Global university rankings and Russia’s quest for national sovereignty

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ABSTRACT
Why have regimes and societies that would otherwise argue for their distinctiveness and sovereign decision-making caught ‘ranking fever’ in HE? Why are they willing to give up their sovereignty in the field of HE, and why do they accept the requirement of homogeneity to succeed in global university rankings? This paradox is explored in the case of Russia. The ranking discourse is analysed at the national and institutional levels using interviews, documents, and media materials. The impetus to ‘internationalise’ education and research, and the aspiration to be globally ranked, is explained using the status, neoliberal competition and state control frames. These conflicts with ‘nationalisation’ part of the discourse, manifested in the resistance to global university rankings and the debates surrounding a Moscow-based ranking. These debates confirm that there is a willingness to internationalise and integrate Russian HE into the neoliberal model of HE on Russia’s terms in preference to self-isolation.

KEYWORDS
Global university rankings; Russia; higher education; internationalisation of higher education; sovereignty; international relations

Introduction
Global rankings entered the field of higher education (HE) more than 15 years ago when the Jiang Tong World University Ranking (ARWU) was first published. University rankings
had existed at the national level from the 1980s. However, the ‘Shanghai’ list in 2003 introduced this alleged measurement of quality to the international academic community. Global rankings encourage universities to compete in research and education on a global level (Hazelkorn and Gibson 2017, 326); they are closely linked with the neoliberal reform of HE (Jöns and Hoyler 2013). According to more critical evaluations, global university rankings impose a uniform model of an Anglo-Saxon research university on universities worldwide and represent a manifestation of cultural imperialism or neocolonialism (Lo 2011; Ordorika and Lloyd 2015), strengthening the division in global knowledge-production into the centre and the periphery (Ndofirepi 2017).

Moreover, it has been argued that global university rankings encourage competition among universities and nations and that they are used for and understood as markers of geopolitical positioning (see Hazelkorn 2014a). Universities of the Anglophone countries occupy the top positions in the leading rankings together with European and some Asian universities (Jöns and Hoyler 2013; Erkkilä 2016; Ndofirepi 2017). Only 1% of all universities worldwide are recognised in the rankings, and newer universities, particularly those that do not emphasise research but rather teaching/learning or serving the community, do not succeed in this competition (Hazelkorn 2014a; see Boyadjieva 2017 on the situation in Eastern and Central Europe).

Even if global rankings have been understood as ‘a product of an increasingly globalised economy and an internationalised higher education landscape’ (Hazelkorn and Gibson 2017, 2) worldwide, we should ask why global university rankings have become a desirable goal and proxy for the quality of education. Further, why are they an important aspect of positioning even in HE systems in which the principle of ‘sovereign’ decision-making is emphasised and the incompatibility of their values with those of the Western world recognised? This paper studies this paradox in the case of Russia.

To provide answers regarding how and why these ‘global’ rankings have been accepted at the state and institutional level in this particular context, the Russian ranking discourse in the 2010s will be examined. For instance, Russia is pushing ahead with its 5–100 programme: the plan for at least five of Russia’s universities to rank in the top 100 in global university rankings by 2020. In 2019, 21 Russian universities received extra funding for the activities that would help them achieve a higher position in one of the three global university rankings: ARWU, the Times Higher Education World University Ranking (THE), and the Quacquarelli Symonds World University Rankings (QS). However, in Russia, there have been calls to choose a distinctive, non-Western path of development and search for partners outside the West, particularly since 2011–2012. The latter is also closely connected with the Russian emphasis on sovereignty in Westphalian terms: ‘sovereign autonomy ... which presupposes the ability of the state to control all significant domestic and transnational processes in and involving Russia’ (Morozov 2008, 174). In international relations, the Russian use of sovereignty discourse is understood as a ‘conceptual and practical mechanism for the exercise of resistance to US global leadership’, a ‘balancing tool against the US and its allies’, and ‘an identity marker for non-Western powers’ (Deyermond 2016, 971, 975).

Kurilla (2016, 3) has focused on the abovementioned dilemma and has argued that in Russia, there is a drive for the internationalisation of education and the nationalisation of politics. According to him, the emphasis on internationalisation is evident in the evaluation criteria that the Ministry of Education and Science uses for universities – the
number of foreign students and academics is considered as well as the number of foreign
grants and international mobility. This is despite what Kurilla calls the isolation of Russia
after 2014, which would be a sign of the nationalisation of politics, connected with the
emphasis on sovereignty as explained above. If we start with Kurilla’s statement that
Russia’s foreign policy (and domestic policy) is based on the idea of nationalisation but
that in HE, the government still strives for internationalisation, how may we understand
this paradox? Is there a division into nationalisation versus internationalisation in different
policy fields?

I propose two interlinked frameworks for understanding the meaning of global univer-
sity rankings in the Russian context: why Russian authorities – and academia, to some
extent – have been caught up in the ‘ranking fever’. This is connected to Kurilla’s interna-
tionalisation argument. The first frame – the status frame – of world politics and global HE
is linked with the notion of recognition. The Russian state seeks recognition from other
nations and actors in world politics as a great power, whereas Russian universities seek
recognition as leading universities from other universities in Russia and worldwide. This
corresponds to previous analyses of Russia’s foreign policy: Russia has sought recognition,
particularly from the West, for its position as a great power (see Neumann 2005, 2013;
Clunan 2009; Tsygankov 2014).

The second, neoliberal frame specifically concerns global HE and the neoliberal reform
of universities and is tied to the idea of competition and competitiveness. Immersed in the
neoliberal reform of HE, states and universities have adopted the idea of having to compete
with other players in the field of the national and global education ‘market’ for their survival
(see Marginson and van der Wende 2007; Erkkiä and Piironen 2014; Hazelkorn and Gibson
2017). In post-Soviet Russia, commercialisation and commodification have characterised
the reforms of the HE field (see Zajda and Zajda 2007; Smolentseva 2017). Funding of
higher education institutions (HEIs) depends on tuition fees and state funding, based on
the number of enrolled students, causing HEIs to compete for decreasing numbers of appli-
cants. The demographic situation, in addition to the funding available from the support
programmes, has also encouraged Russian universities to compete for international stu-
dents, in particular, from the Commonwealth of Independent States and China.

Additionally, I would like to offer a third frame that addresses domestic politics and the
internal logic of the Russian regime. This frame is based on an interpretation of recent
developments in the field of HE and the broader field of politics in Russia and previous
studies. The state control frame does not directly draw on the primary data used for
this article. President Putin has consolidated the current regime by building the ‘power
vertical’ that means a more centralised system of power. The university reforms of the
2000s can also be seen as one step in the direction of the centralisation of power and
introduction of more state control in HE. The introduction of categories of Russian univer-
sities and, accordingly, different funding, the introduction of an evaluation of universities
(Monitoring effektivnosti vuzov), the regulations regarding the appointment of rectors by
the government (federal universities) or the president (Moscow and St. Petersburg state
universities), and the introduction of ‘per-student funding’ serve as evidence of the tigh-
tened control by the state (Forrat 2016). The 5–100 Project represents another example.
For universities, it offers an instrument to obtain more funding and internationalise the
university, making it more attractive to students or even gaining more autonomy in decid-
ing on the curricula. However, although the project provides reputational and financial
benefits or a feeling of enlarged autonomy to the universities involved, it is also a way of imposing a certain kind of an ideal – that of a research-intensive university together with an increased amount of reporting responsibilities (Block and Khvatova 2017). More importantly, the project excludes the majority of Russia’s nearly 600 universities.

The line of reasoning, called ‘nationalisation of politics’ by Kurilla (2016), is not novel in Russian political thinking, although this tendency has again strengthened in the political elite in the 2010s. At least since the nineteenth century, different schools of thinking have been arguing for Russia’s uniqueness and distinctiveness from Europe/the West (e.g. Slavophiles, Pan-Slavists, Eurasianists; Neumann 1996; Tsygankov 2016). To a varying degree, they might have also argued for some type of isolation (e.g. Slavophiles). However, in the Russian Federation, it seems that those schools of thought that have had an impact on the political elite have mainly argued for considering Russian characteristics and the need to adjust the models to the Russian context (e.g. the concept of ‘sovereign democracy’; Mäkinen 2011) and not necessarily (self-)isolation. This is also the case in the field of HE. Global university rankings are criticised because they are not compatible with the HE system in Russia; therefore, they should be revised, or new rankings should be created. If we follow the sovereignty argument, then it might also be claimed that for those resisting global university rankings, they represent an intervention into Russia’s sovereignty in the field of HE, which should not be tolerated.

Contrary to Kurilla’s view, this article argues that the paradox – internationalisation vs. nationalisation – does not necessarily exist between different fields such as politics and education. However, we may find arguments favouring both in the same field, here in the field of HE represented by the ranking discourse. This argument is based on the analysis of 12 semi-structured interviews, conducted by the author, Russian documents, and media materials – all gathered in 2012–2018.

First, I discuss global university rankings based on previous studies; second, I review those in the Russian context. Third, I analyse the ranking discourse that supports the idea of internationalisation of HE and the frames that help us understand Russia’s ‘ranking fever’. Fourth, I turn to the ranking discourse that provides evidence for the need to adjust or ‘domesticate’ global rankings to the Russian context. For the third and fourth sections, I coded the primary data according to the internationalisation and nationalisation categories and then the recognition and competition categories. In the conclusion, Russia’s aspiration to integrate (e.g. by internationalising HE) is elaborated. The conclusions also invite us to consider whether the global rankings are being used to impose more state control on the field of HE, particularly in non-democratic regimes, and pay attention to the reasons for criticism against university rankings and their global nature.

A brief review of global university rankings

The first global university ranking ARWU, published by Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China, was followed by The Times Higher Education QS Top University Rankings (THE-QS) in 2004, which was later (2010) split into two separate rankings: the Times Higher Education World University Ranking (THE) and the Quacquarelli Symonds World University Rankings (QS) (Hazelkorn 2014b). Indicators used in the rankings vary, but they claim to measure the quality of universities based on research and teaching performance (Hazelkorn 2007, 89–90).
Two recent developments that have been crucial in the creation of global rankings and making them more significant are the ‘increasingly globalised economy and an internationalised higher education landscape’ (Hazelkorn and Gibson 2017, 2). The field of higher education has grown significantly both in the number of HEIs and enrolled students. There is a geographical imbalance in demand and supply that has led to the transnational mobility of students and thus also a growing need for objective information on the ‘quality’ of HEIs worldwide (Hazelkorn 2009, 57).

Global rankings in the field of HE should also be seen as part of ‘the general drive for evidence-based policymaking in other areas’ (Erkkilä 2016, 181). Such a measurement of output and quality is not only characteristic of the HE field. Global university rankings are closely tied to New Public Management or the neoliberal model of HE as a whole. This model stands for less state funding and decentralisation of decision-making, the commodification of HE, and calls for accountability and the adoption of accreditation systems and incentives linked to research production (Amthor and Metzger 2011, 68; Ordoñika and Lloyd 2015, 395). Along with the methodological criticism of how the ranking data are collected and/or interpreted (Hazelkorn 2007; O’Connell 2013; Erkkilä 2014; Goglio 2016), another main source of criticism of global university rankings is the drive for uniformity (Erkkilä 2014, 92) or ‘homogenisation’ (Jöns and Hoyler 2013; Kamola and Noori 2014; Ordoñika and Lloyd 2015) in the policies and practices of HE. Rankings ‘create de facto global standards and models that increasingly test and challenge the national traditions of higher education and research’ (Ishikawa 2009) or impose the model of the elite Anglo-Saxon research university on all national systems of HE (e.g. Erkkilä 2016, 178). In the critical accounts, the latter is understood as a form of US cultural imperialism (Ordoñika and Lloyd 2015, 385) or endorsement of the legitimation of the hierarchy of knowledge – of the hegemony of Western knowledge-production (Ndofirepi 2017, 157). A more pragmatic characterisation of the role of rankings is that ‘all rankings systems are both incomplete as a description of reality … and contain built-in bias’ (Marginson and van der Wende 2007, 308–309); a comparison based on global rankings makes sense only between comprehensive research-intensive universities (309).

What is particularly important for this paper is how a university rank is represented as an indicator of HEIs’ competitiveness and national competitiveness. They represent ‘a proxy for competitiveness, with nations and higher education institutions (HEIs) adopting policies and strategies to maximise their reputation and status’ (Hazelkorn 2014a, 14). The metaphor of the Olympic Games has also been applied to global university rankings (Yudkevich, Altbach, and Rumbley 2016), informing us about the ‘seriousness’ of this ranking game in international relations. As an alternative to the hegemony or neo-colonialism interpretation, Lo (2011, 16) suggests that rankings should be seen as part of soft power – they are ‘mechanisms of agenda-setting in the global knowledge economy’. Universities are willing to follow them because of the attractiveness of the world-class status associated with the rank.

The Russian context and university rankings

Before the Russian government started to advocate global rankings and launched the 5–100 Project in 2012, there were national rankings and scholarly discussions on national university rankings in Russia. Voprosy Obrazovniya journal, published by the Higher
School of Economics, discussed rankings in the field of education in 2007. The first article (Chepurnykh and Maiorov 2007) in this series focused on a criticism of the ranking of the Russian regions (federation subjects) in the field of education published by the Ministry of Education and Science and, in general, the problems regarding the measurement of education quality along this line. Recently, several producers of HE rankings have appeared in Russia (Alasheev, Kogan, and Tyurina 2016, 193). For example, the Russia Segodnya ranking produced with the Higher School of Economics ranks 500 Russian HEIs with the indicator of average points of Unified State Exam (EGE) required for entering an HEI. The Ministry of Education and Science has evaluated the efficiency of HEIs since 2012 (Monitoring effektivnosti vuzov). HEIs are evaluated according to their educational, research, international, and financial activities, the salaries of professors and other teachers, and the employment of their graduates. Owing to this monitoring, a concept of ranking ineffective HEIs has emerged; this has also been called ‘anti-ranking’ (antireiting) and has been introduced as a ‘Russian speciality’ (Solov’eva 2013).

With the adoption of the 5–100 Project, Russia followed a global trend termed the ‘world-class movement’ (Mok 2008 in Lo 2011, 212; see Hazelkorn and Gibson 2017). This means that there are government schemes under which ‘a number of top universities are selected to be awarded a special grant. In return, they are expected to pursue better performance (e.g. in university rankings) and to promote the notion of world-class excellence in the higher education sector’ (Lo 2011, 212). Such programmes have previously been launched by China, Germany, France, Spain, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia, Finland, Japan, Singapore, and Latvia (Hazelkorn 2014a, 19). In addition to ‘world-class’, Russia has also adopted the notion of a regional flagship university (cf. Douglas 106 in Hazelkorn and Gibson 2017, 8). In Russia, regional flagship or pillar universities (opornye universitety) should serve the interests of a given region by training cadres for regional businesses and administration and not necessarily by focusing on research or being comprehensive universities.

In the Russian context, the role of global university rankings has been discussed in several studies (Pavlyutkin and Yudkevich 2016; Block and Khvatova 2017; Tsvetkova and Lomer 2019), usually focusing on experiences of one university. More generally, Pavlyutkin and Yudkevich argue that Russia is a special case because Russian universities are situated in a state-monopolised environment and not in a competitive environment like most European, American, and Asian universities. As key characteristics of Russian HE, Pavlyutkin and Yudkevich list the following: separation of universities and academies of sciences; the absence of an academic labour market (meaning that there is little mobility between universities, and graduates often stay at their alma mater); limited research funding; and low trust from the side of the state towards universities and their paternalistic relationship (174–176).

Some of these characteristics have also been identified as the main factors preventing Russian universities from being successful in rankings. The main problem is the lack of research focus at Russian universities. During the Soviet period, research was concentrated in research institutes instead of universities, and this tradition has also persisted to some extent in post-Soviet Russia. Faculty may also lack experience with (international) peer-reviewed publishing. Further, in many universities and fields of study, teachers continue to have a heavy teaching load, which is sometimes combined with having multiple university affiliations due to poor salaries. All these together with a growing
administrative burden required for accreditation and evaluation have negative consequences for the performance of Russian universities in global university rankings. The Russian government has been determined to address all these issues with the help of the abovementioned quality assessment exercises since 2012 and the university mergers following them. For example, several Russian universities and their branch campuses have faced either a closure or a merger in the 2010s. If in January 2014, there were 567 state universities and 422 non-state universities, then in January 2018, there were 484 state universities and only 81 non-state universities; the number of branch campuses has also decreased by almost a half (Kommersant’ 27 March 2018). In addition to the assessment exercises, the field of HE has encountered stratification partly because of different support programmes and other government initiatives (Forrat 2016). The autonomy and funding of universities depend on their status. There have been different support programmes for federal universities, universities implementing innovative education programmes, national research universities, members of the 5–100 Project, universities of national significance – Lomonosov Moscow State University and St. Petersburg State University (Forrat 2016) – and most recently, regional pillar universities and universities participating in education export.

In their study, Pavlyutkin and Yudkevich (2016) focused on institutional responses to global university rankings at the Higher School of Economics. In particular, they studied how university culture shapes the adaptation of faculty and administration to new roles and constraints and their reactions to new realities (172). They found that the meanings ascribed to global rankings varied ‘from being important measures of university progress and reputation to damaging instruments’ (181). They noted the following: friction between the goals of a ‘ranked university’ and a ‘culturally embedded university’ (188); friction between administrative and academic staff; requirements to publish in ranked, international, and peer-reviewed journals; short-term contracts; and a line between ‘those who can do it’ and ‘those who cannot’. Pavlyutkin and Yudkevich argue that to thrive in rankings, ‘the institution must implement new principles of academic work based on English as the key academic language, new modes of professional management, and a commitment to “publish or perish” and “money for performance” maxims … ’ (173). Accordingly, the authors argue for a stronger commitment to the global neoliberal model of HE and for following a research-intensive university model. Some of these goals are also part of the priority project for the Development of the Export Potential of the Russian System of Education (2017), the goal of which is to internationalise HE. In particular, it aims to attract more international students to Russian universities and increase the amount of revenue generated from fee-paying international students.

The Russian discourse on ranking

Below, I argue that Russia’s eagerness to have Russian universities ranked in global university rankings should first be understood as the seeking of recognition for its educational great power status from the West/leaders in the global education market (see also Mäkinen 2016; Mäkinen 2021). In the context of Russia’s search for recognition (Neumann 2005, 2013; Clunan 2009; Smith 2014; Tsygankov 2014; Kiseleva 2015), this could help us to understand why Russia and Russian universities strive for inclusion in the global university rankings. Russia and Russian universities insist on being recognised
as equals; in the future, they seek to be recognised as leaders in this sphere. Global rankings represent proof of this equal or potentially leading/great power status.

Second, the aspiration to become integrated into the ‘global’ can also be understood as a status-related motivation or a goal and the acceptance of a broader ideology of competition as part of the neoliberal reform of HE (see also Tsvetkova and Lomer 2019). Russian universities have to be included in this competition to survive (cf. Erkkilä and Piironen 2014, 181). Erkkilä and Piironen (181) argue that the competitiveness of universities is linked to national and regional competitiveness believed to foster economic goals such as growth, employment, and welfare … global university rankings increase the concern for the perceived loss of competitiveness at all levels’ (178). Russia and Russian universities have also been immersed in this idea of competition and competitiveness, which is also linked to HE reforms.

Below, first the ranking discourse that advocates the internationalisation of HE, and in particular, global university rankings is introduced and then potential nationalisation in this sphere, i.e. that part of the ranking discourse that would like to challenge global university rankings or their ‘globality’.

**Internationalisation of higher education and global university rankings**

**Status frame: searching for global recognition**

At the institutional level, rankings are often represented as marketing tools or ‘statusproofs’, important for their PR purpose in the global market. The position in rankings is connected with the creation of a respectable reputation for the Russian system of education and the attractiveness of Russian HEIs as employers and places of study. In these cases, the attitude towards rankings is extremely positive or seemingly ‘neutral’. For example, they are required for benchmarking (3-Non-5-100-1, 2016) – their original purpose as argued by Hazelkorn. The rankings are needed to make comparisons so that stakeholders such as parents and applicants can compare the HEIs.

Indeed some interviewees emphasise that rankings are mainly for student recruitment: ‘it is a kind of game … face of the university’ (1-non-5-100-2, 2014). A concrete example of the meaning of rankings is given as a hypothetical case of a Chinese parent: a parent who does not necessarily understand the substance of the degree programme, but they understand that it is a good university if there are Nobel laureates in the university and if it does well in the rankings (1-5-100-1, 2016). However, it is also clear that global rankings have a meaning for ‘elite universities’, for example, those in the 5–100 Project, but not for ‘ordinary’ Russian universities (such as opornyé universitety) that compete for local students only. Again, this confirms the separation between elite universities versus most universities that are not ‘globally’ ranked (or culturally embedded universities as argued by Pavlyutkin and Yudkevich 2016).

However, a representative from a university that is not a member in the 5–100 Project claims that if the university is not ranked, then it ‘lags behind (otstal ot vremeni) … (3-Non-5-100-1, 2016)’. University officials (e.g. Higher School of Economics [HSE] Vice-Rector Aleksei Novoseltsev) argue that Russia should not lag behind this ‘trend’ and should act equally and be taken as an equal (Gazeta.ru 9 July 2013). The Rector of the Kazan Federal University, Ilshat Gafurov, explains that global rankings represent belonging to the elite global university community, being the ‘cream of the crop’ (TASS 30 September 2015).
Rankings are understood as mandatory: ‘If you are not in that system, it is a signal to the professional community, applicants and parents, that there is no development at the institution and that one should choose another university that is higher in the rankings’ (2-5-100-1, 2017). It is not a question of whether the ranking system is good or bad: there is no alternative. You are either in, or you are out, and Russian HE wants to be ‘in’ among the leading global universities. The inclusion in the ranking represents proof of global academic leadership. The necessity of being included might be purely instrumental and not necessarily directly linked with any political or value-related questions. It is a way of obtaining more funding, students, and researchers and being recognised as a ‘world-class university’; all these are linked together.

Russia’s isolation is considered a problem, and internationalisation is strongly encouraged. Global rankings could be just one part of this integration into world education. An interviewee mentioned the unfortunate first attempt to create a global ranking of Russian origin in which the Moscow State University was placed ahead of Harvard: ‘besides laughter and embarrassment, similar initiatives cannot create anything. If we plan to fight with ideological instruments, then that fight will be doomed to be unsuccessful…’ (1-5-100-1, 2016). Instead, the interviewee recommends working with the academic community of experts and trying to change the methodology of the existing rankings. Russia should work within the existing ‘reality’ and try to change that rather than attempting to construct an ‘alternative reality’.

There are also critical voices. Russia has been unable to do what China, South Korea, and Singapore have achieved by gaining access to the world market for their HEIs through research orientation, hosting researchers from abroad, laboratories in cooperation with foreign partners, translation of research in Chinese into English, providing education in English, being open, and having better funding. The Chinese system of HE is used for benchmarking and partly as a model to follow in HE. Aleksei Maslov, a member of the study council of HSE, argues that many universities have remained Soviet universities in terms of their structure and cadres (Rosbalt 5 April 2016). The necessary action is to restructure leading universities (peredovye vuzy) and acquire new cadres as was done in China and Singapore.

**Neoliberal frame: enhancing the global competitiveness**

When examining the second frame, the neoliberal model, and the need to enhance competitiveness, we may return to the birth of the 5–100 Project as narrated by one of the interviewees:

The 5–100 Project was born in a situation in which the President had meetings with the theme of how to develop industry, and the conclusion was that without a breakthrough in science and education nothing could be done. This was followed by a reform of the Academy of Sciences and of education. Regarding this, there was a related joke, ‘We have good education, they just do not know about it in the world’; therefore, to measure the quality of education, you need global rankings. (2-non-5-100-1, 2017)

According to this narrative, the ultimate goal is to develop ‘industry’ or the economy as a whole. To this end, you need to develop education and research; to measure their quality, you need global rankings. Global rankings are taken as a proxy for the quality of education – if your institution is represented in the rankings, it offers high quality education. This
resonates with the arguments conveyed in previous research on the link between rankings and the knowledge economy (see, e.g. Hazelkorn and Gibson 2017, 2). Moreover, the Rankings of universities are assumed to indicate the competitiveness of the national economy, a claim also confirmed in research literature (see Marginson and van der Wende 2007, 314):

… when you start to look at the correlation at the level, of say, the GDP per person with the number of HEIs that are in the top-100, top-200 of that ranking, you can immediately see that there is quite a high correlation … the level of education somehow correlates with a successful economy. (2-non-5-100-1, 2017)

This suggests that, if Russian universities are not represented in global university rankings, this also indicates that the Russian economy is not competitive.

The goal of having five Russian universities in the world top-100 was decreed by the Ukase of the Russian Federation (7 May 2012) and signed by the president. Initially, the 5–100 Project comprised financial support for 15 ‘leading’ universities in their attempts to be included in the top-100 in global rankings. Universities were to use this funding to build their research potential, attract foreign students and teachers, change the system of administration of the HEI, and promote Russian education in the ‘global market’ (Concept 2014). Additionally, research was to be internationalised: Russian university research was to be published in Scopus and Web of Science classified journals.

More universities were included in the programme in 2016 (see Table 1 below). However, there was no considerable increase in the total amount of funding; almost the same amount was allocated among 21 universities (Kommersant, 24 April 2015). In 2018, 21 universities remained in the project. A year later, the Russian government announced that it planned to continue and expand the 5–100 Project even after 2020 (Rossiiskaya Gazeta, 25 October 2019). Unlike during the first phase of the project in this call, regional HEIs and sectoral universities could also apply to become members of the project.

The explicitly declared goal by the authorities for the 5–100 Project was to improve the quality of Russian (higher) education: teaching and research, as the then Minister of Education Dmitri Livanov presented it (e.g. in Gazeta.ru 28 October 2013). Two years later, Livanov again argued that the goal was not the rankings themselves but to improve the work of HEIs and their competitiveness (Kommersant.ru 19 October 2015). Indeed, the Project 5–100 is seen as a ‘game changer’ in the Russian HE

| Table 1. 5–100 funding and Russian universities in global university rankings. |
|----------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
|                                  | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 |
| No. of universities              | 15   | 14   | 14   | 21   | 21   | 21   |
| Funding (millions of roubles)    | 8,700| 10,150| 10,140| 10,927| 10,521| 9,908|
| No. of Russian universities in the ARWU top-500 (top-100) *No. in 5–100 | 2 (1) | 2 (1) | 2 (1) | 3 (1) | 3 (1) | 4 (1) |
| THE top-500 (top-100)            | 2 (0) | 1 (0) | 2 (0) | 7 (0) | 8 (0) | 8 (0) |
| *No. of universities in 5–100    | *1   | *1   | *1   | *5   | *6   | *6 (0) |
| QS (top-100)                     | 10 (0) | 9 (0) | 11 (0) | 13 (1) | *8   | *7   |
| *No. of universities in 5–100    | *8   | *7   | *9   | *11 (0) |

Source: Funding information from the documents on the 5–100 Project website https://5top100.ru/documents/regulations/; ranking information from the ranking websites.
because ‘it has changed the attitude of the leading universities’ as well as that of other universities. They ‘have a benchmark that is much higher than it was before … ’ (Agency 2018).

Although the initial, concrete goal of the 5–100 Project was not achieved by 2020, the number of ranked Russian universities has increased, and that of ranked universities and their positions have improved per subject, and this is also deemed a satisfactory result (e.g. Kommersant.ru 19 October 2015).

**The nationalisation of politics and global university rankings**

The second part of Kurilla’s argument concerns the nationalisation of politics in post-Crimean Russia. Below the link between his argument and the discourse that calls for the creation of a new global ranking that would better fit the Russian system of HE is discussed. Kurilla’s argument also includes the idea of the isolation of Russia, in particular, from the West. Russia’s foreign policy has long emphasised – not only since the annexation of Crimea or Putin’s third presidential term – the importance of strengthening Russia’s sovereignty and sovereign decision-making. Further, there have been calls to emphasise Russia’s distinctiveness and follow a distinctive path or at least one different from the Western path of development. Many scholars have talked about a conservative and nationalist turn in Russia’s foreign policy in the 2010s (see Tsygankov 2014; Zevelev 2014; Khudoley 2016) or the instrumental use of nationalist rhetoric for obtaining support from the elites (and public opinion) to legitimate the state (Laruelle 2015).

The notions of democracy and sovereignty are combined in the concept of ‘sovereign democracy’ that was popular with the Russian political elite, particularly during Putin’s second term as president. One of the most influential proponents of this concept was Vladislav Surkov, then Deputy Head of Presidential Administration. For him, democracy signified individual freedom, whereas sovereignty was described as national freedom; the former could not exist without the latter (Mäkinen 2011, 151). Surkov combined neoliberal logic – the criticism of a culture of dependency typical of the Soviet period, advocacy of entrepreneurship, and innovativeness – with the former Russian and Soviet discourses that emphasised Russia’s distinctive path to modernisation (Mäkinen 2011, 144). In addition to emphasising the responsibility of each individual for their future and cooperation with the West for technological modernisation, Surkov argued for respect for Russian traditions and Russian political culture, including the centralisation of power (Mäkinen 2011, 144–145). Therefore, internationalisation of Russian HE should be conducted in a way that would be compatible with ‘Russian culture’.

The nationalisation aspect of the ranking discourse speaks for integration or internationalisation on Russia’s terms rather than isolation. Therefore, it is irrelevant to talk about the contradiction between nationalisation and internationalisation but rather about different types of or approaches to ‘internationalisation’ – the acceptance of the ‘Anglo-Saxon research university model’ or trying to adapt the system to Russian contexts. This is reminiscent of criticisms raised in previous studies on global rankings as manifestations of cultural imperialism that impose knowledge hierarchies. There is support for both models within the Russian HE community, studied for this research. Moreover, when we refer to the nationalisation aspect of the ranking discourse, it might be better to talk about ‘domestication’. This means ‘a transformation in which a reform process
initiated by references to exogenous models, ideas or catchwords results in people viewing the outcome as a unique domestic creation’ (Alasuutari and Qadir 2013, 14). Domestication takes place through the stages of cross-national comparisons, domestic field battles, and naturalisation by nationalisation (Alasuutari and Qadir 2013). This model may partly help us understand the reasoning behind (or the legitimation of) the Moscow International Ranking as an alternative for other global rankings. However, in Russian discourse, it is not claimed that this ranking would be a ‘unique domestic creation’ as it would not have exogenous roots.

Usually, the reason for criticising the global university rankings concerns the emphasis on Russia being unique or Russia’s educational system being distinctive from the Anglo-Saxon models of education: ‘rankings … unfortunately for Russian HE, … are organised according to the Anglo-Saxon system of education, promotion and PR of their universities, and therefore, no other HEIs are needed’ (3-non-5-100-1, 2016). In the Russian context, this difference is explained by the position of research at universities. Universities have not traditionally been strong in research because research has been conducted at the institutes of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and most of the publishing and teaching has taken place in Russian instead of English.

If Russia’s educational system is presented as different, then global university rankings would be unsuitable for Russia, and instead of trying to modify the Russian system to better fit them, Russia should create its own global ranking. The Rector of the Lomonosov Moscow State University (MGU), Viktor Sadovnichii, and the Russian Union of Rectors, headed by Sadovnichii, have been the most influential proponents of this approach.

Sadovnichii’s appeals (e.g. Tverskaya 13, 3 April 2014) for creating a Moscow-based ranking of HEIs as a counterbalance to the Western-dominated ranking systems found resonance, and President Putin decreed that the Russian Union of Rectors and the Russian Academy of Sciences should start preparations for a new ranking. In a meeting of the Council on Science and Education in 2016, President Putin argued as follows:

as long as we do not have our own criteria, we have to be guided by those that exist, those that are offered to us, and we will always complain that this is not good for us. Let us do our own, let us prepare such criteria that can evaluate our work, the work of our collectives and people who work in different organisations that are not represented here by their leaders. (TASS 21 January 2016)

Although Sadovnichii’s calls for a new ranking coincided temporally with the annexation of Crimea, this should be seen as a continuation of the discourse of Russia’s distinctiveness rather than as a causal result of the annexation.

The funding for the ranking comes from the grant of the President of the Russian Federation for the development of civil society (Mosiur 2018). According to Sadovnichii, criteria for the new ranking include the role of the university in society, the employment of graduates, employer reviews, and the role of the university in the region and culture, besides citations and recognition (uznavaemost’) (TASS 6 May 2016). In December 2017, the first Moscow International Ranking Three University Missions was published (TASS 11 December 2017). Indeed, as previously argued for by Sadovnichii (Itogi 15 March 2010) and the Rector of the Russian University of Peoples’ Friendship and former Minister of Education Vladimir Filippov (Moskovskii Komsomolets 30 June 2014), it emphasises education (45% value) and the university and society relationship (30%) instead of
research (25%). Thirteen Russian universities were recognised in the Moscow International Ranking in 2017. A year later, 17 universities from Russia were included in the top-333, which presented the number of ranked universities. In the top 100, there were three Russian universities: the Lomonosov Moscow State University, the St. Petersburg State University, and the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology (Mosriur 2018). The top 10 of the rankings did not differ from those of other global university rankings; the top positions were taken by universities from the US and UK, led by Harvard University, MIT, and Yale (Mosriur 2018).

The creation of the Moscow International Ranking does not mean arguing for isolation but rather advocating for integration on Russia’s terms. Moreover, it is a question of recognition that can be achieved either by Russian universities being recognised in global rankings or by assessing universities with the Moscow-based global ranking. For example, then Minister of Education and Science Ol’ga Vasil’eva (TASS 7 December 2017) argued as follows:

The creation of the national ranking is not only about the most important task of improving the quality of Russian education but also about the solution to our problem of how to show the might and power (demonstratsiya moshchi i sily) of Russian education. And [it is] the most evident example and confirmation of that.

This signifies the dual task assigned to the Moscow International Ranking and Russian HEIs participating in global rankings: their quality should be enhanced in the spirit of neoliberal competition, and they should contribute to Russia’s status improvement.

Conclusion

This article was driven by the following research questions: why have regimes and societies that would otherwise argue for their distinctiveness and sovereign decision-making caught ‘ranking fever’ in HE? Why are they willing to give up their sovereignty in the field of HE, and why do they accept the requirement of uniformity or homogeneity of their HE system and HEIs to succeed in global university rankings? Russia represents a good case for exploring this paradox. The article has offered three frames that help us understand the reasoning behind the ranking fever: status, neoliberal competition, and state control. These translate to the search for worldwide recognition as an equal (and great power), acceptance of the neoliberal logic of competition for survival of HEIs and economies, and the wish to centralise power for control. Further, a reason for why global rankings encounter resistance or calls for their revision has been discussed – the argument on the distinctiveness of each society, culture, and national system of HE – and thus the incompatibility of global rankings with each national system of HE. All these frames extend beyond Russia as indicated by previous studies on global university rankings.

In the Russian context, rankings are believed to have the power to contribute, negatively or positively, to Russia’s global status and consequently to its ability to act and safeguard its interests. Therefore, the authorities cannot ignore them. Even those who argue for Russia’s distinctiveness are not immune to status-seeking, the opportunities that rankings offer for national branding and geopolitical positioning, or the neoliberal idea of competition linked with it. However, their solution is not to ignore global rankings but
to create a new one. Thus, evidently, Russian authorities and some academics are not denying the need for global competition but want to revise the rules of the competition. They want to integrate but on their terms. Notably, Russian criticism towards rankings is not completely congruent with the criticism following critical theory, post-colonial or post-structuralist readings of rankings in the contexts of Africa, Europe, or Latin America. In addition to the cultural imperialism argument, this criticism is addressed at the neoliberal model of HE, or the Anglo-American model of HE is equalled to the neoliberal model. In Russia, although there are arguments emphasising the function of the university for serving the society as a whole and prioritising the function of education over that of research, the neoliberal model is not criticised as such. For example, commodification of HE is not criticised within global rankings debates, but the starting points are the cultural and national differences of HE. Rankings should thus be seen as a further step or tool in the neoliberalisation of Russia’s HE that started after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Adopting global university rankings into Russian HE also represents a continuation of Russia’s concrete integration into the European Educational Area (and more broadly into the ‘global’ educational space), together with the introduction of the Bologna process in Russia since 2005.

In addition to status improvement and competition enhancement, rankings may be used as tools of control on HEIs by the state. The third frame for understanding the ‘ranking fever’ of the authorities’ state control with the centralisation of power is linked with neoliberal logic. Chosen universities are vested with more responsibilities that should be understood as ‘freedoms’. They are given these freedoms (e.g. targeted funding, more autonomy in curriculum design) in return for their behaviour within the limits set by the state; their freedom is limited by their obedient behaviour. ‘Freedoms’ come together with requirements for a massive amount of reporting for accountability and transparency.

Apart from focusing on how to improve rankings, we should critically examine the meanings ascribed to them and how, for what purposes, and by whom they are used in any given context. Academic communities worldwide are in a position to assess whether global university rankings or any HE reform with the publicly declared goals of enhancing the quality of education or competitiveness of HEIs are used to justify other policies or practices not connected with the rankings (or any HE reform) themselves. They can also examine if these rankings are used for political purposes of controlling the universities, their staff, and students, for example, by restricting university autonomy or academic freedom. Moreover, as suggested by previous studies, global university rankings should not start to guide reforms in HE. The reforms should be planned and implemented according to the local and regional needs of societies. In parallel, we must focus on by whom, on what grounds, and for what purposes the criticism against university rankings and their lack of globality is voiced. Apparently, academic criticism may sometimes serve the nationalistic and conservative agenda of authoritarian regimes.

Notes

1. The method of snowballing was applied when searching for interviewees. The criteria used in the selection of interviewees included their position and the status of the university.
Interviewees were vice-rectors, deputy vice-rectors, and heads of international affairs of different Moscow-based Russian universities, both state and private universities, and both the members of the 5–100 project and those not. In addition, a representative of the Ministry of Education and Science and a representative of an expert agency were interviewed. The identity of the interviewees will not be disclosed. I will refer to them with codes, such as 7-5-100-1, in which the first digit stands for the university, 5–100 refers to universities that are members of the 5–100 project, and the last digit is the identifier for the interviewee. Non-5-100 refers to universities that are not members of the 5–100 project.

2. Documents were gathered from the Russian Ministry of Education and Science website, the 5–100 website, and university websites.

3. The media materials were identified by searching for the names of the ministers of education and science, their deputy ministers, rectors of leading universities, and the word ‘rankings’ in Russian newspapers (selected; part of which with the help of Integrum) and online news agencies.

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