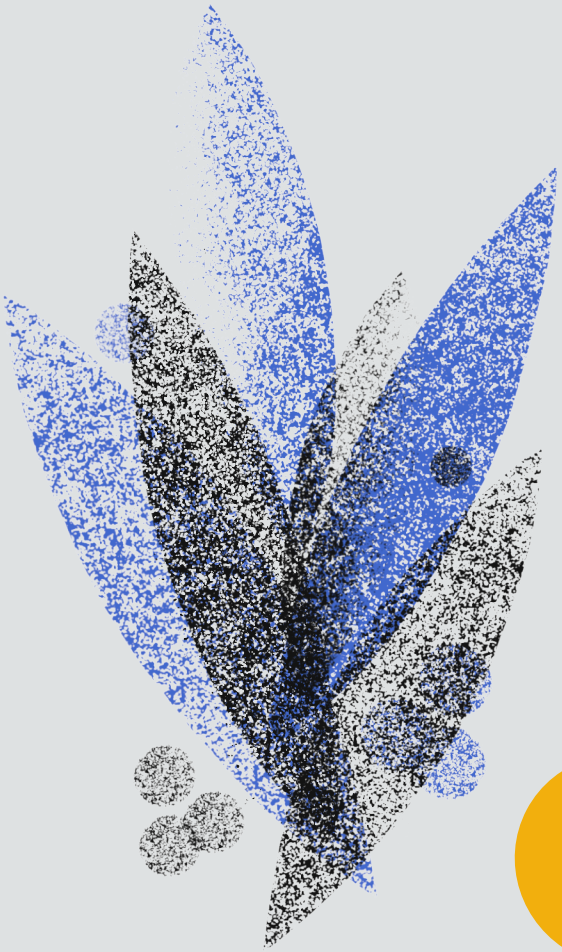
Indigenous Vision: Centering Our Voices, Resilience and Knowledge



Forum 2025

Selected reflections from the Indigenous Vision Forum in Berlin, July 2025

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Selected reflections from
the Indigenous Vision Forum

Berlin, July 2025

Content

Editors Letter

Dear reader,

Whether you are reading these lines on your device or holding a physical copy of the booklet in your hands, it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that you are connecting with a rare treasure of Indigenous knowledge.

Centuries old, the Russian colonial project is remarkable not only for its longevity, but also for its elusiveness. To this day, few external observers — no matter how critical of the current regime — recognize the Russian Federation as the thriving colonial empire that it is.

Systemic silencing of Indigenous voices, coupled with the marginalization of perspectives and experiences that they relay, allowed for this elusiveness. However, it must be said that these reasons are only a tip of the iceberg of structural discrimination against Russia’s Indigenous and minoritized communities.

It is a famous Russian proverb that says: "What is written with a pen cannot be cut down with an axe." Many cultures colonized by Russia would prefer to steer clear of vesting such outsized power in a written word, but history brought us to a paradoxical point where following this wisdom could bring us closer to liberation.

With the above in mind, I am thrilled to present to you this volume of reflections and written statements from Indigenous Vision: Centering Our Voices, Resilience and Knowledge, a two-day forum that took place in Berlin in July 2025.

With permission granted to me by the forum organizers,
I structured this booklet in three parts:

Essays presented in the first part, “The Space,” are written by conference participants and give you a chance to feel the atmosphere of the room where the exchange of ideas took place.

Part two, “The Ideas,” presents contributions from forum speakers and moderators covering a diverse set of topics.

The final part, “The Future,” features essays by conference organizers who speak on the goals of the forum, their activism, and share their vision of tomorrow.

I hope the journey through the coming pages inspires you to do your share in building a more just world.

In solidarity,

Leyla Latypova

The Space

A Vivid Reflection of Russia's Decolonial Movement

By Dr. Maria Ochir-Goryaeva

It so happened that I took part in several conferences put up by the Russian anti-war diaspora over the past year. These events brought together members of various democratic and human rights activist organizations to discuss problems of their movement, as well as processes unfolding inside Russia. Such gatherings have been held frequently since 2022, with their topics and participant lists often overlapping. The "Indigenous Vision" stands out among these events.

It was not only the first offline conference with a fully decolonial agenda and where decolonial activists made up the majority of participants, but also the first conference put up by the decolonial activists themselves. To outsiders, this may not seem remarkable. However, those familiar with Russia's anti-Putin resistance know that decolonial issues have so far remained outside the scope of discussions at conferences of Russian democratic movements, and grant support from Western foundations has largely bypassed decolonial projects.

The first panel discussion of "Indigenous Vision" was dedicated to rethinking the decolonial movement itself and its different factions. This is a particularly important topic because the decolonial movement has asserted itself and turned into a political force in the years since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

What I found especially important was that the discussion was dominated by self-analysis and self-reflection, exploring whether *our own* understandings, terms, and assessments of events are truly democratic and inclusive.

It seemed deeply symbolic that the panel was titled “Decolonizing Decolonization.” Being able to critically assess ourselves before anyone else is a sign of the movement’s healthy development and growth. It seemed to me that this self-critical note, voiced at the very beginning, set the tone for the discussions that followed.

In tackling the decolonization of the decolonial movement itself, several fundamentally important points were clarified: How do theoretical studies of decolonialism relate to realities of the activist movement? Are relations between different factions of the movement being built constructively?

Should the term “decolonial” even be used moving forward when, in essence, the movement is a human rights–oriented democratic opposition movement for a just future for all peoples of the Russian Federation? Does using this same name lead to exclusion of movements from ethnic republics from the broader anti-war movement of human rights defenders and pro-democracy activists from Russia?

Why is it that the feminist movement and the movement for LGBTQ+ rights are accepted as central to the Russian anti-war movement, while the struggle for the equal rights of the peoples from the ethnic republics is still treated by them as unrelated to the fight for democracy?

There was no barrier between panelists and listeners of the forum, all thanks to the open microphone and chair format, which meant anyone could take the role of a speaker. This helped to enrich the debates and increased everyone’s sense of being an active participant in the event.

The topics of other discussions were also analyzed from many angles: from personal stories to legislative acts to philosophical and ethnological studies to news coverage.

Even participants and observers who are less involved in the process of decolonization than the author of this essay made note of innovative approaches and the high level of discussion at the forum.

“The level of discussion taking place there, the caliber of the scholars speaking, the quality of the questions, the tone of the debates — in some respects it was far more advanced than in other movements opposing Putin,” Russian journalist Maxim Kurnikov said in an interview published by the YouTube channel I Gryanul Grem.

“The level of self-organization, the level of mutual respect [that I saw] there was completely different… Even within the opposition, within the resistance to Putin, this movement is severely underestimated,” he added.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that the forum most vividly reflected the present state of Russia’s decolonial movement.
I first stated this at the very beginning of the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war, but the words still ring true: decolonial movement may seem weak on the outside, but it is strong on the inside, because it moves with the course of history — and history, as we know, is an unstoppable forward-moving force.

A Breath of Fresh Air

By Vladimir Son

I was born in Uzbekistan, but ended up in Russia at the age of 17, where many things in life felt like a surreal experience.

When I journeyed to the Indigenous Vision Forum, I had doubts about the decision, afraid of feeling isolated like I did so many times before. But it turned out to be the opposite: the decolonial community welcomed me, if not like a family member, then like an old friend.

Thanks to the forum, I met new people, heard many new and familiar stories, and got to know new projects and initiatives.

I was pleasantly surprised to learn that people were following my activist work too, and that my opinion carries weight — since everyone has their own experience and their own story of encountering Russian chauvinism and xenophobia.

All the themes of the conference echoed with pain in my heart, but the panel that was most firmly imprinted in my memory was on the subject of losing loved ones in the war.

The lump I felt in my throat during the panel cannot be compared even to the one I felt when reading the first media narratives claiming that Russia's most bloodthirsty warriors are ethnically non-Russian — the latter felt like the gravest injustice at the time.

I felt the pain of the speakers on that panel — probably because my own mother, an ethnic Korean, now identifies herself as Russian and supports the war.

I always thought that I had lost the battle for my family, that it was a done deal, but seeing people who had lost their relatives irreversibly gave me new strength to try to talk to my mother again.

When listening to the panel on preserving traditions and family history, I sensed the similarities of Asian cultures in terms of a clan or kin's attachment to a particular land. For example, Koreans have *pon*, also known as *bongwan*, which is used to identify the link between a surname and the settlement it belongs to.

I felt another emotional jolt when hearing about the life of Indigenous Evenk people and the story of an Evenk speaker who grew up in a mixed family and faced racism from her white parent. Her story was very similar to another one I reported on for my project Invisible Rainbow, though that one was from the Republic of Tyva.

After the conference, my husband said he had never seen me so sociable. He only knew about my sociability from my own stories about the past. I always thought that my ability to connect with people vanished without a trace after so many years of living in Russia. I started to call myself antisocial, though it turns out that I simply didn't have the right people around.

"Indigenous Vision" was a breath of fresh air. It gave me strength not only to continue my activist work but also to search for my roots. I am a descendant of the people who were deported and dubbed "unreliable" by Soviet Russia, so a search for my roots will be a difficult task, but one I now feel up to, thanks to the forum.

The Ideas

Indigenous Feminist Anti-War Resistance

Anonymous activist

It happened that I was a moderator of the panel on feminism at the forum, although it wasn't by choice. I was among the organizers of the event, which was put together with limited resources, so we divided the roles chaotically among the available people.

I thought it would be a difficult task for me. The thing is, as a transgender non-binary person, I no longer feel connected with the feminist movement, despite the fact that it was very important to me in the past.

This doesn't mean that I am against feminism — the foundation of my political views is rooted in the works of feminist scholars. But lately, the feminist movement itself is so heavily associated with transphobia — especially against my transgender sisters — that it became alien and unwelcoming. Too often, it represents only the activism of white European women, which is both racist and Islamophobic. I know there are other activists out there, but I can't overcome my negative associations — nor do I want to be bothered anymore.

Yet, moderating this panel has proven to be surprisingly easy.

Right at the start, when discussing the question "What does the word feminism mean to you?" we discovered that none of us, the participants, identified with that word particularly strongly.

The resulting discussion was not built around feminism. Yes, it mattered that the participants are women and that their experiences and perspectives on politics were shaped by that. But declaring “feminist” a part of our identity was not particularly crucial.

We had a tough and emotional conversation about the forced mobilization of Indigenous men by Russia, which uses them as cannon fodder in the criminal war against Ukraine.

Since 2022, the government has hunted for men in Russia’s ethnic republics and regions, kidnapping and sending them to war by force and deception. It is mostly women who took on the burden of organizing escape routes for people eligible for conscription.

Many men refused to flee the country, which was often the only way to avoid the draft. Many believed government representatives, who said nothing bad would happen to men who agreed to visit the conscription offices “just for a documents check.”

As one of the participants of our panel said, men did not want to listen to women urging them to leave the country or at least avoid military officials. They didn’t believe the war with Ukraine is a criminal war, and the draft was a sure path to death when it was said by a woman. One of the reasons for this is that they were raised in a patriarchal society, where the authority of other men — such as those in power — outweighs the voice of a woman relative.

Women play a central role in anti-colonial movements across the world, and our region is no exception. This matters because colonialism is closely tied to patriarchy, where the man is dominant, and his identity as a man depends on how well he can exercise violence and hold power.

I see many examples across the world where certain territories were formally “decolonized” while the absolute power of men and masculine ideology remained intact. In nearly all such cases of decolonization, what remains is authoritarianism, repression, violence, and governments that have close ties with other dictatorships. In those countries, there is currently no room for building alternatives for more equitable futures.

But I hope we will be able to find other scenarios.

Identity as a Mean for Exposing Colonial Violence

Dr. Ekaterina Zibrova

The driving force of any movement or collective of Indigenous peoples is identity. In this sense, the anti-war movement is no different from other Indigenous movements.

Awareness, contact, and engagement with the Indigenous ethnic identity always lead to resistance.

This is precisely why it is so important for the state to hold the ultimate power to attach labels, including the power to name or not name certain groups “Indigenous.” This brings us to the problem of who has the right to name, who holds the power of right and the right of power to determine who is who within the state.

Gender identity among Indigenous peoples is used alongside ethnic identity as a source of anti-war resistance. Yet gender identity in Indigenous anti-war resistance does not serve as a primary reason for awareness of one’s oppressed position. This stands in a stricken contrast with feminist anti-war resistance among white, ethnically Russian women.

It is important to note that I refer to all decolonial Indigenous activists as “actors.” As Linda Tuhiwai Smith said 24 years ago, the central project of Indigenous peoples is the project of survival. And when you are surviving, you become an actor.

For Indigenous anti-war actors, ethnic identity is the central source of resistance. Gender identity, in turn, functions as a source of caring behaviour as a result of gendered socialization.

During Russia's "partial" military mobilization for the war in Ukraine, women became the ones saving their male partners, husbands, sons, sons-in-law, and brothers. That struggle led to the creation of multiple anti-war decolonial initiatives.

Russia's military mobilization also revealed that the boundaries of the Russian colonial project — like those of any colonial project — run across bodies. First and foremost, across women's bodies, which are used as instruments for population control. But also across men's bodies, which are instrumentalized as tools of violence.

The way feminist and anti-war resistance targets violence makes clear that violence is the engine of the colonial project.

Colonialism is a machine, a machine of bureaucracy, administration, and also of war. Violence is the motor of that machine and thus must be persistent.

But to sustain violence continuously over centuries is no simple task. It must always be justified. This justification is achieved by the construction of hierarchies.

From this perspective, both the ethnic identity of Indigenous peoples and gender identity target these hierarchies and expose the true purposes they serve, which is to sustain colonial violence, which is always strategic and always targeted.

The Multidirectional Nature of Russian Imperialism

Lilia Yuldasheva

Imperialism as a practice of influence, suppression, and domination over cultures, lands, states, and regions includes technologies of settler colonialism, occupation, and annexation of lands — but is not limited to them.

Spanning several centuries, the history of Russian imperialism has also been characterized by economic and political influence, direct interference in the politics of independent states, resource extractivism, and aggressive cultural exports, among others.

In Russia's more recent history — that is, following the collapse of the U.S.S.R. — the country's imperial ambitions manifested in a series of wars. This includes Russia's intervention in the Georgian–Abkhazian and the Georgian–Ossetian wars that went on between 1991 and 1993, perpetration of the two Russian–Chechen wars of 1994–96 and 1999–2009, as well as the Russo–Georgian War of 2008 and subsequent Russian occupation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Weak reaction to Russia's involvement in these conflicts from both the domestic population and the international community enabled — and, in fact, legitimized — the occupation of Crimea and eastern Ukraine in 2014, as well as the subsequent full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The distribution of Russian passports to residents of Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia has reached figures of up to 90% by the 2010s, meaning most residents of these territories are now Russian citizens. This is an example of an “undeclared” de facto occupation.

Russia’s military support for the Syrian authoritarian regime lasted from 2015 until the regime’s final days in 2024, while the support for the government of the Central African Republic has continued from 2017 to the present.

Russia’s further involvement in military conflicts and civil wars in Sudan, Libya, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mozambique attests to the expansion of its reach and imperial ambitions beyond Europe and Asia.

In exchange for military aid, Russia gained access to natural resources in these countries, particularly gold and diamond mines — a clear example of neocolonialism and extractivism in action.

Russian imperial policy also uses energy resources and technologies as pressure mechanisms.

By forcing “cooperation” in the sphere of nuclear technologies on countries such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Egypt, Mali, and Burkina Faso, Russia puts them in a position of both political and energy dependency.

Russia also engages in attempts to influence election outcomes in independent states through a wide range of methods: from producing fakes and propaganda to directly sponsoring pro-Russian politicians and parties.

Paradoxically, Russia's rhetoric about its "anti-colonial policy" in African countries, and its self-presentation as an ally of former Western colonies, still finds resonance among certain leftists and in the Global South. This may be explained by the fact that Russia's interference in the politics of other countries also takes the form of aggressive, disguised, and multi-directional propaganda.

After the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russian imperialism has manifested itself more and more aggressively.

Alliances between the Russian regime and fascist and imperialist regimes of North Korea, China, Iran, and India are also strengthening.

This means that we, anti-colonial and decolonial activists and their allies, too, need to build alliances — but ones that are grassroots, self-organized, and seek not power, but a better life for our communities.

From ‘Insufficiency’ to Indigenous Agency

Sholbaana Kuular

A belief that the label of an “insufficient” or a “lesser” Russian is an integral part of one’s identity has been passed down in Indigenous families from one generation to another. This, in turn, led the same people to conclude that fighting for one’s rights and values is pointless.

It is a form of generational trauma: a rejection of oneself imposed by outsiders. As a Khakass activist once told me: “People who have been made to believe they are 'insufficient' often neglect their own rights.”

I see this reflected in my native Republic of Tyva, where concepts of choice and electability have simply ceased to exist for people living under the Kremlin’s colonial rule.

When the majority of the population lives in a survival mode, it becomes all too easy to manipulate, control, and even blackmail people.

More precisely, the very idea of elections as a mechanism of free expression of will and as an instrument of influence over power no longer functions as it should. The republic is dependent on the center in almost everything.

This lack of agency among people living within the country is also reflected in some ways among refugees from Russia.

This invisibility is the reason why many of us are struggling to obtain humanitarian visas or political asylum in the West, especially amid Russia's war in Ukraine. Even though for non-Russian citizens of Russia, who are subjected to disproportionate military mobilization and systemic discrimination, obtaining such legal status is a matter of survival.

It is important to dismantle the myth of Russian citizens being one people with "a shared background and culture" as it was described by Yulia Navalnaya, the widow of Russian opposition politician Alexei Navalny.

Peoples living in modern Russia have entirely different histories, experiences, and identities. Even within one ethnic republic, people's life paths may be very different.

The visibility of Russia's Indigenous peoples on the international stage and their engagement in an equal dialogue with the Russian opposition are essential for the country's democratic future. And this must go on without stigmatization, marginalization, objectification, or exoticization of Indigenous peoples.

We must move forward as equals.

Indigenous Peoples in International Law

Suleiman Mamutov

After World War II, the United Nations launched a global decolonization process shaped by what became known as the “blue water thesis” — a doctrine promoted by the United States. According to the logic it promoted, only overseas territories separated by the ocean from the colonizing state qualified for decolonization.

This model was not progressive. It deliberately excluded Indigenous peoples whose territories were colonized by land and absorbed into expanding states, such as the Russian Empire and, later, the Soviet Union.

While the U.S.S.R. portrayed itself as a champion of decolonization, it silently benefited from the “blue water thesis,” ensuring that Indigenous peoples within its borders were left out of global processes of emancipation and recognition.

Next, let’s consider the positioning of Indigenous peoples within the framework of international law. International law does not provide a fixed definition of Indigenous peoples. Instead, it uses contextual criteria grounded in historical, cultural, and political realities. This approach was crystallized in the Martínez Cobo report and ILO Convention No. 169, which underscores historical continuity with pre-colonial societies, distinct institutions and ways of life, as well as — and most importantly — self-identification as Indigenous as key criteria.

It is critical to understand that Indigenous peoples need not be numerical minorities or so-called “small-numbered peoples” as defined in Russian law to be indigenous. Instead, what matters is that they are non-dominant, often marginalized groups within the state, who retain distinct identities and institutions.

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) “affirms that Indigenous peoples are equal to all other peoples,” meaning that all peoples, without exception, have the right to self-determination.

To deny the right to self-determination to Indigenous peoples would suggest that some peoples are created “more equal” than others. This echoes a famous quote from George Orwell’s “Animal Farm”: “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.”

This logic was foundational to the Soviet system, which praised the equality of nations in theory but enshrined the dominant role of the Russian people in practice — even in its anthem. This logic must be eliminated.

Self-determination is not an abstract idea. It is about having a home, both physically, culturally, and politically. It means being born, living, and dying as part of your people: having *your own* name, being educated in *your* language, watching theatre, cinema, and news in *your* language, and being able to use *your* language in courts and public services. This is not a list of privileges, but of fundamental rights. However, political rights are essential for the security of these cultural dimensions of self-determination.

The harsh reality that we live in is full of barriers to realizing Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination. Achieving it is never easy. It takes decades of work, deep-rooted emotional commitment, and massive resources.

Even in democratic states, Indigenous peoples face bureaucratic inertia, a lack of political will, and often indifference or resistance. However, in many democracies, there is at least some space for recognition and political dialogue, albeit limited or flawed.

Under authoritarian or totalitarian regimes, this struggle becomes exponentially harder.

Indigenous peoples are often not even recognized as such under legal frameworks that erase their existence. Without recognition, rights cannot be guaranteed.

In such systems, non-dominant groups are almost entirely excluded from governance or remain present only symbolically with no real influence. In such systems, the dominant culture often denies the very existence of others, including through repression.

When states demand formal equality, claiming everyone has the same rights, but refuse to recognize unequal starting points or the need for special protections due to generations of structural discrimination, the result is a catastrophic deepening of injustice.

Extractivism in the Sakha Republic: A Colonial Legacy of Displacement and Resistance

Viliuia Choinova

The Sakha Republic, located in northeastern Siberia, is one of the richest resource regions in the Russian Federation.

The republic produces 73.5% of the country's diamonds, 52.9% of its uranium, 12.3% of its gold, along with a vast output of coal, natural gas, critical minerals, and rare earth elements. Industrial activity accounts for 63.2% of the regional economy, of which 58% comes from natural resource extraction — diamonds alone make up 40%. This amounts to billions of dollars in income annually.

Yet, the benefits of this wealth are not available to the local population. All major mining companies operating in the republic, the largest taxpayers, are legally required to register in Moscow and pay taxes into the federal budget, not the regional one. This means that Russia's regions — including Sakha — receive only a small fraction of the real income generated by natural resources in the form of handouts from the federal government.

As a result, the Republic of Sakha consistently ranks at the top of the list of regions dependent on subsidies issued by the federal government. This paints a distorted picture — as if the region is poor and dependent on Moscow's generosity, rather than systematically exploited.

To make things worse, our land and labor are being used to finance Russia's military aggression, including the invasion of Ukraine.

While Moscow enriches itself and wages wars on foreign soil, Indigenous communities are left with poisoned rivers, destroyed landscapes, and in a state of deepening poverty.

When we resist, we are punished.

In 2020, the Evenk people of Tyanya, a village of about 470 people in southeastern Sakha, took Russian gold mining giant Nordgold to court for environmental destruction in a rare act of legal defiance. Shortly after, the leader of the community, Arsentiy Nikolaev, was placed under house arrest on charges of bribery and extortion brought against him by the same company he opposed. Nikolaev died at age 63 in November 2021.

Stepan Pakhomov, a traditional hunter from Aldan, a gold-mining town in the south of the republic, was convicted of illegal hunting activities in 2022 despite evidence proving his innocence. In 2024, he was sentenced to 5.5 years in prison for failing to surrender his weapons. Facing jail, he was pressured into joining the military and soon died in Ukraine.

Extractivism in Sakha is a continuation of Russia's colonial policy: land taken without consent from Indigenous people, wealth extracted without benefit to them, coupled with systemically excluding them from decision-making processes. Ecosystems are degraded, rivers are polluted, and permafrost is destabilized by industrial mining. Traditional livelihoods — such as reindeer herding, fishing, and hunting — are in decline.

This is why I no longer believe that reform is possible under Moscow's rule. We need independence from Moscow to protect our land, our language, our people, and our future. Only through self-determination can we end the cycle of extraction, repression, and erasure.

Indigenous Knowledge and Its Importance for the Future

Ainuur Akhmetov

An honest, deep, and multilayered conversation about the current state, role, and fate of indigenous knowledge unfolded during the panel discussion titled “Indigenous Knowledge and Its Importance for the Future.”

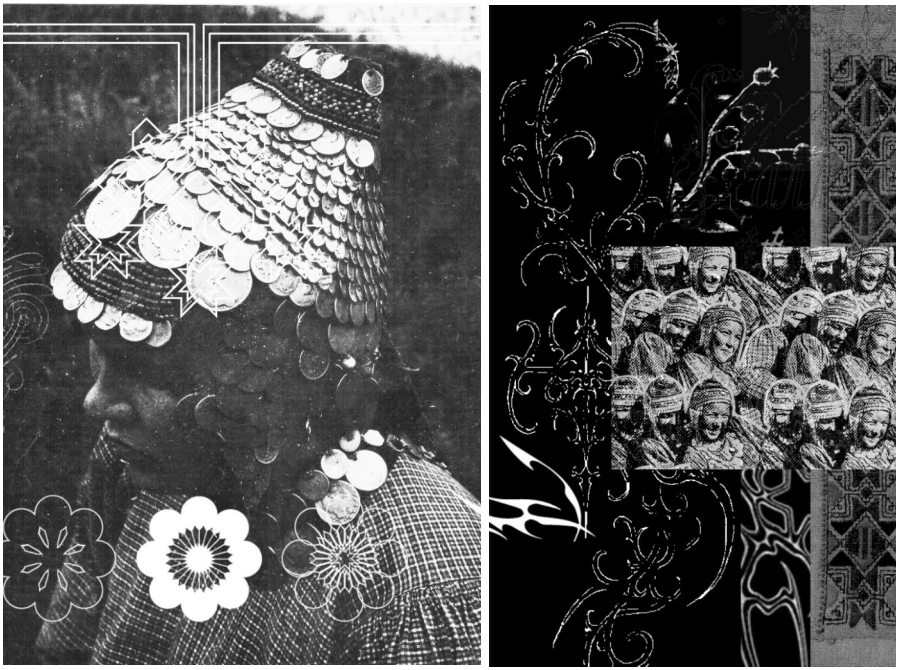
A fishbowl format chosen by the organizers allowed for more than just an exchange of opinions; it allowed participants and listeners to live through many difficult topics together.

One of the key topics of discussion was the exoticization of knowledge.

As participants noted, traditional Indigenous practices are often turned into images convenient for outside consumption — bright, but superficial. The phrase *“*We wanted sovereignization, but got souvenirization*”* accurately expresses the essence of the problem at hand, whereby true Indigenous knowledge is far too often being replaced by superficial substitutes.

Viktoriia Şăltăr, an artist and art curator from Chuvashia, brought attention to the problem of external authorship.

Most texts about the Chuvashs have been written not by the people themselves, but by outsiders. Such texts often contain distortions, including invented traditions that never existed in the culture. False depictions contained in such texts had the power to supplant genuine Chuvash traditions over time.



Fragement from Viktoria Săltăr's presentation

One particularly striking example provided by Şăltăr was the alleged Chuvash tradition of “revenge by suicide” found in some ethnographic publications. The sources claim that, in the Chuvash culture, an offended person might perform a ritual suicide in the yard of their enemy as an act of revenge — a made-up tradition that shapes the image of a people through sensationalized and invented narratives that have nothing to do with reality.

The division of knowledge into internal and external was also discussed. Practice or knowledge considered useful and life-critical by a community could often be presented by outsiders as simply exotic. Meanwhile, such knowledge becomes forgotten or considered outdated by colonized communities.

One example of the phenomenon was that of a food carried by travellers: dairy products traditionally used by steppe and nomadic communities turned out to be more nutritious than modern-day sandwiches. This example is a reminder that Indigenous knowledge is not just a symbol of identity, but also a practical tool for survival.

A panelist from Kabardino-Balkaria highlighted the issue of identity divisions within a single people: Circassians, Kabardians, and Adygs are essentially one people who have been forced to choose one of the three identities, conform to imposed frameworks, and adhere to artificial boundaries. Such fragmentation is a form of knowledge distortion that catalyzes disunity.

Elvis Çolpuh, a panelist from Crimea, reminded us of the physical erasure of knowledge.

The deportation of the Crimean Tatars and the subsequent settlement of outsiders in Crimea brought about the loss of entire layers of culture and knowledge.

The Crimean Tatars' return to the homeland was a difficult process, and to this day, the restoration of the lost culture and knowledge remains incomplete.

Special emphasis was placed on the importance of mutual understanding between colonized and Indigenous peoples.

Batlay Matenov, co-founder the of the Asians of Russia media, said that the project began nearly nine years ago as an attempt to spotlight the Asian peoples of Russia. In the process, it became clear that these peoples know little about each other, while their identities were saturated with internalized colonial myths and stereotypes. This lack of inter-group knowledge breeds alienation and mistrust, while greater mutual understanding could be an important step in rebuilding a shared community.

Within the discussion, a difficult question was raised: why preserve something that seems to be dying, for example, disappearing languages?

The statistics on Russia's Indigenous languages are worrying. My native Tatar, for example, lost about a million speakers in ten years, according to the 2020 census conducted in Russia.

Though the situation for many other Indigenous languages is even more dire, participants of the forum agreed: as long as we, Indigenous peoples, exist, our knowledge matters.

Skepticism was also voiced about the use of official data: many believe that the Russian government deliberately underreports population numbers of the many Indigenous communities and the number of speakers of their languages.

Speakers also pointed out that Indigenous peoples' fight for self-determination and preservation of their knowledge is often misunderstood in the West.

One participant gave an example of research by a European scholar in which democracy and Basque identity were depicted as opposing forces — as if being Basque and striving for autonomy means opposing democratic values. This approach reflects a failure to understand that for Indigenous peoples, the preservation of language, culture, and knowledge is impossible without certain political tools.

This is especially clear in the case of Russia, where the compulsory study of Indigenous languages in schools of ethnic republics has been banned since 2017. Thus, even if they wish to, Indigenous peoples in the republics cannot pass on their knowledge to the next generations through institutional education. This makes the problem deeply political: without rights, autonomy, and the freedom to make decisions, it is impossible to ensure the preservation of cultural foundations. Therefore, the demand for the preservation of knowledge is a matter of political agency.

Overall, the topics discussed at the panel deserve more than a dedicated forum. They deserve to consistently remain in the public eye. After all, the issue of Indigenous knowledge concerns not only the past, but also the right to be oneself in the present and the future.

From Survival to Agency, From an Ethnic Group to a Nation

Elvis Çolpuh

Indigenous knowledge, without a doubt, is valuable and of interest to ethnologists and historians. However, our peoples should not be confined to the role of tourist attractions, but should strive for active participation in social and political life.

We are not precious jewels in the crowns of empires, but living political subjects with the right to development and to a future.

The status of “Indigenous peoples” should be seen as a temporary measure for our protection, a transitional stage on the path to becoming nations.

We, Crimeans (Crimean Tatars), have endured colonization, deportation, attempts at assimilation, and continue to face repression and systemic oppression to this day. Nevertheless, we carry within us a millennia-long experience of statehood and political subjecthood.

We are the heirs of Chersonesos, of the Principality of Theodoro, of the Bosporan Kingdom, and the Crimean Khanate.

In 1917, the Crimean People’s Republic was proclaimed in Bağçasaray, our first democratic republic founded on the principles of parliamentarism and civic equality. Though the Republic had been destroyed by the Bolsheviks, the idea of national statehood remained alive.

Today, we continue the process of restoring the Republic. We are building national institutions, rethinking our own history, shaping a modern national ideology, as well as the myth and vision of the future — one that would be capable of uniting our people and serve as a guide in the 21st century.

We seek to be a modern political nation open to the world and to technologies. We seek to be capable of equal partnership instead of remaining an object in the hands of external forces.

Our goal is the restoration of statehood in a union with Ukraine, within the framework of international law, with respect for the rights of all citizens, and with full responsibility for our future as a people with a deep history and a current political project.

This path from survival to agency, from an ethnic group to a nation — is shared by other oppressed peoples of the post-imperial space: the peoples of the Caucasus, the Volga region, the Urals, and Siberia.

Our destinies differ, but our tasks are common. Only through solidarity and the awakening of national consciousness can we emerge from the empire’s shadow and build a just future for all our peoples.

The Future

A Russia Without Putin

Viktoria Maladaeva

When I imagine the future of Russia without Putin, I also imagine a Russia that is free from the colonial, imperial system of governance that brought with it the wars of conquest, resource extraction, the destruction of Indigenous lands, censorship, repression, and racism.

The future constitution must enshrine Indigenous peoples right to self-determination and to secession from the federation. The “prison of nations” must cease to exist.

The republics must decide themselves whether they wish to remain in the federation or not — this decision must not be dictated by Moscow. Places of compact settlement of Indigenous peoples that do not have the status of a republic or an autonomous region must, in turn, be granted other legal protections.

Indigenous communities themselves must decide on matters of law, healthcare, land use, education, culture, and taxation on their territories.

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The country must also witness a radical education reform to make sure that a new Putin, driven by imperial revanchism and ambitions, cannot come to power.

This reform should include a complete reassessment of Russian history, which must clearly highlight colonial wars, policies of forced assimilation, russification, repression, deportations, as well as forced Christianization of colonized peoples.

Every person, resident of every republic must be able to study the true history of their territory — not the Kremlin's rewritten version that claims "voluntary accession" of Indigenous peoples and their lands to Russia. Only in this way can we rid ourselves of imperial grandeur and truly understand the price at which this country was built. Otherwise, we may easily slip back into romanticizing imperial tsarist aesthetics or Soviet propaganda of "friendship of peoples," without recognizing the role of each specific ruler in waging the wars of conquest or issuing decrees and laws targeting the so-called "non-Russian subjects."

From the youngest age, children in the Russia of the future must be taught tolerance. Schools and workplaces must introduce mandatory classes and courses on anti-racism, anti-Islamophobia, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights. No one should have to fear going out in public — whether wearing a national dress, a head covering, or bright clothing with rainbow symbols, or simply holding hands with a loved one.

In the future Russia, the government at all levels, along with society as a whole, must be ready to condemn racism and any forms of discrimination based on gender, race, religion, or ethnicity.

A Russia That No Longer Exists

Viliuia Choinova

When I speak of the future, I speak of Russia that no longer exists in its imperial form.

The future I see is one where ethnic republics have regained their independence, where Indigenous peoples are no longer treated as resources to be extracted or populations to be silenced. Instead, they are sovereign nations with their own voices, institutions, and futures.

This vision is not utopian. It is necessary.

The current structure of the Russian Federation is unsustainable, built on coercion, violence, and centralization.

To imagine a better tomorrow, we must imagine its end.

Russia has never truly been democratic in any of its forms. From tsarist autocracy to Soviet totalitarianism to today's authoritarianism dressed in the language of federalism, democracy has never been present in the lives of Russia's peoples.

Despite their repeated failure to build a democratic state or address the oppression of non-Russian nations, the so-called Russian "opposition" is provided with a platform, opportunities, and resources by Western allies time and time again.

If the Russian opposition is given another chance at “reforming” or “saving” their empire, then the future of Indigenous peoples is predetermined. All of us, even the millions-strong communities, will follow the tragic path of Indigenous minority peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East. We will be stripped of our lands, our languages will be forgotten, and eventually we will disappear as distinct nations.

The foreign allies must change this trajectory. They must shift their attention and support toward the voices of the republics and Indigenous peoples who know what real self-determination means. For me, independence is not only about political borders, it is about dignity.

Independence means that decisions about our land, our languages, our rivers, and our peoples are made by us, not by distant centers of power. It means that the wealth extracted from our soil is used to build schools, hospitals, and cultural institutions in our homelands, rather than to fund the Kremlin’s wars and propaganda. It means that when floods, wildfires, ecological crises, or other disasters strike, our communities are not left waiting for Moscow’s permission to act, but are equipped with their own governance to protect lives.

But independence will not come on its own. We must prepare for it. This preparation begins now.

At the forum, I was reminded again and again that the struggle for sovereignty requires more than resistance. It requires strategy.
If we want our republics to take their place on the world stage, we must train a new generation of diplomats, lawyers, and negotiators who speak the language of international institutions and assert our rights in those arenas. We must build bridges with allies abroad so that when the moment of transition comes, we are not isolated but recognized as legitimate actors.

This is why I believe our work is not only activist, but also deeply diplomatic. Every meeting, every forum, every conversation with partners abroad is part of this larger preparation.

We are rehearsing the future, teaching ourselves how to act as representatives of free nations. We are creating connections that will sustain us in the difficult years ahead.

Of course, there are obstacles ahead. Imperial powers never surrender willingly, and we will face resistance on our path to independence. But the forum showed me that we already have the resilience and imagination to walk this path.

Across national republics, peoples are envisioning new economic models and reclaiming cultural pride. The seeds of sovereignty are already here.

The future I believe in is one where the Republic of Sakha, along with other national republics, stands on equal footing with the world, contributing knowledge, culture, and innovation while safeguarding our lands and traditions.

It is a future where no one has to choose between their identity and their opportunities. A future where young people can grow up knowing that their language and their homeland are valued.

This is not only the future of our republics. It is the future of a world that must reckon with the end of empire.

And our role is to ensure that when that future arrives, we are ready: with trained diplomats, international connections, and a clear vision of sovereignty rooted in justice and dignity.

The Future Starts With Taking Responsibility

Seseg Jigjitova

Acknowledging both collective and individual responsibility for the war in Ukraine is the first step toward the transformation and emancipation of Russian civil society.

Drawn into this horrific war, Indigenous peoples are being used by the Kremlin as cannon fodder, suffering disproportionately high casualties. And yet, as subjects of Russian colonial violence, we are not absolved of responsibility for Russia's participation in this war. War and violence are made possible by both the active and passive participation of countless people.

We consider it unacceptable to evade the question of responsibility or to shift all the blame onto a single person — even if he is the main perpetrator. Responsibility for the war in Ukraine lies with the Russians and with all those connected to Russia, including Indigenous peoples.

Nonviolent decolonization is a necessary condition for democratizing Russia.

The Russian opposition — just like Putin — deliberately marginalizes decolonial and Indigenous movements, portraying us as "savages" prone to ethnic conflict.

It is time for the Russian opposition to call things by their name. Clearly. War, dictatorship, and colonial violence are not some kind of natural phenomena that simply “happened to us.”

Unlike the metropolitan opposition, Indigenous decolonial movements from different republics and regions share a sense of solidarity. We are united by a shared history of colonial violence and russification. We also share an understanding that Russia’s hyper-centralization of power was not invented by Putin, but that it is a manifestation of a centuries-old system fixated on Moscow.

We, Indigenous peoples, share common problems, but the way out of them will look different for each region.

Each republic of the so-called Russian Federation is unique, and the path to overcoming centuries of accumulated trauma and structural issues will also be unique. That path must take into account the unique traits of each region, its cultural context, as well as historical external ties.

No Moscow-based “specialist” could possibly provide universal solutions to all these questions.

Our regions are united in the strive for nonviolent decolonization. The very possibility of this depends largely on whether Moscow continues to insist on maintaining its hegemony.

Once again, we say: Nothing about us without us.

Author Biographies

Ainuur Akhmetov is a Tatar activist working in the fields of education and media. He is the host of the “Әйдә Podcast,” the podcast about the Tatar language, and the creator of the language project “Әйдә Online.” Ainur has been engaged in activism since 2012, giving lectures and teaching courses in the Tatar language.

Viliuia Choinova is a Sakha scientist, activist, and advocate for Indigenous peoples' rights with a background in environmental engineering. She is currently pursuing studies in space geodesy and geoinformation at TU Berlin with a focus on decolonial issues, human rights, and the intersection of gender, climate, and urban sustainability. Viliuia was one of the organizers of the “Indigenous Vision” forum.

Elvis Çolpuh is the founder of the Crimean Cultural Center “KERMEN” in Germany and a prominent representative of the Crimean (Crimean Tatar) diaspora. Trained as a psychiatrist and forensic psychiatric expert, he now works in the field of cultural, educational, and human rights advocacy. He supports displaced persons, defends the political rights of Crimean (Crimean Tatar) people, and promotes the preservation of Crimean identity in exile. His efforts focus on decolonial education, historical justice, and international recognition of the 1944 deportation of Crimean (Crimean Tatar) people as genocide. He regularly initiates dialogue with European institutions and works to strengthen diasporic networks committed to the decolonization of Russia.

Seseg Jigjitova is an architect, artist, and Buryat activist based in Berlin. She is one of the organizers of the “Indigenous Vision” forum and the founder and board chair of Nomads Indigenous Collective e.V., an organization dedicated to building transnational solidarities among North Asian, Central Asian, and global Indigenous communities. Her work explores the intersections of decolonization, anti-racism, and cultural memory, often drawing from her family history and experiences of migration. Currently, she dedicates her work to reclaiming North Asian narratives through art, storytelling, and community-based activism.

Sholbaana Kuular is the co-founder of the New Tuva movement, a Tyvan activist and a radiologist in forced exile. Engaged in anti-war activism since the early days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, she was forced to emigrate with her family from Russia. She is currently studying to have her medical degree recognized in the Netherlands. Sholbaana also pursues independent studies of decolonization and decoloniality in various fields.

Leyla Latypova is a Tatar journalist and political analyst from Bashkortostan. She is a special correspondent with The Moscow Times, leading the outlet's trailblazing English-language coverage of Russia’s ethnic republics and regions. Leyla is the founder of From the Republics, the first Indigenous-led bilingual media outlet on Russia’s ethnic republics, which brings together Indigenous knowledge and world-class journalistic expertise.

Viktoria Maladaeva is a Buryad-Mongol activist, filmmaker, and founder of the Indigenous of Russia Foundation. Maladaeva has organized numerous decolonial conferences and forums aimed at uniting Indigenous voices and facilitating knowledge sharing and resistance to systemic injustice. Viktoria was also among the organizers of the “Indigenous Vision” forum. As a filmmaker, she has produced documentaries spotlighting the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples, including on the intersectional struggles faced by LGBTQ+ Indigenous individuals in Russia and the legacy of residential schools for Indigenous peoples of the North and Siberia.

Suleiman Mamutov has dedicated the past decade to international humanitarian, development, and human rights work with Ukrainian and international organizations. His contributions extend to Ukrainian policy-making, where he co-authored legislation on IDPs, mine action, and Indigenous Peoples' rights. In 2022 he was elected as an expert member of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, from 2024 - Rapporteur of the Forum. Suleiman also works with Amnesty International Ukraine and the OSCE to promote the rights of Indigenous Peoples and international justice. His research and activities focus on the critical issues of Crimean Tatar identity, collective rights, and language preservation.

Dr. Maria Ochir-Goryaeva holds a PhD in historical sciences. She is an archaeologist and the author of monographs. She holds an honorary title of Distinguished Researcher of the Republic of Kalmykia and is a Corresponding Member of the German Archaeological Institute (DAI). Born and raised in the Republic of Kalmykia, she studied at Leningrad University and has dedicated her career to the Kalmyk Research Center in Elista. Over the years, she has led archaeological excavations across Kalmykia, gaining deep insight into the lives of people in even the most remote areas.

Vladimir Son is a Koryo-saram born in Central Asia. A queer Asian, he dedicated his activism to improving Asian representation in the Russian-speaking LGBTQ+ community, especially in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Son is the founder of Invisible Rainbow, a project spotlighting stories of BAME LGBTQ+ people from post-Soviet space.

Lilia Yuldasheva is a queer and decolonial researcher, activist, and editor of Beda media. Lilia researches anti-migrant ideologies in Russia, Russia's infrastructural neo-colonial projects in Central Asia, and cross-ethnic solidarities across administrative and state borders. Lilia loves butterscotch, plane trees, and black tea.

Dr. Ekaterina Zibrova holds a PhD in Psychology. She is an associate researcher at the Wits Centre for Diversity Studies, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. Her ongoing research focuses on Indigenous perspectives on decolonisation, Indigenous identity in Russia, and its role in social changes. Her areas of academic interest also include critical diversity literacy and politics of identity. Dr. Zibrova is an Evenk from eastern Siberia.

Credits

Indigenous Vision: Centering Our Voices, Resilience, and Knowledge

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Editor

Leyla Latypova

Forum Organizers

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Viliuia Choinova

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