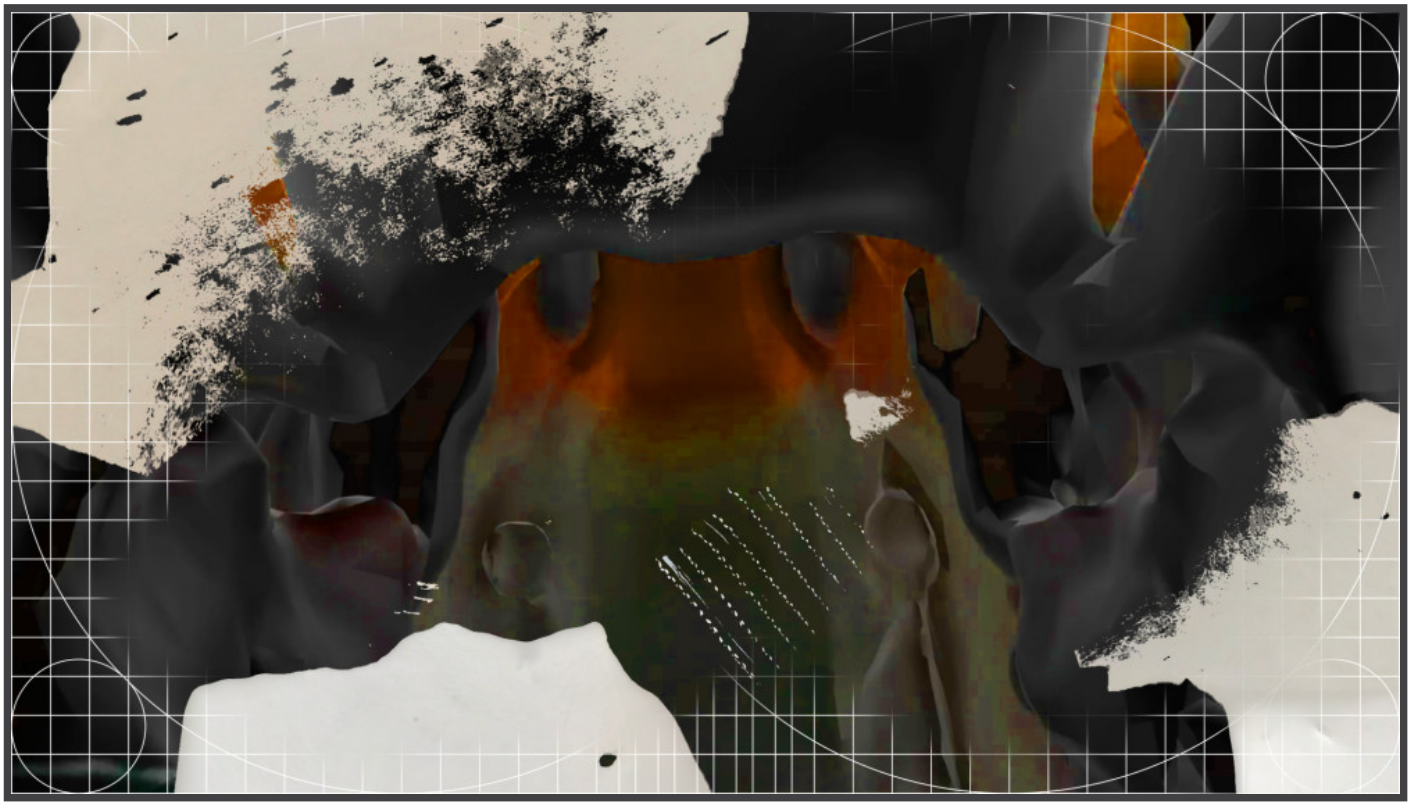
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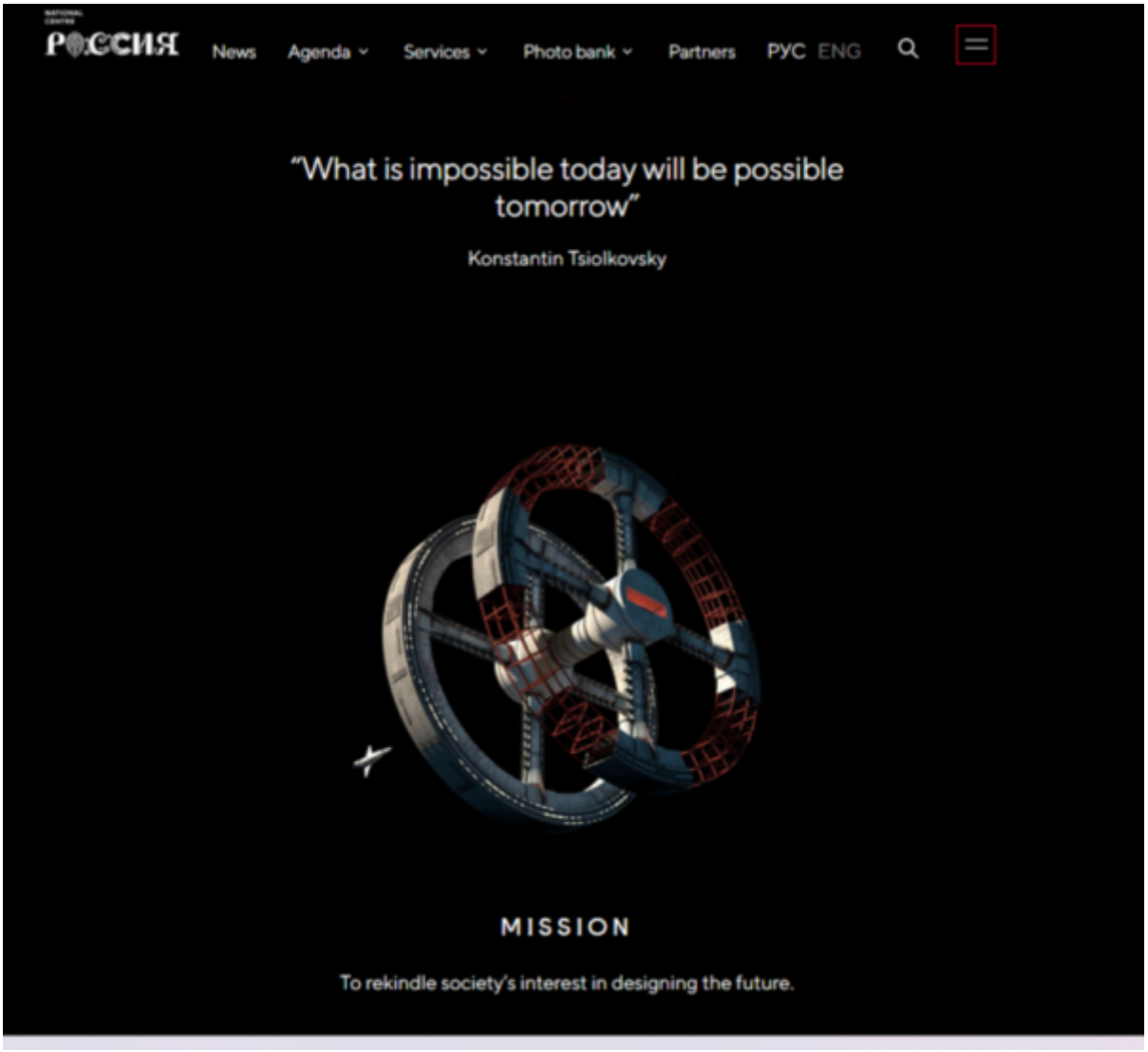
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The Persistence of Settler Futures

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As this article shows, Russia mimics the methods of normalizing colonial occupation and resource extraction practiced by other empires while insisting on its uniqueness. A close reading of the exhibition «Russia» at the All-Russian Exhibition Centre allows for a deeper understanding of the intersections between visual culture and the material infrastructures of settler-colonial occupation. Most recent transimperial collaboration between USA and Russia rendered Ukraine and Russia-occupied Indigenous lands as resources. This article looks at the ways, extractive perspectives and narratives, are developed within Russia.





Screenshot from the website https://future.russia.ru/en [https://future.russia.ru/en]

«The unity of the people is determined not only by traditions but also by the vision of the future. A dream, if you like. And we, of course, dreamed and dream of a sovereign and strong country. In this fair world order, people of every nationality are given the opportunity to realize their talent, to be happy and successful, to live in a safe world,» stated the First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Russian presidential administration, Sergey Kiriyenko, at the opening remarks of the international symposium «Inventing the Future» in Moscow in November 2024.[1] The symposium marked the opening of the «National Centre ‹Russia›» and included both local participants, ranging from science fiction writers to government officials and a museum director, and international ones, such as Italian science fiction writer Roberto Quaglia, entrepreneur and founder of the Cybertecture International architectural firm James Law, and Laxman Kumar Behera, associate professor at the Special Centre for National Security Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, India.

The online page of the symposium includes a picture of Soviet engineer Konstantin Tsiolkovsky alongside a 3D model of the «Space Station V» from Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). The symposium was advertised with space-related and futuristic imagery. It included panels on «Russian cosmism» and cyberpunk as well as the workshop «Foresight of Worlds and Times,» sponsored by the Russian Atomic Corporation, Rosatom. [2]

The National Centre has become a permanent venue for the «Russia» exhibition originally presented at the All-Russian Exhibition Centre from November 2023 to July 2024. As

described by Kiriyenko, the function of the exhibition is to «showcase the successes of the Putin era.»[3] Replicating the structure of the Soviet-era «Exhibition of the Achievements of the National Economy,» «Russia» consists of pavilions representing various territories that are considered part of Russia, governmental structures, and national corporations. One of the central functions of the exhibition is to project and preserve an idea of what the so-called Russian Federation promotes as «territorial integrity.» Although the exhibition is primarily directed at a domestic audience, the international symposium at its re-opening as a permanent «National Centre» shows the intersections of international and local propaganda narratives aimed at normalizing the colonial occupation. The futuristic and space-related imagery of the symposium serves a similar purpose: it takes the normalization of the colonial occupation of lands to a next level by reproducing the imagery of interstellar exploration and conquest.

The original exhibition closed with a «Russia Does Not End Anywhere» concert and was then moved to its permanent venue. The concert title implies that Russia's borders do not end anywhere, words first uttered by Vladimir Putin in 2016, just two years after the Russian occupation of Crimea, and since frequently repeated to normalize colonial invasions. The concert consisted of performances said to be representative[4] of Indigenous lands occupied by Russia with the aim of promoting the greatness of Russian culture and portraying the «Russian world» as endless and global, spanning the borders of multiple nations.



Sergey Bobylev/RIA Novosti. Performance of *Matushka*

An example of the former would be the song *Matushka* (Mommy), in which the titular mother describes Russia: «For me, it is Holy Rus,[5] for others, it is a splinter.»[6] The last part of the lyrics underscores the imagined isolation of Russia by describing its position as antagonistic to the rest of the world. Similarly, one of the points of pride of the Chechen Republic, according to the exhibition website, is that its current head, Ramzan Kadyrov, has the highest number of Western sanctions among Russian politicians placed on him. The local anti-Western narratives, positioning Russia and Russian officials as victims of international hostility, align with the way Russia positions itself internationally. For example, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs recently published a report titled «Regarding the Situation with the Glorification of Nazism and the Spread of Neo-Nazism and Other Practices That

Contribute to Fueling Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance.»[7] Blaming several countries for the spread of «Russophobia,» the report uses this made-up cause to whitewash the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This shows how Russia mimics the methods of normalizing colonial occupation and resource extraction practiced by other empires while insisting on its uniqueness. A close reading of the exhibition discussed here allows for a deeper understanding of the complex intersections between visual culture and the material infrastructures of settler-colonial occupation.

Colonial Friendship



Sergey Bobylev/RIA Novosti

One of the recurring themes of the «Russia Does Not End Anywhere» concert was the presentation of the Indigenous peoples whose native lands have been colonized by Russia. These communities were invariably presented as part of the diversity of the communities living within the borders of the so-called Russian Federation. One of the most telling examples was a dance performance to the song by Cherkess-Kabardian[8] singer Islam Itlyashev titled *Salam Aleykum.*[9]

In this song's lyrics, Itlyashev celebrates Chechnya, Karachay-Cherkessia, and Dagestan as part of Russia, thus maintaining the Russian occupation of Indigenous lands. Alongside Chechnya, he mentions Abkhazia, the Russia-occupied territory of Georgia, which is also claimed as Russian. Itlyashev also celebrates the friendship between the republics of Russia, describing them as part of what he calls the Russian «motherland.»[10]

During the performance, young men danced the Circassian dance Lezginka in front of, and inside, the «Friendship of the People» fountain, which opened to the public in 1954. The fountain features 16 female figures, each representing a «republic of the USSR.» Similar to the «Russia» exhibition, the personifications of the republics each hold in their hand a resource extracted from it – in the case of the Uzbek SSR, cotton, and in that of the Ukrainian SSR, a sunflower. Developed in the 1930s, the «Friendship of the People» policy signified the imagined unity of nations, collectively moving towards socialist progress. It was

combined with «a policy of state-sponsored evolutionism.» Each of the nations of the USSR was given a place on a developmental timeline, in which the Russians were the most developed nation and the rest followed their lead on the path of progress. As the imagery of the fountain shows, this developmental ranking of nations entailed an extractive view of bodies and lands of those in a «catching-up» position. The Lezginka performance in the fountain signaled the imagined continuity between the Soviet idea of the friendship of the people and the contemporary Russian understanding of the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation.

Resourcification



One of the most telling examples of the continuation of the Russian settler-colonial occupation through exhibition-making is the pavilion of the «Kherson Region» at the «Russia» exhibition, especially since this region had already been liberated by the Ukrainian army a year before the opening of the original exhibition on November 4, 2023.

Nevertheless, the exhibition's website claims that «Russia officially recognized the sovereignty and independence of Kherson Oblast» on September 29, 2022. According to the Russian propaganda, Kherson had a referendum and became part of Russia right after it was granted sovereignty. The audio guide to the exhibition extolls Kherson as «beneficial for the Russian economy» reducing the land to a resource and describing Russia as «home» and «mother Russia,» to which it «returns.»[11]

In the Moscow exhibition, the entire territory of Ukraine and Kherson in particular is viewed as a resource.[12] Its website lists everything Russia can extract from it: fertile soils, sanatoriums, and nature reserves. Visually, the resourcification of Kherson is most poignantly reproduced in the central piece of the pavilion – an image of wheat on the screen, framed as a resource to be turned into bread.



The pavilion of the «Kherson Region» at the «Russia» exhibition. From: https://russia.ru/participants/khersonskaia-oblast [https://russia.ru/participants/khersonskaia-oblast]

Asia Bazdyrieva has analyzed the perception of Ukraine as a «Breadbasket of Europe,» writing that «this Breadbasket image evolved through the parallel processes of geological prospecting and territorial imagination. It envisions the infinitely fertile black soil and mineral richness of land that could easily feed the whole world, an inexhaustible resource unconditionally given by nature.» The image of Kherson as a granary, presented at the exhibition in Moscow, replicates this process of resourcification, while also claiming opposition to the «West.»

The resourcification of Kherson within the exhibition is not unique; it is replicated through an «extractive view»[13] across several colonial contexts, which reduces territories to resources. Another telling example is the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia). On the exhibition website, Sakha is hailed as a source of diamonds and mammoth tusks.[14]



Screenshot from https://russia.ru/participants/respublika-saxa-iakutiia [https://russia.ru/participants/respublika-saxa-iakutiia]

[https://russia.ru/participants/respublika-saxa-iakutiia]The video, presenting the region, starts with bird's-eye views of the land and continues with a person in what is supposed to be a Sakha traditional costume serving as guide, perpetuating a settler-colonial fantasy of discovery. Like the land, the Sakha woman in this video is defined as a resource for the Moscow-centric gaze. In the video, she provides access to the land and landscape by showing someone, looking from Moscow the region's most scenic parts. By including Kherson as one of the «republics of Russia,» the Russian state tries to control both time and space and imposes its vision of the future on the present, while at the same time seeking to craft a legitimation of the settler-colonial occupation.

Developmentalism

The imposition of the occupation future also takes the form of infrastructural development in an attempt to maintain the colonial occupation. At the exhibition in Moscow, the Russia-appointed «mayor of Kherson» Vladimir Saldo claimed that «after Kherson became a part of Russia,» priority was given to «revival, repair, and construction of roads; rebuilding the entire infrastructure system, including the transport, medical and educational systems.»[15] The focus on infrastructure repair and maintenance, carried out by the settler state, is also echoed in other exhibition materials.

For example, one of the interviews on an online platform accompanying the exhibition discusses the process of the «digitalization of Kherson.» In it, Russia-appointed «deputy minister of digital development and mass communications» Mikhail Shpir, boasted about the «digitalization» of the Russia-occupied territory of Ukraine, which, in his understanding, meant the establishment of a connection and «documents exchange» between the Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine and Moscow. [16]

Analyzing both real and promised infrastructural developmentalism in Russian-occupied Mariupol, researcher Daria Hetmanova connects it to the settler humanitarianism in Palestine, which, as she points out, reduces a subject of development to their survival: the humanitarianism of infrastructural development in Mariupol deprives the local population of agency, reducing them to the recipients of Russia's «help» such as the «reconstruction of houses» that were previously destroyed by Russian shelling.[17] A similar process unfolds in

the Russian propaganda depiction of occupied Kherson, as it is rendered completely passive, reduced to either a «recipient of Russia's help» in the form of houses or roads or a resource available for extraction.

The developmentalism in the occupied lands is not unique to the Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine. One of the most telling examples of Russia's developmentalism is the way Chechnya is presented at the exhibition. Like Kherson and Mariupol, the video in Chechnya's pavilion describes the Russian occupation of Chechnya as a process of restoring the republic after the war. Like in the case of Kherson, the video focuses on infrastructural development as the central achievement of Chechnya under Russian occupation. The video mentions the building of housing and hospitals and the construction of roads. It describes the Russian colonial invasion as a civil war, thereby erasing the role of Russia as an occupying force. Russia is portrayed as a so-called savior and provider of peace and stability, as well as a rebuilder of infrastructure.



The Chechen Republic, from the website russia.ru [http://russia.ru]

The video enacts the exact operation of erasure as in Mariupol, as described by Daria Hetmanova. By depoliticizing «the war,» Russia makes Chechens passive recipients of Russian «help.»[18] Like Kherson, Chechnya is praised on the «Russia» exhibition website for its contribution to Russia's economy by mentioning oil and gas deposits, gypsum, sandstone, and limestone.

Peculiar to the visual and narrative normalization of the settler-colonial occupation of Chechnya are the notions of «protecting the population» and «providing safety.» Quoting the former head of the republic, Akhmat Kadyrov, the video claims that «fighting terrorism is the job of the locals» and goes on to describe the size of the republic's military force, consisting primarily of locals. In this narrative, the terrorists are anyone who resists the Russian occupation of Chechnya – a common colonial concept. As a historian of modern Kashmir, Hafsa Kanjwal explains in conversation with researcher of space and bodies Shiwangi Mariam Raj how the Indian infrastructural development in Kashmir served to demonstrate that the colonial occupation was «beneficial» to the Kashmiri people, and how it deprived them of political agency, especially since those resisting Indian settler-colonial occupation were and are portrayed as «terrorists.» Like the Kashmiris, the Chechens' political aspirations are depoliticized and situated on «a spectrum between collaboration and resistance.»[19] The combination of resource extraction, colonial developmentalism, and depriving Indigenous

people of political agency through the interweaving of discursive and infrastructural interventions undergirds the colonial occupation. Making an exhibition like this one permanent also signals the empire's dream of permanence, suggesting that the only vision of the future available is the one of the settler-colonial state. Any effort to disrupt this vision must involve imagining and practicing an alternative future rooted in developing collective infrastructures of translocal solidarity and mutual aid.

[1] «Sergey Kiriyenko prinyal uchastie v Mezhdunarodnom simpoziume 'Sozdaya budushcheye,» Russia.ru, https://russia.ru/news/sergei-kirienko-prinial-ucastie-v-mezdunarodnom-simpoziume-sozdavaia-budushhee?utm_source=google.com&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=google.com&utm_referrer=google.com [https://russia.ru/news/sergei-kirienko-prinial-ucastie-v-mezdunarodnom-simpoziume-sozdavaia-budushhee?utm_source=google.com&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=google.com&utm_referrer=google.com .

[2] The Future of Russia, https://future.russia.ru/en [https://future.russia.ru/en] (accessed December 10, 2024).

[3] «?????? ????? ?? ??????????????,» Meduza, July 9, 2024 https://meduza.io/feature/2024/07/09/rossiya-nigde-ne-zakanchivaetsya [https://meduza.io/feature/2024/07/09/rossiya-nigde-ne-zakanchivaetsya] (accessed 15 January 2025).

[4] Here, a different font identifies passages quoted from Russian propaganda narratives.

[5] The Russian colonial concept defining Russia as a promised land with no borders.

[6] Vkontakte, «Prazdnichnyy kontsert – ROSSIYA nigde ne zakanchivaetsya!», June 7, 2024. Uploaded by Viktor Panfilov https://vk.com/video323012377_456244114 [https://vk.com/video323012377_456244114] (accessed 15 January 2025).

[7] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, «Cooperation in the Humanitarian Sphere,» last modified December 8, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/humanitarian_cooperation/1968836/ [https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/humanitarian_cooperation/1968836/] (accessed 12 January 2025.

[8] Both the Circassians and the Karbadians are Indigenous nations of the so-called Russia.

[9] Vkontakte, «Prazdnichnyy kontsert,» 2024.

[10] The song lyrics go «Allah, please save my proud krai (Russian administrative entity) and my motherland.»

[11] Kherson Oblast', https://russia.ru/participants/khersonskaia-oblast [https://russia.ru/participants/khersonskaia-oblast] (accessed 15 January 2025).

[12] Asia Bazdyrieva, «No Milk, No Love,» in: *e-flux journal*, 127, May, 2022, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/127/465214/no-milk-no-love/ [https://www.e-flux.com/journal/127/465214/no-milk-no-love/] (accessed 20 January 2025).

[13] Macarena Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives*, Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2017.

[14] The Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), https://russia.ru/participants/respublika-saxa-iakutiia [https://russia.ru/participants/respublika-saxa-iakutiia] (accessed 12 January 2025).

[15] «Vystuplenie Glavy Khersonskoy oblasti Vladimira Vasilyevicha Sal'do na vystavke 'Rossiya',» Russia.ru December 19, 2023, https://russia.ru/video/vystuplenie-glavy-xersonskoi-oblasti-vladimira-vasilevica-saldo-na-vystavke-rossiia?utm_source=google.com&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=google.com&utm_referrer=google.com [https://russia.ru/video/vystuplenie-glavy-xersonskoi-oblasti-vladimira-vasilevica-saldo-na-vystavke-rossiia?utm_source=google.com&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=google.com&utm_referrer=google.com] (accessed 10 January 2025).

[16] Telegram, ?????? «????» post, May, 11. 2024, https://t.me/shpir/3289 [https://t.me/shpir/3289] (accessed 20 January 2025).

[17] Daria Hetmanova, «The Politics of ‹Ungratefulness›» (on Russian reconstruction projects in occupied Mariupol), Mariupol Memory Park https://www.mariupolmemorypark.space/en/library-en/the-politics-of-ungratefulness/ [https://www.mariupolmemorypark.space/en/library-en/the-politics-of-ungratefulness/] (accessed 12 January 2025).

[18] The Chechen Republic, https://russia.ru/participants/chechenskaia-respublika [https://russia.ru/participants/chechenskaia-respublika] (accessed 15 January 2025).

[19] Hafsa Kanjwal and Shiwangi Mariam Raj, «Kashmir Against the Grain of Normalcy,» in: *The Funambulist 55: Asian Imperialisms*, pp. 58–65.

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