

Indigenous Dissent and Public Diplomacy during Russia's War in Ukraine: The Case of Free Buryatia Foundation

By Anna Popkova



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Introduction

When Russian military invaded Ukraine in February of 2022, many members of ethnic minorities and Russia's indigenous groups came to be associated with the war. While their overall numbers among the military personnel were low, their "non-Slavic" appearance stood out and soon many Ukrainian and international media started blaming the "savage warriors" for the war crimes in Ukraine. Buryats—an indigenous group of Mongolian origin living in Eastern Siberia—became the most visible scapegoats in the first month of the war.

In response, an advocacy group Free Buryatia Foundation emerged in March of 2022 to confront the misrepresentation and vilification of Buryats by international media and publics. Soon, the group's efforts transformed into a robust public diplomacy campaign that was explicitly anti-war and anti-Kremlin, and that asserted Buryatia's political and cultural autonomy within Russia. The campaign intentionally targeted both foreign and domestic publics, and combined the efforts of the Buryat diaspora with those of domestic activists.

This article analyzes the case of Free Buryatia Foundation to demonstrate that non-state actors (NSAs) that challenge their respective states can claim a stake in their country's public diplomacy by disrupting the hegemonic narratives created and disseminated by state actors, and by presenting a more complex picture of political and social reality in their corresponding countries to the foreign publics. Exploring how dissenting non-state actors engage in public diplomacy challenges us to think more critically and in more nuanced ways about the role and purpose of public diplomacy in today's world, as well as the agency and capabilities of smaller actors in global politics. In turn, indigenous perspectives help

illustrate how the intersections of race, ethnicity, nationality and citizenship complicate the question of representation in public diplomacy, especially in times of war. By examining the case of Free Buryatia Foundation, this article aims to analyze the extent to which small non-state actors can utilize their diplomatic capabilities as they challenge their respective states and attempt to communicate to the foreign publics their unique political and cultural identity that gets overlooked and/or misrepresented by larger, more powerful actors.

Public diplomacy scholarship historically has been dominated by analyses of state-centered public diplomacy. Most research that examines the public diplomacy of non-state actors—an area of research that received significant attention in the last decade—analyzes collaborative or at least non-confrontational relationships between state and non-state actors. Yet cases of non-state actors contesting their respective states are common. From members of diasporas challenging authoritarian governments at home (Páez Bravo, 2020; Popkova 2019, 2020), to city governments acting in opposition to their states (Amiri & Kihlren Grandi, 2021; Leffel, 2018), to domestic protests receiving significant international attention and thus challenging the state-promoted image of the nation (Jiménez-Martínez, 2020; Zaharna and Uysal, 2016), to domestic activist groups working with foreign actors to undermine specific policies of their states (Pamment, 2021), examples of non-state actors engaging in political dissent and disrupting the public diplomacy efforts of their respective states can be found in virtually any region and political system. However, with the exception of the studies referenced above, the topic of non-state actors as agents of disruption and dissent remains understudied by public diplomacy scholars. This goal of this article is to add to the emerging body of work on this topic by bringing in the previously unexplored perspective of the

indigenous voices engaged in public diplomacy of political dissent during wartime.

This article proceeds in several steps. First, it discusses Robert Kelley's (2014) framework of the diplomacy of capabilities, links it to the idea of dissenting non-state actors engaging in public diplomacy, and brings in the perspective of indigenous voices as further complicating but also enriching the notion of dissent in public diplomacy. Next, the article takes up the question of the boundaries of public diplomacy and introduces Kadir Ayhan's (2019) typology for assessing the degree to which the activities of non-state actors can be considered public diplomacy activities. The article then discusses the concept of strategic narratives of contestation and articulates the core research questions. A section on methodology is followed by the analysis of the study's findings. The final section discusses the key contributions of the article to the public diplomacy scholarship, their implications and future research directions.

Non-state public diplomacy actors, political dissent, and indigenous voices

The power of independent agency and its ability to affect global politics is at the core of the very idea of non-state public diplomacy. Kelley's (2014) framework of the diplomacy of capabilities offers a solid conceptual foundation for examining political dissent as a form of non-state public diplomacy.

Kelley (2014) points out that "diplomats are increasingly recognized for what they can do beyond simply who they are, and the diplomacy of problem-solving matters more in comparison to the diplomacy of serving self-interests" (p. i). Similarly to La Porte (2012) who argues that the diplomatic potential of NSA's should be assessed "based on the object

of the action rather than on the subject that carries it out” (p. 444), Kelley (2014) puts independent agency of NSAs at the center of the debate and identifies four diplomatic capabilities of non-state actors: disrupting, agenda setting, mobilizing, and gatekeeping.

Non-state actors’ disruptive capability is similar to what the economist Joseph Schumpeter called “creative destruction”—a process during which new ideas replace outdated ones. Disruption and innovation go hand in hand, and the process is frequently accompanied by the actors’ innovative use of technology. Additionally, when engaging in disruption, non-state actors create, or summon the support of epistemic communities—networks of “professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain or issue-area” (Haas, 1992, p. 3). In fact, non-state actors that challenge their states are disruptors by definition. Disruption defines their actions and their political identities.

NSAs also engage in agenda setting—another diplomatic capability identified by Kelley (2014). Agenda setting is the ability of actors to highlight specific issues prompting the publics to think about these specific issues and not any other ones. Agenda setting also includes prioritization; actors rank order issues based on their significance. Setting and controlling the agenda is key to NSAs’ work of challenging the states (or other powerful actors, such as the news media) and competing with their agenda setting power.

Mobilizing, another diplomatic capability of NSAs identified by Kelley (2014)—is “the capability of certain change agents to present ideas to a larger population and summon their support” (p. 63). Legitimacy and representation are at the core of this diplomatic capability. Non-state actors must draw on alternative sources of diplomatic legitimacy and representation to ensure that their publics consider them

legitimate representatives of their interests. Typically, non-state actors strive to accomplish this by bolstering moral authority over the legal and political, and by connecting with their publics on the basis of shared values.

Finally, gatekeeping is defined by Kelley (2014) as NSAs' ability to use the "mechanism that stands between the numerous channels carrying information and a captive audience" (p. 81). Social media and mobile technology—the "new gatekeepers"—help NSAs create platforms that connect ideas to action, or, in the words of Castells (2010) "the space of flows" and the "space of places." Platforms provide communication spaces independent from states; they accelerate social action, facilitate and strengthen weak ties, and help distribute responsibility for action across a range of participants.

In exercising their diplomatic capabilities, dissenting NSAs attempt to (re)claim representational power from their respective states. Their public diplomacy efforts are frequently rooted in the claims that their countries' governments do not represent them, their values, their communities, and their vision of what their country is, should and can be. Dissenting non-state actors work to redefine diplomatic representation. As Sharp (1999) noted, "the study of diplomacy... has tended to accept the identity claims of principal actors [of diplomacy] uncritically. Countries have been assumed to be more or less what those who act for them claim to be, rather than something else, such as an instrument of oppression" (p. 57). The work of dissenting actors exposes this exact phenomenon while at the same time offering alternative ways of engaging in diplomacy and public diplomacy. As Constantinou et al. (2021) pointed out in a recent collective discussion on the practice theory in diplomatic studies, "if we take seriously the proposition that diplomacy is a *claim* to represent a group or entity to the

outside world (Sending, Pouliot, and Neumann 2015), then the scope of its practices ought to better cover heterodox scripts, unconventional sites, subversive performances, unrecognized challengers, alien narratives, muted voices, and a variety of non-human artifacts" (p. 561).

Indigenous dissent and the engagement of indigenous groups in diplomacy and public diplomacy challenge state-centered notions of diplomatic representation and complicate them, too, because indigenous groups always reside in a "third space of sovereignty," neither fully inside nor fully outside the state" (Beier, 2009, p. 5). Moreover, indigenous representational claims have a significant degree of legitimacy as their representational claims are anchored in a combination of ethnic identity, land rights, and a collective trauma of assimilation, plunder and erasure brought by colonial conquest. It is important to note that this article distinguishes between indigenous diplomacies and indigenous people engaging in dissenting public diplomacy, though the two are certainly interlinked. Scholarship on indigenous diplomacies conceives of indigenous diplomatic practices as alternative epistemologies, as practices that, while historically marginalized, have "proved every bit as able to sustain relations between people, facilitating exchange and managing conflict" (Beier, 2009, p. 5). Scholarship on indigenous diplomacies critically examines these practices as diplomatic traditions that are meaningful on their own terms, that are "practices of the present rather than artifacts of the past" and "without succumbing to the pretension to re-render what might be regarded as nominally familiar in terms of hegemonic founding" (Beier, 2009, p. 10). This article draws upon some of the ideas from the scholarship on indigenous diplomacies, mainly on its premise that indigenous perspectives challenge "the singular hegemonic story of state-centric diplomacy" (Beier, 2016, p. 644). Yet this article focuses on circumstances when indigenous

people engage in public diplomacy of dissent through mostly mainstream tactics of public diplomacy to communicate counter-hegemonic narratives anchored in indigenous stories. The article argues that indigenous groups can utilize their diplomatic capabilities to tell important stories that are frequently overlooked, especially during wars, and to disrupt the hegemonic discourses that define global politics, particularly in times of war. These stories also contest representational claims made by the states whose citizenship the indigenous groups happen to hold, and undermine the legitimacy of these states as they summon their citizens to participate in wars.

Non-state actors and the boundaries of public diplomacy

Non-state actors' use of diplomatic capabilities to achieve their political goals inevitably raises the question of whether their activities can be considered a form of public diplomacy? Several scholars addressed the issue of public diplomacy boundaries. In thinking about how to distinguish public diplomacy from, for instance, strategic communication, scholars pointed to the difference between public and private interests as a key criterion for distinction (Gregory, 2016), institutionalization of non-state actors and the presence of political agenda (La Porte, 2012), as well as the connection of the non-state actors' main goals to foreign policy (Byrne, 2016). Ayhan (2019) examined 160 articles and books on public diplomacy to analyze "how scholars conceptualize PD and how they see the place of NSAs in it" (p. 64). Based on this analysis, Ayhan (2019) proposed several criteria that help define the boundaries of PD activities of NSAs:

- PD actors must be institutionalized at least to some extent.

- PD actors must have intentional PD objectives. Ayhan (2019) relies on Gregory's (2008) definition of PD: "understanding cultures, attitudes, and behavior; building and managing relationships; and influencing opinions and actions to advance their interests and values" (p. 276).
- The activities of NSAs must have political goals that are related to foreign policies, whether this means contributing to the foreign policy agenda of a government or influencing changes in this agenda.
- NSAs must rely on communication as their main tool, prioritizing communication with foreign publics or the international community.
- NSAs must act in public rather than private interests. This criterion applies to non-state actors that are not necessarily delegated by the public to carry out their projects but that are "interested in producing collective benefits beyond private interests of their boards and constituencies" (Ayhan, 2019).

This paper relies on the five criteria proposed by Ayhan (2019) to argue that dissenting actors like Free Buryatia Foundation can engage in non-state public diplomacy by utilizing their diplomatic capabilities.

Strategic narratives of contestation

As dissenting non-state actors utilize their diplomatic capabilities in attempts to achieve their goals, they craft and disseminate strategic narratives that reflect these goals. Miskimmon et al. (2014) define strategic narratives as "representations of a sequence of events and identities,

a communicative tool through which political actors—usually elites—attempt to give determined meaning to past, present, and future in order to achieve political objectives. Critically, strategic narratives integrate interests and goals—they articulate end states and suggest how to get there” (p. 5). Strategic narratives shape and reflect various political processes and situations, including those when the interests and narratives of actors clash, resulting in narrative contestation. While Miskimmon et al. (2014) discuss narrative contestation between the states, narrative contestation can also occur when non-state actors challenge the states. Dissenting non-state actors broaden the range of possibilities for imagining what a particular state/nation is like, who is it represented by, what it stands for and what its political and cultural future might be.

This article examines the case of the Free Buryatia Foundation (FBF), focusing specifically on its engagement with foreign publics during Russia’s war in Ukraine, to argue that non-state actors—in this case, an indigenous group—can engage in dissenting public diplomacy. The analysis below focuses on answering the following research questions:

- What key strategic narratives of contestation that define the work of FBF with the foreign publics? How do these narratives help FBF challenge both the hegemonic narratives about the war projected by the Russian state and the narratives about “savage Buryat warriors” disseminated by the international media?
- To what extent does FBF realize its diplomatic capabilities through construction and dissemination of these strategic narratives?
- To what extent can FBF be considered a non-state public *diplomacy* actor?

Methodology

This article relied on the qualitative content analysis of FBF-produced content, such as their website, the videos they produced and posted on their YouTube channel, and their social media posts (this study focused on FBF's Twitter posts). Additionally, this study analyzed all FBF's earned media coverage—interviews with the organization's leaders, as well as articles, podcasts, and news stories about the FBF by various media. All data was combined and analyzed by this article's author following the principles of qualitative textual analysis described by Lindlof and Taylor (2002). Lindlof and Taylor's (2002) approach to qualitative content analysis was chosen for this study because of its emphasis on analyzing and interpreting content within and in connection to its cultural and situational context. Methodological sensitivity to context is particularly important for this study, where the subject of analysis can only be properly understood when the data is analyzed and interpreted within the context of overlapping political, historical, and socio-cultural circumstances. At the initial stage of open coding—"a process of unrestricted coding . . . during which an analyst goes through the texts line by line and marks those chunks of text that suggest a category" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 219)—seven categories or themes were identified to answer the first research question. Next, the categories were integrated during axial coding—a stage in which "the codes are used to make connections between categories . . . thus [resulting] in the creation of either new categories or a theme that spans many categories" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 220). As a result, three core themes—narratives—were identified and are discussed in detail in the Analysis section. During the analysis, attention was also paid to how the narratives created and disseminated by the FBF corresponded to the four diplomatic capabilities of non-state actors. These connections will also be explained in the Analysis section.

Free Buryatia Foundation background

Free Buryatia Foundation was established in March of 2022, shortly after the start of the full-scale war in Ukraine. As it often happens with non-state actors, the organization initially started as a grassroots, diaspora-based movement. Initially, people who later became involved with the organization were speaking out against the war on social media individually. Then one of them, Maria Vyushkova, a U.S.-based research scientist, organized a group call that was joined by ten Buryats living outside of Russia. After the conversation, the group decided to make and post a video speaking out against the war and countering harmful stereotypes about Buryats. Only one person on the call, Alexandra Garmazhapova (currently the FBF's President), was a journalist and had the skills to produce the video. She posted it on her private Instagram account, which at the time had around 1000 followers. The video quickly became popular and more Buryats requested to follow Garmazhapova on Instagram. The message in the video resonated with many Buryats in Russia and around the world. In her interview to the George Washington University Russia Program's online publication *Russia.Post* Garmazhapova discussed how the overwhelming support and interest from Buryats across the world motivated her and others in the initial small group to create the foundation:

We thought we'd release the video and that would be it. There was no talk of establishing a foundation. It was just a movement of Buryats against war. It was important for us to simply identify ourselves as Buryats and voice our position so that people understand that Buryats aren't Vladimir Putin's serfs. We wanted to give moral support to people who oppose the military actions so they don't lose heart. And then people began to write to us asking:

how do you terminate a contract with the Ministry of Defense? We started looking for lawyers. And we found Alexei Tabolov of the Conscript School legal aid organization. In parallel, we continued to go to antimilitarist rallies in the countries where we lived with the Buryat flag with the inscription "Buryats against war." Others who attended these rallies began to approach us and ask what organization we were from. After these actions, it would've been very infantile to turn around and say "thanks everyone, you're free to go," so we decided to create a foundation (Zueva, 2022).

The Foundation is officially registered in Alexandria, VA, United States. It has a team consisting of President, Vice-President, Head of the Media Department, Project Coordinator and Communications Specialist. The foundation's formal structure turned FBF into an institutionalized actor, which is one of the key criteria for considering FBF a public diplomacy actor (Ayhan, 2019).

The Foundation's webpage features the following statement in the description of the organization: "We—Buryats from all over the world, committed to the values of humanism and democracy—united to make Buryatia free and prosperous. We oppose racism in any manifestation and consider the war with Ukraine xenophobic" (About Foundation, n.d.). This articulation of FBF's mission and vision reflects their intention and "interest in producing collective benefits beyond private interests of [its board] and constituencies" (Ayhan, 2019, p. 72), thus satisfying another criterion for considering FBF a public diplomacy actor. On their X (formerly Twitter) account, FBF features an "introduction" thread where the organization elaborates on its goals and vision. They include "free and democratic Buryatia within the Federation framework," "free and fair

elections,” “strong economy that [ensures that] residents of Buryatia do not wait for handouts from Moscow”, “protection of the native language,” “protection of the environment in the region” and “international cooperation, [not] isolation.” All of these are political goals - another criterion for considering FBF a public diplomacy actor. Notably, all these statements, as well as most social media posts by FBF, are both in Russian and English—an intentional approach that allows FBF to reach foreign publics, which is central to public diplomacy.

The Foundation’s activities follow three key directions. First, the Buryats Against War movement that aims to challenge the claims that the most brutal war crimes in Ukraine were committed by Buryats and/or other Russian ethnic minorities. Second, the organization continuously campaigns to educate global publics on “the problem of racism and xenophobia in Russia” (Denazification of Russia, n.d.) and aims to solve these problems too. One of the projects that is central to these efforts is the Denazification of Russia campaign. The campaign’s title mocks one of Kremlin’s key narratives that the war in Ukraine is a “special military operation with the goal of Ukraine’s denazification.” The campaign’s central idea is to expose actual racism and neo-Nazism within Russia by drawing on experiences of indigenous people and ethnic minorities while contrasting it with Kremlin’s propaganda about “Nazis in Ukraine.” The third, and even broader direction is devoted to disseminating and popularizing “materials and articles about the culture of [Buryat] people and other ethnic groups living on the territory of Russia” (History and Culture, n.d.). All of these activities, and the corresponding narratives, will be discussed in greater detail in the Analysis section.

FBF also maintains a legal fund and a humanitarian aid fund. Both help those Buryats who refuse to participate in the war avoid conscription and, if needed, flee Russia.

Finally, all of FBF's activities are communication-based and communication-focused, and prioritize interactions with the foreign publics—another criterion that allows considering FBF a public diplomacy actor.

This paper argues that FBF engages in dissenting non-state indigenous public diplomacy because it crafts and promotes strategic narratives that contest the official, Kremlin-sponsored narratives of Russia's war in Ukraine while also countering the narratives of Buryat participation in the war that appeared in international and Ukrainian media in the early months of the war. The next section presents the analysis of these narratives.

Analysis

Challenging the "savage Buryat warrior" stereotype

Since the FBF initially emerged in response to the vilification of Buryats as "savage warriors of Putin" in Ukrainian and international media, the earliest and one of the most prominent narratives FBF created and started promoting was a narrative that challenged this image while also providing important context for understanding Buryat soldiers' participation in the war. As early as May 2022, almost immediately after the horrific news about the war crimes in the Ukrainian town of Bucha came out, FBF team started actively engaging with various media, aiming to have their voice prominently featured in the media coverage of the war and confronting the "savage Buryat warrior" stereotype. In doing so, FBF utilized its gatekeeping and agenda setting diplomatic capabilities and explicitly targeted foreign, non-Russian publics. Interviews with leaders of the FBF, as well as articles featuring their commentary and perspective, were featured in such prominent media outlets as *The Guardian*, *Corriere Della Sera*, *Der Spiegel*, *Global Voices*, *Fox News*,

The World, *Newsweek* and others like Czech *Voxpot*, Italian *Adnkronos*, and several Ukrainian media and prominent YouTube channels like *Freedom*, *KiyvPost*, and others. On FBF social media, the organization was explicit about their intentions to reach publics around the world. For example, when announcing their interview with *The World* public radio station, FBF Tweeted: “Vladimir Budaev spoke about our agenda to *The World*, the oldest daily radio with a million audience worldwide. It’s very important for us that not only the people of Russia know the problems of ethnic minorities, but the whole world.” It is likely that one of the main reasons FBF was able to secure this media coverage and interviews is that it drew on Alexandra Garmazhapova’s professional network of journalists and activists with connections to international media. Garmazhapova is a Russian investigative journalist and activist who worked for several Russian media outlets, including *Novaya Gazeta*—a newspaper with a reputation for being a stronghold of independent journalism in Russia, often covering corruption, human rights violations, and political repression. She is most well-known for her investigative reporting on the Kremlin’s “troll factories” in 2013, and also for her activism and reporting on issues of Russian regional autonomy, ethnic identity, and the struggles of Siberia’s indigenous people. Garmazhapova moved to the Czech Republic before Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and thus was able to engage in anti-war activism and lean on her professional network to bolster FBF’s diplomatic capabilities.

In media appearances, as well as on their social media, FBF frequently relied on insights from their investigations—facts, figures, statistics—to “debunk the myths” and “correct misinformation” as well as provide crucial context for understanding Buryat’s participation in the war. For example, FBF consistently emphasized that the overall numbers of Buryat soldiers fighting in Ukraine were very low—mostly

because ethnic Buryats only make up 0.3% of the Russian population—yet their death toll was disproportionately high, particularly in the early weeks of the war. As Alexandra Garmazhapova pointed out in her conversation with the Czech media outlet *Voxpot*, “the Buryats were the first to be sent there like live meat. As we know, casualties among Buryat soldiers were quite high, especially in the first days of the war. They did not feel sorry for them because they do not represent the title nation” (Ceplová, 2022). She also added that it was likely that the Ukrainians noticed Buryats first because of their distinct Asian features, as opposed to the ethnic Russians who are visually practically indistinguishable from ethnic Ukrainians. She also noted that an average Ukrainian (or Russian) also wouldn’t be able to tell the difference between Buryats and other Russian indigenous people of Asian origin, such as Tuvins, Yakuts, or Kalmyks. These ideas were reiterated in other media appearances, social media posts, YouTube videos FBF made and promoted, and other activities that utilized the gatekeeping and agenda-setting diplomatic capabilities of FBF. FBF’s approach to challenging the “savage warrior” stereotype drew attention to the complicated dynamics of race, ethnicity, nationality and citizenship, and the precarious position of indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities that found themselves embroiled in the war started by the government of the country whose citizenship they held. Most importantly, FBF used the occasion to point out how racism and white supremacy—in Russia, in Western Europe and North America—shaped the “savage Buryat warrior” stereotype. As the Czech *Voxpot* reported, referencing a conversation with Alexandra Garmazhapova, “not only do minorities die on the front lines of the conflict, they are also subjected to particularly cruel crimes by both the Russian and international press. After all, it is much more advantageous to show the unruly, eternally drunk national minorities, i.e. Buryats, Yakuts or Chechens, as the true

enemies of Ukrainians, than to admit that an Orthodox Slav would kill an Orthodox Slav” (Newman, 2022).

Throughout the summer of 2022, FBF also actively promoted the news about Buryat soldiers refusing to fight in Ukraine. This was in large part due to the efforts of the FBF that actively encouraged Buryat men not to participate in the war and provided legal and financial assistance to those who were looking to leave the country to avoid military conscription, to stay in the country but still avoid being drafted, or to end their existing military contracts legally to avoid being sent to Ukraine. Notably, soon after more Buryat men started refusing to fight in Ukraine, the website of the FBF was blocked in Russia by the Russian government.

Another approach the FBF used to challenge the “savage Buryat warrior” stereotype was to feature stories of Buryats helping Ukrainians on FBF’s social media, and publishing quotes from conversations with ethnic Buryats condemning the war in Ukraine. Importantly, one of the central messages in these vignettes was that of the war being “not our [Buryat’s] war.” As one of the participants of this initiative put it, “This is not our war. Putin is not Russia! Russia is not Putin! If the Russian government wants to seize something, let it do so with its own hands and the hands of its own people” (Free Buryatia Foundation, 2022, November 27). This comment expresses well the idea of the indigenous people occupying a “third space of sovereignty,” neither fully inside nor fully outside the state” (Beier, 2009, p. 5). Ethnic Buryats with firm anti-war position distanced themselves not only from the Russian government but also from Russia itself, highlighting their distinct place within the country and the state. As Alexandra Garmazhapova of the FBF pointed out in one of her media interviews, “the Kremlin talks about de-Nazification, but considering racism in Russia itself, no ethnic minority can take this slogan seriously. Fighting for

the ‘*Russian world*’ does not work for them either” (Newman, 2022). The next section further elaborates on this idea.

Explaining Buryat history and culture—and Russian colonialism

In the late summer of 2022, FBF started disseminating another narrative that later became central to FBF’s public diplomacy efforts. The narrative combined three core ideas: educating foreign publics on Buryat history and culture; explaining racism and xenophobia in the Russian context, and linking Buryat’s and other ethnic minorities colonial struggles in Russia with those of Ukraine. In late August of 2022, FBF started a series of Twitter threads on Buryat culture and history explicitly targeted at foreign publics. Each thread started with the following statement: “We have a growing number of subscribers from all over the world, so it’s important for us to talk about the culture and history of our people. It’s unfortunate that we have to get to know each other in such a horrible situation” (Free Buryatia Foundation, 2022, August 31). The threads featured pictures and text with some key facts and insights about Buryat history and culture but most importantly, almost all of them emphasized Russian colonialism, subjugation and marginalization of indigenous people, and intentional “divide and rule” policies implemented by the Russian and Soviet governments. The threads also connected this historical context to contemporary racism and xenophobia in Russia. FBF explained to the foreign publics how systemic racism and discrimination are chief causes of the high number of war conscripts from Buryatia and other regions populated by other ethnic minorities. FBF also made and disseminated several videos showcasing various examples of racism and xenophobia in Russia; they ranged from personal stories where representatives of different ethnic minorities shared their experience with day-today microaggressions, housing

and workplace discrimination, to official hate crime reports and statistics.

Most importantly, FBF linked the colonial struggles of Buryats and other Russian indigenous people and ethnic minorities to those of Ukrainians. The following Twitter thread illustrates this narrative well:

For hundreds of years, the colonial processes in Russia have diluted and assimilated many indigenous peoples. The unique cultural and linguistic diversity of Eurasia has been under threat since the beginning of its Russification. Multiple languages have disappeared, indigenous traditions and knowledge have been lost - with many more on the verge of dying out. Therefore, for the representatives of Russia's ethnic minorities the war in Ukraine inflicts a special pain as we are witnessing how Ukrainians are fighting for their right to cultural identity, freedom to speak their own language, for their independence, for life. The indigenous peoples of the Caucasus, Siberia and Far East are against violent assimilation of Ukrainians and their territories (Free Buryatia Foundation, 2022, October 8).

Similarly, one of the short Twitter posts featured a quote by a 35-year-old businessman from Buryatia who volunteered at the Polish-Ukrainian border: "The war in Ukraine is what the USSR [and] the Russian Empire did to our and other indigenous peoples" (Free Buryatia Foundation, 2023, February 16). In an interview for an article by *Media Diversity Institute*, FBF's co-founder Alexandra Garmazhapova also emphasized this connection: "Buryats, Ukrainians and Kazakhs can understand each other very well. In the Soviet Union, all of these peoples were considered second-rate..."

Ukrainians remember very well that they were not considered equal with Russians, instead they were seen on par with Kazakhs or Buryats” (Newman, 2022). By linking the colonial struggles of Russia’s indigenous people and ethnic minorities to those of Ukrainians, FBF utilized its diplomatic capability of disruption, where disruption worked at multiple levels. It challenged the stereotype of a “savage Buryat” by digging deeper into the racist and colonial roots of the stereotype. The disruptive narrative complicated perceptions of Russia internationally, particularly among the Western publics, by discussing racism and colonialism—topics that have been absent from the mainstream discourses on Russia’s history, culture and political identity. Finally, FBF’s disruptive narrative also worked to elevate Ukraine’s colonial struggles, which have been consistently ignored by the international community, policymakers and even scholars.

Mobilizing Buryat diaspora

Finally, the last key narrative FBF created and promoted was that of the unity among the members of the Buryat diaspora. Here the FBF engaged in diaspora diplomacy, mobilizing its members globally and calling on them to unite in opposing the criminal war in Ukraine and support their anti-war members residing in Russia. In doing so, FBF pursued two key strategies. The first involved direct appeals for the diaspora in general to unite, such as in the following tweet: “since there are now so many Buryats all over the world, we encourage diasporas to unite and help each other wherever you are. Old-timers, feel free to give advice to newcomers, help find housing and jobs, help with health insurance, schools, and colleges” (Free Buryatia Foundation, 2023, February 19). The second involved soliciting public support from public figures who were ethnic Buryats. Here the FBF was especially strategic by focusing on ethnic Buryats who were Ukrainian citizens.

For example, in summer of 2022, a Russian anti-Kremlin and anti-war YouTube Channel *Utro Fevralya* (*February Morning*) aired a program featuring Alexandra Garmazhapova and a former Prime Minister (2005-2006) and Minister of Defense (2007-2009) of Ukraine Yuriy Yekhanurov, who is an ethnic Buryat and is widely respected throughout Ukraine. The conversation reiterated the narratives discussed above and also worked in two critical ways. First, for Buryats in Russia, watching a fellow Buryat from Ukraine—and a famous one—sent a message that “Putin’s war” wasn’t “their war” and the solidarity of indigenous groups transcended citizenship and nationhood. Second, for Ukrainians who might have fallen for the “savage Buryat warrior” stereotype, seeing a highly respected and universally recognized politician and realizing that he was a Buryat, was a moment to reflect on the perils of racial prejudice. Similarly, FBF also disseminated a video appeal to the Russian Buryats by the former member of the Ukrainian water polo team Ayuna Morozova who is half Ukrainian and half Buryat. In her appeal, she stated: “There are Buryats in Ukraine too. We implore you, stop this war. Because this isn’t only a war of Russians against Ukrainians, it’s a war of Buryats against Buryats” (Free Buryatia Foundation, 2022, July 13). Here too, the idea of members of small indigenous groups uniting across national borders against the war that threatened their already declining populations was key to the FBF’s narrative of mobilizing Buryat diaspora.

Discussion and conclusions

This article examined how the Free Buryatia Foundation utilized its diplomatic capabilities as a small non-state actor to challenge the Russian state and communicate its unique political and cultural identity and firm anti-war position during the war in Ukraine. The analysis demonstrated that FBF utilized all four of the diplomatic capabilities of non-state actors—disrupting, gatekeeping, agenda-setting and

mobilizing—as it created and disseminated several key strategic narratives of contestation.

First, FBF challenged the image of the “savage Buryat warrior” and provided important context for understanding Buryat soldiers’ participation in the war through its active international media outreach, strategically crafted social media posts, and mobilization of legal and financial aid to help Buryat men in Russia avoid conscription. FBF’s approach to challenging the “savage warrior” stereotype drew attention to the complicated dynamics of race, ethnicity, nationality and citizenship, and the precarious position of indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities that found themselves embroiled in the war started by the government of the country whose citizenship they held. FBF’s disruptive narratives directly challenged the state-centric notion of diplomatic representation, contesting the idea that the Russian state represented all the people that lived in Russia. During the war in particular, it was important for the FBF to distance Buryats—and other indigenous groups and ethnic minorities—not only from the state, which to FBF was clearly an “instrument of oppression” (Sharp, 1999), but from the very notion of “Russianness” as well. Notably, aside from a brief period in the 1990s when several Russian indigenous groups joined the Unrepresented National and Peoples Organization, many of them, including Buryats, did not assert their distinct identity at the international level and, unlike many other indigenous groups from other nations, did not seek to bring global attention to their historical and contemporary struggles against racism in Russia before the full-scale war in Ukraine. The war became a catalyst for the “reawakening” of this sense of indigenous identity and historical justice. It also gave the group a unique leverage point and greater legitimacy than, for example, some other Russian anti-war organizations representing Russian political dissent but connecting on the basis of shared political values

rather than any specific ethnic or cultural identity (Popkova 2019, 2020).

Second, FBF used the opportunity to start educating foreign publics on the culture and history of the Buryat people—a classic public diplomacy activity—while emphasizing the impact, the legacy and the consequences of Russia’s colonial rule for the Buryats. Connecting this narrative to the discussion of Russia’s domestic racism and xenophobia, FBF linked historical and contemporary struggles of Buryats with colonialism and racism to similar struggles of Ukrainians. Articulating this link allowed delivering a powerful narrative of ethnic minorities and indigenous people understanding Ukraine’s colonial struggles and thus being Ukraine’s natural allies. Notably, one of the challenges for the Ukrainian public diplomacy during the war has been to contest the popularity of the Russian state-supported narrative of the anti-imperialist, anti-Western war in Ukraine across the Global South and to promote the narrative that Ukrainians are fighting an anti-colonial war. The public diplomacy efforts of the FBF took up these questions. They started with debunking the narrative of the “savage Buryats” but ultimately took it further by exposing Russia’s colonial practices, domestic discrimination and systemic racism, and linking the circumstances and struggles of Russia’s indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities to those of the Ukrainian people. By doing this, FBF reclaimed their representational power from the Russian state and used it to start building alliances—first and foremost with Ukraine, but also with other indigenous groups within Russia and around the world. This point is important to consider when thinking about non-state actors as diplomatic actors. Frequently, such actors, especially those that challenge the state, do not start out with public diplomacy goals and objectives as their key priorities. In the absence of diplomatic status and institutional knowledge—key privileges that the state public diplomacy actors enjoy

—non-state actors learn “on the go” and frequently have more immediate and pressing concerns like ensuring their members’ safety or crafting messages quickly in response to rapidly changing circumstances. As their experience, expertise and networks grow, they start *becoming* public diplomacy actors. Thus, examining the process, not only the outcomes, is critical when thinking about public diplomacy of non-state actors, especially those engaged in political dissent.

This article makes the following contributions to the scholarship on public diplomacy. First, it provides additional evidence to advance the argument that non-state actors that challenge their respective states can engage in public diplomacy of dissent by relying on their diplomatic capabilities in the absence of diplomatic status. Their intentional communication with the foreign publics in order to reclaim representational power from their state, articulate their political position and goals, and bring about meaningful change that would result in public benefits, allow considering these actors public diplomacy actors rather than only activists engaged in strategic communication. At the same time, the reality of any dissent—especially in cases of challenging authoritarian states - is such that any activities or organizations can be dismantled, shut down (permanently or temporarily), or reorganized and rearranged under different names or organizational structures in order to pursue their goals. The reality of the work of dissent makes “fitting into frameworks” challenging at times and scholars of non-state public diplomacy need to keep this in mind in discussions about public diplomacy’s boundaries.

Second, this paper’s focus on the public diplomacy activities of an indigenous group brings important nuance to the concept of dissenting non-state public diplomacy. It shows how issues of race, ethnicity, colonialism

and citizenship can complicate—and also enrich—the conversation on the role of national identity and diplomatic representation in public diplomacy. Indigenous voices not only highlight the domestic diversity that often gets overlooked in state-centric public diplomacy but also expose colonial histories and related present-day systemic abuses of power. In cases when wars of aggression are framed as “just wars” by the states, these narratives of domestic injustice can help legitimize the anti-war efforts as they expose the hypocrisy behind the “just war” arguments. Additionally, public diplomacy work of indigenous dissent is important to keep in mind when considering post-war diplomacy and post-war political transformations. Dissenting actors, by being societies’ “sources of creative provocation” (Said, 1998), produce alternative narratives and create spaces where other ways of being, thinking and doing are developed and expressed, which are central to any post-war transformation efforts.

Finally, the insights from this case study highlight the importance of taking into consideration the process of becoming a public diplomacy actor rather than only looking at actors’ initial objectives and intentions. Diplomatic status that the state-based public diplomacy enjoys automatically grants state actors the power that comes with it while paving the way for strategic planning and goal-setting focused on diplomatic objectives and outcomes. Non-state actors frequently *become* public diplomacy actors along the way as they fight for power and resources, articulate and revise their goals in response to rapidly changing circumstances, and build and navigate international alliances that help these actors achieve their political goals. This insight has important implications for other non-state actors around the world who strive for international visibility and recognition, whether they are indigenous groups, unrecognized nations, ethnic minorities or others that do not fit into the dominant

and formal structures of international system of states. Most importantly, non-state actor's engagement in public diplomacy work, especially in the context of dissent, raises questions about the historical and political conditions under which traditional understandings of what public diplomacy is and who its legitimate actors are have been developed, as well as which actors shaped these mainstream understandings of diplomacy. After all, as Beier (2009) observed, contemporary diplomacy "encloses a set of privileged practices, performed in exclusive spaces, well-resourced and imbued with power" (p. 5). Public diplomacy of dissenting non-state actors challenges these conventions and pushes us to think more critically about what public diplomacy is, what (else) it can be, and most importantly, what difference can it make in international politics and global distribution of power. In turn, this has important implications for practitioners of public diplomacy and for policymakers and their decisions. As was noted earlier, the state—and state-supported public diplomacy—undoubtedly remains the locus of power in world politics. Yet actors like FBF challenge state-centered practices and narratives, often forcing the state to react by either doubling down on repression—an approach the Russian state has been employing against expressions of political dissent and anti-war activities—or by engaging with dissent and adjusting its policies and public diplomacy practices accordingly. Different states in different political systems and in different historical circumstances choose to engage with political dissent differently. Examining the relational dynamics that shape and also get shaped by these competing forms of state and non-state political activities and public diplomacy practices is a fruitful avenue for future research. Analyzing these dynamics in various regions and political systems can provide crucial insights on the role and impact of political dissent and non-state public diplomacy on global politics and international relations.

Author's Biography

Dr. Anna Popkova is an Associate Professor at Western Michigan University School of Communication and an allied faculty member at the Global and International Studies program. Her research on public diplomacy and international strategic communication examines the public diplomacy efforts of such non-state actors as transnational advocacy networks, citizen diplomacy communities, and dissenting diasporas. By focusing on such concepts as agency, representation, power, and legitimacy, Popkova's work aims to gain a deeper understanding of the role of public diplomacy in the shifting dynamics of global politics. Popkova's work has been published in the *International Journal of Communication*, *International Communication Gazette*, *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, and elsewhere.

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