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Dictatorship Isn’t Destiny for Russia’s Indigenous Peoples. They Can Build Independent Democracies.

By Alexander Ivanov

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A Yakut delegation on the Day of People's Unity in Moscow. **Sakha.gov.ru**

In 2023, The Moscow Times published a column by the Indigenous rights advocates Pavel Sulyandziga and Dmitry Berezhkov titled “What Does Decolonization Mean for Russia’s Indigenous Peoples?”

Though the article argues that the Russian state and society must acknowledge the historical fact of colonization and seek more equitable relations between Indigenous peoples and the political center, it also argues that there could be negative consequences if these peoples achieved independence. The authors took my homeland, the republic of Sakha (Yakutia), as an example, asking what guarantee there is that the republic would be led by enlightened, liberal, pro-Western nationalists rather than people like its current leader.

It may seem strange to take issue with an article published three years ago. But as a representative of the Sakha people and someone who has devoted his political life to the struggle for the republic's sovereignty, I cannot leave such an assertion unanswered.

The ideas put forward by Sulyandziga and Berezhkov are constantly repeated by representatives of the so-called good Russians who oppose Moscow's predatory colonial policies, but refuse at every turn to recognize the root of the problems facing every single region of Russia.

The argument that independence for the national republics will inevitably lead to dictatorships can be heard at conferences held by Russian émigrés, in expert reports on the future of Russia after Putin and in conversations among Western diplomats.

Even in 2026, leaders of the liberal opposition publicly question the very idea of decolonization, demonstrating that they are still not listening to Indigenous voices. When Indigenous activists themselves express such doubts, they sound particularly convincing and are therefore particularly harmful.

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The opening paragraphs of the article actually pleased me: Russia's colonial past is spelled out explicitly and the authors acknowledge Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination. But then comes a reversal in tone: independence turns out to be too risky and the peoples of Russia turn out to be unprepared for statehood.

I recognize this approach. Political strategists visiting my republic from Moscow always taught the same lesson: start with an argument that resonates with your audience, lower their defenses — and then carefully slip in the opposite argument.

I will not presume to judge the authors' intentions, but this is precisely how the article is constructed. The result is the same: a reader sympathetic to decolonization comes away convinced that independence is an inevitable path to becoming like Turkmenistan.

It doesn't have to be that way. The republic of Sakha entered the 1990s with an identity as strong as any former Soviet republic. We adopted our constitution before many of them, too. It still states that the republic of Sakha is a democratic state governed by the rule of law and founded on the people's right to self-determination. Moscow has forced us to rewrite the text several times to suit its own interests. But in the early 1990s, we established a full set of state institutions: a president (though that term was eliminated in 2014), the Il Tumen State Assembly, a Constitutional Court and a National Bank.

Under an agreement with Russian government, the republic was allowed to retain just 25% of its diamond revenue — and that was enough. Enough for us to build medical centers and social facilities, develop our language and culture and educate our children abroad. A quarter of our revenue came from that single resource — and our budget had a surplus.

Today, Sakha produces a wealth of diamonds, gold, coal, gas, silver and rare earth metals,

while Moscow and its oligarchs already control much of the resulting wealth. Our language is being pushed out of schools. Our young people are being sent to die in a criminal war, wiping out entire generations of an already small people. Our land and natural environment are being destroyed with barbaric indifference. And at this moment, we are told that we must cling to the federation. Tell me why.

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But the main question I want to ask Sulyandziga and Berezhkov is how they settled on Turkmenistan as the model for an independent Sakha. Why not Estonia, Latvia or Lithuania?

The three Baltic states started in 1991 with the same Soviet legacy as us: a devastated economy, Russification, nomenklatura officials and an absence of market institutions. Over 30 years, they became democracies and members of the European Union and NATO.

Estonia — a country of around 1.3 million people with almost no natural resources — has built one of the world's most digital states: electronic government, online voting and e-residency. Its schoolchildren consistently achieve the best results in Europe on the international PISA assessments. Estonia gave the world Skype and more technology unicorns per capita than almost any other country in Europe. And, in what is particularly important to me, Estonia restored its language's status as the state language after decades of russification — precisely what we are fighting for today.

But unlike Estonia, we in Sakha have a vast territory and enormous mineral wealth: the republic produces most of Russia's diamonds, as well as gold, coal, gas and rare earth metals.

Imagine Estonian institutions — transparent government, high-quality education and digital governance — combined with the resources that now flow to Moscow. This is how Sakha can transform itself from the colonial power's raw-material-producing appendage into the Kuwait of the Far East: a country where mineral revenues serve its own citizens through a sovereign wealth fund rather than someone else's oligarchs and someone else's war.

If we stop dividing our wealth among the Russian Federation's 140 million citizens, we will increase our concentration of national wealth per capita 140-fold. Just imagine!

Of course, resources alone guarantee nothing. They can be used for good or for harm. That is precisely why we need to learn from those who have managed to build a strong, free and educated society without gas or diamonds.

We have much to learn from Estonia and its Baltic neighbors. I hope that the ties between our peoples, still largely symbolic because of the barriers Moscow has created, will eventually become tangible: in education, digital technology, language policy and the building of state institutions.

Sulyandziga and Berezhkov ask what guarantee there is that an independent Sakha will become a democracy. No one has any guarantees. The Estonians had none in 1991, either. But I know one thing for certain: within Russia, we have only one guarantee — that we will never see a democracy on our soil.

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The Sakha people are approaching the third and final stage of their statehood. The first was completed in 1922: we ceased to be aliens without land or recognition and gained autonomy. The second came in 1992: we gained sovereignty and became a state within a federal union.

The third will be the declaration of our independence.

We can no longer trust new agreements with the colonial power sitting in Moscow. Every time the beast grew weak, it persuaded us to stay and promised to treat us well. Every time, it deceived us. It is time to break free of our Stockholm syndrome and look with clear eyes.

An independent Sakha will open to the world. Historically, we had business ties with Manchuria and Japan and the entire Pacific region will be open to us today. I also have no doubt that our Putin-appointed leader Aysen Nikolayev will be the first to flee and, knowing how the Kremlin's personnel selection favors the worst candidates, the others will follow him.

I am a popularly elected deputy of Sakha. I feel, hear and see my people: strong, freedom-loving and talented. I have seen how far we have come in just the decade since the colonial power's noose loosened slightly. We established our own state institutions, made Sakha the official language, built hospitals and schools, enabled our children to study at the world's elite universities.

My people — like the Tatars, Bashkirs, Buryats, Altaians, Erzya and others — are ready to live of their own free will and develop their independent, multiethnic republics themselves, free of Moscow's chauvinism, xenophobia and imperialism.

This third stage is neither a prediction nor an expectation. Independence is a political task that can be accomplished only through political means. The beast is sick. But its illness will not do the work for us — it merely gives us time to prepare properly for that work. And the model for that preparation is before our eyes — on the shores of the Baltic Sea.

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

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