

Russia's exit from the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities

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The analysis discusses Russia's withdrawal from the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) and highlights various issues related to discrimination against minority groups. It examines the current situation of minorities in the federation, with a special focus on ethnic, religious and identity-based communities. The report also addresses the reasons behind Russia's departure from the treaty and its quest for new diplomatic relations. This withdrawal is seen as a part of Russia's broader foreign policy trajectory to distance itself from the West and establish new alliances, especially in the context of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. However, its efforts are met with challenges and isolation in various international diplomatic arenas.

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In October, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed legislation, under which Russia will withdraw from the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM), widely known as the most comprehensive and legally binding international treaty protecting the rights of minority communities worldwide. On the grounds that it is discretionary, exiting the convention marks another milestone in the country's departure from a liberal rule governed international order. This has been developing in recent years mainly due to its increasingly arbitrary attitude towards minorities, manifesting in the Russo-Ukrainian war or the recent meeting with a Hamas delegation.

The [FCNM](#) is a significant international treaty drafted and adopted under the auspices of the Council of Europe in 1995 and came into force in 1998. It had been ratified by 39 states including Russia upon its ascension to the multinational body in February, 1996. With an overarching mission to shield national minorities from discrimination, the treaty is committed to safeguarding the various cultures, religions, and traditions embraced by these minority communities. Moreover, it upholds their fundamental entitlement to practice their native languages. The convention delineates a system of guiding principles and standards, aimed at ensuring that minority groups are not merely afforded parity in treatment, cultural acknowledgment and active participation in the tapestry of public life.

This convention offers comprehensive and precise recommendations from the Advisory Committee in facilitating the resolution of sensitive matters. However -in contrast to the European Convention on Human Rights- the [FCNM lacks a mechanism for entertaining individual grievances concerning breaches of its stipulations](#). It predominantly retains its status as a "consultative instrument" for governments committed to the comprehensive realization of the rights of their minority populations. As such, by its very nature it does not allow for legally binding action to be imposed on states -such as the Russian Federation- violating their obligations.

The current situation of minorities in the Russian Federation.

Russia is a nation harboring representatives of [approximately 193 distinct ethnic groups](#) who converse in no less than 270 languages and dialects, according to official statistics. Externally Russia boasts a large number of minority groups: President Putin pointed out the unique multi-ethnic structure of the country at the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi. Official posters featured a patchwork quilt that represented the country's diversity, using traditional lace, wood and other handicraft designs. However, experts and advocates have long cautioned against the looming specter of discriminatory policies, expressing concerns that these measures may imperil the very essence of this extraordinary cultural and linguistic diversity.

During recent years - especially since the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2022 - the conduct of the Russian Federation has cast a shadow over its adherence to established norms towards minorities. Russia is accused of intentionally deploying troops hailing from economically disadvantaged or ethnically diverse regions within its borders to take actions akin to ethnic cleansing in Russian occupied areas of Ukraine, [while preserving the lives of those deployed from more affluent and predominantly ethnically Russian territories](#). This began in the early 2000s, [when Putin created the "power vertical"](#), a top-down command structure in which loyal representatives appointed by the president oversee newly created federal districts. This system kept regions with separatist movements such as Chechnya in check and concentrated power at the federal centre.

In parallel with this political reorganisation, the Putin regime has promoted the "Ruskie Mir" (Russian World), which places Russia at the centre of a so-called civilising order, and places the Russian language and culture above other cultural affiliations in the post-Soviet space. Crucially, 'Ruskie' in the Russian context refers explicitly to national identity in cultural and ethnic terms. This differs from "Rossiiskii", which, although it translates as "Russian", refers to state identity. One way of implementing Ruskiy Mir was the promulgation in 2018 of a law abolishing compulsory education in indigenous languages in regions with two or more official languages. Another, more recent example came in mid-August, when the state announced that from the autumn all college students will be required to take a course on the "Foundations of Russian Statehood", which will have the theme of Ruskiy Mir as a special focus. Abroad, the concept of the Ruskie Mir has been used to legitimise foreign policy interventions, most notably in Ukraine, first with the annexation of Crimea and then with the full-scale invasion of 2022.

Another example of this minority policy is the treatment of the Crimean Tatars: The census data shows, a [steady decreasing trend in the population distribution of Crimean Tatars: between 2002 and 2010](#). In the period the number of Tatars decreased from 5.5 million to 4.7 million. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 marked the beginning of a harsh repression, which became even more severe after the outbreak of the current Russo-Ukrainian war. Crimean Tatars are subjected to kidnapping, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, disproportionate imprisonment, torture and extrajudicial killings. A number of prisoners have been charged with various political offences, such as belonging to the "Hizb ut-Tahrir¹", which is recognised as a terrorist organisation in Russia. Some have also been arrested for alleged involvement in the Chelyabinsk Volunteer Battalion², there have been reports of reprisals against relatives and neighbours of the accused, and members of 'Crimean Solidarity', an association of activists and relatives of accused Crimean Tatars, have suffered persecution. In addition, the new government was quick to launch repressive measures against the specific culture and identity of Crimean Tatars. In particular all non-governmental organisations (Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People, Advet, Qirim Birligi or Crimea Unity), mass media and religious associations were obliged to re-register by the government, but many of them were subsequently banned. Other organizations were completely abolished or replaced by shadow organizations under Russian control. This was the case of the Mejlis, the highest representative body of the Crimean Tatar people. It was declared "extremist" and banned, and its leaders were forced to leave Crimea. The Russian authorities replaced them with controlled bodies, such as the "National-Cultural Autonomy of the Crimean Tatars." In this context the Crimean Tatar media has been closed or turned into a tool of Russian propaganda. Besides this the Crimean Tatar language has been excluded from both the educational system and the public sphere.

In addition to ethnic differentiation, there are precedents in Russia for religion-based differentiation: some religious minority groups, such as certain Protestant denominations, have faced restrictions (employment, housing, healthcare) and harassment, with the government favoring the Russian Orthodox Church. Also [in 2017, the Russian Supreme Court labeled the Jehovah's Witnesses as an extremist organization](#), leading to the banning of their activities and persecution of their members.

In terms of identity both the Jewish, Chechen and [Roma](#) -among other nationalities- and LGBTQ communities have faced discrimination, prejudice, social exclusion and hate crimes. When considering the Russian government's stance, a discernible anti minority prejudice manifests across numerous areas. As an example the Russian government often stigmatises LGBTQ+ individuals and organisations, portraying them as a threat to traditional Russian values and family structures. A particularly striking example of the latter is the ['gay propaganda' law \(2013\)](#) which restricts the dissemination of information about non-heterosexual relationships and limits LGBT+ people's rights to visibility, as well as advocacy. Furthermore, the scope of legal discrimination is accentuated by the categorization of

certain LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations as "foreign agents" under Russian law, thereby presenting substantial impediments to their operational capacities and access to funding. Additionally, despite the decriminalization of homosexuality in Russia, a conspicuous void remains in comprehensive legal safeguards for LGBTQ+ individuals. Notably, there is no formal recognition of same-sex marriage, and a conspicuous absence of specific anti-discrimination statutes designed to shield LGBTQ+ individuals from prejudice in realms such as employment, education, and public services.

The exit: causes and consequences

Evidently the Russian Federation discriminates against minorities in terms of ethnicity, religion, identity, and gender. Considering the number of cases and the often extreme nature of government measures, it is particularly important to review how minorities may be affected in the future by Russia's withdrawal from the FCNM.

The Russian Federation's departure from the convention was predictable, and has a dual significance. Firstly, it is a logical continuation of a foreign policy trajectory aimed at further disengagement from the Western rules based international community. Secondly, it is a symbolic manifestation of the Kremlin's stance towards non-Slavic communities within Russia. This is evident in the Federation's continued withdrawal from various international conventions and treaties that may infringe on its sovereignty (the European Convention on Human Rights, [the Treaty of Conventional Armed Forces in Europe](#), [the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty](#), and reinstating the death penalty)

The process culminated in [Russia's withdrawal from the Council of Europe](#) in March last year, after its rights of representation were suspended in response to the invasion of Ukraine. A few months later, Russia's participation in the FCNM Advisory Committee - the body that oversees the implementation of the Convention among member states - was also restricted. Official Russian sources posit that their [finite engagement within the Advisory Committee was construed as an intentional](#) discrimination, one that impeded their ability to oversee instances of human rights infringements against Russian speakers residing abroad. Hence, the termination of participation in the international treaty is seen as a means to forestall any such discriminatory treatment of the Russian Federation, all the while ensuring the preservation of the rights of national minorities.

While the withdrawal from the FCNM and ECHR might appear a severe setback for minority rights, it is noteworthy that -as early as 2020- the Russian Federation had already curtailed the legislation that rendered international agreements an integral component of its legal framework, subject to the stipulation that they do not contravene its constitution. This ongoing introduction of fresh laws, exemplified by the enactment of the "On the Control of the Activities of Persons under Foreign Influence," which defines the term "foreign agents," has steadily eroded the foundation of international human rights agreements. Given the Russian ruling elite's prioritization of appearances over substance, the termination of these agreements serves primarily as a symbolic confirmation of the existing state of affairs, as well as an expression of their divergence from Western norms and values.

Summarizing Russia's need for this orchestrated departure from international agreements is multifold: it comes as a response to setbacks on the battlefield and a fragile economy that amplifies its imperialistic inclinations. Particularly, its efforts seek to quell minor ethnic communities perceived as potential threats to its territorial integrity. This trajectory of intensified repression takes various forms, such as the restriction of access to education in native languages, manipulating historical narratives, and conscripting individuals into the military for service in an ongoing conflict. Ethnicity was institutionalised in the Soviet Union, and it is [still so in present-day Russia](#). In general, ethnic categories

and terms have been used as a way of dividing and managing populations and as a means of organizing the political space. Furthermore, the termination of the treaty signifies the closure of the last formal avenue of cooperation between Russia and international organizations focused on the welfare of indigenous peoples within its borders.

Russian Federation's quest for new relations

As the protracted conflict in Ukraine unfolds, Russia faces the imperative of dispelling the prevailing perception among its populace that they stand alone in confronting Western sanctions. In reality, [Russia's dependable allies are limited to China, Iran, and North Korea](#). In an endeavor to forge an alliance with nations sympathetic to its cause, Russia has undertaken several initiatives on the international stage.

For example, the federation convened the second Russia-Africa summit (on the 27th and 28th of July, 2023.). Yet, despite enticements, including the offer of free grain, several influential African states maintained a prudent distance. To mask its sense of isolation from the public eye, Russia embellished the state visits of the presidents of China and North Korea, underscoring that despite Western ostracism, it still maintains resilient alliances.

In its pursuit of new diplomatic partners, the [recent conflict between Israel and Hamas](#) presented Russia with an opportunity to demonstrate its international significance, affirming that it is not isolated and can promote the Palestinian cause. However, this shift came at the expense of Russia's longstanding balanced diplomacy between Israel and Iran, tilting in favor of the latter. Additionally, by receiving a delegation from Hamas in Moscow to negotiate the release of Israeli hostages, President Putin aimed to underscore Russia's potential role as a mediator in the conflict. To bolster its position in the ongoing conflict, [Russia introduced a draft resolution in the UN Security Council](#). The resolution was rejected, as the United States and the United Kingdom voted against it. Conversely, the U.S. draft resolution also faced rejection, with Russia, China, and the United Arab Emirates opposing it. These developments further accentuated the perception of Russia's diplomatic isolation.

The recent declaration by the Turkish President, wherein he [censured Israel and proclaimed Hamas as a non-terrorist entity](#), failed to advance his role as a mediator in the conflict. Yet within the context of contemporary Russian-Turkish relations, it could be construed as a synchronization with Russia, a development that undeniably contributes to Russia's efforts to demonstrate its global relevance in the face of its perceived isolation.

Endnotes

¹ Hizb ut-Tahrir is a global, pan-Islamist political entity of uncompromising Islamic fundamentalist persuasion. Its professed objective is the rekindling of the Islamic caliphate, seeking to bind the diverse Muslim ummah into a harmonious whole and institute the comprehensive enforcement of sharia law on a worldwide scale.

² The Chelyabinsk Volunteer Battalion, also known as the Chelyabinsk Battalion, was a paramilitary group that emerged during the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, particularly in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, in the mid-2010s. This battalion was composed of volunteers from the Chelyabinsk region in Russia and other areas. The volunteers joined the battalion to support pro-Russian separatist forces in Ukraine, which were seeking autonomy or independence from the Ukrainian government.

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