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**Not Our War. A Comparison of Two Anti-War and
Decolonial Organisations' Collective Identity
Construction Processes in Light of Putin's Full-Scale
Invasion of Ukraine.**

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Abstract

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and Putin's announcement of partial mobilisation in September 2022, demonstrations broke out in several of Russia's ethnic republics. At the same time, ethnic minorities and Indigenous activists created anti-war organisations that also demanded for the decolonisation of Russia. These organisations have received a lot of attention outside of Russia and have been presented as forming a united anti-war and decolonial movement. Despite these organisations sharing many similarities, they have different aims, strategies and understandings of decolonisation. This thesis aims to explore whether or not it is possible to speak of a united anti-war and decolonial movement. It does so by comparing the similarities and differences in online collective identity construction processes on Instagram between two prominent anti-war and decolonial organisations: Free Buryatia Foundation and Free Yakutia Foundation. The findings indicate that both organisations share important similarities in the construction of online collective identity, such as by emphasising the importance of building interethnic alliances; identifying the same issues negatively impacting their structural positions; and employing strategies that, although different, are driven by the politicisation of culture, identity and politics. Based on this, it is reasonable to conclude that there is evidence of a shared collective identity that could suggest the existence of a broader united anti-war and decolonial movement.

Key words: Decolonisation, Anti-War, Collective Identity, Ethnic minority and Indigenous activism, Russia

Streszczenie

Po pełnoskalowej inwazji Rosji na Ukrainę w lutym 2022 roku i ogłoszeniu przez Putina częściowej mobilizacji we wrześniu 2022 roku, w kilku etnicznych republikach Rosji wybuchły demonstracje. Jednocześnie mniejszości etniczne i rdzenni aktywiści stworzyli organizacje antywojenne, które również domagały się dekolonizacji Rosji. Organizacje te zyskały duże zainteresowanie poza granicami Rosji i zostały przedstawione jako tworzące zjednoczony ruch antywojenny i dekolonialny. Pomimo wielu podobieństw, organizacje te mają różne cele, działania i rozumienie dekolonizacji. Niniejsza praca ma na celu zbadanie, czy możliwe jest mówienie o zjednoczonym ruchu antywojennym i dekolonizacyjnym. Dokonuje tego poprzez porównanie podobieństw i różnic w procesach konstruowania tożsamości zbiorowej na Instagramie między dwiema prominentnymi organizacjami antywojennymi i dekolonialnymi: Free Buryatia Foundation and Free Yakutia Foundation. Ustalenia wskazują, że obie organizacje dzielą ważne podobieństwa w konstrukcji zbiorowej tożsamości, takie jak podkreślanie znaczenia budowania międzyetnicznych sojuszy; identyfikowanie tych samych problemów negatywnie wpływających na ich pozycje strukturalne; oraz stosowanie strategii, które, choć różne, są napędzane przez upolitycznienie kultury, tożsamości i polityki. Na tej podstawie można rozsądnie stwierdzić, że istnieją dowody na istnienie wspólnej zbiorowej tożsamości, co mogłoby sugerować istnienie szerszego, zjednoczonego ruchu antywojennego i dekolonialnego.

Słowa kluczowe: Dekolonizacja, Ruch Antywojenny, Tożsamość zbiorowa, Mniejszość etniczna, Aktywizm rdzennych mieszkańców, Rosja

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the government's announcement of partial mobilisation in September 2022, demonstrations broke out in several of Russia's ethnic republics such as Dagestan, Buryatia, Tuva, and Sakha (Yakutia) (Chawryło and Wiśniewska, 2023). Alongside this, ethnic minorities and Indigenous activists from different republics established anti-war organisations which shortly after being created broadened their agenda to demand for the decolonisation of Russia (Yegorov-Crate, 2023). Although some organisations existed pre-war, most of them emerged in reaction to it and have linked anti-war efforts to decolonisation (Yegorov-Crate, 2023). Many of the organisations communicate and collaborate with each other as well as have similar organisational structures (Yegorov-Crate, 2023; Zhanaev and Jonutyte, 2023, p. 112). In the media and public, these organisations have been presented as forming a united anti-war and decolonial movement (Cultural Survival, 2022; Zhanaev and Jonutyte, 2023). Nevertheless, despite their similarities, the organisations have different aims, activities and understandings of decolonisation (Cultural Survival, 2022; Latypova, 2024a; Zhanaev and Jonutyte, 2023). This leads to the question of whether or not it is accurate to speak of a united anti-war and decolonial movement.

This thesis aims to unpack this question by comparing two prominent organisations, Free Buryatia Foundation (FBF) and Free Yakutia Foundation (FYF), constructions of collective identity. Based on the findings, I will provide empirically rooted assertions which can then be further investigated as it would be incorrect to make generalisations about the existence of a united anti-war and decolonial movement based on two organisations. I will employ Taylor and Whittier's (1992) framework for collective identity construction to analyse the processes through which both organisations construct their collective identity and how these shape each organisation's understanding of itself, aims and strategies and whether similarities and differences in this process suggest that there is a united movement or not.

This thesis will also make three contributions to academic literature. Firstly, it will question Giuliano and Gorenburg's (2012, p. 185) finding that ethnicity has not played a significant role in Russian society and politics since the 1990s. Whilst these organisations are different to the ethnonationalist movements of the 1990s, they have mobilised around ethnicity and built solidarity based on shared minority identity, thus challenging the widely accepted finding that ethnicity is not a mobilising cleavage. Secondly, with the exception of a few academics (e.g.

Stewart, 2023; Suleymanova, 2018; Yusupova, 2018; 2019; 2022a; 2023), minority expressions of identity have been overlooked in favour of examining top-down nation-building practices and the rise in ethnic Russian nationalism since 2012. This has consolidated the dominant narrative that, although Russia is a multiethnic country, ethnic Russians culture, language and values form its core, and non-ethnic Russian groups accept this (Blackburn, 2021, p. 103). Lastly, the politicisation of cultural and political demands, as evidenced in anti-war organisations decolonisation agenda, is surprising because in recent years, instances of minority offline and online resistance in ethnic republics have been apolitical (Baranova, 2024; Yusupova, 2022a; 2023).

Tying this together, the reemergence of ethnic minority activism, the building of interethnic solidarity and the focus on political issues is unexpected and challenges previous academic findings. Besides this, these organisations are a new empirical phenomenon which despite collaborating have different aims, strategies and understandings of what decolonisation means, thus raising questions about whether it is possible to speak of a united decolonial and anti-war movement.

This research is particularly relevant to current debates in Russian studies because the discipline has historically overlooked the country's diversity, minority voices and the complex intersections of identity and varieties of inequality (Yusupova, 2022b, p. 102). Studies that have previously focused on identity politics have ignored ethnic minority concerns, echoed elite discourses and privileged focusing on top-down processes of nationalism (Yusupova, 2022b, p. 102). Therefore, this study hopes to help decentre research from the country's political centre through the analysis of organisations that are led by Indigenous activists from Russia's regions. In turn, this will reveal how centre-region and state-minority relations are perceived, experienced and resisted by certain segments of Indigenous Russian populations, thus contributing to a more nuanced understanding of Russian society and politics.

This thesis is divided into eight chapters. The second chapter is the literature review which examines how state-region and state-minority relations have evolved by analysing Russia's imperial legacy, state- and nation-building practices as well as ethnic minority mobilisation. This provides a structural and discursive context for the emergence of anti-war and decolonial organisations. The third chapter outlines the theoretical and conceptual framework. It

conceptualises FBF and FYF in social movement literature, operationalises collective identity and outlines the research questions and theoretical assumptions. The fourth chapter discusses the methodology underpinning this study, justifies the case selections and explains the selected method of analysis. The fifth chapter introduces the case studies by providing a historical context for both republics and introduces FBF and FYF. The sixth chapter provides the findings based on the thematic analysis. The seventh chapter discusses the findings in the context of the theoretical expectations, wider literature and research questions. Lastly, the conclusion provides a summary and highlights areas of future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This next section outlines how Russia's imperial history has been conceptualised and its implications on contemporary state- and nation- building practices. It then defines and traces state-building and nation-building processes and evaluates their effects on the ethno-political situation in Russia. Specifically, it focuses on how the state has managed the country's multiethnic composition through its political system and institutions, as well as discursive and policy practices. This is important for understanding how the government has reduced the space for institutional representation of regional interests as well as imposed assimilatory nation-building practices which have limited expressions of alternative identities. It also examines how structural explanations for the emergence and decline of ethnonationalist movements in the 1990s give the impression that ethnic identity no longer plays an important role in Russian politics and society. However, recent research focusing on bottom-up and culturally driven mobilisation highlights that, despite structural impediments, ethnicity plays an important role in building horizontal ties and challenging top-down nation-building practices. Overall, it will contextualise the institutional, political and cultural context in which state-minority and centre-regional relations have evolved, which is necessary to understand from where demands for decolonisation have re-emerged whilst highlighting how anti-war and decolonial organisations are different to previous instances of mobilisation.

2.1 Russia's Imperial Legacy

Prior to examining state- and nation-building processes, I will provide a brief analysis of Russia's imperial legacy in order to understand how it has impacted aspects of domestic politics, diversity management and its implications on decolonisation.

Different debates have shaped the analysis of Russian and Soviet models of imperialism, however, many arguments have not extended to assessing their role in contemporary domestic politics (Syg.ma Team, 2024). This statement is not in support of treating history in a deterministic manner but rather to highlight how aspects of Russian imperial history, such as how its multiethnic territory has been managed and defined, is an issue that has been grappled with at different stages and continues to shape the contemporary context (Bessinger, 1995; Lieven, 1995; 1998; Torbakov and Plokhly, 2018). Until fairly recently, Russian and Soviet models of imperialism had not undergone the same scrutiny as Western counterparts because neither fit neatly into its analytical categories (Khodarkovsky, 2018; Moore, 2001, p.120). This shaped the perception that Russian colonial history was different and less violent than

Western forms and that the country was formed through a peaceful and voluntary unification between people (Khodarkovsky, 2018, p. 6; Moore 2001, p. 121).

To address this gap, Etkind's (2011) theory and concept of 'internal colonisation' reconceptualises Russia's imperial history, identity and socio-political dynamics. Etkind (2011, p. 2) argues that Russia was created through a process of self-colonisation because it was both the object and subject of its colonisation. This makes it difficult to distinguish between the core and periphery because colonisation occurred at the same time as the state's territorial expansion and colonised areas were absorbed into the colonising core (Etkind, 2011, p. 68). Colonial difference was imposed through class, and peasants were constructed as the backward 'other' compared to the Europeanised, enlightened gentry (Etkind, 2011, p.102). Empire-building only occurred after Russia had territorially amassed itself and had run out of fur, a key resource, which led to the reorientation and development of state structures necessary for external colonisation (Etkind, 2011, p. 250).

The implications of Etkind's argument have been widespread because internal colonisation has been used as an explanatory factor for aspects of contemporary state- and nation- building practices. In terms of state-building, the lack of distinction between the core and periphery means that, unusually for an empire, Russia retained most of the territories it internally colonised (Lieven, 1995). Additionally, the development of Russia as a contemporary state was closely tied to empire-building which raised questions as to whether it has ever become a nation-state (Bessinger, 1995; Torbakov and Plokhy, 2018). These questions have also been attributed to the failure to create the idea of Russia as a multiethnic nation (Suny, 1997) and have complicated Russia's understanding of its spatial boundaries and territorial limits (Tolz, 1998). Furthermore, internal colonisation has blurred nation-building processes due to vast social divisions between Russian elites and peasants. Different understandings of what it means to be Russian developed, with the peasants' definition being associated with more ethnonationalist understandings (termed *russkii*), and elites definition being rooted in civic terms (termed *rossiiskii*) (Torbakov and Plokhy, 2018, p. 22-24).

However, Etkind's concept of internal colonisation has not gone unchallenged. Due to the conflation between the core and periphery, different colonial experiences shaped by racial, ethnic and religious differences are not accounted for (Hansen, 2023; Tlostanova, 2015). Etkind also does not substantively apply the concept to the Soviet context which is a

significant oversight (Tlostanova, 2015). Also, the conceptual ramifications of internal colonisation on Russia's political, institutional, economic and cultural evolution makes decolonisation virtually impossible (Spivak et al., 2006, p. 835).

An alternative conceptualisation of Russian and Soviet colonialism is proposed by the post-colonial and decolonial thinker, Madina Tlostanova. The concept of 'external imperial difference' refers to empires, such as the Russian and Soviet, which were 'not-quite western, not-quite-capitalist empires of modernity' (Tlostanova, 2012, p. 135). The concept highlights how both empires were interconnected to Western modernity yet secondary to it and tried to overcome this by unsuccessfully building alternative visions of modernity (Tlostanova, 2012, p. 135). This resulted in both empires transplanting Western colonisation processes and practises of orientalism and eurocentrism onto their colonies (Tlostanova, 2008, p. 1; 2012, p. 136). Thus, different aspects of Western colonisation, such as constructing gender, racial and cultural inferiorities, were present in Russian and Soviet forms of colonialism and discourse (Tlostanova, 2012, p. 136). The implications of this conceptualisation are that it accounts for different colonial experiences and it provides a way to analyse the continuities and changes in colonial and imperial practices across space and time. This is particularly useful for analysing the Soviet experience because it provides a set of analytical tools to examine the Bolshevik's colonial practices that outwardly claimed to erase difference but in fact obscured the process of recolonisation which entailed rewriting difference in line with the dominant ideology (Tlostanova, 2012, p. 2; Tlostanova, 2022, p. 6). More broadly, it also allows for the unpacking of hegemonic discourses which have shaped historical accounts of Russian and Soviet imperialism whose histories continue to influence contemporary structures and thinking.

Based on Tlostanova's conceptualisation of Russian and Soviet imperialism, decolonisation is possible and it is an important concept when trying to understand Russia's colonial legacy in the context of contemporary state- and nation-building. This is because it has significant political, cultural, social and economic implications. Thus, decolonisation is understood in terms of Tlostanova's (2008, p. 8; 2009, p. 4) definition which sees it as a process that critiques colonial power and homogenising structures, and rejects Western modernity and the hierarchical structures of existing knowledge systems. Additionally, Tlostanova (2014, p. 56) views decolonisation as reviving and returning to indigenous epistemologies, which have not been touched by modernity, and treating this knowledge and practices with equal importance

and validity as Western forms. Therefore, whilst arguments related to the implications of internal colonisation focus on territory and national identity, Tlostanova's understanding of decolonisation moves beyond this to emphasise the structural elements that have created and maintained hierarchy across different spheres such as knowledge, history, culture, politics and society.

2.2. Russia's Contemporary State- and Nation-Building Processes

Russia's post-Soviet nation-state development has faced the same two issues as during the Russian and Soviet empires - the questions of how to govern its multiethnic territory and how to define its identity within this territory. In other words, it has struggled with state-building, or the process through which a country's territory and political structures are established (Zamyatin, 2016, p. 22), and nation-building, which is the process through which national identity is constructed that defines and unifies people within a particular territory (Tolz, 1998, p. 267). Though these two processes are distinct, they are closely interrelated.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, four visions of Russia as a nation emerged. The first vision saw Russia as a multiethnic federation in which all ethnic groups are equal and represented in the state (Blakkisrud, 2023, p. 66). The second vision viewed Russia as an ethnic nation which privileges ethnic Russians (Blakkisrud, 2023, p. 66). The third vision saw Russia as a civic nation and it is more associated with Western ideals and institutions (Blakkisrud, 2023, p. 66). The fourth vision saw itself as an imperial nation which seeks expansion and is associated with concepts such as *Russki Mir* (Aksiumov and Avksentev, 2022 p. 195; Blakkisrud, 2023, p. 66). Each of these visions has a corresponding territorial understanding of Russia's boundaries and has different implications on nation- and state-building policies and structures governing centre-republic and minority relations. It is important to note that nation-building policies typically are studied through a civic or ethnic lens, with the latter defining the nation in ethno-cultural terms such as common ethnicity, religion or language, and the former defining the nation as a community united by the territory of the state and political institutions (Shevel, 2011, p. 180). Neither of these approaches neatly applies and there have been competing understandings of what kind of nation Russia is and what defines its territory (Blakkisrud, 2023, p. 65; Shevel, 2011, p. 179; Tolz, 1998, p. 289).

Russia inherited the Soviet Union's ethno-federal structure which had created republics in a top-down process and institutionally linked ethnicity to territory (Prina, 2015, p. 25; Shabaev, Mironova, Poliakov, 2022, p. 9). This had been done to institutionally manage Russia's ethnic diversity and was part of the Bolshevik's presentation of recolonisation as decolonisation (Tlostanova, 2022, p. 6). Historical, cultural and linguistic ties had been systemically erased, repressed and reconstructed in line with Soviet ideology and institutionally controlled ways of expression (Tlostanova, 2022, p. 6). Although initially effective at containing nationalism, the ethnofederal institutional structure provided the necessary resources to mobilise nationalist sentiments (Roeder 1991) and resulted in a primordialist understanding of ethnicity (Shabaev, et al., 2022, p. 9). In the 1990s, ethnonationalism was a key driver of political conflict and there was an expectation that the country might disintegrate like the Soviet Union had (Semenenko, 2015, p. 311). Therefore, federalism was adopted as it was seen as the only constitutional form that could preserve the territorial integrity of the country due to the centre's weakness at the time and the republics' desires for greater autonomy (Busygina, 2018, p. 58; Zubarevich, 2018, p. 368).

This influenced how institutional structures developed and arguably prevented the establishment of a democratic federal system in which power and authority are divided between different levels of government and protected by robust legal structures, civil society and a party system to ensure that the division between power relations is preserved (Busygina, 2018, p. 58; Ross, 2023, p. 149-150; Wilson and Fondahl, 2024, p. 70). Instead, a complex and personalised set of relationships between the centre and regions termed 'asymmetrical federalism' developed under Yeltsin and each republic developed a different power arrangement *vis-à-vis* the centre and operated in the federal system on different terms (Giuliano and Gorenburg, 2012; Sakwa, 2010). This entailed Yelstin establishing personal relations with regional elites, signing bilateral treaties which specified particularistic relations between the centre and republic, and transferring payments from the centre to ensure loyalty from the regional elites (Hale, 2005, p. 63). The most important bilateral treaties were signed with Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Buryatia, Sakha-Yakutia and Tuva, and gave regional elites control over political power and economic assets, and enhanced the status of titular groups in the republics (Hagendoorn, Poppe, and Minescu, 2008). The implication of these policies is that each region participated in the federation on different terms, although it did prevent the collapse of the state (Hale, 2005, p. 64).

During this period, Yeltsin prioritised civic and multiethnic models of nation-building which attempted to balance supporting national republic rights whilst creating a unifying and common identity within the inherited ethno-territorial structure (Blackburn, 2022, p. 470). Many of the ethnonationalist movements in this period prioritised group rights over individual rights, and ethnic claims were used to justify special rights to land, natural resources and, in some cases, privileged position in the republic (Shabaev et al., 2022, p. 9-10). This period was largely seen as a failure in terms of nation-building because Yeltsin was unable to construct a unifying understanding of the nation for the country as a whole and the most effective nation-building took place in Russia's regions (Tolz, 2004, p. 165).

At the turn of the millennium, Putin was elected and he recognised the weakness of the state and lack of a unifying national identity (Blakkisrud, 2023). His first two terms (2000-2008) were marked by the recentralisation of power, statism, patriotism and economic growth (Blakkisrud, 2023; Tolz, 2004). Whilst Putin emphasised state-centred civic patriotism, he committed to neither ethnic or civic visions of the nation, arguably being purposefully ambiguous in order to appeal to as broad a range of people and to allow for political manoeuvring without having to commit to a singular vision (Blakkisrud, 2023; Shevel, 2011; Teper, 2016).

This recentralisation of power in relation to the federal system has been conceptualised in different ways. Zubarevich (2018, p. 369-371) argues that recentralisation was driven by the desire to equalise the financial inequalities between regions and the state was able to cement its position as a redistributive force due to the rise in oil prices between 1999-2008. Others, such as Gel'man (2014, p. 508), have focused on the institutional drivers, such as Putin building a power vertical which has weakened regional elites by implementing administrative and bureaucratic reforms. These included the abolishment of gubernatorial elections in 2004, which gave the president the de facto right to appoint governors, and reforming the party system to give the governing party, United Russia, a greater monopoly over power by making it harder for political parties to register and increasing the qualifying threshold (Gel'man, 2014, p. 508-509). Furthermore, it banned the creation of political parties based on ethnic, religious or regional grounds (Zamyatin 2016, p. 35), and autonomous districts, which were ethnicity-based units, were merged into larger regions (Osipov, 2012). Although the direct election of governors was reinstated following the 2011-12 protests, the Kremlin controls nominations which ensures that regional governors are subordinated to the centre (Ross

2023). Some academics (e.g. Libman and Obydenkova, 2023; Makarychev and Yatsuk, 2018) have convincingly argued that centre-regional relations are more complex and fluid than captured by the power vertical and have shown that there is evidence of decentralisation since 2018. While it is outside the scope of this review to go through them in detail, it acknowledges that there are different interpretations.

Putin's ambiguous approach to national identity changed following the 2011-2012 anti election fraud protests. In order to bring different ideological groups, particularly the conservative, under the state's control, the Kremlin constructed a new national identity based on a civilisational discourse (Blackburn, 2021; Malinova, 2020). The civilisational discourse presents Russia as a unique multiethnic civilisation which is ethnically, religiously and culturally diverse; however, ethnic Russians form the core of because the nation is united by Russian culture, language and traditions (Blackburn, 2021, p. 92; Blackburn, 2022, p. 273). This understanding privileges ethnic Russians but also avoids defining Russia in simply ethnonationalist terms because that would cause tension (Malinova, 2020, p. 28). Therefore, it blurs the boundary between the civic-ethnic dichotomy whilst privileging ethnic Russians (Blakkisrud, 2023, p. 64).

The civilisational identity is both precise and vague enough that it co-opts and marginalises alternative nation-building projects without having to commit to a singular vision of nation and can emphasise different aspects depending on domestic and international interests (Blakkisrud, 2023, p. 74-75). It has also influenced institutional practices of diversity management and state policies. The government has relegated ethnic minority rights into the cultural sphere and controlled how this identity can be expressed; it needs to support the idea of interethnic harmony and Russia-centred patriotism (Prina, 2018, p. 1247). Furthermore, there is evidence of assimilatory practices in recent education and language policies (Arutyunova and Zamyatin, 2021). The new language law enacted in 2018 made the teaching of republican languages non-compulsory (Arutyunova and Zamyatin, 2021). This was interpreted not only as the Kremlin's removal of one of the few remaining competences in republics, but also as an erasure of any potential alternative identity building projects (Arutyunova and Zamyatin, 2021, p. 845-846). Therefore, the expression of alternative identities has been institutionally and discursively reduced which has influenced how state-minority relations have evolved.

Tying this together, Russia's post-Soviet nation-state development has faced similar issues to the Russian and Soviet empires in terms of how to govern its territory and how to define its identity. It initially inherited a decentralised Soviet ethnofederal system, which under Putin has become a highly centralised system that has sought to assimilate minority identity in favour of pursuing a civilisational identity that blurs the civic-ethnic dichotomy but privileges ethnic Russians. With the exception of a few important studies (e.g. Stewart, 2023; Suleymanova, 2018; Yusupova, 2018; 2019; 2022a; 2023), there has been a lack of research on how these top-down processes have been interpreted, negotiated and resisted by ethnic minority communities. Instead, research has prioritised analysing structural factors to explain mobilisation and its decline - this will be the focus of the next section.

2.3. Structural Explanations for Ethnic Mobilisation in Russia's Regions

Research in the 1990s and early 2000s mostly focused on the structural factors driving ethnonationalist mobilisation, variation in support, its eventual decline and unlikely reemergence due to structural impediments.

Literature explaining why ethnonationalism emerged in the 1990s range from demographic and economic (Hagendoorn et al., 2008; Treisman 1997) to institutional explanations (Gorenburg, 2003). Gorenburg (2003, pp. 3-7) argues that the Soviet ethnofederal legacy shaped mobilisation in the 1990s and that variation is explained by differences in available resources and political opportunity structures (Gorenburg, 2003, pp. 6-7). Other research highlights how socio-economic grievances differently shaped secessionist demands in poor and rich republics. For example, Stepanov's (2000, p. 323) research shows how counter-elites in poorer republics presented inequality as exploitation by the centre, and in wealthier republics argued that living standards would improve if they no longer had to transfer resources to the centre. On the other hand, Giuliano (2006) focuses on how nationalist leaders advocated for independence as the solution to widespread job insecurity because joblessness was presented as being driven by ethnic inequality.

The question of why ethnicity failed to emerge as a relevant cleavage around which politics is organised is the focus of Giuliano and Gorenburg's (2012) seminal article. Support for ethnonationalism gradually dwindled in the regions, despite the expectation that it could seriously challenge the centre due to its weakness in the late 1990s, as a result of the 1998 financial crisis and the war in Chechnya (Giuliano and Gorenburg, 2012, p. 185). The authors

argue that declining support for nationalism occurred due to three reasons: the transition to a market economy, which made the nationalists' message of job insecurity become less important; the shift in power from the legislative to the executive branch, making the republic's presidents, rather than movements, be seen as the legitimate defenders of republic interests; and the war in Chechnya, which changed how people perceived the goal of national sovereignty (Giuliano and Gorenburg, 2012, p. 185-187). Other explanations, focus on how the communist nomenklatura, the de facto leaders of these movements, had succeeded in using a nationalist platform to gain legitimacy, demand greater autonomy and cement their authority, before using their power to repress alternative nationalist projects in the regions (Pain, 2012, p. 156; Stepanov, 2000, p. 323).

Linking this to the state- and nation-building section, the decline in ethnic mobilisation and the establishment of an illiberal and assimilatory institutional and discursive context has created the impression that ethnicity no longer plays an important role in Russian politics and that ethnic mobilisation is unlikely to occur due to the structural conditions. However, if one focuses on apolitical grassroots activism, rather than structural explanations for mobilisation, there is a lot of evidence to suggest that ethnicity continues to play an important role in Russian politics and society.

2.4 Bottom-up Ethnic Minority Mobilisation in Russia

To fill the gap in ethnic minority mobilisation and alternative identity expressions, there is a recent body of work which focuses on apolitical bottom-up mobilisation, the role of culture and social media. Yusupova (2018; 2019) rejects the argument that ethnicity does not play an important role in Russian politics and society and claims that ethnicity has become more politicised. Yusupova (2018, pp. 624-625) proposes to use theories of cultural nationalism and complexity to explore minority nationalism in Russia's illiberal and nationalising setting because they capture expressions of everyday nationalism which are more common than overt nationalist claims. Culture and cultural spaces, such as theatres and philharmonics, have become important mediums through which ethnic minority groups articulate alternative identities to top-down state-constructed nationalism (Stewart, 2023, p. 31). On top of this, ethnic identity has been revitalised through everyday practices such as through the use of minority languages and ethnic symbolism in fashion, art and music (Sharapov, 2022; Suleymanova, 2018; Yusupova, 2018; 2019). This has been key to challenging state-approved expressions of identity (Sharapov, 2022; Suleymanova, 2018; Yusupova, 2018; 2019). Whilst

these cultural expressions avoid political issues and do not have the same hegemonic control over cultural representation as the government, these practices build horizontal ties based on trust which is essential for resistance and the development of an ethnic consciousness and alternative understandings of belonging (Stewart, 2023; Suleymanova, 2018; Yusupova, 2018, p. 626; 2019). Additionally, it is much harder for the government to control and repress cultural expression because it undermines the idea of Russia as a multiethnic nation and could result in backlash (Yusupova, 2018, p. 643).

A key aspect in facilitating grassroots mobilisation has been social media because it has provided an alternative space for individuals to come together to construct and share alternative identities (Yusupova, 2022a, p. 636). This is particularly important in the context of a civil society where it is difficult to organise protests, and alternative identity expressions are not tolerated (Holland, 2023; Yusupova, 2022a; 2023). Russia's digital landscape has increasingly come under state control through a series of laws since 2012; however, there is evidence that there is still a degree of tolerance for bottom-up communication (Litvinenko, 2020). This was the case following the adoption of the new language bill in 2018 which made education and the teaching of republic languages non-compulsory and resistance was pushed online due to repression (Yusupova, 2022a). This led to the establishment of horizontal ties between and within different ethnic minority groups, the extension of solidarity, the dissemination of useful skills for online and offline activism, and it facilitated the formation of a political consciousness (Yusupova, 2022a, p. 620; Yusupova, 2023, p. 51). Whilst offline repression did result in online self-censorship and activists' goals did not go beyond cultural rights, the creation of interethnic solidarity and networks is important because they can be mobilised again (Yusupova, 2022a, pp. 637-638). This is relevant when considering that the state has not addressed how to manage the country's diversity and there is underlying discontent (Holland, 2023, p. 17). Therefore, in the context of an increasingly repressive government that promotes assimilatory nation-building policies, focusing on bottom-up expressions of alternative identities and the role of social media in overcoming some of the structural constraints of mobilisation is important to investigate and can be revealing of how top-down policies are negotiated and challenged.

Examining this in context of the empirical focus of this thesis, social media has also played an important role in connecting individuals, building horizontal ties based on shared experiences and coordinating activities (Zhanaev and Jonutyte, 2023, pp. 112, 114). However, the anti-war

and decolonial organisations are also distinct because they are primarily coordinated outside of Russia, meaning that social media facilitates the connection between people inside and outside of the country, as well as transferring information and activities (Zhanaev and Jonutyte, 2023, p. 113). Furthermore, although the organisations were built in a grassroots fashion and have a loose structure, they have become more established and represent a shift because, in addition to focusing on cultural and linguistic issues, they also focus on political ones (Baranova and Darieva, 2023; Baranova, 2024; Zhanaev and Jonutyte, 2023, p. 111). They have also gained a lot more visibility than previous bottom-up apolitical forms of activism, thus suggesting an empirical shift in ethnic minority mobilisation.

It is important to note that the degree of support within the regions for these organisations is unclear and likely not high (Baranova and Darieva, 2023). This is hard to assess as widespread repression has forced Indigenous and ethnic minority activists to leave Russia (Henry, 2024), and any protest in ethnic regions is interpreted as an expression of nationalist sentiments and separatism which is illegal and harshly suppressed (Baranova, 2024). However, preliminary research, such as Baranova's (2024) interviews with Kalmyks and Buryats who left Russia to avoid mobilisation, indicates that there has been a shift to a decolonial discourse to evaluate state-minority relations. This suggests that these ideas and terms have moved beyond activist circles and are being more widely used by everyday people.

Nevertheless, what is clear is that these organisations represent a new empirical phenomena and a shift in ethnic minority mobilisation. The focus on grassroots apolitical mobilisation demonstrates that ethnic minority mobilisation has been overlooked by structural approaches and highlights that ethnic identity does play an important role in society. Additionally, social media overcomes some of the structural challenges of mobilisation and provides an alternative space to challenge the nationalising and illiberal regime. Whilst it is evident that the anti-war and decolonial organisations have adopted and built on previous instances of bottom-up mobilisation, they also represent a conceptually different phenomena because they have an international dimension, focus on cultural and political issues, and have different aims and activities. The next chapter will conceptualise the organisations in social movement literature.

Chapter 3: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This section will outline the theoretical framework underpinning this thesis. It will provide an overview of social movement theory before conceptualising FYF and FBF in New Social Movement (NSM) theory and operationalising collective identity employing Taylor and Whittier's (1992) framework.

3.1 Social Movement Theory

Prior to the 1960s there had been little coherent research on social movements because theories and concepts were located in different disciplines (della Porta and Diani, 2015, p. 1). The classical approaches to collective mobilisation, such as collective behaviour, mass society and relative deprivation theories, are united in their assertion that protest was an irrational response to a grievance shared by alienated and marginalised people, although they conceptualise protest slightly differently (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2009, p. 21). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, these approaches were challenged because they could not account for the wave of mobilisation activity that took place across Europe and the US (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2009, p. 23). To explain this wave of mobilisation there emerged two different paradigms, structural and social constructivist explanations, which have dominated social movement theory (della Porta and Diani, 2015, p. 4; Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2009, p. 18).

The structural approach was developed in the US in the 1970s-80s and is made up of resource mobilisation theory, which examines how organisational structures and the distribution of resources influences mobilisation, and political process theory which focuses on how political and institutional factors shape opportunities for protest (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2009, p. 23-24). At the same time in Europe, the social constructivist approach, also known as 'New Social Movement' (NSM) approach, gained prominence, and it focuses on the shift from material to post-material values underpinning mobilisation, changes in structure to looser forms of organisation and the different aims intended to change social meaning and practice (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2009, p. 29). Theories focused on collective identity, culture and emotions seek to explain why individuals participate in protest and collective action is sustained (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2009, p. 19).

As discussed in section 2.3, structural theories have been dominant in explaining mobilisation, or the lack thereof, in Russia. With the exception of the 1990s when economic

and political protests were visible, and some protests in the early 2000s, (Dollbaum, 2022, p. 217; Morris, Semenov, Smyth, 2023, p. 3), mass country-wide protests have been rare, which has led to the assumption that Russian society does not pose a threat to the regime (Gel'man, 2013, p. 6 in Cheskin and March, 2015, p. 261). Russian society was seen as distrustful, passive and apathetic due to its Soviet legacy (Ljubownikow, Crotty and Rodgers, 2013) and, instead of mobilising against the state, individuals were seen as relying on trusted personal networks to secure needed provisions (Clément, 2008, p. 72). Therefore, the eruption and scale of the 2011-2012 anti election fraud protests caught researchers off guard and a lot of subsequent research on the protests employed structural approaches to explain why mobilisation occurred (see Gel'man, 2015; White, 2015), how the state responded (see Sakwa, 2015) and what the protest dynamics were in the context of a hybrid regime (see Robertson, 2011). Whilst these studies provide an important perspective on state-society relations, they prioritise focusing on overt anti-government protest which ignores other forms of resistance that have different goals (Chebankova, 2013; Cheskin and March, 2015; Clément, 2015; Eliasoph and Clément, 2020).

To capture other forms of resistance, Cheskin and March (2015, p. 266) propose to widen the theory of contentious politics to account for different motivations underlying mobilisation or compliance in relation to the state. This framework does not only account for how and why mobilisation occurs but also explains why it does not occur or it may be state approved (Cheskin and March, 2015, p. 262). Others have examined micro and everyday processes to analyse how individuals become engaged in bottom-up mobilisation which, although previously overlooked, is widespread (Clément, 2015; Zhelnina, 2023). This type of mobilisation typically focuses on local and everyday issues, is made up of people who do not have previous activist experience (Clément, 2015, p. 212) and avoids framing action in political terms to avoid repression and to appeal to as many people as possible (Zhelnina, 2023, p. 71).

NSM theory has not been widely used to study movements in Russia because there have been questions about the applicability of the approach due to it being associated with Western contexts in the 1970s, postmaterialist values and the middle class (Clément, Demidov, Miriasova, 2010 in Solovey, 2021, p. 43). Nevertheless, it has been used to study the feminist and environmental movements in Russia. For example, Gapova's (2015) study of Pussy Riot looks at how its aims and communication attempted to produce symbolic change, and

Solovey's (2021) research uses the concept of collective identity to provide a comprehensive analysis of the contemporary feminist movement in Russia. In this study, FBF and FYF are analysed in the NSM paradigm because, whilst they do have some political aims, a significant aspect of their work is focused on changing societal and cultural values, their structure is loose and informal and is based on post-material values.

3.2 Collective Identity in New Social Movement Theory

In order to understand whether it is possible to think of a united anti-war and decolonial movement, it is necessary to understand the process of collective identity construction which influences a movement and organisation's understanding of itself, its aims and strategies. This next section will situate and analyse the concept of collective identity.

Collective identity is rooted in NSM theory and it is a key explanatory factor for why individuals participate in collective action, tactic selection, organisational forms and strategies, and cultural effect (Polletta and Jasper, 2001). It is underpinned by the theories of Marx, Durkheim and Weber which explain the structural-cultural base for group identity formation, as well as social psychology theories of Mead, Goffman and Bloomer, which explore the connection between individual and group identity, and the process of collective identity construction through interaction and sociocultural structures (Flesher Fominaya, 2019, p. 393; Hunt and Benford, 2004, pp. 434-435). The contemporary conceptualisation of collective identity was developed in the 1980s, and it moved away from structural and rationalist explanations of mobilisation to focusing on the social psychological, emotional and cultural dimensions underpinning mobilisation and the sustainment of collective action (Hunt and Benford, 2004, p. 433; Flesher Fominaya, 2019, p. 430; Polletta and Jasper, p. 283).

Melucci is a key theorist from this period who developed the concept of collective identity in NSM theory. Melucci's (1985, p. 793) starting point was to problematise the assumption that movement unity, or its collective identity, is a given, and instead researchers should view it as being constructed through a process. He posited that this is a dynamic process in which shared meanings and actions are repeatedly constructed and negotiated through interaction and practice (Melucci, 1985, p. 793). There are three dimensions to collective identity: the cognitive framework which involves the shared understanding about the movement's goals, means and the environment it is operating in; active relationships within the movement and with external actors; and the emotional investment of members within the movement which is

essential for solidarity and its longevity (Melucci, 1995, p. 44-45). Melucci recognises that individuals in a movement will have different identities, ideas, and interests, but this does not impede collective action because negotiating this is part of the collective identity process (Flesher Fominaya, 2019, p. 433).

This conceptualisation has not gone unchallenged and, in relation to this study, the three most relevant questions are, firstly, whether collective identity is a process rather than a product (Snow, 2001), secondly, where is collective identity located (Flesher Fominaya, 2010; 2019) and, lastly, whether collective identity strengthens or weakens a movement (Flesher Fominaya, 2010; Snow, 2001).

The importance of viewing collective identity as a process is widely accepted; however, Melucci's assertion that it is more important than the product is seen as problematic (Snow, 2001). This is because it is the product that social actors interact with, meaning that the outcome of the interaction can influence different aspects of the movement, such as the tactics it uses (Snow, 2001). As the aim of the thesis is to examine how collective identity is constructed, it will treat it as a process; however, it attributes equal importance to viewing it as a product.

Another challenge concerns whether collective identity is located within individuals or whether it is constructed through interaction (Flesher Fominaya, 2010; 2019). Flesher Fominaya (2010; 2019, p. 431) argues that it exists in both, but emphasises the need for interaction and repeated action to develop and maintain it.

Lastly, there have been questions as to whether collective identity strengthens a movement or whether it leads to greater fragmentation within movements due to boundary-making processes (Flesher and Fominaya, 2010, p. 398). There have even been questions as to whether collective identity can exist beyond the organisational level (Saunders, 2008, in Flesher Fominaya, 2010, p. 399). Snow (2001) proposes to view collective identity not as fragmented but as multidimensional and being present at different levels, such as in the social movement community, within the social movement and within a specific organisation (Snow, 2001). These different levels should be considered to prevent generalisations about movement collective identity and see it as different iterations rather than as fragmentation (Snow, 2001). Flesher Fominaya (2010, p. 399) supports this and asserts that although organisations within a

movement can have a strong collective identity, this does not necessarily preclude the formation of a movement collective identity because it can be defined in terms of its diversity and heterogeneity, and negotiating differences is part of the process.

From this, it is clear that collective identity is an important dimension of social movements; however, it is also an analytically and methodologically complicated concept to research (Flesher Fominaya, 2010; 2019). To analyse the process of collective identity, I will employ Taylor and Whittier's (1992) framework which builds on Melucci's understanding of collective identity but is clearer in its definition of each aspect of the process. Although the framework was developed to analyse the lesbian feminist movement, the authors claim that it is broad enough to be applied to any identity movement (Taylor and Whittier, 1992, p. 105).

3.3 Collective Identity Construction

In accordance with the conceptualisation proposed by Taylor and Whittier (1992, p. 110), collective identity is a process which defines who the collective is, developing a shared consciousness and opposing the dominant order. Although Taylor and Whittier (1992, p. 121) separate these aspects of collective identity, they are interlinked and each will be examined in turn.

Boundaries refer to 'the social, psychological, and physical structures that establish differences between a challenging group and dominant groups' (Taylor and Whittier, 1992, p. 111). It entails constructing boundary markers that differentiate movement participants from outsiders and revolve around shared characteristics (e.g. shared religion, ethnicity) or are based on shared cultural systems (Taylor and Whittier, 1992, p. 112). Movements that challenge dominant values and structures withdraw from them and create 'new self-affirming values and structures' (Taylor and Whittier, 1992, p. 111). Boundary-making creates a distinction not only between those who are internal and external to the movement but also occurs between organisations that are part of the same movement (Hunt and Benford, 2004, p. 443; Taylor and Whittier, 1992, p. 113).

Consciousness refers to 'the interpretive frameworks that emerge from a group's struggle to define and realize members' common interests in opposition to the dominant order' (Taylor and Whittier, p. 114). This is understood as an 'ongoing process in which groups reevaluate themselves, their subjective experiences, their opportunities, and their shared interests'

(Taylor and Whittier, p. 114). It can occur in different ways such as through speech, writing (Taylor and Whittier, 1992, p. 114), and online communication (Hunt and Benford, 2004, p. 446). Through this process, the movement or group articulates and gains an understanding of its structural position, develops new expectations regarding its position and shapes the need for political action (Taylor and Whittier, 1992, p. 114). This influences mobilisation possibilities and determines what types of collective actions will be taken to challenge dominant arrangements (Taylor and Whittier, 1992, p. 117).

Negotiation refers to ‘the symbols and everyday actions subordinate groups use to resist and restructure existing systems of domination’ (Taylor and Whittier, 1992, p. 111). This entails groups privately and publicly coming up with new ways of thinking and acting, as well as adopting either direct forms of resistance like protest, or less overt forms such as using symbols to challenge dominant representations (Taylor and Whittier, 1992, p. 118).

This framework provides a systematic way of exploring the process of collective identity construction in FBF and FYF because it accounts for the internal boundaries between organisations and explores how consciousness is constructed, and the different ways it is negotiated. Through this approach an understanding will be gained of how the organisation understands itself, its interests and how it acts on its shared interest. From this, it will be possible to examine whether there are any similarities and differences between the organisations in their collective identity construction processes.

3.4 Collective Identity Construction Online

As these organisations are based online, this next part will look at how other studies have explored collective identity in an online setting.

Early research using Taylor and Whittier’s (1992) framework found that face-to-face interaction was needed for collective identity (Ayers, 2001). Although a sense of solidarity and shared culture of opposition could be developed online, a collective consciousness could not (Nips, 2004, p. 222). The findings of both these studies can be challenged because they are outdated and analysed group interaction on discussion boards, an early form of online interaction, which predates the rise of social media. In fact, contemporary research of collective identity acknowledges the importance of social media in its construction (Gerbaudo and Treré, 2015). Milan (2015, pp. 888, 893) demonstrates how social media has reshaped the

processes through which collective identity is constructed and maintained, highlighting that interaction occurs regularly, information is widely shared and platforms have their own resources which influence this process. Another popular area of research has focused on social media affordances. For example, Khazraee and Novak's (2018, p. 1) analysis of an Iranian women's rights campaign page on Facebook finds that the campaign facilitated collective identity through the women sharing personal narratives and photobiographies. This shaped grievances, negotiated meaning and framed collective action whilst conveying the group's message to a broader audience (Khazraee and Novak, 2018, p. 1). Similarly, Kavada (2015, p. 884) examines how the design of social media platforms and the way users interact with the platforms influence boundary-making by making it more inclusive and creating a shared consciousness, although not all users participate equally in this process.

There have been several critiques to online collective identity research, questioning whether it is bound by equally strong ties and emotional engagement as offline forms, and whether online collective identity can translate to offline mobilisation (Flesher Fominaya, 2019, p. 439). The most significant challenge has pertained to whether collective identity is relevant in the context of the individualisation of social media. Bennet and Segerberg's (2012) seminal theory of connective action argues that the traditional logic of collective action has shifted to horizontal connections between individuals and that the unification of action occurs around personal frames, thus rendering collective identity no longer important.

Whilst it is undeniable that social media has reconfigured mobilisation, this thesis focuses on analysing how social media acts as a space for collective identity construction. As highlighted in Yusupova's (2022a; 2023) studies mentioned in section 2.4, social media does support collective identity construction because it facilitates interaction, the building of shared meaning and boundaries, and extends solidarity. Therefore, although participation has become more individualised, this does not mean that collective identity has become irrelevant especially when considering the socio-political context in which the organisations are operating.

3.5 Research Questions and Theoretical Expectations

Having outlined the imperial and contemporary context in which state-minority and centre-regional relations have evolved and the ways in which ethnic mobilisation has been studied in Russia, it is clear that, although the anti-war and decolonisation organisations share some

similarities to previous forms of activism, they also represent a distinct new phenomena that have emerged in reaction to an increasingly illiberal and ethnonationalist state that prevents alternative identity expressions. I have conceptualised the organisations in NSM literature because they fit into the definition. Additionally, I have chosen to use collective identity construction as a means through which to analyse the FBF and FYF understandings of themselves, their strategies and aims. Based on the similarities and differences, I will provide some assertions as to whether or not it is possible to speak of an anti-war and decolonial movement. Therefore, the research questions are:

1. How is collective identity constructed in two different anti-war and decolonial organisations?
2. What are the similarities and differences in this process between the FBF and FYF?
3. How does collective identity shape each organisation's aims and strategies?
4. Does the collective identity construction process suggest the potential existence of a unified movement or not?

Based on the literature, there are several expectations:

1. Ethnic identity will play an important role in boundary making;
2. Consciousness will involve rejecting ethnic centred Russian nationalism, specifically challenging Russia's imperial history and established state-minority and centre-regional relations;
3. The politicisation of cultural and political demands will be present in the negotiation process and be reflected in both organisations strategies.

Chapter 4: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This chapter outlines the methodological approach used in this thesis, justifies the selection of FBF and FYF for analysis, discusses data collection and the sample, as well as method of analysis. It also addresses some ethical considerations and limitations of the study.

4.1 Research Design

This thesis adopts a qualitative approach and is rooted in a constructivist paradigm which holds that there is no objective reality but rather that there are multiple realities that are subjectively constructed by individuals (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 111). Reality is thus socially and historically mediated, and is dependent on individual ‘social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic and gender factors’ (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 113). Furthermore, knowledge is constructed through interaction, and the researcher and object of investigation cannot be separated (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 111, 114). The aim of the constructivist paradigm is to understand how meaning and experiences are created and to interpret them within the specific context they have emerged from (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 113). This aligns with Taylor and Whittier’s (1992) framework of collective identity construction because it seeks to understand and interpret the process through which collective identity is constructed and negotiated. Additionally, this approach allows for collective identity to be examined within its situated context, and to compare and contrast the processes through which different and shared meanings are constructed (Sławecki, 2018).

I adopted a case study methodology because it is best suited for research that asks ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions (Yin, 2008, p. 13). The three main proponents of the case study approach are Robert Yin, Robert Stake and Sharan Merriam. I have selected Merriam’s constructivist approach because it is most aligned to this study. Merriam (2009, p. 40-41) defines a case study as the analysis of a bounded system where the unit of the analysis, not the research topic, defines the case study. In this case, the units of analysis are anti-war and decolonial organisations which were founded by representatives from ethnic republics in Russia following the start of the full-scale invasion in Ukraine. Specifically, this is a comparative heuristic case study which seeks to provide a new understanding of the phenomena under study (Merriam, 2009, p. 44). The strength of using a case study is that it provides a way to investigate the process of collective identity construction within the context where it is produced, thus allowing for a holistic and rich explanation (Merriam, 2009, p. 51).

4.2 Case Selection

An important step was to select two organisations that could most suitably represent a subset of the anti-war and decolonial movement. At the preliminary stage, I identified 18 organisations which had declared themselves as anti-war and decolonial. They were found by typing the keywords ‘anti-war’ and ‘decolonial’ organisations into Google and Google Scholar where I found news articles, reports, interviews with activists from specific organisations, websites and social media accounts. I found each organisation’s aims, purpose, social media platforms, the type of content they posted on their social media, whether they represented a single group or a coalition of groups under a single platform, how many followers they had and how frequently they posted. I do not claim that this is an exhaustive list, however, I undertook this process three times between December 2022-April 2024. I have thereby attempted to stay up-to-date and to ensure that equal consideration was given to organisations before deciding on the final cases.

To ensure that the two organisations were comparable and representative of a potential movement, I developed a criterion-based sample, establishing specific and predetermined criteria and then reviewing all the cases that meet them (Patton, 2015, p. 281).

The first criterion was to focus on established, active and popular organisations because they had received the most public attention and were foundational to the perception of the existence of an anti-war and decolonial movement. I eliminated groups that mostly cross-posted content, had been inactive and posted irregularly. In cases where there were several organisations representing a republic, I selected the organisation with the most followers across its social media accounts. This was the case in both Sakha and Buryatia where there were other organisations apart from FYF and FBF; however, they were removed because they had significantly fewer followers.

The second criterion was to focus on organisations that had ties to a single republic rather than a coalition organisation because, in the latter case, it would be harder to analyse how collective identity formed as a process.

The third criterion was to exclude organisations that existed previously and had switched to an anti-war and/or decolonial agenda as I wanted to investigate organisations that had emerged in response to the war and partial mobilisation. Following the elimination of

organisations based on those criteria, I was left with four organisations: FBF, FYF, New Tuva, and Oirad-Kalmyks against War (formerly known as Free Kalmykia Foundation).

The fourth criterion was to select two organisations that had different understandings of decolonisation because the aim of the study is to see whether, despite these differences, there could be the existence of a united movement. FBF and FYF were selected because they differ in their understanding and aims for decolonisation. FBF advocates for a truly democratic decentralised federal system and FYF advocates for self-determination and favours independence. However, both organisations are also similar in several respects, such as in their social media followings and organisational structure. Therefore, FBF and FYF were chosen as the most suitable organisations to analyse collective identity construction processes.

4.3 Data Collection and Sample

The first step of the data collection process was to select the social media platform I would collect the data from. Both FYF and FBF have YouTube, Telegram, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter). In addition to this, FYF has a WhatsApp group and FBF has a website. I selected to compare the organisations' posts on Instagram because it is a visual social network which creates a community through sharing images and videos, as well as textual data, which users can interact with through different mechanisms, such as likes and comments. This aligns to the construction of collective identity online, as discussed in section 3.4, because sharing visual and written information is an important aspect of defining the boundary of the group, establishing shared meaning and symbols over time, and deciding the strategies that are adopted. Furthermore, Instagram is the most used platform with the most followers for both organisations. Therefore, Instagram seemed like the most suitable platform to study the construction of collective identity.

The data was collected using extant methods and unobtrusive observation, which meant that I reviewed both organisations' written and visual materials on Instagram without interacting with FBF, FYF or their followers (Salmons, 2016, p. 116).

The data sample consists of posts from the start dates of each organisation's Instagram account, those being April 2022 for FBF and August 2022 for FYF, until April 2024. The time period was selected because it includes a long enough time span to reflect processes of collective identity construction, as well as take into account several important events that had

taken place in March 2024, such as the Presidential election and the Crocus City Hall attacks. Notably, both organisations discussed the increase in ethnically motivated violence and xenophobia following the attack (Coalson, 2024), which is why the cutoff date of April 2024 was chosen for the sample.

As of July 2024, which is when the data collection was finalised and analysed, FBF had 529 posts and 12.1k followers on Instagram and FYF had 429 posts and also 12.1k followers on Instagram. The data sample was made up of 235 posts from FBF and 136 posts from FYF. In total, 371 posts were analysed.

It is important to note that videos were excluded from the analysis, although I watched many of them to gain a deeper understanding of the organisations' goals, ideas and broader context. Most of the information contained in the videos was already in the posts, and some of the videos, such as live streams, were several hours long, so it would have been outside the scope of this thesis to analyse them. I also excluded posts that were not relevant to the research questions, such as lists of names with soldiers that had died, information about how to relocate to a different country and posts that collected money for the organisation. It is also important to note that FBF posted two series, 'Buryats Against War' and 'Conversations about Nationality', which interviewed different Buryats and Indigenous representatives about the war, the political regime and different experiences of living in Russia as a minority. These interviews were then published in written form. I only analysed the first page and FBF's captions of these multi-page posts because it contained a summary and highlighted key points of the interview. This was however an exception and for all other posts I analysed the content in full, with most posts consisting of up to 10 images.

4.4 Method of Analysis

To answer the research questions, I employed Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis (TA) approach. There are different approaches to TA, however, I selected Braun and Clarke's approach because of its applicability to the constructivist paradigm. The authors' approach is flexible and more exploratory than other TA methods that are more structured and associated with post-positivist coding reliability approaches (Braun and Clarke, 2019, p. 593).

Furthermore, another benefit of this approach is that it enables the researcher to analyse most types of qualitative data and can be used for both inductive or deductive analysis. It also allows the researcher to capture the semantic (explicit) and latent (implicit) meaning in the

data (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 83; 2022, p. 27-28). In this case, the analysis was more deductive because it was shaped by Taylor and Whitter's (1992) framework of collective identity construction which provided an analytical lens through which to interpret the data.

The goal of TA is to identify, analyse and report on themes, which are defined as patterns based on shared meaning in the data, that are important for answering the research question (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 79; Braun and Clarke, 2019, p. 592). The researcher plays an active role in each step of the theme construction process; therefore, it is important to acknowledge the researcher's assumptions and positioning in the research process by being reflexive (Braun and Clarke, 2019, p. 595; 2022, p. 5).

In terms of the data analysis process, it was conducted manually and I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step approach. This involved, firstly, familiarising myself with the data by reading each social media post and underlining key words and images that seemed relevant to identity construction. Secondly, I reread the posts and started to generate some initial codes which were descriptive and focused on capturing what was being communicated e.g. 'war', 'fear', 'propaganda'. Thirdly, I reread the social media posts and initial codes and started to go beyond descriptions. Some of the developed codes were 'values', 'representation', 'unity', and represented the more latent meanings behind the initial codes. Fourthly, I reviewed the codes and started to consider their broader connections across the data as well as how they linked to Taylor and Whittier's (1992) theoretical framework. This was an iterative process that was undertaken several times because as mentioned, although Taylor and Whittier (1992, p. 121) separate boundary, consciousness and negotiation, these processes are interlinked. Therefore, in order to develop themes with distinct boundaries, it was necessary to consider how the different codes grouped into potential themes. Lastly, I reviewed and defined the themes to ensure that they represented the codes and data. These themes will be discussed and analysed in chapter 6.

4.5 Ethics

This study did not require ethical approval from the University of Glasgow because it used publicly available data posted by two organisations that intended this information to be in the public sphere. Both organisations have actively brought attention to their work and cause; therefore, there was sufficient certainty to classify the data as belonging to the public domain and not requiring ethical approval. Nevertheless, I still took steps to ensure I followed ethical

guidelines when conducting this research. For example, when collecting data, I ensured not to have any of the user comments visible so that specific user accounts could not be identified. Furthermore, all the publicly available information about the organisations' participants pertains to people located outside of Russia and I do not name any of them apart from both the founders as their 'foreign agent' status is both relevant to the findings and also publicly available information.

An important consideration throughout the research process was that the topic of decolonisation is very controversial and complex. Whilst I have interpreted the data in the context of existing literature, I have attempted to stay as close to the original data as possible to avoid misinterpretation. This is particularly important in the context of the decolonisation debate because it is very polarising, and Indigenous and ethnic minority activists have been presented as separatist and extremist (Baranova, 2024). Therefore, as an outsider to this debate, it was especially important to be sensitive to the wider context in which this research sits. To ensure contextual sensitivity, I have actively read, followed and unpacked the decolonisation debate in Russia.

4.6 Limitations

This study has several limitations. Firstly, interviewing organisation participants would have likely provided a deeper understanding of the collective identity process, especially the internal dynamics. However, as both organisations are primarily coordinated online and connect participants together from across the world, it is clear that social media plays an important role in facilitating collective identity construction, therefore just focusing on Instagram is appropriate within the constraints of this study. Another limitation related to not interacting with FBF and FYF is that I did not verify my findings and interpretations with either organisation. This would have eliminated the risk of misinterpretation or inaccuracy and also is more aligned to the broader decolonial debate of inclusion and representation.

Secondly, social media posts can be viewed as the end products of collective identity construction, rather than as part of the process. This is one of the reasons why I selected the data sample to cover a long time span, so that the posts in their entirety could be considered as part of the collective identity construction process. Additionally, as discussed in section 3.2, the question of whether collective identity is a process or product is part of a wider conceptual debate and this thesis treats it as a process.

Thirdly, the case selection and representativeness of the organisations can be questioned. As discussed in section 4.2, I attempted to stay up-to-date by monitoring different anti-war and decolonial organisations and based on carefully considered criteria I selected the most representative and comparable organisations from the identified list of organisations. I cannot claim that this list is exhaustive and that the selected organisations are fully representative of the potential existence of a united movement. However, as this is an exploratory piece of research, the aim is to provide empirically grounded assertions that can be researched further. Therefore, the aim is not necessarily representativeness but rather to provide an in-depth analysis that can identify potential areas of future research on this under researched topic.

Chapter 5: Case Studies

This next chapter introduces the case studies. Firstly, it provides a brief historical context of Buryatia and Sakha because this information is relevant to understanding and contextualising the findings. Secondly, it introduces the two organisations - FBF and FYF.

5.1 Buryatia: Historical Context

The Republic of Buryatia is located on the eastern shore of Lake Baikal in the Far Eastern Federal District, although prior to 2018 it had been part of the Siberian Federal District (Jonutyte, 2023, p. 9). The Republic is home to Buryats, who are a Mongolian people and share similar history, traditions, religion and cultural practices (Chakars, 2020, p. 64). The Republic is multiethnic and multireligious, and based on the 2021 census, Buryats comprise around one-third (32.5 percent) of the population, ethnic Russians make up 63.9 percent of the population, and there other groups, such as Evenks and Soyots, are represented in much smaller numbers (Jonutyte, 2023, p. 9; Wikipedia, 2022).

Buryat lands were colonised during Russia's eastward expansion as early as the 17th century but contacts between peoples remained more limited until large-scale Russian migration in the 18th century (Minority Group Rights, 2020a). Buryats located to the west of Lake Baikal had more contact with Russian peasants and exposure to Orthodoxy and their culture, whilst Buryats located to the east maintained greater contact with Mongolia and Inner Asian cultures and practices (Sweet and Chakars, 2010, p. 202). The Buryats had gained relative autonomy in the early 19th century and had been given the legal right to rule themselves by Mikhail Speranskii, the governor-general of Siberia; however, by 1900 the tsarist government changed land ownership, which entailed confiscating and redistributing it, settling nomads under the same administrative system as Russian peasants and replacing Buryat leaders with tsarist officials (Sweet and Chakars, 2010, p. 202). Thus, around the end of the 19th and start of the 20th century, a Buryat nationalist movement emerged which called for the reversal of the land legislation, return of greater autonomy and preservation of culture and language (Sweet and Chakars, 2010, p. 202). Buryat intelligentsia organised two congresses in 1905 and 1917 to discuss these issues and the future of the Buryat nation (Chakars, 2020, p. 63; Sweet and Chakars, 2010, p. 202).

The Buryat-Mongolian Autonomous Soviet Social Republic (BMASSR) was established in 1923. Despite an initial sense of autonomy, the policies of the 1930s and 1940s crushed any

aspirations of it being genuine (Sweet and Chakars, 2010, p. 202). The impacts of Stalinist policies entailed: violent collectivisation which settled the remaining Buryat nomads, the influx of Soviet European workers to promote industrialisation, which had demographic impacts, and the purging of Buryat political and cultural intellectuals (Sweet and Chakars, 2010, p. 202-203). In particular, 1937 marked a significant year in the Republic's history as Moscow reduced its territory by 40 percent by merging it into neighbouring Irkutsk and Chita regions (Sweet and Chakars, 2010, p. 203). This created two smaller autonomous okrugs: Ust'-Ordynskii Buryat Autonomous Okrug and the Aginskii Buryat Autonomous Okrug (Chakars, 2020, p. 64). These changes were made without the consent of the Republic despite the constitution preventing territorial changes without local approval (Chakars, 2020, p. 64). Most importantly, it meant that the Republic was no longer the designated Buryat territory, which pre-1937 had held more than 90 percent of the country's Buryat population, and after which it went down to 50 percent (Chakars, 2020, p. 64). Another significant moment during the Soviet period was the removal of the word 'Mongolian' from the Republic's official name in 1958 to cut any ties it had to the neighbouring country (Chakars, 2020, p. 64).

Following Gorbachev coming into power in 1985 and his subsequent reforms, a Buryat nationalist movement formed in 1986 which was led by scholars who focused on historical and contemporary issues related to the Buryat nation (Chakars, 2020, p. 63). This resulted in the formation of an organisation called Geser in 1988 which focused on two main issues: the territorial changes in 1937 and the reestablishment of the word 'Mongolian' into the Republic's name (Chakars, 2020, p. 64). The organisation was also concerned with the decline of Buryat traditions, religion and language use (Chakars, 2020, p. 64), the latter being important as in the 1970s Buryat language education had been cancelled, so by the collapse of the Soviet Union many could not speak the language (Sweet and Chakars, 2010, p. 203).

On October 8, 1990, the BASSR declared sovereignty and elevated its status to union republic (Chakars, 2020, p. 63). This did not result in secession from Russia but rather allowed it to bypass the authority of the central government on important issues such as reviving international relations, which it did by directly inviting the 14th Dalai Lama to the 250th anniversary of official recognition of Buddhism in Russia (Zhukovskaya, 1995, p. 30).

In February 1991, the government of the Republic of Buryatia and the leaders of the Buryat national movement held the first All-Buryat Congress for the Spiritual Rebirth and

Consolidation of the Nation (Chakars, 2020, p. 62; Sweet and Chakars, 2010, p. 203). The Congress discussed the future of the Buryat people and territories within the changing context of the Soviet Union (Chakars, 2020, p. 63). They did not demand independence but there were disagreements about political and territorial questions, and the Congress had to balance discussing practical and economic concerns with wider goals surrounding autonomy and identity (Chakars, 2020, p. 63). Although in 1993 the national movement was able to get the local government to officially declare that the 1937 territorial changes had been unlawful, this did not lead to any changes (Sweet and Chakars, 2010, p. 204).

The post-Soviet cultural revival has been complicated by several factors. Buryatia's economy in the 1990s was incredibly weak and continues to be, which has meant that it relies on subsidies from Moscow and Republic leaders have subsequently prioritised maintaining good relations with the centre (Chakars, 2020, p. 70). Additionally, as discussed in section 2.2, Buryatia has experienced the impacts of Putin's recentralisation policies and the two Buryat okrugs, which were merged into neighbouring territories in 1937, were officially dissolved and merged into Irkutsk Oblast in 2006 and Chita Oblast in 2008, thus ceasing to exist (Sweet and Chakars, 2010, p. 204). In reaction to recentralisation, a group known as 'Young Scholars' (2004) organised different activities in opposition to these policies, including demonstrations, sending a letter to the president arguing against the merging of two Buryat okrugs and calling for greater protection of Buryat language, traditions and culture (Sweet and Chakars, 2010, p. 205). However, local Shaman, Buddhist and civil society activities have become increasingly repressed by the government which has reduced the space for cultural and linguistic revival and political autonomy (Sweet and Chakars, 2010, pp. 205-206). Additionally, the Republic's nationalist demands have partly been counterbalanced by its ethnic Russian population who now make up the majority of the republic (Stepanov, 2000, p. 319).

5.2 Buryats in the Context of the War

In the context of the war, Buryats have been one of the most visible ethnic groups because they have suffered disproportionate casualty rates as well as media misrepresentation.

According to data analysis conducted by the FBF using open-source data, they found that from March 23, 2023, Buryatia has suffered the third highest overall casualty rate in Russia, second- highest casualty count per capita and third-highest rate of casualties among the

mobilised (Jonutyte, 2023, p. 9). There have been different interpretations for why this is the case. Bessudnov (2023, p. 883) argues that this is driven by socioeconomic inequality between regions and that when these disparities are taken into account the ethnic difference in mortality rates is sizably reduced. However, the dataset he uses is incomplete because it does not include all Russian war deaths and ethnicity was determined using the person's name which challenges the reliability of the statistics due to Russified names and interethnic marriages (Bessudnov, 2023, p. 885). Research by Vyshkova and Sherkhonov (2023, p. 136) supports the finding that there is a correlation between poorer regions having higher numbers of casualties, but they also argue that it is associated with the presence of military bases in the region. Nevertheless, their findings still demonstrate that Asian ethnicities, such as Buryats and Tuvans, are overrepresented in casualty rates and are at a higher risk of dying in the war (Vyshkova and Sherkhonov, 2023, p. 136).

In terms of media misrepresentation, the narrative of 'Putin's combat Buryats' has regained prominence (Jonutyte, 2023, p. 9). This narrative started during Russia's 2014 invasion of East Ukraine and now it is often used to describe any Russian Asian soldier (Jonutyte, 2023, p. 9). It is a racist label that has been used in the media to suggest that Buryat soldiers are more cruel and violent than other soldiers. Even the Pope in 2022 fell into this trope by claiming that Buryats and Chechens were more violent than those 'of the Russian tradition' (Jonutyte, 2023, p. 9).

5.3 Emergence of FBF

FBF is the first ethnic anti-war group to form. It started as a phone call between 10 natives of Buryatia based in the diaspora (Zueva and Garmazhapova, 2022). The group wanted to denounce the war and challenge the narrative of 'Putin's combat Buryats' (Epureanu, 2022) so they released a video condemning the war. The video received a lot of support and people from Buryatia started to contact the group asking for help on issues such as how to terminate a military contract (Zueva and Garmazhapova, 2022). This was the motivating factor to establish the foundation (Zueva and Garmazhapova, 2022). FBF engages in anti-war activities by offering legal assistance to help terminate military contracts, supports those facing discrimination and racism, promotes information that challenges propaganda and collects data on ethnic minority participation and casualties in the war (Vyshkova and Sherkhonov, 2023, p. 127; Zueva and Garmazhapova, 2022). For example, they have helped over 500 servicemen

terminate their contracts (Zueva and Garmazhapova, 2022). Therefore, although the founders are based in the diaspora, they have ties to the country and support people in the region.

In addition to its anti-war activities, FBF advocates for the cultural, linguistic and historic decolonisation of Russia (Beda, 2022). Their ultimate goal is the establishment of a democratic and federal system which is truly decentralised (Beda, 2022). The Foundation has received a lot of international media attention and has also come under the radar of government authorities in Russia. FBF's website is blocked in Russia, and it was first declared a 'foreign agent' in June 2023 and then an 'Undesirable Organisation' in August 2023 (AFP, 2023).

5.4 Sakha: Historical Context

The Republic of Sakha is located in the Far Eastern Federal District. It is the largest Republic in terms of territory and one of the richest due to its abundance of natural resources, which makes it one of the most important donor regions in Russia (Chernin, 2024; Kempton, 1996). The Republic was first inhabited by Tungusic and Paleosiberian peoples, such as the Evenks and Yukaghir, who were displaced and assimilated in the 14-15th centuries by Turkic Sakha peoples who came from the area around Lake Baikal (Kempton, 1996; Minority Watch Group, 2020b). The Republic is very sparsely populated and, according to the 2021 census, 55.5 percent of the population is Yakut, 32.3 percent Russian and 4.5 percent Evenks and Evens (Chernin, 2024).

Russia first started to colonise the region in the 17th century and built settlements towards the end of the century after decades of struggles and revolts (Chernin, 2024; Minority Watch Group, 2020b). Sakha was primarily a resource colony and provided the key resource of fur (Etkind, 2011). In the 18th century, Russian settlers arrived in much smaller numbers compared to the Soviet period and they adopted Sakha language, religion and customs (Cruikshank and Argounova, 2000, p. 101). The 19th century marked a turning point because the Imperial government had changed its approach to administering the territory and shifted to a Russifying mission through religious and educational means (Hodgson, 2022). Also in this period, Siberia, but specifically Sakha, became a destination for political exiles due to its remoteness (Cruikshank and Argounova, 2000, p. 101). The exiles exchanged political ideas with local intelligentsia which sparked the initiation of nationalistically-oriented activities such as developing the written Sakha language starting in the late 19th century (Cruikshank

and Argounova, 2000, p. 101). In the 20th century, following the 1905 revolution, the first Sakha national movement was established - the Yakut Union (1906) - which criticised colonialism and demanded the restitution of lands (Cruikshank and Argounova, 2000, p. 101). In this period, other organisations were established to raise ethnic consciousness such as Sakha Omuk (1920) which was banned in 1928 due to its perceived secessionist intentions (Cruikshank and Argounova, 2000, p. 102).

Sakha was declared the Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (YASSR) in 1922 and its territorial boundaries were changed, so it lost access to the sea of Okhotsk (Balzer and Vinokurova, 1996, p. 162). There was an initial perception of emancipation from Imperial Russia because the Sakha language could be used in educational and official activities, however, at the same time, the local government did not control its lands or resources (Wilson and Fondahl, 2024, p. 75). Furthermore, the Soviet Union presented the Imperial period as a voluntary unification between peoples, rather than a violent conquest, and there was an emphasis on the positives of Russian imperial rule (Hodgson, 2022). The 1930s and 1940s were difficult periods for the Republic due to collectivisation and the purges of Sakha's cultural and political elites (Cruikshank and Argounova, 2000, p. 101). Sakha's population also significantly increased in the Soviet period, specifically the 1950-60s, because many Russians moved there to exploit its natural resources (Cruikshank and Argounova, 2000, p. 101; Hodgson, 2022). This changed the demographic makeup of the Republic and by 1989, Yakuts made up 33.4 percent of the population, which was down from 81.6 percent in 1926, and in the same period, the ethnic Russian population rose from 10.4 percent in 1926 to 50.3 percent in 1989 (Wikipedia, 2024). However, there was an exodus of ethnic Russians in 1994 and, due to relatively high birth rates in Sakha in the post-Soviet period, the demographic situation has changed (Chernin, 2024; Cruikshank and Argounova, 2000, p. 100).

Sakha's cultural and spiritual revival started before Gorbachev, however, it intensified in the late 1980s and entailed a push for greater linguistic, political, cultural and economic rights. Though in 1989 only 5 percent of people in Sakha listed their primary language as Russian, there were concerns about the Russification of the Republic's capital and there was a demand for more language training at school and for changes in language legislation (Balzer and Vinokurova, 1996, p. 161). There was also a revival of ethnic consciousness and culture by resurrecting earlier groups such as Sakha Omuk as well as establishing new ones (Cruikshank and Argounova, 2000, p. 102). In the 1980s-90s organisations, such as Sakha Keskile (Sakha

Future), produced research about Russification and colonialism (Cruikshank and Argounova, 2000, p. 102). This challenged the Soviet propaganda's presentation of the incorporation of Yakutia into the Russian empire as a peaceful event and its oversight of distinct cultural markers (Balzer and Vinokurova, 1996, p. 160).

Sakha declared its sovereignty in 1990 and it signed its constitution in 1992 (Balzer and Vinokurova, 1996, p. 160). The Republic chose to keep and hyphenate 'Yakut', the outsiders' name for the Republic, which was interpreted as willingness to work with Russia (Balzer and Vinokurova, 1996, p. 160). Additionally, its constitution is based on government sovereignty, rather than national sovereignty, which highlighted its commitment to the federal system but also its desire for greater political and cultural autonomy (Balzer and Vinokurova, 1996, p. 160). In this period Sakha highlighted its linguistic and cultural connections to Asia and Northern peoples and subjugation to Russian colonialism which cut off those ties (Cruikshank and Argounova, 2000, p. 102).

By 1996, the Republic's first president Mikhail Nikolaev, elected in 1991, made formal and informal links with other northern governments such as Canada, Alaska and Iceland (Cruikshank and Argounova, 2000, p. 102). Nikolaev was a supporter of greater autonomy which was initially supported under Yeltsin (Kempton, 1996, p. 591). However, due to Sakha's economic importance to assuring Moscow's stability there were disagreements as to how much control the Republic could have over its resources (Kempton, 1996, p. 594). Nevertheless, the personal relations between Yeltsin and Nikolaev, as well as Nikolaev's bargaining power due to the Republic's wealth and his ability to stop exports, ultimately gave Sakha scope to influence the relationship (Kempton, 1996, p. 609). As discussed in section 2.2, under Putin the Republic has experienced the impacts of recentralisation. Sakha's regional autonomy has been reduced as it has lost control over its resources, experienced greater federal control over educational policy, and all references to sovereignty have been removed from its constitution (Wilson and Fondahl, 2024, p.75). Nevertheless, over the years there have been different examples of resistance to this loss of autonomy, ranging from environmental concerns to a rally held by a Shaman in 2019 in favour of self-determination (Balzer, 2021) and, more recently, to a women-led protest against mobilisation in Yakutsk (Novaya Gazeta Europe, 2022).

5.5 Emergence of FYF

Similarly to FBF, FYF is an anti-war organisation that was founded following the release of an anti-war video posted by the organisation's founder, Sargylana Kondakova (Latypova, 2024b). The video received a lot of support which drove Kondakova to search for similar-minded Yakutians to come together to establish a foundation (Latypova, 2024b). In addition to its anti-war activities, such as helping people avoid mobilisation and countering state propaganda, the Fund advocates for the decolonisation of Russia (Latypova, 2024b).

Specifically, FYF supports self-determination and the founder has stated her desire for an independent state (Latypova, 2024b). FYF also coordinates different protest activity, such as the women-led anti-mobilisation protest, in Yakutsk in September 2022, in which up to 500 women participated (Latypova, 2024b). Additionally, in November 2023, the organisation leaked recordings of closed-door government meetings which brought attention to the fact that the Republic had failed to meet the Kremlin's volunteer military recruit quotas (The Moscow Times, 2023). Therefore, although the organisation is based abroad, it maintains strong ties to the Republic.

Overall, both Buryatia and Sakha share similar experiences in terms of colonialism; the rise in nationalist movements in the early twentieth century; and demographic, territorial, cultural and political changes during the Soviet period, although to different degrees. Both experienced strong cultural and political revivals in the 1980s and declarations of sovereignty in 1990, and have been impacted by Putin's recentralisation policies. One of the main differences between the two Republics is that Sakha is much wealthier, ranking 5th in Russia's federal subjects by GRDP per capita compared to Buryatia which ranks 60th (Wikipedia, 2020). Additionally, Yakuts make up a majority of the population in Sakha and almost all Yakuts speak their native language, unlike in Buryatia where ethnic Buryats are not a majority, have been territorially split up and much fewer people speak the language (Jonutyte, 2023). These similarities and differences as will be discussed in the next chapter are present in the collective identity construction process.

Chapter 6: Findings

This chapter will discuss the findings from the thematic analysis. This section is structured based on Taylor and Whittier's (1992) approach to collective identity formation. This means that boundary, consciousness and negotiation will be examined in turn and provide an analysis of each of the themes that come under each aspect of the process. The three themes examined under boundaries for both organisations are: 1) withdrawal from imperial values and structures; 2) withdrawal from undemocratic values and structures; and 3) building shared indigenous identity. The three themes examined under consciousness for both organisations are: 1) re-evaluation of colonial history and processes; 2) unequal economic relations between the centre and regions; 3) raising political awareness. The three themes examined under negotiation for both organisations are: 1) changing representation and 2) promoting culture 3) resistance.

6.1 FBF Boundary

Based on the thematic analysis, FBF establishes a boundary between those inside and outside of the organisation by emphasising the need to unite around Indigenous communities' shared experiences of colonialism. FBF further distinguishes the boundary by creating a distinction from the current regime's imperialistic and undemocratic values, instead advocating for anti-imperial and pro-democracy values.

In terms of FBF's withdrawal from the imperial nature of the regime, it does this by underlining Indigenous communities' shared experiences of colonisation, which includes Russification, assimilation, territorial changes, violence and experiences of racism and discrimination (e.g. Appendix A, post 1; 2). FBF raises awareness about these shared experiences by posting a series called '*Narodi* Against Racism' (Appendix A, post 3) and a 'Denazification Campaign' (Appendix A, post 4). The posts share personal experiences and highlight that racism and discrimination are experienced at all stages of life, spheres of society, and people constantly are dehumanised and experience violence (Appendix A, post 3; 4; 5). As discussed in section 2.2, this can be seen as an implication of nationalism which privileges ethnic Russians and does not protect minority rights, and in turn constructs an ethnonationalist understanding of the nation.

In response to historical and contemporary imperialism, in particular 'Putin's commitment to the principle "divide and rule"' (Appendix A, post 6), FBF emphasises the importance of

establishing ‘horizontal ties between peoples living in Russia’ (Appendix A, post 6), especially those who diverge from standard Russianness in terms of ‘ethnicity, religion, and race’ (Appendix A, post 7).

Furthermore, FBF points to the imperial nature of the war and presents it as an outcome of Putin’s imperial ambitions. FBF highlights the hypocrisy of Buryats being sent to fight on behalf of the ‘Russian world’ to enforce ethnic Russian values, culture and language, yet they themselves experience racism and discrimination due to these imperialist values (Appendix A, post 8). In relation to the war, FBF specifically appeals to Buryats and emphasises that this is ‘not our war’, ‘we’ should not be fighting in it (Appendix A, post 9; 10). FBF also questioned Buryat's identity, as evidenced in the sentence ‘we have always been a proud and free people, at what moment did we lose ourselves?’ (Appendix A, post 11). The focus specifically on Buryats is likely because they were being recruited and dying at disproportionate rates compared to other nationalities in Russia (Appendix A, post 12).

FBF also uses messages to appeal to Buryat values shaped by Buddhism which advocate for ‘nonviolence (ahimsa)’(Appendix A, posts 13), as well as question ‘what kind of Buddhist are you’ if supportive of the war (Appendix A, post 14). This constructs a boundary based on Buddhist and pacifist values. Whilst the content of these posts are not necessarily exclusive, it does focus on fellow Buryats and questions their shared identity.

Additionally, FBF withdraws from the undemocratic structures of the regime. It does this by highlighting the failures and selfishness of Buryat government officials which is contrasted with FBF’s values. FBF brings attention to the failure of the regional head, Alexsey Tsydenov, to represent and protect Buryats interests. Not only does he not speak Buryat, which is in violation of the constitution (Appendix A, post 15), but he also uses his position to solely promote his career at the expense of the reputation of the whole ‘*narod*’ (Appendix A, post 16). In turn, FBF views itself as having to ‘endlessly give interviews and defend Buryatia’s honour’ (Appendix A, post 16).

FBF also highlights how regional officials have spared their family members and friends from being recruited because they take advantage of their power and ‘pity their sons but not yours’(Appendix A, post 17). This is a particularly sensitive issue in Buryatia due to the high recruitment and death rate of soldiers and there is ‘not one citizen in Buryatia who has not

been impacted by the war - everyone knows someone who has been sent to die in Ukraine' (Appendix A, post 18). This especially contrasts with FBF and its founder, Alexandra Garmazhapova, receiving 'foreign agent status', and later on being declared an 'Undesirable Organisation'. FBF highlights its commitment to the Buryat people and acts 'in the interest of life' (Appendix A, post 19). Garmazhapova challenges her status by highlighting that the Fund works 'exclusively in the interest of the Buryat people and their right to life and freedom' (Appendix A, post 20). Therefore, there is a clear withdrawal from anti-democratic and corrupt structures and the creation of a boundary between regional officials and FBF which works on behalf of representing and protecting Buryats interests.

6.2 FBF Consciousness

Based on the analysis, three themes were constructed in relation to FBF's consciousness development. Firstly, 're-evaluation of colonial history and processes', which in this case specifically focused on the Soviet Union and highlighted how colonisation has structurally influenced the societal position and self-identification of Indigenous and ethnic minorities in Russia. To resist this, FBF provides an alternative understanding of history and a framework through which to analyse the long-term impacts of colonisation. Secondly, the theme of 'unequal economic relations' highlights Buryatia's reliance on the centre and unequal distribution of resources as well as inability to control its own resources in its territory. Thirdly, the theme 'political awareness' underlines the lack of objective discussion and education of politics in the country. To counter this, FBF educates subscribers about Russia's politics, rights and state propaganda.

6.2.1 FBF Re-evaluation of Colonial History and Processes

FBF challenges the narrative that the USSR was an anti-colonial power that freed all 'subjugated peoples' (Appendix A, post 21). FBF illustrates how people's histories were rewritten to portray 'voluntary entry' into the Union and the acceptance of 'brotherly unification with the Russian people' (Appendix A, post 21). This myth has gone unchallenged which has resulted in its survival and acceptance (Appendix A, post 21). FBF highlights that this has shaped Buryat and other Indigenous peoples' perception and understanding of their history. To challenge this, FBF brings attention to historical events that have been overlooked or manipulated in the dominant retelling of history.

FBF brought attention to other Indigenous communities' colonial experiences which have been ignored or misrepresented, such as in the case of the deportations of the 'Karachay, Kalmyks, Chechens and Ingush' that have been presented as 'justified' (Appendix A, post 21.1). However, FBF also focused specifically on Buryatia's Soviet history which experienced numerous traumatic events, such as the splitting of the republic into five parts, as well as the cutting off of its cultural, religious and linguistic ties as part of rewriting its history (as discussed in section 5.1). For example, the Republic's educational system is rooted in the Buddhist monastery system which was destroyed and replaced by the Soviet system in the 1930s (Appendix A, post 22). Furthermore, the Soviet government changed the writing script three times, from Mongolian to Latin (1931) and finally to Cyrillic (1939) (Appendix A, post 23). Alongside this, there was mass killing and repression of the Buryat intelligentsia (1937-38) (Appendix A, post 23.1). Finally, as mentioned earlier in 1970, there was a reform which reduced the teaching of Buryat at schools (Appendix A, post 23.2). From this, it is clear that FBF's narrative focuses on the systematic process which disconnected Buryats from their historical knowledge and cultural systems and rewrote their histories in line with Soviet ideology.

As part of formulating new expectations of treatment, FBF shares terms and concepts to identify and unpack the long-term impacts of colonisation. This can be interpreted as part of the broader shift in thinking and language use when discussing topics related to centre-region and state-minority relations (Baranova, 2024). For example, FBF underlines how colonial processes create hierarchical division to justify the colonial regime (Appendix A, post 24). This division overtime psychologically affects communities but also results in 'racial (and ethnic) discrimination which simultaneously increases systemic injustice (e.g. employment, education, health care, justice system) and strengthens discriminatory beliefs and resource distribution' (Appendix A, post 24.1). This can be seen as an important step in providing a way for people to understand their experiences which in turn can provide a means through which to resist the dominant colonial system. Therefore, FBF counters dominant colonial historical narratives and provides a framework of analysis to understand the long-term impacts of colonisation and raise awareness about history that people are not taught about.

6.2.2 FBF Unequal Economic Relations

The second theme to emerge from the data as part of consciousness is the emphasis on the unequal economic relations between the centre and the Republic.

FBF highlights Buryatia's wealth in natural resources such as minerals, metals and coal (Appendix A, post 25). Yet it is one of the poorest regions in Russia and lacks investment in infrastructure. One of the biggest problems that FBF brings attention to, is that the Republic is not gasified, so '43% of Buryatia's inhabitants have to buy wood in order to heat [their house] and to cook food' (Appendix A, post 26). The lack of gasification also impedes industry development (Appendix A, post 26.1). Despite the significant benefits gasification would bring to the Republic, discussions have been sidelined over the years due to the government claiming that it is too expensive (Appendix A, post 27).

This is considered not only ironic because the government presents Russia as 'one of the richest countries in the world' but also because of its wealth in gas (Appendix A, post 28). Furthermore, FBF questions how Putin can 'spend billions on the war with Ukraine, but at the same time think that the gasification of Buryatia is expensive?' (Appendix A, post 27). FBF also found that Tsydenov spent around 2.748 billion Rubles of the Republic's budget on the war (Appendix A, post 29) and financed rebuilding projects in occupied Ukraine (Appendix A, post 30). In light of the Republic's poverty and Tsydenov's failure to deliver on public projects, through these examples FBF highlights Tsydenov's lack of care for the Republic and its people (Appendix A, post 31).

FBF attributes economic inequality to centralisation and the structure of the tax system. As discussed in section 2.2., the Kremlin reasserted control over the regions by recentralising economic power. This has made regions reliant on the centre for financial support, and to 'oppose the Kremlin is disadvantageous' because it is against the republics' interests (Appendix A, post 32). FBF also points to the concentration of wealth, businesses and job opportunities in cities like Moscow, which in turn results in higher taxes, generation of more wealth and investment in those cities and their people (Appendix A, post 33).

Furthermore, FBF identifies economic inequality and the lack of work opportunities as being reflected in recruitment and death rates for the war. These have been push factors that have driven men from the poorest regions to go to war (Appendix A, post 34; 35). For example, not only are more people from Buryatia recruited and dying at a higher rate compared to cities like Moscow (e.g. Appendix A, post 36) but, also, the payout for a soldier's death differs

depending on where they are registered, with those registered in Moscow receiving triple the amount than someone registered in Buryatia (Appendix A, post 35.1).

Therefore, FBF raises consciousness by pointing to the unequal economic relations between the centre and regions which have purposefully reduced regions economic control over time, meaning that regions do not control their resources and there is a lack of investment and job opportunities.

6.2.3 FBF Political Awareness

The third theme related to consciousness is ‘political awareness’. FBF identifies that the ‘lack of good social and humanitarian education’ and development of critical thinking at school, as one of the main reasons for why people lack knowledge in politics (Appendix B, post 27).

Therefore, to counter this and formulate new expectations of treatment, FBF educates subscribers about politics, rights and state propaganda.

FBF raises awareness about the country’s political system by explaining the country’s federal structure and how Russia has effectively become a unified and totalitarian country due to power being centralised and Putin ‘defacto ... being able to do anything - his power is unlimited’ (Appendix A, post 37). FBF also brings attention to how Buryatia’s sovereignty has been encroached upon over the course of the last 30 years (Appendix A, post 38). This is done by highlighting the principles of the Republic’s constitution that have been violated or changed over the years. Particularly painful is the changing of the statute that required the President of the Republic to have lived in the Republic for at least 10 years and removing the maximum two term limit (Appendix A, post 38.1). These statutes were important to protect Buryatia from being governed by someone who has ‘never lived in [the Republic] and does not understand local realities’ (Appendix A, post 38.2). As previously mentioned, the constitution stipulates that the head of the republic needs to speak Buryat, however, the current regional head, Tsydenov, does not (Appendix A, post 39). This not only is a violation of the constitution but means that Tsydenov is unable to communicate with certain members of the population (Appendix A, post 39).

FBF also examines how propaganda has influenced the educational system, especially after the war. For example, there is a new compulsory class at schools called ‘Conversations About Important Things’ which covers different topics through the government’s perspective and

engages in ‘patriotic’ actions such as raising the flag and singing the national anthem (Appendix A, post 40). Furthermore, at special school events, children have been asked to stop dressing up in ‘western’ influenced costumes, like Spiderman, and instead dress in ‘patriotic’ costumes (Appendix A, post 41). This underlines the importance of FBF’s work because there are very few spaces where political information free from the government’s perspective can be shared and discussed.

Furthermore, FBF highlights how state propaganda has attempted to permeate all aspects of public and private life. FBF posts a series named ‘Propagandists from Buryatia’ which names famous public figures and officials from the Republic who use their position to promote and support the war. For example, in one of the posts, FBF named a famous Buryat singer who has appropriated historical memory by ‘supporting the myth that Putin’s Russia is fighting Nazism, the way our ancestors did during WW2’ (Appendix A, post 42).

FBF also focuses on how the government has used Shamanism and ethnic minorities as a propaganda tool. For example, representatives from the ‘Huns Fund’, which supports the government, sent ‘three yurts as part of “humanitarian aid” for Russian soldiers’ (Appendix A, post 43) which is viewed as ‘another exploitation of our national culture for propaganda’ (Appendix A, post 1.1). Furthermore, the Kremlin has actively promoted the idea of ‘multiethnic Russia against “Ukrainian nazis”’ (Appendix A, post 44) and published videos recorded by different ethnic minority representatives stating their support for Russia, Putin and referring to themselves as ‘*russkie*’ (Appendix A, post 44.1). This all points to the issues discussed in section 2.2, where it was emphasised that ethnic minority rights and identity has been relegated to the cultural sphere and are used to support the idea of interethnic harmony and Russia-centred patriotism (Prina, 2018, p. 1247). Therefore, it is evident that raising awareness about the political system both provides a context for the structural positioning of Indigenous and ethnic minorities, as well as a means through which to challenge the current context.

6.3 FBF Negotiation

Based on the thematic analysis, FBF employs different strategies to challenge and shift negative dominant representations of Buryats by highlighting the Republic’s rich cultural, artistic and linguistic heritage. Additionally, FBF confronts negative portrayals of Buryats in

the context of the war and resists legal violations by appealing to both domestic and international institutions.

FBF promotes Buryat cultural heritage which contributes to self-identification and challenges negative perceptions that Buryats were ‘uncultured and savage’ (Appendix A, post 45). FBF underlines Buryat's rich knowledge system built on its historical connections with Mongolia. For example, prior to the Soviet Union, Buryatia’s educational system was based on Buddhist monastic education (Appendix A, post 46) and the Republic played a central role in publishing and during Buddhist enlightenment in Inner Asia (Appendix A, post 46.2). Furthermore, there is a widely shared misconception that the Russians ‘saved Buryats from diseases and death’ (Appendix A, post 45). However, FBF highlights Buryatia’s over 300 year old connection to Eastern Tibetan-Mongolian medicine and, according to archives, at the start of the 20th century there were ‘over 10 medical schools’ in the Republic (Appendix A, post 45.1). Therefore, this underlines that ‘Buryats across decades had their own effective medical system’ (Appendix A, post 45.2). These examples highlight how Buryatia has historical links to alternative knowledge systems and practices, which differ, that were cut off and denied by Russian and Soviet modernity.

FBF brings attention to Buryat creativity by highlighting unique artistic styles and contributions to society (Appendix A, post 64). For example, Sergei Dovlatov’s monument in Saint Petersburg was sculpted by a Buryat named Vyacheslav Buhaev (Appendix A, post 64). Furthermore, FBF posted photos of a young Buryat woman in traditional clothing asking important questions such as ‘why do we not know our native language?’ (Appendix A, post 65) and underlining that ‘[we are] the answer to protect Buryat language, culture and traditions, spirituality and religion, history and heritage’ (Appendix A, post 65.1). The photos of the young woman link both the past and present, as well as traditions with modern life. These examples of Buryat creativity can be interpreted as changing the perception and representation of Buryats through positive symbols as well as acting as a means through which to inspire the Buryat people to reconnect with Buryat heritage and culture.

FBF also promotes Buryat celebrations by underlining how they are distinct from Russian ones. For example, birthdays historically were not celebrated and instead Buryats marked ‘collective events linked to life stages, religious celebrations and seasonal rituals’ (Appendix A, post 47). In addition to this, FBF raises awareness about the rituals and traditions of

Buryatia's most important celebration, Sagaalgan (New Year) (Appendix A, post 48). Whilst it was banned during the Soviet Union, it was still secretly celebrated (Appendix A, post 49). This can be interpreted as highlighting how traditions and rituals have been passed on despite repression, which can be linked to the current limits on alternative identity expressions and language.

FBF also challenges the clamping down on republic languages by actively promoting and reconnecting with Buryat language. For example, FBF posts different sayings in Buryat (e.g. Appendix A, post 50), publishes a magazine with 'Feminist Antiwar Resistance' in Buryat (Appendix A, post 51), and creates an explanatory guide on how to read long vowels (Appendix A, post 52). Furthermore, FBF highlights how Buryat names were Russified as part of colonial processes (Appendix A, post 53). To counter this, FBF provides examples of how the surnames were changed and how to revert back to traditional Buryat spellings (Appendix A, post 53.1). FBF notes, however, that from a legal perspective name changes are limited because the Buryat alphabet has letters which do not exist in Russian (Appendix A, post 53.2). Nevertheless, this doesn't stop people from using the correct letters and spellings of their surnames on the internet (Appendix A, post 53.2). These actions actively promote Buryat in the public sphere.

Buryats have incorrectly been presented as 'the main fighters for the "Russian world"' and accused of committing some of the most serious war crimes. FBF works to challenge this narrative by investigating accusations, such as that Buryats were the main perpetrators in Bucha (Appendix A, post 54), and emphasising that they make up a minority in military units and there is no unit made up of just ethnic Buryats (Appendix A, post 55). FBF's series 'Buryats Against War' actively tries to change this negative perception by highlighting that there are many Buryats who have refused to fight and do not support the war (e.g. Appendix A, post 8; 9). FBF also encourages journalists and media not to single out nationalities for war crimes prior to independent investigations and verification, and to avoid attributing characteristics to someone based on their identity (Appendix A, post 56). This is part of a broader shift in which FBF advocates for a change in how minorities are represented and discussed in the media (e.g. Appendix A, post 57).

FBF resists the violations of the law. For example, FBF wrote to the Prosecutors Office and Investigative Committee in Buryatia stating that the war was a genocide due to the

disproportionate death rates of Buryats, citing that the likelihood of an inhabitant of Moscow to participate and die in the war is '300 times lower' than a Buryat's (Appendix A, post 58). Similarly, FBF wrote an open letter addressed to the head of the Republic, Tsydenov, holding him responsible for the deaths of Buryat soldiers due to his support for the war (Appendix A, post 59). FBF also wrote to the Prosecutors Office in order to raise the issue of Tsydenov violating the Buryat constitution because he does not speak the language (Appendix, A, post 60).

FBF has also engaged international structures, such as the United Nations (UN), in monitoring human rights violations in the Republic. For example, a Buryat woman was fined 30,000 Rubles for posting the message 'Buryats against the war and genocide! No to mobilisation (*mogilizatsiya!*)' (Appendix A, post 61). This complaint was registered by the UN as it violated the freedom of expression and sharing opinions freely on the internet (Appendix A, post 61).

Lastly, FBF brought significant attention to the Natalya Filonova case. Filonova is an anti-war activist who was sentenced to 2 years and 10 months in prison for allegedly attacking two police officers with a pen - an allegation that she denies (Appendix A, post 62). The actual reason for her arrest is her anti-war position (Appendix A, post 62). FBF encourages people to write to her in prison and cover how and what topics people can write about with political prisoners (Appendix A, post 63).

All of these actions are important regardless of the outcome in order to monitor the government and also build democratic behaviours and practices for the participants in the organisation. Additionally, this work is important for raising morale, getting people engaged and promoting a sense of agency; the focus is thus not on the effectiveness of the strategies but on the importance of participating in these actions together and acknowledging that what the government is doing is wrong.

6.4 FYF Boundary

Based on the thematic analysis, FYF establishes a boundary between those inside and outside of the organisation by emphasising the need to unite around Indigenous communities' shared experiences of colonialism. Similarly, to FBF it also constructs a boundary with the current

regime's imperialistic and undemocratic values and structures by advocating for anti-imperial and pro-democracy values.

In terms of FYF's withdrawal from the imperial nature of the regime, it does this by emphasising Indigenous communities' shared experiences and the importance of having a united voice because 'we are united not just by our shared history of colonisation and the extermination of our people, but also by the systematic elimination of our languages, Russification, and also experiences related to racism and xenophobia' (Appendix B, post 1). FYF collaborates with representatives from other diaspora Indigenous communities to ensure that 'our voice is heard and visible' (Appendix B, post 2). This indicates that FYF advocates for a more inclusive boundary beyond solely appealing to exclusive ethnic identity.

Whilst FYF underlines the imperial ideology of the regime, stating that 'revanchism' and 'chauvinism' are pillars of Putin's ideology and drivers of the war (Appendix B, post, 3), particular attention is paid to the Russian liberal opposition. FYF challenges the notion that the liberal opposition are 'good Russians' and views them as having the same imperialist mentality as the Kremlin (Appendix B, post 4). FYF points to the opposition's 'chauvinism and imperialism' and lack of support for democratic and anti-war initiatives led by other nationalities (Appendix B, post 4). FYF also highlights the opposition's 'use of the same methods as Kremlin propaganda', such as when discussing protests in the republics and presenting protesters as separatist and extremist (Appendix B, post 5). This points to FYF constructing a boundary within the broader anti-war movement and highlighting that the liberal opposition does not represent its interests.

Furthermore, FYF withdraws from the undemocratic structures of the regime. Similarly to FBF, FYF does this by highlighting the selfishness of regional officials and underlines their criminality which contrasts with FYF's values. FYF discredits the Republic's head, Aysen Nikolayev, due to his support for the war. Nikolayev's inclusion on the United States' (US) 'Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List', which is designated for 'terrorists, drug traffickers, and other criminals', supports FYF's construction of him as a criminal due to his support for the war (Appendix B, post 6). Nikolayev cannot enter the US, and FYF hopes this travel restriction will extend to 'all developed countries' (Appendix B, post 6). This assertion can be interpreted as FYF constructing a boundary between its alignment with the developed world versus the criminal government officials.

FYF also highlights how Republic officials use their position to protect their own interests. This is evident in the context of mobilisation, as none of the officials' families or friends have been mobilised (Appendix B, post 7). Authorities are presented as 'traitors' for sending Yakuts to the frontline, and this message is supported by strong visual imagery of Republic officials splattered with blood combined with photos of mobilised soldiers below them (Appendix B, post 7). This contrasts with the declaration of FYF and its founder, Sargylana Kondakova, as foreign agents. FYF responds to the status by emphasising love for 'our home, our fellow citizens' and its desire for a 'free, democratic and prosperous future, [where] government institutions serve for the benefit of the people' (Appendix B, post 8). This clearly contrasts with the portrayal of Republic officials sending Yakuts to war and using their position to protect their interests, rather than the population's. Furthermore, FYF highlights that the organisation is made up of 'teachers, lawyers, journalists, drivers...' (Appendix B, post 8). This can be interpreted as FYF underlining its relatability and closeness to Yakuts, which is contrasted with the distance and self-interest of the Republic's officials.

Similarly, Kondakova juxtaposes the idea of being a foreign agent, as she emphasises her blood and family links to the Republic and her love for 'the Arctic's environment, its harsh climate and the people who live far away from the whole world...the Arctic is my soul and my pain.' (Appendix B, post 9). There is also arguably an important connection to gender. Kondakova highlights her role as a mother and teacher, both of which reproduce the nation in a biological and symbolic sense (Appendix B, post 9). Therefore, the references to blood and territory strongly resist the label of 'foreign agent'.

6.5 FYF Consciousness

Based on the analysis, three themes were developed in relation to FBF's consciousness development. Firstly, 're-evaluation of colonial history and processes', which in this case challenged the dominant narrative in Russian historiography about the conquest of Siberia. Secondly, the theme of 'unequal economic relations' juxtaposes Sakha (Yakutia) wealth with its poverty levels, highlighting unequal resource distribution and inability to control own resources. Thirdly, the theme 'political awareness' unpacks the pillars of Putin regimes ideology and how this has impacted political rights. FYF also brings attention to state propaganda.

6.5.1 FYF Re-evaluation of Colonial History and Processes

The first theme that is part of FYF's consciousness development is related to the 're-evaluation of colonial history and processes'. FBF challenges the dominant narrative in Russian historiography that the conquest of Siberia was 'peaceful and voluntary' (Appendix B, post 10), and that the colonists were 'pioneers' who discovered a 'new land' (Appendix B, post 11).

FYF underlines the violent nature of Siberia's conquest and highlights that Yakuts resisted the colonisers, who ultimately got the 'right to live [on Sakha's territory] through force, aggression and killing' (Appendix B, post 11.1). In addition to this, FYF raises awareness about the Republic's pre-colonial history by tracing Sakha's history back to 4000-3000 BC (Appendix B, post 12) and presenting an overview of key historical periods until the arrival of Moscow government colonisers in the 17th century (Appendix B, post 12; 12.1). This highlights Yakut's pre-colonial ties to its territory and FYF emphasises that every Yakut needs 'to know about their peoples' fight for freedom and self-determination, their bravery and the unwavering will of our ancestors living in this harsh but beautiful *krai!*' (Appendix B, post 12).

Furthermore, FYF uses the example of Yukaghir peoples who have lived in northeastern Siberia for thousands of years (Appendix B, post 13) to highlight how colonisation endangers people, culture and language. FYF raises awareness about different aspects of Yukaghir culture, such as language (Appendix B, post 13.1) and their 'unusual' pictographs, which are distinct from neighbouring peoples' (Appendix B, post 13.2). However, due to processes linked to colonisation, such as 'war and epidemics', the pictographs never developed into a full ideographic writing system (Appendix B, post 13.2). Furthermore, an expedition to Magadan Oblast' in 2011 found that only six out of the 69 Yukaghir's who took part in the research could speak their language, no Yukaghir's were involved in traditional activities and the majority did not know Yukaghir traditions, rituals and folklore (Appendix, B, post 13.3). This highlights the threatening aspects of colonisation and also links to the issues discussed in section 2.2 related to the lack of protections for minority rights which can threaten languages and cultural activities.

Additionally, FYF highlights the violence and repression experienced by Yakuts during the Soviet Union. Specifically, FYF draws comparisons between the repression experienced then

with the current regime because ‘again, like almost 100 years ago, the government has become a weapon for its citizens and not its protector’ (Appendix B, post 14). FYF links the waves of repression in the 1920s-30s and 1950s against the Yakut population and intelligentsia to the contemporary regime by highlighting that it ‘uses the same methods as its predecessor - OGPU, NKDV, KGB...’ (Appendix B, post 14.1). Furthermore, FYF highlights the Soviet authorities’ disregard for Yakut life by highlighting the ‘carelessness and incompetence of the party apparatus which led to the death of thousands of Yakuts’ in relation to one of the most tragic events during the Soviet period - the resettlement in Churapcha (Churapcha tragedy) (Appendix B, post 15). This indifference is evidenced in other events, such as when Soviet authorities conducted a series of ‘peaceful’ nuclear underground explosions between 1974-1987 (Appendix B, post 16). After one of the explosions conducted on 24 August 1978, radioactive particles spread to the surrounding area (Appendix B, post 16.1). This not only had a serious environmental impact but also affected the population’s health in terms of birth abnormalities and a rise in oncological diseases (Appendix B, post 16.2; 16.3).

Overall, FYF reevaluates its Republic’s colonial history and underlines how these colonial processes have been sustained overtime by highlighting trends in terms of repression and disregard for Yakut life.

6.5.2 FYF Unequal Economic Relations

The second theme to emerge from the data as part of consciousness is the emphasis on the unequal economic relations between the centre and the Republic.

FYF highlights unequal economic relations by pointing to the fact that Sakha is one of the wealthiest republics in Russia in terms of resources, yet people live in poverty and the region lacks infrastructure (Appendix B, post 17). FYF posts statistics from 2021 of how many resources were extracted from the Republic to point out its wealth. For example, in 2021, 17.3 million tonnes of oil (Appendix B, post 17.1) and 42 tonnes of gold (Appendix B, post 17.2) were extracted. Furthermore, the diamond company ALROSA, which mines diamonds in Sakha, makes approximately ‘240-250 million dollars’ from its sales every month (Appendix B, post 17.3). This is contrasted with the Republic’s statistics from 2021 which demonstrate the lack of basic amenities, such as ‘only 45.9% of households had all amenities including water supply, plumbing, heating, hot water, gas or electric’ (Appendix B, post 18). There is

also a lack of investment in infrastructure, as the Republic floods every year when the snow melts which leaves ‘inhabitants in this big and rich resource colony of Russia drowning in melted and faecal waters’ (Appendix B, post 21). FYF emphasises that there are ‘basically no analogous [territories] in the world that are as poor and lacking in amenities despite its wealth’ (Appendix B, post 18.1).

This leads to FYF asking an important question - ‘where is our money’ (Appendix B, post 17) and gains particular prominence in the context of the cost of the war. FYF shares statistics estimating that in the first nine months of the war the government spent 6 trillion Rubles (Appendix B, post 20). FYF also highlights that the cost of two X-101 rockets - 2 billion Rubles - is equivalent to the budget the Kremlin gave the Republic to repair 37 schools (Appendix B, post 20.1). FYF raises the further challenge that it is ‘our tax money [and] revenues from our resources’ funding the war, rather than being used to improve Yakut lives’ (Appendix B, post 20).

Moreover, the tax system is seen as a major contributor to unequal economic relations because it favours the centre - taxes collected from natural resources go to the federal centre. For example, in 2022, ‘350 billion in NDPI tax’ was collected in Sakha which superseded its regional budget of 280 billion in 2023 (Appendix B, post 21). Therefore, even though Sakha is resource rich, this is exploited, which leads to environmental degradation and declining population health in the Republic, whilst ‘officials and corporations make billions’ (Appendix B, post 22). This narrative underlines the lack of economic control the Republic has over its resources and taxes, and the exploitative nature of the economic relations between the centre and Russia’s regions.

Similarly to FBF, FYF identifies economic inequality, specifically ‘poverty, low salaries, absence of workers unions and opportunities to defend workers rights’ as the drivers of men to go to war (Appendix B, post 23) under the guise of getting a ‘quick and relatively high salary’ (Appendix B, post 23.1). FYF highlights the lack of other opportunities to economically develop, as Putin and regional officials have forced ‘the population to such levels of poverty, that the Kremlin’s handout of mercenaryism is the only option of survival’ (Appendix B, post 24). Therefore, FYF highlights how men ‘without constant work and a worthy salary, deep in loans and credit’ are targeted (Appendix B, post 23.2) and fighting in the war is presented as the solution to their financial troubles.

6.5.3. FYF Political Awareness

The third way FYF raises consciousness is through spreading ‘political awareness’ by highlighting the regime’s ideology and analysing its impacts as well as reflecting on Sakha’s period of greater autonomy.

FYF unpacks the fundamental pillars of Putin's political ideology termed ‘Ruscism’ or ‘fascism with Putin’s face’ (Appendix B, post 25). According to FYF, this ideology is based on different aspects, such as the myth of great empire, revanchism and chauvinism, which have driven the war in Ukraine, and resulted in the genocide of Ukrainians and ethnocide of Indigenous and ethnic minorities in Russia (Appendix B, post 26). FYF also underlines some of the main symbols that support this ideology, such as ‘Z’ and ‘V’ (Appendix B, post 25). As part of this ideology, minorities are treated as ‘second class citizens’ (Appendix B, post 26) and have experienced ‘Russification of culture, denial of expressions of national pride and identity’ (Appendix B, post 25.1).

FYF also brings attention to other social issues which have been politicised, stigmatised and marginalised as part of the government’s ideology. For example, FYF highlights how the government has dismissed domestic abuse (Appendix B, post 27) and migrant rights (Appendix B, post 28), as well as adopted transphobic legislation (Appendix B, post 29). These examples not only bring awareness to these issues but also highlight the government’s lack of protection of minorities (Appendix B, post 29.1). By linking minority rights FYF emphasises the systematic discrimination of rights.

Furthermore, FYF commemorates Sakha’s fight for independence and its period of government sovereignty. This is important to raising political awareness because younger generations are likely not educated on this matter. FYF explains that Sakha’s national project dates back to 1922 and was reignited in 1990 when the Republic declared its sovereignty (Appendix B, post 30; 30.1). The Republic adopted one of the first constitutions in the post-Soviet space in 1992 (Appendix B, post 31) and it had the right to form its own citizenship rules, legal system, army and to control natural resources in its territory (Appendix B, post 32). It also had the ability to decide its own external relations with Russia, USSR and foreign governments (Appendix B, post 32).

FYF fondly remembers the Republic's first president, Mikhail Nikolaev, who gave the Republic its 'constitution and sovereignty and thanks to him the whole world learnt about the Republic' (Appendix B, post 33). The former president invested in education and young people and Yakut's success in different spheres such as 'IT, Yakut film, sport...[which] are the fruits of [his] work' (Appendix B, post 33.1). This strongly contrasts with Putin's rule which has reduced Sakha's sovereignty by limiting its constitution, accusing the Republic of ethnic nationalism (Appendix B, post 32.1) and 'becoming a leader among the subsidised regions waiting for handouts from Moscow' (Appendix B, post 32.2).

FYF also raises political awareness by countering propaganda about the war and spreading information about the truth of mobilisation.

FYF identifies the ways in which propaganda has adapted to the Yakut mentality in order for it to be more effective (Appendix B, post 34). FYF shares Yakut sayings, which it views as revealing of an aspect of the Yakut mentality that state propaganda can take advantage of. For example, a 'particularity of the Yakut mentality is reliance on authority figures' meaning that people who appear on TV and radio are seen as reliable and authoritative figures on the subjects they are discussing (Appendix B, post 34.1). Additionally, there is a widespread fear of being judged, specifically a fear of 'public condemnation', which is why men go to war - they do not want to go against the norm (Appendix B, post 34.2).

Furthermore, FYF counters state propaganda by spreading information about the true mobilising rates in the Republic, such as by leaking a recording from a closed meeting with Republic officials (Appendix B, post 35), as well as challenging the idea that soldiers are heroes. FYF counters the government narrative that men who have fought in the war should become a new social elite (Appendix B, post 36). FYF highlights that soldiers who have returned to the republic have engaged in violence, criminal activity and suffered from PTSD (Appendix B, post 36). FYF also shares information from Yakut soldiers who have fought in the war and who want to relay their truthful experiences. For example, one soldier explains that the war has been misrepresented by the government and it is 'criminal, monstrous and bloody' (Appendix B, post 10). Also, soldiers are lied to - this was brought to attention by a Yakut soldier who, in his last letter, conveyed that he was told he would 'serve maximum 3-6 months and that mobilised [soldiers] would not go to the frontline. I now realise how cruelly we were lied to' (Appendix B, post 38). According to FYF, there is also evidence to suggest

that army commanders commit serious violations (e.g. Appendix B, post 39). Therefore, by sharing Yakut soldiers' experiences, FYF seeks to counter state propaganda by highlighting the real experiences of Yakuts who are more likely to be trusted by people in the Republic.

6.6 FYF Negotiation

FYF uses different strategies to challenge and shift negative dominant meanings and representations of Sakha by taking back control and power over political symbols and cultural events that have been usurped by the government. FYF also seeks to change the negative representation of decolonial activists by organising and attending different conferences, as well as coordinating different resistance actions, such as protests and online marathons.

FYF negotiates by taking back control and power over political symbols and cultural events that have been usurped by the government. For example, the Yakut flag 'the main state symbol of Yakutia is being tarnished and smeared with the blood of the criminal war in Ukraine' and has been turned into 'a source of Kremlin propaganda' (Appendix B, post 40). The Republic's flag has been used to promote the war amongst Yakuts and to outwardly show the Kremlin the presence of Yakut soldiers and the Republic's support for the war (Appendix B, post 40.1).

In 2023 the government usurped one of the most important Yakut celebrations, Yhyakh. This day is for celebrating friendship, spending time with family and friends and 'connect[ing] with ancestors, feel[ing] unity with our people and hav[ing] the opportunity to feel pride in that we are Sakha' (Appendix B, post 41). This celebration has been celebrated every year apart from in 1941, due to it coinciding with Hitler's invasion of Russia (Appendix B, post 41). However, in 2023, the government usurped the celebration to make it a display of support for the war (Appendix B, post 21). FYF encouraged people to boycott the event because the government was using it to promote the war which goes against the fundamental values of the celebration (Appendix B, post 41).

FYF also seeks to change the negative perception of decolonisation and decolonial activists by participating and organising conferences, giving interviews and working with independent media. FYF can be seen as rebranding the mainstream representation and perception of decolonial activists as 'separatists' and extremists (Appendix B, post 4). For example, FYF organised two online conferences on the topic of decolonisation of Russia, which brought

together activists from different regions and covered topics such as decolonising the media and culture, and discussing forgotten history (Appendix B, post 42; 42.1). FYF also publishes different activists' understanding of decolonisation and underlines that their goals are not the collapse of the country but rather 'to have the same protections of existence as your people' (i.e. ethnic Russians) (Appendix B, post 4.1) and for Indigenous and ethnic minorities to have control and be responsible for their future (Appendix B, post 4.2). As part of this, an important aspect of negotiation has been the entry of the word decolonisation and associated terms into the 'Russian lexicon' and 'international media' to discuss the experience of Indigenous and ethnic minority communities (Appendix B, post 43).

FYF has utilised international institutions' declarations of Russia as a colonial and imperial empire to support its message of decolonisation. For example, EU institutions, such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe 'declared Russia a colonial empire which denies equal rights and self-determination to the Indigenous peoples of Russia' in July 2023 (Appendix B, post 44). Similarly, the Assembly of the Council of Europe declared the war in Ukraine as being driven by a 'neoimperial ideology' of expanding the 'Russian world' (Appendix B, post 45) and recognised that national minorities have been subjected to 'Russification' and national movements have experienced 'repression and discrimination' (appendix B, 45.1). Both of these declarations are important moments for decolonial activists because it is seen as the culmination of their work (Appendix B, post 44). Whilst it is unclear whether there is any direct correlation between FYF activists' work and these outcomes, such declarations will significantly support and legitimise FYF's, as well as other decolonial organisations, work and message.

FYF has also organised numerous protests across the US, as well as Europe, and shared photos of them on their social media (e.g. Appendix B, post 46; 47). From the photos, one can see posters in different republic languages focusing on different issues such as the war, repression and imperialism (e.g. Appendix B, post 48; 49; 50). This not only extends solidarity across different groups, but also brings visibility to Indigenous communities' perspectives, and raises awareness in Western countries that Russia is a multiethnic country made up of different nationalities and languages. These protest events are also seen as particularly important to represent those who are silenced in the country or are in jail (Appendix B, post 51).

FYF even organised two protests in Yakutsk, although the second protest in October 2022 had to be moved online (Appendix B, post 52). Both protests had a strong emphasis on women and promoting national culture and language, with the first protest adopting the form of a mass national dance called *Osuokhay* (e.g. Appendix B, post 53; 54). However, due to the dangers associated with protests, FYF organised flash mobs, which encouraged participants to publicly display anti-war positions by engaging in anonymous and everyday actions of resistance, such as anti-war graffiti or leaving papers in public (Appendix B, post 55). FYF also organised online flashmobs to bring attention to the disappearance of the activist and singer Aikhal Ammosov on December 12, 2022, titled ‘Where is Aikhal Ammosov?’ (Appendix B, post 56). This involved people taking photos with missing posters and sharing them on Instagram (e.g. Appendix B, post 56.1).

In addition to this, FYF organised an online marathon titled ‘Recovering the Names of Indigenous Peoples’ in order to ‘honour and remember our *zemliaki* and relatives that were repressed, as well as the terrifying mark political repression has left on our families’ fates and the histories of our peoples’ (Appendix B, post 57). This event took place on the same day as the ‘Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Political Repressions’ (Appendix B, post 57). This is a notable date, thus by running the marathon on the same day FYF brings wider visibility to the repressions experienced by Indigenous and ethnic minority groups.

Lastly, despite the undemocratic nature of the country’s elections, FYF organised a ‘smart voting’ campaign for the regional elections in September 2023 (Appendix B, post 58) and encouraged people to become independent observers (Appendix B, post 59). FYF argues that not participating in the elections is an ineffective strategy that is ‘demoralising’ and takes away power from people (Appendix B, post 58). Instead, FYF encourages people who are against the regime to vote for the Communist party, not for ideological reasons but rather to ‘show the government that we are NOT in support of what is happening in the country’ (Appendix B, post 58). Furthermore, FYF provided information about how to become an independent observer at the polling stations and encouraged people to sign up and ‘let us know about all the violations’ (Appendix B, post 59). Although these actions do not change the electoral outcome, they are an important way to give people a sense of power, rather than a feeling of helplessness and victimhood (Appendix B, post 58).

Therefore, based on these examples, it is evident that FYF has organised events outside and inside of the country to encourage activism and challenge negative dominant representations of Yakuts and decolonial activists more broadly.

Chapter 7: Discussion

This next section discusses the findings by linking them to the theoretical expectations, wider literature and research questions. Based on FBF's and FYF's collective identity construction processes, it finds that there is a basis to consider the potential existence of a united anti-war and decolonial movement.

7.1 Boundary

The findings support the theoretical expectation that ethnic identity plays an important role in boundary-making and challenges Giuliano and Gorenburg's (2012, p. 185) finding that ethnicity has not played a significant role in Russian society and politics since the 1990s. Both organisations emphasise the creation of interethnic solidarity based on the shared experience of being a minority within a societal and political context that privileges ethnic Russian nationalism. One key difference between the two organisations is that FBF appeals more specifically to Buryats compared to FYF. Whilst FBF references ethnic Buryat identity as evidenced by the language used, such as 'we', 'our', 'us' and '*zemliaki*' (e.g. Appendix A, post 9; 10), the organisation still underlines the importance of interethnic solidarity based on shared experiences of colonisation (Appendix A, post 6). Furthermore, FBF more strongly focuses on Buryats likely because the Republic has suffered from disproportionately high casualty rates among mobilised (Jonutyte, 2023, p. 9). Whilst Sakha has also been impacted by recruitment and mobilisation, it has not been to the same degree. Therefore, appealing specifically to Republic inhabitants is less prominent in FYF compared to FBF.

These findings differ from the nationalist movements of the 1990s discussed in section 2.3 which evoked ethnonationalist sentiments and appealed to a primordialist understanding of ethnicity which linked territory to ethnic identity. Based on the analysis of FBF and FYF, there is evidence of a shift towards building interethnic solidarity based on common interest. This is supportive of Yusupova's (2022a, p. 620; 2023, p. 51) research which found that online resistance to the 2018 language law led to the establishment of horizontal ties between and within different ethnic minority groups. This shift is likely facilitated by social media because it provides a mechanism to build horizontal ties in an increasingly repressive civil society context which limits expressions of alternative identities (Yusupova, 2022a).

In addition to this, the findings from both organisations indicate that an important part of establishing boundaries is by underlining that Indigenous and ethnic minority interests are

dismissed and in no way protected or represented in the political system. Instead, FBF and FYF see themselves as the representatives and protectors of their Republics' interests. Whilst it is hard to assess the degree of support for both organisations, this finding counters Giuliano and Gorenburg's (2012, p. 186) argument that the decline in support for nationalism in ethnic republics was partly due to the shift in power from the legislative to the executive branch. In turn republic presidents, rather than movements, were seen as the legitimate defenders of public interest (Giuliano and Gorenburg, 2012, p. 186). It appears that as the political system has become more repressive and less democratic, political officials are no longer viewed as representing the interests of the population and instead it's civil society organisations abroad playing that role. This is an interesting area that would require further research.

7.2 Consciousness

The findings are generally supportive of the theoretical expectation that both organisations would reject ethnic centred Russian nationalism by challenging Russia's imperial history and established state-minority and centre-regional relations. However, both organisations approach these areas in different manners.

7.2.1 Re-evaluation of Colonial History and Processes

Whilst both FBF and FYF reject the dominant historical colonial narrative, they focus on different time periods and utilise distinct approaches.

FBF focuses primarily on the Soviet period to reconnect with historical experience and assess the impacts of colonisation from a structural perspective. The focus on the Soviet Union is likely because it was a traumatic historical period for Buryatia as discussed in section 5.1. Some of the most difficult events pertained to the changes in territorial boundaries, removal of the word Mongolian from the Republic's official name, linguistic changes and restrictions, as well as the purging of Buryat political and cultural intellectuals (Sweet and Chakars, 2010, p. 202-203). These events fit into Tlostanova's analysis of the Bolsheviks presentation of recolonisation as decolonisation, as part of which peoples' historical, cultural, linguistic and knowledge systems were systematically erased and rewritten in line with the Soviet ideology (Tlostanova, 2022, pp. 6-11). This combined with repression meant that there were few ways for people to reconnect with indigenous practices and thinking (Tlostanova, 2022, p. 11).

Furthermore, FBF analyses the colonial experience through ideas such as ‘hierarchy’, ‘difference’ and ‘inferiority’ to understand the contemporary systemic injustices experienced by colonised peoples (Appendix A, post 24). This links to some of the ideas discussed in section 2.1, specifically that Russian and Soviet forms of colonialism and discourse had similar constructions of inferiority to Western colonialism (Tlostanova, 2012, p. 136).

Contrastingly, FYF focuses more on the conquest of Siberia, although it does reference the Soviet period. This is likely because of the widespread acceptance of the historical myth that Sakha joined Russia peacefully and voluntarily (Appendix B, post 10). Unexpectedly, the approach FYF uses to counter this myth is to highlight that the Republic had been inhabited for centuries prior to the arrival of the Moscow government colonisers (Appendix B, post 12), thus adopting a primordialist approach by linking different Indigenous Siberian peoples to the territory. FYF’s analysis of the Soviet period focuses on the violence and repression experienced by Yakuts. If this is all taken together, there is an evident trend of colonial violence and disregard for the Republic’s inhabitants’ lives, starting from the Imperial government to the current regime. FYF’s focus on the central government, unlike FBF which focuses on the structural relations of colonialism, could be seen as shaping its demand for self-determination and preference for independence. This is because FYF clearly links Sakha’s history to being subjugated under Russian rule, thus self-determination and specifically independence, is the solution to be free from that.

7.2.2 Unequal Economic Relations

The findings from this theme are also supportive of the theoretical expectation that both organisations would reject Russia’s established centre-region relations.

It is interesting that despite the very different financial situations in Sakha and Buryatia, with the latter ranking 60th in Russia’s federal subjects by GRDP per capita, compared to the former ranking 5th (Wikipedia, 2020), the framing of the issue in both republics is very similar. Both organisations attribute financial centralisation, or, in other words, the lack of control over taxes and resources in their territories, as the reason for poverty and lack of investment into local infrastructure. This convergence counters the findings discussed in section 2.3, which highlighted that there were differences in how socioeconomic grievances were presented by ethnonationalist movements in richer or poorer republics in the 1990s (Stepanov, 2000). In many respects, this is not surprising because as discussed in section 2.2,

Russia's regions have experienced the impacts of recentralisation which have centralised administrative and financial controls in the federal centre to weaken regions (Busygina, 2018, p. 60).

However, based on the findings, it is clear that inequality has become a particularly pertinent issue in the context of the war. Specifically, the cost of the war is compared to the low quality of life and lack of regional investments. Additionally, both organisations share the belief that socioeconomic inequality is the driver of disproportionate mobilisation and death rate. This not only shapes both organisations' demand for greater regional fiscal control over taxes and resources but also is a potential push factor for the formation of more widespread grievances in Russia's regions as evidenced in the 1990s and discussed in section 2.3. This is potentially an interesting area of future research as the cost of the war grows and death toll increases.

7.2.3 Political Awareness

The findings from this theme are also supportive of the theoretical expectation that both organisations would reject Russia's established centre-region and state-minority relations.

Both organisations highlight the ongoing restrictions to their Republics' governmental sovereignty. This finding is expected because it is reflective of the literature discussed in section 2.2. A key difference between the two organisations is that FBF presents these restrictions as violating Russia's federal system, whereas FYF presents them as suppressing Sakha's national project. Furthermore, FYF links this period of governmental sovereignty to the Republic's progress and development. It is also strongly associated with Sakha's first president, Nikolaev, who bargained for greater autonomy and represented the Republic in Russia and on the international stage. Therefore, the difference between the two organisations can also be viewed in light of their aims, with FBF advocating for a truly decentralised federal system based on democratic principles and FYF advocating for self-determination with a preference for independence.

Additionally, FBF and FYF counter state propaganda by raising awareness about how the government has manipulated and used Indigenous and ethnic minority culture and identity to support the war. This ties to the literature discussed in section 2.2 and illustrates how minorities have been used to support the idea of interethnic harmony and ethnic Russian-

centred patriotism (Prina, 2018, p. 1247). For both organisations this was an important aspect of their work and is evidence of one of the ways that top-down nationalism is being challenged. This is an area that could be researched further as the government has framed propaganda differently depending on the republic (see Ilyasov et al., 2024). Whilst it is interesting to see how propaganda changes between republics, it would also be worthwhile to assess its effectiveness and the ways in which it is resisted.

7.3 Negotiation

The findings from this section support the theoretical expectation that there has been a politicisation of cultural and political demands to resist dominant representations.

The politicisation of culture can be viewed as resisting top-down and ethnic Russian-centred nationalism. Both organisations promote culture to construct alternative identity expressions, although they do this in different ways. FBF highlights Buryatia's rich cultural, linguistic and religious history as well as emphasises its ties to Mongolia. On the other hand, FYF resists the government's usurpation of Yakut culture by taking back control over political symbols and cultural events. These differences are likely because of the Republics' distinct historical events discussed in chapter 5. Not only are these examples of bottom-up expressions of identity but, because these are posts on social media, they also publicly challenge and bring attention to alternative identities to dominant ethnic Russian nationalism.

Furthermore, as part of resisting negative representations, identity has been politicised. As mentioned earlier, FBF counters the perception that Buryats are the main group fighting in the war. It does this by using open sources and verified facts to challenge the false representation. FBF also underlines the importance of not singling out nationalities for war crimes prior to independent investigations and verification (Appendix A, post 56). On the other hand, FYF challenges the negative representation of decolonial activists such as by organising and attending conferences and giving interviews. This indicates that, as part of both organisations' work, an important part is publicly resisting dominant negative associations and representations.

Lastly, both organisations coordinate resistance actions to promote their aims. A key difference between the two organisations is that FBF focuses on resisting violations of the law by appealing to institutions, whereas FYF organises different protest actions, such as meetings

and online marathons. Despite these differences, these strategies contribute to the literature discussed in section 2.4 and highlight the different actions taken by bottom-up Indigenous and ethnic minorities organisations. These findings are interesting to consider in the context of both organisations being coordinated primarily in the diaspora while promoting actions both inside and outside of the country. This is an area that would be interesting to research further as a significant part of Russia's civil society has moved abroad, yet there is not much research on this.

7.4 Summary

Based on the findings, it would be fair to state that there is evidence of the possibility of the existence of a united decolonial and anti-war movement despite differences in aims and strategies. This assertion is rooted in the three overarching findings below.

Firstly, both organisations emphasise the importance of building interethnic alliances rather than promoting exclusive ethnic nationalism. This could point to the existence of a united movement because the boundary is inclusive enough that it can encapsulate other organisations that have a decolonial and anti-war stance.

Secondly, both organisations identify the same issues defining their structural positions, including Russia's colonial history and established centre-region and state-minority relations, which in turn shape what they are resisting. Although there is a difference between what both organisations see as the solutions to these issues, as discussed in section 3.2, differences do not necessarily preclude the existence of a movement with a shared collective identity.

Thirdly, although both organisations differ in the focus of their strategies, they are driven by the politicisation of culture, identity and politics.

Whilst these claims need to be substantiated by further research and comparison to other anti-war and decolonial organisations, based on these findings FBF and FYF share similar collective identity construction processes, thus indicating the possible existence of a broader united decolonial and anti-war movement despite differences in aims and strategies.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to understand whether or not it is accurate to speak of a united anti-war and decolonial movement despite organisations having different aims, strategies and understandings of what decolonisation means. To answer this question, I compared two anti-war and decolonial organisations, FBF and FYF, and employed Taylor and Whittier's (1992) framework for collective identity construction to analyse the processes through which both organisations construct their online collective identities on Instagram and how these influence each organisation's understanding of itself, its aims and strategies, as well as whether similarities and differences in this process point to the existence of a united movement or not. Furthermore, as these organisations represent new empirical phenomena that challenge established assumptions in academic literature related to the role of ethnicity in Russian politics and society, as well as the oversight of bottom-up minority expressions of identity and activism, this thesis also sought to contribute to these bodies of work.

Overall, the findings indicate that, based on FBF and FYF collective identity construction processes, it is possible to conceive of a united anti-war and decolonial movement, although this will have to be investigated further. These findings are substantiated by the important similarities both organisations share in the construction of collective identity, such as by emphasising the importance of building interethnic alliances; identifying the same issues negatively impacting their structural position; and employing strategies that, although different, are driven by the politicisation of culture, identity and politics. Furthermore, these findings contribute to academic literature by demonstrating that ethnicity does play a role in Russian politics and society by building interethnic solidarity. Moreover, the findings highlight the ways in which ethnic Russian centred nationalism is resisted by challenging imperial history and the established centre-region and state-minority relations. Additionally, the findings indicate how culture, identity and politics have been politicised despite previous resistance in ethnic republics being apolitical.

As this is an exploratory piece of research, there are several avenues for future research. Firstly, it is necessary to compare these findings to other anti-war and decolonial organisations to see what similarities and differences they share in collective identity construction processes. Secondly, it appears that republic leaders are no longer viewed as representative of the population's interests because the regime has become increasingly illiberal. In turn, civil society organisations coordinated abroad see themselves as filling this

vacuum and representing their republic's interests. From this arise many interesting questions related to how representative and effective diaspora coordinated civil society is and how they interact with the population inside the country. Lastly, whilst the findings indicate the potential existence of a united anti-war and decolonial movement, significant divisions remain concerning the vision for Russia's future. These are important debates and conversations that must occur not only within the anti-war and decolonial movement but also within the broader civil society and political context, ensuring that these organisations are included and listened to in discussions about Russia's post-war future.

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Appendix A - Free Buryatia Foundation

See attached document, it was too large to upload as part of final thesis.

Appendix B - Free Yakutia Foundation

See attached document, it was too large to upload as part of final thesis.