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What Decolonization Means for Russia's Indigenous Peoples

By Pavel Sulyandziga and Dmitry Berezhkov

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Aboriginal peoples of Kamchatka – Evens, Koryaks, Itelmens and Aleuts– celebrate the First Fish Festival. **Alexander Arkhipov / TASS**

For the indigenous peoples of Russia, decolonizing the country is not just a matter of historical justice. In our eyes, it is a necessary precondition for moving past the obsolete narratives that the Russian state and society tell themselves; narratives that are founded in widespread misunderstandings of history, official propaganda, and outright lies.

In Russian historical narratives, the colonization of Siberia and the Far East is described as a "unification," as in "voluntary unification." Historians point to the relatively peaceful nature of Russia's eastward expansion, which they call the Cossack "March to Meet the Sun," in contrast to the brutal campaigns of Cortez in the lands of the Aztecs.

This whitewashing of history takes place at many levels. For example, in the late 1990s, Russia planned to celebrate the anniversary of the "voluntary unification" of Kamchatka and

Russia. However, the Tkhansom, the council of the Itelmen peoples who are native to Kamchatka, took a formal decision to boycott the celebrations, on the grounds that the annexation of Kamchatka could in no way be described as voluntary. Instead, it was the violent conquest of the peninsula by the Russian Empire.

When pressed at a 1997 academic conference in Kamchatka, Russian historians were unable to provide sufficient arguments in support of the myth of the region's "voluntary unification with imperial Russia." When it became clear just how tenuous their arguments were, one academic remarked, "Alright, so there was colonization, but it was *good* colonization." The participants of the conference were then left to guess what distinguishes "good colonization" from the usual kind.

In reality, as the testimony of numerous witnesses shows, the armed conflicts between the Russian state and the subjugated peoples of Siberia demonstrate that Russian colonization differs little from European colonialism in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. The only apparent difference was how the colonizers treated the people they conquered. While the Spanish Conquistadors committed large-scale massacres in their pursuit of gold, the Siberian Cossacks were more interested in extracting lucrative tributes from locals. These tributes, paid in the form of furs collected by the legendary hunters of the conquered peoples, became a major source of wealth for the tsars. The legend that indigenous peoples were such expert hunters they could "shoot a squirrel in the eye" persists to this day.

For the Indigenous peoples of Russia, it is vitally important that the Russian state and society recognize the historical fact of colonization. This could become the jumping-off point for a new, more just relationship between Indigenous peoples and the state. Such recognition is the first step toward the kind of national reconciliation that took place in Canada, Norway, Australia, and other countries with a history of injustice toward their indigenous peoples.

Moreover, acknowledging colonization as a process and the undeniable legacy of the Russian Empire and its successor states could be the starting point for the construction of a new state, one that dispenses with revisionist history in favor of historical truth.

This would go a long way toward dismantling the particularly toxic myth of the God-given role of the Russian people in world history, and the special path of a Russia that acts as a lone bulwark of traditional values against a West that is mired in iniquity. It will be a great boon to Russian society when this perverse conception of patriotism is allowed to implode. It has been relentlessly amplified for decades by the powerful state propaganda machine in the service of Putin's criminal régime, and the wars of aggression against Russia's neighbors.

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The Russian people must finally recognize that, by and large, they are no different from other European countries. There is just one exception: the Russians' ancestors lived on the eastern frontiers of Europe, beyond which lived numerous indigenous peoples of Siberia. Those territories were only conquered thanks to military technologies that the Russians received from their European neighbors (facilitating its growth into a geographic giant, a source of continuing pride for modern-day Russians). Other European countries lacked vulnerable neighbors, and so had to look overseas for their expansionist aims.

As the right of peoples to self-determination gained acceptance in the latter half of 20th century, culminating in its enshrinement in the United Nations Charter and then the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, the overseas colonies of the European powers, one after another, started to gain their independence.

Meanwhile, Soviet leaders — who were happy to invoke those arguments when it suited them — liked to pretend that the Soviet Union itself was exempt from these principles.

Those peoples who had the dubious privilege of finding themselves within the U.S.S.R. were kept busy building socialism. They would not have dreamed of demanding their independence from the Kremlin. Those that did were swiftly dealt with by the KGB. The Kremlin was happy to use UN declarations to actively promote "anti-imperialist" struggles around the world, but this didn't extend to how it treated its own people.

Today, a multitude of societal and political players are actively discussing the country's post-Putin political future. Their proposals range from an even greater role of the state and its repressive apparatus to the creation of a parliamentary republic, and include the suggestion that Russia be divided into seperate independent ethno-states.

This is not the place to go into the details of these various scenarios. Self-determination for the peoples living on the territory of the Russian Federation today is of course to be welcomed, as a matter of principle. However, there are two issues that should be a source of concern.

The first is raised by representatives of the Russian opposition who consider creating new states on the territory of the Federation to be either entirely unfeasible, or a proposition with marginal support in the ethnic republics.

The opposition is debating this vital question without consulting any representatives of the colonized peoples themselves. This demonstrates the pervasiveness of the imperial mindset even among people of seemingly impeccably liberal credentials, and not just members of Putin's entourage.

It is worth asking what would happen if these opposition politicians came to power and found themselves in a situation where the majority of Chechens or Buryats pronounced themselves in favor of independence from Russia. Would they go to war to reassert control? Past experience is not encouraging.

A second issue that should be a cause for alarm is the rhetoric of some ethnic national activists themselves. There have been calls from such figures for the dismantlement of Russia and the creation of separate ethnic states without giving sufficient thought towards what these new states will look like. Nor do they propose a mechanism for handling the dissolution. It is as though the only thing that matters is their separation from Russia.

The sad legacy of democracy-building efforts in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia should make them more cautious about the disintegration of the Russian Federation. The expectation that it will lead to a useful and favorable outcome for the peoples living on these territories and for the world as a whole should not be taken for granted.

We suspect that many representatives of the Sakha people of Yakutia, for example, would be aghast at the prospect that one day they might be liberated from Russia's authoritarian regime only to find themselves citizens of a new country styled after "democratic, law-based, secular" Turkmenistan. Despite boasting in its constitution that "the people are the only source of state power," the country is often compared to North Korea. Independence risks trading one authoritarian regime for another.

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There will be no easy solutions to the political, legal, technological and military problems and risks that any new state entities will have to face. Where is the guarantee that the republic of Sakha will end up led by enlightened, liberal, pro-Western nationalists rather than its current leader? Aysen Nikolayev is a notorious Putin loyalist. His entourage is rife with corruption and he has centralized control of both enormous financial resources and even the security services. Will he take fright and run after the political death of his patron? Or will he seize the opportunity to re-enter politics under a different guise and assert his personal dominance over the new republic?

The dissolution of the Soviet Union shows that, sadly, the former leaders of the republics, more often than not, are first in line to take up the reins of power. The West may have little inclination to step in. On the contrary, it would in all likelihood lose no time in establishing favorable economic relations, seeing that it is often more expedient to deal with authoritarian regimes than with democratic ones. That is, for as long as the dictator does not completely lose the plot and launch military adventures.

The bitter reality is that there is virtually no prospect that the relatively small populations of the indigenous peoples of Russia's Far North, of Siberia, and of the Far East will ever have the luxury of achieving self-determination in the form of independent states. Whichever way the political situation in Russia evolves, we are likely to find ourselves living in someone else's country.

Numerous other problems stand between our peoples and self-determination. We suffer from the absence of qualified specialists, the geographical isolation of our traditional lands, the low level of education of our people, and inadequate financial and administrative resources. Additionally, we are for the most part but a minority of the population in the regions that are our ancestral homes.

For us, a key prerequisite for our survival and continued development as nations in our own right must thus be not a chance to create and govern our own states, but meaningful political participation in Russia. Our institutions of self-government must have the possibility of ensuring that our hunters, fishers, and herders have access to their traditional lands and traditional resources, that our cultures and languages are preserved, and that our peoples have an opportunity to pursue the realization of their political, economic, and social potential on the twin pillars of tradition and new knowledge and technologies.

For us, democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights are the basic principles that can help our peoples protect their collective rights for development and self-determination.

Faced with an overwhelming power imbalance, the indigenous peoples essentially have no other recourse apart from international law to assert their rights.

This is why we believe that Russian civil society, political players, opposition leaders and ethnic activists should embark on a nationwide debate devoted to the processes of decolonizing Russia. We believe that such a debate can bring together people of diverse views around the same table, where we can begin grappling with our undeniable political differences. It will also look for a shared vision of our future and the future of the country of which we are citizens. The first step is to agree that Russia needs decolonization of its past, present, and future.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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