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State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2013 - Russia

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In 2011 the Advisory Committee on the Council of Europe's Framework Convention on National Minorities sharply criticized Russia on the lack of participation of persons belonging to national minorities in public life, which is limited to the organization of cultural events. According to the Advisory Committee, there are no effective consultation mechanisms in place to ensure that minorities have an opportunity to influence effectively decisions on issues concerning them.

In July 2012, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay also expressed concerns that a series of legislative amendments in the Russian Federation would seriously restrict human rights in the country. 'In just two months, we have seen a worrying shift in the legislative environment governing the enjoyment of the freedoms of assembly, association, speech and information in the Russian Federation,' she said. 'At least four new legal provisions have been made that will have a detrimental effect on human rights in the country.'

Of concern are the restrictive amendments to the law on public rallies, a bill limiting freedom of information on the internet, the restoration of defamation provisions into the Criminal Code, and a restrictive new law on non-commercial organizations, which would effectively require all NGOs that receive foreign funding to register as 'foreign agents'. Under the provisions, NGOs involved in politics and receiving foreign funds will have to issue twice-yearly reports on their activities and financial audits. Because of limited state support, many NGOs need to seek foreign funds. Failure to comply will be punishable by heavy fines or even a two-year prison sentence. Journalists and human rights activists see the bill as an attempt to crush dissent and restrict freedom of expression.

Another move of the government on civil society that sparked international opposition in 2012 was the closure of Russian's indigenous peoples' umbrella organization RAIPON, because of an 'alleged lack of correspondence between the association's statutes and federal law'. According to Russia's Ministry of Justice, which ordered the closure in November, the indigenous peoples' association will be closed for six months until the statutes have been adjusted. For over 20 years RAIPON has

represented more than 250,000 indigenous people from 40 groups inhabiting huge Arctic territories of the Russian Federation from Murmansk to Kamchatka. Its first vice-president, Pavel Sulyandziga, a Russian indigenous rights activist of Udege nationality, said that the decision was illegal and he is determined to fight it.

This will be not an easy task given the strong stance of President Vladimir Putin, who in January warned that ethnic tensions could tear Russia apart. He stated that he would toughen migration rules and keep a tight rein on Russia's regions to prevent it following the Soviet Union into oblivion, and that minorities in what he called a multi-ethnic society must live under the umbrella of Russian culture.

Among the most vulnerable groups in Russia are the country's indigenous peoples. Although there is no unified system of health monitoring of indigenous peoples, some general trends show significantly lower average health outcomes compared to majority populations. According to the 2002 Census the average life expectancy of Russian indigenous peoples was 15 years below the Russian average. Equally, for these groups, the disease-propensity is 1.5 times higher than for central Russian peoples. This includes a significant increase in diseases such as tuberculosis, hepatitis and illnesses spread through parasites (see case study).

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