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CONVERSATION

CHUKOTKA AND THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

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It seems that Russia's invasion of Ukraine came as a surprise to the Indigenous people of Chukotka. Indeed, at first, there was confusion among them, then ignorance and even denial of the war. Militarist state propaganda and exceptional cash payments to soldiers and their families, on the one hand, and the threat of imprisonment to protesters, on the other hand, convinced most Chukotkans to accept the war and even find excuses for it. Dozens of residents from every village in Chukotka signed up as "volunteers", leaving their homeland to kill or be killed. Those who stayed at home have adapted to the new reality and returned to their routines, at least outwardly. In my research, I trace the Chukotkans perceptions of a seemingly distant war. The Russian authorities have criminalised any sign of anti-war speech and given that I have no right to endanger the Chukotkans, I cannot conduct interviews and surveys. What I can do is monitor internet sources. Thanks to the growing role of social networks in the daily life of Chukotka settlements, I was able to observe what people discussed and how in order to get a sense of what they were really thinking. As a litmus test to monitor trends in people's views on the war, I tracked donations to the front lines and the campaigns to attract them. Online research significantly limits my ability to describe a comprehensive picture, but it does provide enough circumstantial information to outline the social trends in Chukotka's communities. A very preliminary conclusion from my observations is that the most valuable group of men were taken from the villages. This group is the backbone of local settlements, providing traditional food, new generations and identity. The remaining Chukotkans are stubbornly trying to return to everyday life, and the war is not something they care about. The result is that the Russian authorities have dealt yet another crushing blow to the identity of Chukotka's Indigenous peoples.

KEYWORDS: Chukotka, Ukraine, Russia, SMO, war, social media.

1 The author of this opinion piece decided to remain anonymous and uses a pseudonym. This opinion piece did not undergo an external review process.

INTRODUCTION

The distinctive geographical features of Chukotka have formed its unique sociocultural characteristics. It is a sparsely populated area where Indigenous peoples make up almost half the population, and traditional subsistence still dominates the Indigenous settlements. Although the region is remote from the densely populated central regions of Russia, it has a significant mining industry based on a rotational labour force. During Soviet times, Ukrainians were the second largest immigrant group in the region after the Russians (Kumo and Litvinenko 2019, 60) and are still present today. There are quite a few mixed Russian-Chukchi and Ukrainian-Chukchi families in Chukotka, among other ethnicities, and the number of Chukchi living in the central regions of Russia and Ukraine has been increasing for decades. Together, these processes have built a rather mixed demographic picture in which the Chukchi, although they retain their characteristics, have been forced to adapt to other cultures.

How the Russian invasion of Ukraine has affected the people of Chukotka, including the Indigenous population, is the question considered here. The Russian authorities project contradictory and confusing justifications for the so-called special military operation (SMO) in Ukraine. The undoubted result of this propaganda are terms such as "Ukrofashists" and "neo-Nazis of the Kyiv regime" having taken root in Russian society. Despite the endless stream of militant clichés, the attitude of the Chukotka residents towards Russia's war in Ukraine differs from that portrayed by the pro-government media. At the very least, there are signs that not all residents in Chukotka approve of the actions of the Russian authorities in Ukraine. Even among those forced to support the operation, there is an opinion that war is not the solution. In order to investigate these views, I was forced to use mainly observational methods through online sources and communication tools. I remained anonymous in my online research so as not to harm the residents of Chukotka; anyone who takes part in non-government-sanctioned research is at risk. I also did not want to create ethical dilemmas for people who have no choice in a society that does not accept a diversity of opinion. Taken together, these difficulties significantly slowed down and complicated my research.

In the past 15 years, social networks based on online messaging have become popular in the settlements of Chukotka on account of slow internet but affordable smartphones. First WhatsApp and then Telegram contributed to the creation of a special communication environment. Social messengers have opened new horizons of communication for villagers. Previously, any information about upcoming and past events and incidents spread slowly, allowing for several interpretations. Now, every member of a social media group, which is almost every village resident or household, can be a spokesperson or newsmaker. Hunters easily gather together whenever a hunt is

necessary or invite villagers to the shore after a successful hunt to collect their share of the walruses or whales they have caught. Every villager has immediate access to the entire population of the village to place an advertisement for the sale of harvested fish, berries and wildlife. Even the local authorities use social media to inform villagers about formal events or hazardous natural phenomena. I am inclined to believe that social media more or less reflects the sociocultural appearance of the modern Chukotka settlement. Telegram channels have become a fairly popular means for regional authorities to inform the population, ahead of WhatsApp and other social media, such as VKontakte, Odnoklassniki and, even more so, Facebook or Instagram, now banned by the federal authorities in Russia. I subscribed to the two most popular Chukotka Telegram channels dedicated to the war in Ukraine, "Chukotka to the Frontline" (Chukotka to the Frontline n.d.) and "People's Front: Chukotka" (People's Front: Chukotka n.d.). Several local Telegram channels in the Russian regions bordering Ukraine, such as Belgorod (Belgorod-Molniya n.d.) and Bryanskiy Vestnik (Bryansk Bulletin n.d.) were additional sources of information on the impact of the war on Russians.

Tracking two indicators – donations and their justification – I put together the puzzling perception of the war among Chukotka residents. I extracted information about the size and frequency of donations from Chukotka residents in support of the "Chukotka to the Frontline" movement as well as what the collected funds are spent on from the daily flow of messages and discussions. This data were then entered into a chart to visualise the dynamics. Although patriotism dominates the movement's Telegram channel, the dissenting thoughts of some of its members occasionally break through. I therefore set out to determine the frequency and number of dissenting statements; however, channel administrators more often than not beat me to the punch by deleting opposing statements. The majority of the group, including administrators, are supporters of the war, and their actions are formulaic: opponents are blocked, grieving parents and wives are calmed down, and those who in desperation ask questions deemed too uncomfortable are warned that they risk being subject to criminal prosecution. In general, no matter how hard I tried to adhere to quantitative methods, qualitative interpretation regained its place in this study. To complement the picture, I also observed information about current events in regional media, such as the regional newspaper Krainii Sever (Krainii Sever n.d.), the Telegram channel "ProChukotku/News" (Pro Chukotku/News. n.d.) and Radio Purga (Purga Radio n.d.). The Telegram channels of the regional governor, first Roman Kopin (Kopin n.d.) and then Vladislav Kuznetsov (Kuznetsov n.d.), and the State Duma deputy from Chukotka, Elena Evtyukhova (Evtyukhova n.d.), completed the general agenda dictated by the authorities.

OBSERVING SOCIAL MEDIA

After two years of war, the attitude of Chukotka residents towards the SMO in Ukraine has changed significantly. Not a trace remains of the initial rejection and ignorance. It is not easy to find out what the population of Chukotka really thinks about the war in Ukraine, but volunteer participation in the war among men and mass support of the front line by women are rather common in the region. These two groups of Chukotka residents are the focus of my research.

Military

The first several months of the Russian invasion of Ukraine were carried out by soldiers serving under contract. Service under contract was a good opportunity before the war for villagers to secure a prosperous life. By concluding a military contract, young Chukotka residents secured a full-time job, qualified training, early retirement and other social benefits. This is in addition to the potential employment opportunities after military service in law enforcement, which have expanded significantly in post-Soviet Russia. The first three residents of Chukotka killed in the war in Ukraine (Prochukotku.ru 2022b; Prochukotku.ru 2022c) were declared war heroes, but their deaths frightened the residents. In the spring and summer of 2022, there was almost no mention of the war on social media. Watching villages' social media, I got the feeling that people were ignoring the war, hoping it would pass them by.

By the end of the summer, Russian authorities announced the mobilisation of Russians, including the inhabitants of Chukotka. According to Volkov (2022), Russians were shocked by the compulsory "partial" mobilisation. The war, which seemed so far away and being waged by professional soldiers, suddenly came knocking – perhaps not at every door, but everyone heard the knocks. Unlike soldiers serving under contract, those who were mobilised were not ready and not motivated to serve or fight. They had their ordinary lives, which were suddenly interrupted by mandatory participation in a war. This was the first year of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the authorities had not yet drilled into people's heads the analogy with the Second World War when the homeland was in danger. In any case, mobilisation occurs in accordance with the law, meaning that its violation entails a sense of guilt among people and criminal prosecution by the authorities.

The authorities fulfilled the mobilization plan and provided for the short-term needs of the Russian army in personnel for the winter of 2022 and 2023. However, because the mobilisation caused a negative reaction in Russian society, the authorities looked for other strategies for recruiting the military. First, a propaganda campaign was launched to attract additional soldiers for the "holy" war against the "Ukronazis". Chukotka's social and mass media proudly called the Russian

soldiers who bought into the propaganda tricks "volunteers". The term appeared in contrast to "mobilised" and denoted the free choice of a citizen in the decision to go to war. There was also a group of prisoners, residents of Chukotka, who went to war in exchange for amnesty. Wagner, the notorious private military company, announced a recruitment drive for prison inmates, guaranteeing their release after six months of combat (Fokht et al. 2023). I learned about these Chukotka prisoners from messages in the Chukotka Telegram channels, which regularly publish information about fellow countrymen killed in Ukraine. In the villages' social media, villagers know each other personally. The villagers, knowing well the nature of their criminal neighbours, laughed at the statements of the pro-government media about the selfless, heroic prisoners. On the contrary, I also found a handwritten letter published in a telegram channel from a young criminal who, being a volunteer, sent an apology to his fellow villagers for his criminal activities. It is impossible to know how sincere his apology was, but it was obvious that the war mixed people, made them the same, regardless of whether they were criminals or law-abiding citizens – they all agreed to kill and be rewarded for it.

The Chukotka authorities did not publicly announce how many Chukotka residents went to fight in Ukraine as part of the mobilisation and how many went there voluntarily. In the fall of 2022, there was speculation that several people were mobilised from each village, with as many as 10 from some. Since the spring of 2023, the number of volunteers has increased sharply, and again, there were rumours of a similar number of 10 volunteers, but from almost every village (see Figure 1). This is a large amount given the small population of Chukotka, which numbered 47,480 people as of 1 January 2023 (Chukotka.rf n.d.). Unable to verify the precise number of men taken from the villages by the war, I made approximate calculations. According to the Chukotka mass media, the total number of Chukotkans killed from February 2022 to January 2024 was 60 individuals, including 37 Indigenous residents; these numbers were extrapolated using calculations I found in independent internet research. Olga Ivshina (2023) catalogued reports published by local authorities throughout Russia about soldiers killed in the war. Although the figure of 33,236 killed is clearly lower than the actual losses, they are confirmed. Putin stated that there are 617,000 Russian soldiers in Ukraine (Aksienov 2023). As a rough estimate, this means that the percentage of soldiers whose deaths were announced in the media is about 5.4%. When we take into account the official number of 60 killed Chukotka residents (January 2024), this means approximately 1,100 Chukotkan residents, including roughly seven hundred Indigenous people, went to fight in Ukraine. The figure is likely higher, but as of yet, there are no other data. The above calculations to some extent concur with rumours circulating on social networks in Chukotka. The high percentage of young Indigenous villagers participating

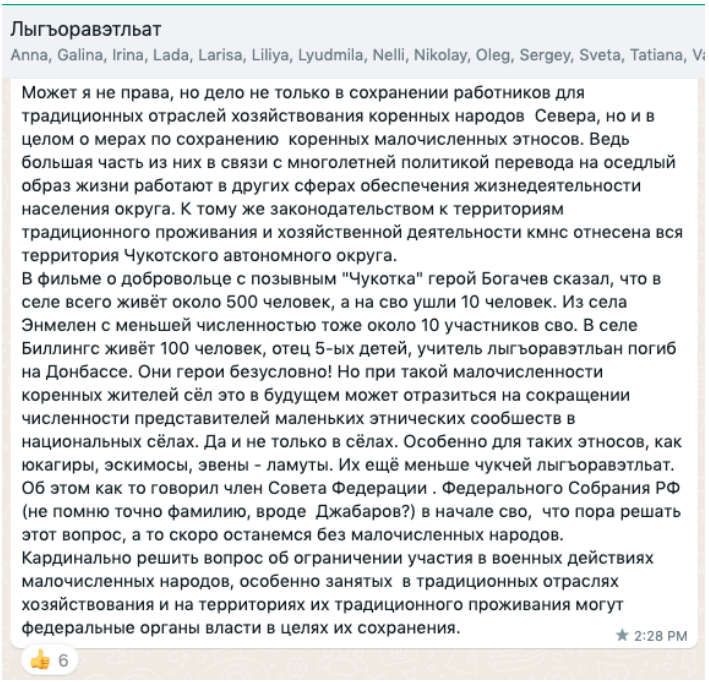

Figure 1. Online discussion about the impact of the special military operation on the future of the Indigenous peoples of Chukotka.

Translation: Maybe I'm wrong, but the matter is not only about preserving workers for the traditional economic sectors of the Indigenous peoples of the North. […]
In a documentary about a volunteer contract military man, Bogachiov, the main character, said that there were about 500 people in his village, and 10 people went to the SMO. About 10 Indigenous residents from the village of Enmelen – the population there is smaller – also went to the SMO. The population in the village of Billings is only 100 residents; their teacher, Lygyoravetlan, the father of 5 children, died in the Donbas. They are definitely heroes! But given the small number of Indigenous people in the villages, such a number of war dead may reduce the number of small Indigenous communities in the future. […]*(Lygooravetliat, 2024)*

in the Russian invasion of Ukraine worries the Chukchi elders. Despite the real danger of criminal prosecution "for fakes about the Russian army" {Russian legislation justification to stop criticism of the government's decision to invade Ukraine}, they are sometimes willing to discuss this issue on social media, but without much result.

Why Did the Chukotkans Go to War?

The first combatants to invade Ukraine were soldiers already serving signed contracts, which meant they had to carry out their orders. The second wave of Chukotka's war participants were mobilised; that is, they had a choice between going to war or going to prison for breaking the law. For almost a year now, volunteers have also been going to war, having made their choice voluntarily, for personal reasons. The mass media point to the patriotic motivation of defending the homeland from Ukrainian "fascists", which is then echoed on social media and repeated by contract soldiers who participate in discussions on such topics on social media. One volunteer, for example, stated that he was indifferent to the SMO in Ukraine until he learned from Russian television that German Leopard tanks had arrived in the newly formed "Russian" regions, writing, "I have to go to defend my homeland from the Nazi invasion, just like our grandfathers did." From discussions on social media, I learned that someone went to war to avenge a brother, a son, father or friend killed in the first two waves of army reinforcements for the war. Widespread hatred of the West and revenge for the collapsed USSR also circulate within the list of motivations. In the villages of Chukotka, male solidarity matters too. Members of one fraternal group, such as a hunting or reindeer herding team, signed a contract because their informal leaders did so. This solidarity can turn negative when alcohol is involved, with some men signing contracts while drunk. When they sober up, they learn they have signed a military contract joining the Russian Armed Forces and there is nothing they can do about it.

Only the government in its recruitment campaign indicates the true reason why volunteers go to war – money. The Russian government and, separately, regional authorities offer a fairly large set of social benefits to military personnel serving under contract (Prochukotku.ru 2022e; Prochukotku.ru 2022f). According to the mass media, a soldier who participates in the SMO has a salary of about 200,000 roubles ($2,300) a month; there is also emphasis on compensation for the family of 5,000,000 roubles ($55,000) in the event the soldier is killed. The Chukotka authorities also publish information about the compensation the regional government provides to the soldiers and their families in addition to federal funding (Fig. 2). The most notable figures in these advertisements were first 300,000 and then 400,000 roubles ($3,500–$4,500) as a one-time bonus to a soldier upon signing a contract and from 500,000 to 1,000,000 roubles ($5,500–$10,000) in case a soldier is wounded. It is necessary to clarify that the declared salaries and compensation represent a huge sum for an ordinary family in Russia, including in Chukotka. Combatants returning from the war to their home village a few months later with a lot of money are the best advertisement for those who want to pay off debts, buy an apartment, a vehicle or something else. Poverty, loan debts, dreams of living as advertised, in a good house, owning a vehicle and travelling, overpower all fears and doubts.

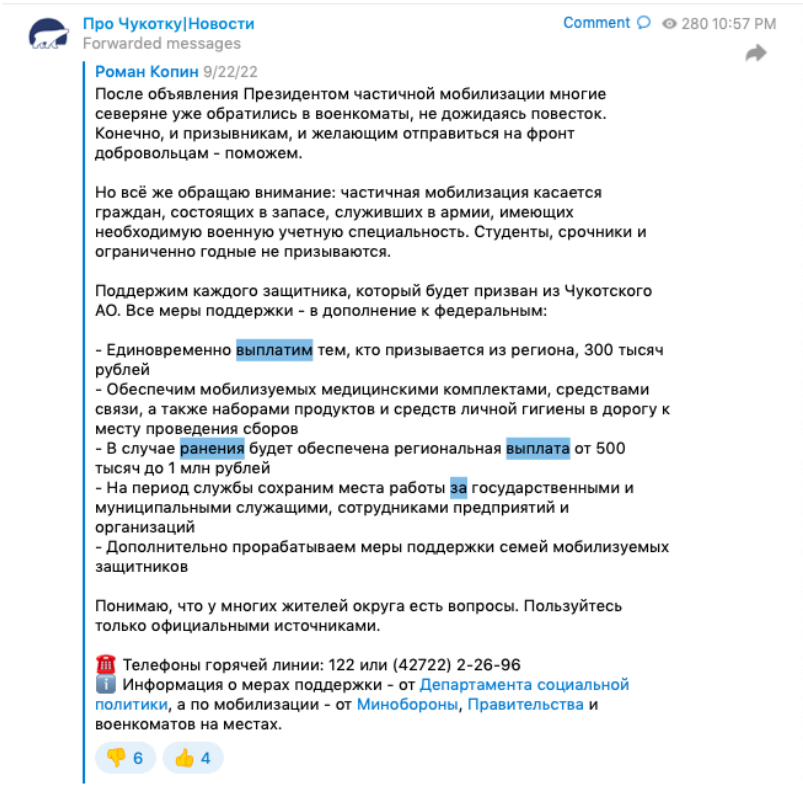

Figure 2 Regional financial support for mobilised residents of Chukotka, in addition to federal. September 2022, Prochukotku.ru.

Money is a strong justification, especially when it is supplemented by patriotic propaganda. According to the media, almost everyone killed from Chukotka was a hero. The obituaries usually state that a volunteer was killed while covering the retreat of their comrades or evacuating wounded brothers in arms. Death, injury, and broken families are drowned out by money and media glorification, and ultimately strengthen the regime. For now. In any case, there are enough volunteers in Chukotka, and apparently in Russia, that the authorities do not consider it necessary to launch another mobilisation. Which raises another question: Will a growing number of dead and disabled Russian citizens, including the inhabitants of Chukotka, make people understand that neither they nor the country needs the war?

Civilians: Everything to the Front Line, Everything for Victory?

During the two years of Russia's war in Ukraine, the attitude of the Chukotka people towards the SMO has changed radically. In the first spring and summer, the Chukotkans seemed to ignore the war on most social media, discussing everyday things as if nothing else had happened. People followed the news of the ongoing war with dismay, with the occasional patriotic comment about the war either causing a backlash or a pause in conversation. Eventually, participants of Chukotka's social media became more involved in discussions about Russia's war in Ukraine. News of both drafted and contract soldiers, fellow countrymen, killed and wounded began to arrive in the villages. Authorities then pulled young villagers from the communities as part of the "partial" mobilisation (RIA Novosti 2022a). Once the Chukotkan social media began to convey that the majority of those called up for the war in the villages were marine hunters and reindeer herders, Russia's war in Ukraine ceased to feel distant and alien. The number of mobilised indigenous people was so large that even Roman Kopin, the governor of Chukotka at that time and a supporter of the war, was forced to promise that not a single sea hunter and reindeer herder would be mobilised again. The autumn mobilisation gave rise to various feelings among the Chukotka communities. There was still some discussion of the war, with reposts of local newspaper articles calling on the residents to provide all possible assistance. These publications did not prompt much discussion. The lack of reaction could signify a negative attitude towards the war. The poverty of the villagers, whose income is barely enough to survive on, is also a good reason to withhold support. However, some group members warned that discussing the war, especially anything related to the soldiers on the front lines is prohibited because "the enemy" might be monitoring social media sites.

In any case, trying to continue ignoring the war, as seemed to be the case throughout summer 2022, when only contract soldiers were being sent to Ukraine, was no longer an option. Now that their relatives and friends were at war, the villagers were forced, if not to support the war, then certainly to worry about the life and health of the soldiers. This also means that a killed or wounded relative should be seen as a hero rather than an invader. Chukotkan social media had no choice but to justify the participation of the Chukotka residents in Russia's war in Ukraine. Patriotic conversations and the glorification of the dead soldiers prevail over the rare mournful questions of the relatives of those killed, such as why the war is necessary and why fellow countrymen had to die. The money generously poured into society by the authorities drowned out the desperate cries of mothers and wives mourning their fallen men. Along with public praise for fallen heroes, monuments, praise boards and hero desks, the goal was to force women to be proud of their sons and husbands killed in combat.

There are those who believe that regardless of the reason for the war, Russia's soldiers should be supported. Many Chukotkans have willingly transferred money and sent clothes, shoes and medical kits to the front. Combined with the overwhelming poverty of the villagers, the propaganda that poisons Russian civil society has also made the war a tangible way of solving one's financial problems. The mothers and wives of soldiers have become leaders in their support. Knitting socks and mittens, weaving camouflage nets, both have become popular activities among grandmothers and mothers, a brand to unite people and make them happy that they can contribute to the SMO. These women raised money to buy food, clothes, shoes and special equipment first and then equipment that helps soldiers kill, such as drones, vision devices and so on. Donations for the Chukotka soldiers participating in the war are difficult to interpret unambiguously. At first glance, people want to somehow help relatives and friends who are at war. Whatever one may say, this is also a sign of approval of the current Russian ideological concept of a unique "Russian world" (Suslov 2018), a world built on the confrontation of cultures and the division of spheres of influence. This worldview is based on coercion and force and is contrary to the widespread use of the term "voluntariness".

USSR 2.0.: Reflection in Donations

Money was the decisive argument in convincing Chukotkan volunteers to go to war in Ukraine. And it appears it is enough to compensate families for the loss or wounding of their loved ones in the SMO. However, the Chukotka people not participating in this war also express their attitude towards it in cash. Donations to support the SMO have become commonplace in Chukotka. By the summer of 2022, it was revealed that Russian soldiers were often left alone to secure needs, such as tactical clothing, survival gear and medical kits. This issue intensified during the autumn mobilisation when even assault rifles were not provided to all the mobilised soldiers (Fokht et al. 2022).

There are three main sources of financial support for soldiers from Chukotka: the state budget, individual and group donations, and donations from commercial companies. Supplies for the Chukotka forces are financed through the regional government's budget (Fig. 2). A special regional foundation Chukotka to the Frontline (not to be confused with Alexander Pravednykh and Nadezhda Efimova's donation movement) focuses on donations from commercial companies. The most popular and significant in terms of the volume of cash collected from individuals is the abovementioned donation movement of the same name, "Chukotka to the Frontline", under the informal leadership of Alexander Pravednykh, which began its activities in the summer of 2022 (Prochukotku.ru 2022a). Pravednykh is what is called a real "Chukot", a man who cannot imagine life outside the region. He worked for many years in various positions

in the Anadyr district telephone service department, currently lives in Anadyr and runs a small business. Pravednykh was not a public figure and his political activity was limited to participation in the elections of members of the Anadyr District Council in 2008, he was not elected (Info.vybory.pro n.d.). The movement is an example of a popular initiative supported by the authorities, the media and the people. The spark that ignited Pravednykh to establish the movement came after he learned that the foundation to which he had donated money was spending the funds on employee salaries (Prochukotku.ru. 2022a). In response, he created a Telegram channel with several regional mass media figures joining him, headed by Nadezhda Efimova, the director of the Chukotka News Agency (CNA; Fig. 3). In addition to advertising in the media, CNA uses the same Telegram channel as Pravednykh to attract donations. Although they have different bank accounts, it seems that Pravednykh and Efimova managed to coordinate the donations of the Telegram channel members between themselves because there were no noticeable signs of tension or conflict over money on the channel. This movement primarily provided soldiers with tactical clothing and personal protection as well as practical equipment, such as saws, axes and more. Hospital equipment and medical kits were another major area of supply. They later expanded the aid with auxiliary equipment, such as generators and vehicles. In the second year of the war, the information Pravednykh shared in his reports to donors began to show subtle signs of weapons-related equipment shipments, such as electronic jammers, drones and thermal imaging sights.

Government and municipal officials have tried several times to exploit the popularity of the "Chukotka to the Frontline" movement. They joined the fund in delivering equipment to combat units, made statements about cooperation and promoted the idea that the fund would be successful thanks to them. This greatly offended the participants of the movement, and they repeatedly pointed out the injustice of such statements. The last big attempt to seize the initiative occurred in early autumn 2023. Kremlin's protégé and governor of Chukotka, Vladislav Kuznetsov, used any means at his disposal to promote his popularity in the region. This was when the government of Chukotka created the foundation with the same name, Chukotka to the Frontline.[2] More criticism followed from the movement's participants. Pravednykh pointed out several times the difference between the movement he controls and the fund managed by the governor's office. It was clear that he did not pretend to represent all of Chukotka, but he really did not want his movement under the control of the officials. Over time, however, the conflict was somehow resolved, with no more confusing announcements or tense messages on Pravednykh's Telegram channel.

2 It is common practice in Russia to use a similar name or title to replace an independent person or organization. For example, in the election process, the authorities sometimes promote a group of people with the same name as an opposition candidate in order to steal his votes.

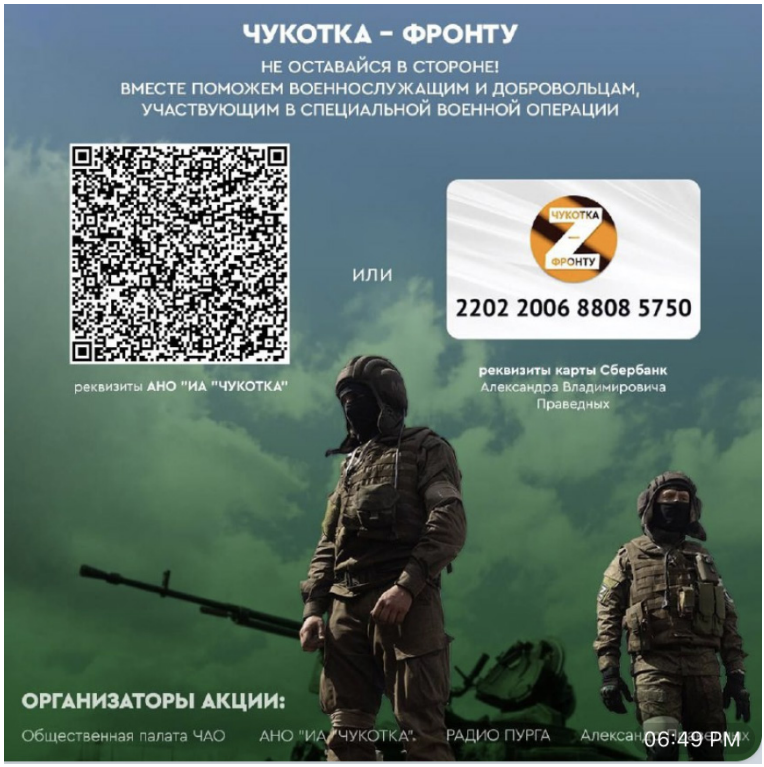

Figure 3. Announcement of fundraising details in support of Chukotkans on the frontline (SMO). From the Telegram channel "Chukotka to the Frontline".

The channel (Fig. 4) became the basis of communication between administrators and donors. The channel administrators have been exploring the best option to provide donors with satisfactory reporting information and as leverage to increase donations. In the beginning, the number and frequency of donations were small, so they mentioned each donation and the name of the donor. Later, Pravednykh decided to inform donors every couple of days, and sometimes, when he was busy personally delivering aid to frontline units, once a week. On the contrary, Efimova, head of CNA, continued to publish the daily total amount of donations and list the names of donors. Individuals and groups of individuals transferred money to Pravednykh's personal bank account, whereas companies and groups of employees from regional and municipal departments preferred to transfer money to the agency's.

In the initial period, while the "Chukotka to the Frontline" channel administration was looking for the best way to inform donors, things were a bit confusing.

Figure. 4. Group info and avatar of the Telegram channel "Chukotka to the Frontline".

Until October 2022, it was difficult to determine which account was used for donations. Therefore, I simply divided all donations equally between both accounts, except for those contributions where the note clearly indicated which account the donations went to. Figure 5 summarises the donations to Pravednykh's bank account, that of CNA and their combined amount. The amount of donations should be, if not exact, then at least somewhat close to the true numbers. According to the website mk.chukotka.ru, over four months in 2023, Pravednykh and CNA accumulated 11 million roubles (Kovalikhin 2023; MK-Chukotka.ru 2023), and the data in my chart corroborate these figures.

In the first few months, the amount of donations was small due to various circumstances. Firstly, the majority of Chukotka's population was still in a state of shock from the unprecedented war in Europe. In addition, the Russian authorities have in recent years described the Russian army as a well-paid, well-equipped, professional

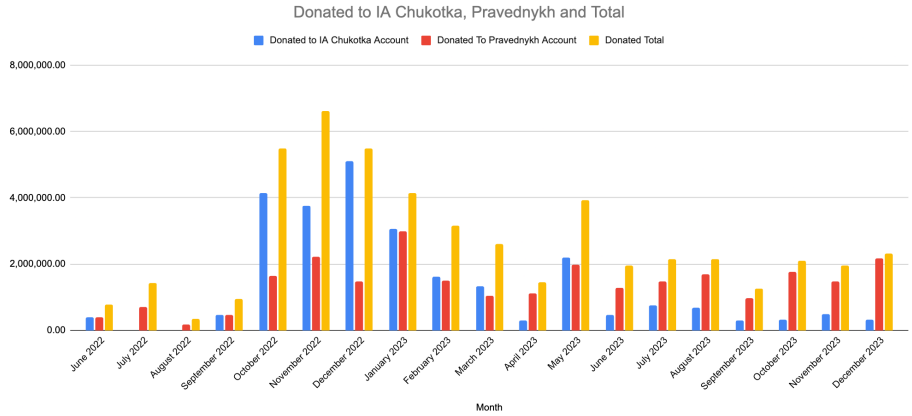

Figure. 5. Donations to the "Chukotka to the Frontline" movement bank accounts.

army capable of defeating any adversary in a local conflict. Finally, not many Chukotka people were involved in the invasion of Ukraine. At least during the first six months of the war, the Chukotka media mentioned killed soldiers from Chukotka only three times (Prochukotku.ru. 2022b; 2022c; 2022d). When the mobilisation began in the fall, it involved a huge number of Russians and a relatively large number of Chukotka residents in the SMO. This mobilisation raised questions about the ability of Russia to supply its army (Moscow Online 2022) as the mobilised soldiers experienced a shortage of military clothing and equipment. Since then, donations have increased, albeit in the winter of 2022 and 2023 it was mainly money from Chukotka companies (Fig. 5).

As of the beginning of summer 2023, donations have fallen and look approximately the same, about two million roubles per month. There are some possible reasons for the decline in donations. Several similar movements have emerged in the region, including small ones in the districts. The pro-Putin "People's Front: Chukotka" collects donations for the frontline. From time to time, advertisements from civilian volunteers or soldiers appear on social media to raise money to purchase transport, equipment and medicine for the soldiers. Scammers also collect donations (RIA Novosti 2022b; Sidorov 2022), presenting themselves as volunteer foundations that need donations to support the Russian army.

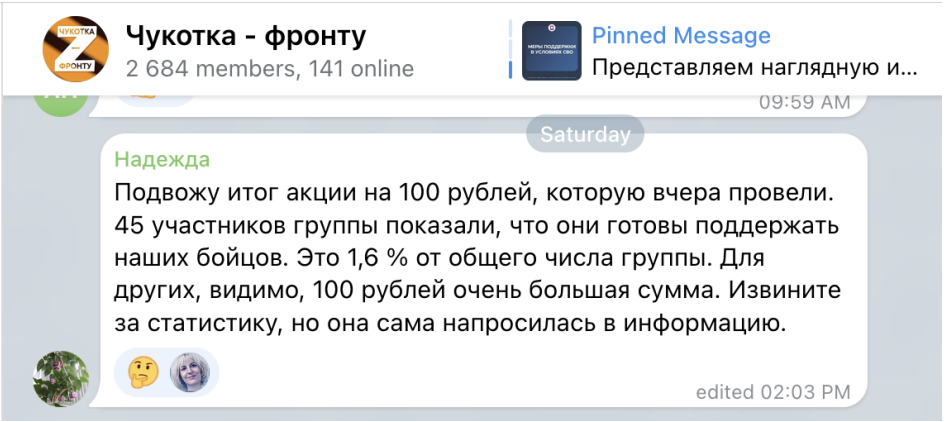

Figure. 6. Nadezhda Efimova's message summarises the call to donate 100 roubles to see how many Telegram channel subscribers will donate to the bank accounts of "Chukotka to the Frontline" (6 July 2024).

Do the Majority of Chukotka Residents Support the War through Donations?

The number of members (or rather subscribers) in the Telegram channel "Chukotka to the Frontline", more than 2,600 individuals by the end of 2023, does not reflect the number of donors. Donations are made not only by subscribers but also by random visitors to the channel. At the same time, as Pravednykh and Efimova repeatedly noted in their disappointed messages, the real number of donors is actually small – only several dozen people compared to the 2,684 subscribers (July 2024) on the Telegram channel (Fig. 6).

The problem stemmed from the fact that the movement's enthusiastic supporters wanted it to be massive. To do this, movement activists signed up several dozen people at a time to the Telegram channel using the contacts their phones. While activists were pleased with the growing number of participants, new subscribers often learned they were members of the channel several weeks or even months later. They wrote in the channel chat that they had just accidentally found out the real goals of the movement and justified it by claiming they believed it was just one of many propaganda channels. It is likely that among the subscribers of the Telegram channel, there are many who want to keep abreast of events but do not want to donate money to the war for various reasons. They limited themselves to consuming a few patriotic videos, stories, slogans and poems posted on the news feed and, eventually, tired of it and simply stopped checking for updates.

To maintain the volume of donations, the administrators of the "Chukotka to the Frontline" channel host various events to attract Chukotka residents.

The Chukotka News Agency publishes an advertisement for the channel on its website prochukotku.ru. The Telegram channel, at the same time, publishes daily documentary films as well as upbeat stories and photographs of everyday military life on the front lines and in hospitals. Video and audio recordings of calls from Russian celebrities to unite and donate to the war are often posted. Patriotic and militant folk poetry and song performances occupy a significant place. The obituaries of fallen soldiers always cause waves of condolences and subsequent donations.

Channel administrators also diversify the donation methods to make them accessible and attractive. In December 2022, Efimova addressed the group members:

> Good morning, Chukotka! Today is the last Thursday of the outgoing year. There is very little time left until the New Year! Shall we continue our pre-holiday fireworks? So, let me remind you: 100 and 300 roubles – a firecracker; 500 and 1,000 roubles – fireworks; 3,000 roubles – a volley from the Tsar's Cannon. Pick up the baton! (Telegram channel "Chukotka to the Frontline", 27 December 2022)

Of all this variety, the channel members fell in love with the term "volley", although its categorisation disappeared completely, with any amount of donation, in the end, called a "volley". Around the same time, Efimova proposed "cutting off the *khvostiki* [tails]" (Fig. 7), that is, a campaign to round bank totals to the nearest thousand roubles. For example, if the owner of a bank account has 23,152 roubles in his account, then 152 roubles can be transferred to the "Chukotka to the Frontline" movement, rounding down the amount in the account to 23,000 roubles.

> Nadezhda Efimova admin: +961.07 roubles is the *khvostik* from my debit card to our best guys! The whole country is praying for you! You are the best, the bravest, the worthiest in the world! All the warmth of our souls to our defenders!
> […]
> Anna Chukotka: Good idea! I'll also transfer the *khvostik* from my debit card now. Channel members, join us! Let's move the *khvostik* from the debit card today. If 2,156 people transfer at least 50 roubles each, there will already be 107,800. Our defenders are really looking forward to this help! (Telegram channel "Chukotka to the Frontline", 15 December 2022)
> *Call to cut off the kvostiki. Telegram channel "Chukotka to the Frontline", 15 December 2022 – translated by the Author*

Since then, the most popular amount among channel members has become 333 roubles, although this was not the original idea. Rather often, channel members

encouraged each other to limit their festivities and instead donate money to the front line. Another suggestion was to give up a morning cup of coffee and send its cost as a donation. Administrators used any means (poetry, stories, videos and audio recordings), any reason (obituaries of soldiers, photos and videos of wounded soldiers and civilians, destroyed cities) and asked for any amount of money, desperate to raise enough money to cover the soldiers' requests for military equipment and clothing. However, the war is somewhere far away, and life goes on. The Chukotkans must survive in the here and now, dealing with everyday challenges. Children grow up and start new families. They have children who need to be raised and educated. Parents need to earn money for clothes, food, housing, treatments and so onThe daily expenses of maintaining a family, already limited, are strained by the war and its economic consequences. All these circumstances, of course, limit the size of donations. It is also quite possible that these everyday worries of Chukotkans about survival are intensified by their doubts about the need to kill Ukrainian soldiers in order to "return Russian" regions in Ukraine to Russia.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

More than two years have passed since the start of the Russian "special military operation" in Ukraine, a war that has shaken the fundamental legal and moral principles of modern society. The reaction of Chukotka residents to the war has changed over time and continues to fluctuate. The trend points can be simplified to rejection, acceptance, compartmentalisation and a return to routine life. Indeed, there are now signs that the residents of Chukotka are getting used to living under such conditions. Death and disability have become commonplace, and state-ordered murder is simply another source of making money. However, in the world media, the situation looks similar. In the spring of 2022, Russia's invasion of Ukraine was almost the only topic in the news, whereas today, even the most horrific civilian massacres in Ukraine barely make the news cycle.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of the Russian authorities in the invasion of Ukraine was the blatant dismantling of Russian democracy. The authorities, juggling the terms "denazification" and "demilitarisation" of Ukraine as well as contradictory slogans, such as the reunification of Russian lands and the construction of a multipolar world, called for the consolidation of the country in the name of these goals. This unity, as they understood it, meant adherence to government policy, and any deviation was prohibited under threat of imprisonment. Thus, Russians, including the Chukotkans, are forced to hide their thoughts about the war in Ukraine. Researchers are having a hard time learning people's true opinions. By identifying and systematising the diverse picture of how Russians perceive the war,

they come to the conclusion that the general trend does not quite coincide with what the Russian government would like. According to the Public Sociology Laboratory (2024), the majority of Russians are dissatisfied with the war against Ukraine but do not oppose it. At the same time, even when justifying the war, they do not turn into its supporters.

The online monitoring in this research cannot reflect the accuracy of the full-fledged ethnographic study conducted by the Public Sociology Laboratory, but its results showed a similar pattern in Russians' attitudes towards the war in Ukraine. There are government officials who claim that dying for the motherland is an honour, but they themselves are not going to die for it. They obtain power and money in exchange for leading people into combat for the "Russian world". There are activists who believe in the goals of the SMO and make efforts to support it. There are those who benefit from participating in the war, either financially by sacrificing their life and health or by supplying instruments of death. Most still see war as something the government does, not something they need to care about. Those Chukotka residents who do not agree with the government policies, hiding their thoughts, try to avoid militant activities. Unfortunately, today, it is not enough to shy away from militant cries; everyone must publicly declare their devotion to the fight for the "Russian world" – people are forced to shout their support. However, the size of the donations shows that the war in Ukraine at least not their priority.

The most valuable stratum of the Indigenous villages was decimated, having drawn skilled men of reproductive age to war. This group is the backbone of the local settlements, providing food, identity and new generations of Chukotkans. Money, patriotism, masculine solidarity, fear and alcohol have mixed together and pulled the Chukotkan out of their communities in the hope of surviving in a rapidly and dramatically changing world. Some of them will die or become disabled in combat operations. Those who do survive will return to their settlements with post-traumatic stress. Significant changes in cultural identity, even compared to the effects of globalisation, are brewing in Chukotkan communities.

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