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Activist Viktoria Maladaeva Uplifts Russia's Indigenous Peoples With Power of Unity

By Leyla Latypova

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Viktoria Maladaeva. **Courtesy photo**

Viktoria Maladaeva, an activist from the eastern Siberian republic of Buryatia, is one of the most recognizable faces of Russia's Indigenous rights movement.

In 2022, she became a leading figure in civil society's resistance to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine when she co-founded the Free Buryatia Foundation, an advocacy group established to support conscientious objectors from Buryatia.

Nearly three years since the start of the war, Maladaeva's activism has expanded far beyond the borders of her Siberian homeland. She now heads Indigenous of Russia, a project aimed at fostering closer ties between Russia's nearly 200 Indigenous peoples and minorities.

The Moscow Times spoke to Maladaeva, who lives in the U.S. with her family, about her

journey as an activist, Indigenous people's view of Russia's "liberal opposition" and the future of Buryatia:

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

MT: Can you recall your first step as an activist?

VM: I have always tried to fight against injustice, even in my school years. I was the editor-in-chief of my boarding school's newspaper and didn't shy away from exposing our problems, including abuse by the teaching staff.

When I moved to St. Petersburg, I went on to compete in the Mrs. St. Petersburg beauty pageant despite hearing that I could not do so because I am not [ethnic] Russian. My participation in the contest prompted a wave of online bullying [because of my opposition-oriented political views]. Since then I have used my platform to speak out against injustice and racism.

My activism culminated in 2022 with the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. I knew that I couldn't just stand by and watch it unfold, so I used my platform to spread the truth, to speak out against the war and Russian occupation of Ukraine.

And how was the Free Buryatia Foundation created? Back then, in 2022, it was an outlier in the Russian political landscape...

Everything started with two Instagram Stories I made in the first few days of the war. One of those posts contained a seemingly rhetorical question: 'I wonder how many Buryats are participating in this war?' But I received a flood of messages in response.

The messages were so many that I realized I could no longer read and respond to all of them alone, so I asked my friends to help me first...I then decided to gather a group of other Buryats who were ready to speak out against the war. I reached out to [Buryat activists] Dorji Dugarov and Natalia Arno, whom I had known since before the full-scale invasion, and wrote to many other friends and acquaintances.

A group of us met for an hours-long Zoom call in March 2022 and from there on we started to record anti-war videos and make [social media] posts, which were met with overwhelmingly positive feedback.

Alexandra Garmazhapova soon suggested that we should establish a foundation and I agreed.

I invited many politically aware and energetic people I knew to join Free Buryatia and we built it together from the ground up.

Why did you leave Free Buryatia in 2023?

Let's say we had some moral disagreements [with remaining members]...

The final straw was [when a lead member] refused to write a letter of support for a humanitarian visa for a Buryatia-based activist who was recently visited by an FSB agent [and feared for her safety]. Our foundation had always claimed that we help Buryats, yet there we

were refusing assistance to a woman who was clearly in danger. To me, this was pure hypocrisy, and I couldn't come to terms with it.

There were already tensions due to...occasional open criticism of other Indigenous activists, and the tendency to turn a blind eye to blatant racism or arrogance from some individuals within the Russian opposition. It felt like we were ignoring the racism of those within the 'inner circle' while openly criticizing the actions of others.

It became clear that some people [in the leadership] were using the foundation not to provide genuine help [to others] but for personal benefits.

How did the idea to create Indigenous of Russia come about? What is the main mission of this project?

The idea to create Indigenous of Russia was born out of my exit from the Free Buryatia Foundation...I realized at some point that I and some other members of the Foundation had divergent goals. When I left, about 80% of the members followed me, and together with some of them, we launched Indigenous of Russia.

We created Indigenous of Russia with a mission to unite Russia's Indigenous peoples, raise awareness about their struggles and advocate and promote their rights.

All of us suffer from Russian colonialism equally and our power is in unity — I think most other Indigenous activists also realize and believe in that.

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We all want to protect and advance our basic rights, including political, economic and social rights, as well as language rights. We also want to have our right to true history and to own our historic lands. But we [Indigenous people] also know so little about each other, so one of our goals at Indigenous of Russia is to increase mutual understanding and learn about each other's problems and dreams.

Pro-Kremlin commentators often claim that the decolonial movement is a well-funded Western-backed project aimed at partitioning Russia. What does the relationship between the movement and Western politicians and donors really look like?

We are a small community and all of us struggle to find money to support our work. I think this is evident by the fact that Russia's Indigenous people have very limited representation in media and public political spaces.

If we had money, our voices would sound louder, we would put out more projects and we would have the opportunity to advocate for the interests of our people in the UN and other global platforms.

Indigenous of Russia is currently working on our second documentary project about residential schools for Indigenous peoples of the North [of Russia]. Almost all activists involved in the project work for a very small fee or for free because we have no means to fund it.

We would love to realize even more ideas and initiatives, but we don't have the resources to do it all.

Unfortunately, most Western donors have a very Moscow-centric view of Russia and don't hear voices from the republics. I want to underline here that I am talking about ethnic republics and not Russian regions in general — our problems differ.

The liberal Russian opposition often dreams of the 'beautiful Russia of the future.' Do you share that dream? Do you think Indigenous people have a place in it?

No and no.

Because Alexei Navalny — just like many other living members of the Russian opposition — never apologized for participating in [ultranationalist] 'Russian marches.'

The 'beautiful Russia of the future' should start with acknowledging the country's imperial past, recognizing mistakes, offering apologies, paying reparations, and so on — things that are entirely normal in contemporary democracies.

But [right now] any kind of diversity within the Russian opposition ends with gender; they choose to forget about LGBTQ people and ethnic minorities.

There will be no 'beautiful Russia of the future,' as long as we, the minoritized, remain on the sidelines.

What kind of Buryatia would you want to come back to?

I would want to return to a Buryatia which is independent from the Kremlin, where Indigenous people are masters of their own faith and can use their fundamental right to self-determination.

I want Buryatia to be free, independent and prosperous.

But, most importantly, I want it to have a plurality of political voices. I want our people to be able to choose which political force they want to back, the 'federalists' [looking to stay as part of Russia] or those advocating for independence.

I support the voices of those who advocate for independence and hope their voices will no longer be marginalized.

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