

Ignoring Russian Colonialism Has Deadly Consequences

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Red Square in central Moscow. **Natalia Kolesnikova / AFP**

Since the Soviet days, Russia has tried to sell the story that the country is a “family of nations.” President Vladimir Putin still tries to export this narrative, as shown when an indigenous Tuvan musician represented Russia during a performance at the recent G20 summit in India. But this multicultural image does not reflect the reality faced by Russia’s ethnic minorities at home.

Back in Russia, this Tuvan musician (or any other non-Slavic Russian citizen) would probably have a hard time renting an apartment, as many are still listed “for Slavs only.” His passport will be checked by almost every police officer he sees in major cities like Moscow or St. Petersburg. And if he goes to [court](#), chances are that a judge will declare his ethnicity non-existent and [forbid](#) him from speaking his mother tongue.

Violence is [on the rise](#). Just recently, a student from Gabon was [killed](#) in Yekaterinburg in what

was believed to have been a racially motivated attack. Unfortunately, the outside world knows little of this side of Russia. Surprisingly even the majority of Russians will deny the problem. Do they still believe in the “family of nations” narrative?

When we think about empires, Russia is not normally one that springs to mind first. Many, both inside and outside the country, believe that the territories that make up Russia were either peacefully absorbed or were conquered so long ago that there is no point in discussing it today. However, I believe now is just the right time for this discussion. The state’s narratives of Russian supremacy and Russia being a force for world peace were used as justifications for the invasion of Ukraine.

In the Russian language, we have two separate words to describe Russian ethnicity and Russian nationality: *russskiy* and *rossiyanin*. The words are commonly and interchangeably used to describe Russian nationals. However, *nerussskiy* (*non-Russian*) is often used as an insult for anyone who is not ethnically Russian. The language has many insults, still in use today, that originate from stereotypes about minorities being uncultured and dirty. Since February 2022, a plethora of slurs against Ukrainians have also become commonplace on the Russian internet.

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I come from the republic of Komi, an area in the northeast of the European continent, just by the Ural Mountains. Our language belongs to the Finno-Ugric family, and I am lucky to be able to speak it. However, I never had Komi lessons at school. Neither did my parents. It was even harder back in the Soviet times, as schools only taught in Russian and neither of them knew the language before they began their studies. At their school, built on ancestral Komi land, both of them were bullied and called arrogant for speaking Komi and leaving their Russian classmates out of their conversations.

I cannot say that the situation was much better when I went to school in the 90s. I was told that I was *almost* as smart as a Russian, and my accent in Russian was constantly mocked. This discrimination was based on the widespread belief that Komi, as well as other ethnic minorities, are inherently less intelligent and capable than Russians. This has serious consequences. Even now, native Komi are [six times less likely](#) than ethnic Russians to get psychological help according to some studies. The reasoning is simple — doctors believe that because Komi are less educated, no intervention can help them.

In my opinion, the answer to whether Russia is a family of nations is clear. It isn’t. Russia is an imperial state by design. In schools, the history of Russia is still taught through the eyes of its titular nationality — the Russians. The same applies to the whole education system, permeating *great* Russian literature. I still vividly remember having to learn a poem by Pushkin — Ruslan and Ludmila — by heart. In the poem, a cat sitting on an oak tree becomes intertwined with a Russian spirit as the text goes on. But oaks do not grow in my region, so the majority of the class did not know what they looked like. One of my classmates promised to bring us oak leaves from his relatives’ home in southern Russia, where these trees grow. Yet even as we studied the literature of a faraway place in Russia, we learned no poems about the Komi lands or in the Komi language.

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I don't want to say that only ethnic regions are being discriminated against by Putin's regime. All of provincial Russia suffers from widespread underinvestment and poverty. Ethnic discrimination simply compounds this problem. Russia had a window of opportunity in the 90s to build a true federation structure, where power and funding were shared throughout the regions.

But as soon as Putin came to power, that dream was dashed. He canceled regional gubernatorial elections and reshuffled tax revenues so that three-quarters would go to the federal budget, leaving the regions with little for their own development. This led to an overly centralized system that discriminates against people who live outside Moscow and St. Petersburg. While the quality of life in Moscow became pretty much comparable to that of the Netherlands, life in the regions was much worse. People had to survive on the bare minimum and were left struggling to develop not only their potential as individuals, but the potential of their communities.

This imbalance is grimly realized in the unequal toll the war has taken across Russia. Soldiers from economically disadvantaged areas of Russia are [overrepresented](#) among the [dead](#) and wounded. For a lot of men, joining the army is their only opportunity to make a decent living and have some career prospects. It was even [estimated](#), based on the low average life expectancy and salary of Russian men, that it is "more profitable" for a family to send a man to die in war and receive compensation from the state than for him to keep earning at home. This is a very unsettling outcome of Putin's two decades in power.

Unfortunately, decolonial ideas are viewed as marginal even among pro-democracy activists. This is not at all surprising. The majority of these liberals come from Moscow and St. Petersburg, so they still benefit from Russia's imperial structure. Nor do many of them have experiences of discrimination and the legacy of Russian colonialism.

I believe more space should be given to people from the regions to tell their personal opinions on Russia from their fundamentally different points of view. Through this prism, we will be able to gather more information and get a fuller picture of Russia's problems. Furthermore, it will give these people direct agency to improve their lives and safeguard their interests, without the need to rely on Moscow.

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