RUSSIA AND PUTIN

Authoritarianism at Home; Imperialism Abroad

Policy Brief

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The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep) is a research consortium led by the University of Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics in the 21st century.

PeaceRep's Ukraine programme

PeaceRep's Ukraine programme is a multi-partner initiative that provides evidence, insight, academic research and policy analysis from Ukraine and the wider region to support Ukrainian sovereignty, territorial integrity and democracy in the face of the Russian invasion. PeaceRep's Ukraine programme is led by the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) partnering with the Kyiv School of Economics (KSE) in Ukraine, the Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies (IOS) in Germany, the Institute of Human Sciences (IWM) in Austria and Jagiellonian University in Poland. Through our collaboration with KSE we work closely with researchers, educationalists and civic activists in Ukraine to ensure that policy solutions are grounded in robust evidence and are calibrated to support democratic outcomes.

Background

On 11th March 2023 PeaceRep's Ukraine team hosted a seminar discussion on the topic, "Russia and Putin - Authoritarianism at Home; Imperialism Abroad", as part of the Solidarity with Ukraine conference at the London School of Economics and Political Science. This readout contains a non-verbatim summary of key points made by panellists in their presentations.

About the Authors

Volodymyr Artiukh is a postdoctoral researcher on the ERC-funded project 'Emptiness: Living Capitalism and Democracy under (post-)Socialism' (University of Oxford) and an editor at Commons: Journal of Social Criticism'.

Mazen Gharibah is a Research Fellow with the Syria team at the LSE Conflict and Civicness Research Group (LSE CCRG). LSE CCRG is an autonomous research group in LSE IDEAS, the in-house foreign policy think tank at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Inna Berezkina is a programme coordinator, contributor and an editor at the School of Civic Education and Sapere Aude, and an international advisor to Democracy Without Borders.

Volodymyr Artiukh: Analysing the Myths and Realities of Russian Imperialism

In what follows, I would like to offer several points to an analysis of Russian imperialism, which can hopefully help in developing strategies of resistance among activists. I think it is a project of control that is failing and a fight against it depends on identifying its areas of weakness.

Let me start by offering a correction to two widespread myths about Russian imperialism. The first is that Russia is an inherently imperialist nation, its culture is permeated with colonial attitudes and even its language is a tool of imperialism. This mythology of a 'timeless' Russian imperialism is not just a conservative line of argument but is widespread in liberal and progressive circles just as well. The second myth is that Russia is just defending itself: having been encircled by NATO it is now reacting to US hegemony. This is the stance that some on the left take – and is, of course, the stance of Putin himself.

Both approaches are simplistic and harmful. Russia has travelled through a complex political history, part of which – indeed, huge chunks of which – involves radical experiments in democracy, socialism, anarchism, and liberalism. The nineteenth century was a period of democratic agitation in the Russian Empire, which continued into, and was often radicalised, as forms of resistance in Soviet and post-Soviet times. These democratic traditions form part of Russia's political heritage, although they were increasingly repressed under Putin's militarist rule. The myth of organic primordial imperialism is not only distorting but also poses a problem for developing solidarity in a fight against Putin's authoritarianism and his invasion of Ukraine.

The perception of the Russian language and all elements of Russian culture as complicit in Russian imperialism also threatens to undermine the unity of the Ukrainian people that is vital for resisting the invasion and reconstructing Ukrainian society in the future. Although many Russian speakers in Ukraine decided to switch to Ukrainian after the start of the invasion, many more in the frontline, in the rear, and in refuge abroad continue using Russian language and elements of the Russian and Soviet culture in their everyday life while decisively opposing the Kremlin's imperialist politics. This harbours the risk of political cleavages as the war and its destructive economic consequences wear out the affective unity.

The second line of argument – that Russia is simply defending itself by fighting this appalling war – is also, of course, not true. Beyond state propaganda, Russian top politicians and commentators consider the subjugation of Ukraine not as a reaction to the strength of the West but as a pro-active move exploiting the signs of its historic weakness. If the circles of liberals and leftists that support this line of argument continue to stick with it, then they will find themselves ever more refuted by the actual course of events. The Kremlin's is an offensive opportunistic gamble at establishing an alliance of right-populist regimes under the banner of multi-polarity.

Both of these explanations – both myths – nonetheless have some grains of truth. Russia is indeed reacting to the American hegemony but at the time of its weakness. And it is true that the Russia elites don't strive for their own hegemony if the latter is understood as a set of institutions and ideologies that coordinate the interests of the hegemonic elite, the subaltern elites, and the civil societies in a hierarchic but non-violent manner. They chose a different imperialist strategy, that of domination without hegemony that relies on force rather than consent. As part of this strategy, the claim that Russian society as a whole had imperialistic inclinations is also partially true. These trends in

Russian culture and political life were utilised by the Kremlin as a justification of its militarism in foreign policy but they didn't cause it.

This strategy of non-hegemonic imperialist domination and its ideological justification came at a certain conjunction after a series of experiments. To properly assess the causes and the dynamics of the militarist turn in Russian imperialist politics, I offer an analytical narrative rather than a set of timeless statements regarding the secular inclination of Russia towards imperialist aggression or its reaction to the incessant NATO expansion.

As I wrote before, I argue that Russia's transition from an economic to a military strategy for expanding its interests overseas took shape between 2008 and 2014. This was not due to Russia's strength although it was conditioned by the decade of hydrocarbon enrichment. It occurred primarily due to its failure in addressing the penetration of Western hegemony where the Kremlin thought it had full control. Despite the Russian capital's considerable presence there, the Kremlin failed to establish effective civil society groups in Ukraine and other countries aligned with its interests and positions. It failed in its strategy to recruit and cultivate reliable political groups under its control abroad. It even failed to stave off mass protests at home. The contradiction between its perceived economic and military strength and its political impotence prompted experiments with the Kremlin's foreign policy.

The change of strategy was evident in response to the Maidan protests in Ukraine in 2013-2014. Russian policymakers realised that they could not match the Western liberal hegemony in the post-Soviet countries' civil societies or even rely on existing political allies. The annexation of Crimea was the exception that confirmed the rule. Instead of competing over political-economic hegemony, they started to experiment with the means they had at their disposal; namely to re-create patron-client ties with local actors supported by the military and encouraged to use terror locally. This cannot be equated with the influence of the West in civil society, because it does not require the formation of wide groups of population that are genuinely motivated and committed to certain ideas; it does not require political mediating institutions; it does not require establishing deep ideological 'roots' in society. These 'non-hegemonic' strategies for control worked fairly well in Donbas. They managed to create client statelets that were relatively stable and functional. This came at the cost of atomizing and depoliticising most of the population in the client statelets and alienating the Ukrainian population, which precluded the expansion of the so-called Russian Spring from below in the rest of Ukraine. I would call this form of control an 'anti-Maidan regime' given its legitimizing narrative of opposing the Maidan protests.

This was the first point of encouragement for Putin and his strategic planners. The second element of this transformation of Russian imperialist strategy was extending the military intervention to uphold these patron-client relations. The war in Syria served to prepare the cadres and test the effectiveness of a direct military intervention. This experiment was continued in 2020-2022. Russia, having developed the methods of non-hegemonic control, put them to effective use in Belarus and Kazakhstan. What worked to suppress the mass electoral protests in 2020 in Belarus was the very quick and overwhelming use of force to punish the protesters coupled with the direct and indirect support of the Belarusian security apparatus from the Kremlin. Belarus, formerly a populist authoritarian state based on a minimal use of violence, transformed into an 'anti-Maidan regime' whose elite was fully dependent on the Kremlin. Similarly, the Kremlin reacted very quickly to the Kazakhstan unrest in January 2022 with a rapid military intervention. This seemed to prove to the Russian leadership that rapid, 'lightening' interventions could be an effective way of securing their interests through the use of patron-client relations combined with military force. Both caused little practical negative consequences from the side of the US and the EU mired in a series of

political crises. Moreover, it allowed the Kremlin to advertise its non-hegemonic technologies of control to the leaders of other states suffering from mass protests that have been attributed to the influence of the faltering liberal hegemony. If either of these interventions had failed, I am not sure whether Putin would have launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

So, Russia's imperialism is not at all timeless, it evolved through several stages by experimenting with the use of force in response to discrete challenges. It remained opportunistic although increasingly confident that violence works. We, as activists and progressives, can counter this in part by identifying the weakness in this strategy. Above all, it failed to create a genuinely hegemonic politics that would encompass all layers of society, it failed to expand its cultural influence, it failed at the level of propaganda, it did not construct an appealing ideological picture, or any kind of successful economic model. In Donbas, in Syria, in Belarus they have created political structures based on force and personal dependencies rather than on active popular support and sturdy structures of civil society.

This all renders the project of Russian imperialism, ultimately, fragile. Countering it requires acting on its weaknesses. We should obsess less with the influence of the Kremlin's propaganda that has proven much less efficient than it was portrayed both in the Kremlin itself and in the West. We should also overcome the obsession with identity politics that threatens to undermine the unity in the fight with the domestic and foreign consequences of the Kremlin's imperialist policies. We should strive to propose a political vision that encompasses broad masses of the population in Ukraine, other countries threatened by Russian imperialism, and in Russia itself. And, lastly, we should strive to support the groups in civil societies and the media that develop such vision despite the seduction of identitarian entrenchment.

Mazen Gharibah: 'What happens in Ukraine has the potential to unlock the situation in Syria'

I would argue there are a lot of lessons to be learned from Russian military intervention in Syria – which paved the way for many of the atrocities we are seeing in Ukraine. This can be summarised perhaps under the term, "from Aleppo to Mariupol". Many military observers have noted the parallels between the actions of Russia in these two cities. Aleppo formed something of a blueprint for Russia. Indeed, I think you can argue that over the last 12 years, Syria has generally formed a kind of 'testing zone' or showcase for the Russian armed forces; their arsenal, their intelligence capacities, their military equipment, and so on.

Most literature on Russian involvement in Syria goes back to 2015. This is when Putin officially declared the mobilisation of the Russian armed forces in Syria. But the story goes back far longer than this. The Syrian modern army was shaped, trained and equipped by the Soviet Union since the early 1970s and has been involved in the governance of the Syrian military for decades. For example, in Damascus, there is a well-known neighbourhood called the "Russian experts neighbourhood". I remember when I met with high-ranking Syrian military defectors in 2015, and they recalled the conversations they had been involved in with Russian generals. They recalled how one of the Russian generals had told them it was set to be a "long war" and that this meant they needed to employ "cheaper war tactics with the greatest, most devastating impact possible". What did they mean by that? It was manifested in several ways. For example, the Russian army said to the Syrian regime that they should reduce their spend on missiles and utilise barrel bombs, crude weapons that could not be effectively targeted with any precision and inflicted deliberate devastation on civilians.

Another example is chemical weapons. The regime have – with the blessing of the Russian Army – been used on Syrian civilians more than 100 times. For many years there was considerable uncertainty regarding Russian involvement in Syrian chemical weapons attacks. In the face of scepticism, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW)'s Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) carried out an investigation, working closely with, and under a mandate from, the UN. They found evidence that there was 'reasonable grounds to believe' that a chemical weapons attack in Douma, located at Damascus Suburbs, committed in April 2018 was conducted by a helicopter of the Syrian Armed Forces. OPCW's IIT report highlights that Russian forces were co-located at the airbase from which Assad's helicopters launched their deadly chemical attack and that they controlled the airspace over Douma along with the Syrian air force. This has led to considerable discussion over whether chemical weapons attacks in Syria were not only tacitly endorsed, but actively facilitated by the intervention of the Russian Federation.

The Russian state also advised the Syrian regime to not undertake resource intensive attempts to retake rebel held areas using ground forces due to the risk that their (relatively small) numbers of loyal soldiers would be killed. So, instead of this, they pursued brutal sieges of these rebel held areas combined with intensive bombardment, utilising barrel bombs and artillery, etc. For instance, in the siege of Ghouta, which the UN Human Rights Commissioner described as the longest siege of a civilian area in modern history, they locked down all routes in and out of the region. It was cut off completely. For several years, civilians were forced to survive on scarce food resources, resulting, entirely predictably, in high levels of starvation and malnutrition. Eventually the siege led to a surrender agreement, which the Russian state referred to as a 'reconciliation agreement'. But, of course, it was nothing of the sort. Rebels surrendered and this was followed by deliberate policy of forced displacement and demographic engineering as citizens were relocated.

The next major tactic, applied in Syria and then in Ukraine, is the deliberate and conscious targeting of health facilities. This sheer brutality even led civilian groups in Ghouta to create health infrastructure underground to evade these bombs – something that was very well captured by the brilliant Syrian documentary, the Cave. In 2016, the UN carried through a negotiation to share the coordinates of Syrian medical infrastructure in order to avoid their targeting. This resulted in Russian forces carrying out deliberate and targeted attack on these facilities. Major medical organisations, including Doctors Without Borders, consequently committed to never again share the details of health facilities with the UN. This has had a long-term impact on the ability of health infrastructure to actually function – and was especially evident in the ability of the sector to respond to the 2023 Earthquake.

The further area where Russia have been very effective is in the realm of propaganda and disinformation. For years now they have run a high profile, professionally orchestrated campaign. I am not just talking about internet troll factories here. This is a highly professional propaganda machine, involving public relations companies, academics, policy-makers, parliamentarians, celebrities, including some here in the UK. Last year, the Guardian reported, using data gathered by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, on a network accused of spreading disinformation in relation to Syria. The same study also found that official Russian communications channels interacted openly with this disinformation network. In some instances, this has involved completely outlandish claims about the White Helmets (the humanitarian relief organisation), for instance describing them as an arm of ISIS or as foreign agents. They find an audience for this, especially I am afraid in parts of the global left. It has harmed and undermined the solidarity efforts of the global Syrian diaspora.

Another political strategy that the Russians have been utilising in Syria for a long time is endlessly prolonged negotiations on any subject. For example, I am also a member of the UN established body called the Syrian Constitutional Committee, where I am part of a civil society team. For more than 18 months, the Russians have refused to allow this meeting to take place in Geneva because they have refused to attend its meetings in light of Western diplomatic sanctions. These tactics of deliberate delay and stalling have been commonplace.

Finally, I just want to say something about accountability in Syria. This is one of the main issues that Syrians are now fighting for. Here the International Criminal Court investigation of war crimes in Syria is being actively blocked by continuous vetoes of the Russian state. The Russians are very effective in using their veto power at the Security Council to manipulate and restrict the mandate of key organisations or blocking their reports to be presented at the security council. for instance, in October 2017, Russia vetoed a UNSC resolution demanding a one-year extension of the mandate of the Joint Investigation Mechanism (JIM), a UN-OPCW joint investigation body charged with identifying perpetrators of chemical attacks in Syria. This is why what happens in Ukraine – if it leads to a potential for a breakthrough on accountability for Putin et al – has the potential to unblock the problems seen in Syria and deliver justice for Russia's crimes.

Inna Berezkina: 'We must demand justice and accountability for war crimes by Russia'

For the past 17 years, I have worked for the School of Civic Education and I am also an international advisor to Democracy Without Borders since 2020. Over the past year after the full scale Russian invasion of Ukraine like many others, I have become an anti-war activist. I personally prefer to work rather than to talk, but because I am based in Lithuania and therefore retain freedom of speech, I realise that I have a responsibility to speak on behalf of those in Russia who cannot. My sincere gratitude for the invitation to join this discussion and share my thoughts.

I will start by saying that the work we have been doing this past year as civil society, this has been done first and foremost in solidarity with Ukraine. We are extremely grateful to all of our Ukrainian colleagues, and for the work we have done together. We are also very grateful to our European and American friends for all the support we have been receiving in these dark days. The work of civil society is impossible without that support.

As Ukrainians have rightly pointed out, the war did not start last year. The war started nine years ago. And the pressure – the sharpening of repression – on civil society inside Russia began to intensify around ten years ago. These processes are strongly bound together.

Here, I just want to mention a few lines of work that civil society have been pursuing around the last year – i.e., since the start of the full-scale Russian invasion.

First, there is the work of investigative journalists. This work has sought to expose everything from Russian war crimes, indoctrination camps, oligarchic schemes, and so on. It would be impossible without the joint efforts of Ukrainian and Belarusian colleagues. And it has been undertaken from the fields of battle to work in exile. Independent media and journalists have been shut down and kicked out of Russia, but they still continue their work. They seek to counter propaganda inside Russia, but also seek to bring Ukrainian voices into the Russian information space and to the Russian society. The joint international collaborative project, <u>Voices of War</u>, is making a huge difference and would be impossible without substantial international collaboration, especially the work of Ukrainian colleagues.

Second, there is humanitarian activism and the mobilisation of civic help. These initiatives to provide vital humanitarian resources to Ukraine are on-going; and have involved items like <u>power banks, generators, and gathering money to support hospitals and health infrastructure</u>. Again, this would not be possible without support from inside Ukraine. So, thank you so much for that.

Third, I have to mention the work of lawyers and human rights defenders, both inside Russia and outside. Their work for the protection of protestors and the anti-war campaigns, their support for conscientious objectors, and so on. For those of us outside, and I have to stress this, giving voice and support for those that are working inside Russia is absolutely crucial.

Another responsibility of those of us outside Russia is to correct the mistaken impression that there are no people that say 'no' to war inside the country. This is not true. There are about 20,000 people <u>detained since the start of the war</u>. We have 500 political prisoners, who are standing against the regime and saying no to war. There are

spontaneous flower memorial vigils throughout the country, which occur despite state repression. After the shelling of Dnipro on the 23th January these took place in 73 cities across Russia. Some 75 conscription offices have been set on fire – with people now facing up to 12 or more years in prison charted with "terrorism". There are also projects within Russia that undertake searches and identification of prisoners of war – these initiatives would also be impossible without the support of our Ukrainian colleagues. In reference to legal accountability as Mazen Gharibah has rightly emphasised, we also need to support lawyers and human rights defenders so that the Russian human rights community are fully prepared for the Special Tribunal for Russian War Crimes. This preparatory work is already being done on different levels, even if it is not always visible from outside. This is important to stress.

We must demand justice and accountability for war crimes by Russia in Ukraine and the rest of the world. And we must also demand justice and accountability for the crimes committed within the territory of the Russian Federation. These are not just crimes committed by Putin and his cronies, but those that have been committed systematically by state institutions such as the FSB for many years. Russian totalitarianism and imperialism have never been overcome for this reason; these forces persist through their deep hold on state institutions. Russian society has never been able to learn the lessons from the past. As activists, we understand that this is the key issue we have to work on. The impunity that Russia has been enjoying as a state – this is what took us to this tragic point. It is the fundamental question.

It is now down to us, civil society, to prepare processes of transitional justice back at home. Russia must become a normal, democratic society. There are no two ways about it. Given how atomised Russian society is and has always been, we are seeing unprecedented calls for solidarity. The rallies organised from 24th to 26th February this year are proof to that. We managed to bring about 60 thousand people together in 126 cities across the globe in some 46 countries, including anti-war memorials in 44 cities in Russia.

Thousands took to the streets saying 'no' to war. They stood for solidarity with Ukraine.

To confront authoritarian regimes, and to make a difference back at home, this is only possible through solidarity and resilience. We are all facing the same evil – though we understand that, some of us are in a safer position than others. We need to stand united with the global community, recognising their crucial role in supporting Russian civil society.

I will finish by saying what many have been saying across this year, a slogan that we all draw strength from, "glory to Ukraine."

About PeaceRep

PeaceRep is a research consortium based at The University of Edinburgh. Our research is re-thinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

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