

RIGHT TO EDUCATION

Submission to the Universal
Periodic Review of the United
Nations Human Rights Council

4th Cycle – 44th Session

Country Review: Russian Federation

February 2023
by Johanna Farkas



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Broken Chalk is an Amsterdam-based NGO established in 2020 that monitors and minimises worldwide human rights violations in education. We aim to promote universal and equal access to education for all.

We encourage and support achieving societal peace with our international sponsors and partners by advocating for intercultural tolerance, preventing radicalism and polarisation, and tackling educational inequalities.

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I. Introduction: an overview of the Russian education system

1. The Russian Federation has provided free state education since its formation in 1991. The Ministry of Education and Science centrally regulates education, while regional authorities may regulate and control education within their competencies and the helpful framework of federal law.
2. In recThe Russian Federation has shown significant progress in early childhood education rates in recent years. Enrolment of 3–5-year-olds has increased from 53% in 2005 to 83% in 2017, only slightly below the OECD average of 87% in 2017 (although there are still regional inequalities among enrolment rates).¹ 99% of children in early childhood education attend a public institution.
3. It is also impressive that 95% of adults between 25 and 64 have completed upper secondary education, well above the OECD average of 79%.²
4. Broken Chalk is pleased to note that the share of people with tertiary education in the Russian Federation is among the highest among the OECD countries: 63% of 25–34-year-olds, compared to an OECD average of 44%.³ Moreover, in 2018, 63% of young adults aged 25-34 in the Russian Federation had completed tertiary education, the second highest rate after South Korea and significantly higher than the OECD average of 44%.⁴
5. Despite all the improvements, the country's educational sector does show severe issues. Problems often relate to regional inequalities, socioeconomic inequalities, and discrimination based on ethnicity.
6. The Russian Federation still spends one of the lowest amounts per student (USD 8 4791 in 2016) among the OECD countries: merely half the amount of the OECD average (USD 15 556).⁵ Despite this, Russian students score 481 points in reading literacy, mathematics, and science, just below the OECD average of 488 issues in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).⁶
7. As the Russian Federation ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, the state must commit to carrying out its duties and obligations, including the insurance of free compulsory education and equal opportunity for all children. Broken Chalk urges the Russian Federation to address all issues which prevent the realisation of the rights set out in the Convention.

II. A brief overview of the last UN-UPR cycle

8. In its national report prepared for the state's 2018 UN periodic review, the Russian Federation emphasised its efforts to ensure human rights in its territories, including the principle of inclusive education.

9. The Russian Federation emphasised its efforts to provide inclusive education both in terms of promoting accessible education to children with disabilities as well as preventing racial or ethnic discrimination in education.⁷ Such actions were reflected, for example, in setting up a multilingual interactive educational portal which aims to promote Russian-language education by teaching children (for example, of Roma origin) the Russian language to integrate into society.⁸
10. In the last UN UPR cycle, the Russian Federation received seven recommendations regarding the right to education, which focused on making quality education accessible to disadvantaged people, such as children with disabilities, indigenous groups, and children living in rural areas. The Russian Federation supported 6 of these recommendations. However, it rejected one which thematised the endorsement of the Safe Schools Declaration and its guidelines.

III. Economic challenges affecting the education sector

11. The economic sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation in recent years, inflation, and the economic difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have led to significant financial cuts in the federation, affecting many non-profit-oriented sectors, such as education.⁹
12. “According to government data, federal spending on education decreased by 8.5% between 2014 and 2016, from 616.8 billion rubles to 564.3 billion rubles (\$10 billion).”¹⁰
13. This situation was further exacerbated by the Russia-Ukraine war starting in 2022, which, in addition to the sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation, led to an increase in armament spending, further reducing funds available for education which can seriously affect the quality of education.¹¹

IV. Demographic challenges affecting the education sector

14. The Russian Federation has been struggling with demographic issues in the past decade as the country has one of the lowest birth rates in the world.¹²
15. According to the State Statistics Service, the Federation's population decreased by 1.3 million in 2020 and 2021, with the most significant decrease among ethnic Russians, whose number fell by 5.4 million between 2010 and 2021.¹³
16. This decline in population results in a declining number of people in higher education. The number of students enrolled in higher education was 7.5 million in 2008/09, which fell to 5.2 million in 2014/15, and was estimated to be around 4.2 million by 2021.¹⁴
17. The Federation has been attempting to mitigate this problem by encouraging the intake of international students at Russian universities by raising the foreign student quota by

33% and increasing available scholarships to international students.¹⁵

18. However, the decreasing number of students can lead to many tertiary education institutions closing.
19. In addition, there has been a trend of young people leaving the country in search of better educational and economic opportunities, which direction has just grown since the beginning of the war. 2 million more Russians have left the country in the past three years than the Federation would have usually lost.¹⁶
20. Between 500 thousand and 1 million young men and academics have left the country to flee the war.¹⁷
21. These negatively impact the quality of the education system, as many of the country's most talented educators and students leave the Federation.

V. Challenges in education for the Indigenous population

22. The Russian Federation is the largest state in the world, with over 143.4 million citizens, 85 federal subjects, 30 official languages, and 190 identified ethnic groups.¹⁸
23. The recent decentralisation tendencies are the Russian Federation, where decision-making and control are increasingly in the hands of the federal government, is concerned with providing adequate education to such a divergent population.¹⁹
24. Moreover, “the Committee of the Federation Council on Northern Affairs and Affairs of Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples, the only federal legislation body specialising in Indigenous Affairs, was dissolved, along with several regional specialised government bodies” by the end of 2011.²⁰ This action further endangered the adequate representation of indigenous and ethnic minorities in various crucial sectors, such as education.²¹
25. The federal government's specific measures are partly aimed at reducing financial and administrative support to minority groups. Moreover, appointed indigenous governors often need to be made aware of the particular indigenous groups and the issues that affect them.²²
26. Indigenous people tend to live in low-density and isolated areas, leading to a deterioration in living standards and infrastructure.²³
27. A closely related problem is the high level of unemployment among indigenous people, which is 1 to 2 times higher than among the Russian population, depending on the region.
28. Furthermore, poverty is common among indigenous populations as they usually earn 2 to 3 times less than the average Russian resident.²⁴

- 29.** In the Federation, participation in pre-primary education is optional, and less than two-thirds of indigenous children have access to state nurseries and kindergartens. This is because of the low number and capacity of institutions and the poor financial situation of indigenous families. As a result, less than half of indigenous children attend kindergarten.²⁵
- 30.** Broken Chalk, however, welcomes the indigenous programmes introduced in several regions to provide financial support to families whose children are not enrolled in kindergarten to encourage kindergarten enrolment.²⁶
- 31.** They have also developed a "nomadic kindergarten school" model specifically to meet the needs of children from nomadic families. The initiative aims to enable children between three and six to learn their language and cultural traditions.²⁷
- 32.** The low population density and poor infrastructure also reduced the number of schools, students, and teachers in indigenous areas. In the early 2010s, less than two-thirds of schools in the north had the necessary facilities for quality education, including water and central heating.²⁸
- 33.** This resulted in at least 48% of the young indigenous population having only completed (partially or fully) primary or secondary school, while 17% still needed to complete primary education.²⁹
- 34.** While it is legally possible to establish schools that meet the needs of indigenous peoples, these schools also must follow a centrally determined curriculum at the federal level and often face financial difficulties. While individual school curricula may include multicultural elements, indigenous peoples are not directly involved in curriculum development.³⁰
- 35.** Efforts to preserve the tradition of informal education are also limited, as only qualified teachers are allowed to teach there, which often excludes members of indigenous groups from passing on their knowledge to younger generations.³¹
- 36.** The forced dominance of the Russian language and culture in education, and the limited or non-existent presence of indigenous culture in formal education, contribute significantly to the worrying erosion of indigenous cultures.³²
- 37.** Besides indigenous teacher training, higher education is only available in Russian.³³
- 38.** Broken Chalk welcomes initiatives such as the introduction of special preparatory courses for undergraduate applicants, the introduction of ethnic quotas for special admissions, and the provision of public support for indigenous students through social benefits (e.g. scholarships, travel grants, student accommodation) to support indigenous youth in their higher education.³⁴

VI. Challenges in education for disabled children

39. There are approximately 13 million people with disabilities in Russia, but only a tiny percentage have access to inclusive education.³⁵
40. Many schools lack the necessary resources and training to support students with disabilities.
41. In 2016/17, only 14.5% of parents of disabled children in urban areas and 13.9% of parents in rural areas were satisfied with the performance of comprehensive schools, which integrate 72% of the child population with disabilities in the Federation.³⁶
42. This creates a significant barrier to social mobility and limits opportunities for disabled individuals to participate fully in society, which is also reflected in the fact that only 32% of the working-age disabled population (2.5 million) have a job.³⁷
43. The Russian Federation has no comprehensive government initiative to provide lifelong education for children with disabilities and facilitate their integration into professional retraining programs across all levels.³⁸
44. Furthermore, comprehensive schools do not consider the learning needs of children with disabilities concerning digital education, which increases their inequality of opportunities and contributes to maintaining their social immobility.³⁹

VII. Educational challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic

45. Broken Chalk admires the pre-pandemic efforts in the Russian Federation to computerise and digitalise education. This success is demonstrated through the OECD indicators of “computerisation” and “connection of schools”, which are higher than the OECD average.⁴⁰
46. Before the pandemic, 94% of students reported having an electronic device to work on, which was higher than the 88% OECD average. Moreover, even 85% of children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds reported having such a device which was also higher than the OECD average of 78%.⁴¹
47. However, internet speed was lower than the world average, while only 76.9% of Russian households had internet access.⁴²
48. Furthermore, at the beginning of remote education during the pandemic, 32% of school principals reported that the lack of digital technology was a barrier to providing quality education, slightly higher than the OECD average (25%).⁴³
49. Also, 22% of principals reported problems with internet access, which was also slightly higher than the OECD average (19%).⁴⁴

50. Teachers were also better prepared to use information and communication technology (ICT) than the OECD average: 75% of teachers reported being trained in ICT during their professional development activities. In comparison, the OECD average is 60%.⁴⁵
51. 50% of principals participated in inter-school collaboration to support professional development and adaptation during the pandemic (OECD average: 37%), and 66% of teachers participated in networks developed for the above reasons (OECD average: 40%).⁴⁶
52. Small settlements with poor infrastructure experienced the most severe difficulties accessing adequate education. These areas mainly were colliding with the regions where indigenous populations resided who were already in a disadvantaged position in accessing quality education.⁴⁷
53. Families with lower socioeconomic status in remote regions and around larger cities, such as Moscow or St. Petersburg, faced increased technological difficulties in keeping up with high-quality learning opportunities for children. Due to the accessibility to (technical) resources, inequality, particularly among larger cities and their surrounding regions, has grown during the pandemic.⁴⁸
54. Despite the pre-pandemic efforts to create both public and private digital educational platforms, no unified federal system existed. Still, rather regional media differed in quality and quantity region by region. Therefore, some areas were disadvantaged in digital education, while united action could have been more challenging.⁴⁹
55. Furthermore, while there are federal policies and quality regulations to theoretically ensure the same quality of education and training to all students and teachers throughout the federation, the resources and funding of education are organised locally, which puts poorer areas in a disadvantaged position.⁵⁰
56. Additionally, due to the centralised decision-making system in the Federation, regional authorities in charge of education had to unexpectedly take up decision-making roles as the federal government pushed several responsibilities on regional governance during the pandemic.⁵¹

VII. Recommendations

57. Broken Chalk recommends that the Russian Federation make the last two years of general education compulsory, with the option to spend these last two years in vocational courses to facilitate social mobility and integration.
58. Broken Chalk recommends that the Federation allocate extra funds towards education, particularly in low population density regions and regions with lower socioeconomic statuses, to provide adequate, high-quality education.

- 59.** Broken Chalk suggests that the state improves the quality of its education system to attract and retain more students. Investing in teacher training, modernising curricula to meet the labour market's needs, and upgrading educational institutions' infrastructure are essential to stop emigration. Furthermore, increasing higher education funding would make it more affordable for students.
- 60.** Broken Chalk recommends that the Federation provides more support to the cultural and linguistic development of the indigenous population through regional educational reform, which involves indigenous people in the school curricula development.
- 61.** Broken Chalk recommends that the state re-establishes a federal committee to empower indigenous peoples.
- 62.** Broken Chalk welcomes all efforts to develop new teaching methods for indigenous peoples in the Russian Federation to nurture indigenous cultural and linguistic heritage. It encourages the federal government to increase its engagement in supporting these initiatives.
- 63.** Broken Chalk recommends that the Federation actively studies the needs of students with different conditions (socioeconomic status, type of settlement, disabilities, ethnic background) to address educational needs adequately and to ensure equal opportunities for all children by providing extra support to disadvantaged regions.
- 64.** Broken Chalk recommends that the federal government invests in improving internet speed and availability (e.g. expanding internet infrastructure; subsidising internet access) throughout the country, especially in smaller municipalities and indigenous regions.
- 65.** Broken Chalk recommends that the Russian Federation unify the federal digital education system and make it accessible to all regions of the country, thereby eliminating the disparities in the quality of digital education.

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