

## **5. Analysis and Presentation of Findings**

This chapter discusses the findings from analyzing the data from the transcribed interviews. As previously stated, the interviewees are activists from indigenous communities in North Asia, namely Buryatia and Sakha, who are actively working for the benefit of their respective communities. The analysis aims to investigate how the indigenous peoples of these two North Asian ethnic groups, which constitute a significant territorial and resource-rich part of the Russian Federation, perceive and describe the issue of decolonization, which seems to come up more and more frequently when discussing Russia's future. The analysis is based on the interviewees' descriptions of their own experiences of living in Russia and their perceptions of their rights to participate in broader discussions about their lands and resources. Throughout the analysis, interviewees describe and reflect on the lives of their indigenous ethnic communities in Tsarist Russia, Soviet Russia, and contemporary Russia from the insider's perspective, how power imbalances and hierarchies have shaped their identities, self-perceptions, and the implications in their daily lives and thoughts about the future of their communities. Qualitative content analysis helped to organize and categorize such a large amount of data and facilitated the analysis process. The following sections present the categories of analysis: indigenous identity, Russian colonialism and its legacy, decolonization, activists' experiences, and further implications of decolonization. Each category is analyzed separately.

### **5.1 Indigenous Identity**

Due to the differences in the interpretation of indigeneity in the global and Russian academic world, the first step of the interview was to find out and clarify how the interviewees themselves perceive self-identification and identification of indigeneity, how they explain and comprehend the heterogeneity of republics and centuries-old proximity of other ethnic groups.

As discussed in the State-of-the-art section, the Russian interpretation of indigenous peoples is narrowed to only "small numbered native peoples of North Siberia and the Far East". It has a range of constraints that many ethnic communities in Russia face; therefore, they cannot be officially recognized by the state as indigenous peoples and consequently lose some privileges and benefits. All the activists interviewed disagree with this classification and strongly criticize it. Mariya, a Buryat activists, said:

“I disagree with that classification. Well, it’s ridiculous. It’s ridiculous because the requirement is for the population to be less than 50,000 people. So that means that you need to destroy the nation first and then just label them as indigenous, right? Which is absurd. I understand that it’s just because of certain state-issued benefits for the so-called indigenous small numbers of people. The government artificially imposed this limit of 50,000 people because they did not want too many people to be eligible for those benefits. But, otherwise, indigenous people are indigenous people, and it doesn't depend on the size of the population.”

Her response coincides with that of her colleagues and other interviewees from the Republic of Buryatia. They all agreed on the definition of indigenous people as those who had lived in these territories for centuries before the arrival of Russian Cossacks in the mid-seventeenth century (the 1630s) before the so-called exploration of Siberia began.

As for the respondents from Sakha, their answers also resemble hers. However, they have a few unique insights. Evdokia from Sakha noted that in the case of the Republic of Sakha, she partially agrees with the government’s categorization. She explained the ethnic composition of the republic by stating that the small indigenous peoples of North Asia and the Far East, as written by the authorities, constitute an integral part of the republic. In general, she pointed out that indigenous peoples are those people who have always been on the land and belong to the land.

Interviewee 6 (a Sakha activist) posited that indigenous people are those “who have preserved their traditional way of life, their livelihoods, and, accordingly, who have adapted to the climatic conditions and so on”<sup>3</sup>. This last remark raises an issue that is covered and explained further in the Section “Russian Colonialism and its Legacy”.

During the interviews themselves and their transcription, it was fascinating to observe the responses of the two different ethnic groups regarding the ways in which they identify themselves and their communities. First, it is necessary to note that Russian colonialism has left different traces on the two republics. As Alexandra (a Buryat activist) explained, in Buryatia, only 30 percent are ethnic Buryats. The other 70 percent are Russians, Ukrainians, and representatives of other peoples, those who identify themselves as Russians. In other words,

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<sup>3</sup> Translated by the author, the original: *которые проживают именно на своих территориях традиционного расселения своих предков, которые сохраняют традиционный образ жизни, свои хозяйства, и соответственно, которые приспособились к своим климатическим условиям и так далее.*

Buryats are an ethnic minority in their republic. These are all echoes and consequences of successful Russification. According to all experts from Buryatia, that is what distinguishes their case. Vladimir (a Buryat activist) underlined such trivial factors of forced Russification as the rejection of their Buryat name, changing it to a Slavic one, and the forced renunciation of their own religion in favor of baptism. He added:

“In the Soviet Union, people who spoke Buryat were blamed and punished. In fact, it was everywhere, all over the Soviet Union, because not only the peoples of Russia but also, for example, the Ukrainians. Because it was not prestigious to speak in one’s native language, one had to speak only Russian. The problem is that some groups of people managed to get rid of this complex, but it persists in the case of the Buryats. This is exacerbated by the fact that, for example, the Buryat language, and in general, the languages of other indigenous peoples, have been relegated to the category of optional languages. In other words, it’s a couple of hours a week as an extra class on Saturdays. Banally and artificially, they reduce the percentage of people for whom Russian can be a second language. In this regard, many Buryats do not speak the Buryat language because of the colonial policy of the Kremlin.”<sup>4</sup>

In her interview, Mariya (a Buryat activist) spoke about the same issues and expressed concerns about language and traditional livelihoods. She stated that the Buryat language is officially considered endangered. Culture is more just a show for tourists and traditional festivals twice a year in ethnic dress. She explained the situation with the head of Buryatia to show the extent to which it has become critical.

“For example, last year, the head of Buryatia, Alexei Tsydenov, who is an ethnic Buryat, at a traditional ethnic summer festival, took a publicity photo with a young Russian army officer and an ethnic Buryat who had been wounded in Ukraine. Mr. Tsydenov was dressed in traditional Buryat attire, but I felt

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<sup>4</sup> Translated by the author, the original: В Советском Союзе людей, которые говорили на бурятском, обвиняли и наказывали. На самом деле такое было везде, по всему Союзу, потому что об этом говорят не только народы России, но и, например, те же украинцы. Потому что неprestижно было говорить на своем родном языке, нужно было говорить только на русском. Проблема в том, что какие то народности избавились от этого комплекса, но в случае с бурятами все еще это продолжается. Это еще ухудшается, тем что, например, бурятский язык, в принципе, языки остальных коренных народов, переведены в разряд факультативных. То есть это пару часов в неделю как дополнительное занятие при желании по субботам. Да, банально и искусственно они снижают процент людей для которых русский язык может быть вторым языком. В связи с этим, очень многие буряты не разговаривают на бурятском языке из-за той же колониальной политики Кремля.

something was wrong with the photo. Then, my Buryatologist colleague told me he wore a winter outfit in July. We have lost even that distinction and don't know what ethnic attire is appropriate for what season. It's very sad, but that's how it really is. Tsydenov himself, being the head of the republic, does not speak Buryat."

When discussing identity, Evdokia (a Sakha activist) also addressed the issue of Buryats. Indeed, she considers the Buryats to be an indigenous population, and there is no doubt about this. The essence of her arguments was the preservation of traditions and pre-colonial identity. She confirmed the claims of other activists from Buryatia that Buryat's identity is nearly extinct. She argued that language plays a vital role in preserving the traditional qualities of the indigenous population.

"In my understanding, preserving identity is preserving language. When people have their language, they continue to exist as a nation. Unfortunately, nearly all Buryats speak only Russian."<sup>5</sup>

In her reasoning, she also gave a possible explanation for the fact that the Yakut language has been preserved among the people despite the Kremlin's attempts to change the situation and transfer the Yakut language to an elective in schools.

"Perhaps we have preserved our language because we are territorially further away from Muscovy. Buryatia, together with the separated regions, is closer to Russian cities. Moreover, we don't have many cities; we have many villages, uluses (note: tribal villages)."<sup>6</sup>

She added that the current head of the republic is an ethnic Sakha and speaks the Yakut language, but the general Sakha population does not favor him. She cited data from a sociological survey of the republic's residents about their choice in the upcoming elections. Most of them prefer the ethnically Russian candidate Gubarev to become the head of the republic.

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<sup>5</sup> Translated by the author, the original: В моём понимании сохранение идентичности — это сохранение языка. Когда у народа есть свой язык, он как народ продолжает свое существование. У бурятов нет языка. Они все говорят на русском языке.

<sup>6</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Мы, наверное, сохранили свой язык, потому что территориально находимся дальше от Москвы. Бурятия же, вместе с отделенными областями, находится ближе к русским городам. Тем более у нас городов не так много, у нас много деревень, улусов.

Interestingly, the Buryat activists shared that the head of the parliament of Buryatia is also an ethnic Russian who, unlike Tsydenov, was born and raised in a small village in Buryatia and knows the Buryat language. It was then that the first mentions of the term “regional identity” appeared in our discussions. Thus, regional identity is as important as ethnic identity.

For a more detailed consideration and analysis of this sub-theme, it should be mentioned that four activists identified themselves by ethnicity, which coincides with their regional identity. This question provoked more profound reflections and discussions for only two of them. Anna (an activist from Buryatia) admitted in her response that she had not thought about her ethnic identity before the war in Ukraine. She explained that such a concept as “the Russian world” is foreign to her, although she is ethnically Russian. She said:

“I don’t know what it is to be a Russian person. What is it? Is it to eat Olivier (note: the Russian Salad) or “seld pod shuboi” (note: another salad), to celebrate the New Year in valenki (note: traditional winter boots), in kokoshniks (note: traditional hat), to be an Orthodox Christian, to live in Russia, to speak Russian? I’m still learning it, but what I definitely have is a regional identity. This is something that will never be taken away from me. All my life, until the last six months, I lived and grew up in Buryatia. I am a Russian Buryat woman. A Russian woman of 36 years old in Moscow and a Russian woman of 36 in Buryatia are two completely different women. We will have different levels of access to certain resources. So, I have this regional identity, which I think is very pronounced. But in my case, I always say that I have two identities, at least.”<sup>7</sup>

Another activist from Buryatia, Alexandra, an ethnic Buryat, was born in Buryatia but spent her adolescent years growing up in St. Petersburg. She heads an anti-war foundation and actively advocates for the interests and rights of Buryats. However, as Alexandra says, she has several key identities: ethnically, she is a Buryat, but her regional identity is St. Petersburg. Speaking of identity, she again cited the example of the current head of the Republic of Buryatia,

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<sup>7</sup> Translated by the author, the original: “Я не знаю, что такое быть русским человеком. Что это такое? Это есть оливье или селедку под шубой, встречать Новый год в валенках, в кокошниках, быть православным христианином, жить в России, говорить по-русски? Я все еще изучаю, но что у меня точно есть, так это региональная идентичность. Это то, что у меня никогда не отнимут. Всю свою жизнь, до последних шести месяцев, я жил и рос в Бурятии. Я - русская бурятка. Русская женщина 36 лет в Москве и русская женщина 36 лет в Бурятии - это две совершенно разные женщины. У нас будет разный уровень доступа к определенным ресурсам. То есть у меня есть такая региональная идентичность, и я думаю, что она очень ярко проявляется. Но в моем случае я всегда говорю, что у меня две идентичности, как минимум.”

Tsydenov, an ethnic Buryat who does not know the Buryat language and traditions, and the first president of Buryatia in the 1990s, Leonid Potapov, an ethnic Russian who spoke Buryat and had more in common with the land where he was born. She added:

“It’s great when it’s not just a question of ethnicity, but rather a question of a person’s belonging to the region and the land they lead.”<sup>8</sup>

This is an example of the very hybrid identity that Bhabha talks about in his work. In Anna’s case, she cannot label herself as a colonized person, nor can she define herself as a colonizer as she does not have certain privileges, such as quality of life and income, like Russians in the Russian cities of the country. Mariya (a Buryat activist) also noted when discussing the issue of identity that Russians living in Buryatia are also treated differently, more like colonial subjects.

In Alexandra’s case, she is unable to identify only as an indigenous Buryat activist because she grew up in a Russian city and has somewhat better instruments and resources than other Buryats in Buryatia. Both activists addressed the issue; Anna is more frequently invited for interviews on issues and the topic of Buryats against the war. Alexandra, on the other hand, has more access, outlets, and connections to “liberal oppositionists to Putin’s regime” such as Khodorkovsky and Navalny’s family. The hybrid identity of such activists thus becomes a valuable tool for indigenous activists to be heard by a wider audience. This subject will be explored further in the following chapters.

From the interviewees’ responses, it becomes evident that they do not fully accept the state definition and categorization of indigenous peoples in Russia. Such classification and characterization give some social benefits to small indigenous communities but fail to recognize the indigenesness of other ethnic communities. The responses show that Buryats and Sakha consider themselves indigenous to the land of North Asia. Along with ethnicity, there is regional identity, which is equally important and a key factor. According to the answers, self-identification does not mean the opposition between them/us, colonizers/colonized, Russians/other ethnic nationalities, but rather the prevalence of regional identity and belonging to the land of Buryatia and Sakha. As described in the example with the current heads of the

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<sup>8</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Это здорово, когда это не просто вопрос этнической принадлежности, а скорее вопрос принадлежности человека к региону и земле, которую он возглавляет.

republics, who come from ethnic peoples, the preference of people voters is given to ethnic Russian representatives of the regions.

In Buryatia's case, the consequences of colonialism have had a profound effect on the people, language, and traditions. Not only are Buryats a minority in their republic due to resettlement, but a small percentage of Buryats speak their native language, which is an example of successful Russification. In contrast to the Buryats, the Sakha people have retained their language and traditions.

The next chapter covers the activists' reflections on Russian colonialism and its effects on indigenous peoples.

## **5.2 Russian Colonialism and its legacy**

The issue of identifying oneself and one's people is closely intertwined with the period of Russian colonialism and its legacy. All interviewed activists spoke of the colonial period as the darkest times for their people. To everyone, it is the tragedy of all indigenous peoples, the loss of identity, history, and loss of self. The two republics' current problems are deeply rooted in the colonial period and originate from there. The most striking legacy of colonialism is the change of traditional names to Slavic names and forced baptism. Those who continued to practice the religions of shamanism and Tengri were massacred. Interviewee 6 and Evdokia from the Sakha Republic shared that they speak the Yakut language solely because it is still commonly used in their families, and they have relatives living in hard-to-reach uluses where the language is relatively intact. However, in the central cities of the republic, people are publicly shamed and reprimanded for speaking their native language. Interviewee 6 recalled the following example from the past:

“Children of reindeer herders were forcibly taken from their parents and placed in boarding schools where they lived and learned Russian language and, in fact, culture. As a result, the Yukaghir language, one of the languages of Yakutia, is extinct. There are no books or surviving chronicles. It is a pity, and the same thing is happening to the Chukchi and Dolgans; they all speak only Russian. This is the “inferiority complex” of all peoples. There were persecutions against teachers of

the Yakut language, not only Yakut language but indigenous languages and indigenous culture in general.”<sup>9</sup>

Residents of Buryatia face the same problem, as reported by the activists. However, the only difference is that the Buryat language is not spoken in families. Anna from Buryatia shared her thoughts on this:

“The Buryat language is part of the endangered group of languages. Only a tiny percentage of Buryats speak Buryat, their native language. This is also a consequence of Russian colonization. Many people think that there is no point in learning Buryat if Russian is everywhere. And they are right: higher education, school education in Russian, hospitals, and courts only in Russian. From the time we were young, we were indoctrinated to speak Russian, so that we don’t have an accent, so that we don’t have any problems at school, at university, at work, and so on”<sup>10</sup>.

Each activist discussed the consequences of the stripping of ethnic communities of their identity and the extreme methods of the Soviet authorities. In recounting the harsh conditions and forced Russification, Mariya (a Buryat activist) cited a more personal story that happened to her grandmother. She revealed:

“My grandmother’s generation was Russified by “sword and fire”. They were all physically forced to convert to Russian. She was locked in a classroom for six days straight and had to read very politicized articles in Russian. Until the last days of her life, my grandmother continued to think in her native language; even though she spoke Russian, she would translate in her mind every time and then speak. To the last days, the fear in her made her use Russian.”

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<sup>9</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Детей оленеводов насильно отбирали у родителей и помещали в интернаты, где они жили и учились русскому языку и, по сути, культуре. В результате юкагирский язык, один из языков Якутии, вымер. Нет ни книг, ни сохранившихся летописей. Очень жаль, и то же самое происходит с чукчами и долганами, они все говорят только на русском. Такой вот “комплекс неполноценности” у всех народов. Были гонения и на учителей якутского языка, не только якутского, вообще национальных языков, национальной культуры.

<sup>10</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Бурятский язык входит в исчезающую группу языков. Только мизерный процент бурят владеют бурятской речью, своим родным языком. Это же тоже последствия русской колонизации. Многие считают, что нет смысла учить бурятский, если кругом русский. И они ведь правы: высшее образование, школьное образование на русском языке, в больницах, судах только русский. С молодых ногтей нам внушалось “надо говорить по-русски, чтобы не было акцента, чтобы у тебя потом не было никаких проблем в школе, в университете, на работе и так далее”.



There is another crucial point that causes grief among Buryat activists. It is the topic of the partition and resettlement of the Buryat people. It has already been noted that the Buryats are a minority even in their own region. But Mariya explained the reason for this in her interview. According to her, about one-third of the Buryats live outside Buryatia because of Stalin's partition of Buryat-Mogolia in the 1920s and 1930s. She added:

“It was divided into five parts, and according to renowned anthropologist Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer of Georgetown University, it was a political move. The goal was to dilute the Buryats demographically and weaken them politically. Stalin believed that as a political nation, the Buryats could pose a threat to the communist leadership because of the possibility of separatist or nationalist sentiment. Many prominent intellectuals were killed, and others were executed or died in the Gulag camps because they were accused of being pansies. My great-grandfather was also one of the victims of Stalin's repression, and he died in the Gulag. So this was the next step in destroying and erasing our identity, essentially dividing the Buryats and repressing the Buryat intelligentsia.”

Alexandra (a Buryat activist) recounted similar stories about how her ancestors were executed for being members of the religious clergy. Her family archives still have pictures of Buddhist monks. This part, even after many years, is vehemently hidden and not brought up, even though these are the stories of the families. The Buryats, as she argued, still have the psychological trauma of colonialism.

All activists interviewed complained about the current conditions in which people in the two republics live. According to their stories, it is clear that the tough times when the republics were colonies were still going on. According to Interviewee 6 (a Sakha activist), all the lands of the Sakha Republic, including those initially intended for use by indigenous peoples and essential for the preservation of their traditional way of life, have been made federal and controlled by the Kremlin, which is being destroyed year by year. She added:

“Now we indigenous people own nothing on our own land. We are all poor. We go outside at minus 50 degrees Celsius to use the toilet, there are no facilities. Not even gas, in a country that supplies gas to other countries. The gas is extracted in Yakutia. We have to use coal for heating, destroying the ecology and nature,

thereby destroying an integral part of ourselves. It's hard to talk about it without tears.”<sup>11</sup>

Evdokia (a Sakha activist) expressed precisely the same problems. She repeated more than once that Yakutia is the wealthiest region, entire of resources, but the people are poor, lacking money even for bread. She shared:

“Our tax system is a slave one. We pay the highest VAT on goods because we are more remote and northern. It is harder for the small-numbered peoples: Evenks and Yukaghirs. There are no bridges or roads to their uluses, and it is a quest to carry out anything. We are just a resource colony of diamonds. All the profits go to the Kremlin, and we live on subsidies. And now we are a human resource - a supply of people for the war.”<sup>12</sup>

The abundance of resources in the Republic and the poverty of the people themselves were also mentioned by activists from Buryatia. Vladimir reported that the Kremlin takes all the earnings from the resources while the Republic survives on subsidies, just like Sakha. He added:

“Buryatia is one of the richest republics in resources and one of the poorest republics in quality of life.”<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, the essential point that took more time to discuss is the very designation of Russia's colonialism and its most immediate consequence, which still makes the two republics colonies. The misinterpretation of the history of the enslavement of the region of North Asia, which is described in all official sources in Russia and the only version that the Kremlin accepts to this day. All six activists interviewed ridiculed the official narrative of Siberia's voluntary annexation to Russian territory. They recounted actual historical events to their ethnic

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<sup>11</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Сейчас нам, коренному населению, ничего не принадлежит на собственной земле. Мы все нищем. Выходим на улицу в минус 50 градусов в туалет, нет условий для удобств. Даже газа нет, в стране которая снабжает газом другие страны. Газ добывается в Якутии. Нам приходится топиться углем, при этом мы разрушаем экологию, природу тем самым разрушая неотъемлемую часть себя. Об этом тяжело говорить без слез.

<sup>12</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Наша налоговая система - рабская. Мы платим самый высокий НДС на товары, потому что мы отдаленнее и севернее. Сложнее всех в малочисленным народам: эвенки, юкагиры. К их улусам нет ни мостов, ни дорог, это целый квест что-либо провести. Мы всего лишь ресурсная колония алмазов. Все деньги полностью уходят Кремлю, а мы живем на дотациях. А сейчас мы ещё живой ресурс - поставка людей на войну.

<sup>13</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Бурятия - одна из богатейших республик на ресурсы и одна из беднейших республик качество жизни.

communities and how they had suffered. The following is what each of them had to say on the subject.

“Our societies still have no knowledge of our history. That’s because everything has been rewritten. But we have to understand how Russia came to Siberia in the first place. We had forced assimilation. The Russian Empire seized Siberia in the 16th century, and that’s when colonization actively began. About 60-70% of the Sakha population was exterminated. This is genocide. It happened even afterward. It was the indigenous peoples who were forcibly sent to the First and Second World Wars, which is also the case now. People have been starving and dying for five centuries, and so far, villages have completely disappeared. Also, the Russian Empire brought plague and smallpox, resulting in which villages and hamlets were wiped out. Therefore, we ourselves do not know how many ethnicities and tribes there were in Yakutia.”<sup>14</sup> (Interviewee 6, a Sakha activist)

“We study a history that has been completely cleansed, emptied of historical truth. The republics are in terrible conditions, and ethnic people face high levels of xenophobia and racism, discrimination on ethnic grounds, and poverty. National republics are poor because everything was and is being taken away by Moscow. And other ethnic groups are forced to turn a blind eye and keep silent. For generations, people have suppressed their love for freedom and independence. Don’t stick out, don’t talk, don’t shout, don’t sit, don’t stand out, nod, wave. That’s how we grew up, not loving freedom. That’s the worst consequence of colonial thinking.”<sup>15</sup> (Anna, an activist from Buryatia)

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<sup>14</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Наши общества до сих пор не знают нашу историю. Потому что все переписано. Но мы должны понимать, как вообще Россия пришла в Сибирь. У нас насильственная ассимиляция была. Российская империя захватила Сибирь в 16 веке, тогда и началась колонизация активно. Примерно 60-70% населения Саха было истреблено. Это геноцид. Это происходило и после. В первую и вторую мировые войны насильно отправляли именно коренные народы, что происходит и сейчас. Люди в течении вот уже на протяжении 5 веков голодают и умирают, прямо сёлами полностью вообще исчезали. Также Российская империя принесла: чума, оспа, в результате которых стирались сёла, деревни. Поэтому мы сами не знаем сколько вообще было народностей, племен в Якутии.

<sup>15</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Мы изучаем совершенно вычищенную, выхлощенную от исторической правды историю. Республики находятся в ужасных условиях, этнические народы сталкиваются с большим уровнем ксенофобии и расизма, дискриминации по национальному признаку, с бедностью. Национальные республики бедны потому что все забирает Москва. А остальные народы вынуждены на все это закрывать глаза и молчать. Люди поколениями подавляли любовь к свободе, к независимости. Не высовывайся, не говори, не кричи, так не сиди, не выделяйся, ты там кивни, махни, подмахни. Вот мы такими и выросли, не любящими свободу. Это самое ужасное последствие колониального мышления.

“My grandmother is not just a Buryat; she is from a particular tribe, the Yalguts, who fought against the colonizers and did not stop fighting. There was a misunderstanding of cultures. So, Russian settlers came and started cultivating the land. You couldn’t do that in Mongolia or Buryatia because spirits dwell in the land, and you can’t dig it. If it was a voluntary annexation, why did the tribes fight, and why was the fort “Ostrog” built? Who should be defended against if Buryatia is a steppe and the only people there are Buryats? But, of course, if you look at the history textbook, Russia has always done everything right. If Russia subjugated some peoples, it was for their good.”<sup>16</sup> (Vladimir, a Buryat activist)

“We were always told at school about “unity of peoples”. Everything sounded so beautiful, but it was all so far from the truth. If it had been voluntary annexation, there would not have been seven armed uprisings against the Tsarist Empire and occupation in Yakutia. So many people would not have been exterminated. Not only were the lands seized and the resources of our people brazenly used, but there were underground nuclear explosions in Yakutia during the USSR, which were hidden from the people. There were no Russian towns nearby, only Yakut villages. It was the most unsuccessful experiment. 50 percent of the population has various cancer diseases, including my grandmother, sister, and uncle. This is not mentioned in the history books.”<sup>17</sup> (Evdokia, a Sakha activist)

“The Kremlin’s policy and the whole problem with Russia is that it was created with lies. Because there has never been such unity and friendship among peoples, which they liked to talk and write about during the Union. Indigenous peoples were second-rate inhabitants. The official name of Russia is the Russian

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<sup>16</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Моя бабушка не просто бурятка, она из конкретного племени, ялгутов, которые воевали против колонизаторов, которые не прекращали воевать. Происходило непонимание культур. То есть приходили русские переселенцы и начинали возделывать землю. Не в Монголии, не в Бурятии так делать было нельзя, потому что в земле обитают духи, и ты не можешь ее копать. Если это было добровольное присоединение, почему тогда племена воевали и для чего был построен форт “Острог”? От кого обороняться если Бурятия это степь, и единственные люди там буряты? Но, конечно же, если посмотреть на учебник истории России, то Россия всегда все делала правильно. Если Россия подчиняла какие-то народы, то это для их блага.

<sup>17</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Нам в школе всегда говорили про «единение народов», все звучало так красиво, но это все так далеко от правды. Если бы это было добровольное присоединение, то в Якутии не было бы семь вооруженных восстаний против Царской Империи и оккупации. Столько людей не было бы истреблено. Мало того, что были захвачены земли и нагло использованы ресурсы нашего народа, но и на территории Якутии проводились подземные ядерные взрывы во время СССР, которые скрывали от народа. Рядом не было русских городов, только якутские села. Это был самый неудачный эксперимент, 50% населения болеет различными онкозаболеваниями, включая мою бабушку, сестру и дядю. Об этом в книгах истории не написано.

Federation, and it has nothing in common with the federative structure. Modern Russia is a unitary state, very centrist. The center determines how much funding a region gets. The region determines how much funding municipalities get. And de facto, every time, you have to stick your hand out and do everything you can to get something. The regions, including Buryatia, were deliberately brought to such a horrible financial state that there was complete dependence. And this has always been the case for many centuries. It has become popular to romanticize Tsarist Russia and the beautiful Nicholas II. But none of them thinks how bloody those years were for the ethnic groups.”<sup>18</sup> (Alexandra, a Buryat activist)

“The narrative of imperial innocence is promoted by both Soviet and post-Soviet authorities. They always claim that the Russian Empire was an empire, but a good one, unlike any other. For example, Russians readily admit that Russia was an empire when it comes to national pride and pride in their great history or great country, but everything immediately changes as soon as you start talking about colonialism and annexations. They either ignore the concept or get angry as a psychological reaction, but not a single attempt to think about it. To understand and logically connect the dots. “If we are an Empire, then we are an Imperialist, colonial empire. So there are colonized peoples that we have conquered. Otherwise, we cannot be an empire.” This chain of thinking is simply absent. Even Putin's critics either avoid talking about decolonization or get angry. No one tells the true story of how Siberia was conquered. It was conquered by the Russians, and only the narrative of peaceful and voluntary unification is promoted enough that many people believe it. I would say that most ethnic Buryats don't even realize or identify themselves as a colonized people. I think because of the political situation in Russia and also because any Russian authorities since the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and post-Soviet Russia have been afraid to talk

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<sup>18</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Политика Кремля и вся проблема России в том, что она создавалась со лжи. Потому что никогда не было единства и дружбы народов о которой так любили говорить и писать во время союза. Коренные народы были второсортными жителями. Так же и сейчас официально называется Российская Федерация, при этом с федеративным устройством она ничего общего не имеет. Современная Россия - это унитарное государство, очень центристского толка. Центр определяет, сколько получит регион финансирования. Регион определяет, сколько получат муниципалитеты финансирования. И де-факто ты каждый раз должен стоять с протянутой рукой и выполнять все условия для того, чтобы тебе что-то дали. И регионы, всё-таки, в том числе Бурятию, специально доводили до такого состояния, очень плохого финансового, чтобы была полная зависимость. И так было всегда вот уже много много веков. Ныне стало популярно романтизировать Царскую Россию и прекрасного Николая II. Но никто из них не думает насколько эти годы были кровавыми для этнических народов.

about it for fear of possible separatist sentiments and ethnic conflicts. Indigenous people are denied agency and are not treated as equals, as compatriots.” (Mariya, a Buryat activist)

Nevertheless, some activists shared the positive aspects of Russification as an instrument of Russian colonialism, such as the high level and importance of education regardless of gender and ethnicity. In particular, during the Soviet era, there was a strong emphasis on higher education, and this process was made a little easier for ethnic nationalities by offering quotas that allowed many to be eligible for university education.

It becomes clear from the activists’ statements that the history of the formation of modern Russia is exclusively based on positive aspects and disregards the reality of events, thereby misleading all residents as well as international society. Only the narrative that is convenient for the dominant structure is being presented, while the voices of the indigenous peoples themselves are being silenced and erased. The true history of the Russian colonization of North Asia is not discussed in Russia. This is one of the reasons why the concept of decolonization is poorly understood in Russian society, which is discussed in the next chapter.

### **5.3 Decolonization**

The topic of decolonization was already mentioned in the previous sub-topic. Therefore, this part discusses in more depth what experts-activists believe concerning this topic and the situation in their republics. The term decolonization is a relatively recent phenomenon in the Russian-speaking environment, so each activist has a different understanding of the concept’s meaning. In their responses, the activists expressed varying final objectives of decolonization; however, the ways to achieve them and the tools they used were similar. Activists from Buryatia described the meaning of decolonization for them as: “de-chauvinization”, “revision of historical memory and truth”, “federalization”, and “understanding own identity”. The following interview excerpts elaborate on these concepts and the vision and reflections of the activists.

“This word has several meanings, and everyone understands it immediately as separation. When I gave a speech in the European Parliament in June 2023, I spoke about “de-chauvinization” instead of “decolonization”. I guess that’s what I mean by the word - rejecting chauvinism, revising our own history, raising the

status of languages so that people can be themselves. At the same time, the basis for this is mutual respect. I really don't like this rhetoric of blaming all Russians. Stalin was not Russian, and neither is Shoigu. This thinking is absolutely chauvinistic. Decolonization is something that all representatives of all ethnic groups in the Russian Federation should work with.”<sup>19</sup> (Alexandra, a Buryat activist)

“In general, this is quite a new word for me. But as it seems to me now, I've been working on decolonization for a long time. I traveled to Buryat villages, filmed stories for my YouTube channel about how Buryats live, their successes, their problems, culture, national holidays, and language problems, and learned the language myself. Decolonization is the return of historical truth and the revival of historical memory. It is the recognition that one people oppressed another due to different circumstances. Decolonization is about regaining one's dignity. Many Russians are probably frightened by this word. We can just admit it, write truthful history books, and live in a post-colonial world. There is another aspect of decolonization, which is the independence of indigenous territories once colonized by Russians. A small percentage, but still, there are ethnic Buryats who want to regain their former independence because their coexistence with Russia has not led to anything good for these people. Russia is still an empire under the name of Federation but with terrible feudal fragmentation and absolute indifference to regions.”<sup>20</sup> (Anna, an activist from Buryatia)

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<sup>19</sup> Translated by the author, the original: У этого слова есть несколько значений, и все сразу воспринимают его как отделение. Когда я выступала в Европейском парламенте в июне 2023 года, я говорила о "дешовинизации" вместо "деколониизации". Наверное, именно это значение я и подразумеваю под этим словом - отказ от шовинизма, ревизия нашей собственной истории, повышение статуса языков, чтобы люди могли быть самими собой. При этом в основе всего этого лежит взаимное уважение. Мне очень не нравится эта риторика о том, что во всем виноваты русские. Сталин не был русским, и Шойгу тоже. Такое мышление абсолютно шовинистическое. Деколониизация - это то, над чем должны работать все представители всех этнических групп в Российской Федерации.

<sup>20</sup> Translated by the author, the original: В целом, это довольно новое для меня слово. Но, как мне сейчас кажется, я уже давно занимаюсь деколонизацией. Я путешествовала по бурятским деревням, снимала для своего YouTube-канала сюжеты о том, как живут буряты, об их успехах, проблемах, культуре, национальных праздниках, языковых проблемах, и сама учила язык. Деколониизация - это возвращение исторической правды и возрождение исторической памяти. Это признание того, что один народ угнетал другой в силу различных обстоятельств. Деколониизация - это восстановление собственного достоинства. Многие русских, наверное, пугает это слово. Мы можем просто признать это, написать честные учебники истории и жить в постколониальном мире. Есть и другой аспект деколонизации - это независимость территорий коренных народов, некогда колонизированных русскими. Небольшой процент, но все же есть среди этнических бурят, которые хотят вернуть себе былую независимость, потому что сосуществование с Россией не привело ни к чему хорошему для этого народа. Россия по-прежнему является империей под названием Федерация, но с ужасной феодальной раздробленностью и абсолютным безразличием к регионам.



“If you promote decolonization, the Kremlin immediately paints you with the label “separatist” which has serious consequences. Besides, not everyone in Buryatia supports separatism. The Buryat population is not even a majority, and there is a very large percentage of ethnic Russians. And if, for example, Buryatia secedes from Russia, what, for example, to do with them? That is why we do not stick to such a radical form of discussion. It is federalization because the population in these regions has the right to be represented, and people have the right to elect their leaders in these regions. As we can see, this is absolutely absent now. And the situation is not improving. People should stop feeling themselves as part of the imperial world and start seeing themselves as part of the democratic world because all those social problems that I, and I’m sure my colleagues too, have described before, nationalism, Nazism, discrimination, happen precisely because of imperialism.”<sup>21</sup> (Vladimir, a Buryat activist)

“Decolonization is overcoming the colonial or imperial mindset in Russian society, Russian leadership, and our own community. It is about enlightenment, understanding our identity as a colonized nation, the consequences, and devising ways to overcome them. I want to stress it’s by no means an anti-Russian movement. It shouldn’t be an anti-Russian movement, and there should be no revanchist sentiments or policies against Russians or any revenge-seeking attacks against Russia.” (Mariya, a Buryat activist)

The activists from Buryatia give diverse but, at the same time, very similar explanations for the term decolonization. However, they all confidently said one thing that the term does not mean, and that is hatred of Russians and a call for Russian repentance and other dramatic gestures. Decolonization is not a hostile process for the people of Russia but a stepping stone for improving the regions’ quality of life, development, and stability.

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<sup>21</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Если вы выступаете за деколонизацию, Кремль тут же навешивает на вас ярлык "сепаратиста", что грозит серьезными последствиями. Кроме того, не все в Бурятии поддерживают сепаратизм. Бурятское население даже не является большинством, и очень большой процент составляют этнические русские. И если, например, Бурятия отделится от России, то что, например, с ними делать? Поэтому мы не придерживаемся такой радикальной формы дискуссии. Это федерализация, потому что население этих регионов имеет право быть самим представленными, а люди имеют право избирать своих лидеров в этих регионах. Как мы видим, сейчас этого абсолютно нет. И ситуация не улучшается. Люди должны перестать чувствовать себя частью имперского мира и начать видеть себя частью демократического мира, потому что все те социальные проблемы, которые я, и я уверен, что мои коллеги тоже, описывали ранее, национализм, нацизм, дискриминация, происходят именно из-за империализма.



Sakha activists have similar descriptions of the term but have slightly different ideas about decolonization or, as already mentioned, the outcome of this process. They are frank and confident in their stance and present their arguments for thinking this way. According to them, decolonization is:

“Democratization, and self-determination, being able to decide in a referendum whether to become an independent republic. To have freedom of speech and choice. And as a result, to secede peacefully. It’s political, economic and psychological independence.”<sup>22</sup> (Evdokia, a Sakha activist)

“For me, decolonization is complete independence of the territory. Cultural, psychological, and economic freedom. Of course, it starts with exploring your own history, negative and positive experiences, recognizing your own identity, and it's a long way to go.”<sup>23</sup> (Interviewee 6, a Sakha activist)

This side-by-side comparison shows how the two republics, having been colonized and now having the same status in the country, have divergent visions of the goals of decolonization, which can be explained by the historical moments. The Yakut language is still preserved and used in families, uluses, and villages located in hard-to-reach areas, so they live in a secluded environment, maintaining a more or less traditional way of life and mentality. On the other hand, the population of Buryatia is primarily ethnic Russians who perceive decolonization as something anti-Russian and are afraid of the concept and the consequences for themselves, so most of the population would not choose secession and independence.

Nevertheless, their insights on how to accomplish decolonization coincide. According to activists, intellectual and educational work are the critical areas needed for decolonization. First and foremost, they pointed to Ukraine’s experience and how it decolonized, especially after the war began. According to the activists, Ukrainians have done a tremendous job in this regard, doing much more for the decolonization of Ukraine and even Russia itself than indigenous peoples themselves, based on the fact that Ukrainian channels and media have provided a lot of

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<sup>22</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Демократизация и самоопределение, возможность выбора на референдуме, быть ли независимой республикой. Иметь свободу слова и выбора. И, в результате, мирно отделиться. Это политическая, экономическая и психологическая независимость.

<sup>23</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Для меня деколонизация - это полная независимость территории. Культурная, психологическая и экономическая свобода. Конечно, все начинается с изучения собственной истории, негативного и позитивного опыта, признания собственной идентичности, и это долгий путь.

broadcasting time and other platforms for discussion on this topic, asking and being interested in indigenous peoples' opinions. Here is what Alexandra (a Buryat activist) had to say about this:

“Ukraine has been able to form and rebuild its identity. But Ukrainians in this regard usually joke that after their victory, they will put up a monument to Vladimir Putin as the founder of the Ukrainian national identity. After February 24, 2022, the youth switched to Ukrainian speech. They realized they were Ukrainians.”<sup>24</sup>

Each of the activists touched on the topic of Ukraine and how the nation encouraged the active formation and promotion of the decolonization movement and supported the indigenous population of Russia. Other examples mentioned were the experiences of countries such as Greenland, Australia, and Central Asia. Interviewee 6 (a Sakha activist), who studied the Greenland experience, including its ecology, argued that the two societies of Greenland and Sakha are similar in many aspects: climate, life, traditions, and nomadic lifestyle. However, she added the most significant difference between the two regions:

“They have Self-Government in Greenland now. They aspire and want to be independent, just like us. But they have specific plans and strategies and, most importantly, a shared understanding of their history. And, of course, they are part of a democratic country and society, compared to Russia, which the whole world has recognized and acknowledges that there was colonization. There should be recognition by the world community and by organizations. For this to happen, the indigenous peoples must understand, realize, and acknowledge it themselves.”<sup>25</sup>

Mariya (a Buryat activist) firmly stated that the lack of discussion on this topic distinguished all former colonial empires and Russia. This allowed the imperial ideology to persist in the Russian leadership and Russian society. She added:

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<sup>24</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Украина смогла полностью сформировать и воссоздать свою идентичность. Но украинцы по этому поводу обычно шутят, что после победы они поставят памятник Владимиру Путину как основателю украинской национальной идентичности. После 24 февраля 2022 года молодежь перешла на украинскую мову. Они почувствовали, что они украинцы.

<sup>25</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Сейчас в Гренландии действует самоуправление. Они стремятся и хотят быть независимыми, как и мы. Но у них есть определенные планы и стратегии и, самое главное, общее понимание своей истории. И, конечно, они являются частью демократической страны и общества, в отличие от России, где весь мир признал и признает, что была колонизация. Должно быть признание со стороны мирового сообщества и организаций. Чтобы это произошло, коренные народы должны сами это понять, осознать и признать.

“It is dangerous because Russia is a nuclear superpower with a medium-sized army, and they can invade, in their mind, their own rebellious provinces.”

Vladimir (a Buryat activist) commented very interestingly on this topic, stating, “First of all, it is necessary to start with yourself.”<sup>26</sup> In his opinion, many people do not want to begin with themselves. In particular, those who sit in the Kremlin. Like other activists, he agreed that this is lengthy and difficult work and should be carried out among the population of Russia. The history of the country and regions should be taught and presented correctly, along with the mistakes made. He added:

“If they are given all the information, they can draw the right conclusions. Decolonization has already started because we did not expect such an impact. Many Buryats are against the war, and many organizations have emerged to fight the Kremlin regime and their policies towards us.”<sup>27</sup>

Most importantly, all the activists spoke about the use of soft power and the need for patience since the decolonization process is a long one, and to achieve it and make it lasting, it is necessary to renounce violence and physical force, not to let it degenerate into extremism. Anna (an activist from Buryatia), speaking about the rejection of violent decolonization, said:

“Violence is what leads to wars. This civil war is going on in Russia now, in every family’s kitchen every day. There is already too much violence in the world; can’t we stop it?”<sup>28</sup>

Evdokia’s (a Sakha activist) words on this point are similar to Anna’s, and she also tried to explain the motivations of those who may be supporting riots, coups, and violent takeovers, saying:

“For so many years to experience hatred because of belonging to a different race and a different ethnic group, for using a different language, it leads to people

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<sup>26</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Необходимо начать с себя.

<sup>27</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Если им предоставить всю полноту информации, они смогут сделать правильные выводы. Деколонизация уже началась, потому что мы не ожидали такого эффекта. Многие буряты выступают против войны, появилось много организаций, которые борются с кремлевским режимом и его политикой в отношении нас.

<sup>28</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Насилие - это и есть причина войн. Сейчас эта гражданская война идет в России, в каждой семье, на кухне каждый день. В мире и так слишком много насилия, неужели мы не можем это прекратить?

wanting to solve the issue now and not wanting to wait and wanting to return “the favor”. But in this situation, you have to realize that we will then sink to the level of Putin and his associates, for whom violence is the way out of any situation.”<sup>29</sup>

Most of the experts pointed out that when speaking about the use of violence, it was critical not to forget about young people and argued that they should not be taught that violence is an option so that it does not automatically become their choice in all matters. According to the experts, youth are more involved in their activities than the older generation, as they have technological skills. However, experts noted that the word “decolonization” is rarely used by young people and still evokes negative associations. Nevertheless, the very essence of the decolonization process - self-recognition and revival of identity - is actively discussed and practiced.

Mariya (a Buryat activist) noted that the term decolonization is used mainly by people who have left Russia, as it is not safe to talk about it in Russia itself. In addition, Anna (an activist from Buryatia) commented that the topic of decolonization is relatively marginal because people are afraid to talk about it openly.

Vladimir (a Buryat activist) spoke positively about young people in the Republic of Buryatia and their activities. He assured that people do not give up protesting even in such difficult times.

“People protest in more or less safe forms, that is, print out leaflets, for example, what is VPN, so that people can use it for themselves to draw other information, not the one from the Kremlin. It turns out that many people are continuing their protest by staying in Russia. It’s difficult, of course, and the Kremlin makes it even more complicated, but it’s possible.”<sup>30</sup>

Experts from the Sakha Republic also highlighted the positive trends concerning decolonization among the younger generation. Then again, the term “decolonization” is not as

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<sup>29</sup> Translated by the author, the original: На протяжении стольких лет сталкиваться с ненавистью за принадлежность к другой расе, другой этнической группе, за использование другого языка - это приводит к тому, что люди хотят решить вопрос сейчас, не хотят ждать и хотят отплатить "за добро". Но в этой ситуации нужно понимать, что тогда мы опустимся до уровня Путина и его соратников, для которых насилие - это выход из любой ситуации.

<sup>30</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Люди протестуют в более или менее безопасных формах, то есть распечатывают листовки, например, что такое VPN, чтобы люди могли использовать их для получения другой информации, не той, что из Кремля. Получается, что многие продолжают свой протест, оставаясь в России. Это, конечно, сложно, и Кремль еще больше усложняет ситуацию, но это возможно.

popular as its core. However, according to the experts, Yakut names are gaining popularity, and more kids have native Yakut names. The youth actively explore their family's history and try to memorize the names of their seven ancestors, "7 fathers", as customary among Turkic-speaking nations. As Evdokia (a Sakha activist) commented:

"Young people want to preserve their identity and language first. That is why many are starting to learn the Yakut language"<sup>31</sup>.

The activists repeatedly emphasized the significance of decolonization for the enhancement of indigenous peoples' rights and the development of the national republics, specifically referring to Buryatia and Sakha, while also stressing that it is not extremism. They do not hold the most radical views of immediate secession through a bloody and violent coup d'état or seizure of power, breaking off all contacts with Moscow. Indeed, activists from the Sakha Republic spoke about understanding the term decolonization as independence. However, they did not call for rapid action towards secession but through reaching out to the population and holding a fair referendum.

In addition, based on the activists' answers, it is notable that a significant role is played by the youth of both republics, who unknowingly move towards decolonization, simply replacing the word with other synonyms. However, the essence of the process does not change. The interviews make it evident that the activists have a clear understanding of decolonization and realize that it is a gradual process but one that is essential for development and peace.

#### **5.4 Activists' experiences**

The experts further revealed what they have faced as activists in their struggle for justice and journey to end to the oppression of indigenous peoples' rights. Before analyzing this sub-theme and presenting the comments and statements of the activists, it should be recalled that they are all currently outside of Russia and, therefore, expressed their stories openly and dedicated a lot of time and attention to responding to interview questions regarding their personal experiences. According to them, it is particularly challenging for indigenous activists to be able to speak out about their rights inside the country. All activists had to leave Russia because they were prosecuted or persecuted, as described in the extracts of their statements.

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<sup>31</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Молодежь в первую очередь хочет сохранить свою идентичность и язык. Именно поэтому многие начинают изучать якутский язык.

Interviewee 6 (a Sakha activist) explained in her response that Russia was, until recently, a member of international organizations on indigenous peoples' rights, preserving everyday life and traditional knowledge, and environmental protection. However, not too long ago, she said, Russia withdrew from membership and affiliation and severed all relations and previous agreements. She also included some extremely relevant and important details:

“Indigenous peoples, being members of these organizations, were controlled by the Kremlin as to what to say and what topics could be covered. We were not allowed to cover certain topics. The situation is becoming even worse now. The current regime has isolated the indigenous peoples of Russia from the rest of the world, depriving them of platforms where many issues were discussed. Any statements are classified as a “call for separatism”, which is a criminal offense, by the way. I face prosecution and imprisonment for my views, comments, and even my current responses. We're back in the Soviet Union. Even the walls have ears. A family friend from the police told me it would be safer if I left.”<sup>32</sup>

Based on the activists' stories and a comparison of their statements, it is clear that Anna (an activist from Buryatia) was the last one among them to leave the country. At the time of the interview in early September, she had been out of Russia for six months. In her words, she was trying to fight for the truth inside the country, do her job as a journalist, and cover the realities of what was happening both for the Buryats inside the republic and the international audience about internal problems. She talked about her inner feelings then:

“I was doing my duty, my job, but in my heart, I was waiting for a knock on the door at 6 a.m. It was in the early morning that activists were visited and detained. I was worried about my family. So, I decided not to wait for that knock. I packed up and left, and it happened exactly six months ago.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Коренные народы, будучи членами этих организаций, находились под контролем Кремля в отношении того, что говорить и какие темы можно затрагивать. Нам не разрешали освещать определенные темы. Сейчас ситуация становится еще хуже. Нынешний режим изолировал коренные народы России от остального мира, лишив их площадок, на которых обсуждались многие вопросы. Любые высказывания квалифицируются как “призыв к сепаратизму”, что, кстати, является уголовным преступлением. Мне грозит преследование и тюремное заключение за мои взгляды, комментарии и даже за мои сегодняшние высказывания. Мы снова в Советском Союзе. Даже у стен есть уши. Друг семьи из полиции сказал мне, что будет безопаснее, если я покину страну.

<sup>33</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Я выполняла свой долг, свою работу, но в душе я ожидала того, что в 6 утра в дверь постучат. Именно рано утром к активистам приходили и задерживали их. Я переживала за свою семью. Поэтому я приняла решение не дожидаться этого стука. Я собрала вещи и уехала, и это случилось ровно шесть месяцев назад.

In comparison to other activists, Vladimir (a Buryat activist) left Russia relatively early, before the Russian army began its military operations in Ukraine. He also shared his experiences with law enforcement and what triggered his immigration.

“The law on foreign agents is clearly a tool for the Kremlin to jail and shut up all those who disagree with them. My mother worked for an international organization that was funded from abroad. That's when my mum started to be persecuted and pressured through me. Once she was captured and threatened that she and 18-year-old me would be imprisoned. After this incident, we left the country.”<sup>34</sup>

Evdokia (a Sakha activist) admitted that the war in Ukraine played a significant role in her activism. Having always been an environmental activist, she became increasingly vocal in other aspects of indigenous rights, and the war and mobilizations finally convinced her to pursue her activism despite all the bans and fears. She also spoke about her previous workplace:

“I worked as a teacher in a school and was involved in activism at the same time. Once the war started, it was impossible to work because they forced me to campaign for the Kremlin’s policy on mobilization and the war itself. Everything was blocked off, and those who disagreed were forced to quit.”<sup>35</sup>

Alexandra’s (a Buryat activist) situation is rather difficult; while other activists have experienced persecution and threats, Alexandra, being the founder of the anti-war foundation “Free Buryatia”, is on the list of foreign agents, on the federal wanted list for spreading fakes and is an unwanted person in the country. At the time of writing this thesis, she was sentenced in absentia to seven years imprisonment under the very article for spreading fake information, giving an interview about gathered evidence on Buryat and Russian soldiers (Meduza, 2023). She treated the situation with a bit of humor:

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<sup>34</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Закон об иноагентах - это очевидный инструмент Кремля, позволяющий сажать в тюрьму и затыкать рот всем, кто с ними не согласен. Моя мама работала в международной организации, которая финансировалась из-за рубежа. Именно тогда мою маму начали преследовать и давить на нее через меня. Однажды ее схватили и пригрозили, что ее и 18-летнего меня посадят в тюрьму. После этого случая мы уехали из страны.

<sup>35</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Я работала учителем в школе и одновременно занималась активизмом. Как только началась война, работать стало невозможно, потому что меня заставили агитировать за политику Кремля относительно мобилизации и самой войны. Везде перекрывали доступ, а тех, кто не соглашался, заставляли увольняться.

“I wonder what else they can come up with. I don't even know where to hang my medals.”<sup>36</sup>

Only Mariya (a Buryat activist) left the country not due to persecution but because of her work, as she is a professor at the University of Notre Dame in the United States. Nevertheless, she also had a lot to share. Working as a professor helped her to start writing and publishing research in English so that the world would recognize the other side of stories that could not be heard. She adds:

“It's completely volunteer work on my part. I have never been paid for anything I have done or published. I still have other commitments and the need to work as a computer scientist. Because of this, I may not be able to do as much, but I try to do my best.”

As highlighted earlier, the war in Ukraine has played a role in the manifestation of decolonial activism and agendas among indigenous peoples and beyond. The activists interviewed also have their own opinions on this matter. According to them, indigenous activists were among the first to speak out against the war, and, as Anna (an activist from Buryatia) claimed, Chechen indigenous activists voiced the imperial nature of the war and presented solid arguments. Other interviewed activists also talked about indigenous activists being the ones who both started discussing decolonization and decolonizing themselves. Earlier, this agenda was not spread, and opposition politicians also avoided speaking on this topic.

Interviewee 6 (a Sakha activist) expressed some grievances regarding the growing discourse that goes along with the imperial war narrative that “Russia is a terrorist country” and explained the reason for her anger.

“I will be honest. The whole world turned a blind eye to the crimes and the terrible deeds that Russia was doing towards its former nations, using them as a resource. The West is doing business with Russia despite the sanctions. Russia has a lot of our resources to continue this war. And who is sponsoring this? Where is the money coming from? Not us. We don't even have gas. All we get is environmental problems and poverty. Calling Russia a terrorist country

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<sup>36</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Мне любопытно, что еще они могут придумать. Я даже не знаю, куда девать свои медали.



automatically makes us all complicit. Indigenous people have been suffering under Putin's regime for years. We are not terrorists.”<sup>37</sup>

She shared these statements in support of decolonization and how important it is for indigenous peoples, that more activists have joined the movement and are vocal about Russia's use of indigenous lands, resources, and people.

Anna (an activist from Buryatia) added in her response the situation in Russia itself and the representation of indigenous voices. She assured that indigenous representatives have been “voiceless” for a very long time and that the state media have never interviewed them. Meanwhile, the independent liberal media looked right through them. According to her, as a journalist who has worked for local and federal channels, sharing her professional opinion, only people with Slavic facial phenotype and not Asiatic were interviewed. She further mentioned the efforts of indigenous activists to be heard:

“Now we are invited to such events, even to the European Parliament, but it all happens with a strong pressure and influx of requests from our side. At least Ukrainian media are calling us. I have often given them interviews, and my colleagues also talk a lot about Buryatia. We are grateful to the Ukrainian media who invited us and gave us a platform to tell them that we don't need to be demonized.”<sup>38</sup>

Mariya (a Buryat activist) recounted in her interview that since Buryats were blamed for the massacre in Bucha, Buryat activists had to quickly mobilize their resources and overwhelm not only the Western but, more importantly, the Ukrainian media with research and evidence. She added that they organized protests to make their voices heard. However, she argued that the problem is not being heard in the West but in Russia.

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<sup>37</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Я буду откровенна. Весь мир не обращал внимания на преступления и ужасные поступки, которые Россия совершала по отношению к своим бывшим народам, используя их как ресурс. Запад продолжает вести бизнес с Россией, несмотря на санкции. У России есть много наших ресурсов, чтобы продолжать эту войну. А кто спонсирует это? Откуда берутся деньги? Не мы. У нас даже газа нет. Все, что мы получаем, - это экологические проблемы и бедность. Назвав Россию страной-террористом, каждый из нас автоматически становится соучастником. Коренные жители страдают от путинского режима уже много лет. Мы не террористы.

<sup>38</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Сейчас нас приглашают на различные мероприятия, даже в Европарламент, но все это происходит при сильном давлении и большом объеме запросов с нашей стороны. По крайней мере, украинские СМИ нас зовут. Я часто даю им интервью, и мои коллеги тоже много говорят о Бурятии. Мы благодарны украинским СМИ, которые приглашают нас и дают нам площадку для того, чтобы рассказать о том, что нас не нужно демонизировать.

“It’s a huge problem because you have to go through a kind of psychological defense. The Russian majority, who we want to get through, tends to just take offense instead of starting to listen. I think it’s still possible because, as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “We ain’t what we oughta be. We ain’t what we want to be. We ain’t what we gonna be. But, thank God, we ain’t what we was.” We’re not who we used to be, are we?”

Vladimir (a Buryat activist) pointed out that decolonization became a more popular topic of discussion due to the media in Ukraine, which gave activists from Buryatia broadcasting time. However, he said, making their voices heard inside Russia is still a big challenge, particularly by the Kremlin.

“The problem is not us, but the Kremlin, because it silences not only indigenous voices but all voices except its own. Yet, we are finding solutions. With the current situation, we can cooperate with other indigenous peoples and the Russian opposition. For example, Ilya Yashin, a political prisoner, has posted our videos on his page. Karamurza, who is also now in prison, helped us by publicizing our position and reposting us. We are not alone, we work together. It even gave us more strength.”<sup>39</sup>

In her interview, Alexandra (a Buryat activist) discussed more about the fact that even when speaking the same language - Russian - it is difficult for indigenous activists to explain themselves and be understood by the Russian opposition. She said that this is due to their different social statuses and mentality and the environment in which they grew up and were socialized. Due to this, it is difficult for the two groups to understand each other, and there is absolute miscommunication. She explained her position this way:

“I am, in fact, a megaphone. I was and am privileged from the beginning compared to other indigenous people. Representatives of the Free Buryatia

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<sup>39</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Проблема не в нас, а в Кремле, потому что он подавляет не только голоса коренных народов, но и все голоса, кроме своего собственного. Тем не менее, мы находим решения. В нынешней ситуации мы можем сотрудничать с другими коренными народами и российской оппозицией. Например, Илья Яшин, политзаключенный, разместил наши видео на своей странице. Карамурза, который тоже сейчас находится в тюрьме, помог нам, опубликовав нашу позицию и сделав репост. Мы не одиноки, мы работаем вместе. Это даже придало нам сил.

Foundation quickly appear on Ukrainian TV channels and have the opportunity to promote our common agenda.

Another critical factor is that I am a journalist and have many connections with my colleagues in St. Petersburg. They usually cooperate with me and publish my articles and statements. I have more tools in this respect. Of course, in Russia, they do everything to ensure that people are not heard - this is a fact. We are the force that can bring down the Kremlin, so we are outlawed.

At the start of our activities, the Russian opposition supported us very actively, but not all indigenous activists had such an opportunity. For example, Navalny Life and Khodorkovsky's channel gave us airtime. Plus, I am very grateful for the support of Ukraine's former Prime Minister, Ikhanurov, an ethnic Buryat. Moreover, about 100 thousand people watched our interview with the former president of Mongolia. It was helpful for all Mongolian ethnic communities. Decolonization and discussions about it are going on, and our voices are getting through, too. We just have to accept that it's a long process.”<sup>40</sup>

As Alexandra already expressed, not all indigenous representatives have such an opportunity as she and the “Free Buryatia” Foundation, and Evdokia's (a Sakha activist) words confirm this. Her comments towards the Russian opposition were not so positive, but she also expressed her gratitude to the Ukrainian media for the opportunity to speak to their audience. She also mentioned that speaking out about something while in Russia itself is fraught with severe consequences and that it is a way to silence everyone, and for many people, this is the deterrent.

“Nobody wants to go to jail, and nobody wants to sacrifice themselves... We activists from Sakha and Yakutia find out about conferences and discussions ourselves and beg to attend them, but we are deliberately not invited... The

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<sup>40</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Я, по сути, мегафон. Я с самого начала была и остаюсь в привилегированном положении по сравнению с другими коренными жителями. Представители Фонда свободной Бурятии оперативно появляются на украинских телеканалах и имеют возможность продвигать нашу общую повестку дня. Еще один важный фактор - то, что я журналист и имею много связей с коллегами в Санкт-Петербурге. Они обычно идут мне навстречу и публикуют мои статьи и высказывания. В этом отношении у меня больше инструментов. Конечно, в России делают все, чтобы не слышать народ - это факт. Мы - сила, которая может свергнуть Кремль, поэтому мы вне закона. В начале нашей деятельности российская оппозиция очень активно нас поддерживала, но не у всех коренных активистов была такая возможность. Например, Навальный Life и канал Ходорковского предоставляли нам эфирное время. Кроме того, я очень благодарна за поддержку бывшему премьер-министру Украины Иханурову, этническому буряту. Кроме того, около 100 тысяч человек посмотрели наше интервью с бывшим президентом Монголии. Это было важно для всех монгольских этнических общин. Деколонизация и дискуссии о ней продолжаются, и наши голоса тоже пробиваются. Мы просто должны принять, что это долгий процесс.

Russian opposition itself has imperial ambitions; they don't hear us. They need indigenous peoples to criticize the Kremlin, but as soon as there is talk of decolonization, they stop listening to our voices.”<sup>41</sup>

It is evident from the interview responses of the experts that indigenous activists are promoting decolonization in Russia very actively and have started this process themselves. The war in Ukraine has influenced the activation of many indigenous decolonial movements. Moreover, the Ukrainian media have given activists the impetus and the platitude to “speak out”; even if the Russian population does not hear them, they are being heard by other people. In Russia itself, as it has been said, the voices of indigenous activists are silenced, sometimes even physically. However, it should be noted that the narrative about the bloody Buryats in Bucha gave an impetus to activists from Buryatia and offered them an opportunity to refute this news in the Ukrainian media space and declare their stance on the war and the Kremlin's actions.

Spivak's work and the inability of subalterns to speak applies to this situation with indigenous peoples. The Kremlin not only prevents indigenous voices from being heard but also punishes those who dare to speak out. The Kremlin is allowing only its propaganda to speak, and therefore, Russia only hears the voices of Putin and his associates. Based on the activists' responses, they are invited to conferences and debates in the West only through their own efforts and endeavors. However, the activists' main goal is to be heard in Russia by the entire population of the Russian Federation, not in the West. Since the fate of Russia is up to its population to decide, the process of decolonization requires the people to start with themselves and the population. They must want change in order for change to happen.

Additionally, it is more likely in the case of Anna and Alexandra from Buryatia, who have hybrid identities, that their statements reach the Russian opposition. They are heard because they are not perceived as indigenous activists and colonial others. Thus, this divide is blurred for them, creating more opportunities for activists from Buryatia to speak and cooperate with the Russian opposition. However, other indigenous peoples and their voices are still muted.

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<sup>41</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Никто не хочет попасть в тюрьму, и никто не хочет жертвовать собой... Мы, активисты из Саха и Якутии, сами узнаем о конференциях и дискуссиях и просимся на них, но нас намеренно не приглашают... У самой российской оппозиции имперские амбиции, они нас не слышат. Им нужны коренные народы, чтобы критиковать Кремль, но как только заходит речь о деколонизации, они перестают нас слышать.

## 5.5 Implications

Before discussing the political implications of decolonization and the possible scenarios that the activists interviewed foresee for their republics, it is necessary to take a moment to talk about Russia's current political system. As has been said before and more than once, Russia is officially a federation, but it does not fit the description of this term and has different characteristics, which is what these experts described. As Alexandra (Buryat activist) put it, there would not have been the war in Ukraine if Russia had been a federation since the president has no unilateral right to decide on such issues. Indigenous peoples would not have agreed to these actions. Alexandra further elaborated on her thoughts on the topic of the war in Ukraine without the consent of the indigenous peoples and its causes.

“The war for “Russian World”. Why should indigenous peoples die for the “Russian world”? An empire needs national populaces, solely for them to die for this empire. In my opinion, the biggest problem with the current government is that Vladimir Putin is a xenophobe and a Nazi. The denazification of Ukraine is the Russification of Ukraine. The indigenous peoples of Russia have experienced all of this firsthand.”<sup>42</sup>

In her responses, Mariya (Buryat activist) expressed the same concerns as Alexandra, stating that Putin does not have the right to “denazify Ukraine” because ethnic communities in Russia regularly face discrimination and xenophobic attacks. She also revealed that, as an ethnic woman, she feels double pressure and fear when she is in the Russian cities of the country. Her thoughts also touched on the nature of the Russian Federation, as she stated:

“It’s more of a unitary state because it has no actual sub-government, and I can say that having lived in the United States for several years, I know what real federalism is. I want Russia to have the same kind of federalism.”

Vladimir (Buryat activist) reflected much on the current government, the Russian concept of federalism, and their attitude towards indigenous people. The expert’s replies were similar and

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<sup>42</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Война за "русский мир". Почему коренные народы должны умирать за "русский мир"? Империи нужны национальные народы, исключительно для того, чтобы они умирали за эту империю. На мой взгляд, самая большая проблема нынешнего правительства в том, что Владимир Путин - ксенофоб и нацист. Денацификация Украины - это русификация Украины. Коренные народы России ощутили все это на собственном опыте.

covered the same issues as the discontent with the policies of the Kremlin and Putin, particularly concerning the indigenous republics. He noted that the mobilization of indigenous peoples to participate in the war in Ukraine for its denazification had resonated with the public. His statement summarises his answers, which shows how he feels about the government:

“For the People in the Kremlin, their state, their homeland is not Russia, it is directly Putin.”<sup>43</sup>

Similarly to Vladimir, Anna (an activist from Buryatia) said that she has no confidence in the current government, especially when it comes to issues of indigenous peoples and their fate. In her words, Moscow has been using the resources of the indigenous republics for years while erasing the identity of the people and killing their gene pool.

“The diamond region is Yakutia. It’s absolutely insane how people survive in minus 60 degrees Celcius in villages with no infrastructure while working to exhaustion.”<sup>44</sup>

The responses of Interviewee 6 (Sakha activist) are some kind of continuation and explanation of Anna’s phrase about survival and all the awfulness of what is happening. Like all other experts, she is sure that it is impossible to reach an agreement with the current Kremlin. She explained:

“We are now a federation that has failed. To not become extinct, we must take our fate into our own hands. The number of people in Yakutia has sharply decreased; for example, the Chukchi are only 670 people, the Dolgans 1006, the Yukaghirs 1281, the Evenes 15071, and the Evenks 21008. The people are dying out, and the state only aggravates the situation by raising taxes, prohibiting the use of land, and sending us to war. If in Ukraine there is genocide of the people, in Russia there is ethnocide of indigenous peoples.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Для кремлевских людей их государство, их родина - это не Россия, это напрямую Путин.

<sup>44</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Алмазный регион - Якутия. Это просто безумие, как люди выживают при температуре минус 60 градусов по Цельсию в деревнях без инфраструктуры, работая до изнеможения.

<sup>45</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Мы являемся федерацией, которая потерпела крах. Чтобы не исчезнуть, мы должны взять свою судьбу в собственные руки. В Якутии резко сократилась численность населения, например, чукчей всего 670 человек, долганов - 1006, юкагиров - 1281, эвенков - 15071, эвенков - 21008. Народ вымирает, а государство только усугубляет ситуацию, повышая налоги, запрещая пользоваться землей и отправляя на войну. Если в Украине идет геноцид народа, то в России этноцид коренных народов.

Concluding from all that had been said and experienced, Evdokia (Sakha activist) shared her vision of a possible scenario where decolonization would lead. She said that most of the Republic's residents shared her views regarding independence and secession from the Russian Federation. She explained it as follows:

“On September 27, 1990, the declaration of Yakutia's independence was adopted. On April 4, 1992, Yakutians passed their constitution in a referendum. However, Yakutia was bound by a federal treaty that prevented it from fully realizing its independence. In this short time, we have enjoyed this taste of freedom and elected a president who brought development to the region, albeit short-lived. We are a rich republic. We want to continue the development started by the Republic's first president so that resources and money from these resources would be spent on the well-being of the republic and its citizens, not on Muscovy... I have a very optimistic scenario, and there is no option to remain part of Russia in it. After Putin, the same imperialists will come to power who are currently not against imperialism but against the “emperor” - Putin.”<sup>46</sup>

Interviewee 6, who is also a citizen of the Sakha Republic, has the same views on the fate of her Republic, and the most beneficial option as a consequence of decolonization is secession and independence. She described the historical moments after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the achievements of the first president Nikolaev, and the positivity of these achievements for the small groups of Yakutia's peoples and the traditional tribes that still exist today. Speaking about independent Yakutia, the expert emphasized that she meant all people living in Yakutia, not only the peoples of the region but also other Slavic, Mongolian, and Caucasian peoples living in the region. She further commented on the need to remain in partnership with Russia but as a separate state. Interviewee 6, like all activists, expressed her concern that the next government, based on the Russian opposition, may have the same imperial and chauvinistic agenda as the current

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<sup>46</sup> Translated by the author, the original: 27 сентября 1990 года была принята декларация о независимости Якутии. 4 апреля 1992 года якутяне на референдуме приняли свою конституцию. Однако Якутия была связана федеративным договором, который не позволял ей полностью реализовать свою независимость. За это короткое время мы успели насладиться вкусом свободы и избрать президента, который привел регион к развитию, пусть и недолгому. Мы - богатая республика. Мы хотим продолжить развитие, начатое первым президентом республики, чтобы ресурсы и деньги от них шли на благополучие республики и ее граждан, а не на Москву... У меня очень оптимистичный сценарий, и в нем нет варианта остаться в составе России. После Путина к власти придут те же империалисты, которые сейчас выступают не против империализма, а против "императора" - Путина.

government and that there are no hundred percent guarantees of maintaining peaceful coexistence while remaining in the federation.

As analyzed earlier, the activists from Buryatia are in favor of federalism, not secession, like their counterparts from Yakutia. Vladimir (Buryat activist) gave practical arguments about the advantages of promoting federalism to support his position.

“Firstly, the population of Buryatia is predominantly ethnically Russian, who will not vote for secession. Second, if you favor federalism, you are not breaking the law. Third, if the protest is peaceful, it is more challenging to work with. We knew from the beginning that if you’re fighting against the Kremlin, it’s not a sprint; it’s a marathon.”<sup>47</sup>

In her interview, Mariya (Buryat activist) reflected on federalism as a possible outcome and consequence of Russian society’s decolonization and addressed the topic of gaining independence from Russia. She stated that the primary objective is more democratic leadership, and federalization gives people actual self-governance and the opportunity to use tax revenues from a fair share of the natural resources extracted in a given region. She added:

“Later, if the referendum results in some nations wanting independence, so be it—no forcible retention. In reality, immediate independence is not a silver bullet. It will not solve any of the existing problems. Look at Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Mongolia: they are independent countries but still look up to Russia.”

These responses and interview excerpts demonstrate that the activists hold different perceptions of the future political consequences of decolonization of Russian society and, specifically, their region. The activists from Sakha presented arguments in favor of ultimate separation from Russia and the establishment of an independent Yakutia with all peoples living on this territory regardless of ethnicity. The activists from Buryatia, in their turn, are cautious in their answers. They are well aware of the state of affairs in their Republic, the fact that when talking about secession, the majority of the population of Buryatia, i.e., non-ethnic Buryats, will be angered, so they use the word federalism and call for it.

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<sup>47</sup> Translated by the author, the original: Во-первых, население Бурятии - преимущественно этнические русские, которые не будут голосовать за отделение. Во-вторых, если вы выступаете за федерализм, вы не нарушаете закон. В-третьих, если протест мирный, то с ним сложнее работать. Мы с самого начала знали, что если бороться с Кремлем, то это не спринт, а марафон.



Nonetheless, they all expressed a lack of confidence in the possible changes in the attitude of the current authorities towards indigenous peoples and positive developments in the republics. The activists equally share the primary goal of decolonization, which is to transform society into a less xenophobic towards minorities and eradicate such tendencies in the future. Furthermore, the emphasis is on improving lives in the republics, ensuring freedom of speech and choice, and preserving traditional life and indigenous identities.

## **6. Conclusion**

This thesis attempts to shed light on the views and opinions of activists from the indigenous republics of Buryatia and Sakha on Russia's colonial legacy, including possible approaches to overcoming this historical burden. Emphasis is placed on exploring the internal views of indigenous communities on the topic of decolonization, particularly considering the fact that their voices often remain marginalized in both domestic and general discussions about Russia's future.

Moreover, the thesis aims to decentralize discourse and research on the future of Russia and to focus on indigenous voices on this issue, particularly those from the Buryatia and Sakha republics in North Asia. It is crucial to stress that the aim is not to give indigenous peoples a voice but to offer an academic platform that promotes the expression of their voices. Indigenous communities have a proven track record of expressing their voices, and it is essential to recognize and respect their agency. The goal of this paper is to encourage a more inclusive dialogue by providing a space for the expression of indigenous perspectives and views on decolonization and the future of the Russian Federation.

The section summarises the main findings of the analytical part, explains the connection to the theory, and provides an answer to the main research question. By using a deductive approach of qualitative content analysis based on the systematic literature review presented in the state-of-the-art and the theoretical part, five categories were identified: indigenous identity, Russian colonialism and its legacy, decolonization, activist experiences, and further implications.

The central findings from the first category on indigenous identity are the non-acceptance and emphasized discriminatory nature of the definition of indigenous peoples in Russian law. The Buryats and Sakha have a population of over 50,000, yet they consider themselves indigenous to North Asia because their people lived in this territory long before Russian