

Leading Yakutian Activist Refuses to Give Up on Region's Free Future

By [Leyla Latypova](#)

February 15, 2024



Sargylana Kondakova. **Courtesy photo**

“I would want to come back to a free Yakutia,” Sargylana Kondakova says when asked about returning to her home region.

“I would like for it to be an independent state, of course, but it is even more important for me to see that our people have a free conscience, free mind and a free soul.”

A native of Russia's Far East republic of Sakha (Yakutia), Kondakova is a co-founder of Free Yakutia Foundation, the region's largest anti-war and indigenous rights group.

The idea for the group came to Kondakova when the Kremlin invaded neighboring Ukraine in February 2022.

Though she was in Australia, tens of thousands of kilometers away from her homeland, Kondakova said she felt an immediate sense of urgency to do something to save fellow

peoples of Sakha who, she feared, would be sent to the frontlines to do Moscow's bidding.

"We don't say 'no war' as often these days," Kondakova says in an interview with The Moscow Times. "Back then it seemed that saying it could help us avert a terrible tragedy."

"I thought that if we firmly declare that we are against this war, then people will make the right decision — this was naive, of course. Now we know that people don't actually decide whether to go to war or not," she explains.

On the streets of Melbourne, where Kondakova has been living with her husband and two children for nearly a decade, she recorded an anti-war address to the people of Sakha and posted it to social media.

"To my surprise, this video resonated not only with people in Russia but also in other countries, in Kazakhstan, in Ukraine," Kondakova recalls. "That's when I thought that it is time to gather a Sakha movement."

Kondakova's search for like-minded Yakutian expats led her to establish the Free Yakutia Foundation.

In the less than two years since it was founded, Free Yakutia has helped hundreds of conscientious objectors avoid service in Ukraine, provided support to dozens of persecuted activists from the region and waged a massive counterpropaganda campaign against Sakha's pro-Kremlin authorities.

"Right now our main goal is enlightenment," says Kondakova. "While people have the opportunity to read alternative sources of information, we continue telling [about] what is really happening in Russia, in Ukraine and the world."

Related article: [Far East Region Struggles to Meet Kremlin's Military Recruitment Quotas, Leaked Video Shows](#)

Though founded by exiled Yakutians, the movement maintains a wide network of supporters inside the republic who helped it stage one of Russia's [largest anti-mobilization protests](#) in September 2022.

"People [inside the republic] started writing to us, saying that it is time to go out [to protest]," Kondakova recalls. "We knew there would be arrests and were preparing for that, too. We wrote detailed instructions on how to behave in a detention center and started raising money for fines and for lawyers."

In defiance of a heavy police presence — and with Free Yakutia's help — up to 500 women managed to [gather](#) on the central square of the regional capital Yakutsk.

Footage of these women dancing the *ohuokhai*, a traditional Sakha dance in which participants perform improvised choral songs in a circle, became a symbol of that autumn's anti-mobilization protest.

"We understood then that peaceful protests are the only right way forward. We didn't want

any violence,” Kondakova explains. “Those who know Sakha languages understood that the songs were about our women not wanting to let their men go to war.”

In November, the group released leaked [video recordings](#) of closed-door government meetings where local government and military officials discussed the fulfillment of Kremlin-imposed quotas of military volunteers for the war in Ukraine.

“We wanted to understand who these people going to the war are,” Kondakova says when asked about watching hours of recordings obtained from a whistleblower.

“Of course, the state is offering just enormous amounts of money [to contract soldiers],” she says. “People in the regions and particularly in remote villages just don’t have such salaries. But we kept wondering, ‘Is it all about the money? Is a human’s life really valued by some thousands of rubles?’”

Up to 8,000 men from Sakha — which has a total population of 997,000 — were drafted in Russia’s “partial” military mobilization in 2022.

At least 5,000 others went to the frontlines as contract soldiers last year, according to data collected by Free Yakutia.

Sakha’s verifiable war casualties so far amount to at least 394 men, according to a [tally](#) by the independent Mediazona news website and the BBC’s Russian service.

Russian officials have repeatedly [assured](#) the public that the Kremlin has no plans to mobilize reserves to aid its war efforts. Instead, the government has been banking on enlistment of military volunteers.

But videos obtained by Free Yakutia have revealed that officials coerce men from disadvantaged backgrounds, debtors and those with a history of minor administrative offenses into joining the army by threatening them with lengthy jail terms on fabricated charges.

“We, the activists, always understood that the Kremlin is playing dirty, that it is not a voluntary enlistment at all, but even we were shocked when we saw these videos. We didn’t realize that they are so proactive,” says Kondakova.

“There also was a feeling that they are talking not about people, but about livestock,” she adds, referring to the fact that officials were caught using words such as “supply” and “delivery” when discussing the quotas assigned to each of Sakha’s *uluses* (districts).

Free Yakutia has also repeatedly [voiced](#) concerns over the mobilization and forced army enlistment of the republic’s small-numbered indigenous peoples who predominantly reside in small, remote Arctic villages. In these areas, inhabitants rely heavily on hard labor for their livelihoods.

Related article: [Ban of Sakha Films Signals Uncertain Future for Russia’s Regional Movie Industries](#)

The Kremlin's targeting of smaller indigenous communities is painfully familiar to Kondakova, who was born to a Yukaghir family in the Arctic village of Chokurdakh. The global population of ethnic Yukaghirs stands at just over 1,500.

"The war in Ukraine has opened our unhealed wounds. Now we understand that a genocide of Ukrainians and of indigenous people of Russia is ongoing," she says.

"It is clear that this is a colonial war, a war of conquest...They might be talking about the 'fascists,' the 'Nazis' [in Ukraine] and so on, but we know our history well and we know that we are a nation that was once colonized in the same way as Ukrainians are right now."

With no end in sight to the Kremlin's two-year invasion, Free Yakutia is expanding its work to bring closer a long-term dream of building active civil society networks in Sakha, according to Kondakova.

"We not only push the anti-war agenda but talk a lot about the environment, our history and culture. People need to understand their past and present to build a better future," she says.

"Until people decolonize their mind and until they admit and reflect on their colonial past, there can be no mention of freedom."

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/02/15/leading-yakutian-activist-refuses-to-give-up-on-regions-free-future-a84028>