

Not Russians’ ‘little brother’ anymore

Russia’s decolonial movement banks on interethnic solidarity in its fight against the Kremlin

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“At the outset of my activism, ‘decolonization’ to me was just about learning the history of my people and bringing the soldiers back [from the frontlines in Ukraine]. Now it is much more than that,” says Buryat activist Viktoria Maladaeva.

“Now it is about giving a voice to Indigenous peoples, giving them more autonomy to allow them to be the masters of their destiny and the defenders of their dignity. I don’t want our people to feel like Russians’ ‘little brother’ anymore.”

Once a co-founder and a lead member of the [Free Buryatia Foundation](#), an advocacy group established to support conscientious objectors from Russia’s Siberian Republic of Buryatia, Maladaeva now leads [Indigenous of Russia](#), a solo project aimed at fostering closer ties between members of the [more than 190](#) Indigenous and ethnic minority communities living in Russia.

“This was a natural evolution. We work to support and strengthen the ties between ethnic and decolonial activists. We can’t fight the colonial system on our own. In unity, there is power,” explains Maladaeva.

With more than 23,300 [Instagram followers](#), Maladaeva has become one of the most recognizable faces of Russia’s decolonial movement. The evolution of her work reflects the trajectory of many Indigenous initiatives that sprang up at the outset of Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine and have since grown into a vast movement pushing to tackle issues of systemic injustice that the country’s non-Russian populations face.

‘Oirats are dying there’

When President **Vladimir Putin** sent troops over the border into Ukraine in February 2022, many in Russia’s ethnic republics feared that the Kremlin would bank on using non-Slavic Indigenous peoples and minorities as cannon fodder in its quest to capture Ukrainian territories — a fear that materialized into a tragic reality.

Russia’s Defense Ministry last [released](#) information on wartime casualty numbers in September 2022, but journalists from the BBC and Mediazona have [corroborated](#) more than 45,000 deaths based on open-source information. In an investigation based on inheritance records, Meduza [determined](#) that an estimated 75,000 Russian troops have been killed in action.

The majority of these casualties are ethnic Russians, but the country’s non-Slavic minorities and Indigenous peoples are overrepresented among the battlefield losses compared to their overall share in the country’s population, [according](#) to research conducted by **Maria Vyushkova**, a Buryat activist and research scientist based at the University of Notre Dame. Vyushkova’s most recent findings show that ethnic Buryats, Tyvans, and Oirats (Kalmyks) are the three ethnicities most over-represented among Russia’s casualties.

Vyushkova's analysis also points to a disproportionately large number of casualties among the small Indigenous communities of Russia's north, Siberia, and the Far East, including the Chukchi and Nenets peoples, who are exempt from military service under Russia's [law](#) on the rights of small-numbered Indigenous peoples.

"This is a systemic problem," said Vyushkova. "Some researchers [...] choose to say that this is not a consequence of discrimination, but rather of some regional specificities and [economic inequality](#). Yet, they don't explain why Indigenous people have to be poorer [than Russians]."

The visible threat that Moscow's quest to expand the "Russian world" poses to the many non-Slavic communities living on its territories catalyzed the emergence of dozens of organizations and individual activists from Russia's Indigenous communities. With most of them working in exile, these movements initially focused on countering war propaganda in their native regions and encouraging and providing legal assistance to [conscientious objectors](#).

But after the Kremlin launched a mobilization campaign in September 2022 — which, too, [disproportionately affected](#) ethnic republics — these groups were forced to pour most of their efforts into helping draft-eligible men escape the country.

"When we were evacuating the mobilized, many activists asked me: 'Are we going to evacuate people who were in the army before? What if they are Putin supporters?'" recalls activist **Aldar Erendzhen**. "I told them that I don't care because my main goal is to save Oirat lives."

Erendzhen is a co-founder of [Oirad Jisän](#), an anti-war and cultural association of ethnic Oirats, a formerly nomadic Mongolic ethnic group that numbers just over 650,000 people globally. The 159,000-strong Oirat community living in Russia's Republic of Kalmykia is more widely known as the "Kalmyks," an exonym of Turkic origin imposed on the group by Russian authorities that many Oirats, including Erendzhen, reject.

According to Erendzhen, Russia's mass mobilization of Indigenous peoples to fight in Ukraine rekindled painful memories of 1943, when the Soviet authorities baselessly accused the Oirats of mass collaboration with Nazi Germany and deported them to Siberia by the thousands. As many as 20,000 Oirats [died](#) in the first two years of the forced exile. (Before the Soviet Union's collapse, in April 1991, the Russian Parliament [recognized](#) "repressed peoples" — like the Oirats — as victims of genocide.)

Though the Soviet authorities later rehabilitated the Oirats and allowed them to return to the re-established republic of Kalmykia, the enduring trauma of deportation persists.

During the 2022 mobilization campaign, Erendzhen and his fellow activists helped to relocate Oirats unwilling to fight against Ukraine outside of Russia, primarily to Kazakhstan and Mongolia, where volunteers of Oirad Jisän established shelters for new arrivals and helped them find jobs. "I am against the war because Oirats are dying there. Every one of those men could make a meaningful contribution to Oirat culture, leave a positive mark in [Oirat] history, but they just die a stupid death," says Erendzhen.

"I don't partake, for example, in the establishment of volunteer battalions [that fight for Kyiv] in Ukraine because that is against my principles. That would mean that I am sending one group of Oirats to fight against other Oirats — that's a fratricidal war," he adds.

'Decolonization starts when you travel to Moscow'

Not all of Russia's Indigenous and decolonial activists share Erendzhen's stance. For example, the

opposite end of the decolonial movement spectrum is the [Siberian Battalion](#), a unit within the Ukrainian Army comprised of Russian citizens with a notably high representation of Indigenous fighters, including people from the republics of Buryatia and Sakha.

The diversity of opinions within the decolonial movement also extends to visions of the future of the different republics. More radical movements like the [Free Nations League](#) call for secession from Russia, pushing for the complete independence of [nations represented in it](#), including Bashkorts, Buryats, Erzyas, Kalmyks, and Tatars. Other more pacifist-leaning factions emphasize nonviolent resistance and realizing their right to self-determination through democratic procedures, and some entertain the idea of achieving greater autonomy within the Russian federative state.

However, what unites all of these movements is a collective colonial trauma: the shared first-hand experience of Kremlin policies that threaten the existence of Indigenous languages, cultures, and — as the rippling effects of the invasion show — entire ethnic groups.

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine pushed many Indigenous peoples into making activism their full or part-time unpaid venture. But for many, their personal decolonial journeys started years or decades before that. "Decolonization starts when you travel to Moscow for the first time," Erendzhen explains. "You get there and enter a completely different world where it turns out that you are not just a person, but, first and foremost, a non-Russian, a non-Slav."

"[It starts] when you try to rent an apartment [and the landlord] tells you: 'We don't lease to people like you; only to Slavs. You're probably also Muslims and would be slaughtering sheep here,'" Erendzhen recalls with a laugh, noting that Kalmykia is, in fact, a Buddhist-majority republic.

Erendzhen's frustrations and fatigue from racial discrimination boiled over at the outset of the war when he saw a [propaganda banner](#) with the slogan "I am Kalmyk, but today we are all Russians" on the central square of his hometown, Elista. Together with his team at [4 Oirad](#), a fashion brand he founded back in 2011, Erendzhen created a line of t-shirts and hoodies printed with "Nerusskiy" and "Nerusskaya" (Russian words for "non-Russian"), styled to resemble the script font used in the "I am Russian" [merchandise](#) marketed to Russian nationalists.

4 Oirad's "non-Russian" line was a viral hit that soon became a symbol of resistance in its own right; decolonial, Indigenous, and minority activists can be frequently spotted wearing the merch at [protests](#), [public events](#), and as casual daywear.

'About us and by us'

Erendzhen's experience closely mirrors that of Buryat activist Maladaeva, who moved from her native Ulan-Ude to St. Petersburg in the early 2000s and then spent her student years living in fear of being attacked by far-right Russian nationalists.

"We gathered for a birthday in a park once with our multinational group of Sakha, Kyrgyz, Buryats, Tyvans, Kalmyks, and others. Just when we were about to leave, [a group of right-wingers] attacked us," says Maladaeva, recalling an incident in 2009. "I just remember everyone running [away] as fast as they could. Some of my friends ended up with concussions [from the beatings]." (Maladaeva and her friends didn't file a police report because "it would have been pointless.")

Dankhaiaa Khovalyg, a writer and a podcaster from the Siberian republic of Tyva also remembers how casual racism and random police checks from officers trying to root out "illegal migrants" darkened her time living in the capital. "I would return to Tyva, get re-Tyvanized, and then feel an inexplicable pain once back in Moscow," says Khovalyg.

“My mom once gifted me with her mink fur coat — an unimaginable luxury! I looked so good walking around Moscow in that coat, and then suddenly I got the feeling that I had become less noticeable to the cops,” Khovalyg recalls. “[I thought,] *Wow! All I had to do was look rich!*”

Khovalyg is the host of [Republic Speaking](#) (stylized in Russian as “говорит республика _”), a podcast where residents of Russia’s six Asian republics, namely Kalmykia, Buryatia, Tyva, Sakha (Yakutia), Khakassia, and Altai, share stories about everyday life in their home regions, their family histories, and traditions, as well as the rituals and histories of their peoples.

Except for a handful of other Indigenous-led projects, such as [Asians of Russia](#) and [Komi Daily](#), most content about Russia’s ethnic republics is still produced by outsiders, predominantly ethnic Russians whose story-telling often lacks important nuance or openly exoticizes Indigenous peoples.

With 15 episodes that listeners have streamed more than 38,000 times, Republic Speaking is the most successful podcast to date that was created exclusively by Russia’s Indigenous peoples.

“[We have created] a base layer of content that captures the voices and stories of people from these republics without exoticization for the first time,” says Khovalyg. “Last year, I also launched a [training course](#) on developing podcasts for people from the republics because we really are lacking content made about us and by us.”

But Khovalyg envisions Republic Speaking as more than just a podcast: to her, this project is “a unifying platform” that fosters solidarity between members of Russia’s formerly nomadic Asian communities by exposing shared traditions, histories, and colonial traumas.

‘The key to salvation for Russia’

As Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine enters its third year and with no end in sight, Khovalyg’s vision for her podcast mirrors that of many others in the decolonial movement.

Multiple activists who spoke to The Beet said they have largely pivoted to teaching the [threatened](#) languages of Indigenous peoples and minorities in Russia. Activists say they’ve also committed to preserving these groups’ histories, which Moscow has rewritten with the clear aim of [whitewashing](#) centuries of territorial expansion.

“We are not fighting against the Russian people; we are fighting against the colonial system in which Russians are considered ‘a state-forming nation’ — against a system that discriminates against our languages, cultures, and histories,” explains Maladaeva of Indigenous of Russia.

Together with individual activists and advocacy groups from Sakha, Kalmykia, Tyva, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Chechnya, Komi, and other republics, Maladaeva has jump-started several first-of-its-kind educational initiatives. Last September, the network held its first [Decolonial Conference](#), which brought together activists, bloggers, media professionals, and researchers of Indigenous backgrounds to discuss pressing issues and strategies for the future development of Indigenous and minority communities in Russia.

Last October, on the day when Russia’s flagship human rights group Memorial [holds](#) its annual event commemorating victims of Soviet-era repressions, decolonial activists and their supporters from across the globe tuned in for a six-hour-long [online marathon](#) where participants read out the names of persecuted Indigenous and ethnic minority peoples.

The latest show of unity among Indigenous activists was the organization of [worldwide rallies](#) in support of residents of Russia’s Bashkortostan, where a [wave](#) of Kremlin-instigated repressions

followed [protests](#) in support of jailed Bashkort activist **Fayil Alsynov**.

Indigenous of Russia and the decolonial community it unites organized [solidarity protests](#) across Europe, the United States, and the United Kingdom where ethnic Bashkorts stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Tatars, Russians, Ukrainians, Sakha, Armenians, peoples of Dagestan, and others.

“If one nation faces injustice on such a scale, then all other nations should come to their defense and support the persecuted. That should be the norm. That is the very reason the decolonial movement exists,” says Maladaeva. “I am trying to change things, to give a voice to Indigenous peoples, to promote decolonial optics because that is the key to salvation for Russia.”

Leyla Latypova

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