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Russia's Opposition Is Leaving Indigenous People Behind. We Will Not Remain Silent.

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Yulia Navalnaya, widow of late Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny. **Wojtek Radwanski / AFP**

In mid-November, Politico published an article, "What the Russian Opposition Wants," by Yulia Navalnaya. Many have already responded critically: the Ukrainian blogosphere notes Navalnaya's use of the phrase "Putin's war" and how she avoided the topic of occupied regions of Ukraine. I want to share my perspective as a Buryat Indigenous activist.

It is apparent to me that Navalnaya wrote the article to be full of flattery for European politicians and especially businesspeople. She used the word "European" about 20 times, as a synonym for "good" and "moral." With compliments for "European culture" and "European civilization," Yulia promises that the opposition will lead Russia down the "European path." That made me wonder if for Navalnaya, Russia consists only of Moscow, St. Petersburg and the wider central Russian region.

Here is the problem: most of Russia's territory is in North Asia, not Europe. The Asian part of Russia is home to hundreds of Indigenous peoples, each with their unique Turkic, Muslim, Buddhist and Shamanist cultures, histories, languages and traditions — to name just a few. Russia also currently occupies a region of the North Caucasus — a land with its own separate history of surviving through violent Russian colonization.

The second problem is that words about the unacceptability of racism and the preservation of languages and cultures sound hypocritical. For years, the Russian opposition has constantly made racist remarks about Indigenous people and Central Asian migrants. Despite this, they talk about anti-racism to foreign audiences. I guess it is because the sympathy of Politico's foreign audiences could be monetized. Meanwhile our opinions are of no importance.

You will not find the word "Asian" anywhere in Navalnaya's article as the flip side of "European" because it would not be politically correct to make it explicit. The fact is that Alexei Navalny's political platform has always been based on the colonial-minded division of the "enlightened Europe" and the "undeveloped" rest of the World. So to say, the whole region referred to as the "Global South" for Navalny's followers embodies backwardness and barbarity. Within the Russian context, that phrase encompasses Asian parts of the country, the North Caucasus and everything that is not the small European region of Russia.

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In 2023, Navalny wrote from prison that Russia did not turn to Europe for political inspiration in the 1990s, but to Central Asia, as if Asian people and not his fellow compatriots from Moscow created President Vladimir Putin's regime. He blamed the "Asian mindset" for the Russian corruption, creating the racist narrative of Asian people being "undemocratic" by nature. Navalny's analysis never addressed the colonial relations between Russia and Central Asia, nor did it consider racism. This was simply impossible, because his populist so-called moderate racism is exactly what attracted his core supporters.

Just last month, the Anti-Corruption Foundation's Popular Politics YouTube channel hosted a neo-Nazi, Dmitry Demushkin. The host neutrally refers to Demushkin as a politician, normalizing his agenda. For us decolonial activists, Demushkin is the man who organized racist rallies on Manezhnaya Square and the leader of the Russian neo-Nazi movement, which is responsible for the murders of people of the North Caucasus, Asian Russian people and Central Asian migrants. Given Alexei Navalny's ties to Russian nationalists, it is not surprising that Navalnaya's colleagues see no problem in collaborating with neo-Nazis further.

So what does the Russian opposition really want? It may seem strange, but when it comes to Indigenous peoples, the opposition follows Putin's colonial ideology. For Indigenous peoples, Putin's rule means the destruction of self-government, the extraction of resources for the benefit of Moscow, and the erasure of languages, cultures and identities. What does the Russian opposition have to say on these issues?

In her article, Yulia repeats that she wants Russia to be a "normal country." This is a reference to Alexei Navalny's slogan, which was passed on to his colleagues as an ideological legacy.

In 2023, political scientist Fyodor Krasheninnikov and politician Vladimir Milov from the Free

Russia Foundation published a political program titled "Normal Russia of the Future," with references to Navalny. One of the first things that Krasheninnikov and Milov have to say on the problem of Indigenous people is that poorer regions that are less "economically and infrastructurally attractive" will "gradually disappear" from the "map of the country." In other words, there is no need to worry about poor regions exhausted by centuries of colonial extraction. The Russian opposition views our history and identity simply as objects of a competitive economy: those that are "uncompetitive" will be merged with another region. This is a direct continuation of Putin's policy of erasure of national autonomies.

In 2020, Putin infamously changed the Russian Constitution to legalize his authoritarian power. Besides that, there were several ideological amendments, with one declaring the Russian language as the "language of the state-forming people." This amendment is highly discriminatory to thousands of Indigenous non-Russian languages. Once again, Putin and Navalny agreed on that point. Navalny's website still has a dedicated section on this regard: "Russian culture and the Russian language are the foundations of our national identity."

Here is what Krasheninnikov and Milov propose on the issue of languages: the question should be transferred to the municipal level. But today, the status of native languages in the republics is already reduced to the level of school electives. This optional nature means that much less funding is allocated for native language infrastructure. If the issue of the official status of languages is transferred to the municipalities, the situation will only worsen.

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In regions such as the Yamalo-Nenets and Khanty-Mansi autonomous districts, and the republics of Komi, Buryatia, Sakha and others, especially in urban municipalities where Russians are the majority, Indigenous peoples lose their culture and language to market colonial logic. Moscow grabs our lands, drains our resources which could have been spent on our culture, kills our talented people and then blames us, saying we are "underdeveloped" and our languages are too outdated.

It is interesting that, while constantly referring to the policies of the United States and the EU, the Russian opposition avoids looking into the struggles of Indigenous peoples there.

For example, the American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples explicitly states that Indigenous peoples have suffered from colonization. The declaration calls for respect for their political, linguistic and cultural rights, as well as rights to land and natural resources. Most importantly, states do not have the right to support policies of assimilation or the destruction of Indigenous cultures.

Recently, all nine federally recognized tribes in South Dakota banned U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem from entering their reservations. Of course, the U.S., like any colonial entity in the world, is not an example of actual decolonization. However, it at least did something formal about this issue. If the Russian opposition really needs to "follow the example" of the West, how about we start with the basics: recognition of Russian colonialism?

It is hard not to see Navalnaya's flattery and desperate promises of normalization as: "Dear sponsors, give us money, and we will ensure risk-free trade for you." The unfortunate fact is

that the Russian opposition does not know its own country beyond its European part and therefore will be unable to keep any promises while refusing to listen to Indigenous peoples.

We are not silent anymore — and we refuse to see ourselves as inferior. We demand a complete reassessment of Russian history, the acknowledgment of Russian colonial wars and war crimes, not only in Ukraine, but in Chechnya, Georgia, Syria, the Central African Republic, Mali, Libya — the whole list will be very long. We demand that all opposition powers condemn the Russian barbaric politics of forced assimilation, repression, deportation and the violent Christianization of colonized peoples.

We need to restore our agency, not only in the sphere of culture, but also our economic and political sovereignty or independence, and the ability to protect nature. Our culture and our survival should not be turned into market value. We will not agree to the version of so-called democratization that masks with nice words the continued plundering of our lands and ecosystems for the benefit of business and profit. Not only us, but our whole planet can no longer withstand this.

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

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