

Decolonizing Russia: A Moral and Strategic Imperative



JUNE 23, 2022

**Briefing of the
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**

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The Helsinki process, formally titled the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, traces its origin to the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in Finland on August 1, 1975, by the leaders of 33 European countries, the United States and Canada. As of January 1, 1995, the Helsinki process was renamed the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe [OSCE].

The membership of the OSCE has expanded to 57 participating States, reflecting the breakup of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia.

The OSCE Secretariat is in Vienna, Austria, where weekly meetings of the participating States' permanent representatives are held. In addition, specialized seminars and meetings are convened in various locations. Periodic consultations are held among Senior Officials, Ministers and Heads of State or Government.

Although the OSCE continues to engage in standard setting in the fields of military security, economic and environmental cooperation, and human rights and humanitarian concerns, the Organization is primarily focused on initiatives designed to prevent, manage and resolve conflict within and among the participating States. The Organization deploys numerous missions and field activities located in Southeastern and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. The website of the OSCE is: <www.osce.org>.

ABOUT THE COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the Helsinki Commission, is an independent U.S. Government commission created in 1976 to monitor and encourage compliance by the participating States with their OSCE commitments, with a particular emphasis on human rights.

The Commission consists of nine members from the United States Senate, nine members from the House of Representatives, and one member each from the Departments of State, Defense and Commerce. The positions of Chair and Co-Chair rotate between the Senate and House every two years, when a new Congress convenes. A professional staff assists the Commissioners in their work.

In fulfilling its mandate, the Commission gathers and disseminates relevant information to the U.S. Congress and the public by convening hearings, issuing reports that reflect the views of Members of the Commission and/or its staff, and providing details about the activities of the Helsinki process and developments in OSCE participating States.

The Commission also contributes to the formulation and execution of U.S. policy regarding the OSCE, including through Member and staff participation on U.S. Delegations to OSCE meetings. Members of the Commission have regular contact with parliamentarians, government officials, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and private individuals from participating States. The website of the Commission is: <www.csce.gov>.

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June 23, 2022

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe Washington, DC

The briefing was held from 10:03 a.m. to 11:24 a.m. via videoconference, Bakhti Nishanov, Senior Policy Advisor, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, presiding.

Mr. NISHANOV: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe's congressional briefing on "Decolonizing Russia: A Moral and Strategic Imperative."

Now, from the very beginning, I would like to empathize a few points about today's hearing. Today's discussion is not a mere brain-stimulating, yet largely esoteric exercise in a lip service to a zeitgeist-y topic. It is also not an effort to be controversial or edgy just for the sake of likes and retweets.

Today's a discussion to look at the foundational reasons for Russia's aggressive and brutal foreign policy that leaving innocent people dead, displaced, and hurt in ways difficult to imagine. Investigating those reasons will help us craft policies and come up with ideas that will actually contain Russia and make a long-term peace on the Eurasian continent and beyond be possible. Tragically, and ironically to an extent, these are the very same reasons you see ethnic minority Russians dying in Putin's senseless war in Ukraine in larger proportions than ethnic Russians. Without addressing the core of this, we will only be applying a Band-Aid to wound that will inevitably start gushing blood—in this case, literally.

That brings us to the subject of today's discussion, the issue of decolonizing Russia. Russia's barbaric war in Ukraine has exposed the Russian Federation's viciously imperial character, something that has been apparent to an acute observer for some time, but now it is apparent to the entire world. Let me make it clear: Ukraine is not the first, and, if left unchecked, it will not be the last instance of this. The Russians for decades now have waged wars on people Chechnya, Syria, Georgia. This aggression also is catalyzing a long overdue conversation about Russia's interior empire, giving Moscow dominion over many indigenous non-Russian nations, and the extent to which the Kremlin has taken to suppress their national self-expression and self-determination.

I want to make it clear: These conversations are not new. They have been percolating in the community, and indeed among nations and ethnic groups that have been subject

of Russia's colonial policies. It is after the start of Russia's war in Ukraine that serious discussions are now underway about reckoning with Russia's imperialism and the need to colonize Russia for it to become a viable stakeholder in European security and stability. As a successor to the Soviet Union, which cloaked its colonial agenda in anti-imperial and anti-capitalist nomenclature, Russia has yet to attract appropriate scrutiny for its consistent and oftentimes brutal imperial tendencies.

That is precisely the reason we have gathered our distinguished panel today. Without further delay, let me introduce our panel. We have a tremendous panel today, and from Ukraine we have Dr. Hanna Hopko. She chaired the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Ukrainian Parliament from 2014 to 2019. She was one of the civic leaders of the Maidan Revolution of Dignity. She was elected to parliament from European Self-Reliance Party, and then served as an independent MP. Since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine she, along with other activists, established an International Center for Ukrainian Victory. The center advocates for Ukrainian interests internationally and supports civil society actions for Ukraine's victory.

We also have Casey Michel, who is an American author and journalist who covers illicit finance, kleptocracy, and developments in countries and regions formerly or currently occupied by the Russian and Soviet empires. He is the author of "American Kleptocracy," and his writing has appeared in Foreign Affairs, Financial Times, The Atlantic, and Washington Post, as well as other publications. He has a master's in Russian, Eurasian, and East European Studies from Columbia University's Harriman Institute.

Dr. Botakoz Kassymbekova is a lecturer in modern history at the University of Basel. She specializes in Russian and Soviet history, Stalinism and post-Stalinism. She is the author of "Despite Cultures. Early Soviet Rule in Tajikistan," which traces Soviet imperial strategies in Central Asia, and she is the guest editor of the "Stalinism and Central Asia" with Central Asian Survey. Her current research project deals with the post-Stalinist Soviet Union and analyzes how Soviet citizens unprocessed Stalinism in their private lives. Another book project titled "Imperial Innocence," traces major narrative tropes and imagery of Soviet imperialism.

Dr. Erica Marat is an associate professor and chair of the Regional and Analytical Studies Department at the National Defense University. Dr. Marat's research focuses on violence, mobilization and security institutions in Eurasia, India, and Mexico. She is an author of three books, including most recently "The Politics of Police Reform: Society Against the State in Post-Soviet Countries." Her articles appeared in Foreign Affairs, Washington Post, Foreign Policy, Eurasianet, and Open Democracy.

Fatima Tlis is an investigative journalist, researcher, and expert on Russia. Ms. Tlis has covered Russia's brutal war in Chechnya, and for that repeatedly and violently assaulted. She has traveled extensively in Russia and filed reports from Adygea and Dagestan, among others.

Like I said, this is an incredible panel. This is an incredible group of people who, in many ways, brought—their writing and their conversation and their reporting has brought this issue of decolonizing Russia to the mainstream. This is why you are seeing this topic being discussed today.

We are going to open this up. We have—we have many, many participants. I think this is pretty much a record for a Helsinki Commission briefing. I am—I am not sure if

Congressman Co-Chair Cohen joined us. If he has, Congressman, would you like to offer your comments before we start? If you are not on, that is totally fine. Just want to make sure that we give you an opportunity to do so. Okay, on that—yes? Oh, Okay. Sir, I think you are on. Yes.

Co-chair COHEN: Yes, I am here somehow. My camera does not work or something else, but it is my fault. I just want to thank you for holding this briefing. You have got a great panel. It is an interesting topic, which I have not really put together in my own mind as far as Russia's inconsistencies. They often criticize us for being inconsistent and having unique situations that may be distinct, some of our foreign policy decisions and maybe some internal problems we have had over the years with civil rights, et cetera. Russia certainly has issues where they have, in essence, colonized their own country.

It is not a strict nation in the sense that we have known it in the past. I visited a couple of the Caucasus that are certainly not treated like people from Moscow and St. Petersburg, which dominates. The Russian people dominate, all these people. We need to be concerned about the people in Tatarstan, in Buryatia, and in the Far East and in other areas, and it is just shown the inconsistency that Russia has. It is not just what they want to do with Ukraine, and Georgia, and Chechnya. That is clear examples, but there are other examples where they have not been consistent.

I am here to learn, and I thank you for holding the hearing. I am going to be listening and thank all of our—and to Ms. Fatima Tlis, I see you are with us. You were with us on a Russia propaganda hearing. It brings back the Vladimir Kara-Murza, who was with us that day, a heroic Russian citizen who has been incarcerated by the cruel and inhumane and typical autocratic attitudes of Putin. I do not know when Vladimir will get out of prison. I do not know if he will get out of prison, but we must never forget Vladimir, and always bring him up in conversation, and speak to for his freedoms, as well as Navalny, who has been sent off to a gulag, and we see what is going on in Russia. It is just crazy, but thank you for having the hearing. I am here to listen.

Mr. NISHANOV: Thank you so much, Co-chair Cohen. Really appreciate your participation.

Let us get started. First, let me—Casey, let me ask you this question. I know you have remarks, but also within your remarks if you could address this question: What is decolonizing, anyway? I mean, why we are talking about it? What is—why it is so important. There is a war happening in Ukraine, and why are we talking about decolonizing Russia, the aggressor?

Ms. MICHEL: Sure. Yes, Bakhti, that is a great question. I mean, I will say at the outset what an honor it is to be here with everyone today and talking on this topic. I certainly do not think it could be timelier for any range of reasons.

I mean, I certainly think, at the outset, there is this ongoing confusion—some in good faith, some in bad faith—that the notion of decolonization, especially as it pertains to Russia, is simply a camouflage for dismemberment and partition, when it is absolutely not whatsoever. Which is why I am so happy we have voices like Erica and Botakoz and Hanna and Fatima here today to shine further light on the notion and topic, and about our history of discourse surrounding decolonization, perhaps lack thereof, as pertains to Russia in and of itself.

Bakhti, I guess I am wondering, should I just dive right into these opening comments right here as we begin this conversation?

Mr. NISHANOV: Please.

Ms. MICHEL: Which, again, I should say—I know we talked about this off mic—which will hopefully be the first of far more to come, whether it is briefings or hearings moving forward. I guess I want to just outline on my end, speaking as an American, the broader history of U.S. policy, or perhaps lack thereof, as it pertains to the kinds of indigenous and anti-colonial movements within Russia. I know Representative Cohen just outlined some of the non-Russian nations that are still considered part of Russia proper. These are colonized nations that we consider to be part of Russia proper, even though, again, these are non-Russian nations themselves, that remain colonized by, as we have seen yet again, another dictatorship in the Kremlin.

To start, I am going to go back a few decades to the actually early 1990's. I am not going to go through the entire history of Russian expansionism and imperialism. I am sure we will get to more of that in this conversation today. I want to actually start in 1991, as the Soviet Union itself began its final hurtle toward collapse and disintegration. While this was taking place, the U.S., as the historical record makes very clear, was very much caught off-guard. The George H.W. Bush administration spent months during that year trying to find some kind of new strategy as it pertains to what was then this splintering superpower in the Soviet Union.

The course that Washington ended up choosing was simple. It chose to prioritize relations with Moscow and prevent the disintegration of the Soviet empire, and eventually Russia, from going too far. That meant, in many cases, simply sitting on our hands instead of offering diplomatic and or even material support to new countries and new nations declaring independence, declaring sovereignty from Moscow empire. The U.S. actively worked to prevent certain pro-sovereignty movements from succeeding. Think of Bush's infamous Chicken Kiev Speech in 1991, where he publicly criticized Ukrainian separatists for trying to break away from Moscow, which unfortunately has not aged very well whatsoever.

There was a logic to all of this. This was a country, in the Soviet Union, that was a country with a significant nuclear arsenal, and no one wanted that arsenal to fall into the wrong hands. The West, and the U.S. especially, perhaps understandably, thought at the time that so long as Russia transitioned into a market economy and held free and fair elections, that actually borders and boundaries would not necessarily matter quite so much, and again, you can see the logic through this argument.

This was all taking place amidst far broader ignorance in the West, and again especially in the United States of America, of the history of Russian imperialism and Russian colonization, writ large, and of understanding that Russia continues to oversee what is, in many ways, a traditional European empire. Only that instead of colonizing nations and peoples overseas, it instead colonized nations and peoples overland. That is to say, Russia did not create a transoceanic empire of colonized nations, but a transcontinental empire of colonized nations.

Now, in the 1990's the tradeoff was clear. Instead of backing these independent and pro-sovereignty movements rising up against imperialists in Moscow, the U.S. either dragged its feet or willingly turned a blind eye to these movements. This was not just a case in places like Ukraine, or Georgia, or Moldova, or Kazakhstan, or Kyrgyzstan, or Azerbaijan. That goes also for the colonized nations that are still considered part of Russia proper. Because in the early 1990's so many of these nations also pushed for increased sovereignty—in some cases, even outright independence.

These are nations like Chechnya, which had clear majority support for independence in the early 1990's, and yet received no support whatsoever from the West, even though the West could likely have stopped the violence and resulting tens of thousands of deaths that came from the Chechen wars. It goes for nations like Tatarstan, which Representative Cohen just mentioned, which was first colonized by Russia centuries ago, but which in the early 1990's clearly voted for equal footing with Russia itself. And again, received no help whatsoever from the West.

Over and over and over again these indigenous and colonized nations pushed for sovereignty in the 1990's. Again and again the West placed all of its hopes on a market economy, on democratic norms, changing Russia, changing the Kremlin to such an extent and preventing a return to the kind of Russian imperialism we see now, that these anti-colonial movements would not end up mattering. This was administration after administration in the U.S. that pursued this policy. It happened year after year, decade after decade.

Thirty years later, from the vantage point of here we are in 2022, it is as clear as day, that policy has failed. Bakhti, as you mentioned, Ukraine is the latest manifestation of this failure, but it will not be the last. The reason is simple: Russia remains the only European empire that has never come close to fully decolonizing. It is the only European country that has not come anywhere close to fully recognizing—reckoning with its colonial history. That reckoning is coming, regardless of what the West does. It may come in 5 years. It may come in a decade. It could be as soon as next year when Russia's economy begins to accelerate toward an outright depression.

Regardless of when it happens, the West, the especially the U.S., has to be ready. Because the West was not ready in 1991 when it did all that it could to try to keep the Russian Federation patched together, and then turned a blind eye when the Kremlin began smothering these anti-colonial movements and recreating dictatorship in Moscow. Now as Putin threatens nuclear war, all in the service of, again, extending an expanding and entrenching Russian empire, choosing to ignore the kinds of anti-colonial, pro-sovereignty and anti-imperial movements that will emerge in Russia is a luxury we no longer have.

That means we need to begin fleshing out related policy on this, and soon. Everything from supporting democratic federalism in Russia to simply recognizing Russia as a European empire that has never fully decolonized. Beginning to be ready for these anti-colonial movements when they begin emerging, because after this war that Russia has unleashed there is no going back to the status quo ante, and that goes for Russia itself. We cannot afford to make the same mistakes that we did 30 years ago, because otherwise we are just going to end up in the exact same place that we are today. I will stop there.

Mr. NISHANOV: Casey, tremendously helpful. Thank you so much. Thank you for laying out a framework and explaining why and what is happening, and this understanding that Russia is a colonial and imperial power that is just not there.

Let me ask you this, Dr. Kassymbekova. Your writing is incredible. I mean, some of the stuff that you have written that I have read just truly explains the extent of this internalizing this colonial kind of subjugation among the peoples of the Soviet Union, and even before that. Let me ask you this: Why do you think there is this—I know you have your prepared remarks. If you could address this question of why is it that people inside and outside of Russia have such a tremendous time acknowledging that Russia is, has been, was a colonial power? That it has brutally subjugated all these peoples? That you

do not get to be a country of this size without being a colonial power? Why is there such a reluctance to admit that?

Mr. KASSYMBEKOVA: Well, thank you so much for having me here, and thank you for this question. Well, the book that I co-author right now with another historian, we argue that it has to do something with kind of the narrative that the Soviet Union created, and that is the narrative of imperial innocence. The Soviet Union blamed the West, and it is only Western empires that were colonial, but the Soviet Union was a liberating force. Because this idea—this narrative was very attractive, especially in the global south, this propaganda was allowed to oversee the colonial dimensions of the Soviet Union.

It has to do with the narrative, and it has to do with this kind of idea that it was—that only capitalism—only—the whole idea also has to do with kind of the Marxian idea that was popular all around the world, that capitalism produces colonialism, whereas socialism liberates. However, historical work that has done a great job to uncover the colonial nature of the Soviet Union. Unfortunately, it has not gone into the mainstream. Now I think it is quite clear the continuities that we have from the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the post-Soviet. This is something that despite kind of the economic system, we have the same dimensions.

European decolonization in the aftermath of the Second World War made the world a more just, more democratic, and safe place. Today nobody questions the rightness of the French, British or German decolonization. The Soviet Union was the largest land empire here of the Russian colonial empire, which only partially underwent decolonization. The Soviet Union was based on military occupation, systemic crimes against humanity and genocides, forced Russification, and elimination of the understanding of individual rights and dignity of people, and this has been—for historians, this is nothing new.

Today Russia attempts to restore the Soviet empire based on the idea of Russian cultural superiority and genocidal suppression of peoples. Decolonization of Russia would mean, I think, first of all, with the recognition of the imperial and brutal nature of the Soviet Union and the contemporary Russian ambitions, well, second with setting up justice and reconciliation committees to account for past and current atrocities to restore the dignity of the colonized, such as accepting the past genocides as genocides. For example, the 1944 deportation of the entire Chechen people was recognized as genocide by the European Parliament already in 2004, but we need a larger recognition and awareness of these and other atrocities.

It also means decentering Russia as the main player in the former Soviet space by supporting civic initiatives and civil societies of its neighbors and within Russia. Civil societies and a civic spirit based on the political understanding of a nation, as the case of Ukraine has shown again in 2022, is a key precondition for the struggle for decolonial freedom and justice. Moreover, since civil societies are based on debate, and therefore advance plurality, tolerance, and respect of human rights, they tend to successfully deal with the issues of overcoming colonial legacies and fostering reconciliation. Decolonizing Russia will make a safer and more democratic world in Eurasia. Thank you.

Mr. NISHANOV: Thank you. Thank you so much. This is—I think this is a great transition from laying out a framework, understanding why and how. I think, to your point, about, you know, Soviet Union using propaganda to explain, no, no, no, what we are doing here is actually, you know, liberating these people and not colonizing, while they were actually doing the opposite. I think this explains a lot about the reluctance and sort

of confusion, I think, among many people who say, wait, why is Russia a colonial power? Why do we need to decolonize? I think this is incredible.

Dr. Marat, let me ask you this: How does all of this translate into what Russia is doing today? In Ukraine it is pretty obvious what is going on. It is a war. It is a colonial, neocolonial—whatever you want to call it—it is a war that is happening just to subjugate a people, to be able to control territory, and a people, and a culture, and everything else. Beyond Ukraine, what are some of the other places that Russia maybe not so explicitly—maybe a little bit more implicitly, a little bit more subtly—is continuing these policies? Are there threats to other parts of the former Soviet Union or beyond?

Ms. MARAT: Thank you, Bakhti, and thank you, Helsinki Commission, for organizing this discussion today, the briefing. Really important and really—yes, important discussion. I am speaking to you from Bishkek—my native city of Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan. My views today are mine. They do not represent National Defense University, DOD, or U.S. Government.

Yes, the war in Ukraine is the worst expression of Russia's imperial ambition today, and Russia's efforts to restore the Soviet regime, Soviet Union, and restore territories of the Soviet Union. But of course, that is not the only aggressive political action that Russia and Putin are currently perpetrating on the territories that were previously occupied by the Soviet regime. There was—of course, there was the war—the occupied territories in Georgia and Moldova. There is constant nationalistic, aggressive language against Kazakhstan and against other countries, again, that were formerly under the Soviet control.

With that, I would like to start reading my briefing, my notes for today. While Putin is trying to restore the Soviet Union by invading Ukraine and intimidating other countries in the region, Russia's neighbors—Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and Eastern European countries—are undergoing a decolonial awakening of their own. The war in Ukraine is prompting a deeper reexamination of the meaning and legacies of the Soviet regime. Many in Eurasia now realize that Russia may have never pursued true equality with its neighbors—not now, not a century ago when the Soviet empire was established.

The genocidal war in Ukraine reminds of the way the Bolsheviks conquered Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia through genocidal violence, starvation, and cultural erasure. Difficult discussions about the current role of Russia in the region are taking place as well. Several governments surrounding Russia and countries surrounding Russia have shown greater independence from Moscow than previously expected. Just a few days ago in a televised meeting with Putin, President of Kazakhstan Tokayev said that his country cannot recognize Luhansk and Donbas as separate from Ukraine. Former Foreign Minister of Uzbekistan Kamilov also stated that his country supports Ukraine's territorial integrity.

Time is thus not on the side of Putin's imperialistic crusade to reassert Russia's exclusive control over its neighboring countries. Nations formerly occupied by the Soviets expect Kremlin's full recognition of their sovereignty, that Kremlin stops demanding political loyalty, stops imposing the Russian language and Russian cultural dominance, and stops interfering with their foreign policy. The war in Ukraine has accelerated the process of breaking out of Moscow's orbit and abandoning loyalty to Putin's regime. Russia is becoming just another neighbor, not a historical ally, a neighbor that is dangerous in the eyes of Kazakhs, Georgians, Moldovans, and Kyrgyz.

Separation from Russia does not always mean that these countries will see closer alignment with the West, but it is the right moment for the West to support decolonial discussion of Russia's imperial ambitions, both on the territories formerly occupied by the Soviet Russia and inside Russia. Only by examining and abandoning its centuries-long imperial identity can Russia remain a relevant political actor in the region and maintain friend relations with its neighbors and the West. Hopefully we will continue discussions like this, and include more people also from Russia, not just from countries that were formerly under the Soviet control. Thank you.

Mr. NISHANOV: Thank you so much, Dr. Marat. I think you have pointed out something that is absolutely critical to understand, that time is not on Putin's side. I think having these conversations and talking about these issues is just elevating this issue to a point where many people recognize that hopefully we will shorten that timeline, so there is less damage that Russia can do to its neighbors and, frankly, to its own people as well.

Before we move onto the next—to the next witness, I would like to point out to all of our participants that we have a question box, so we are going to have a Q&A session in a little bit. Whatever questions you have, just write it in. I will see those, and I will take those questions and address to our witnesses.

Hanna, let me ask you this—first of all, thank you for doing this. I know you are in between airports. Hanna just told us she was—she missed—the plane was late, so she—it looks like you are in a cab going from one airport to another. Thank you for taking the time to do this, but let me ask you a very basic question that I think is very apparent to everyone who is speaking today but does not seem to be apparent to everybody else. Is Russia's war against Ukraine in any way, shape or form justified? Is it anything but colonial projection of power? What is it? Why is Russia doing this? What does Ukraine do in response?

Ms. HOPKO: Thank you, Bakhti, and thank you, Helsinki Commission, for organizing this very brave and, I think, very strategic event today. Because just last week when—[INAUDIBLE]. The taxi driver asked me, are you from Ukraine? I say, yes, I am from Ukraine. I am Ukrainian. Could you please tell me why Russians are fighting with you[AUDIO BREAK, TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES]—

Mr. NISHANOV: Hanna, maybe I would ask you to maybe switch off your video feed. Because, Hanna, I may ask you to switch off your video feed because you are breaking up. I think maybe because you are trying to—yes, thank you so much. Hanna, I think—Hanna, I think we might have—Hanna maybe I am going to Fatima for a second and then we will come back to you because you are breaking up. I am sorry. Again, I do apologize. Like I said, Hanna is in between airports, and she was here last week. Some of us had an opportunity to talk to her.

Ms. HOPKO: No, sorry, can you hear me now?

Mr. NISHANOV: Oh, yes. Now it is so much better. Yes, please go ahead. Yes.

Ms. HOPKO: Ah, sorry. Russia has a long and horrific tradition, going back centuries, of attempting to eliminate Ukrainian nation, by destroying Ukraine's national culture, linguistic and historic identity. Most of these are during tsarist imperial times and during Soviet times, and just in—[AUDIO BREAK]—period, Moscow—[AUDIO BREAK]—

Mr. NISHANOV: Hanna, I do apologize. You are breaking up. Maybe—let me—let me try you in a few minutes.

Ms. HOPKO:—erase Ukrainians from existence by Holodomor genocide and—[AUDIO BREAK]—Middle East, Asia. Therefore—[AUDIO BREAK]—

Mr. NISHANOV: Hanna, let me—let us try to come back to you in a second.

Fatima, let me ask you this question. I—again, I do apologize to everyone. Like I said, it is trying to make this work in this—in this complex world.

Fatima, let me ask you this: I think, you know, we have talked a lot about, you know, Russian colonial policies and their impact abroad beyond Russia. Can you talk to us—and you are an expert on this—a little bit about what kind of an impact—or, what is Russia doing to its own native peoples? Again, Russia has—it is not just, you know, one ethnicity. There are many peoples and many nationalities and ethnic groups. What does Russia's colonial policies at home—what do they look like, and what is their impact on Russia's peoples? Non-majority ethnic peoples?

Ms. TLIS: Thank you. First, let me start with thanking Representative Cohen, staff of Helsinki Commission, and distinguished colleagues for this panel. I have to say first that I am speaking today in my personal capacity and expressing my own views, which do not represent those of Voice of America or the U.S. Government. More importantly, I am honored to speak on behalf of millions of my fellow Circassians, those living in forced exile and those suffering under the Russian occupation in the homeland. We call our homeland Heku, which means “the middle of the sea.”

Today the Commission has given voice to those Russia has been trying so hard to mute forever. There is a reason to why Russia wants to silence Circassia, to erase the country and the people from the existence. That is because Russia, more than anybody else, knows it has committed genocide against Circassians. Those crimes against humanity are documented in the hundreds of testimonies of Russia's own tsars' military commanders, top policymakers, the evidence preserved in the imperial archives in St. Petersburg, Russia, in Helsinki, Finland, in Tbilisi, Georgia. It is based on the examination of those Russian documents that the Georgian parliament recognized in 2011 the Circassian genocide perpetrated by Russia.

Today's stories from Ukraine are those of ethnic cleansing, mass murder of civilians, destruction of entire cities and villages, forced deportations, filtration camps, mass abduction of children, forced russification, appropriation of culture and historic revisionism—everything the United Nations defines as crime against humanity, genocide. In the face of such senseless brutality, many wonder what Russia's ending is. The answer to that question is Circassia. Just like Ukraine, Circassia was a vibrant, prosperous nation centuries before Muscovy existed. Circassians converted to Christianity before Russia existed. Circassian nobility was embedded in the Kyivan Rus from its very early stages. Seeking to strengthen his grip on power, the Russian Tsar Ivan the Terrible married the Circassian princess Maria.

Where is Circassia today? It is not on the world map or even in the history book. Circassia fought against Russia for more than 100 years. It never surrendered. Russia won and occupied Circassia by killing and forcibly deporting an estimated 98 percent of the Circassian population. The genocide of Circassians did not end with Russia declaring a victory more than a century ago. The Kremlin divided Circassia into three administrative entities, and Circassians into multiple ethnic minority groups, giving each different names and even different languages.

The Circassian kids in Russia do not study their history, or their language, or culture in schools. Today, Russia denies this Circassians the indigenous status, their political, economical, cultural, ecological, and linguistic rights. To the millions of Circassians living in the forced exile in more than 50 countries around the world, Russia denies the right for repatriation, instead imposing visa limitations, quotas specifically designed for the Circassians. Regardless of who occupied the Kremlin at any given era, be that a tsar, a communist, or a Chekist, the Circassians know firsthand that the core of the regime's policy toward Circassians is constant. That is a colonial policy of systematic and selective destruction of the identity, and that also goes for other what Russia calls ethnic minorities.

Vladimir Putin made it clear twice his role models are two Russian emperors known for the most aggressive, brutal, and bloody State building strategies. That his mission is to rebuild that empire at any cost. His appetites, as we have seen with Ukraine, are on the ground. I just wanted to underline, I am not a policymaker. I am not a political analyst. I am not going to suggest any measures to be taken to improve the situation, to prevent Russia from, you know, being emboldened even further than it is now. I am presenting a case of my people. I hope this helps to understand the root of brutality and Russian colonialism, and why this needs to be changed. Thank you very much.

Mr. NISHANOV: Thank you so much. I mean, this is—I think, again, the historical perspective is very important. The context may be different, but I think that reality that you have laid out just shows the brutality of the policies, and how basically a people, a nation, can just cease to exist because of these policies. Again, this does not suggest that that is what is going to happen, but I think it is a good reminder.

I think this is, again, to everyone who is still debating—and I do not want to use the word “apologist,” but, you know, apologizing or sort of trying to apologize themselves or Russian—trying to excuse Russia from some of the things they are doing, that it is important to kind of understand. This is—this has been the history of Russian empire. This is not Russophobic, this is not anti-Russia, this is not anti any ethnicity, but this is just a statement of a fact.

Hanna, let me try to go back to you and see if you may be able to join us. I think the best thing to do is maybe not do your video screen, because maybe that is what is preventing us from hearing you. Let us try to do it again. Hanna. I am not sure. Sometimes, yes. All right. Let me—let me—Paul, I think you have raised your hand. Please go ahead.

Mr. MASSARO: Hi, everybody. Wonderful panel. I am here with my colleague Rachel Bauman. Just really terrific. I guess it strikes me that this incredible discussion is not a part of D.C.—mainstream D.C. policy discussion. I mean, it is one of the reasons why we wanted to have it, because it does not—it does not seem to echo, and I think there is a lot of reasons for that, and we could get into those reasons.

One very big reason that often comes up, because—and Putin never lets us forget it—is Russia's—the Russian Federation's possession of nuclear weapons, which is constantly this, oh, well, do not try us, or anything like that. How can we talk about this while taking into consideration these kinds of, you know, I guess, large-scale realist grand strategy concerns that seem to almost entirely trump the discussion and shut down any discussion of this?

Mr. NISHANOV: Who would like to take this question? Casey, please go ahead. Anyone can feel free to jump in.

Ms. MICHEL: Yes, I will just—a quick response to that, Paul. I mean, you know, one of the things that I talked about in the beginning was these lessons from the 1990's, lessons missed, lessons forgotten, and lessons learned. One of the very clear successes, arguably the clear success, at least as pertains to American policy, was—and this is a far broader story than kind of the scope of the discussion today—was the management of the former—I guess former—Soviet nuclear arsenal, and what to do with those elements that were in, you know, a range of different countries that were emerging from the Soviet collapse.

You know, there is a very clear kind of muscle memory from that moment in and of itself, which is, I suppose, another way of saying we have already experienced, as it pertains to the dissolution of a nuclear power, that 30 years ago in the Soviet Union. There is another potential for that moving forward with things like Irish reunification from the United Kingdom moving forward. That is another nuclear power that may see some certain territorial shifts, pertaining to directly the history of colonization, or lack thereof, on the island of Ireland.

That is to say, there are lessons aplenty for that moving forward. It is one element of further discussion and discourse to kind of work around this—what you described, Paul, as this kind of barrier that seems to appear or emerge that blocks this discourse around decolonization in Russia, solely because of the nuclear arsenal it maintains.

Mr. NISHANOV: Thank you so much, Casey.

Ms. MARAT: Then, Hanna, I see you are back on, but let us try to do it again after Dr. Marat's answer.

Ms. MARAT: Right. Back to why are we not discussing Russia from a decolonial perspective, since it looks so obvious now? [LAUGHS.] Why has not it been happening for a while now? Well, I think the answer is not necessarily the nuclear or military might of Russia, or any other hard security issues, to be honest. It is really about knowledge production and the structure of knowledge production. How Western academic and policy communities really believe—and I am afraid, continue to believe—that Russia brought modernization, electrification, development to its colonial subjects.

That—and now I would like to empathize that I am citing a lot of what Bota has been writing about, Dr. Kassymbekova, that since we see all those roads and plantations—cotton plantations in Central Asia, or in the Caucasus, or in Ukraine, Soviet Union must have been a good empire, or a good force for the people. I will let Bota to continue on these—on this argument, on why we do not see Russia as a colonial power.

I would like to just add that I really appreciate spaces like this when you can hear voices not necessarily from Western academia, but actually the very people who lived under the Soviet regime, and who had the time to process, honestly, the trauma of living under an imperial master. Thank you so much for holding this forum and hearing the voices that have not been heard before.

Mr. NISHANOV: Thank you so much, Dr. Marat.

Hanna, we are going to go to you, but I just want, again, to empathize we have a chat box. Any questions you guys have, please—anyone in the audience—please feel free to write those questions. We will shortly start a Q&A session. Hanna, please go ahead.

Ms. HOPKO: Thank you so much for having me today. Actually, from Peter the Great then Soviet Union, now Russia's genocide against Ukraine, we have to learn lessons, and at least not to be afraid of the strategic approach and—[INAUDIBLE]—approach in how to change not just regime, but now to change the imperialistic nature of Russian statehood. Because instead of seeing some, how to say, do not humiliate Putin, or let us negotiate and peace talks. Well, we have seen these within 8 years of ongoing Russian aggression. In return we received what? We received genocide.

Mr. NISHANOV: Hanna, we lost you again, but we understand what you are saying, and I think you made the most important point. I mean, that got through. That is—the important bit got through. While we are waiting for Hanna, Co-chair Cohen, I just wanted to make sure that we gave you an opportunity to ask any questions, if you have any, to our distinguished panel here.

Co-chair COHEN: I do not think I have any questions. I appreciate—I have learned a lot. I understand the inconsistencies in Russia's position. It is obvious it is a federation that they colonized, and they are not—and what is going on in Ukraine, it is just an extension of their imperial—from Peter the Great—attitude that Putin has picked up with a—it really never has had much of a lapse. I mean, they have always—the Soviet Union, et cetera, has been a—they have taken over other nations and people and tribes who—and they subjugated them to Moscow and St. Petersburg, but thank you. Thank you.

Mr. NISHANOV: Thank you so much. Thank you so much, Congressman. Appreciate your comments.

Dr. Kassymbekova, I think you had your hand raised.

Mr. KASSYMBEKOVA: Yes. I just wanted to add that decolonization is about listening. As Erica Marat already mentioned, it is about listening to voices that one does not want to hear. Imperialism is about shutting those voices and not listening to people. So what we have is that—why we never considered the Soviet Union as a colonial empire is that, first of all, these kind of very successful anti-Western narrative of the Soviet Union that colonialism is a Western problem. That was very successful.

Second, lack of knowledge. For example, when we talk about Holodomor, when we talk about hungers and genocides, these were forbidden topics in the Soviet Union. So for example, when Kazakh scholars tried to—or, students tried to find out information about it, they were arrested and they were repressed. So some committed suicide because—so it was impossible. We have a very short period of time in the 1990's when archives were open, but that was a very short period of time and there are still archives in Moscow. We do not have access to our history. So we do not have a lot of proofs to go and prove our history.

Second, and very importantly, in the West most of the voices were given to Russian scholars. And Russian scholars are not interested in that story. So even like scholars from Central Asia or scholars from Eastern Europe, we also have historical academic debates and struggles as well, because we are underrepresented, our voices are not heard in the West. It is a very lonely struggle. That moment is amplifying a bit of our voices, but this is kind of—academic structural hierarchies that privilege Russian voices is also a very important problem. This is something that I would like to say, yes.

Mr. NISHANOV: Perfect. Thank you. That is a fantastic point, and with that, let me transition to a Q&A session. I want to make a couple things very clear to the—to our panel, but also to the participants, to the audience. There are a lot of questions. Some

of them are incredibly, I would not even call them R-rated, it is like NC-17. I think you can just tell that this is generating a lot of interest—[LAUGHS]—to say it politely. Some of the questions are—I will try to—I will try to kind of distill them into an actual question. Some of these are not distillable at all, but let me—I think this is an important question, and I think this is something that kind of I am getting —there are multiple questions that are similar to this one.

The question from—and, actually, our staff told us that there were people from a handful of Russian universities joining us today. Welcome to everyone, but I am hoping for a good conversation here. So should every—somebody from—from Anton (sp). He says: So should every State that has ever subjugated another grant them independence if they ask for it, or it just about Russia because of the way it has subjugated other nations? Can you clarify the difference? Because it can be the point of more arguments. I think it is a valid point, right? Why are we talking about Russia specifically? Can—maybe, Dr. Marat, if you could take it, and then anyone, please jump in.

Ms. MARAT: Sure. I will try. I think the answer is pretty simple. Yes, there were a lot of evil empires out there, and every empire embarked on genocidal warfare and erased cultures and peoples, and so on. Extracted resources. That is all right, and here in United States also is a settler-colonial empire. Same with European countries, some Asian countries. China is one. The key difference is the discussions are happening in Western countries or in other parts of the world on the repercussions of this imperial advancement on territories of indigenous and native peoples. Those discussions are difficult. They are emotional. They generate a lot of tensions in societies, but they are important, and they do take place.

Unfortunately, Russia maintains what Botakoz labeled imperial innocence. That Russia is not an empire. That Russia's advancement into neighboring territories was a gift to those countries. Somehow Russian culture is so great that the people that Russia occupied need to be thankful to the imperial master. These kind of discussions are happening outside of Russia, in the territories where Soviets previously ruled. These discussions are not happening to—are not happening in Russia. They are unfortunately just now picking up in the West as well, and we really need to reprocess, we need to understand, we need to look at the Soviet legacy from the perspective of the people who were colonized, and not from the Russian perspective, and not from the Western perspective.

Mr. NISHANOV: Thank you so much, Dr. Marat.

There is another side to this question, and I am going to—I'm going to actually read it as-is, just because I think—and Casey, I think you would be a perfect person to take this. You actually have been very critical of some of the U.S. policies, frankly, and, you know, you have written extensively about Japanese internment in the United States. I think this is—and this is a critical question, but I think it is an important question.

Marveling at the spectacle of the U.S. Government, founded upon genocide without parallel in human history and sitting upon internal colonies of the remains of that genocide and the descendants of slaves, with perhaps 1,000 military bases occupying the bulk of the planet and conducting a war on Russia's borders, holding this discussion. It is—[INAUDIBLE]—if you would like to respond to this. Do we have the moral authority to be even talking about this, Casey?

Ms MICHEL: Well, I do not know about the question of moral authority, insofar as we have moral authority to talk about any topic under the sun. I think it is incredibly

important to, again, as Dr. Marat, Dr. Kassymbekova mentioned, elevate the voices that have been silence for so long, certainly as pertains to Russian colonization and lack of decolonization, these days. One of the things that I am most—and perhaps this is not the right forum to talk about this, or the right framing for this—but excited about moving forward about conversations like this, is that this is going to spark so many further conversations not just in Russia, not just in regions and territories occupied either formerly or currently by the Russian empire itself, but even the discourse of the United States in and of itself.

I could not help think, you know, during this entire conversation today, of the role that the, of all things, cold war played in framing and accelerating civil rights discourse in the United States of America in the 1950's and the 1960's. I think there is still an underappreciated element of just how it is that that international pressure, shining a light on the lack of civil liberties for minorities in the United States in the mid-20 century, and in many cases still today, played in accelerating the expansion of civil rights, of voting rights, of civil liberties in the U.S.

This is, again, a conversation for another time. I know Dr. Marat was just talking about the lack of discourse internally in Russia in decolonization or the prior decolonization discourse. It is only in recent years that in the academic space in the United States of America we have seen, finally, this kind of watershed moment of approaching, attracting, identifying, analyzing American imperial conquest in North America, to say nothing of broader American imperial conquest elsewhere. There have been—I mean, certainly—you know, an unprecedented range of—raft of publications and analyses, some of which I have sitting behind me here today, as it pertains to American-Indigenous relations, American indigenous colonization of the hundreds of indigenous nations that continue to comprise, and in many cases are still growing, on what we consider to be, what we would describe, as the United States of America.

This is only going to continue. One of the reasons I am so—I use the term “excited”—about where that discourse is going to go is I know it's going to redound in the United States of America to force Americans to approach, to identify, to understand America's own imperial history. Because at the end of the day, there are far more similarities than there are differences as pertains to 19 century expansionism from Moscow, St. Petersburg eastward, from Washington and the eastern seaboard in North America westward. It is going to take decades—frankly, it is going to take centuries. I do think that that question hits on an important comment.

Again, I am not going to take about moral authority one way or another, but the more voices that have been silenced for years and years that we can elevate, the better off we are all going to be in the long run.

Mr. NISHANOV: Thank you so much, Casey.

Fatima, I think you had a response to this question, or maybe you had a comment on a previous one. Then, Dr. Kassymbekova.

Ms. TLIS: Yes. I do have a response to this question. My response is I absolutely have a moral authority to talk about this topic. I am Circassian. How much talk you hear in the United States about slavery? How much effort is done by the United States people to start helping people who suffered slavery to start healing, to rectify the situation? Did you ever hear anything like that in Russia? Now, please go Google white slavery. The first

word which is going to come up is Circassians. The Circassians were sold in thousands on the slave markets in the Ottoman Empire by Russia.

If you go and see the biography of some famous people, including the mayor of London—the former mayor of London, now prime minister of Great Britain, Boris Johnson, his great grandmother was a Circassian slave. Who talks in Russia about rectifying the trauma of the Circassian slavery? Who talks about the guilt of Russian State before the Circassian people? Nobody. That is not just, you know, the absence of discussion. It is a specifically designed strategy to silence this discussion, to make sure it does not exist. That is a colonial strategy.

As for your question, everybody who has ever dealt with the Russian disinformation and propaganda would immediately recognize it for what it is. It is called—you know, it is actually professional term for it, disinformation, whataboutism. No matter what each country's position or past is, it does not eliminate the other country's problems. Neither does it answer it. Neither does it give anybody a moral—higher moral ground to question somebody else, but this situation is as it is. I am representing the people who suffered and still are suffering from Russian imperial policies. I hope this answers your question. Thank you.

Mr. NISHANOV: Thank you so much, Ms. Tlis. This has been—this is, I think, a really good answer to that question.

Ms. Kassymbekova, I think you had a comment as well.

Mr. KASSYMBEKOVA: Yes, very quickly. Yes. So very quickly on the question with the U.S., again, I agree that this is kind of a very typical way of blaming the West rather than looking inwards. At the same time, I co-authored the book “Imperial Innocence” with an excellent historian, Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon from the United States, who comes also from—also looking at the history of Black Americans. She recognizes a lot of the things that are happening in the United States. These comparative perspective that we will have clearly shows that one can—that one does not have to have slavery to have colonialism. This is the first point.

The second point, I think what we need to look at decolonization, and I recently realized that there is imperial understanding of decolonization. That imperial colonial understanding of the decolonization is, you know, divide and rule, ethnic violence, strife, disempowerment. However, the decolonial understanding of decolonization is dignity, human rights, self-determination, political rights. If we look at—not from the kind of colonial understanding of decolonization but the decolonial understanding of decolonization, it is a chance. It is a chance for everyone. It is a chance for all the peoples in Eurasia. It is a chance for reconsolidation. It is a chance for truth. It is a chance for democratic involved, you know, political system.

I have spent many years in Germany, and so Germany has been looking at its very difficult past. Can you imagine, Germany would not want to go to these decolonial debates about themselves. Would just say, you know, the Americans or, you know, the British were worse. That does not work, and decolonization in Germany has meant equality, you know, inclusivity, tolerance, democracy. Decolonization, we need to look as a chance—as a chance. It is a very difficult story. Stalinism and decolonization are not separate. Without decolonization, we will never have de-Stalinization. We will never be able—without looking at the imperial dimensions of Soviet dictatorship, we will never be able to break through this Soviet dictatorship.

This is a chance for Russian citizens, the chance for all of us to build a better future, and what we want is simply to be heard and to be respected. This is—and equality, something that was propagated as something that the Soviet Union wanted to install and never did because, for example, Central Asians never had a political voice in all of the decisions that were taking place. This is something that is good. This is something that will build and will be able to—a peaceful and respectful coexistence. We need to see it as a good process, as something that is very positive.

Mr. NISHANOV: Thank you so much. I genuinely—as an eternal optimist myself—I appreciate this positive, you know, look at it. I think this is—this is the truth of it. This is not an effort to hurt anyone. This is not, again, to be—again, I see some of the comments. To be Russophobic, to—anti-Russian, or anything like that. This is an effort to genuinely understand what is driving Russia, but also do somethin—have a conversation that is going to be good for neighbors—Russia's neighbors, but also for Russians themselves.

Let me—Dr. Kassymbekova, you have talked about it—before we do that. Let me—we are actually out of time. If everyone is available for maybe another 10 minutes, just because we have such a glut of questions. If everyone is available, we are just going to extend it for, maybe, another 10 minutes, and we are going to finish at 11:15. If it is okay with everyone else? Hanna, unfortunately, could not join. We will share her statement with everyone who is interested. It is going to be on our website as well, so please feel free to check up on that.

I think you have touched upon it indirectly but let me ask you this. Therefore, what—Brian Coe is asking: What about the great risks involved in pushing to break up Russia as it exists now? Are we pushing—is decolonizing breaking up Russia? Is that—is it equal to that? Is, one, decolonizing is—definitely is breaking up Russia? If so, are there any risks associated with that? [INAUDIBLE.]

Mr. KASSYMBEKOVA: Yes. Well, okay, yes. Well, if we will—just a comparison. If we look at Germany and Poland, which share this kind of colonial history in the past, kind of decolonization brought only equality. On an equal basis they are part of the European Union. So if polities work with each other on equal standing, they can cooperate with each other on equal standing, when both of the polities have equal rights. So it is not about—it is not about, you know, collapse, and it is not about demise. It is about giving rights and equal standing in a conversation and in coexistence.

To say that, you know, British empire should have never been broken because it is all about demise, or the French, or the Nazi Germany, for that matter, it is something that will provide everyone dignity, rights. It is about, you know, coexistence. So one really needs to look at it. It is a chance for everyone. It is a chance for Russians and it is a chance for all other people who suffer from dictatorships. The only way to really deal with imperial dictatorship is really to talk about rights, and dignity, and voices.

Mr. NISHANOV: Thank you so much. Let me ask you one more question, and maybe Dr. Marat and Ms. Tlis, maybe you could answer this question. This is from Kadeel, and he asks: What about voices of minorities within the ethnic regions of Russia? So the point being that, you know, there are—for example, the Mari people in Tatarstan and Bashkortostan who were under unwilling Tatarization during the relatively free time. I think we miss that colonialism is multilayered and colonized groups can also engaging in colonizing activities within their territory.

Is that true? What do we do about this, right? I mean, we are talking about, A, ethnic groups. We are talking about a people who are being colonized, but they themselves apparently, seemingly, engaging in colonizing. Is that an important dynamic to keep in mind when we are talking about Russia? As, you know, Russia—the big, Federal Russia—actually helping those tiny minority groups to maintain their identity?

Ms. MARAT: We absolutely need to hear voices from all across Russia. So far, the dominant discourse about Russia is from—comes out from Moscow and St. Petersburg, and not from other parts of Russia. On collaborators—imperial collaborators, they always existed, no matter in what imperial reality, what geographical context. There has always been collaborators. It is a way of survival, or a source of a power. These kind of—these are the destructions. They allow colonizers to pretend as if this was—that their actions are legitimate, and acceptable, and even welcomed in the colonized nations.

Ramzan Kadyrov is an example of such collaborator who found an enormous source—a source of enormous power for himself by collaborating with Kremlin. In any colonized society, nation, group, you will always find someone who will exist in between the colonized and the colonizer. It is a normal thing and we should not be distracted by that.

Mr. NISHANOV: Thank you so much. Ms. Tlis, I wonder if you might have some comments on that.

Ms. TLIS: A few days ago I read a commentary, an interview with Christopher Steele. He is a famous British spy who wrote this Trump dossier. [LAUGHS.] So anyways, that was about the situation in Russia. He was asked, why does he think that the Russians—you know, the population in Russia condone Putin's violent actions in Ukraine? His answer just, you know, struck me because it let me understand that he does really know Russia. His answer was: Because people—I am not quoting directly, it is just a paraphrase of his words. The core of it was that the Russian government has brutalized people to the point when the people became brutal themselves. That is what is going on in Russia, and that is why we see so many non-Russians being sent to Ukraine, killing and dying themselves, and committing atrocities.

As for the multiplying the colonial powers on the horizontal level, on the local level, that is pretty much a classic Kremlin divide and rule policy, part of it. For instance, in one of the republic they simply promote and support, of course, to the certain extent, one of the ethnic groups, while they oppress the other one. By doing that, they simply pull the strings. They keep the situation under control. That is how it works, and I have seen this. I have experienced this. I lived through this in Russia.

If Adygea, for instance, one of the Circassian republics, declares the Circassian language as a State language, Russian prosecutors force Adygea to change the constitution. The local Russians, who actually are happy to study the Circassian language because they are living there, are brainwashed into believing that they are forced to use the Circassian. I mean, we live in Russia. We all speak Russian, not by choice.

I cut the O-V-A end of my last name because nobody asked me when they put it, you know, at the end of my last name. My Circassian last name is Tlis. It means “hot blood.” In Russian, it is Tlisova. Who asked me when they changed that? They changed our topography, the names of our cities, our own names. That is what you call, you know, ethnic targeting of the people. Thank you. I hope this answered your question.

Mr. NISHANOV: Ms. Tlis, I mean, you already had an amazingly cool last name, but knowing that it means “hot blood” makes it even cooler. So congratulations on a really

cool last name. Maybe one more question, and then any final comments, and then we can maybe wrap this up. This has been an incredible discussion. Like I said, the engagement's been through the roof. I am hoping maybe we can do one of these down the line, too.

This is from Maryam Hayat, and I think this is an interesting and important question just to see sort of a throughline: How do you interpret Russia's presence in Syria and its continued endorsement of the Assad regime? Is this connected to Russia's expansionist agenda? If I may add to that, is there a connection between what Russia's doing in Syria and Ukraine, in Georgia, in Moldova—is there a connection there? Maybe Casey, and then anyone else please jump in.

Ms. MICHEL: I am not going to pretend to be an expert on Russian activities in Syria. I have not written extensively on that point. I am coming kind of from the broader, 10,000-foot view. My sense is that there is less, certainly at the nationalistic or, I do not know, imperialistic discourse around intervention in Syria, even though the term that comes to mind is "derzhavnost," right, greatness—"great-powerness," and hard, I suppose, realism that is lacking in the Ukrainian context and the Ukrainian invasion.

I do think future scholars will have a field day examining the similarities and especially differences and discrepancies between Russia's intervention in Syria and invasion of Ukraine. I do think there is fertile ground for examining it. Then extracting that much further the role of imperialism, the role of colonization in Russia's invasion in Ukraine moving forward.

Mr. NISHANOV: Fatima, please. I think you are muted.

Ms. TLIS: Sorry about that. Since the time of the Soviet Union, Russia has been maintaining what is called its assets in the Middle East, in Africa, all around the world, in Latin America. In the Middle East, one of the assets of the Soviet Union, the KGB, was the asset family, generation after generation. One of the reasons Russia went to Syria was to protect its asset. It has military bases—important military bases in Syria, in Latakia and other places. There are another, you know, very important reasons for Russia to go there, including oil, including expanding its influence in the Middle East, et cetera.

Also—this question also relates to the Circassian diaspora. Syria is one of the countries with the largest Circassian diasporas in the world. When the war started, those Syrians, Circassians, started going to the Russian embassy asking for refugee status, for visas—tourist visas, business visas, whatever—to just try to get back to their homeland, to Circassia, which is now part of Russia. Imagine that Russia actually denied most of them. Some few hundred—less than few hundred people managed to get to Circassia through Turkey. The whole burden on hosting, aiding those refugees, fell on the community. There was not a single ruble coming from the Russian Federal Government. Moreover, some of those people were deported back to war from their homeland. That is the Russian policy, another side of it. Thank you.

Mr. NISHANOV: Thank you so much. Ms. Tlis.

I think we are at 15 minutes—11:15. This went over by 15 minutes. I genuinely appreciate our panelists' time and patience and their incredible knowledge and expertise. I mean, like I said, this is the group that brought—in many ways, brought this issue to the—to the mainstream. That is why there are so many conversations happening around this. I also want to thank just all our participants for their—like I said, there were a few questions that were, you know, they were genuinely not meant to be questions but more an effort to—I think to offend us, which we are not offended. It is okay. This is a free

country. Everybody can say whatever they want to do, but most of them, they were genuine questions. I think we have tried to answer them all.

I just would like to offer maybe last comments before we wrap up, and then we can just finish this up. Anyone? Yes, Casey, please.

Ms. MICHEL: Yes. I will just jump in very briefly. Again, just to circle back to where we were at the beginning of this conversation. I think there is a lot of, again, good faith, bad faith, whatever it might be, commentary surrounding the notion of decolonizing Russia or the decolonization process in Russia, as kind of a veiled attempt at dismemberment, or partition, or whatever term you would like to use. This is obviously not the case.

I do want to close with this quote, which it has come to mind quite often on my end. Which is, quote, “as much as decolonizing Russia is important for the territories it formerly occupied, reprocessing its history is also key for the survival of Russia within its current boundaries.” That quote comes from Dr. Marat and Dr. Kassymbekova in a wonderful writeup they had recently. I just wanted to make sure to insert that in there as we wrap up the discussion today.

Mr. NISHANOV: That is fantastic. I love that. Anyone else? Please feel free to jump in.

Ms. MARAT: I think we had a very active person here, Mustafa Wasat were his name—[LAUGHS]—comment here: It is too big—this discussion is too big for 1 hour. I completely agree. I hope that we will continue discussing this topic. I think one other area, in addition to discussing Western scholarship, I think we should also engage the global south, why the global south continues to consider Russia as anti-Western, anti-colonial power, and denies the dignity of non-Russian people, and especially people of color, from the former Soviet space. That is—and we see implication of this attitudes now in how the global south is reluctant in supporting Ukraine’s plight against Russia’s war. That is another territory where we can go in the future as well, but thank you so much.

Mr. NISHANOV: Thank you. Any—

Mr. KASSYMBEKOVA: Yes. I could probably just add, as a historian, that probably many people from Russia would say, you know, what do we have to do with that? We did not do anything. So it is—so I would like to say that there is no—of course, the understanding of guilt, not collective guilt and not personal guilt. Of course, a lot of people ask themselves whose forefathers were probably engaged, you know, in different atrocities, we do not bear that responsibility for our forefathers.

The only responsibility that we have, and I would say it is a chance that we have, is to look at our past honestly, to listen to each other, to engage in an equal, and respectful, and sensitive dialog with each other, to listen to each other’s voices. It will make our societies better. It is a chance—decolonization is a chance, it is a promise for a better future, for a safe future. If we want to take this responsibility on looking honestly at our past and listening to each other, this is the responsibility of our generation that we can take, and we can make a better world and learn from the past.

Mr. NISHANOV: That is a fantastic point. Thank you so much for it. Ms. Tlis. You are on mute.

Ms. TLIS: Thank you. To conclude, I want to say that before this briefing I posted on Facebook a question: What do the Circassians want me to say, to ask for? The questions—the answers were unanimous. We want justice. We want the recognition of the genocide. We want to build a democratic future for our kids in a free society. This is me

speaking on behalf of those people. Also, I wanted to say that right now people are dying in Ukraine. Ukraine is fighting for its existence, just like my forefathers fought against, you know, the Russian imperial powers for their existence. We have lost, but I hope Ukraine wins, for the sake of the entire world. The world is not going to be the same as we know it today if Ukraine loses, so glory to Ukraine.

Mr. NISHANOV: "Heroyam slava."GLORY TO THE HEROES] Thank you so much. This has been, like I said, an incredible, I think, both educational but also emotional conversation. I want to acknowledge that there are a lot of emotions running the gamut. Again, by no means—and I think we try to convey this message—that this is not anti anything. This is pro something. This is pro-peace. This is pro-reform. This is pro-justice. This is about things that every human being in the world wants for themselves and, as you, Ms. Tlis said, for their kids. This is what we want, and this is the first conversation in what appears to be is a series of conversations about this specific issue.

Thank you so much for our panelist. I would be remiss not to thank Michael Cecire, my colleague at the—senior policy advisor at the Helsinki Commission, who, you know, just driving force behind this. This was his brainchild. He put this together. He organized everything. Michael, credit to you and to Rachel and Paul, who assisted or helped—together they worked on this. Michael, kudos to you and credit to you. Again, thank you to everyone, and appreciate. We are going to continue this conversation maybe in a bit of a different format. Thank you, once again. Goodbye.

[Whereupon, at 11:24 a.m., the briefing ended.]





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