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

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.1 Purpose of the Research and Research Question

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.2 Overview of the Thesis

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

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

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

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

2. State-of-the-art

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

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

analyzing the existing academic articles and passages and describing the historical journey of the Tsarist Empire in relation to its Asian counterparts, the indigenous population of the lands that make up present-day Russia, and the long record of injustice and enslavement.

Furthermore, this piece examines the trends of “federalization” of the contemporary Russian state and the indigenous population’s unequal treatment and participation in decision-making processes. It discusses the beginning of Putin’s presidency and the changes it brought to the newly emerged “democratic” Russian state regarding constitutional and governmental amendments and their implications for indigenous peoples in the regions.

A handful of articles mention the experiences of the local indigenous peoples and the injustices they have faced under Russian rule, starting with the very definition of indigeness in the Russian constitution. As the debate about the future of Russia, a country that directly affects them, escalates, the lack of inclusiveness and opportunity to participate in decision-making and ownership processes needs to be discussed.

Indeed, there is a lack of scholarly articles discussing the socio-political future of Russia concerning recent events and the ongoing war featuring indigenous perspectives. The primary focus of this paper is on the decolonization of Russia, a process mentioned in all debates as being essential. The term’s meaning and its implementation implications will be thoroughly addressed. The emphasis is required to illustrate the relevance of the study in the contemporary context and to point out the gaps in the existing literature and the political world on the further development and future of Russia.

Despite the academic and media attention to this topic and their speculation about the future of Russia and possible decolonization due to the war in Ukraine and Russia's recent political actions, the purpose of this particular line of analysis used for the research is to seek the opinion of experts from the indigenous Buryat and Sakha communities in the Russian Federation on the issue, as they are an integral part of the state and have a central voice in the discussion. The main reasoning is that it is a matter of justice, explicitly ensuring long-term sustainability and securing the peace of different communities and cultures in the region. Thus, interviews with indigenous activists will be used to shed light on indigenous perspectives and their views on contemporary Russian imperial policies and actions, as well as on the possible future of their own communities. The following paragraphs of this chapter will show the differences in the

interpretation of key concepts related to Russian historical and contemporary practice to the academic narrative of the same terms.

2.1 Settler Colonialism

The origin of the word “to colonize” comes from the Latin verb “colon”, which means “farmer, tiller”. The word is closely related to the Roman practice of conquering a hostile territory and settling its citizens in their own country to work and inhabit the land. Later, the term “colonies” started to refer to those territories that were settled and where settlers established whole new communities over many generations but remained politically and economically subordinate to their former country of origin. The late nineteenth century and early twentieth century were marked by a new form of colonization with a “civilizing mission”, in which Western countries sought to educate the “barbaric” peoples of Africa and Asia (Ypi, 2013: 160-161). Fanon, describing the colonial period and the colonizing settlers, writes that the colonized, or as he uses the word, natives, are seen by the settlers as evil, devoid of human values, beauty, and morality. Rather, they are unconscious and amoral (Fanon, 1963: 41).

Nonetheless, the common understanding of colonialism is that it is a form of territorial expansion carried out by powerful states. Subsequently, expansion is followed by the displacement of the indigenous population of the colonies or, in some cases, the total extermination to create space for settler colonizers (Horvath, 1972: 46).

Moreover, the essence of colonialism is domination and a power relationship in which the colonizing states have control over the territory and the people who belong to it (Nicholls, 2011: 161).

2.1.1 Russian context

The official Russian discourse to current and former non-Russian entities is one of incorporation, annexation, and assimilation, thereby attempting to tone down the representation of the colonial nature of Tsarist Russia, in contrast to the Western terms of colonization and enslavement. The Soviet and Russian historians and politicians justify using these terminologies by arguing that the expansion of the Russian Empire was non-violent and voluntary, thereby denying the colonial nature. However, excerpts from historical journals prove otherwise. Millions of indigenous non-Russian, non-Orthodox Christian, and “uncivilized” subjects were

executed or expelled from their lands (Schorkowitz, 2019: 126). It shows the tendency to give neutral or even positive connotations of these terms compared to the negative ones, which, according to historians, could only be associated with the West.

Another example from the excerpt is the notes from the Tsarist generals, who sometimes compared Russia to Western empires, referring to colonized subjects and labeling Siberia as India or other colonized countries (ibid: 127).

Colonialism in the Russian experience certainly does not fit into the established pattern of colonial relations between the West and the Third World. Therefore, when it comes to Russia's colonial legacy, the terms "underarticulated colonialism", "hybrid empire", or "self-colonization" have been used (Bovdunov, 2022: 648). It is a comparatively new phenomenon that differs from other empires and still raises questions. It began in Tsarist Russia and carried on into Soviet Russia. Foreign lands and cultures were colonized and later became integral to the empire. The famous writer Fyodor Dostoevsky, in his diaries, expressed the common opinion regarding the conquest and expansion of territories towards Asia: "In Europe, we were hangers-on and slaves, while in Asia we shall be the masters. In Europe, we were Tatars, while in Asia, we are the Europeans. Our mission, our civilizing mission in Asia, will encourage our spirit and draw us on" (Schorkowitz, 2019: 127, Dostoevsky, 1881: 509). The statement represents the prevailing beliefs of the leaders and intellectuals of the Tsarist Russian Empire, who advocated the conquest and exploitation of territories in Asia and presented themselves as colonizers. It highlights and provides a holistic explanation and ambition for their civilizing mission in Asia, emphasizing and pointing to the superiority and dominance of Tsarist Russia over the new territories, especially viewing themselves as "master" and continuing this hierarchical dichotomy of West and East by painting one as superior in status and the other as inferior. Dostoevsky's commentary provides a glimpse into the consciousness of the Tsarist Empire as colonizers of Asia, their attitude towards the "new" territories, and the indigenous people who had lived for centuries in these territories.

Despite the Bolsheviks' promises to liberate many peoples of Tsarist Russia and grant them their sovereignty, the USSR became yet another "People's prison". The USSR did not eliminate Russian imperialism and colonial policy but established a regime that retraces the steps of its predecessor and can be described as the "communal apartments" that were famous in the Soviet period because they have fewer rooms, are completely packed, and consequently residents have fewer rights and fewer votes (Schorkowitz, 2019: 131). Such accommodations mirror the

realities of Soviet colonialism in the best possible way, where people had no fundamental rights and voices, with places and rooms granted by the party and the leadership, and subject to confiscation at any time.

2.2 Federation

A federation is a specific type of federal political system in which, under the Constitution, the central and federal entities are not bound to subordinate each other. The constitution grants the units sovereign powers and gives them the right to appeal directly to their citizens in the conduct of legislative, executive, and fiscal powers. Thus, the residents of these entities have the right to vote and elect each type of authority as they see fit. Another major aspect of the definition of a federation is the representation of various regional opinions in decision-making on federal policy (Watts, 2008: 9).

Consequently, there is no pronounced hierarchy in a federation, where the center dominates the subjects, manipulating the decision-making mechanism of the constituents and forcing them to comply against their political will.

Scholar Olivier Beaud, in a continuation of his work on federation theory, “Federation and empire: About a conceptual distinction of political forms”, agrees on the implication of the equivalent relationship, including equal treatment of citizens, between the subjects and the center comparing it to an empire. He claimed that a federation is not merely about free will but rather suggests member states’ political existence and autonomy (2019: 1206).

In a federation, the voluntary consent of citizens is essential, as well as compliance with the constitution as the fundamental authority. Therefore, the legitimate citizen representatives of all federated entities, whom the citizens elect, have the right to participate in political decision-making also through an open political debate on significant issues in order to avoid centralization of power and implement a system of checks and balances (Watts, 2008: 18). However, the interpretation of this term considerably differs in Russia.

2.2.1 Russian context

Since the beginning of his presidency in 2000, Putin has worked to strengthen the vertical line of political power in which the president is at the top of the hierarchy. He has implemented

various alterations to the existing structure and measures to restructure the federal and, most importantly, the regional governments (Oliker et al., 2009: 9).

Thus, Putin's presidency has been characterized by a high degree of consolidation of power in the presidency. The Russian state is characterized as "extremely centralized", with the high possibility of becoming an autocracy if the current course of neglecting the diverse interests of ethnic minorities and excluding them from involvement in state governance continues (Gosart, 2018: 203-205). Moreover, like any other branch of power under Putin, the judiciary does not function as an independent entity but is increasingly under the influence of the Kremlin and designed to serve the interests of centralized power (Oliker et al., 2009: 14).

Moreover, Putin and his administration have made several significant changes to federal laws that strongly affect the rights of autonomous republics and regions. One example is the abolition of quotas to represent indigenous communities in the subject administrative bodies. Previously, this law had supported representatives of ethnic minorities, whose participation in legislation and decision-making processes was ensured through single-mandated constituencies (Gosart, 2018: 209-210). These legislative changes affect and limit indigenous regions' political rights and autonomy. Moscow appoints heads of constituent subjects, as well as prosecutors, judges, and other officials, displacing elected politicians from their positions at the local, regional, and national levels. These appointed governors serve the interests of the central government rather than the people, advancing their political careers, enabling the central government to profit from resource-rich indigenous territories, and creating obstacles to indigenous and ethnic minorities' struggle for their rights and representation in decision-making for the development of the subjects (ibid: 211-212).

In addition to weakening the autonomy and representation of the federal subjects, the president has the power to dissolve regional legislatures in case they fail to approve, within three readings, laws directly delegated by the federal government (Oliker et al., 2009: 15).

Basically, Russia's division of power, as well as its current treatment of its indigenous population, are similar to that of the USSR, despite regime change and a formal course towards federalism. These alterations in the attitude of the federal authorities do not create or support politically and culturally autonomous communities within ethnic minorities as equal subjects of the federation. Today, indigenous groups remain heavily dependent on federal aid and services while their rights are violated and their voices are suppressed. The inability of these communities

to make decisions about their political, economic, and social future is due to Russian policies and governance that are entirely contrary to the basic principles of a country that has declared itself a multicultural federation (Gosart, 2018: 215-216). The case of Russia and the aforementioned features of Russia as a federation directly contradict the basic principles of the federal form of government. In Russia, decision-making power remains highly centralized, without an authentic voice for its constituent entities, whose citizens have no representation of their interests and are in an unequal position.

As Shorkowitz stated in his article, Putin's regime continued the two previous colonial empires' methods of using patrimonial power to consolidate control, assert and revive Russia's status as a great power, and re-establish competition for territory along its borders. Modern Russia has once again become an empire (2019: 138). Therefore, the decolonization of Russia must be an ongoing phenomenon.

2.3 Decolonization

Decolonization is viewed as a broad concept that includes actions that end such phenomena as imperialism and colonialism. In the most common and traditional perspective, the process is also known simply as "flag independence", whereby a dependent country achieves sovereignty and constitutional independence from its former colonizer. Nonetheless, the definition of the term "decolonization" needs to include the social, political, and economic legacy as well as the impact of the former colonial relationship and past not only on colonized countries but also on imperial powers (Collins, 2015: 1). In Fanon's understanding, decolonization implies a call to question and challenge the colonial situation. He used the phrase "the last shall be first and the first last" to explain the process more deeply and to eliminate the colonial hierarchy in which the colonizers dominate the colonized (Fanon, 1963: 36).

The term "decolonization" peaked in the 1960s with the rapid decline of European overseas empires. By this time, the number of UN member states had risen to 117, driven by the independence of former colonies as a result of decolonization. The legal independence of the Global South cannot be seen as the only time of decolonization but rather as a restructuring of the international system and world politics. The essential foundations of decolonization are the principles of nationhood or "self-determination". These two concepts largely contributed to the modern idea of decolonization, democratic will, and sovereignty. World War II accelerated the

processes of decolonization, which by then had been only partially realized. The overextension of empires, the large debts associated with the war, the rise of nationalist forces, and the weakening and undermining of imperial control enabled colonized peoples to decolonize and escape Western colonial domination (Collins, 2015: 2-4).

Fanon asserted that colonizers and settlers had committed crimes against colonized communities for centuries, using methods such as deportation, slavery, and mass murder to increase their wealth, gather and use resources, and establish power dominance. Even after their so-called “withdrawal from the territories”, the damage remained tangible (Fanon, 1963: 100). Therefore, the process of decolonization was necessary for colonized peoples to regain independence and control over their land and resources and use them for the development of their countries and nations.

Another understanding of decolonization can be through a concept explained by the Kenyan scholar, novelist, and literary theorist Ngũgĩ wa Tiong’o “decolonizing the mind”. In this book, he argues that the most effective and decisive way of colonization is to dominate the mentality of colonial subjects, which can be done through control of culture, how they perceive themselves of the world, their position, and their value (Ngũgĩ, 1981: 17).

Many theorists and scholars support Ngũgĩ’s position that the way out of colonization is decolonizing consciousness, eliminating colonial belief systems, and the ability to recognize, accept, and rediscover one’s Self. Furthermore, it is argued that decolonization must begin with reducing fear in their consciousness as the key to liberation (Kgatla, 2018: 151). Fanon supplements that the process of decolonization is called for and demanded, i.e., absolutely necessary. The only successful way to decolonize is to completely change the social structure, as well as the consciousness and lives of colonized men and women (Fanon, 1963: 34-35).

Simply put, decolonization of consciousness means drawing attention to and getting rid of colonial thinking, where a particular group can escape responsibility by perpetuating oppressive practices that are harmful to others (Bresciani, 2020: 27).

2.3.1 Russian Context

As Alexander Etkind argues in his work on Russian colonialism, Russian academics and historians perceive Russian colonization as a welcoming process of expanding the territories of the homeland and Russian peoples. At the same time, Western colonization is portrayed as a

brutal military conquest and, naturally, in a negative way. Thus, from their perspective, decolonization does not apply to the case of Russia; it is logically possible only in relation to the West (Spivak et al., 2006: 835; Etkind, 2001: 64-65). In the same way, the Soviet Union, in its foreign policies, preached about decolonization and portrayed itself as a leading fighter for it. However, this applied only to Western colonies in Asia and Africa (Schorkowitz, 2019: 131).

Succinctly, it is clear that in Soviet times, Soviet scholars and politicians used the notion of decolonization in their speeches and publications and strongly advocated for it. However, the term was never intended to be used to its own subjects and indigenous communities - the colonies, but only in relation to the colonies of the West.

2.4 Indigenous Peoples

According to the definition taken from the Convention 169 on Indigenous Peoples and Tribal People, the terms “indigenous peoples” and “tribes” refer to people whose “social, cultural and economic conditions distinguish them from other sections of the national community, and whose status is regulated wholly or partially by their own customs or traditions or special laws or regulations”, as well as to indigenous people in independent countries - due to “their descent from the population which inhabited the country, or geographical region to which a country belongs at the time of conquest or colonization or establishment of present state boundaries and who, irrespective of their legal status, retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions”. (Libakova & Sertakova, 2015: 115; Indigenous Peoples and Tribal People, 1989: Article 1).

2.4.1 Russian Context

The researchers studied the concept of indigenous peoples in Russian conditions and noted that the understanding of this term by the public and political authorities is different from the academic concept formed in the West. The reason may be that in the Soviet era and post-Soviet Russia, the perception of Tsarist Russia has changed over the years. Therefore, it creates problems in determining the status of indigenous peoples and which groups belong to that status (Libakova & Sertakova, 2015: 115).

According to the legislation of the Russian Federation, the official term and status of “indigenous peoples” or “malye korennyye narody” in Russian (small-numbered native people)

relate only to a small part of the indigenous population, consisting of multinational Russia. An important aspect is an emphasis on the word “small”, as only an ethnic community with a population of 50,000 or less can benefit from the status and privileges funded by the government. There is also a geographical limitation of official status, as it relates only to those whose historical homeland is North Siberia and the Far East (On Guarantees of the Rights of Indigenous Minorities of the RF, 1999: Article 1; Gosart, 2018: 197). There is no consensus listing of all ethnic groups that identify themselves as indigenous to the land that is now considered the Russian Federation. However, the Russian classification of the term "indigenous", which includes only the small communities of Northern Siberia and the Far East, significantly limits and excludes many other, more numerous groups. Thus, for the purposes of this thesis, the concept of "indigenous population" is used in an international academic interpretation and does not centre on the Russian constitutional definition.

Although there are 41 ethnic minorities in the Russian Federation, ethnic Russians make up the majority of 80 percent of the population, which is more than 110 million people, according to the latest officially published 2010 population census with ethnic divisions. Only four ethnic minorities in Russia have more than a million people. The Tatars are 5 million, the Chuvashis 1.6 million, Bashkirs 1.6 million, and Chechens 1.1 million (Rosstat, 2010; Heinemann-Grüder, 2013: 7).

The current policies and attitudes of the Russian state towards indigenous peoples and minorities derive from a set of national measures and regulations of the USSR towards non-Russian cultures and peoples. They are based on the consciousness and understanding of the inferiority of non-Russian communities and dependence on central Moscow in all aspects (Gosart, 2018: 193-194). Additionally, the USSR did not ratify Convention 107 of the International Labor Organization, claiming that it only concerned countries, former colonies, and former empires, indicating that the Soviet Union did not represent itself as a colonial power in any way. The topic of indigenous peoples' rights was banned, and no open discussion was allowed (ibid: 195). Convention 107, “On the Protection and Integration of Indigenous and Other Tribal and Semi-Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries”, is regarded as the first attempt to target and reflect Indigenous peoples' rights in international law. This convention covers such basic issues as the right to land, working conditions, health, and education. Later, after much negotiation and expert pressure, Convention 169 was tabled and adopted in 1989, but, as with the

previous convention, it has not been ratified by Russia. The difference is that under the Convention, indigenous peoples are treated as political subjects with rights, duties, and conscience (Kryazhkov & Garipov, 2020: 2-3).

Convention 169 “On Indigenous and Tribal Peoples” in article 1 paragraph 2 includes the right of Indigenous peoples to self-identification as indigenous, in article 3 paragraph 1 the right to freedom from discrimination, in article 6 paragraph 2 the right to participate in decision-making processes, in article 7 paragraph 1 the right to determine their own priorities for economic, social and political development, in article 14 paragraph 1 the right to land ownership and in article 15 paragraph 1 the right to natural resources belonging to their land (1989).

Moreover, the Russian Federation did not vote when adopting the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Thus, the country and its authorities do not recognize the international provisions and instruments on the rights of indigenous peoples and are only subject to Russian legislation, which has a very limited concept of indigenous peoples and even more limited input (Gosart, 2018: 195).

Even historically, indigenous knowledge and perceptions have not been considered or taken into account as a basis for legislative power and changes affecting indigenous rights, liberties, and justice. The federal government appoints official representatives in the regions and decides on the limited rights granted to indigenous peoples. Thus, the country’s indigenous people have no voice of their own (ibid: 193). This assertion can be supported by examples of the federal government's neglect of the needs of indigenous communities.

For instance, the legislative changes regarding indigenous rights force indigenous communities to lease territories to carry out their cultural practices and compete with companies licensed to use territories originally designated for traditional community activities. In addition, these companies are exempt from any obligation to the communities and territories they use and can cause environmental damage through their activities without any legal penalties (ibid: 205-206).

These changes further worsen the rights of indigenous communities by reducing the funds allocated from the budget for the needs and development of indigenous communities and by eliminating the national bodies responsible for their well-being. In 2015, the Federal Agency for Nationalities was created to include indigenous peoples in its work. The Agency is directly subordinate to the president. In their program for 2017-2025, only 7 percent of the budget is

allocated to indigenous communities' issues, compared to, for example, 10.5 percent of the budget allocated to the prevention of extremism (ibid: 207-208). These numbers show the tendency of the Agency and the authorities to ignore indigenous peoples' needs.

Thus, Indigenous peoples are denied self-determination by the Kremlin regime and are not allowed any degree of autonomy over their social and political issues (ibid: 200). These are the two core paragraphs that are included in ILO Convention 169 and are the fundamental rights of indigenous peoples.

2.5 Right to Self-determination

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples recognizes their right to self-determination, which means “freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development” (UNDRIP: Article 3). Self-determination can thus be seen as a bottom-up approach to development, which is significant for indigenous peoples because it allows them to exercise their fundamental human rights in determining their own political, social, and economic affairs (Cepinskyte, 2019: 279). In essence, self-determination is a tool for enabling and empowering indigenous communities to make their own decisions to benefit community life, where their voices can be heard and considered.

2.5.1 Russian Context

Russia, predictably like its predecessor, the Soviet Union, abstained from voting on the UNDRIP. Thus, Russian law concerning indigenous peoples avoids using the term “self-determination” and formally acknowledges the right to “self-government” instead. In general, the concept of self-determination is rarely discussed in public discourse because of its association with separatism and extremism (Rohr, 2014: 16). Crucially, the UNDRIP explicitly states that the declaration does not implicate an encouragement to undermine and attack “the territorial integrity or political unity of sovereign and independent States” (Article 46 (1)).

In light of the aforementioned substitution of the concepts of “self-determination” and “self-government” in Russian law, it is crucial to understand the difference between these terms and their implementation. As discussed earlier in this section, self-determination is considered an inalienable human right of indigenous communities in the UNDRIP Declaration (Article 3). It is a protective measure for indigenous peoples against possible infringement of their rights as a

minority by the majority. However, self-government is not recognized by governments as a fundamental right of the people and is a privilege granted by the State. It implies participation in democratic processes where the majority rules when, in fact, indigenous peoples are often a political minority and do not have access to an equal role in decision-making, thus making participation in democratic processes impossible. Furthermore, unlike self-determination, self-government does not guarantee indigenous communities control over land and natural resources (Daytec, 2013: 31).

When it comes specifically to the Russian context, the highly centralized power of the state contradicts an understanding of self-determination where indigenous communities play the role of decision-making agents and determine their political activities.

In 2012, the Russian State Duma passed a federal law “Concerning the Introduction of Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation Regarding the Regulation of Activities of Non-Profit Organisations Performing the Functions of a Foreign Agent” commonly referred to as the “foreign agents” law, where “a non-profit organization that engages in political activities in Russia and receives funding or property from foreign organizations or citizens may be recognized as a foreign agent” (Article 2 b). This term has a tinge of stigmatization and is similar in meaning to the Soviet term “foreign spy”. After the law was passed, the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON), the largest civil society organization for the protection of the rights, interests, and representation of indigenous peoples, openly discussed the fact that organizations would either have to lose international funding or register as “foreign agents”, which would jeopardize their relations with regional authorities and partners. As a result, the Russian Ministry of Justice suspended RAIPON’s activities and agreed to resume them only if a government favorite, who was a member of Putin’s political party, was elected chairperson (Cepinskyte, 2019: 276-277). In this way, the government has limited indigenous communities’ political activities and participation in representing indigenous rights, becoming the sole representative and decision-maker and making even self-government barely possible.

As already stated, without rights to land and rights to natural resources, there can be no right to self-determination, as in the case of Russia. According to the Russian Federation’s Constitution, much of Russia’s land and subsoil remains under state control. This means that while indigenous communities are given the right to use the land and its resources, the right of ownership remains with the state (Suliandziga & Sulyandziga, 2020: 7).

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper applies postcolonial theory to describe the dynamics of colonial Russia with its indigenous constitutions, the ongoing impacts of colonialism, and the power structure of dominance in contemporary Russia, as well as to accentuate the perspectives of ethnic minorities and their experience.

Postcolonialism indicates that colonial power relations have never ended and tend to re-emerge. Despite the prefix post, which alludes to the formal end of control, domination, and imperialism, colonial structures remain present and determine the contemporary politics of power relations. It is an ongoing work of analyzing the colonial legacy for a present, not fully decolonized society (Wilkens, 2017: 2).

Fanon, a prominent postcolonial theorist, insists that power dynamics do not transform after the formal removal of colonial power and domination persists even in liberated countries. He points out that *de jure* independence is neither a solution nor will it eliminate any of the existing problems, as people will keep starving, and the national regime will further constrain people, leaving them even more vulnerable. He further argues that some countries refuse to endure such a situation and seek help from the former colonial power, which in turn proceeds to exploit its position and engage in treaties that only serve to strengthen their domination further. Thus, the former colonies become dependent again on the first-world countries, the former colonial power (Fanon, 1963: 97-98). Therefore, postcolonial studies focus on the legacy of the colonial past, the power and domination of the former colonizers and the colonized, and the reenactment of these hidden processes (Wilkens, 2017: 2).

Fanon dedicated his works to studying and calling for the fight for decolonization in his country, Algeria. In his terminology, decolonization refers to the urgency of challenging the colonial situation and reclaiming power and agency (Fanon, 1963: 36).

Bogaerts and Raben, in their study of empires and decolonization in Africa and Asia, outline decolonization in the same vein as the breakdown of colonial relations. They use it as a synonym for withdrawal and dispossession and as a process of transferring power back to indigenous peoples (2012: 3). Therefore, they presumed that decolonization is a pathway to escape the colonial relations and completely put an end to empires.

The central argument of Fanon's writings and analysis is the necessity for violence. He advocates that to change the status of the colonized as second-class citizens, any means are to be

used, including the phenomenon of violence. Violence has always been present in the colonial world and used to destroy the social forms of the natives and subjugate them, erasing their identity. He insists that colonialism is violence in itself. Therefore, it can only be countered by greater violence (Fanon, 1963: 36, 40, 60).

Bhabha, another pillar of postcolonial theory, disagrees with Fanon and his description of the colonized and the colonizer as two opposing and distinctive identities. Fanon, in his explanation of the process of decolonization, affirms that it can be characterized as “the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature, which in fact owe their originality to that sort of substantification which results from and is nourished by the situation in the colonies” (Fanon, 1963: 35). However, Bhabha rejects the binary division of identities. He claims that identities, especially the colonial, are heterogeneous (Bhabha, 1994: 2). Identities are constructed and reborn in the interaction between the colonizers and the colonized (Wilkins, 2017: 6).

Despite his complex use of language, in his book “The Location of Culture”, he proposes the crucial idea of cultural hybridity for postcolonial theory. Bhabha argues that a new hybrid identity stems from blending elements of two cultures or worlds - colonized and colonizer - which fundamentally questions any essentialist and distinct cultural identity. Hybridity is presented as an opposition to the belief in the unchanging and fixed nature of culture and identity (Fuss, 1991: xi). He believes that cultural identity is not a fixed unit but is constantly in the process of change and transformation.

In his logic, it is essential to understand that the accepted dichotomies of identities reproduce power relations. He emphasizes that colonial discourse is still used in colonized societies, which creates hybrid forms of identity. This hybrid identity shapes social, political, economic, and other spheres of human life (Wilkins, 2017: 5-6). Hybridity, for Bhabha, “is a sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal” (Bhabha, 1994: 112). However, in Bhabha’s understanding, power structure and hierarchy are present in his notion of hybridity. Reproduction and repetition of dominant structures is also a form of control. In this context, the colonized can become agents who challenge colonial structures but cannot leave the hegemonic discourse altogether (Wilkins, 2017: 6). In his explanation of “hybridity”, Bhabha aims to end the stereotypical racial dichotomy of the colonized and the colonizer as to signify the complex nature of this relationship. Postcolonial theory addresses the effects of colonialism,

particularly the experiences of subaltern subjects of colonization, by explaining the cultural, social, and political relations between the historical colonial past and the contemporary colonial narrative. Furthermore, postcolonialism analyses the changes brought by postcolonial subjects' cultural, social, and political consciousness to make sense of the identity of the so-called self and their worldview beyond the dichotomy of colonizer and colonized (Burney, 2012: 44-45).

The term “subaltern” was first introduced by the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci. In his interpretation, subalterns are understood as lower-class people or groups of people subjected to the hegemonic domination of the ruling elite class. They are deprived of basic rights to participate in decision-making mechanisms, unlike members of the ruling class (Louai: 5). Evidently, the subalterns are perceived to be the opposite of the ruling class, being completely under its influence and having no political agency. However, they do not remain inactive but rather initiate actions against the dominant class to fight for their rights (Gramsci, 1971: xxxvii). Gramsci, at the time, labeled workers and peasants as subalterns because they were under the oppression of the fascist party. He was interested in exploring the consciousness and culture of the subaltern classes to make their voices heard, as historical narratives were controlled and shaped by the ruling class. He firmly believed that the subordinate classes, as compared to the ruling class, had an equally complex history. However, only one was officially recognized. According to Gramsci, the reason is that the history of the subalterns lacks unity, is episodic, and remains influenced by hegemonic narratives even after quitting the system. All this has an impact on the inability of the subalterns to represent themselves adequately (Louai, 2012: 5). The only possible solution, for Gramsci, to obtain the ownership of representation, fundamental rights, and inclusion in decision-making is a process of “permanent” victory, which means breaking down the master-slave relationship and mentality. It has to happen by liberating the consciousness of subordinated subaltern groups from the dominant class's cultural and historical hegemonic domination (Gramsci, 1971: 55; Louai, 2012: 5).

Spivak, another notable postcolonial theorist, expands on Gramsci's concept of the subaltern in her paper “Can the Subaltern Speak?”. She begins her essay by arguing, “Some of the most radical criticisms coming out of the West today is the result of an interested desire to conserve the subject of the West, or the West as Subject”. Spivak's central line of reasoning is that the construction of knowledge is Eurocentric and subjective, with intellectuals ultimately preserving the subject of the West in their literature and constructing it as universal and

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

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

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

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

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

4. Methodology

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

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

4.1 Expert Interviews

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

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

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

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

4.1.1 Selection of Interviewees

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

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

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

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

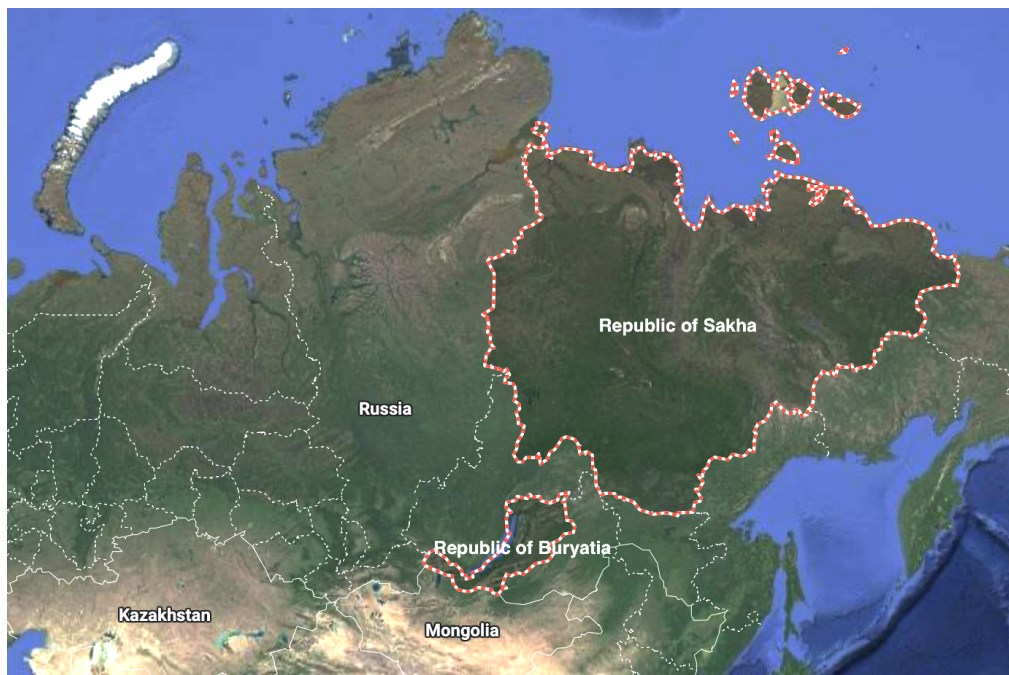
All six activists are currently active both online and offline. Almost all of the participants in the study identify as women, except for Vladimir.

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

4.2 Qualitative Content Analysis

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

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

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

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

4.3 Challenges

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

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

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”³. 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,

³ 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.”⁴

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

⁴ 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."⁵

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)."⁶

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.

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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.”⁷

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,

⁷ 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.”⁸

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

⁸ 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.”⁹

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”¹⁰.

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.”

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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.”¹¹

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.”¹²

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.”¹³

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

¹¹ 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.

¹² 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.

¹³ 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.”¹⁴ (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.”¹⁵ (Anna, an activist from Buryatia)

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ 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.”¹⁶ (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.”¹⁷ (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

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ 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.”¹⁸ (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

¹⁸ 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.”¹⁹ (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.”²⁰ (Anna, an activist from Buryatia)

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ 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.”²¹ (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.

²¹ 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.”²² (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.”²³ (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

²² 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.

²³ 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.”²⁴

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.”²⁵

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:

²⁴ 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.

²⁵ 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.”²⁶ 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.”²⁷

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?”²⁸

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

²⁶ Translated by the author, the original: Необходимо начать с себя.

²⁷ 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.

²⁸ 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.”²⁹

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.”³⁰

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

²⁹ 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.

³⁰ 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"³¹.

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.

³¹ 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.”³²

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.”³³

³² 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.

³³ 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.”³⁴

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.”³⁵

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:

³⁴ 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.

³⁵ 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.”³⁶

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

³⁶ 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.”³⁷

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.”³⁸

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.

³⁷ 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.

³⁸ 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.”³⁹

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

³⁹ 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 сделал 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, Ikhannurov, 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.”⁴⁰

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

⁴⁰ 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.”⁴¹

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.

⁴¹ 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.”⁴²

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

⁴² 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.”⁴³

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.”⁴⁴

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.”⁴⁵

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

⁴⁴ 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.

⁴⁵ 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.”⁴⁶

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

⁴⁶ 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.”⁴⁷

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.

⁴⁷ 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

colonization and occupation. Under the influence of external factors in the wake of colonization, such as the forced Russification of indigenous peoples, the displacement of substantial parts of the population, and internal migration in search of better living conditions, hybrid identities have emerged.

The second category outlines the essence and nature of the conquest of the indigenous territories of Siberia, claiming that it was never a voluntary incorporation into the Russian Empire but a violent and forcible colonization by Tsarist Russia. Despite the political, economic, and social transformation of the Russian Empire into the Soviet Union, the nature of Moscow's relationship with the indigenous republics remained the same, which persists in the modern Russian Federation. The living conditions and rights of the indigenous peoples of Buryatia and Sakha are severely underdeveloped and neglected.

The following category is the indigenous activists' interpretation of the term "decolonization" and its relevance and importance for Russia. The activists provide different definitions of the concept but along the same lines of "democratization" and "restoration of historical identity". The focus is on the need for the process to be non-violent to avoid bloodshed and hatred.

The "Activist Experiences" category describes how indigenous activists survive in contemporary Russia, fighting injustice, encouraging decolonization, and ensuring their voices are recognized. Five of the six activists interviewed for this thesis were forced to leave Russia, except for Mariya, as it was no longer safe to remain in Russia and continue to engage in activism and advocate for their rights.

The last category, on further implications, presents indigenous activists' views on the possible and preferred consequences of the decolonization process in Russia in the future. There are different answers from the activists interviewed. The activists from Buryatia favor "federalism" in its true meaning, while the ultimate goal of activists from Sakha is the self-determination of Yakutia's region. Nevertheless, all activists note the incompetence of the current government to bring about positive developments for indigenous peoples and their lack of trust in Putin and his regime.

The following paragraphs of the conclusion outline the connections between the theory and the analysis of the interview responses. The theoretical approach used for this topic and the thesis is postcolonialism, as explained in Chapter 3. This theory focuses on the legacy of the

colonial past, the power and dominance of former colonizers on the colonized, and the continuation of the very processes and nature of colonialism even after its so-called termination (Wilkens, 2017: 2). Based on the interviewees' responses, the Kremlin's current approach to the indigenous republics is indeed colonial. It has continued since their very annexation in the seventeenth century, despite Moscow's attempts to present this as a voluntary accession and call itself a federation. The activists' answers point to the harsh living conditions of the republics, even though they are rich in natural resources, because the center determines where the money is allocated, and the republics live on subsidies from it. The President appoints the heads of the republics, and the residents of those republics have no right to vote. The colonial mentality is deeply rooted in indigenous communities, owing to the way history is taught in schools, the neglect of national and ethnic languages, and the official rhetoric of the current government. The interviewees are aware of the colonial past and its legacy in contemporary Russia, so they stress the need to decolonize Russia, not only the center but all the republics within it - to decolonize society. A long process of education and enlightenment about its history, identity, and real affairs. Fanon's argument, as mentioned in the theoretical part, that decolonization must necessarily be violent is refuted by activists. They focus on soft power because reiterating violence does not distinguish them from what the Kremlin is doing currently and causes more suffering, especially to indigenous communities.

The majority of activists also affirm their indigenous identities by making a clear distinction between colonizer and colonized and between us and them, perpetuating the colonial division of power hierarchy and narrative. Nevertheless, the two activists (Anna and Alexandra) possess more than one identity and do not identify as solely one, confirming Bhabha's assertion that identities are heterogeneous (1994: 2). Identities and cultures are changeable and fluid in nature (Fuss, 1991: xi). Anna and Alexandra thus have hybrid identities and view the relationships beyond the dichotomy of "Self" and "Other". Hybrid identities bridge the gap smaller and bring two opposing existences closer to one another, enabling an interaction between them. They are what Spivak calls "translators" or community spokespersons who are able to transfer the voices of the subaltern to the privileged powers, whereby they are no longer considered subaltern, which may eventually lead to an end where the oppressed cease to exist (Landry & McLean, 1996a: 6). However, in the case of Russia, according to the activists' responses, the privileged power is the liberal opposition, as the current government, which is the

dominant power, does not allow the voices of indigenous activists to be broadcast and represented to the broader population and does not hear them itself. The subalterns, or in this case, indigenous activists, have a voice and an opinion on any issue concerning the present and future of their republics and Russia but are not heard by the Kremlin and Putin.

Nevertheless, this thesis explores activists' views and answers the research question, "How do indigenous communities, such as the Buryats and Sakha, perceive the issue of decolonization in Russia?". The activists perceive decolonization as a process of liberation from colonial thinking and revision of one's own history to understand and embrace one's own identity. It is a long process of education and outreach to the entire population of Russia, including indigenous peoples, aimed at decolonizing consciousness and embracing one's self. The activists do not envisage ways to cooperate with the current government in decolonization work; however, the population is the primary force behind this process. It is the people of the Russian Federation who have to decide the future of the country and their republics. Russia is not just Moscow and other Russian cities; it is the largest country with many indigenous republics whose voices need to be considered and represented in every discussion and debate on the Russian Federation. Thus, first and foremost, decolonization for indigenous activists is a shift in mindset from colonial and imperial to democratic and liberated. Physical separation, "flag independence", or secession are consequences of decolonization, as is federalization, which can only be decided after a population has decolonized itself to determine its own path freely. To secede or to remain is for the people of their republics to decide.

6.1 Limitations and Further Research

As with any research, this thesis acknowledges some limitations that should be noted. In particular, the study is limited by the relatively small sampling of experts interviewed, which is explained in the methodology section. Furthermore, the study encounters difficulties in accessing activists who remain in Russia due to political constraints and limited access to META social media platforms, which the government controls. The inability to interview these activist groups in Russia may bring certain potential bias, as any perspective is shaped by the specific socio-political context, and the ones in Russia remain unexplored. Nevertheless, the findings from the six interviewed activists provide invaluable insights into the issue and its analysis. It is

essential to keep these limitations in mind and recognize that the research findings may not reflect all the views of indigenous activists on this issue.

For future research, a geographical expansion of the scope beyond the current focus on the North Asian republics and the inclusion of other regions of Russia would significantly increase the validity and depth of the study. It would provide a more comprehensive view of variations in regional perspectives on decolonization among indigenous peoples.

Moreover, the topic of decolonization of Central Asian states as well as the South Caucasus would be interesting to explore, as these regions are still under the political and economic domination of Moscow, despite sovereignty and more than 30 years of independence. Politicians in all these countries still maintain the Soviet system and listen to the Kremlin. At the same time, the older generation of people has never gone through the process of decolonization of consciousness.

In addition, it is worth noting the different views within the indigenous movement and communities regarding the conflict between Israel and Palestine, which is an interesting perspective for further research. An in-depth study could shed light on the divergent positions of indigenous activists on issues such as land rights and resource allocation, depending on geographic location. Exploring these nuances would make a valuable contribution to the evolving discourse on indigenous perspectives and decolonization in different regions of Russia and globally.

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Appendix A

Interview guideline

Master thesis topic: *‘Nothing about us without us’ - Decolonization of Russia from the perspective of activists from the indigenous republics of Buryatia and Sakha*

Research Question: *“How do indigenous communities, such as the Buryats and Sakha, perceive the issue of decolonization in Russia?”*

Type: Semi-structured expert interviews

Language: English or Russian (up to interviewees)

Amount: 6

Estimated time for each interview: approx. 1.5 hours or 90 minutes

Structure:

- Introduction of the interviewer, the topic, the aim of the research, and the format
- Ethical considerations, the issue of confidentiality if needed, and voluntary nature of the interview

Questions:

1. Indigenous identity

- Who can be considered as indigenous peoples of Russia?
- What are your thoughts on the government’s classification of indigenouness, “korennye narody”?
- Over the centuries, people in Russia have lived together and interacted. How has it shaped identities in the region?
- How do you identify yourself?
- How do you think forced Russification in the Tsarist Empire shaped the identities of your community?
- And how did Forced Sovietization shape the identities of your communities during Soviet Russia?

2. Russia and the colonial approach

- What does colonialism in Russia mean to you?
- How would you describe the life of your community during the Tsarist Empire?
- During Soviet Russia?
- And the Russian Federation?

- How has it changed?

3. Decolonization

- What is decolonization for you?
- How do you think this concept applies to contemporary Russia?
- What role do you think violence plays in decolonization?
- Would you agree with the argument that decolonization is a violent phenomenon?
- What lessons do you think can be learned from other decolonization experiences around the world?
- How do you think the colonial mindset of Russian society can be changed?
- How much do you think decolonization is talked about among the youth in your community?
- What challenges do you anticipate in the decolonization of Russia?
- How do you think they can be overcome?

4. Activists' experiences

- Do you think that indigenous knowledge is being represented in discussions about decolonization in Russia?
- What has been done by indigenous activists to be included in decision-making and fight against injustices?
- Could you talk about how Spivak's idea about the subaltern not being able to speak relates to your work as an indigenous community activist in Russia?

(Note: Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" where the inability to speak refers to the fact that the dominant power structure does not allow or have the desire to hear the voices of subalterns)

5. Implications

- What are some of the key political implications of decolonization in Russia for your community? Russia? and the region in general?
- How do you see the war in Ukraine affecting indigenous public opinion toward self-determination? Sovereignty? And decolonization?
- In your opinion, what are the opportunities for the Russian government to promote positive changes for indigenous communities?

6. End of interview:

- Further queries, additional information, thanks

Translation of the Interview questions into Russian

Вопрос Исследования: "Как коренные народы республик Бурятия и Саха относятся к теме деколонизации России?"

Интервью вопросы:

1. Идентичность коренных народов

- Кого можно назвать коренными народам России?
- Как Вы относитесь к государственной классификации коренных народов - "коренные малочисленные народы Севера, Сибири и Дальнего Востока"?
- На протяжении веков народы России жили вместе и взаимодействовали. Как это повлияло на формирование идентичности в регионе?
- Как вы идентифицируете себя?
- Как, по Вашему мнению, насильственная русификация в царской империи повлияла на идентичность Вашего народа?
- И как повлияла насильственная советизация в Советской России?

2. Россия и колониальный подход

- Что для вас означает колониализм в России?
- Как бы вы описали жизнь Вашего народа в период царской империи?
- В период Советской России?
- В нынешний период Российской Федерации?
- Как она изменилась?

3. Деколонизация

- Что такое деколонизация для Вас?
- Как, по Вашему мнению, это понятие применимо к современной России?
- Какую роль, по Вашему мнению, играет насилие в деколонизации?
- Согласны ли Вы с аргументом, что деколонизация - это насильственный феномен?
- Какие уроки, по Вашему мнению, можно извлечь из опыта деколонизации других стран мира?
- Как, по Вашему мнению, можно изменить колониальный менталитет российского общества?
- Как Вы думаете, насколько активно обсуждается тема деколонизации среди молодежи в Вашем регионе?
- Какие трудности Вы предвидите в процессе деколонизации России?
- Как, по Вашему мнению, их можно преодолеть?

4. Опыт активистов

- Как Вы считаете, представлены ли знания коренных народов в дискуссиях о деколонизации в России?
- Что было сделано активистами коренных народов для участия в принятии решений и борьбы с несправедливостью?
- На Ваш взгляд, как идея Спивак о том, что угнетенные (субалтерны) не могут говорить, связана с ситуацией активизма и протеста в России?

(Пояснение: Спивак «Могут ли угнетенные говорить?», где под невозможностью говорить подразумевается, что доминантная структура власти не дает право и не имеет желания слышать голоса субалтернов)

5. Последствия

- Каковы некоторые ключевые политические последствия деколонизации в России для вашего сообщества? России? и региона в целом?
- Как, по Вашему мнению, война в Украине повлияла на общественное мнение коренного населения в отношении самоопределения? Суверенитета? и деколонизации?
- Каковы, на Ваш взгляд, возможности российского правительства по содействию позитивным изменениям для коренных общин?

6. Заключительная часть

- Дальнейшие вопросы, дополнительная информация, благодарственная часть

Appendix B

<i>Nº</i>	Name	Function	Origin	Date	Length
1	Mariya Vyushkova	Ethnic activist, Quantum chemistry scholar, Prof. at the University of Notre Dame in Illinois, USA	Buryatia	23 Aug 2023	1 hour 57 min
2	Vladimir Budaev	Anti-war ethnic activist, analyst, researcher in the Free Buryatia Foundation	Buryatia	5 Sept 2023	1 hours 32 min
3	Alexandra Garmazhapova	Anti-war ethnic activist, independent journalist, head of the Free Buryatia Foundation	Buryatia	5 Sept 2023	2 hours 21 min
4	Evdokia Egorova	Ethnic and climate activist, teacher, member of the Free Yakutia Foundation	Sakha	7 Sept 2023	1 hour 44 min
5	Anna Zueva	Anti-war activist, independent journalist, Zueva online project	Buryatia	8 Sept 2023	1 hour 39 min
6	Interviewee 6	Ethnic and climate activist, teacher	Sakha	13 Sept 2023	1 hour 45 min

Declaration of authorship

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I hereby certify that this thesis “‘Nothing about us without us’ - Decolonization of Russia from the perspective of activists from the indigenous republics of Buryatia and Sakha” was written independently, that no sources and aids other than those specified were used and that the passages in the thesis that were taken from other literary, scientific, media and/or technical sources were marked with reference to the source. The submitted versions fully comply with the examination regulations and are identical. I am aware that violations of copyright law may give rise to claims for injunctive relief and damages by the author / creator as well as criminal prosecution by the criminal prosecution authorities.

Magdeburg, 01.02.2024

