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THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR – A PROJECT OF VLADIMIR PUTIN OR THE RUSSIAN ONE?

***Abstract:** The paper attempts to look deeper into the complex determining factors and a variety of causes of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian War. We particularly address a very meaningful question to us all, i.e. how much is the current warfare – a game-changer with broader regional and global implications, can be considered as just a personal project, almost some private endeavor of the Russian authoritarian leader - Vladimir Putin? Or maybe there is a much-complicated set, whether sets of circumstances/ specific determinants for Russia, majorly of geopolitical character, beyond the factor of personalities who even due to first of all being the country leaders, in any case, are, and will be made legitimately responsible for concrete actions and/or initiatives without any doubts, that need our special attention?*

***Keywords:** Russian-Ukrainian War; Project of Vladimir Putin; Russia; Ukraine; geopolitical imperatives; strategy; public opinion; Russian liberals; anti-Putinists; Russian imperialism.*

Introduction

The paper aims to examine various determinants and contestable grounds laying under the current unprecedented since World War II times - warfare raging in Europe in the face of the Russian full-scale aggression against Ukraine.

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We specifically raise for the broader public and/ or expert discussion one of the key questions of crucial interest and high significance:

- Is it possible that the ongoing confrontation between Russia and Ukraine, which is regarded as a real game-changer with lasting consequences for the regional, as well as for global contexts, can in fact be reduced to being just a personal project, almost some private venture of Vladimir Putin, still the authoritarian leader of the post-Soviet Russia? This question by its essence applies to the liberal explanations² for the Russo-Ukrainian War, from the international relations (IR) theoretical considerations.
- Or presumably, there is a much uneasy combination of specific conditions and/ or turn of events for such a complicated country and international player – Russia, with the maintaining ambitions of the superpower, even after the collapse of the Soviet Union? We first of all address here the geopolitical factors in addition to the component of individual responsibility that certainly and automatically, due to their beginnings, in any case, needs to be borne by the country leaders in the first place. In contrast to the question raised in the previous paragraph provided above, the given one corresponds to the realist international relations (IR) theory³.

In the process of investigating the concrete agenda, motivation, and reasons behind the Russo-Ukrainian War, in the paper, we define the following research objectives:

- Understanding and explaining the general framework for peculiar geopolitical imperatives and strategy of Russia;
- Keep studying the public opinion dynamics in Russia regarding the so-called Special Military Operation;
- Observing and assessing even theoretical or hypothetical resources that should be present for any real democratization perspectives for the former Soviet center.

Methods

In the article, there have been employed the following research methods appropriate for our given analysis: critical analysis, historical method, analysis of existing data, and a comparative method.

² Ch. McCallion, *Assessing Realist and Liberal Explanations for the Russo-Ukrainian War*, <https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/assessing-realist-and-liberal-explanations-for-the-russo-ukrainian-war> (28.09.2023).

³ *Ibidem*.

Critical analysis represents perhaps the most essential and predominant method applied in the paper. In particular, critically have been examined or evaluated all of the data, arguments and claims, a variety of processes, as well as diverse phenomena discussed in the article.

The historical method has also been helpful for us when especially outlining the general framework for specific geopolitical imperatives and the strategy of Russia processed and comprehensively analyzed during conducting the research provided while employing the accurate facts borrowed apparently mainly from the past.

The analysis of existing data on various aspects of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian confrontation from official statistics, factsheets, and/ or surveys of public opinion conducted through a personal interview method in specific, etc., has been decisive for studying the events in chronological order, comparing them, and forming the influential arguments and prime claims of the paper.

The article additionally relies upon the comparative method applied predominantly when particularly scrutinizing and contrasting the results of the public opinion polls or some other subjects or phenomena carried out in and topical for Russia in different periods.

When conducting the research, we have been applying the theoretical frameworks and lenses of the liberal and realist theories of international relations.

The major findings of the paper are as follows:

- The general framework for specific geopolitical imperatives and strategy of Russia serve as substantially perceived grounds for pragmatic justifications for Russian imperialism, going deeper beyond only one salient leader's ambitions regarded as rather anachronistic for the overall logic of functioning of the modern states and their interactions on the international arena in our contemporary times. This way of understanding and interpreting the problem fits the realist international relations (IR) theory that emphasizes the Russian security concerns in the face of NATO expansion and Western-sponsored regime change⁴ against the liberal narratives - focusing predominantly on the internal attributes of states and their decision-makers, and attributing the current Russo-Ukrainian War to the pathologies of the Russian government instead⁵.
- Following the systematic surveys, including the latest one, organized and carried out in fact by the only independent non-governmental research organization that exists and is functioning in Russia - Levada Analytical Center (Levada-Center), it was found that the traditional support for the

⁴ *Ibidem.*

⁵ *Ibidem.*

actions of the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine still constantly persists in being considerably stronger among the ordinary Russian citizenry.

- Among the Russian liberals, self-identified or recognized internationally, whether anti-Putinists, there have been revealed such critical factors for any optimistic scenario as specifically significant skepticism towards, and denial of the moral denouncement of Russian imperialism.

Geopolitical Imperatives of Russia – The Constant Framework

According to George Friedman, a Hungarian-born U.S. geopolitical author on international affairs and the founder of Stratfor, in order to secure the Russian core of Muscovy (core Russia is limited to the region of the medieval Grand Principality of Muscovy), Russia has to reach the following geopolitical goals⁶, and constantly maintain such achievements:

- Expand north and east to secure a stronghold in climate-hostile territory partially protected by the Urals. Thus, even in a worst-case scenario (i.e. the fall of Moscow), there is still a “Russia” from which to potentially be reborn.
- Expand south into the Caucasus and southeast into the steppe to discourage Asian invasions. If circumstances permit, move as deep as possible into Central Asia and Siberia to deepen this bastion.
- Expand as far west as possible. Do not stop in the southwest until the Carpathians are reached. Never stop on the North European Plain. Deeper penetration not only improves security in terms of buffers; The North European Plain narrows as the one moves west, making it easier to defend.
- Rule the empire through terror. Since the vast majority of Russian territory does not actually belong to Russia, it takes a very firm hand to prevent many minorities from establishing regional control or joining hostile forces.
- Expand to warm water ports that have access to the open ocean so that the empire can begin to counter the economic problems that plague a purely land-based empire.

Strategy of the Russian Empire – The Topicality

From the classical geopolitical viewpoint⁷, the modern Russian empire faces three separate border regions:

⁶ G. Friedman, *The Geopolitics of Russia: Permanent Struggle*, <<https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/geopolitics-russia-permanent-struggle>> (25.09.2023).

⁷ *Ibidem*.

- Asian Siberia (There is only one railway line - the Trans-Siberian Railway (TSR) that runs from east to west, connecting Siberia with the rest of the empire, and stationing military forces there is difficult, if not impossible. Attacking Siberia is difficult because not only is there especially nothing to attack, but the weather, the terrain, and the sheer size of the region make holding not only complicated, but questionable, and an attack beyond its borders is impossible due to the Urals.);
- Central Asia and the Caucasus (now mostly independent states) (The mature Russian Empire and the Soviet Union were anchored on a series of interconnected mountain ranges, deserts, and bodies of water in the region, giving it an excellent defensive position. The Caucasus terminated on the Black Sea, completely protecting the southern border of the empire. These regions were much more useful to Russia than Siberia and therefore may have been worth capturing, but this time geography actually helped Russia rather than working against it.);
- Western Europe (There is a western border that runs from west of Odessa north to the Baltic Sea. This European border was a vulnerable point. Geographically, the southern part of the border changed from time to time, and the location of the border was decisive. When Moldova or Bessarabia belongs to Romania, it poses a threat to Russian national security. When it is in Russian hands, it allows the Russians to gain a foothold in the Carpathians.).

Along the North European Plain, Russia has three strategic options⁸:

- Use Russia's geographic depth and climate to absorb enemy forces and then defeat them, as was the case with Napoleon and Hitler. After this, a solution appears, but it is always close range and the attackers devastate the countryside. It is interesting to speculate what would have happened in 1942 if Hitler had resumed his offensive across the North European Plain towards Moscow, rather than switching to an offensive from the south towards Stalingrad.
- Face the attacking forces with large, immobile forces of infantry on the border and bleed them dry, as they tried to do so in 1914. At first glance, this seems an attractive choice, since Russia has more manpower than its European enemies. In practice, however, this is a dangerous option due to the unstable social conditions of the empire, where a weakening of the security apparatus could lead to the collapse of the regime through a soldiers' revolt, as happened in 1917.
- Push the Russian-Soviet border as far west as possible to create another buffer against attack, as the Soviets did during the Cold War. This is obviously an attractive choice because it creates strategic depth and

⁸ *Ibidem.*

increases economic opportunities. But it also diffuses Russian resources, spreading security states into central Europe and vastly increasing defense spending that ultimately destroyed the Soviet Union in the early 1990s.

The Contemporary Context of the Specific Geopolitical Imperatives and Strategy of Russia

A number of modern developments and factors of relatively more crucial significance almost for the whole history of the existence of the country have determined the current controversial nature and consequently, the similar image of Russia, in fact, in need of survival, and with its raw imperialism, which evidently is less compatible for highly diplomatic standards and normative frameworks designed to be particularly functional for the twenty-first century and the future world:

- The greatest extent of the Russian Empire occurred under the Soviet Union from 1945 to 1989.
- Paradoxically, the expansion mentioned above, preceded the collapse of the Soviet Union and the shrinking of Russia to its current borders.
- It is important to understand that modern Russia has essentially retreated to the borders of the Russian Empire, which were in the 17th century.
- It includes old Muscovy, Tatar lands in the southeast and Siberia.
- It lost its Western buffers in Ukraine and the Baltic countries, as well as its strong positions in the Caucasus and Central Asia⁹.

In differ from countries like China, Iran, and the United States, Russia has clearly not achieved its strategic geopolitical imperatives. On the contrary, it has retreated from them; in particular¹⁰:

- Russia holds the North Caucasus, but can no longer boast deep penetration into the mountains, including Georgia and Armenia. Without these territories, Russia cannot consider this flank safe.
- Russia has lost its anchor in the mountains and deserts of Central Asia and therefore cannot actively block or impede - or even monitor well - any developments in its deep south that might threaten its security.
- Russia retains Siberia, but due to the region's climatic and geographic hostility, it is almost at a security stalemate (economically, for sure).
- Russia's loss of Ukraine and Moldova allows both interference of other powers and the potential emergence of a Ukrainian rival on its doorstep.

⁹ *Ibidem.*

¹⁰ *Ibidem.*

The powers behind the Carpathians have a special opportunity to take advantage of this political geography.

- The Baltic states have regained their independence, and all three are east and north of the Baltic-Carpathian line (the last defensive line on the North European Plain). Their presence in a hostile alliance is regarded as unacceptable. There is no independent or even neutral Belarus (also located on the other side of the line).

The Public Opinion Dynamics in Russia Concerning the So-Called Special Military Operation

According to the regular surveys, including the latest one conducted through a personal interview method in respondents' homes on June 22 – 28, 2023, on a representative All-Russian sample of urban and rural population of 1,634 people aged 18 years and older in 137 municipalities of 50 regions of the Russian Federation by almost the only independent non-governmental research organization functioning in Russia - Levada Analytical Center (Levada-Center)¹¹, support for the actions of the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine still consistently remains remarkably high among the Russian population.

The study has revealed that the level of attention to Ukrainian events remains at the level of the last month's poll – May 2023. 20% follow them “very closely” (in May — 21%) and another 34% follow them “quite closely” (33% – in May). 46% of respondents follow without much attention or do not follow at all¹².

Table 1. Are you following the situation around Ukraine?

	very closely	somewhat closely	not too closely	I don't follow it at all	I haven't heard anything about it
March 2022	29%	35%	27%	8%	
April 2022	26%	33%	29%	10%	
May 2022	22%	34%	33%	10%	
June 2022	24%	31%	32%	13%	
July 2022	25%	31%	32%	11%	
August 2022	21%	30%	34%	14%	
September 2022	32%	34%	25%	8%	

¹¹ *Conflict with Ukraine: Assessments for Late June 2023*, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2023/07/14/conflict-with-ukraine-assesments-for-late-june-2023/> (27.09.2023).

¹² *Ibidem*.

November 2022	23%	35%	29%	11%	
December 2022	27%	32%	30%	11%	
January 2023	22%	35%	32%	11%	
March 2023	21%	32%	32%	15%	
April 2023	24%	31%	32%	13%	
May 2023	21%	33%	33%	12%	
June 2023	20%	34%	34%	12%	

As % of respondents per age group. Adapted from the source: Levada-Center.

According to the survey, as in other months, respondents from the older age group (55 years and older) most closely follow events related to Ukraine: 67% of this group follow them closely. In the age group from 40 to 54 years, 56% of respondents closely follow the events, as do 41% of people aged 25 to 39 and 34% of people aged 18 to 24¹³.

Table 2. Are you following the situation around Ukraine?

	very closely	somewhat closely	not too closely	I don't follow it at all	I haven't heard anything about it
Total	20%	34%	34%	12%	
18-24	6%	28%	46%	19%	
25-39	13%	28%	41%	17%	
40-54	20%	36%	33%	11%	
55 and older	29%	38%	26%	7%	

As % of respondents per age group, June 2023. Adapted from the source: Levada-Center.

In June 2023, support for the actions of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine slightly sank. 40% definitely support (in May – 43%), 33% rather support (as in May). 19% do not support it – (18% in May)¹⁴.

It is of interest and sufficiently logical that the highest level of support for the actions of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine is typical for those who trust TV as the main source of news (86%) and who approve of the president's activities (82%), as well as for respondents 55 years and older (82%) and men (77%). The lowest level of support is observed among those who disapprove of the president's work (31% in total). Also, young people (56% among

¹³ *Ibidem.*

¹⁴ *Ibidem.*

respondents aged 18-24) and women (70%), as well as those who do not trust any news sources (62%), are less likely to show their support¹⁵.

Table 3. Do you personally support the actions of Russian military forces in Ukraine?

	definitely yes	rather yes	rather no	definitely no	can't say
February 2022	48%	20%	8%	15%	9%
March 2022	52%	28%	8%	6%	6%
April 2022	45%	29%	8%	11%	7%
May 2022	47%	30%	8%	9%	6%
June 2022	47%	28%	11%	9%	5%
July 2022	48%	28%	10%	8%	7%
August 2022	46%	30%	8%	9%	7%
September 2022	44%	28%	11%	10%	8%
October 2022	44%	29%	11%	9%	8%
November 2022	42%	32%	11%	9%	7%
December 2022	41%	30%	10%	11%	8%
January 2023	45%	30%	10%	9%	6%
February 2023	48%	29%	10%	7%	6%
March 2023	41%	31%	11%	9%	8%
April 2023	43%	32%	7%	9%	9%
May 2023	43%	33%	10%	8%	6%
June 2023	40%	33%	10%	9%	8%

As % of respondents. Adapted from the source: Levada-Center.

The dominant feelings among Russians caused by military actions in Ukraine are “pride for Russia” (43%), “anxiety, fear, horror” (32%), and “shock” (11%)¹⁶.

Table 4. What feelings do Russian actions in Ukraine cause you?

	February 2022	March 2022	August 2022	November 2022	March 2023	June 2023
Anger	8%	8%	11%	11%	10%	8%
Shame	5%	5%	7%	6%	6%	8%
Depression	6%	6%	6%	7%	6%	5%

¹⁵ *Ibidem.*

¹⁶ *Ibidem.*

Anxiety	31%	31%	31%	34%	35%	32%
Shock	12%	12%	12%	11%	10%	11%
Satisfaction	7%	7%	7%	5%	5%	7%
Inspiration	7%	7%	8%	5%	5%	6%
Pride for Russia	51%	51%	48%	42%	43%	43%
Other	4%	4%	4%	3%	4%	5%
No particular feelings	8%	8%	11%	8%	10%	8%

As % of respondents. Adapted from the source: Levada-Center.

By the end of June 2023, the share of respondents supporting the continuation of hostilities had slightly decreased – this month they were 40% (in May – 48%), supporters of the transition to peace negotiations – 53% (in May – 45%). It can be assumed that the mutiny of the private military companies (PMCs) influenced the changes in sentiment on this issue “Wagner”, since there were slightly more supporters of continuing the rebellion (43%) before the start of the rebellion than in the following days (39%). On the contrary, there were slightly fewer supporters of negotiations at the beginning (49%) than on June 25-28 – 55%¹⁷.

Table 5. Do you think it is necessary to continue military actions or proceed to negotiations?

	definitely continue military actions	rather continue military actions	rather start negotiations	definitely start negotiations	can't say
September 2022	29%	15%	27%	21%	8%
October 2022	22%	14%	31%	26%	7%
November 2022	24%	17%	31%	22%	6%
December 2022	27%	13%	29%	21%	10%
February 2023	27%	16%	29%	21%	7%
March 2023	26%	16%	29%	19%	11%
April 2023	25%	13%	28%	23%	11%
May 2023	30%	18%	28%	17%	7%
June 2023	26%	14%	30%	23%	7%

As % of respondents. Adapted from the source: Levada-Center.

¹⁷ *Ibidem.*

Table 6. Do you think it is necessary to continue military actions or proceed to negotiations?

	definitely continue military actions	rather continue military actions	rather start negotiations	definitely start negotiations	can't say
Total	26%	14%	30%	23%	7%
22-23 June	27%	16%	29%	20%	8%
24 June	25%	14%	33%	20%	8%
25-28 June	26%	13%	29%	26%	7%

As % of respondents. Adapted from the source: Levada-Center.

The share of respondents who believe that the “special operation” is progressing successfully has slightly decreased. In May 2023 there were 61% of them, in June of the same year – 54%. This decrease was due to an increase in the share of those who found it difficult to answer (in May – 12%, in June – 17%)¹⁸.

Table 7. How do you think the “special military operation” of the Russian Army in Ukraine is going?

	very successfully	rather successfully	it's rather failing	it's a total failure	can't say
April 2022	18%	50%	12%	5%	15%
May 2022	17%	56%	11%	4%	11%
September 2022	9%	44%	22%	9%	16%
November 2022	9%	45%	23%	9%	16%
February 2023	11%	52%	18%	6%	13%
May 2023	12%	49%	20%	8%	12%
June 2023	9%	46%	20%	8%	17%

As % of respondents. Adapted from the source: Levada-Center.

The respondents are most concerned about the shelling of Russian regions that do not border the “special operation” zone, as well as the shelling of Russian border cities by the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the threat of the use of nuclear weapons in the Ukrainian conflict¹⁹.

¹⁸ *Ibidem.*

¹⁹ *Ibidem.*

Table 8. Are you concerned about...?

	defini- tely yes	rather yes	rather no	defini- tely no	can't say
Ukraine attacking Russian territories with drones	72%	21%			
Ukrainian Army shelling Russian territories along the border	73%	20%			
The possibility of nuclear weapons being used in the conflict	71%	14%		8%	
Western countries supplying arms to Ukraine	52%	28%		9%	
The counteroffensive of the Ukrainian Armed Forces	35%	32%		16%	

As % of respondents. Adapted from the source: Levada-Center.

The overwhelming majority (81%, 77% in April 2023) of respondents are concerned about the supply of Western weapons to the Ukrainian army. The group of 55 years and older (89%) is the most concerned, and the least – 18-24 years (62%)²⁰.

Table 9. Are you concerned about Western countries supplying arms to Ukraine?

	definitely yes	rather yes	rather no	definitely no	can't say
April 2023	51%	26%	9%	10%	
June 2023	53%	28%	8%	9%	

As % of respondents. Adapted from the source: Levada-Center.

Finally, based on the study, 60% of respondents believe that the situation in Ukraine could escalate into an armed conflict between Russia and NATO, noteworthy that 48% of respondents thought so a year ago²¹.

Table 10. Can the situation in Ukraine grow into a military conflict between Russia and NATO?

²⁰ *Ibidem.*

²¹ *Ibidem.*

	definitely yes	rather yes	rather no	definitely no	can't say
May 2022	15%	33%	32%	10%	10%
June 2023	22%	38%	22%	7%	11%

As % of respondents. Adapted from the source: Levada-Center.

As the survey has found, the level of attention to Ukrainian events remains at the level of the last two months of conducting the study. Support for the actions of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation has also remained virtually unchanged, and keeps to stay at a high level. After a surge of support for the idea of continuing hostilities in May 2023, against the backdrop of the capture of the smashed eastern Ukrainian city of Bakhmut (Artemovsk) by Russian forces through mercenary Wagner Group, in June, the number of supporters of peace negotiations has increased significantly. This may have been partly due to concerns following the events of June 24th, when Wagner forces' boss Yevgeny Prigozhin ordered his group, who had been advancing on Moscow, to turn around and return to their bases to avoid bloodshed. Prigozhin reportedly agreed to go into exile in Belarus as part of the deal. The overwhelming majority of respondents expressed concerns about both the start of the Ukrainian Armed Forces' counter-offensive and the supply of Western weapons to Ukraine. Most still believe that in fact the US and NATO are responsible for the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Concern over the possibility of a direct clash between Russia and NATO has increased markedly over the year²².

The Deep-Rooted Problems within the Russian Society

Even among the Russian liberals, self-identified or recognized internationally as such, whether anti-Putinists, there is significant skepticism and contradiction towards the moral denouncement of the Russian imperialism, the factor that translates into the apparent lack of existence of the constructive determinants and thus, resources for more sustainable democratization perspectives at least for the future development of the former Soviet center.

“Russia can ill afford waging the war”²³ – these words are attributed to Alexey Navalny, the Russian lawyer and blogger, who, eventually, particularly, after the assassination (in 2015) of the prominent Russian opposition politician Boris Nemtsov, the loud protester of the country's aggression against Ukraine and

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ V. Dergachev, E. Kuznetsova, I. Nemchenko, “*Vzyl svoyu trekhlineechku*”: kto viigral v debatax Strelkova i Navaljnogo, <<https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/65183b789a7947dc850a7342>> (30.09.2023).

annexation of Crimea, became the face and main opposition leader of Russia, contradictory to Putin. Even though by the words quoted above, Navalny reflected on the events concerning the Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea of 2014, referring to the politician's in fact nominally contradictory position against the Russian aggression in Ukraine, however, showing at the same time that his "anti-war" stance was underpinned by economic, and not moral, considerations, later on, since Russia has launched the full-scale war in Ukraine in February 2022, the remnants of anti-Putin opposition in Russia, including Navalny's team, have dramatically changed, or due to the massive emigration of critical minds out of the aggressor country to different states – normally, sympathizers of Ukraine, simply were forced to diplomatically hide their previous critical views on the victim of Russia's ongoing violence, i.e. Ukraine, totally fitting the Russian imperialist agenda. Noteworthy to mention that in late February 2023, Navalny's team published a 15-point manifesto, which aimed at clearing much of the controversy around their problematic stance on Ukraine. Significantly, the manifesto acknowledged the internationally recognized borders of Ukraine, emphasizing the necessity for the restoration of Ukraine's sovereignty over Crimea and all other currently occupied Ukrainian territories. The document also insisted on withdrawing all Russian troops from Ukraine, offering reparations, investigating war crimes in cooperation with international institutions, and ultimately letting Ukraine live and develop as Ukrainians want²⁴.

As another quite clear example of a failure of democratization trends and/ or liberal experiments collapsed in Russia, serves the story about the Higher School of Economics (HSE) - one of Russia's most prestigious universities, which, since the founding in 1992, had been well-known by its political liberalism in an increasingly authoritarian country, despite the fact that interestingly enough, it has been a state-funded institution. Since February 24, 2022, and the invasion of Ukraine, the university has been rapidly shaking its almost unique reputation. In March of the same year, HSE rector Nikita Anisimov signed an open letter along with more than 300 fellow university leaders that argued that universities were to support the Russian state in its attack on Ukraine. Later that month, students were officially warned against participating in any anti-war protests. And, in June of 2022, HSE promised to allocate 10 percent of state-funded places at the university to children of soldiers taking part in Russia's invasion. HSE used to be the first university ever to be newly established in post-Soviet Russia, and soon became a real symbol of the window of hope for the democratic transition that Western powers were looking at to come. It has to be noted that founder Yaroslav Kuzminov - initiator of the Bologna Process that aligned Russian education systems with those across Europe, sent future HSE professors to France and the

²⁴ A. Shekhovtsov, *Why Ukraine is wary of the Russian opposition*, <<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/3/4/why-ukraine-is-wary-of-the-russian-opposition>> (30.09.2023).

Netherlands to learn Western pedagogical methods. Since then, the university has ranked among Russia's top universities and has sought to rise in international rankings, moving from the top 500 to the top 300 between 2012 and 2021 in the QS World University Rankings. In 2021, it tied for the 24th place in Times Higher Education's ranking of universities in emerging economies. Highly qualified faculty, rigorous entry requirements, and a focus on research were among the pillars of its success. The founding of the independent news site in 2017 by some of its students exemplifies the space HSE once allowed for political free thinking. Nonetheless, the seeds of the university's later decline existed right from the start, as it appears more evident now. Signed into being by Yegor Gaidar, a leading economic reformer in Boris Yeltsin's government, HSE has existed under the auspices of the state, a fact that Putin's regime later exploited. While insisting upon academic freedom and HSE's independence from politics, Kuzminov, HSE's rector from its founding until 2021, also had to make concessions - such as joining the pro-Kremlin All-Russia People's Front - in order to ensure the continued existence of his brainchild²⁵.

Taking into account the significant part of the academic staff of HSE, as well as others, who consider themselves and/or are regarded as inherently liberal, while exhibiting something contradictory to such of their images in parallel, it has to be recognized that Russian liberals played a powerful role in opposing Putin, although the full-scale invasion of Ukraine exposed, along with other critical aspects, a deep-seated sense of imperial superiority towards the peoples of their country's former imperial possessions.

Conclusions

We come across the following conclusions provided below. They are based on the main findings of the paper:

- The general framework for specific geopolitical imperatives and strategy of Russia serve as substantially perceived grounds for pragmatic justifications for Russian imperialism, going deeper beyond only one salient leader's ambitions regarded as rather anachronistic for the overall logic of functioning of the modern states and their interactions on the international arena in our contemporary times. This way of understanding and interpreting the problem fits the realist international relations (IR) theory that emphasizes the Russian security concerns in the face of NATO expansion and Western-sponsored regime change against the liberal narratives - focusing predominantly on the internal attributes of

²⁵ E. Couch, *Why Russian Liberalism Has to Change*, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/08/29/russian-liberal-universities-hse-ukraine-war/#cookie_message_anchor> (30.09.2023).

states and their decision-makers, and attributing the current Russo-Ukrainian War to the pathologies of the Russian leadership instead.

- Correspondingly with the regular surveys, including the latest one, organized and carried out in fact by the only independent non-governmental research organization that exists and is functioning in Russia - Levada Analytical Center (Levada-Center), there was found out that the traditional support for the actions of the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine still constantly persists in being considerably stronger among the ordinary Russian citizenry.
- Even among the Russian liberals, self-identified or recognized internationally, whether anti-Putinists, displayed have been significant skepticism and contradiction towards the moral denouncement of the Russian imperialism implying to the deficit of the resources for the real democratization prospects for the former Soviet center.

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