

NATIONALIST SAKHA WARRIORS FOR THE KREMLIN: THE CASE OF YS TYMSY

Aimar Ventsel



Abstract. Since the start of the full-scale war between Ukraine and Russia, both commentators and people who follow the war have paradoxically increasingly acknowledged the multicultural nature of Russian society. There are two non-Russian ethnic groups who are associated with the ongoing war more than others: Chechens and Buryats. Nevertheless, with approximately 200 ethnic groups, members from more or less each one are represented in the Russian armed forces. There is the popular assumption that most non-Russians in Russia oppose the war, oppose the Kremlin and are potential separatists. This chapter demonstrates that nothing can be further from the truth. This is a presentation of the analysis of Ys Tymtsy, a Sakha pro-Kremlin nationalist popular male movement. The movement is anti-immigrant, conservative, anti-Western and homophobic. This ideology helps to find common ground in the Kremlin's anti-Western conservative world view. Moreover, the concept of masculinity in the movement is rooted in a perception of the mythical Sakha warrior. This makes all members of Ys Tymtsy supporters of Putin's war to the extent that young Sakha men join the Russian army voluntarily.

Keywords: Sakha, masculinity, nationalism, Ukrainian-Russian war, non-Russian regions, migrantophobia, homophobia

1. Introduction

Since the start of the full-scale war between Ukraine and Russia, both commentators and people who follow the war have paradoxically increasingly acknowledged the multicultural nature of Russian society. If the tradition to call all inhabitants of Russia 'Russians' dates back to the Soviet period or even earlier¹, then the war has brought certain changes to the perception of Russia in the so-called Western world.² There are two non-Russian ethnic

¹ **Smith, H.** 1976. *The Russians*. New York: Quadrangle.

² As an anthropologist I find it problematic how to define a large geographical area in one expression that includes Eastern and Western Europe, the USA and Canada, Australia and Japan that are very often lumped together Under the expression "the West".

groups who are associated with the ongoing war more than others: Chechens and Buryats. The first group deserves mention because Chechen troops are a separate military entity on the Russian side, and Buryats get negative coverage because of their association with mass murders, rapes and human rights violations in Ukrainian Bucha.

The population of the Russian Federation includes nearly 200 different ethnic groups, whereas ethnic Russians make up more or less 72% of the population. The biggest non-Russian ethnic group are Tatars with more than five million members; the smallest ethnic groups consist of few dozen people or even fewer. The position of the non-Russian ethnicities in the ongoing war is ambivalent. On the one hand, these minorities are seen as victims of the Russian colonial politics that prefers to annihilate non-Russian people, preserving the lives of ethnic Russians. This point of view is cultivated both by the activists of these minorities and sympathisers abroad.³ On the other hand, non-Russians are blamed for committing atrocities, depicting them as barbarians and wild people. This is very well supported by the fact that most well-known non-Russian minorities are either Muslims (like Chechens) or Asians by appearance (Buryats)⁴. In this way, non-Russian minorities are seen as the classic 'Other': dangerous, culturally distant and alien. There is also a third view bridging the first two that one encounters very often in Estonian mainstream and social media; it is the view that Russian ethnic minorities are victims of the colonial yoke of Moscow and will soon use the crisis, caused by the war, to declare their independence from Russia. Therefore, many such commentators want to see the non-Russians of the Russian Federation as disloyal groups who juxtapose themselves in opposition to Moscow and Russians. This means that every available piece of information about the appearance of nationalist and protest movements among non-Russian minorities is, by some people at least in Estonia, hailed as the beginning of a future secession.

³ **Седярова, Е.** 2022. “В лесу связи нет, мужчины не знают, что их на войну шлют”: как в Бурятии проходит мобилизация. – BBC News, 24 сентября. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-63019983>; **Бессуднов, А.** 2022. Смертность российских военных в Украине: действительно ли этнические меньшинства погибают чаще? – BBC News, 28 октября. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-63416259>.

⁴ The most prominent advocate of this view is the Pope who stated that most atrocities were committed by 'cruel' non-Russians 'like Buryats or Chechens'. See: **Maishman, E.** 2022. Ukraine war: Russia hits out as Pope labels minority ethnic soldiers 'cruel'. – BBC News, 20 November. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63789475>.

The aim of this article/chapter is to demonstrate that such an understanding is simplistic and the nature of the nationalism of non-Russian minorities in the Russian Federation cannot and should not be seen solely as anti-Kremlin and oppositional. One example and object of study is the Sakha nationalist movement Ys Tymsy (in Sakha), currently probably the most well-known cultural and patriotic movement in the Republic of Sakha. I have been conducting field work in the Republic of Sakha since the year 2000 and have always been interested in Sakha nationalism and the quasi-statehood of the Republic of Sakha. I have been lucky enough to witness and document the development of Sakha nationalist ideas over two decades and know many leading figures either directly or indirectly. This essay is based on my field notes, discussions with different people—including cultural and political activists—and information from written sources, be it books, newspaper articles or texts from social media. In the first part of the article I will provide some larger context discussing what ethnic regional autonomy means in the Russian Federation and what is it based on. Then I will introduce the Republic of Sakha, Sakha nationalism and its nature. In the final part I will explain the logic behind the anti-Western and conservative nature of Ys Tymsy.

2. Regional autonomy in the Russian Federation

According to the constitution the Russian Federation is a multi-ethnic state and, indeed, the Russian population consists of roughly 200 various ethnicities. Looking at the last 2021 census in an overall population of circa 147 million, Russians represent roughly 72%⁵. Other ethnic groups enjoy various degrees of cultural and administrative autonomy. First of all, these groups must be recognised as indigenous minorities, therefore non-indigenous groups like Uzbeks or Kazakhs do not have such institutionalised autonomy. The history of that politics goes back to Soviet era Leninist ‘national politics’ which meant that all ethnic groups of Soviet Russia had the right to develop their culture and language⁶. Depending on their size, indigenous non-Russian

⁵ Among the analytics one can encounter opinions on whether Russia is a multinational state or a one nation state with multiple ethnic minorities. There are arguments supporting both opinions, but this discussion is beyond the scope of this article.

⁶ **Hirsch, F.** 1997. The Soviet Union as a Work-in-Progress: Ethnographers and the Category Nationality in the 1926, 1937, and 1939 Censuses. – *Slavic Review*, Vol. 56, No. 2, pp. 250–278; **Slezkine, Y.** 1994. The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism. – *Slavic Review*, Vol. 53, No. 2, pp. 414–452.

groups received their administrative units within Soviet republics. Smaller groups had ‘national villages’ whereas bigger groups received territories called Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics. In between were ‘national’ oblasts, rayons (districts) and so forth. This policy was not without controversy, especially when the titular ethnic group was a minority in its territory (like Karelians) or a significant number of the group lived outside of ‘their’ administrative units (like Tatars or Buryats). Moreover, members of other ethnic groups very often also lived on the territory of the titular group. This policy was rooted in the Marxist ideology that stated the ethnic group must have its distinctive culture, economy and territory. This doctrine partially resulted in most ethnic groups in the Soviet Union beginning to view certain territories as their homelands where they must have exclusive rights and decision-making power⁷.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 it also caused changes in the status and position of indigenous Russian minorities, at least in some cases. Former autonomous republics declared what they called sovereignty and changed their names. In this way, the Republics of Sakha, Tatarstan and Khakassia appeared. In total, Russia suddenly contained 22 republics, four ‘national’ autonomous okrugs, and one such oblast. Due the fact that the Russian president Yeltsin leaned heavily on regions in his power struggle with the last Soviet leader Gorbachev, he endorsed them to “take as much sovereignty as you can swallow” before the collapse of the Soviet Union. One expression of “taking sovereignty” was what was called “the parade of sovereignties” in the abovementioned sovereignty declarations. Without going into detail, various Russian regions pursued their own starkly autonomous internal and even foreign policies⁸. One part of these policies was the endorsement of non-Russian language education and support for indigenous cultures. In this way, several republics established a governance mode that can be called a hidden ethnocracy where key political positions were dominated by the titular ethnic group. When Putin came to power as president in March 2000, one of the first things he started was to roll back regional autonomies. This caused

⁷ **Anderson, D. G.; Alymov, S. S.; Arzyutov, D. V.** 2019. Grounding Etnos Theory: An Introduction. – Anderson, D. G.; Alymov, S. S.; Arzyutov, D. V. (Eds.). *Life Histories of Etnos Theory in Russia and Beyond*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers/Lightning Source for Open Book Publishers, pp. 1–20. [Anderson et al. 2019]

⁸ **Petrov, N.** 2002. Seven Faces of Putin’s Russia: Federal Districts as the New Level of State – Territorial Composition. – *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 33(1), pp. 73–91; **Petrov, N.** 2010. Regional Governors under Dual Power of Medvedev and Putin. – *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, Vol. 26(2), pp. 276–305.

several backlashes and protests; the last events took place in 2019 when the compulsory learning of non-Russian regional languages was declared illegal.

3. The Republic of Sakha

The Republic of Sakha is located in the Russian Far East and is part of the Far Eastern Federal District. At the same time, the republic is the largest territorial unit of the Russian Federation with slightly more than 3 million square kilometres. The territory is thinly populated, however; with fewer than one million inhabitants, the Republic of Sakha has fewer inhabitants per square kilometre than most territorial units of the Russian Federation. The Republic of Sakha is part of the so-called national republics of Russia or territories that bear the name of a non-Russian ethnic group—in this case the Sakha. The Republic of Sakha is economically important to Russia, producing nearly 100% of Russian diamonds but also having vast gold, oil, natural gas, coal and timber reserves. Ethnically, Turkic-speaking Sakha represent slightly more than half of the population of the republic, whereas Russians are the second biggest group. Statistically, the Republic of Sakha houses members from almost all former Soviet Union states, but roughly informally the population is divided between indigenous and immigrant populations. The indigenous population also consists of five smaller indigenous groups including the Dolgan, Yukhagir and Evenki.

The Sakha, who are more known as their Russian ethnonym Yakut, are a Turkic-speaking ethnic group in the Russian Far East who numbers 478,409 according to the last census. Traditionally, the Sakha have been the northernmost cattle breeders of Eurasia who in medieval times formed a semi-feudal society with nobles (*toyon*) on top and subordinated common people as their followers. Their religion has always been animism merged with shamanism, and in the 19th century they also added Russian Orthodoxy into the mix. Until the Soviet industrialisation of the 1950s, the Sakha were a majority in the region; with the migration of people from other parts of the USSR, they became a minority, only to become a small minority in the 2010s.

The Sakha people have a strong sense of ethnic/national identity that was also noticed by foreign visitors in the Soviet era⁹. In fact, this goes back to Tsarist times when the Sakha people were mediators between the Tsarist official and local multi-ethnic populations. Mainly, Sakha nobles collected

⁹ Mowat, F. 1970. *The Siberians*. London: Heinemann.

taxes and organised transport for Russians. With the appearance of educated Sakha intellectuals by the end of the 19th century and the creation of the Sakha alphabet and literature, the national consciousness of the Sakha people increased. When a famous Sakha intellectual Gavril Ksenofontov wrote the book *Uurankhai* in 1937¹⁰ it became one of the pillars of the Sakha national myth. This myth is based on perceptions of the Sakha as mystical warriors who in the past conquered, depending on who you ask, either most of Siberia or 'only' the lands that are inhabited by them today. With this book there also emerged the concept of a Sakha homeland *Sakha sire*, a land of Sakha that belonged to them and where the Sakha are supposed to have the privilege of determining their own destiny. This unofficial ethnic elitism continued in the Soviet times when Sakha Communists formed local political upper echelons and Russians dominated the mining industry¹¹ in what later became officially known as the Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within the Russian FSSR¹². In fact, the Sakha ethnic consciousness was strengthened by Soviet Marxist ideology. In the Marxist historical-materialist ethnography (the Soviet version of ethnology/anthropology) and theory of *ethnos*, every ethnic group must have had their own distinct culture and specified territory¹³. Soviet education and cultural policy only underlined the idea that Sakha people have an exclusive bond and right to their homeland. These sentiments became stronger when the YASSR declared its sovereignty in 1991 as the Republic of Sakha. The Sakha language became a 'state language' alongside Russian and the Sakha people were very clever to use Yeltsin era laws for the cultural autonomy of non-Russian people¹⁴. This helped the Sakha to establish schools where the main teaching language was Sakha and enforce a cultural policy that often prioritised everything Sakha. There exists certain anecdotal evidence that some proportion of the Sakha people, including the political and cultural elite, dreamed of full independence but the political elite was cautious enough to limit itself to wide economic and political autonomy.

¹⁰ **Ксенофонтов, Г. В.** 1992. Ууранхай-Сахалар. Национальное издательство Республики Саха (Якутия).

¹¹ This kind of unofficial ethnic divide was very usual in Soviet regions and republics with a high degree of industrialisation, be it Kazakhstan or Tatarstan.

¹² Federal Soviet Socialist Republic.

¹³ **Anderson et al.** 2019.

¹⁴ **Баишева, С. М.; Донской, Р. И.; Константинова, Т. Н.; Сосин, П. В.; Тобуков, П. З.; Томаска, А. Г.** 2012. Этносоциальная адаптация коренных малочисленных народов Севера Республики Саха (Якутия). Новосибирск: Наука.

When Putin became the President of Russia in 2000 he immediately began to roll back these liberties of various regions. It is noteworthy that some steps of the federal government were met with contempt and even protests. For instance, in 2006 when a huge share of diamond mining profits that went to the republican budget were channelled into the federal budget, it brought some people out into the streets.

In order to understand the movement of Ys Tymsy one should also have some knowledge of Sakha nationalism. First of all, as cattle breeders who loved to believe in the history of a glorious warrior past and great *toyons*, the Sakha people in general and intellectuals in particular had and still have prejudices against indigenous minorities who have traditionally been nomadic reindeer herders and hunters. At the same time, most Sakha felt under pressure and that their culture was being endangered by increasing Soviet era migration, especially by Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians. Tensions between the Sakha and incomers grew until youth protests took place in 1980 against Sovietisation and Russification. The second wave of protests broke out in 1986 when Sakha students in Yakutsk had conflicts with Russian youths at the university's skating rink. These conflicts ended in fistfights and were followed by a protest march in the city centre. These protests were cracked down on by local authorities which were dominated by ethnic Sakha.¹⁵ When I started my fieldwork in the region in 2000 relations between Russians and Sakha were tense; youth clubs and bars in particular were places of ethnic clashes¹⁶. In 2005 the situation had calmed down but in time there rose negative sentiments toward migrants from Central Asia, Caucasus and Russian North Caucasian regions like Dagestan. The influx of migrants grew due to ethnic clashes and a civil war in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in the 2000s.

¹⁵ See **Argounova-Low, T.** 2007b. Nationalism: Enemies and Scapegoats. – *Sibirica*, Vol. 6(1), pp. 30–58; **Argounova-Low, T.** 2012. The Politics of Nationalism in the Republic of Sakha (Northeastern Siberia) 1900–2000. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen.

¹⁶ **Ventsel, A.** 2004. Sakha Pop Music and Ethnicity. – Kasten, E. (ed.). *Properties of Culture – Culture as Property. Pathways to reform in Post-Soviet Siberia*, Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, pp. 67–85; **Ventsel, A.** 2012. Religion and Ethnic Identity: Sakha Shamanic Rock. – *Forschungen zur Anthropologie und Religionsgeschichte*, Vol. 43, pp. 247–259; **Ventsel, A.** 2005. Popmuusika, etniline identiteet ja traditsioon Jakuutias (Pop music, ethnic identity and tradition in Sakha (Yakutia)). – *Pärimusmuusikast popmuusikani. Töid etnomusikoloogialt (From traditional to pop music. Works of ethnomusicology)*, Vol. 3. Tartu: Eesti Kirjandusmuuseumi etnomusikoloogia osakond, pp. 157–170.

4. Sakha masculinity, conservatism and nationalism: the coming of Ys Tymsy

When I started my fieldwork in the Republic of Sakha I was amazed by Sakha pop culture. In my first years I discovered Sakha ethnorock, dance pop and hiphop. Years later I understood that the reception to different facets of pop culture was ambivalent. Certain forms of music (like ethnorock) or national theatre were seen as a continuation of the Sakha cultural and intellectual tradition in a modern configuration, whereas other forms were seen as ‘alien’.¹⁷ In certain conservative circles, hiphop and some genres of pop music were viewed as a breach of Sakha norms, culture and world view¹⁸. More conservative Sakha, not only the old ones, did not like consumerism and the “cult of Western goods”. They also did not like the sex appeal and glamour linked to such pop culture. Most of what such people did not like was the disconnectedness of certain youth culture genres with rural Sakha culture. When ethnorock and older pop artists connected their music with the rural i.e. traditional Sakha culture by using traditional music instruments and singing about the village or family, young culture rejected it all and manifested itself as an urban culture¹⁹.

The conflict around pop music had broader demographic, cultural and also political roots. When the Soviet Union collapsed and unemployment in villages increased, people from villages started to move to cities, especially

¹⁷ **Ventsel, A.; Peers, E.** 2017. Rapping the changes in north-east Siberia: hip-hop, urbanization, and Sakha ethnicity. – Miszczyński, M. (ed.). *Hip-Hop from the East of Europe*. Indiana University Press, pp. 228–242.

¹⁸ One important music producer described to me in 2007 the appearing hiphop and r’n'b music as “soulless” and compared it to ethnorock that he produced because it was “for my soul”. A famous theatre director and long-time minister of culture wrote a newspaper article where he dismisses hiphop as alien music whose fashion (baggy trousers, hooded sweaters) is not suited to Sakha who have “short legs and sturdy bodies” in contrast to Afro-Americans. He claimed that hiphop fashion is also not suitable for the harsh Arctic climate. See: **Ventsel, A.** 2004. *Sakha Pop Music and Ethnicity*. – Kasten, E. (ed.). *Properties of Culture – Culture as Property. Pathways to reform in Post-Soviet Siberia*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, pp. 67–85.; **Peers, E.; Ventsel, A.; Sidorova, L.** 2020. *Voices of the forests, voices of the streets: popular music and modernist transformation in Sakha (Yakutia), Northeast Siberia*. – Koivurova, T.; Broderstad, E. G.; Cambou, D.; Dorrough, D.; Stammler, F. (eds.). *Routledge Handbook of Indigenous Peoples in the Arctic*. Routledge, pp. 76–91.

¹⁹ **Ventsel, A.; Peers, E.** 2017. Rapping the changes in north-east Siberia: hip-hop, urbanization, and Sakha ethnicity. – Miszczyński, M. (ed.). *Hip-Hop from the East of Europe*. Indiana University Press, pp. 228–242.

to Yakutsk, seeking work and income²⁰. Among others, this was a collision of two worlds. In those times urban Sakha (*kuorat sakhalar* in Sakha) were mainly Russian speakers who viewed their Sakha-speaking country relatives as backward people. Indeed, most villagers spoke Russian with a thick Sakha accent. They more often than not had insufficient education to find highly-paid jobs and seemingly had difficulties in adapting to an urban environment. There were also problems with criminal village youth in the cities²¹. At the same time, many Sakha intellectuals were worried about the loss of language and seeming loss of cultural knowledge among the urban Sakha. Nevertheless, over decades the village people established themselves in cities. As many of them moved to high political and economic positions, demand for Sakha schools grew and the Sakha language became more widespread. Alongside that appeared a certain Sakhanisation of the urban space. Some symbols related to the Sakha identity, like *serge* or a kind of ritual pole, were erected in Yakutsk central squares. Advertisement agencies started to use motifs from traditional Sakha culture in their advertisements, and the number of take-aways and restaurants serving Sakha food grew in Yakutsk and other cities. I noticed when we were in cafes or restaurants and the serving staff was Sakha that my Russian-speaking Sakha friends automatically switched to the Sakha language, whereas earlier they had placed their orders in Russian.

After 2010 there was an obvious growth in prosperity in the Republic of Sakha. As mentioned above, the Russian-Sakha conflicts were forgotten, the Sakhanisation of the urban space was in full swing and contemporary Sakha culture—especially pop music and cinema—was becoming better and more popular every year. In Yakutsk there was a construction boom with new shops and houses, improved sanitation and roads also appearing in the countryside. At the same time, I noticed an ongoing Sakha cultural revival, especially among young people. It is hard to say whether traditional customs were being brought into the city with the arrivals of more traditional and conservative village Sakha or if were there other reasons, but suddenly certain Sakha traditional beliefs and customs—especially various blessings and

²⁰ **Argounova-Low, T.** 2007a. Close Relatives and Outsiders: Village People in the City of Yakutsk, Siberia. – Arctic Anthropology, Vol. 44(1), pp. 51–61.

²¹ **Ventsel, A.** 2011. Elitarisation and lumpenisation of Sakha language. Education in social, cultural and political context. – А. В. Воронцов (ред). Социальная стратегия российской системы образования. [Social strategy of Russian educational system] Материалы международной научной конференции – Третьих Санкт-Петербургских социологических чтений 14–15 апреля 2011 г. Санкт-Петербург: Издательство РГПУ им. А. И. Герцена, с. 429–431.

sacrifice rituals—were in wider everyday use. This was accompanied by the appearance of various religious leaders who practiced their own way of Sakha traditional customs. The traditional Sakha religion is a loose combination of shamanism and animism, and in around 2013 men and women appeared all over the republic building their own small temples and offering blessings and healing ceremonies, sometimes for money but sometimes not. Some such religious leaders were well-known in the whole republic, while some had only local importance. The platform for such retraditionalisation was also provided by new Sakha language journals like *Kisteleng Kyys* that informed readers about the traditional Sakha calendar, customs, important intellectuals and, last but not least, folkloristic quasi-religious events.

This is also the time when I first heard about a movement called *Uurankhai*. It was in 2013 when I heard rumours about a sports club that sounded like a patriotic Sakha movement in disguise. *Uuraakhai* could be described as an anti-colonial, conservative, masculine group who promoted abstinence from alcohol, martial arts and republican patriotism. They were quite controversial because some of my friends described them as nationalists, and some as a harmless sports club promoting a healthy way of life. The club gained some attention when they gathered some 500 supporters to conduct an anti-alcohol march through the inner city of Yakutsk in 2013. Moreover, they also organised a traditional Sakha round dance, *osuokhai*, in Yakutsk²². To stress their patriotic stance, the group organised a flash mob on the day of the republic of Sakha where a huge number of sharply-dressed men with the flags of the republic organised a quick gathering, only to escape in expensive cars before law enforcement arrived. This action also demonstrated one feature of the movement: its supporters were mainly sporty, wealthy men. Unfortunately for *Uurankhai*, 2014 started with the Russian invasion in Ukraine and therefore the Russian security services started to pay more attention to organisations they defined as extremists or separatists. In mid-2014 the group just faded away. I saw one interview with one of the *Uurankhai* leaders in a Sakha neo-traditionalist journal where he emphasised the importance of knowing traditional Sakha culture to maintain the identity of a “Sakha nation”, but

²² The Sakha round dance *osuokhai* is a very important part of the Sakha tradition. Originally being a ceremonial dance for spiritual purposes, it has taken different meanings over the course of history. Not only is *osuokhai* one cornerstone of Sakha identity symbols, the all-male *osuokhai* has become a sign of Sakha warrior masculinity. See: **Tarasova, Z.** 2021, All-Male Warrior Dances and Men's Groups Coping with the Decline of Manhood and Immigration in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia). – *Sibirica*, Vol. 20, No. 2, Summer, pp. 1–26. [**Tarasova** 2021]

otherwise the movement disappeared. The only remnants of the group to persist were stickers with the Uurankhai logo I occasionally saw on expensive jeeps.

Uurankhai was to some extent an exclusivist group. First of all, it attracted men who were interested in sports, training and martial arts. As mentioned above, it seems that its followers were from rather wealthy backgrounds. Nevertheless, Uurankhai set a benchmark showing that it is possible to organise a nationalist movement focused on a conservative concept of Sakha identity and culture. The bottom line of Uurankhai's activities was its opposition to the official republic's political elite who, for many Sakha people, are too loyal to Moscow and forget what they believed to be the interests of the republic. This includes the 'loss of diamonds', the influx of migrants from Central Asia and North Caucasus, the influence of Western culture and neglect of the preservation of the Sakha tradition and language.

In my last visit to the Republic of Sakha in the pre-COVID period I met my old acquaintance, sociologist Yury Zhegusov, who told me that there exists a discussion club where Sakha men gather to "discuss the future of the Sakha nation". He told me that the men who participate in these meetings are from different social backgrounds "from ex-convicts to entrepreneurs and scholars" and the issue that unites them all is the future of the Sakha people. After that, I heard rumours about a new growing conservative Sakha movement led by Yury. In March 2019 anti-migrant pogroms broke out in Yakutsk. What sparked these events off was the alleged rape of a Sakha girl by a migrant man. In Yakutsk there have been spontaneous anti-migrant protests before and at least one was incited by a similarly alleged rape case. This time it turned violent. Mostly young Sakha men looted fast food takeaways and fruit and vegetable kiosks run by migrants mainly from Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaidjan. On the next day of the pogrom the Yakutsk city came to a partial standstill. Migrant workers working as bus or taxi drivers were afraid to come to work and the city transport was disturbed. Many shops and eateries remained closed as well. To calm down the situation the city's government organised a huge meeting in one of the sports halls where thousands of Sakha men of various ages turned up. After heated discussions and shouting, city officials promised to enforce stronger controls on migrants and deport those who were working without the necessary documentation or residency permits. The promised checks followed and there were reports of fines and deportations of migrants. It is hard to say what role Ys Tymsy played in these events, but the anti-migrant agenda, as explained below, is part of the movement's ideology and some involvement cannot be excluded.

What is more important is that anti-migrant sentiments among the Sakha, especially men, have grown to the degree where they were ready to engage in violent actions. Habeck (2023)²³ links the birth of Ys Tymsy with the post-Soviet “crisis of masculinity” especially among the Sakha and, indeed, masculinity plays great role in what Ys Tymsy is and what the grounds are for anti-migrant sentiment in the republic. To start with the latter, the influx of young migrant men and their alleged popularity among Sakha girls has disturbed Sakha men for as long as I can remember. This issue has come up in discussions many times and is often linked with the belief that migrants are immoral criminals who seduce and rape underage girls. On the other hand, as Tarasova (2021)²⁴ has shown, there is also the belief that Muslim migrants are “more powerful”, i.e. trustworthy, caring and reliable, due the fact that they are religious, do not drink and can work hard. Therefore, one can find concerns in the republic that Sakha women prefer to marry Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Tajik men. However, the problems with fragile masculinity are broader, as Habeck (2023) rightfully points out. Literature on the “crisis of masculinity” emphasises that the collapse of the Soviet Union also caused a rupture in gender roles and social hierarchies²⁵. In the Soviet era men were the main breadwinners, then in many cases in the 1990s or later women became the main earners of the household. The collapse of the Soviet planned agriculture resulted in increasing migration from villages to cities, especially to Yakutsk. Village youths in particular arrived in cities to study and find work. Apart from contributing to the rise of contemporary Sakha club culture, these young people often encountered prejudice from their Russian-speaking urban compatriots who often associated the Sakha language and village conservatism with backwardness. Nevertheless, when talking about masculinity, the Russian Arctic has been a place where male toughness has been something of a cult for a long time. The Soviet and post-Soviet narrative of the industrial mastering (*osvienie*) of the North included lore about how tough men worked in a “harsh climate” establishing settlements, building roads and working in mines. All this included heavy physical work outdoors in one of the coldest regions of the world. In the mid-2000s such jobs were in decline, often being

²³ **Habeck, J. O.** 2023. Masculinity and Patriotism in Sakha (Yakutia) in the Context of Remilitarisation and Partial Mobilisation in Russia. – Northern Indigenous Cultures and Gender. The Proceedings of the 36th International Abashiri Symposium. The Association for the Promotion of Northern Cultures, pp. 49–57. [**Habeck** 2023]

²⁴ **Tarasova** 2021.

²⁵ **Ashwin, S.; Lytkina, T.** 2004. Men in Crisis in Russia: The Role of Domestic Marginalization. – Gender & Society, Vol. 18(2), pp. 189–206.

replaced with office work. Additionally, the Sakha are almost obsessed with sports that emphasise toughness and physical power, but also one's ability to control the body²⁶. Martial arts and boxing have been very popular in the region, also including "Sakha national sport arts" like lifting a heavy stone or wrestling. The shift to highly-skilled office jobs introduced what scholars call "soft masculinity"²⁷ or a perception that dismissed the cult of the heavily-trained powerful male body who earns his income through heavy physical work. That shift has also caused complaints among more conservative Sakha (men) that "boys these days have no masculinity"²⁸. The rise of Ys Tymsy derives from complex reasons that are linked in one way or another to a conservative view of Sakha identity and nationhood. Members and supporters of the movement are worried that the Sakha people might lose control of their homeland and that their conservative understanding of Sakha culture and tradition (i.e. social and gender hierarchies, rootedness to traditional spirituality and the rural Sakha lifestyle) are in danger.

Summing up Ys Tymsy's ideology, it is more focused on Sakha spirituality than the male body and sports²⁹. This is probably one reason why it attracts a more and more diverse following than Uurankhai. Sakha spirituality is expressed in a communal male *algys* (traditional blessing ceremony) in Yakutsk's House of *Algys* which was established in 2015 as a place for the revitalisation of Sakha traditional culture. This is a place where concerts of traditional Sakha folk music take place as well as various spiritual ceremonies led by different *algysyt* and *emchit*.³⁰ On Ys Tymsy's Instagram page there are photos of communal male *algys* ceremonies in the House of *Algys*. There are also photos of gatherings with old, respected Sakha cultural figures like actors, scholars and artists. These meetings aim to transfer cultural norms and

²⁶ **Ventsel, A.** 2018. Blurring Masculinities in the Republic of Sakha, Russia. – *Polar Geography*, Vol. 41(3), pp. 198–216. [Ventsel 2018]

²⁷ **Heath, M.** 2003. Soft-Boiled Masculinity: Renegotiating Gender and Racial Ideologies in the Promise Keepers Movement. – *Gender & Society*, Vol. 17(3), pp. 423–444.

²⁸ Personal communication. See also **Ventsel** 2018.

²⁹ See **Tarasova** 2021.

³⁰ In the Sakha spiritual tradition there exist different kinds of spiritual leaders. At the top is *oiyn* (shaman) that is a very exclusive category because it needs some genealogical ancestry and wide recognition as such. In Siberian tradition, the shaman communicates with spirits and to a certain extent controls them. The more powerful the shaman is, the more powerful the spirits are that he can control. Less demanding is to be either *algysyt* or *emchit*. The former is a person who conducts rituals of blessings and is not able to control spirits; the latter can be translated as 'healer' but also is able to communicate with the spiritual world and ask for spirits' help in the healing process.

knowledge to younger generations. One very important part of Ys Tymśy's agenda is to emphasise family solidarity and rootedness in Sakha traditions. Photos of communal meals where a Sakha family eats traditional Sakha food are also very popular. Knowing Yuri Zhegusov personally, I would argue that the movement is also shaped by his ideas. A few years back Zhegusov used to be an activist of an environmentalist movement that fought for the ecology of the Lena River, the biggest and most important river of the Republic of Sakha³¹. In his understanding—not uncommon among other activists—this was not just a struggle for ecology but a struggle for the preservation of the Sakha homeland, i.e. there was a strong patriotic and nationalist imperative.

Nevertheless, central to his political activity and views is his anti-alcohol campaign. This is where he has personally very firm and sometimes not-to-be-discussed ideas. The problem, however, is larger than one person's personal agenda. The Russian Arctic, and the Arctic in general, is notorious for its unhealthy relationship with alcohol. Contrary to widespread legends and beliefs, alcohol abuse was until recently a general problem for inhabitants of the Arctic, including the Russian Arctic. I have briefly described elsewhere³² that the widespread belief that Asians are genetically especially vulnerable to the harm caused by alcohol abuse is not medically proven. Nevertheless, this approach was and still is popular among Sakha intellectuals, but not only. Alcohol is seen as “culturally alien” because, as the popular narrative says, “Sakha did not drink vodka before the Russians came. Our traditional beverage is *kumys* (fermented mare milk)”. Therefore, in many cases, alcohol is seen as a tool of Russian colonialism, something that poses a grave threat to Sakha identity and culture. Yuri is the epitomisation of these beliefs. His personal, professional and political career has been a crusade against alcohol use among the Sakha and in the Republic of Sakha in general³³. Among the Sakha people, especially among the intellectuals, there have been several attempts to limit

³¹ **Balzer, M. M.** 2022. *Galvanizing Nostalgia?: Indigeneity and Sovereignty in Siberia*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, p. 43.

³² **Ventsel, A.** 2005. *Reindeer, Rodina and Reciprocity. Kinship and property relations in a Siberian village*. – *Halle Studies in the Anthropology of Eurasia*. LIT Verlag: Münster, p. 289.

³³ As a sociologist, Zhegusov, among others, conducted research on alcohol use in the republic. He tends to compare the health and other data of the Republic of Sakha with the Muslim regions of the Russian Federation to show that most problems of the Sakha are related to high alcohol use. He also ran for the position of Yakutsk mayor where an important part of his programme was strictly limiting the sale of alcohol in the Republic of Sakha. Zhegusov currently works in the republican ministry of health where he promotes and supports the movement of so-called ‘dry villages’ or villages that have declared themselves ‘alcohol free’ and has forbidden the sale of alcohol on their territory. I have met people who are very critical of Zhegusov's data on the

alcohol use so the idea is not alien³⁴. Uraankhai sported total abstinence, as do some Sakha intellectuals. Nevertheless, alcohol consumption and abstinence is a highly politicised and controversial issue among the Sakha, as shown by Peers and Kolodeznikov (2015).³⁵ Members of Ys Tymsy demonstratively distance themselves from alcohol consumption, posting pictures on social media of events like family gatherings, New Year's Eve and so on, where they prefer drinking *kymys* or *mors* (cranberry juice mixed with water) to celebrating with alcohol as people traditionally do in Russia.

This brief focus on Zhegusov's personality and ideas does not mean that he was the sole initiator of Ys Tymsy, but his ideas have resonated with a huge number of people. Currently, Habeck argues that Ys Tymsy has some 2000 members but the number of supporters is much bigger.³⁶ It is difficult to say how important socially and politically Ys Tymsy is now. Some of my Sakha colleagues who live and work in the West dismiss the movement as a small and insignificant interest group. On the other hand, people I am still in contact with in Yakutsk have told me that this is "The movement" or the most important non-governmental initiative in the Republic of Sakha "because Ys Tymsy is all about the Sakha and Sakha culture".

When the Ukrainian-Russian war broke out, Ys Tymsy joined the ranks of supporters of President Putin and the war. Ys Tymsy joined a big pro-war rally in Yakutsk where another all-male *osuokhai* took place³⁷. As far as I know, there were more all-male *osuokhai* dances including a dance for conscripts. This pro-war stance becomes very clear on the movement's Instagram page. There are videoclips of pro-war *algys*, ceremonies, reports of Sakha soldiers who have committed "heroic deeds in defence of the homeland", and videoclips of Sakha conscripts serving with Russian troops fighting in Ukraine. These are group videos in which soldiers send greetings home while holding the flag of the Republic of Sakha. One can also see a video of a Sakha soldier performing an *algys* ceremony in Ukraine, asking for the

success of the 'dry village' movement, arguing that he is attempting to show that this movement is more successful than it is.

³⁴ Zhegusov once said that in the late 1980s there existed a movement of "cultural drinking" where a group of intellectuals wished to demonstrate personally that one can enjoy alcohol without getting completely drunk. When I asked him what happened to these people, he answered grimly "*Oni napilis!*" [They ended up as alcoholics!]

³⁵ Peers, E.; Kolodeznikov, S. 2015. How to enjoy a teetotal all-night party: Abstinence and identity at the Sakha people's Yhyakh. – Folklore, Vol. 61, pp. 117–134.

³⁶ Habeck 2023, p. 45.

³⁷ See also Habeck 2023.

blessings of the Russian army. Zhegusov has taken a back seat now and the public face of the movement is David Arkhan whose videoclips show how he visits the Donetsk Peoples Republic, meets his old Soviet Army friend there and promises help to local people. There are photos of how Arkhan brought some children from the DNR to a children's camp in Tuapse, a resort on the Russian Black Sea coast. One can also see series of videos of how in Yakutsk the members of Ys Tymsy erect three *serge*-poles and hold an *algys*-ceremony to support Sakha conscripts. The last video shows a group of conscripts with the republic's flag in front of serge-poles shouting "For the Sakha homeland! *Urui aikhal!*" This last phrase is considered to be a war cry of ancient Sakha nomadic warriors. Moreover, on the account one can see photos and videos of meetings with children organised by members of Ys Tymsy in order to "educate children patriotically", some promotion of sports and Sakha traditions, and some other videos condemning homosexuality. In short, today Ys Tymsy is quite a standard pro-Kremlin 'patriotic' militant movement the like of which exists in Russia everywhere. The only difference is that members of Ys Tymsy are not Russians but Sakha.

5. Conclusion and discussion

Ys Tymsy is a pro-Kremlin Sakha nationalist male movement. I believe that every Asian has encountered racism in Russia, along with marginalisation and discrimination. The Sakha people have also experienced economic colonialism from the federal centre that has claimed income from the rich natural resources of the region. Nevertheless, members of the movement do not support the anti-colonial agenda but see themselves as Russian patriots who support President Putin's policy unconditionally. At first glance, this seems to be illogical but only at first.

Ys Tymsy is a paleoconservative movement that puts great value in maintaining what they understand as Sakha traditions. It must be mentioned that many Russian citizens see their state and president as guardians of the "common sense" values that are nearly lost in the decadent West. In Russian public awareness there exists a dichotomy, powered by the state-controlled media, that the West is overwhelmed by homosexuals and feminists, and that the pillars of "traditional values" are either shaking or have already been destroyed there. Sakha conservatives do not wish these values to spread over to their country, interpreting their local youths' affinity for Western pop culture as a conflict between two worlds. Some scholars have described the rise of militant conservative movements as a sign of a "crisis of masculinity". Without

doubt, masculinity plays a very important role in the appearance of Ys Tymsy. There is the fear that adoption of Western consumer and pop culture makes young Sakha men “soft” and effeminate. In fact, being patriots of the Sakha country and being proud of its development and increasing living standards, supporters of Ys Tymsy refuse to acknowledge that it is urbanisation, technological development and rising incomes that are changing lifestyles, not Western pop culture. On the other hand, joining the army and fighting in Ukraine offers to young Sakha men the chance to live up to the historical myth of the ancient Sakha warrior being cultivated not only by intellectuals but also by film-makers, musicians and painters. One of the founding myths of contemporary Russia is based on the Great Victory in the Great Patriotic War, as it is called in Russia, when in World War II it was Russia who “saved the world from fascism”, not the allied forces or all the people of the Soviet Union. Participating in the current Ukrainian-Russian war offers an opportunity to link with that glorious past, view oneself as a ‘saviour’, in this case of Russian people and traditional values. War is also an opportunity to prove one’s manliness and toughness, directly related to perceptions of traditional and conservative masculinity. However, we cannot reduce everything to issues related to masculinity. Having conducted field research among the Sakha, I have personally witnessed the widespread belief that the Sakha nation, identity and culture is in danger through the influx of Western culture where more and more young people are being affected by new fashions, music and films. It is paradoxical that in the early 1980s the appearance of Sakha ethnorock was viewed as a sign of the modernisation of Sakha culture, while the adoption of hip-hop and electronic music is seen by the same people as a sign of the loss of cultural integrity. The reaction to this is to support Kremlin politics which periodically announce attempts to limit the spread of Western liberalism and pop culture in Russia. Researchers who study indigenous Russian people ignore the fact that there exists racism among people like the Sakha, Buryats or Khakassians—racism that is directed towards Central Asian people and the Chinese. It also seems that people who advocate separatism among the non-Russian people of the Russian Federation do underestimate the emotional affiliation these people have with the Russian state. Non-Russian citizens of Russia view the Russian Federation as their motherland (*Rodina* in Russian) with the feeling that they must protect it. Therefore, given the existence of a history that extends over centuries of being part of Russia, strengthened by narratives of “conquering fascism together”, various ethnic groups in Russia do strongly identify themselves with the Russian Federation to an extent that is sometimes little understood.

Nevertheless, there is one aspect that current and future students of similar movements probably ignore: the patriotism of Ys Tymsy is sincere and the Sakha people are inhabitants and citizens of the Russian Federation. Being to a large extent influenced by state propaganda, many of them believe that their homeland is being attacked and must be defended. It must be considered that state patriotism is indoctrinated into them starting from kindergarten, then in school, on television and in speeches from public figures, and exists in the upper echelons of both Russia and the Republic of Sakha. The non-Russian people of Russia tend not to draw a sharp line between Russians and non-Russians, especially when it comes to “geopolitical struggles”. The belief that Russia has been mistreated and offended by the West is spread by most inhabitants of the Russian Federation independent of their ethnic background. The sanctions, introduced by Western countries after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, are widely seen in Russia as an attempt to destroy Russia; the refusal to recognise Russia as an equal power to great Western powers is felt as an offence. It is difficult to put together the pieces of a puzzle that, at first glance, seem to be contradictory. Nevertheless, we must accept that conflicts at a lower level inside Russia do not mean there is any decline of support for the president and the Kremlin when it reaches the geopolitical level and the people of Russia, despite their ethnicity, feel loyal to the Kremlin’s politics in this regard.

It might seem a contradiction that at a local level non-Russians in the Russian Federation struggle to maintain their language and identity against Russification and discrimination and at a ‘global’ level they support the state that introduces such policies. But this is the reality we must accept.

Russia does not count its casualties based on ethnic origin. According to official Russian statistics, in the Ukrainian-Russian war those killed in action (because casualties also include wounded and missing soldiers) of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) number 347 people. There is reason to believe that the real number is many times higher and that approximately half of the dead are ethnic Sakha.³⁸

AIMAR VENTSEL, PhD, is an associate professor and a senior research fellow in Ethnology of the Institute of Cultural Research at the University of Tartu, Estonia.

³⁸ Потери России в войне с Украиной. Сводка «Медиазоны». – Медиазона. <https://zona.media/casualties>.