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DEBATE ON DECOLONIALITY AND SENSE OF BELONGING AMONG YOUNG KALMYKS AND BURYATS WHO FLED TO MONGOLIA AFTER 2022

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In 2022–2023, there was a significant shift in discussions about minority languages and ethnic groups in Russia. This study examines discourses concerning the attitudes to the Russian state, the sense of belonging and the future of ethnic minorities. The paper is based on interviews with young people from Mongolian-speaking republics in Russia, Kalmykia and Buryatia who left for Mongolia after mobilisation was announced in 2022. Fleeing possible conscription into military service, living in a country with a similar culture and language, and sharing emigration experiences with other young people made their life in Mongolia a space for fruitful discussions about their experiences, history and the future of their ethnic groups. The sense of belonging is context-sensitive. The study shows that the views of young Kalmyks and Buryats consider both official and activist perspectives. Their narratives about the future of their republics are closely linked to personal decisions to leave, life experiences and family memories of their community's turbulent history. At the same time, the evolving perspectives of young people will shape future collective discourses among ethnic minorities.

KEYWORDS: sense of belonging, young Kalmyks, young Buryats, Mongolia, Russia

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the war with Ukraine, there has been a notable shift in discourses on ethnic minorities, both in the rhetoric employed by officials and ethnic activists, as well as in that of ordinary community members. Restricting the rights of ethnic minorities and emphasising Russian nationalism on a symbolic level has been ongoing for some time. In particular, amendments to the Russian constitution have included the formulation of “Russian as a state-building group and language” (State Duma 2020). These

trends have continued and intensified during the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. To emphasise national “unity” during the war, the authorities have adopted policies that reduce the autonomy of minority groups. For example, in September 2023, the Russian government withdrew from the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (Postanovlenije 2023), which Russia joined in 1996.

Research on language activists conducted in 2019–2021 found that they tended to engage in linguistic and cultural projects, but avoided discussions of language rights (Baranova 2023; see a similar conclusion in Yusupova 2022, 2023). However, after the outbreak of war, many of them became more active in language advocacy or decolonial discussions (Baranova 2024). Ethnic activist media platforms are diligently working to legitimise and endorse such debates. In 2022–2023, many new projects emerged. Currently, the primary debate among language and ethnic activists in diasporas revolves around understanding the relationship between the state and minority groups, as well as exploring the concept of belonging.

Various stakeholders have now actively engaged with and contested these discussions. Despite the uncertainty surrounding who can authentically represent a community during times of war, these initiatives have been gaining influence within the international community. For instance, the 30th Annual Session of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe acknowledged the “forceful, ongoing and deliberate subordination of Indigenous and ethnic minority nations within the Russian Federation, which are denied equal rights and self-determination” (OSCE 2023, 35). Notably, the idea of ethnic republics seeking secession and achieving independence has become one of several possible scenarios for the future mentioned by experts.

Thus, the political context of the war introduces a new perspective on the relationship between ethnic minorities and the state as seen by officials, whereas ethnic and decolonial activists present an alternative viewpoint. How are these discourses structured, and which aspects of these discourses resonate with “ordinary” community members? The variety of beliefs and political views among the general population appear random, underlining the importance of figuring out what influences people to support or dispute a specific standpoint.

It should be noted that there is a disparity in mobilisation and death: members of ethnic minorities have a higher chance of going to war. This is evident in Buryatia (Bessudnov 2023; Vyushkova and Sherkhonov 2023). The threat to members of minority ethnic groups is rather high, which may influence their perceptions of belonging to the state. I examine these reflections using the example of a group directly affected by the war: young Kalmyks and Buryats who are subject to mobilisation and have decided to leave Russia (at least temporarily).

This study explores how and why respondents from two Mongolian-speaking areas, Kalmykia and Buryatia, speak about the future of their republics in the context

of the Russian-Ukrainian war and how they describe their sense of belonging. Do Indigenous people engage in identity discussions and align themselves with particular positions, and if so, what influences their position? More specifically, I examine how these positions are reflected in their narratives and how they relate their stance to external discourses, official propaganda and decolonial activism, as well as historical events or their biographies. The ensuing section deals with the study's methodology.

METHODOLOGY

Data and Methods

The paper is based on interviews with young Kalmyks and Buryats, comparing them to official discourse and the voices of decolonial activists.

Methodologically, selecting a sample for this research posed challenges due to the wide relevance of identity, belonging and the future structure of the republics. For the sake of safety, the sample was limited to individuals outside Russia. This determined the age range, as younger individuals (20–30 years old) tended to leave during the mobilisation¹. Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper.

Those who emigrated to Mongolia were selected for the study. Buryats and Kalmyks primarily left Russia across the land borders to Mongolia and Kazakhstan. Some of my respondents initially crossed into Kazakhstan (the closest border for residents of Kalmykia) and then moved to Mongolia a few months later. Their choice of destination was influenced by linguistic and cultural proximity, as well as comparative accessibility. Mongolia is relatively affordable and has an open land border with Russia. Russian citizens can stay in Mongolia without a visa for 30 days. On 25 September 2022, immediately after the mobilisation was announced, the former president of Mongolia, Elbegdorj Tsakhia, appealed to Buddhists in Russia – Buryats, Kalmyks and Tuvinians – urging them to stay out of the war and promising residency in Mongolia for these groups (world mongol 2022). Although these promises were not fully realised, many respondents expected visa relaxations for co-ethnics. A total of 13,285 Russians moved to Mongolia in 2022 (Shirmanova 2023). While some eventually returned to Russia (Jonutyte 2023a), others remained in Mongolia or moved to different countries.

Although there is no data on the ethnic composition of these migrants, my observations and commentaries from activists who assisted them suggest that residents of border regions (the Altai Republic, Tyva, Buryatia and Zabaikalye Krai) predominated among those who moved to Mongolia. While there were also Russian residents

1 Moreover, attempts to conduct online interviews with Kalmyks currently residing in the republic who support the war proved unsuccessful due to trust issues.

from these regions, and Buryats and Kalmyks migrated to other countries as well, a significant group of Mongolian-speaking residents from Russia formed in Mongolia. The ethnic, historical, religious and linguistic affinity with Mongolians plays an important role in their identity. Therefore, Buryat and Kalmyk migrants to Mongolia are particularly interesting for understanding changing discourses.

I found the respondents using the snowball method, conducting a total of 15 in-depth online interviews and collecting several commentaries from other participants via voice message. All respondents were men because they were avoiding mobilisation. Among emigrants after 2022, there were both men and women (Kamalov et al. 2022). However, those who left in the autumn of 2022 were predominantly men (Exodus-22 2023), and among those who went to Mongolia, the absolute majority were young men of conscription age, particularly among Kalmyks and Buryats. Only one of my respondents moved with his family; the rest were unmarried and childless, or left their families in Russia. As Jonutyte (2023b) notes, family pressure – either their own or their parents’ – often led them to return to Buryatia despite the continuing threat of mobilisation. Economically, my respondents are not very secure, and their choice of Mongolia was linked to their financial capabilities. Unlike many emigrants who moved to other countries in 2022 (to Armenia and Georgia, for instance, Exodus-22 2023), those who relocated to Mongolia generally did not have remote IT jobs and were seeking manual labour (for example, through a tree planting programme in Mongolia or by working for a few months at a car factory in South Korea) or unskilled remote work (such as in a call centre in Russia). Only a few had a high level of education and were able to (plan to) maintain their profession after retraining (for example, one respondent was a lawyer and wanted to learn the specifics of Mongolian law).

Kalmyks were chosen for analysis due to language proficiency and the author’s previous work with the community (2006–2018), facilitating access to respondents. Despite familiarity with respondents or introductions through mutual contacts, the issue of trust was significant. The language in which the interviews took place was crucial as respondents were able to switch to their native language (as a field linguist, I speak Kalmyk and partly understand other Mongolic languages, e.g. Buryat).

I had originally planned to focus only on interviews with Kalmyks, but research showed that young people from Kalmykia and Buryatia often rent accommodation together in Ulaanbaatar. In the new context of emigration, they find themselves in a similar situation: natives of Russia who enter as tourists and apply for a residence permit in Mongolia, who are culturally and linguistically close to Mongolians, but who do not speak the standard Khalkha-Mongolian language. Temporary or permanent departure from Russia has created a circle of young people interested in discussing the situation. They discuss among themselves not only the everyday problems

of emigration but also the political and historical situation in Russia and their narratives influenced each other. I have therefore included a few interviews with Buryats from a common circle of migrants in Mongolia.

Representations of identity are largely influenced by individual experiences, so the study focuses on the personal narratives of Indigenous people from Kalmykia. Interviews dealt with various topics focusing more on the respondents' migration to Mongolia and adaptation there than the future of their native region. I analysed how people specifically discussed the future of Kalmykia (and, partly, Buryatia as another Mongolic-speaking region), but I preferred to avoid direct questions about the war and its consequences due to the danger for Russian citizens and possible fears among respondents. Usually, the respondents brought up the topic of the war when discussing other ethnic-related issues.

As an additional source of data, I used documents and statements from officials related to language and national policy and online discussions of decolonial activists (media, YouTube channels, video conferences, etc.). I captured intertextual references when respondents mentioned statements from ethnic activists, projects or Russian propaganda that had influenced them. Attention was paid to how these macro-narratives intertwined in interviews with the biographical circumstances or specific decisions of individuals, such as migration.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

There are two dimensions of belonging: “emotional attachment”, formed primarily through family relationships and biography (Yuval-Davis 2006) and the politics of belonging, that is, “a discursive recourse which constructs, claims, justifies or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion” (Antonsich 2010, 645; Cornips and de Rooij 2018). The resources or building materials for the second dimension, include various discourses concerning the past and present of the ethnic group. These discourses encompass perspectives from the state and activist realms, as mentioned earlier. However, these discourses are not static: individuals actively construct their own ideological frameworks from the ideas that are presented to them.

The development of a personal sense of belonging constitutes a complex domain intricately tied to the respondent's social position, communication networks and individual circumstances. The analysis does not attempt to comprehensively cover every aspect of the respondents' sense of belonging and ethnic identity. Instead, it focuses on examining the circumstances that respondents themselves identify as crucial in shaping their worldview and sense of belonging.

The discourses on the sense of belonging in the ethnic republics in Russia were far from political mobilisation. Describing Buryat's sense of belonging, Graber shows

that the most widespread discourse adopts the notion of autonomy within this multinational state and multiculturalism at the regional scale rather than the conception of “indigenous sovereignty or empowerment” (Graber 2020, 78). In a similar way, exploring the notions of identity and sovereignty in Siberia, Mandelstam Balzer (2021) does not find grounds for it. At the same time, she states that “identity can be crystallised through shattering events that force people to realign and rethink their loyalties” (Mandelstam Balzer 2021, 166). This may be the process we are witnessing now.

In the new media that ethnic activists in diasporas create, the notion of decolonisation plays an important role. For example, one of the movements is called “Decolonise Russia” and others often use this word to explain their programme. It should be emphasised that the understanding of decoloniality among activists may coincide, or it may differ from academic approaches and between different actors. For example, they may focus primarily on the political sense of the word, emphasising part of a broad decolonial approach as an “epistemic, political and ethical instrument” (Mignolo and Tlostanova 2009). In this paper, I will use the notion of decoloniality to refer primarily to the system of representations and knowledge they offer. According to Quijano (2007), the decolonial approach brings a “historical diversity of knowledge” that can transform an understanding of the roles of different groups or reconstruct memories and local histories (Tlostanova 2015).

Ordinary members of the community, however, are not passive recipients of ideology. The work of ethnic activists can also be perceived differently, remaining at the margins of community interests or offering, especially in moments of crisis, new explanations and discourses that shape identity and a sense of belonging. These ideas resonate most strongly among young people (as seen in different contexts, especially the Basque movement; Urla 2012).

The stances of young migrants from ethnic minorities are important because they will influence society in their republics of origin. To understand the influence of migrants on their countries of origin, the term “social remittances” has been coined (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011). This encompasses a fusion of new practices, ideas and vocabulary. Emigrants play a crucial role in transmitting perceptions of societal structures shaped by their new experiences post-departure. This transmission occurs through various channels, including online platforms in digital diaspora settings and interactions facilitated by cross-border movements.

SOURCES AND RECEPTION OF DISCOURSES: OFFICIAL PROPAGANDA AND DECOLONIAL MEDIA

In this section, I outline the external sources shaping representations of Kalmyk and Buryat identities, as well as the relations between these republics and the state.

The analysis focuses on how these official and activist discourses become part of respondents' narratives about the structure of society and the future of the ethnic minority community. Two predominant discourses stand out: official propaganda and decolonial media. The key aspects of these discourses are briefly summarised below, with acknowledgement that they are not internally uniform.

The responses vary from direct references to specific media events or political statements during interviews to expressing shared views, such as “the state is currently oppressing our ethnic culture”. This description aims to convey not only how the state's ethnic policy and opposition discourse on ethnic groups are structured but, more importantly, what resonates with the perspectives of my respondents.

Official Discourse

For Russia, during the war, national policy turns out to be one of the most important areas of activity. In 2022, reports emerged in the press indicating the need to develop a federal law on state national policy (that was not there before). During 2022–2023, a draft law was developed, but the text is currently unavailable. Reports by the Federal Agency for Ethnic Affairs (FADN) on working meetings emphasise discussion of “the powers of state authorities” and “a uniform approach to implementing state national policy” in all regions of Russia (FADN, 2023).

There is a distinction that emerged in the 1990s between ethnic *russkiĭ* (Russian) and civil *rossiĭanin* (citizens of the Russian Federation) identities. While everyday spoken language tends to favour the noun *russkiĭ*, officials stick to the term *rossiĭanin* to emphasise that they are addressing all citizens of the country, not just a specific ethnic group. Initially, this official terminology aimed to acknowledge the diversity within society. Laruelle and her colleagues show the gradual increase of *russkiĭ* instead of *rossiĭanin* in official discourses but consider it not as ethnonationalism, but rather, as the culturalisation of citizenship (Laruelle et al. 2022, 27). However, the surge in nationalist sentiments during the war has led to the erasure of the very concept of diversity and equality among ethnic cultures. The pro-war discourse increasingly defaults to labelling the inhabitants of Russia as *russkie* (Russians). For instance, in spring 2022 in Elista (Kalmykia), official pro-war banners carried the message, “I am a Kalmyk, but today we are all Russians.” This shift in language usage reflects a growing tendency to emphasise Russian identity over the broader concept of a diverse, multi-ethnic nation.

Respondents sometimes refer directly to this case when talking about Russification and the erasure of identity: “[There will be a] chance [for a society] if rhetoric like, ‘I am Kalmyk, but today we are all Russians,’ diminishes and when our regional identity is no longer erased. We've been forced to forget about our constitution and even that we once had a president, haven't we?” (Timur, Buryat, 25). Another respondent, Kalmyk



Figure 1. “I am a Kalmyk, but today we are all Russians” (with the ethnic term *russkie*)

from Elista, commented on the reaction to this poster in his environment: “First of all, nobody liked it at all, because, well, we have never had it to the point where we are like: ‘We’re Russian.’ We know who we are” (Artem, Kalmyk, 23). In addition to the nationalist discourse, official propaganda promotes the idea of a multi-ethnic nation. Thus, an important task of propaganda is to present the multinational character of the army or festivals of food, song and dance, and make official statements about the nature of the relationship between ethnic minorities and the state. A good example of this is provided by film clips put out by the FADN about the production of body armour, inclining that ‘it doesn’t matter whether we speak Russian, Khakas, Chuvash or Bashkir, we are all united by our love for the motherland and a great desire to help it” (FADN, 2022). This understanding is close to the Soviet notion of nationality, where different ethnic cultures together constituted one “nation”. Respondents take this perception into account and are mostly critical of it.

Official discourse also uses the notion of “coloniality”, though not in the same way as ethnic activists. Putin emphasises in many of his speeches that Russia is neither a colonial country nor an empire.

In my opinion, what’s the most important thing? The fact that we have never been colonisers anywhere. Our co-operation [with ethnic minorities] has always been built on an equal basis or on the desire to help and support [them]. And those countries that are trying to compete with us, including now, have pursued a completely different policy. (EEF 2023)

At the linguistic level, the vocabulary used in propaganda differs slightly from that of the opposition: official discourse speaks of “anti-colonialism” (mostly in Africa). For young Kalmyks, ideas are mostly sourced from opposition media.

Activists’ Media and the New Agenda

In 2022–2023, online organisations with anti-war or decolonial goals emerged for nearly every ethnic group. The first such organisation was the Free Buryatia Foundation, which aimed to help individuals avoid being sent to the front, particularly during mobilisation. Similar organisations, such as Free Kalmykia and Free Yakutia, also operated in other republics, receiving financial and organisational support from their respective diasporas. Other organisations had a less direct approach, promoting the culture of the respective ethnic group.

Some projects aim to represent subethnic groups, for example, the podcast *Govorit Respublika* (the republic speaks) and the organisation *Aziaty Rossii* (Asians of Russia) discuss several “Asian” regions of Russia, for example Altai, Buryatia, Kalmykia, Khakasia, Tyva and Yakutia. The Telegram channel “The Indigenous of Russia” unifies all “Indigenous minorities”. There are attempts to find a common identity and term for all ethnic minorities, for example, the design brand 4 Oirads created new merchandise in 2022 called Nerusskiĭ (non-Russians; see Figure 2), which became popular among different ethnic activists. The Telegram channels “Nerusskiĭ” and “Nerusskiĭ mir” (non-Russian world) reclaim the slurs and provide an umbrella term for all minorities, including migrants. Another channel, “Decolonise Russia”, deals with all ethnic minorities in Russia, emphasising their understanding of decoloniality.

During 2022–2024, there was a process of searching for new terms for minority activists and new identities. The re-labelling of channels or movements mirrors this discussion. For example, the channel “Tozhe_rossiĭāne” (Russians citizens too) published a post about possibly renaming the channel. The author invited subscribers of the channel to vote for variants of the name (the old one or a number of new ones), expressing their identity: “The channel was conceived before the war, and at that time, the name *Tozhe_rossiĭāne* was chosen as provocative and inclusive and reconciling. Before the war, it still seemed that a return to civil unity from the already established Russian ethnostate was possible.” As another example, an Instagram channel changed its name from “Free Kalmykia” to “Oirad Jisān” (Oirad movement):

The new name is more decolonial and well-thought-out. The nam kalmyki [Kalmyks] was given to us in the russian empire [without capital letters], and the name we have given ourselves is the word *өөрөд* or *оўрад*. We realise that it is not easy to give up the name Kalmyks, because many people associate themselves with it, so we will try to use the name *оўрат-калмыки* [Oirad-Kalmyks] in our writing.



Figure 2. Nerusskiĭ (Non-Russian) created by the design brand 4 Oirads. 2022 ©4Oirads (published with the author's permission)

New media facilitate online co-operation between activists who have emigrated to different countries. In particular, ethnic activists actively collaborate with each other and with other anti-war movements such as the Feminist Anti-war Resistance, and their understanding of the goals is transformed into a struggle for ethnic and linguistic rights. Some ethnic activists have also sought political representation and organised forums for representatives of potential independent states.

Discussions among activists in the diaspora are spreading to some extent among young people from ethnic republics, particularly from Kalmykia and Buryatia. Without delving into all the debates among activists here, only those cases mentioned by my respondents, “ordinary” Kalmyks or Buryats, are discussed below.

During the war, activists have problematised the situation of ethnic and linguistic minorities inside Russia. One of the important topics they address is the impossibility of preserving language and culture without fighting for linguistic rights, “because the right to learn a (minority) language is a political question” (from a blog of a language activist, spring 2022). Decolonial media often emphasise that the independence of the republic is important for the preservation of culture. Respondents also mentioned this close link between a separate state and language maintenance.

Perhaps the collapse of Russia, the acquisition of independence or extended autonomy and possibly forced learning of the Kalmyk language, somehow might revive this whole tradition, just as Hebrew was revived in Israel. Maybe somehow their experience in self-identification in cultural and linguistic terms can help. I don't see any way out at the current moment except the possible disintegration of Russia. (Baatr, Kalmyk, 30)

It is important to note that leaving during mobilisation does not automatically imply an oppositional position or solidarity with the struggle for independence. An activist who helped organise departures during the mobilisation announcement pointed out that fear for their lives, both their own and their compatriots', led to the departures, irrespective of political views. "There was such an upsurge on the internet among different Kalmyk communities. And different people with different political views helped them. So, this big problem, which affected everyone, united many different people," says a Kalmyk activist (Darsen, 32, Mongolia/Germany).

One extremely important idea and even slogan found in opposition decolonial media is "this is not our war" (Sakha resistance, 2023-). The phrase was also repeated in some of the interviews.

Well, I mean, there are, of course, people... In my environment, it was people of the older generation, my bosses, and so on, they were pro-war, *Z*. But everybody who was not related to my work, they were all against it. And they don't understand why it's necessary in general. That is, people have the feeling that this is not their war at all. That is, it is something [Ukraine] that the Slavs have not divided among themselves, but what does it matter to us? (Artem, Kalmyk, 23)

Reconsideration of the war as national/ethnic and the inclusion of the Kalmyks in the group of "Russians", in which they are not prepared to include themselves, evokes the opposite idea – distancing themselves in principle. When they say that this is a "Russian" or "Slavic" war, it means it is not about "us".

At the linguistic level, one can see how new words and concepts are spreading. Until 2022, I had not heard young Kalmyks use the terms decolonial, empire (except for the combination "Russian Empire") and related notions of the relationship between empire and oppressed groups. They have now entered the discourse, along with some slogans. While there are numerous subtle and concealed repetitions of independence movement slogans, some respondents tend to articulate their views more frequently by referencing media or distant organisations.

I'm not in favour of separation at all; I'm in favour of self-determination. In the sense that I can't decide for all other Kalmyks how they should live. And this should be done democratically, with a referendum. If they want to live in Russia, let them live in Russia; if they don't, we'll work towards an independent Kalmykia. In this regard, I don't have this firm stance that we absolutely must separate and build our independent Kalmyk state, engaging in conflicts with all our neighbours [ironically]. That's more the stance of the members of congress and their rhetoric. (Darsen, Kalmyk, 32, Mongolia/Germany)

Defining too radical a position, the respondent distances himself from it, referring to the Congress of the Oirat-Kalmyk People (Kongress ojrat-kalmyckogo naroda), the organisation that participates in different meetings of The Forum of Free Nations of Post-Russia (*Forum svobodnykh gosudarstv Postrossii*).

The respondent often misattributed the idea, for example, in the excerpt below, of independence as part of a moderate NGO with a different agenda: "It's better to ask foreign agents, like 'Free Buryatia': they are actively engaged in this. I believe that if such discussions are taking place now, they have more of an informal nature, like kitchen talk. Most of these conversations about the need to leave separately or to join Mongolia, for instance, are happening abroad" (Timur, Buryat, 25).

Together with the emergence of decolonial media, there has been more discussion of racism and discrimination, both at the domestic and institutional level (e.g., prejudice has been addressed in the podcast *Govorit respublika, Beda-Media* and others). It should be noted that the level of ethnic and linguistic prejudice in Russian society is extremely strong (ECRI 1996–2022). At the same time, discussion of this situation has long been silenced in the ethnic republics. While respondents do not directly quote these media sources, they speak extensively and openly about experiences of discrimination that have affected them: "When even the cops, police officers [in Moscow] stop you, they are surprised that you have a Russian passport. What? You know, like, really? They are surprised that you don't look like a citizen of the Russian Federation" (Ayush, Kalmyk, 33).

In summary, the respondents did not align themselves explicitly with any particular political movement, including those advocating for the independence of the republic. However, various positions emerged in the interviews, evident in both logical connections and linguistic expressions. Notable instances include use of terms like "decolonial" and "empire", as well as discussion of the possibility of the republic's separation from Russia – even if the respondents did not endorse such a stance.

THE PAST AND FUTURE OF AN ETHNIC GROUP AND PERSONAL
NARRATIVES OF BELONGING

A sense of belonging involves recognising the self as a member of some group. In this sense, the respondents often spoke explicitly about their desire to leave a group, not to be part of it: “Because of the war and mobilisation, I made a decision that I didn’t want to be part of this, how to say, part of Russia, part of Russian society, and I thought that I should try myself in another country” (Baatr, Kalmyk, 30). Their decision to emigrate is considered an act of identity. So, personal biography (i.e., departure to Mongolia) is constructed through a sense of (not) belonging to the state and responsibility.

The experience of emigration impacts identity. While the lives of Kalmyks and Buryats fleeing mobilisation in Mongolia are beyond the scope of this text, it is important to note that many emphasised cultural affinities: “It’s as if I were in Elista! The atmosphere, the vibe – it’s very similar. The same Mongolian faces, the same everything practically. As my Kalmyk friends used to joke, Ulaanbaatar would be Elista if it weren’t for Russia” (Artem, Kalmyk, 23). Some reflected on ideas of pan-Mongolism and the concept of a unified state for various Mongolian groups, whereas others specifically highlighted Kalmyk and Buryat identities in Mongolia. Notably, some objected to the term “Western Mongols” (adopted in Mongolia) for Oirats/Kalmyks.

The fieldwork occurred after recent and sudden relocation, making it difficult for my interlocutors to define their plans and status. One person might say he wanted to return to Kalmykia, stay in Mongolia or travel the world. They avoided using terms related to mobility status (e.g., “emigration”, “refugee” or “temporary departure”). If they did use any terms, they referred to “escape” or “running away”. This ambiguity is also seen among other groups of emigrants from Russia after 2022, such as those in Armenia and Georgia (Baranova and Podolsky 2023). However, unlike Russians in the South Caucasus, Kalmyks and Buryats did not consider their choice of destination, Mongolia, to be random. Some respondents had previously visited Mongolia or had considered the possibility of living there.

In conversations about the future of the region, research participants often referred to historical events. The memory of the group’s past was often used to maintain different perspectives on the post-war organisation of the country or to justify individual decisions to participate in the war or not, to go abroad or not. For the Kalmyks, a significant moment in understanding their belonging to the state was the deportation in 1943–1957. The deportation significantly impacted the community’s ethnic and linguistic identity (Guchinova 2005, Baranova 2009). The deportation became a collective trauma for Kalmyks, perpetuating this memory through three generations (Guchinova 2005, 15). Any biographical narrative revolves around

the memory of deportation, whether experienced directly or, typically, through relatives. An activist mentioned the trauma as a reason to fear participation in anti-war protests: “Well, it seems to me that we still have a post-genocidal trauma, because, let’s say, any protest in our minds is triggered by December ’43. That is, I heard it with my own ears, that the Russians would come again, deport everyone, kill everyone, and so on” (Badma, Kalmyk, 28).

Most respondents discuss the deportation in the context of their anti-war position or their decision to flee: “From my childhood, I was taught that this is bad, that war is bad, that it will never, will never lead to anything good, and my ancestors, grandmothers, grandfathers, *ava-eeji* [grandparents in Kalmyk] were deported because of the war. And they were all exiled, exiled, born in exile” (Maxim, Kalmyk, 29).

Another respondent says that he does not understand how their grandparents did not flee (although he does not take into account the real possibilities of emigration from the USSR):

And after the exile. How was it possible? [...] the actions of these Soviet authorities are so terrible. *Aava-eeji* there were such terrible things experienced, well, even from the stories that I don’t understand why they didn’t leave, didn’t leave everything, didn’t flee the country. And so, for me, I decided to run away, not to be part of Russia. (Baatr, Kalmyk, 30)

Thus, when they discuss the ethnic group or its history, they relate these events to their situation.

It was noted above that moving and socialising with other young compatriots was cited as a moment when they reflected on the political order. Some respondents state that the war with Ukraine was the starting point for reconsideration of their identity and their circle: “In fact, if you think about it, it’s a shock to the public. And if there was no such shock, people probably wouldn’t think about it” (Mergen, Buryat, approx. 30). At the same time, some participants talked about their previous life and, primarily, the experience of discrimination that was a starting point for thinking about independence:

But, in general, I honestly want us to have our own independence... I do not perceive... as everyone says “Mother Russia” is like a stepmother for me, probably [laughs] not a mother. Because when you go outside Kalmykia, you feel that you catch a lot of sidelong glances. Let’s put it this way. [...] So I think it will be very hard, but, in general, it will probably be better for the people if we are independent and live separately from Russia. (Maxim, Kalmyk, 29)

Another respondent attributed his interest in the independence of the republic to his passion for history. He also mentioned communication with customers in his ethnic clothes and goods shop and previous trips to Mongolia:

I'm a historian by education, I took part in all sorts of history competitions at school. And I realise that if we lived on our own before, without all the telephones and credit cards, with three sheep and two camels, then we can live on our own now. And then we started travelling to Mongolia, and it all became clear at once how colonised we were in everything – in language, in culture, even in everyday life, how to tie a horse properly and so on. You have to stir the *chigyan* [koumiss in Kalmyk] with a spoon to make it more tart. And you realise that you have been colonised so much that you don't even know some simple things. (Darsen, Kalmyk, 32, Mongolia/Germany)

The research participant sees his professional and personal life story as a continuous means of establishing a connection with his ethnic group and addressing past experiences of indignity. While the exact timing of these perceptions is not specified, the current narrative offers a framework to envision the future through this perspective. The language used (“how colonised we were in everything”) enables him to articulate and comprehend both the past and future. Moreover, he shares this narrative with other young Kalmyks and Buryats, providing them with a tool to understand their own experiences.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study illustrates how the positions of young Kalmyks and Buryats emerge at the intersection of official and activist discourses, taking into account individual decisions and the group's turbulent history. The decision to avoid mobilisation and leave Russia largely shapes their narrative.

Hegemonic, monolingual language ideologies and dominant mainstream discourses which emphasise homogeneity have led to the neglect of linguistic and ethnic diversity (Piller 2015). Amidst the war, the official discourse constructs a narrative of voluntary national unity, establishing a hierarchy among ethnic groups, with “Russians” placed in a superior position. Ethnic activists counter this narrative by shedding light on instances of Soviet and post-Soviet ethnic repression.

The discourse on minority status during the war expanded beyond activists to encompass a broader audience. The diaspora became a forum for discussing the history and future of the ethnic group. The interviews revealed how terminology typically associated with ethnic activists' media is entering the lexicon of “ordinary people”, notably terms like “colony” and “empire”, to describe the relationship between Russia and the republics.

This study captures a specific cross-section of how new discourses and a sense of belonging are formed in the specific context of recent, sudden and effectively forced migration or temporary departure. This explains why all significant moments of family or collective history are connected to the current situation or the decision not to participate in the war. Beyond the context of mobility, however, the sense of belonging is closely linked to individual biographies and narratives.

The respondents' positions are shaped by the official discourse, new opposition media aligned with a decolonial agenda and communication with other Kalmyks and Buryats who fled Russia. These factors affect each person differently, carrying distinct meanings for each individual. This text refrains from summarising various views on the post-war dispensation, but the respondents mentioned the development of regional identity, federalism, a referendum determining the fate of the republic and full independence. The distribution of these assessments reflects not so much a political stance but rather the voices they currently hear, associated with events from their lives or the history of their family and ethnic group. The most important consequence for the future of society is that this conversation has begun, and different discourses provide different perspectives for understanding the sense of belonging to the group and the state. Young people choose their understanding of identity, with which they will then live in the community.

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