

normative despite the voices coming from global peripheries (Spivak, 1994: 66). For the West, the course for the global South consisted of following “universal” Western histories and cultural values disregarding local narratives, indigenous knowledge and other socio-economic features of their societies (Nabudere, 1997: 209).

Spivak, interestingly, draws her key arguments on interviews given by Foucault and Deleuze, two French philosophers, and their discussion of the irrelevance of their further representation of oppressed by the intellectuals as they are able to speak for themselves (Spivak, 1994: 66-67). Disagreeing with their manner of thinking, she asserts that subalterns cannot speak for themselves and that intellectuals must continue to represent the colonial Other to avoid trapping them in the shadow of the Self, the West, and denying their Subject-ivity and other politics (ibid: 75, 83).

Donna Landry and Gerald McLean, in their introduction to “The Spivak Reader” collection, explain that in claiming that subalterns cannot speak, she does not refer to the physical act of speaking, but rather that the voices of subalterns cannot be heard by the dominant and privileged power. They point out that if a subaltern gains the ability to “speak”, she becomes a spokesperson for the community and thereby no longer a subaltern herself, which is the ultimate goal Spivak describes in which the oppressed cease to exist (1996a: 5-6).

This is where the tension of “speaking” and “being heard” emerges, and as postcolonial scholars suggest, hybridity offers a possible solution in which the division between “self” and “other” transcends (Maggio, 2007: 431).

Additionally, in answering a question about the responses to the work and the main question, “Can the Subaltern speak?”, Landry and McLean emphasize that by the word “speak,” Spivak meant “the transaction between the speaker and the listener” and the inability of making a speech (1996b: 289-290). Therefore, Spivak and other theorists indicate that “translation” and the role of the translator are more appropriate for subalterns than representation in terms of capturing originality and its further conveying (Maggio, 2007: 438).

4. Methodology

The overall aim of this Master’s thesis is to understand and describe the thoughts and views of indigenous peoples, particularly the Sakha and Buryats, on the process of decolonization of Russia and the importance and necessity of this process for their republics and

region. As well as to comprehend the findings by linking and relating them to theory and theoretical concepts. Since the topic is new and has not yet been researched, the idea of conducting interviews occurred. Interviewing expert activists from indigenous communities seemed reasonable since they are actors within the community, representing the internal dynamics and having unique knowledge of the insider environment and general specificity.

4.1 Expert Interviews

Exploratory expert interviews are used to address the objective of this study. Expert interviews help researchers gather raw data from the ground up and examine personal experiences and opinions about the effects of policymaking decisions. In this way, experts are crucial to understanding the relationships between the phenomena under study. They help explore everyday micro-processes or uncover information outside the public domain that cannot be easily obtained. Moreover, expert interviews can link local, national, and global trends and how they affect each other (Von Soest, 2022: 279). An essential component of this type of interview is the knowledge of experts who have worked on and faced the problem on a daily basis rather than the political elite. They may have more in-depth knowledge of the events and processes inside (ibid: 278). Interviewing experts for an exploratory project is beneficial and saves time and effort in data collection. Expert interviews are beneficial in situations where it is difficult or almost impossible to access information in the case of politically or socially taboo issues (Bogner et al., 2009: 2).

This paper uses a semi-structured expert interview format with prespecified questions and defined categories of topics. These types of questions are based on clear themes, specifically selected keywords, and already established questions while providing the ability to ask follow-up questions. Consequently, they provide structure and flexibility to the research topic (Von Soest, 2022: 280).

The method of exploratory expert interviews can be an excellent addition to researching the topic of indigenous voices in debates about Russia's colonial legacy, ongoing injustices, and the consequences of the country's decolonization. This expert interview helps to gain a deeper understanding of the topic from one's experience and perspective. The interview guide and questions are based on the theoretical chapter and literature review, as shown in Appendix A.

The questions are grouped into the following categories: identity, Russian colonialism, decolonization, indigenous perspectives, and further implications.

4.1.1 Selection of Interviewees

The selection of interviewees took a surprisingly long time, as it was crucial that activists were from a common region and could communicate freely.

Having no personal connections with activists from the indigenous republics of Russia, the decolonialsolidarity.com digital platform facilitated the process of finding potential interviewees, their place of origin, and their ethnicity. This website represents a statement by activists from indigenous peoples and republics of the Russian Federation, which openly declares that all possible discussions, debates, and conferences on the future of Russia should exclusively invite indigenous activists. The topic of this paper is adopted from this website: “Nothing about us without us” (Decolonial Solidarity, n.d). The author of the thesis thoroughly checked the social media pages of potential interviewees; the most active were the Free Buryatia Foundation and the Free Yakutia Foundation accounts. Further research provided the Instagram pages of eleven possible interviewees: six from Buryatia and five from Sakha. Interviewees are selected based on their specialization and indigenous knowledge of the topics under study.

The author contacted the possible interviewees through their Instagram pages and anticipated a positive response to the request for an interview. Eventually, six activists returned the message, and the next stage began - setting up a suitable date and time for the interview.

At the beginning of the process, the goal was to interview representatives of only one indigenous republic in Russia. However, the number of positive responses was insufficient. Therefore, the author recognized that it might be helpful to interview activists from two indigenous republics, both to understand the perceptions of the two ethnic communities and also to compare the findings and see the similarities and differences in their views.

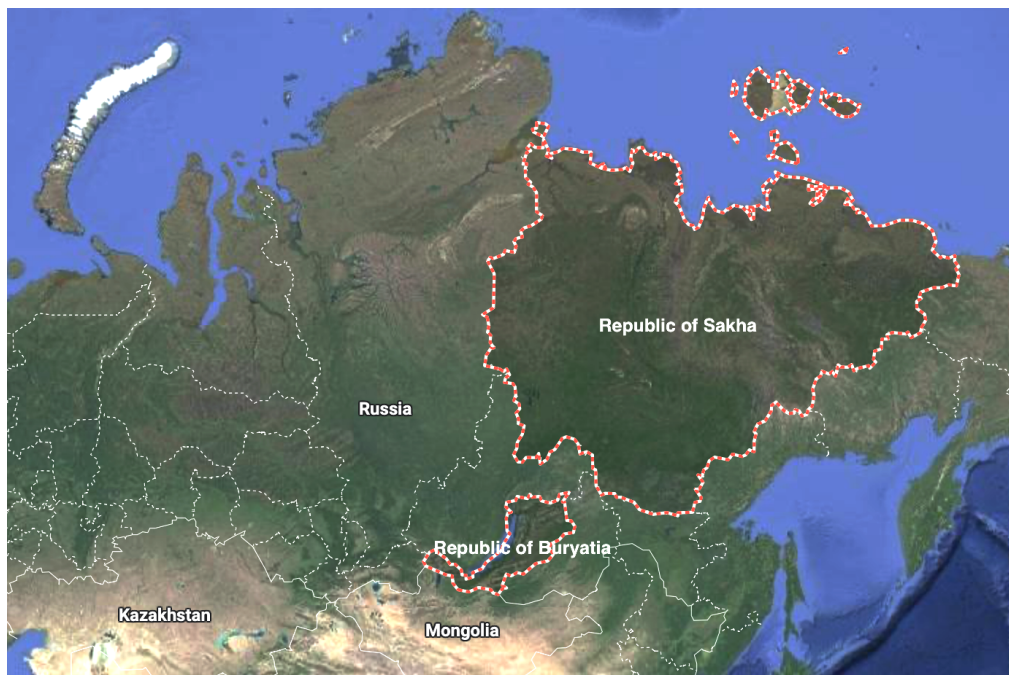
All six activists are currently active both online and offline. Almost all of the participants in the study identify as women, except for Vladimir.

The other important reason for selecting the interviewees was their belonging to indigenous republics, as these republics are heterogeneous. One interviewee is an ethnic Russian, but she was born and raised in Buryatia and identifies herself as a Russian Buryat. All of the interviewees are currently outside of Russia. Thus, they can communicate freely. Two of the

activists from Buryatia are labeled as “foreign agents” by the Russian authorities. Only one of the six interviewees requested confidentiality so that they would be referred to as “Interviewee 6”, and the other five gave permission for their names to be used in this study.

A summary of the interviewees can be found in Appendix B.

After conducting a thorough literature review of existing research articles and theories, five categories of questions were compiled and developed for the purposes of this thesis. Sub-questions and an interview guide (Appendix A) were developed based on these categories. The questions were ordered from more open-ended to more specific. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interview, the order of questions was not strictly followed during the interview. The interview questions were asked depending on the interviewees’ answers. Four Buryat and two Sakha activists were interviewed for this thesis. The choice of these indigenous communities is also due to the following reasons. Buryats or, as they are called in the scientific world, Buryat-Mongols are Mongolian tribes living in North Asia and are considered the largest indigenous community in the region (Tsyrempilov, 2015: 1). The Sakha Republic is the largest republic in terms of territory, occupying one fifth of the area of the Russian Federation. The Republic, or Yakutia as it is also referred to, is home to a large number of indigenous peoples, with the majority being the Sakha Turkic tribes (Maj, 2012: 210). To visualize the location of the two republics, their size, and their distance from each other, a map of Eastern Russia with the borders of the two republics circled is provided.



(The map is taken from Google Map and modified by the author)

Only one interview was conducted in English, all others in Russian, as preferred by the activists. All interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams and Google Meets, with verbal permission given to record for better and more precise transcription and subsequent analysis.

The duration of each interview ranged from a minimum of 1 hour 30 minutes to 2 hours 20 minutes.

The fact that the researcher of this thesis is a citizen of a post-Soviet country allowed the interviewees to be more open and speak freely, knowing that the political context and issues were familiar to their own.

4.2 Qualitative Content Analysis

The qualitative content analysis method is also used to transcribe and analyze interviews with experts more thoroughly.

Kleinheksel et al. defines qualitative content analysis as “the process of becoming intimately familiar with the content being analyzed through transcription, re-reading, and/or several iterations of encoding”. The method believes that texts and words are valuable data sources that, when used properly, can reveal valuable information about specific phenomena. To achieve this result, the categories’ context and subject matter must be accounted for to discover implied patterns and associations. This method’s most commonly used application is textual or transcribed content analysis, including open-ended surveys, media articles, interviews, news articles, and recordings (2020: 128).

In this regard, qualitative content analysis is primarily employed to examine a complex form of text and qualitative data materials in a context-specific manner to allow researchers to understand a given social reality of an issue, its meanings, and implications. According to Hsieh and Shannon, qualitative content analysis is a tool used to interpret data subjectively using coding and categorization techniques consistent with themes/ subject matter (2005:1278; Shava et al., 2021: 553). This instrument incorporates a process aimed at transforming written and verbal raw data into specific categories or, as mentioned above, themes through valuable insights and interpretations. Thus, materials to be used for qualitative content analysis are best garnered from exploratory, in-depth interviews that require analysis “with a degree of interpretation”

(Shava et al., 2021: 554). In this paper, content analysis of expert interviews is used to help interpret the responses to interview questions by indigenous activists on the topic of the future of the Russian state and the debate on decolonization. Therefore, the researcher applied a deductive approach to content analysis in this study. As explained by Kibiswa, under this approach, the researcher pre-defines categories before the data collection process begins, and the interpretation and analysis of the data is conducted based on these categories (2019: 2061). The interpretation and organization of the collected interview responses are based on the categories developed for the interview guide following the same structure. The interviews were meticulously transcribed, and transcripts were thoroughly read and carefully categorized by the researcher manually using a color coding scheme to highlight associated statements and identify categories. To gain an in-depth understanding of the topic and address the research question accurately, expert interviews combined with content analysis provide the researcher with insights and valuable information. All interviews were conducted in August and September 2023, resulting in 88 pages of interview transcripts.

4.3 Challenges

The process of finding interviewees proved to be quite tricky and time-consuming, despite the existence of such a website as decolonialsolidarity.com, where, as described earlier, there is a list of activists who are open to discussions about the future of Russia. Since this work focuses on North Asia, the activists on the list that were contacted were all residents and ethnically belonging to this region. Many activists contacted, apart from those who agreed to be interviewed, declined due to their inability to find the time, as the first decolonization conference was to be prepared and held in September and the second one in December 2023 and launching a new project, “Indigenous People of Russia” in all social networks to attract people to the beauty of indigenous cultures in North Asia, as well as other as more extensive anti-war and decolonial activities.

The author of the thesis wanted to interview an equal number of activists from both republics; however, due to the above-mentioned factors, this idea was not realized, and only two activists from the Sakha Republic responded and took part in the interview and contributed to the development of this thesis.