoye lithium deposit in Murmansk Oblast, Russia's largest known lithium deposit [22]. The project intersects with Sámi and reindeer-herding rights and has already generated consultations, ethnological assessment, and discussion of FPIC. PORA experts have participated in this process. The project marks a new phase of strategic mineral extraction in the Russian Arctic, yet RAIPON has remained silent despite the profound implications for Indigenous lands and Arctic ecosystems.

The question is whether an organization financially and institutionally integrated into partnership with the company responsible for one of the Arctic's largest industrial disasters can still function as an independent watchdog over that company.

Silence on the Criminalization of Indigenous Advocacy

Perhaps most striking is RAIPON's silence in the face of political repression directed at Indigenous Peoples themselves.

On 17 December 2025, Russian authorities interrogated and detained 17 Indigenous rights defenders; most were released that day, while Daria Egereva and Natalia Leongardt remained in custody and were transferred to pretrial detention [23]. Amnesty International described the events as evidence of a wider crackdown on Indigenous civil society. UN experts later called for the release of Egereva and Leongardt and raised concerns over the use of terrorism and extremism frameworks against Indigenous defenders.

The wave of arrests targeting Indigenous activists in late 2025 represented one of the most serious attacks on Indigenous civil society in post-Soviet Russia. In response, RAIPON publicly distanced itself from those arrested. More than a month later, on 28 January 2026, President Alexander Novyukhov issued a statement and declared that the Association had "no moral right" to defend individuals suspected of links to organizations officially designated extremist by the Russian state [24].

RAIPON did not simply remain silent. It adopted the state's legal classification as the boundary of its own solidarity, and abandoned one of the most fundamental responsibilities of a representative organization: **defending its own People**.

The very laws whose expansive application independent observers and international human rights bodies have questioned became the basis on which RAIPON justified abandoning Indigenous activists facing prosecution. In the statement, it did not merely align itself with the state. It invoked UNDRIP—the principal international instrument protecting Indigenous rights—to legitimize the state's treatment of Indigenous advocates and rationalize its refusal to support them.

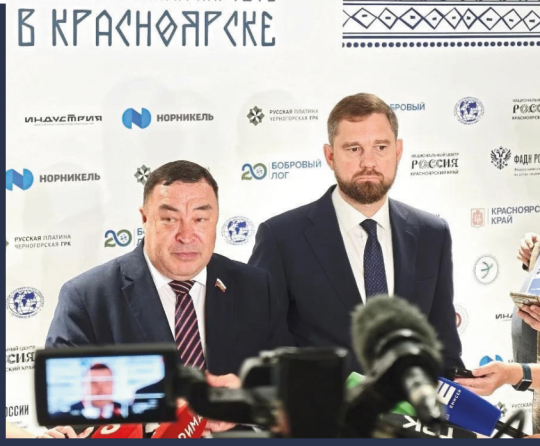
Silence on the Legal Architecture of Repression

The December 2025 cases did not emerge in a vacuum. For years, independent Indigenous organizations and defenders have operated under the expanding reach of laws on "foreign agents," "undesirable organizations," extremism, terrorism, and wartime restrictions on expression. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination previously warned that broad extremism definitions and restrictions on "foreign agents" and "undesirable organizations" could arbitrarily silence groups including Indigenous Peoples. The UN Human Rights Council has since documented the broader dismantling of independent civil society through these mechanisms [25]. RAIPON has not become a visible institutional opponent of this legal architecture. That absence matters because these laws now define who can organize, who can cooperate internationally, who can receive funding, and ultimately who can speak.

Silence as Political Position

Each of these examples reflects a deep institutional failure. RAIPON has become a neutralized entity, offering tacit approval to the industries and policies causing irreparable harm. Taken together, these examples reveal a broader pattern. The organization's silence is an active component of authoritarian governance. It normalizes what is not challenged. It makes repression appear marginal, environmental conflict appear consensual, and political disagreement appear absent. RAIPON no longer merely fails to amplify independent Indigenous voices. It increasingly manages their absence.

> **While RAIPON is increasingly showcased abroad as a symbol of Russia's supposed commitment to Indigenous rights, the domestic space for Indigenous expression and resistance continues to collapse — and RAIPON appears willfully blind.**
>
> **As Indigenous activists, environmental defenders, and community leaders have been arrested, prosecuted under extremism and terrorism legislation, forced into exile, or stripped of their ability to organize freely, RAIPON has neither publicly defended them nor challenged the misuse of legislation against Indigenous voices. The transformation is complete when the organization created to defend Indigenous peoples begins deciding who deserves defense through the very categories of the state prosecuting them.**



MAP OF SILENCE: Indigenous Regions and Disasters Ignored by RAIPON

The "Map of Silence" exposes how RAIPON has become conspicuously absent in speaking out against environmental injustices affecting Russia's Indigenous Peoples. As extractive industries expand into Indigenous territories, RAIPON's voice is either muted or co-opted, leaving communities to seek help elsewhere.

This map is a powerful testament to the dangers of state-managed advocacy. It urges observers, allies, and Indigenous communities alike to ask: **Who really speaks for us — and who remains silent when it matters most?**

MAP OF SILENCE

ARCTIC OCEAN

NORILSK REGION (TAIMYR PENINSULA)

Norilsk Diesel Spill (2020): A catastrophic diesel spill polluted rivers and tundra in Nenets and Dolgan-Nganasan territories. RAIPON signed a cooperation agreement with Norilsk Nickel shortly after.

WHEN THOSE ENTRUSTED WITH ADVOCACY FALL SILENT, THEY DO NOT JUST FAIL THEIR MISSION; THEY ACTIVELY AID IN THE SUPPRESSION OF THEIR PEOPLE.

PLACES WHERE DISASTERS OCCURRED AND RAIPON REMAINED SILENT

BARENTS SEA

KARA SEA

LAPTEV SEA

KOLA PENINSULA (MURMANSK OBLAST)

KOLA PENINSULA (MURMANSK OBLAST)

Kolmozerovo Lithium Project (March 2026): "Polar Lithium" (Rosatom & Norilsk Nickel) began pilot industrial extraction at the Kolmozerskoye lithium deposit, the largest in Russia. Profound risks for Indigenous lands, reindeer herding, and Arctic ecosystems.

NORILSK

YAKITIA (SAKHA REPUBLIC)

YAKITIA (SAKHA REPUBLIC)

Wildfires (2019–2021): Unprecedented wildfires devastated Evenki and Yakut communities. RAIPON made no public statements, offered no support, and raised no concern in international forums.

RUSSIAN NORTH

KUZBASS (SOUTHERN SIBERIA)

KUZBASS (SOUTHERN SIBERIA)

Open-pit coal mines razed entire Shor villages and destroyed traditional lands. While grassroots activists and independent NGOs fought back, RAIPON said nothing. Advocacy came from local voices and NGOs—not from the national association.

SEA OF OKHOTSK

RUSSIAN NORTH (ARCTIC & SUBARCTIC REGIONS)

N

0 500 1000 1500 km

DIPLOMACY BY DESIGN:

The co-optation of RAIPON was not the endpoint of Russia's approach to Indigenous diplomacy—it was its foundation.

Once independent Indigenous representation had been brought under political control, a second phase began: the construction of an institutional ecosystem capable of reproducing, legitimizing, and exporting state-approved Indigenous voices.

Rather than relying on a single organization, the Kremlin developed a mutually reinforcing network linking government agencies, extractive corporations, educational initiatives, expert platforms, and international appointments. Together, these institutions manufacture the appearance of Indigenous participation while ensuring that those who speak publicly remain politically reliable.

This ecosystem performs several functions simultaneously. It trains future Indigenous representatives, funds organizations willing to cooperate with state priorities, produces "expert" knowledge supporting extractive development, and places carefully selected individuals into international institutions where they speak with the authority of Indigenous representatives while rarely challenging Russian domestic policy.



A Ministry-funded finishing school for loyal Indigenous diplomats' tasked with exporting Kremlin narratives.

What appears externally as a diverse landscape of Indigenous participation is, in reality, an increasingly integrated system of managed legitimacy.

Within this system, the School of Indigenous Diplomacy, PORA, corporate partnerships with Nornickel, and appointments to international expert bodies are not isolated developments. They are components of a single architecture designed to replace independent Indigenous advocacy with state-managed representation.

The following sections examine how this architecture functions in practice.

The School That Trains Consent

With RAIPON firmly under state direction, the Kremlin moved to occupy Indigenous voices on the international stage – by filling them with loyalists and effectively manufacturing "approved" Indigenous voices for international consumption.

The School of Indigenous Diplomacy is perhaps the most sophisticated institution within Russia's new architecture of Indigenous governance. Publicly presented as a program that prepares Indigenous youth for international engagement, it instead functions as a pipeline through which carefully selected representatives are trained, credentialed, and deployed into international forums.

The School was established through a partnership between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), the Federal Agency for Ethnic Affairs (FADN), RAIPON, MGIMO (Moscow State Institute of International Relations, run by MFA), and the mining corporation Nornickel [26].

The School operates under the direction of Alexey Tsykarev, a non-Indigenous state-hired official and former member of the UN Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP) tasked with shaping diplomatic compliance. Under his leadership, the School recruits and internationally positions cadres who reliably advance state and corporate narratives under the banner of "Indigenous diplomacy."

The School's funding model reveals its political purpose. State budgetary resources channeled through MFA structures, substantial corporate contributions from Nornickel (one of RAIPON's largest donors, with documented transfers exceeding 54 million rubles in recent war years alone), and RAIPON's organizational infrastructure together — ensure that the curriculum, participant selection, and international placement of graduates remain under effective state-corporate control [27].

The School ostensibly aims to educate Indigenous youth in international diplomacy. However, behind its educational facade, it operates as a grooming ground to train carefully selected individuals and create a reliable cohort of "Indigenous diplomats" who will occupy or influence positions in international forums and serve as spokespersons for state-sanctioned narratives in international forums.

The School teaches a carefully curated narrative of Russia's Indigenous policy— one that emphasizes partnership, sustainable development, and constructive engagement while systematically omitting political repression, the erosion of Indigenous rights, environmental destruction, and conflicts over extractive development. Graduates are positioned to speak the language of partnership, sustainable development, and



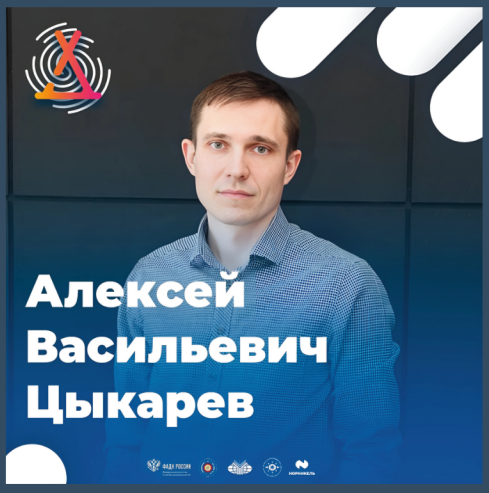
"constructive engagement" — precisely the vocabulary required to neutralize scrutiny in the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII), EMRIP, the Arctic Council (prior to its effective paralysis), CBD processes, and related mechanisms.

Graduates of the School are frequently part of Russian delegations at the UNPFII, where they echo state positions, organize side-events, and meet with key international stakeholders, including the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Instead of airing grievances about land grabs or cultural suppression in Russia, the trained "diplomats" emphasize examples of successful cooperation and redirect attention toward challenges faced by Indigenous Peoples elsewhere.

This is the institutional production of politically reliable Indigenous diplomacy. Independent Indigenous organizations have accurately described this process as Indigenous-washing — the manufacture of authentic-looking Indigenous voices whose legitimacy derives from state and corporate patronage rather than community accountability.

The School therefore represents a new form of soft power. Rather than excluding Indigenous peoples from international diplomacy, Russia increasingly occupies Indigenous diplomatic space with representatives whose participation strengthens state legitimacy while limiting international scrutiny of domestic repression. By channeling Indigenous voices through its own proxies, the Kremlin not only amplifies its message but also prevents the emergence of any alternative Indigenous discourse from Russia on the world stage.

Tsykarev's own trajectory is telling: One of Russia's most visible figures in international Indigenous diplomacy, Alexey is a human rights expert from the Republic of Karelia. Between 2013 and 2019, he served on the UN EMRIP, including as Vice-Chair and Chair. From 2020 to 2022, he was appointed an independent expert to UNPFII, representing Eastern Europe, Russia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus [28]. In 2018, Finnish authorities denied Tsykarev a visa on the grounds that his entry posed a threat to national security. Estonia subsequently adopted the same position, likewise refusing him entry for national security reasons [29]. Today, his program, under the banner of empowering Indigenous leaders, "grooms Indigenous diplomats as Kremlin puppets on the international stage."



> **Who designs the pipeline? Who finances it? Who selects and rewards participation? And which forms of Indigenous politics become institutionally valuable within it?**



Коренные малочисленные народы России. Школа общественной дипломатии

ОТКЕ
АННА ИВАНОВНА

ФАДН РОССИИ МГИМО НОРНИКЕЛЬ KMNSOYUZ



Яунгад Эдуард Хабэчевич

ФАДН РОССИИ



Коренные малочисленные народы России. Школа общественной дипломатии

МОГХАНИ
ХАНИ

ФАДН РОССИИ МГИМО НОРНИКЕЛЬ KMNSOYUZ



Коренные малочисленные народы России. Школа общественной дипломатии

ОДЖУЛУ
ОДЖДОТ



Коренные малочисленные народы России. Школа общественной дипломатии

КАРПЕНТЕР
КРИСТЕН

ФАДН РОССИИ МГИМО НОРНИКЕЛЬ KMNSOYUZ



Бинота Дамай

ФАДН РОССИИ МГИМО НОРНИКЕЛЬ KMNSOYUZ

Toxic Partnership: How Nornickel Bought Legitimacy

The School of Indigenous Diplomacy does not operate in isolation. Training politically reliable representatives requires more than a curriculum—it requires sustained financial support, institutional protection, and incentives for long-term loyalty. That role is performed by Russia's largest extractive corporations, foremost among them Nornickel.

One of the Arctic's most notorious industrial polluters has systematically purchased legitimacy through strategic sponsorship of captured Indigenous structures. Nornickel (Norilsk Nickel) stands as the central corporate pillar of Russia's Indigenous co-optation architecture.

As the world's largest producer of nickel and palladium, the company operates vast mining and metallurgical complexes across Indigenous territories in the Russian Arctic and sub-Arctic. Its environmental record includes the 2020 diesel spill that contaminated rivers and wetlands near Norilsk, repeated heavy metal pollution affecting reindeer herding and traditional livelihoods, and ongoing degradation of lands belonging to Dolgan, Nenets, Evenk, and other Indigenous Peoples [30].

In September 2020—months after the spill—Nornickel signed a major cooperation agreement with RAIPON and regional Indigenous associations, creating a five-year Taimyr support program with financing of approximately two billion rubles [31].

The relationship subsequently deepened. Nornickel has invested heavily in laundering its reputation through Indigenous institutions, and became one of RAIPON's largest financial backers: Investigative financial records reported by Arctida show charitable transfers to RAIPON-linked foundations exceeding 54 million rubles in the two years following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine — the single largest corporate contribution during this period. A later Arctida investigation found that KMNSOYUZ (the Union of Indigenous Peoples "SOYUZ") received 91.8 million rubles from Nornickel between 2021 and 2025—approximately 63 percent of the organization's total budget during that period. The same investigation reported 21.1 million rubles in payments from KMNSOYUZ to Tsykarev for expert and consulting services [32].



TRAINING THE ECHO:
Diplomacy School fellows meet with MFA

Widely condemned for its devastating environmental impact across the Arctic, Nornickel does not stop promoting itself as a champion of the "green economy."

This investment generates multiple political returns. It sustains recruitment pipelines for future Indigenous representatives, reinforces narratives of partnership and sustainable development, supports lobbying efforts against international sanctions, and provides legitimacy for consultation processes that many Indigenous observers describe as procedural rather than substantive.

- Institutional co-optation and recruitment pipelines: Nornickel funding helps sustain RAIPON and KMNSOYUZ structures that recruit and credential participants for the School of Indigenous Diplomacy.

- Greenwashing and "sustainable development" optics: By sponsoring "Indigenous diplomacy" training and events, Nornickel positions itself as a partner in Arctic sustainability while its core operations drive extractive expansion.

- Political influence and sanctions lobbying: Corporate resources support platforms that project an image of harmonious state-corporate-Indigenous relations, aiding efforts to normalize Russia's position internationally and lobby for sanctions relief.

- Procedural theater on FPIC: Nornickel has organized or participated in "Free, Prior and Informed consent" processes (e.g., in Tukhard) that independent observers describe as tightly controlled consultations rather than genuine community decision-making. Figures linked to Nornickel-funded structures play prominent roles in these processes [33].

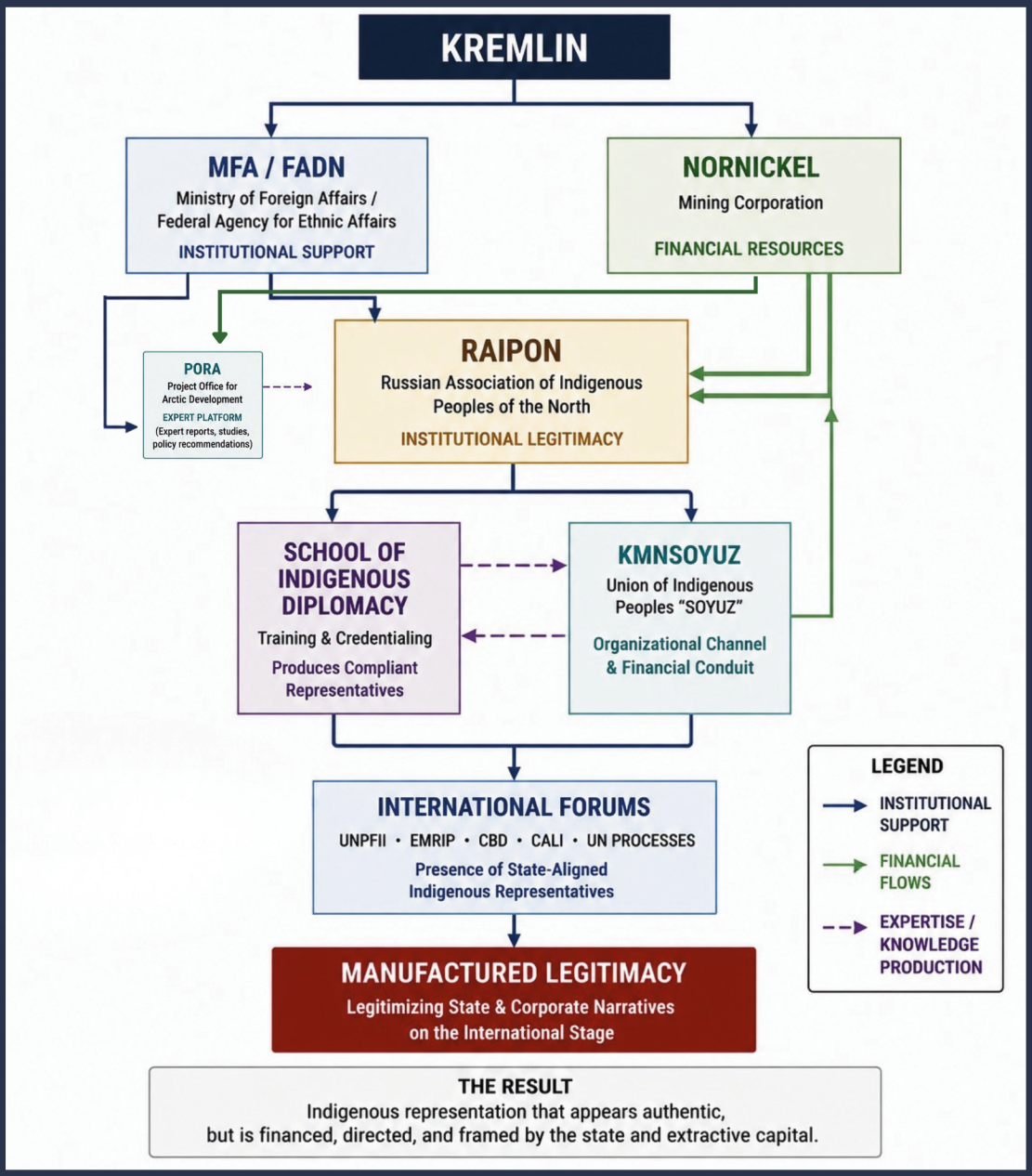
While Nornickel's operations continue to threaten Indigenous lands, waters, and traditional economies, its sponsorship ensures that the dominant "Indigenous" voices in international forums rarely raise these issues.

The company's funding creates a closed loop: it pollutes Indigenous territories, funds the organizations that claim to represent those territories, and deploys trained spokespeople who emphasize partnership over accountability. This is not corporate social responsibility. It is the purchase of manufactured consent and the conversion of extractive capital into diplomatic soft power.

Pollution and Patronage | Greenwashing by Nornickel



"THE MACHINERY OF MANUFACTURED CONSENT"



The diagram illustrates how the Russian state has built an integrated ecosystem that produces, finances, legitimizes, and projects state-aligned Indigenous representation. At its center is RAIPON, supported institutionally by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the Federal Agency for Ethnic Affairs (FADN), while receiving financial backing from Nornickel, one of Russia's largest extractive corporations. Through affiliated structures—including the School of Indigenous Diplomacy, which trains politically reliable Indigenous representatives, and KMNSOYUZ, which serves as an organizational and financial conduit—this network prepares and deploys state-approved voices into international forums. In parallel, PORA supplies the "expert" knowledge that frames extractive development as compatible with Indigenous interests. Together, these institutions create a closed system in which state coordination, corporate funding, managed expertise, and international appointments reinforce one another, producing manufactured Indigenous legitimacy while marginalizing independent Indigenous voices and masking political repression, environmental destruction, and the erosion of Indigenous rights.

Expert Knowledge in Service of Extraction

While the School produces representatives, PORA produces expertise. Together they manufacture both the messenger and the message.

The Project Office for Arctic Development (PORA / ПОРА) functions as a parallel knowledge infrastructure. Founded in 2017 and operating across Arctic regions, PORA facilitates collaboration between businesses, academia, and government to advance Arctic "development." Its expert networks supply "scientific" framing that presents large-scale mining, infrastructure, and resource extraction as necessary, modernizing, and compatible with Indigenous interests [34].

PORA describes itself as an independent think tank, but its own materials emphasize close collaboration with government bodies and major corporations. PORA states that its mission includes facilitating execution of government policy and business networking in the Russian Arctic; it identifies Nornickel, Rosatom, government bodies, universities, and development institutions among its partners. It also states that it contributed to Russia's Arctic Strategy through 2035 and conducts ethnological impact assessments related to industrial development.

These expert narratives marginalize evidence of environmental degradation, displacement, and rights violations while providing the authoritative-sounding justification for continued extraction. PORA operates in close proximity to state agencies (including FADN, headed by Igor Barinov, a former FSB colonel) and corporate actors [35]. It produces expert assessments, and policy recommendations portraying industrial expansion as fully aligned with Indigenous rights.

Together with the School of Diplomacy, these organizations demonstrate that authoritarian governance relies not only on suppressing independent institutions but also on production of a parallel new "expert" ecosystem centered on relocating Indigenous issues into frameworks that are compatible with state and corporate priorities under the appearance of professional expertise.

Knowledge production in this context is not politically neutral. It supplies the intellectual architecture that allows captured diplomatic voices to claim that industrial expansion on Indigenous lands represents mutual benefit. When combined with the School's trained spokespeople and Nornickel's financial patronage, it completes a powerful triad: compliant representatives, legitimizing expertise, and corporate resources.



RAIPON meeting with officials from Ministry of the Far East and Arctic

Occupying International Institutions, Emptying the Voice

UN Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

The final stage of this architecture is the international projection of managed legitimacy.

Figures emerging from or closely connected to the RAIPON ecosystem increasingly occupy influential positions within international institutions. Antonina Gorbunova, who serves as Executive Director of KMNSOYUZ embodies the concentration of power within this network. KMNSOYUZ was established in 2020, ostensibly to support ethno-tourism and traditional economic activities among Indigenous communities. In practice, it functions as a Nornickel-backed parallel structure to the co-opted RAIPON.

Documented flows show Nornickel resources supporting KMNSOYUZ, which in turn subsequent transfers from KMNSOYUZ structures to initiatives associated with Alexey Tsykarev and the School of Indigenous Diplomacy, creating a direct financial pipeline from the mining corporation through the captured Indigenous apparatus to the training and international placement of state-aligned representatives.

Antonina Gorbunova now also occupies the position of chief administrator of RAIPON while simultaneously serving as a member of the UN Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP) [36]. This dual role concentrates significant institutional power in a single figure whose organizations are deeply embedded in the state-corporate funding network.

Her participation in EMRIP allows a figure embedded in the state-corporate-Indigenous patronage network to speak with UN authority on Indigenous rights issues while the domestic record — arrests of activists, expansion of extractive projects without genuine consent, and suppression of independent voices — remains unaddressed.

> ...between 2021 and 2025, Nornickel provided KMNSOYUZ with 91.8 million rubles (63% of its total budget), while KMNSOYUZ paid Alexey Tsykarev 21.1 million rubles for "expert" and consulting services...
>
> **Arctida, 2026**



The pattern extends beyond EMRIP. School-linked and RAIPON-endorsed figures appear regularly in Russian delegations to the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and engage international stakeholders.

By occupying these institutional spaces with carefully managed representatives, the architecture does not merely supplement Indigenous participation — it crowds out and delegitimizes alternatives. Genuine community concerns are replaced by scripted performances of partnership. International bodies receive polished narratives of progress while the land and its defenders pay the price.

Russia's strategy has benefited from weaknesses in global governance and from the political conditions created by wartime rule at home. Yet in navigating those same crises, RAIPON has also exposed itself, making the underlying architecture increasingly difficult to conceal. Its responses to repression, war, and corporate expansion have revealed the limits of its independence and the extent of its alignment with state priorities.

V. Nemechkin, KMNSOYUZ

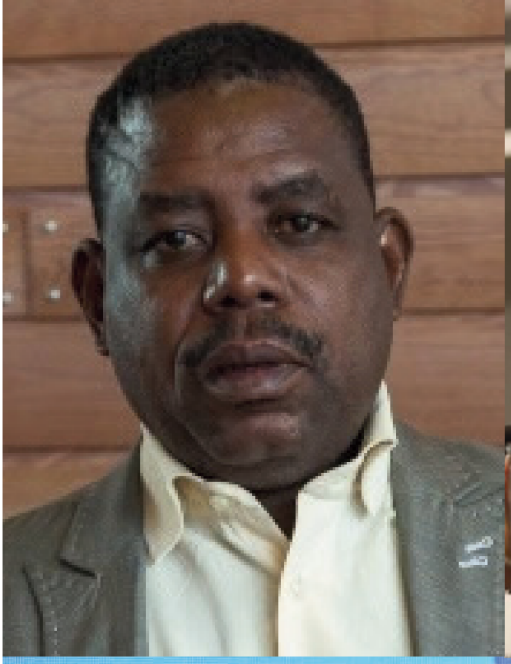




G. Kutzenko, LIENIP



UN Permanent Forum 2026, RAIPON and I. Barinov (FADN) and V. Nebenzya, a Russian diplomat and the current Permanent Representative of Russia to the United Nations




UNPFII




правительства Югры
ПРАВИТЕЛЬСТВО
ХАНТЫ-МАНСИЙСКОГО
АВТОНОМНОГО ОКРУГА – ЮГРЫ
Всероссийская конкурсная образовательная программа
Коренные малочисленные
народы России.
Школа общественной дипломатии

Performative Legitimacy:

CBD, the Cali Fund and IIFB

The School's importance becomes clearer when the network is followed outward. In 2025, the Convention on Biological Diversity selected Alexey Tsykarev as the Indigenous representative for the region of Central and Eastern Europe, the Russian Federation, Central Asia and Transcaucasia on the Steering Committee connected to the Cali Fund [37]. CBD documentation also shows Tsykarev and Antonina Gorbunova selected for supported participation in Article 8(j)-related processes for the same broad sociocultural region.

Representational authority is expanding from a domestic Russian institutional network into spaces where individuals may speak or exercise expertise on behalf of a vastly larger regional Indigenous constituency.

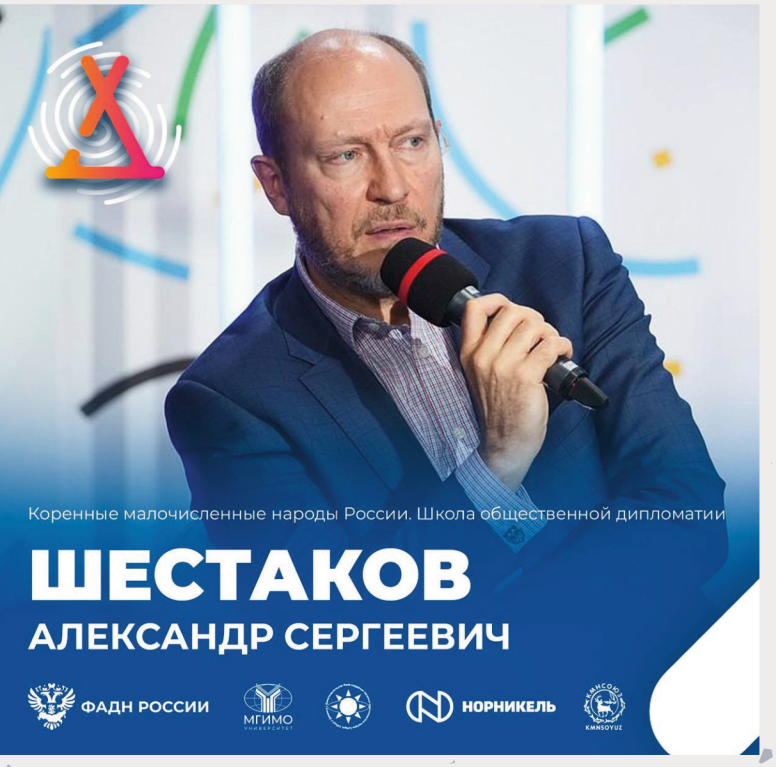
Tsykarev's appointment to the Global Steering Committee of the GBF-CALI Process illustrates how School leadership has become embedded in international governance structures. In this role he moderates discussions on "Indigenous priorities" in CBD forums, often alongside Russian state negotiators such as Alexander Shestakov, a long-standing figure in Russian biodiversity diplomacy, former WWF Arctic Program roles, senior staff within the CBD Secretariat and head of delegation elements in CAFF [38]. Decades of involvement have given him procedural knowledge and longstanding relationships across the biodiversity community.

The growing presence of RAIPON-linked actors within CBD processes raises a difficult question:

Why do international institutions and Indigenous Forums continue to work with representatives whose independence is increasingly contested?

Timur Tsybikov sits at one critical junction. As a senior official of the Federal Agency for Ethnic Affairs (FADN), he is also Russia's official National Focal Point for Article 8(j) and traditional knowledge [39]. This gives FADN—the federal agency responsible for implementing state ethnic policy—a formal role in Russia's interface with the CBD on precisely those questions concerning Indigenous knowledge and participation.





The International Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity (IIFB) faces a related dilemma. In October 2025, regional discussions within the IIFB selected Alexey Tsykarev to serve as the Indigenous "friend of the Bureau" for Central and Eastern Europe, the Russian Federation, Central Asia and Transcaucasia [40]. The same meeting saw IIFB leadership participate alongside Tsykarev, Tsybikov, Alexander Shestakov, Antonina Gorbunova, and RAIPON-affiliated representatives in discussions of Russia's Indigenous biodiversity policy.

This shows how quickly a state-connected domestic network can be transformed into the internationally accepted gateway for Indigenous representation across an entire region.

CBD participation mechanisms require organizational accreditation, formal nomination, demonstrated experience, and sustained engagement. The Convention's voluntary funding rules even give priority, where appropriate, to applicants living within their own communities, territories, or countries over applicants living abroad [41].

Under normal political conditions, these mechanisms strengthen community accountability and facilitate meaningful participation. Under authoritarian conditions, however, the same procedures have the opposite effect: as repression removes independent actors from the field, their procedures increasingly privilege and select from those the authoritarian system has allowed to remain —representatives able to operate openly inside the country precisely because they are less likely to challenge the state.





Russia does not therefore need to "capture" the CBD itself. It needs to ensure that the representatives most capable of satisfying the CBD's procedural requirements come from an ecosystem already aligned with the state. As independent actors are criminalized, displaced, or deprived of institutional resources, international procedures naturally begin to select from those who remain accredited, financed, mobile, and institutionally connected. As a result, the ability to remain inside the system is mistaken for evidence of community support.





SILENCING THE REST:

ERASING INDEPENDENT INDIGENOUS VOICES

The section turns to the other side of the system: the activists, community leaders, and independent organizations pushed to the margins or into exile—and the ways they continue to challenge RAIPON's claim to speak for Indigenous peoples in Russia.

Perhaps the most tragic consequence of RAIPON's co-optation is the systematic silencing of independent Indigenous voices from Russia. The Kremlin 's co-optation of RAIPON has gone hand-in-hand with ruthlessly silencing the rest of Indigenous civil society. A once pluralistic landscape of Indigenous voices in Russia – which included RAIPON, regional associations, independent NGOs, and respected scholars – has been whittled down to a singular, state-approved monologue. Those who refused that monologue have been removed: by social pressure, by legal force, or by flight across borders. It is a loss not just for those individuals, but for the communities back home who lost their advocates.

This occurred through multiple mechanisms rather than a single centralized ban. Administrative pressure weakened organizations. Security legislation raised the risks of international cooperation. Independent media and advocacy platforms were blocked or designated [42]. Activists faced surveillance, prosecution, professional consequences, or exile. The Kremlin 's message was clear: RAIPON (under its control) is the only legitimate voice of Indigenous Russia, and anyone speaking outside that channel will be marginalized or punished.

One method of silencing has been simple exclusion and gatekeeping: RAIPON' s leadership, with government backing, has barred independent Indigenous groups and activists from participatory processes.

RAIPON tightly controls which local community representatives get invited to national consultations or international trips.

Only those deemed "reliable " (i.e. supportive of the official narrative or at least apolitical) are included. Instead of defending these activists' freedom of speech or even remaining neutral, RAIPON's leadership actively assisted the state in targeting dissidents, smearing campaigns.

The Aborigen Forum, an informal network of Indigenous activists and NGOs in Russia, has repeatedly been sidelined. Its members have been denied speaking opportunities at events that RAIPON coordinates. By monopolizing representation, RAIPON makes sure that critical perspectives do not reach state officials or international partners in any formal setting. It acts as a buffer: insulating the government and corporations from Indigenous criticism.

Russian security services (FSB) have reportedly kept tabs on Indigenous organizers, especially those with international contacts. Some activists have been called in

for "prophylactic talks" – thinly veiled warnings to stop airing dirty laundry abroad. In several cases, legal persecution was used.

The crackdown intensified dramatically after the Ukraine invasion. Within Russia, many Indigenous community members now self-censor. Some activists remaining in Russia have retreated to very local or cultural work only, steering clear of any hint of "political" topics. Essentially, the space for independent Indigenous advocacy inside Russia has been choked off. Some Indigenous activists rapidly arranged travel out of the country knowing they could not stay silent. These included community leaders from Sakha-Yakutia, Kamchatka, and elsewhere who had quietly opposed state policies and now feared that even social media posts could land them in prison.

Some of the most prominent figures of the earlier Indigenous movement eventually left Russia. Former RAIPON Vice-President Dmitri Berezhkov was detained by Norwegian police in 2013 following a Russian request connected to fraud allegations; he subsequently remained in Norway and continued Indigenous-rights work from exile [43]. Pavel Sulyandziga, another major figure in the independent Indigenous movement and former RAIPON leader, later left Russia and continued his advocacy from exile [44]. These high-profile departures signaled to many others that exile was the only safety if one wanted to continue Indigenous rights work honestly.

Abroad, the new diaspora of Indigenous Russian activists is striving to be heard, but they face challenges too. They are activists in exile, trying to represent communities they had to leave behind. Russian officials and RAIPON dismiss them as inauthentic or traitorous, claiming they do not represent anyone.

Despite this, exiles have mobilized. In March 2022, within weeks of the war starting, a coalition of these exiles formed the International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia (ICIPR) [45]. This was an unprecedented coming-together of Indigenous voices from multiple nationalities of Russia – Udege, Sámi, Shor, Itelmen, and others – united by the fact that they could no longer speak freely at home. Their founding statement explicitly denounced RAIPON' s support of the war and asserted that RAIPON "did not represent" Russia's Indigenous Peoples' true opinions.

They network with international NGOs, attend UN meetings (virtually if not in person, given travel and visa issues), and keep in touch covertly with contacts back home to document abuses.

The exile activism creates a genuine representational dilemma. Activists abroad may have greater freedom to speak but greater physical distance from communities at home. Those remaining inside Russia may possess proximity but operate under conditions that make open dissent dangerous. This is precisely the representational trap created by authoritarian governance:

Independent leaders are pushed out.
Their displacement is then used to question their legitimacy.
State-aligned organizations remain inside the country.
Their continued presence is presented as evidence that they alone represent the population.

The next section channels the words of some of the activists in exile – a testimony to their resilience and a reminder that RAIPON' s narrative is not the only narrative.

For these activists, there is a deep personal anguish. Many poured years of effort into RAIPON or regional organizations, only to see them co-opted and used against their own communities. They carry the sorrow of betrayal – by their state and by the institution that was supposed to defend them. And yet, they continue to fight, albeit from foreign soil.

STATEMENT FROM THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF RUSSIA (ICIPR), AND ALLIED ACTIVISTS IN EXILE (2026)

WE WERE RAIPON TOO

A Statement from the Exiled and ~~Silenced~~

We write as Indigenous activists of Russia in exile – representatives of Peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East who can no longer safely raise our voices on our ancestral lands.

We Are Still Here. We are still Indigenous, no matter where we are. We write with both sorrow and defiance. Sorrow, because the organization that once united and defended us, RAIPON, has been taken from us and turned against us. Defiance, because we refuse to let that be the end of our story.

We've been told — often and with condescension — that we don't know what's happening in Russia anymore. That exile has made us irrelevant. That our distance disqualifies us. RAIPON's representatives, now tightly woven into the state's fabric, like to suggest we've become outsiders. But we have not stopped being Indigenous. And we have not stopped watching. And we haven't forgotten what RAIPON used to be.

A voice of resistance. A bridge to the world. A symbol of what Indigenous power could look like in Russia. We remember what it meant to believe in it.

We know how fierce and bright its voice could be. We remember the RAIPON that stood for land, for language, for self-determination. We remember congresses that mattered, debates that were real, leaders who were chosen. We remember when being a representative meant representing people, not power. That memory is both our strength and our sorrow. Because now, when we see it used as a tool of state propaganda — polished, obedient, stripped of integrity — we don't just see a captured institution. We see the loss of possibility.

Today, RAIPON tells only one side of the story — the one it's allowed to tell. The current leadership, led by officials ensconced in Moscow offices, wears two faces – one as members of parliament or agents of ministries, the other as heads of our Peoples' association – but behind both faces we see the same master. They have betrayed the very communities they claim to represent. By endorsing policies that poison our rivers, by staying silent (or even applauding) as our lands are seized for mines and pipelines, by supporting a war that sends our People to the front lines as cannon fodder – RAIPON's leaders have betrayed us all.

We speak up not because we've abandoned our communities, but because we refuse to abandon the truth. We speak because silence became impossible. While others sit in international halls and recite approved lines, we carry the harder burden: speaking the things they won't. We raise our voices now so that others won't have to whisper later.

We are not bitter because we've been cast out. What haunts us most is to see younger generations believing this is the only way advocacy can look — sanitized, loyal, performative.

That applause without dissent is a win.
That costumes equal culture.
That loyalty to power counts as representation.
That being allowed to speak means being heard.
That obedience means strength.

When the language of rights disappears, and all that's left is folklore festivals and staged gratitude — what are you supposed to believe? The system works because it isolates. Because it removes comparison. Because if you've never seen what genuine self-governance, consultation, or consent looks like — if you've never had the right to say no — then yes, even silence can feel like safety.

We are devastated because we see hope being manipulated. There are bright spots, yes — people and projects doing what they can inside a shrinking space. But they deserve to know what real advocacy once looked like.

We owe it to our youth to teach them not just traditions, but critical thinking. To help them ask:

Who benefits from this version of the story?
What voices are missing?
What am I not being told?

We call out to the international community: do not be fooled by the false image of consensus that the Russian state paints. When RAIPON's delegates sit at UN tables or Arctic forums and praise the government, know that back home their own People often live in fear and want. Know that those who dared dissent were silenced – labeled "foreign agents," forced out of jobs, or driven into exile. For every cheerful statistic they cite, there is a community whose hardship has been erased from the ledger.

To RAIPON's leaders, we say: your mandate was to defend your People, and you have squandered it for a seat at the Kremlin's table. You may occupy our chair in international halls, but you do so with no honor. The "consultations" and letters you orchestrate lack legitimacy – they are written in the language of power, not the language of rights. Know that the Indigenous movement in Russia is not dead; it lives on in the communities and in us. We recall a time when RAIPON truly fought for Indigenous rights, when it helped achieve the UN Declaration on Indigenous Rights, when it stood up to authorities on principle. That RAIPON is gone – a ghost that haunts the shell you now inhabit. But the spirit of advocacy has not vanished; it has simply been forced outside your walls.

To RAIPON followers, do not confuse good fortune with safety. If your community still feels untouched, still feels safe — hold that close, and then ask: What protects us today? And what happens when it's gone? Do not assume that because the storm hasn't reached your doorstep, it doesn't exist. Power moves quietly, and when it comes, it does not knock. You too deserve the truth — not another script. No one should be forced to choose between their identity and their integrity.

We reaffirm the legitimacy of dissenting Indigenous voices. Our dissent is born of love for our Peoples and homelands, not from any "foreign" influence as propaganda claims. It is RAIPON's current obedience that feels foreign to us – foreign to our values and our dignity. If defending our sacred lands against exploitation makes us "extremists" in the eyes of the regime, then so be it. We wear that label with pride, because it means we remained true to our ancestors' trust.

We speak for those occupied voices who can't speak freely now. We, however, can tell the truth here and now: that our lands are not the idyllic picture RAIPON paints. They are places of daily struggle, where climate change and industrial greed, combined with official neglect, threaten our very survival. Where traditional hunting grounds are given to companies without consent. Where speaking up for your rights can mean being surveilled by the security services, or denounced by the association meant to protect you.

Finally, we urge the world: Do not write off Russia's Indigenous Peoples because our state has fallen into authoritarianism. We exist beyond RAIPON. Connect with us – the independent associations, the grassroots initiatives, the cultural revival groups operating under difficult conditions. When RAIPON or officials claim to speak for us, seek a second opinion. We are still here. We are organizing in new ways, across borders and online. We are collecting evidence of the damages and abuses that go unreported. One day we will return – either physically to our homelands or in representation in international forums – and we will reclaim our platform. We will rebuild a RAIPON or a network like it that is once again by the People and for the People. Until then, we remain what RAIPON ceased to be: the advocates of our ancestors and descendants.

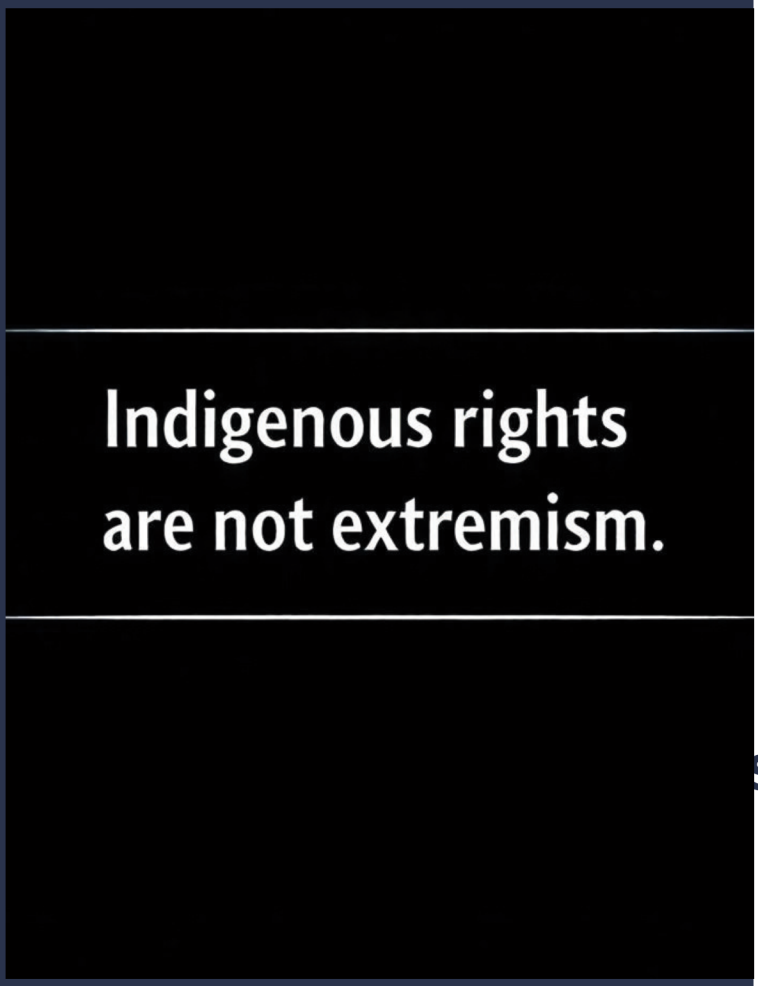
We are not defeated. Our connection to our land cannot be severed by distance, and our commitment to our Peoples' future cannot be silenced by fear.

This report is not just an analysis. It is a call. It is for those who remember, those who resist, and those still learning that Being Indigenous means more than appearances — it means standing for something, even when your voice shakes.

"WE REMEMBER WHAT RAIPON ONCE WAS"

Advocacy in the Age of Control

What Is Lost When Indigenous Platforms Become State Tools



RAIPON today is a capitulation of Indigenous advocacy. It stands as a ghost of its former self – retaining the outward form (the name, the seat at the table, the rhetoric of rights) but devoid of the spirit of grassroots empowerment that once animated it.

What exactly has been lost?

First and foremost, truth and accountability. When RAIPON was free, it could highlight uncomfortable truths – oil companies poisoning tundra rivers, or government policies eroding Indigenous language education – and demand accountability. Its co-optation means these truths are now swept under the rug.

Secondly, trust has been lost – the trust of Indigenous communities in their representative institutions, and the trust of international partners in the veracity of those institutions.

RAIPON was once a bridge between Russia's Indigenous Peoples and the world. Now that bridge is viewed with skepticism or outright disbelief. Arctic Council colleagues, UN officials, and Indigenous nations no longer take RAIPON's words at face value, knowing its leadership is compromised. This erodes the effectiveness of all multilateral work. When RAIPON speaks, others quietly wonder, "Is this genuine, or is this Moscow talking?" The doubt undermines legitimate Indigenous issues from Russia as well – a tragic collateral effect. The credibility current RAIPON built up over decades has been spent down to zero, and that is a loss for all parties engaged in dialogue.

Thirdly, the Indigenous communities in Russia lost an advocate in domestic affairs. RAIPON used to be the entity that could lobby the federal government for changes – whether it was amending a flawed hunting law or fighting a hydro dam that threatened sacred sites.

Without RAIPON's independent voice, those battles have largely ceased or become one-sided. The hard conversations – about land rights, self-governance, consent – are increasingly absent from the corridors of power in Moscow.

A room without dissent is the easiest battlefield to conquer.

Finally, what is lost is the very principle of Indigenous self-determination in the Russian context. The co-optation of RAIPON is an assault on the idea that Indigenous Peoples have the right to choose their own representatives and chart their own development. Indigenous self-determination will be allowed only on the state's terms. The vibrant civil society that was emerging in the 1990s among Indigenous groups – characterized by bottom-up organizing and international networking – has been stifled. What remains is a top-down simulacrum. Indigenous advocacy in Russia now haunts the halls as a ghost, a pale imitation orchestrated by those who fundamentally contradict the ethical obligations of advocacy leaders.

What Indigenous communities lost in an independent advocate, the Russian state gained in an internationally recognized diplomatic instrument.

RAIPON carries decades of institutional history, established relationships within the international Indigenous movement, recognized status in Arctic governance, access to United Nations mechanisms, and the symbolic authority attached to an organization speaking in the name of Indigenous Peoples.

These inherited credentials make RAIPON valuable precisely because its external appearance has changed far less than its internal political function. When RAIPON representatives enter an international forum, they do not appear as Russian government officials. They appear as Indigenous representatives. Positions aligned with Russian state policy are articulated through the vocabulary of Indigenous rights, traditional knowledge, sustainability, partnership, and cultural preservation. Corporate development can be presented as cooperation. State policy can be described as Indigenous advancement.

RAIPON's continued presence allows the Russian state to point to Indigenous participation itself as evidence that the system is functioning. The credibility built by Indigenous leaders who fought for legislation, land rights, self-determination, and international recognition became an inherited political resource.

And yet, the conclusion is not entirely bleak, because where there are ghosts, there are memories – and where there are memories, there is the potential for revival. As painful as the loss is, it has prompted a new generation of Indigenous advocates to emerge and innovate, finding ways around the roadblocks RAIPON now presents.

Conclusion: Ghost of Advocacy

Today RAIPON stands accused of becoming a de facto arm of the Kremlin, more a mouthpiece for state interests than a champion of Indigenous communities. Moreover, it has evolved into one of the most strategic tools utilized by the Russian state to advance its geopolitical agenda and international soft power under the banner of Indigenous representation.

RAIPON's journey from independent watchdog to state-controlled apparatus offers a cautionary tale of co-optation and its costs. In capturing RAIPON, the Kremlin gained a short-term propaganda asset, but the Indigenous Peoples of Russia – and the international Indigenous movement – lost something far more profound: an authentic champion for their rights.

The School of Indigenous Diplomacy, Nornickel's financial patronage, PORA's expert infrastructure, RAIPON's organizational authority, and the strategic placement of affiliated individuals within international institutions do not represent separate initiatives. Together they constitute a closed loop of manufactured consent, and form an integrated architecture designed to manufacture Indigenous legitimacy.

Domestically, this architecture disciplines representation. Independent Indigenous organizations are weakened, marginalized, or criminalized, while cooperation with the state is rewarded through institutional access, funding, and international visibility.

Internationally, the same system exports carefully managed representatives into United Nations mechanisms, biodiversity negotiations, and other multilateral forums, where they project an image of partnership while remaining largely silent on political repression, environmental destruction, and the dismantling of Indigenous rights inside Russia.

The significance of this model extends well beyond the Russian case. It demonstrates that contemporary authoritarianism does not necessarily eliminate civil society or Indigenous participation. Instead, it increasingly seeks to reorganize them. Independent institutions are replaced by politically reliable alternatives that preserve the appearance of representation while fundamentally altering its purpose.

The greatest danger is therefore not that Indigenous Peoples disappear from international governance. It is that they remain visibly present while their political independence disappears. Continued acceptance of RAIPON-endorsed figures as authoritative "Indigenous voices" from Russia — without parallel, robust engagement with independent, exiled, and community-based actors — perpetuates the very capture the Kremlin seeks to normalize.

Protecting the integrity of Indigenous participation now requires more than opening seats at international tables. It requires ensuring that those who occupy them remain accountable to Indigenous communities.

In closing, the case of RAIPON is a lesson:

When an Indigenous representative institution becomes a state tool, it betrays its Peoples and purpose. The loss is felt in silenced voices, unmet needs, and the corrosion of trust locally and globally. It leaves a ghost where there should be a living advocate. But a ghost is also a call for justice unfulfilled. The advocacy that RAIPON once embodied must be reborn elsewhere – in new networks, in strengthened global alliances, and someday, one hopes, in a reformed RAIPON liberated from state capture. The spirit of Indigenous autonomy demands no less.

The real voice of Russia's Indigenous Peoples – though currently exiled or underground – speaks to empower the community and protect the vulnerable. The world must learn to discern between the two. Only then can the ghost of advocacy be laid to rest, and a genuine advocate resurrected in its place.

The voices of Indigenous Peoples – unfiltered and unco-opted – must and will prevail.

Recommendations | Breaking the Illusion

Strategies to Counter State-Co-Opted Advocacy

The following recommendations offer clear, actionable steps for different stakeholders – diplomats, institutions, donors, and Indigenous coalitions – to help "break the illusion" of state-controlled advocacy and ensure that authentic Indigenous voices are heard and respected. These measures aim to counter the monopoly of organizations like RAIPON (when they act as state proxies) and to reinforce genuine representation and accountability.

For International Institutions and Policymakers

Engage beyond the official RAIPON channel. International bodies should broaden Indigenous consultation by including independent Russian Indigenous voices in discussions and working groups. Member states can invite representatives of independent Indigenous Peoples and exile or grassroots networks to participate in meetings as observers or expert contributors. This would dilute RAIPON's monopoly and send a signal that state-proxy organizations do not have an exclusive franchise on Indigenous representation. Additionally, diplomats should privately and publicly press Russia on its treatment of Indigenous activists – making clear that persecuting Indigenous leaders (or using RAIPON as cover for propaganda) undermines trust and cooperation. Bilateral human rights dialogues should explicitly include Indigenous rights cases, citing examples like RAIPON's 2012 closure, 17 December case and the silencing of activists, to keep these issues on the agenda. In summary: do not accept RAIPON's statements at face value in international forums; always seek verification from independent sources, and insist on pluralism of voices.

For Financial Actors

Do not rely on state-aligned organizations as proof of Indigenous consent or well-being. Companies operating or sourcing from Russia (for instance, those buying minerals from Nornickel) and international donors funding Indigenous projects should seek independent verification of RAIPON's claims. If RAIPON says a community approves a project, double-check via third parties (local activists, NGOs and HR institutions, or academic researchers). Corporate social responsibility programs must expand their stakeholder engagement beyond RAIPON to avoid being complicit in a Potemkin process.

By cutting through the state-organized façade, investors and donors will protect themselves from reputational risk and do actual good. As a concrete step, international financial institutions could condition engagement in Russia's Arctic on transparent, multi-stakeholder consultations rather than taking RAIPON's endorsements as sufficient. This undermines the value of RAIPON as a whitewashing instrument and incentivizes genuine dialogue.

For Indigenous Coalitions and Allies Worldwide

Show solidarity and open platforms to Russia's independent Indigenous voices. Indigenous organizations globally – from the Sami Council to the Inuit Circumpolar Council and ICC to Africa and Latin America coalitions, from North American Nations to Pacific Indigenous networks – should formally acknowledge the situation in Russia and refuse to legitimize RAIPON's state-driven agenda. For example, they can pass resolutions (as some did in 2012 and 2022) expressing concern that RAIPON no longer freely represents its Peoples. They should continue to suspend bilateral cooperation with RAIPON as long as it silences its own Peoples (much as the Sámi Council and Parliament have done post-Ukraine invasion), to avoid giving it a veneer of normalcy.

At the same time, they can collaborate with exiled Russian Indigenous activists: inviting them to speak at general assemblies, including them in joint statements on global Indigenous issues, and helping protect their safety.

Indigenous scholars and activists worldwide should also help document and publicize cases of persecution – effectively creating an international watch on Russia's treatment of Indigenous defenders. By keeping these stories in the public eye, they deny the Kremlin the cover of darkness it prefers. In essence, global Indigenous solidarity can both outflank RAIPON's gatekeeping and put moral pressure on Russia: showing that Indigenous Peoples will not let one of their own be co- opted without protest.

For Human Rights Mechanisms

International human rights bodies should specifically reference the RAIPON situation in their reports and urge Russia to guarantee freedom of association for Indigenous Peoples. Essentially, treat the manipulation of Indigenous representation as a human rights violation in itself – because it results in the denial of Indigenous Peoples' voice.

Together, these strategies can strip away the illusion that a co-opted organization like RAIPON legitimately speaks for its Peoples. By engaging alternative voices and demanding transparency, the international community and allies can neutralize the Kremlin's advantage in this arena. The goal is to restore those communities' real voice.

In implementing these measures, one must be mindful of not endangering Indigenous Peoples inside Russia. Sometimes quiet diplomacy behind closed doors (for example, offering asylum to a threatened activist, or funding a discreet workshop outside Russia for Indigenous representatives) can be as important as public statements.

By breaking the state's illusion and amplifying the silenced narratives, we uphold the principle that Indigenous Peoples have the right to speak for themselves – even when a powerful government tries to speak for them.

The story of RAIPON is a sobering one, but with concerted effort, it need not be the final word on Indigenous advocacy in Russia. Through vigilance, solidarity, and strategic action, the international community can help ensure that never again will an Indigenous platform be so cynically turned into a state script without challenge.

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