

“By seeing its colonial subjects on its territory as equals and reforming to avoid future mass atrocities at all costs, Russia can finally become a strong federative system built on the shared values of political representation, pluralism, and inclusion.”
(Kassymbekova & Marat, 2022: 5)

1. Introduction

With the escalation of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine and the ongoing war that began in February 2022 to undermine the independence of sovereign Ukraine, the Kremlin’s agenda and foreign policy are attracting increasing attention and deeper analysis from the academic world and major media (Mankoff, 2022: 1). Growing concerns about the Kremlin’s “imperialist” attitude and policies, pressures and Russia’s latent threat to some countries of “near abroad” put the topic of Russia’s still existing colonialist approach and mentality at the forefront of many political debates (Expert Institute for Social Research, 2023: 10, 14). In this context, Ukrainian and Western politicians and the media talk about the future of Russia and the need for decolonization, which has caught the attention of Russian academics and politicians (ibid: 7).

To begin with, it is crucial to note that Russia, unlike any other colonizing country, was simultaneously a colony. Historically, it represented an imperial power that colonized and enslaved many other countries and peoples, with some of its parts also being colonies. While Soviet academics accused the West of imperialism and colonial history, some experts argue that both of Russia’s predecessors were, indeed, colonial powers of their own. Tsarist Russia went hand in hand with extreme aggressiveness, colonization, and imperialization from the beginning (Horvath, 1972: 45).

The Russian Empire featured unequal attitudes and approaches between the Russified, though in some cases coercive, “metropolis” or ruling elite and the non-Russian peoples living on the periphery, which resulted in their inability to be fully incorporated into a unified nation. When it comes to the Soviet Union, the situation is somewhat contradictory. The ideas underlying the creation of “the voluntary union” run counter to the imperialist features. Lenin preached equality of nations with non-exploitive relations, wanting to integrate other countries into his model of the state. Nevertheless, imperialist relations persisted in the USSR, where the power structure and resources were centralized in the metropolis, and other units remained exploited. Given that decision-making power was entirely concentrated in Moscow, the

relationship between the capital and all other republics and regions could be characterized as a subordination of the periphery to the metropolis, as in the tsarist empire, despite its original intentions (Suny, 2001: 50-55).

Contemporary Russia, however, is legally a federation of semi-presidential republics. It comprises eighty-three regions, comprising forty-six oblasts, twenty-one republics, nine krais, four autonomous districts, one autonomous oblast, and two cities of federal significance¹. Eight federal districts unite the regions. Each district has a federal representative whom the president appoints. They are the main link between the regions and the federal government (StatData.ru, 2023). According to the latest open census of 2010, Russia has a population of over 140 million and is primarily made up of ethnic Russians, 70 percent of whom identify as Orthodox Christians. It is important to note that the country is ethnically, religiously, and regionally highly diverse. It is estimated that there are about 25 million Muslims and, in addition, 170 different ethnic groups in Russia (Rosstat, 2010; Heinemann-Grüder, 2013: 5). Indeed, these numbers show the multicultural environment of the country. However, according to many historians and scholars, including Heinemann-Grüder, it developed as a result of territorial expansion, exploitation, and colonization that began during the Tsarist Empire (2013: 5). It is crucial, for one, to determine to what extent the violence against indigenous peoples has stopped since the end of the Tsarist Empire and whether present-day Russia is repeating the actions of its predecessors.

Gosart, in her study on structural violence against indigenous communities in contemporary Russia, reveals that structural violence is embedded in the Russian state in its attitude toward indigenous communities. The needs of these communities are separated from the interests and functions of the state, following the path of Soviet-era laws and viewpoints. Therefore, indigenous peoples born on Russian territories are subjected to violence and neglect through state administration and law enforcement (Gosart, 2018: 193).

Furthermore, indigenous populations are severely declining, and some communities are at risk of extinction. Despite this concern, the “partial mobilization” into the Russian army due to the war in Ukraine, which took place in September 2022, strongly affected primarily indigenous peoples. The first and second waves mobilized young people from Russia’s poorest regions, inhabited mainly by indigenous peoples, even those who are not eligible for military service.

¹ This paper does not consider the annexed and occupied territories of Crimea, Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia as Russian territory. The author of the thesis deducted these territories from the list.

According to Article 18 of Federal Law No. 31-FZ of 1997, these include: students, the elderly, the disabled, and fathers of three or more children. This move by the Russian state and officials directly threatens physical survival and contributes to decreasing the indigenous population or their extinction. Many activists have called this act a new genocide (ADC Memorial & ICIPR, 2023: 23). The report cites numerous supporting facts and evidence to corroborate this statement. As a case in point, the mortality statistics for soldiers from Russia, presented by the Free Buryatia Foundation, show a disparity in the deaths of mobilized indigenous men compared to those of Moscow. Indigenous activists, thus, concluded that, say, Buryats have a 300 times higher risk of being killed in the war than residents of Moscow despite the population difference (ibid: 24).

The obvious implication is that the political system in contemporary Russia creates conditions for the continuation and intensification of structural violence against indigenous peoples and their further marginalization. The state can be held responsible for the harsh living conditions, discrimination, and population decrease that indigenous communities face (Gosart, 2018: 257).

Thus, when discussing Russia's future, the question of decolonization arises as a way of addressing the ongoing injustice and exploitation, as well as achieving peace in the region and ceasing conflicts.

1.1 Purpose of the Research and Research Question

While this topic deserves to be discussed and draw public and political interest, a deeper understanding of the complexity of Russian decolonization and the specific difficulties faced by indigenous communities in Russia is required. Moreover, it is necessary to consider and understand the indigenous peoples' perspectives on the potential decolonization of Russia. Due to the vertical political authorities and increased centralization of power (Oliker et al., 2009: 9), Russia's indigenous national republics have been excluded from political decision-making processes (Suliandziga & Sulyandziga, 2020: 8), so the debates about the future of their people and country should not exclude their voices either.

In February 2023, the 59th Munich Security Conference took place, and one of the panel discussions was devoted to Russia and was titled "Russia Reimagined: Visions for a Democratic Future". Among the invited speakers were only ethnic Russians from Moscow. They were: Garry

Kasparov, Zhanna Nemtsova, Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Irina Scherbakova (Stiftung Münchner Sicherheitskonferenz, 2023). Given the diverse ethnic composition of the Russian Federation and the debate about its future, it is puzzling that no indigenous representatives were present at the conference. Furthermore, activists from indigenous movements - Tatars, Bashkirs, Buryats, Yakuts, Kalmyks, Chechens, Erzyans, Mokshans, Cossacks and Ingrian peoples - issued a collective statement before the event and asked Munich Security Conference chair Christoph Heusgen to include their participation, representing voices of millions of residents, in the dialogue, as they are presently an integral part of the Russian Federation (Free Nations League, 2022).

Indeed, indigenous peoples have their own views on the future and have been trying to voice them. For example, at the Forum of the Free Peoples of Russia held in Prague in July 2022, representatives of more than 30 regions of Russia gathered and argued that although Russia is constitutionally a “federation”, in reality, Moscow speaks for each region, regardless of their true feelings and opinions. They argued that striving for self-determination and decolonization of Russia does not necessarily make them Russia’s enemies and anti-Russians, as Russian propaganda portrays it (Expert Institute for Social Research, 2023: 16).

The study aims to highlight indigenous knowledge and perspectives on the issue of Russia's colonial legacy and ways to overcome it, as well as to understand their internal views related to the topic of decolonization as a sustainable option. Indigenous voices are not represented in both domestic and broader discussions and debates about Russia’s future. To address the shortcomings, this research paper examines the decolonization of Russia, its possibility, meanings, implications, and significance, focusing on indigenous peoples’ voices of North Asia², specifically Buryats and Sakha, in framing the entire phenomenon. The study presents indigenous peoples’ unique knowledge and experiences, which are crucial to understanding the ongoing consequences of Russia’s colonial approach and promoting more peaceful and sustainable development in their republics, Russia, and the region. In this regard, the research poses and attempts to answer the question, *“How do indigenous communities, such as the Buryats and Sakha, perceive the issue of decolonization of Russia?”*

² During the interviews, interviewees requested that the term "North Asia" be used to describe the region, as the term "Siberia" has a colonial connotation and could be perceived as offensive. Therefore, this study takes into account the wishes and requests and uses only the term "North Asia", the use of the term "Siberia" in some parts is intentional and is used to emphasize colonial connotation.

1.2 Overview of the Thesis

The thesis consists of four main parts. Firstly, the current state of the art contains different views on essential concepts, shows significant discrepancies in general academic and Russian interpretations, and provides context for a better understanding of the realities of Russia and its academic world. Most importantly, the article defines the term “decolonization”, which is essential for the purposes of the thesis.

The next part is the theoretical part about postcolonialism, and it discusses the concept of hybrid identity and subalternity. The literature review on postcolonial theory continues with a deeper explanation and familiarisation with Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and their respective studies. From the literature review on theory, various codes were derived and used in the methodology section to create themes for the interview guide and analysis of the data.

Experts and activists from the indigenous republics of Sakha and Buryatia were interviewed with a set of questions (Appendix A) concerning their perceptions of the term “decolonization”, the relevance of the term in relation to Russia, indigenous and hybrid identities, and the ability or inability of activists to reach a broad audience and be heard. The process of selecting interviewees is described later in the chapter on the methodology of the research. Thus, the third part of the thesis analyzes the findings. The same codes and themes used in the interview guide were used to transcribe all interviews and reflect on them for further analysis. The section includes a description of the crucial factors and insights solely from the interviewees’ perspectives.

Finally, the conclusion provides a connection between the theory and the findings and answers the research question of the thesis, followed by recommendations for further research and a discussion of the limitations and challenges of the work.

2. State-of-the-art

The literature-scientific basis of the thesis lies in providing insights into the Russian interpretation of its practices and their presentation to its own nation and the world through a comparison of the Russian connotation with the generally accepted academic narrative.

The first course is to recognize the nature of the Russian Federation’s historical “territorial expansion” and how it has been presented in the academic world. This strand involves