



Odysseus's boat passing between the six-headed monster Scylla and the whirlpool Charybdis. Scylla has plucked five of Odysseus's men from the boat. The painting is an Italian fresco from circa 1575.

Academic Freedom in Russia:

Between the Scylla of conservatism and the Charybdis of neoliberalism

by **Dmitry Dubrovskiy**

The academic community in Russia was, in many ways, both the creator and the beneficiary of freedom from the ideological dictates of the state and the state censorship of the Soviet era; moreover, we can say that, to a certain extent, the academic community benefited more from the freedom of speech than the rest of Russian society, bearing in mind the direct dependence of the work of the scientist, as well as the journalist, on the level of freedom of speech and thought.¹ The shock reforms and the crisis of the nineties, on the contrary, greatly worsened the situation for scientists and teachers, which could not but cause a serious outflow of personnel from the academic environment. At the same time, starting from the second presidential term of Vladimir Putin, the space of academic freedom, which began to form in the '90s, began to narrow dramatically. The reason for this was the cooling of the political climate in Russia and a sharp narrowing of the space of freedom of speech. And again, this restriction appears to have to a greater extent affected science and education compared to society as a whole. The reason for this was, first of all, that at some point in the nineties

academic freedom ceased to be a privilege that distinguished the Soviet scientist from the Soviet worker and became part of the general freedom. In the situation of a certain refusal of society from political freedom, as well as sharply increased control over science and education, it is humanitarian science that has again become the object of ideological control and dictates.

At the same time, paradoxically, the Russian higher education system has been actively developing projects in the field of internationalization of higher education: there were projects of higher education with international participation (European University at St. Petersburg, Smolny College – The Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Shaninka – The Moscow School of Economic

and Social Sciences), strengthening the role of academic exchanges and international research projects. Such projects were actively encouraged by the state, which was interested in promoting Russian higher education, and even invested serious money in the program 5–100–20² – which involves getting five Russian universities in the top hundred universities in the world by 2020.

This trend, in turn, faced with the strengthening of the state

abstract

Independent scientific and professional organizations began to suffer especially after the introduction of the so-called law on “foreign agents”. Ideological control over science, together with espionage, begins to directly influence the state of academic rights and freedoms. The topic of human rights has almost disappeared from teaching, and research in the field of queer sociology is in fact banned. However, the most vulnerable are those who either teach or demand respect for human rights at the university, and then the loss of employment is the result of a direct ideological confrontation with the rector, such as for the author of this text.

KEY WORDS: Human rights, academic freedom.

system of control over research and researchers: we are talking about the revival of the “first departments” – that is, the FSB (Federal Security Service) officers in charge of particularly sensitive industries, such as nuclear physics and work in the field of bacteriology, for example. The practice of monitoring the exchange of information and ordinary research has often become a transition to espionage, which also could not but affect the situation for academic rights and freedoms, and the atmosphere in the academy as a whole.

This change affects different groups of teachers and researchers in different ways: as Robert Quinn and Jesse Levine precisely note in 2014,³ researchers and teachers may demand that they be taught in one way or another, or, without being directly related to teaching or education in the field of human rights, they may simply be confronted with violations of their rights and demand that they be respected. This is the case with the violation of academic rights and freedoms in Russia: those who either teach human rights too responsibly and consistently or those who openly and clearly protest against their violation suffer the most.

Scylla of conservatism

The strengthening of state control over universities under the slogan of the reform of science and higher education, in fact, revived the Soviet practice of pathological control over all contacts with foreigners. The order “About export control”, signed in 1999,⁴ although it generally refers to the control over the export of nuclear weapons, military technologies and other things, nevertheless, intensified the work of the so-called “First departments” (dealing with secrecy) and generally updated the scope of excessive control over the activities of researchers and teachers of higher education institutions. Thus, according to the official provisions of the Law, research in such fields of knowl-

edge, the results of which can be used to create weapons of mass destruction, as well as for preparing or committing terrorist acts, is subject to special control at universities. First of all, despite the rather clear boundaries that the law establishes with respect to the subject of control (this is primarily atomic physics and some types of biomedical research). This did not prevent the author of this article⁵ from broadly interpreting disciplines that should be subject to enhanced state control; for example, at St. Petersburg State University, the rector N. Kropachev believed that all con-

tacts with foreigners without exception should fall under the reporting procedures provided by the Law.⁶

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HOWEVER, THE MAIN victims of the strengthening of the fight against spies were scientists and researchers who had no access to classified information, like for example the researcher of the Institute for US and Canadian Studies, Igor Sutyagin and the physicist from Krasnoyarsk, Valentin Danilov, who were accused of disclosing military secrets.⁷ Since that time, espionage cases have arisen constantly, and it is especially significant that in most cases the accused

either did not have access to state secrets, or, as, for example, in the case of the professors of the Baltic State Technical University (St. Petersburg), Afanasyev and Bobyshev,⁸ this transfer had been authorized by the state. It is at the same time significant that all organized espionage processes, actually ignore the fact that not only cooperation, but also data transmission, subsequently qualified as “military-technical secrets”, could not take place, according to the law, without the control of special departments, namely, the FSB, which together with scientific staff must include an expert opinion with any action of this kind.⁹ In other words, criminal cases are initiated upon the transfer of information that has already been the subject to consideration by the FSB and authorized for transfer to the official partners of the

DMITRY DUBROVSKIY

Expert on human rights in Russia affiliated to the Center for Independent Social Research, St. Petersburg. Previously Lecturer, Bard College (New York), Adjunct Assistant Professor at the Harriman Institute, Columbia University, and Reagan-Fascell Fellow, National Endowment for Democracy. Before that he was Associate Professor of international relations, political science, and human rights at St. Petersburg State University, where he was affiliated with the Andrew Gagarin Center for Human Rights.



PHOTO: VLADIMIR TELEGIN

Dubrovskiy (right) with Vladimir Kostushev, professor, Higher School of Economics, St. Petersburg, serving as expert witnesses at the criminal trial against the street art group Voina, known for its provocative and politically charged performance art.

project (in the case of Bobyshev and Afanasyev, it was China). In exactly the same way, Vladimir Lapygin, who was sentenced in September 2016 to seven years under article 275 (treason) for transferring a demo version of a program to China, a program which even in the full version did not constitute a state secret. He is recognized as a political prisoner by the Russian Memorial.¹⁰ It is significant that the signatories of the letter in defense of his colleague, an employee of the same institution, Victor Kudryavtsev, are now being accused of passing secret data to a scientific institute in Belgium, although the cooperation agreement was agreed upon by the government of the Russian Federation.¹¹ The Russian team of human rights lawyers “Team 29” drew attention to these processes as examples of completely illegal processes, closed for the public, in which the basic principles of judicial proceedings are constantly violated.¹² A study of the report shows that the main victims of state espionage are researchers and teachers, usually engaged in dual-use technologies, and working in organizations engaged in international cooperation. The active work of the special services in fabricating such cases, supported by experts from the same special services, makes the situation for scientists accused of “treason” almost hopeless, since 99 percent of the cases end with sentences, but the researchers note that “the large number of extremely mild sentences suggests that the evidence base of such cases raises doubts even in the courts that pass sentences”.¹³ The laws – known as the “law on foreign agents” and “undesirable organizations” – adopted in the development of the idea of “permanent intervention of the West in the internal Affairs of Russia”, had a double effect on the Russian academic community. On the one hand, a number of organizations directly involved in the research have been affected; but it has had an even greater “cooling effect” on researchers and teachers as well as on public officials.¹⁴ Currently, the fear of communication with “foreign agents” serves as an obstacle not only to cooperation with foreign funds and organizations, but also to partnership with those organizations that are recognized as “foreign agents”.¹⁵

Independent scientific and professional organizations began to suffer especially after the introduction of the so-called law on



European University in St. Petersburg.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

“foreign agents”.¹⁶ The most famous “foreign agent” among the scientific organizations was the famous Levada-Center, which was almost the only independent center for the study of public opinion. It is significant that the direct reservation of the law on “foreign agents”, excluding scientific research from the consideration of law enforcement agencies, was meaningless. Protests from the scientific community did not lead to anything.¹⁷

THE EMERGENCE OF THESE laws has had an obvious chilling effect on public policies for the licensing of non-state universities. The crisis in relations between the state and the European University in St. Petersburg, recently resolved by issuing a license for educational activities, is quite indicative, both from the point of view of the structure of violations of academic rights and freedoms, and from the point of view of exactly who, and how one tries to deprive one of the best universities in Russia (which is recognized by the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation) of accreditation. The fact is that in 2008, the European University of St. Petersburg had already experienced closure due to “fire safety violations”, while the obvious reason for the closure was



PHOTO: VLADIMIR TELEGIN

Dubrovskiy pondering the case, with Voina's founding member Oleg Vorotnikov behind bars in the background



Dubrovskiy responding to questions from the media.

PHOTO: VLADIMIR TELEGIN



A rally in support of EUSP, St Petersburg.

PHOTO: ANNA KLEPIKOVA

the state's reaction to the grant for the study of electoral behavior in Russia, issued to one of the European University professors by the European Union. Then the decision was taken by the European University to refuse this grant and the crisis was successfully resolved.¹⁸ The crisis of 2017–2018 at the European University was complicated by the ideological battles around the independent university; it was the beginning of the verification procedure by the experts of the *Rosobrnadzor* (Federal Service for Supervision in Education), which first revoked the accreditation, and then also the license, which led to a one-year downtime for the educational institution. It is significant that the attack on European University was started by the infamous State Duma deputy Milonov, author and initiator of the law on “LGBT propaganda”, and it accused the University of financial fraud, and teaching “fake sciences”, such as gender studies.¹⁹ The journalist of the *Christian Science Monitor* cites the words of political scientist Nikolai Petrov, who notes that paradoxically, since the era of Peter the Great, Russia has constantly tried to use Europe as a source of technology, but has avoided borrowing political ideas.²⁰ The very course of the crisis, and its end (European University has got license – not state affiliation yet – at the Fall of 2018),²¹ shows that independent universities remain the most vulnerable in the policy pursued under the flag of “improving the quality of Russian education”.

ANOTHER VICTIM OF this policy of the Federal Service for Supervision in Education and Science, in detail analyzed by the sociologists of the European University, M. Sokolov and E. Guba,²² was Shaninka – The Moscow School of Economic and Social Sciences, whose accreditation (that is, the right to issue state diplomas) was withdrawn for reasons entirely contrived.²³

It must be said that gender studies in general are becoming very vulnerable; this is due to the growing role of the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, especially with the constant attempts to increase the “spirituality” of education with the help of “Orthodox culture”, a term that most in fact often replaces religious education.²⁴ First of all, this is

due, of course, to the homophobic policy of the Russian state in recent years, especially intensified after the adoption of the law on so-called “homosexual propaganda”. At the same time, teachers who dare to raise issues of violation of the rights of the LGBT community experience real difficulties at work, including dismissal. For example, Anna Alimpieva, a teacher at the Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University, did not have her contract extended, which many observers linked with the fact that she on “gender psychology” with a liberal content, as well as the fact that in the summer of 2017, on the Russia-24 TV channel, there was a story that this teacher “receives Western grants” and “approves of LGBT and non-system opposition”.²⁵

No less serious and conservative turn that has occurred in the study of religion and especially in the application of religious studies for applied purposes. The conservative turn ended with the emergence of theology departments at secular universities in Russia, where, of course, there is no other theology than orthodox. This was accompanied by a special formulation of the new ideology of human rights, which was presented by the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, in which, of course, there is no place for LGBT people, euthanasia and other rights “unnatural” to the doctrine of human rights of the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, rights which are internationally recognized. This circumstance, I must say, affects both the development of the educational programs, where a number of humanitarian disciplines are under attack. As a result of this development, there are such departments as the Department of theology at the Moscow State Institute for Engineering and Physics, the Department of Orthodox Medicine, State North Medical University (Arkhangelsk), or the emergence of such an exotic discipline as “Orthodox sociology”.²⁶ At the same time, religious scholars who are involved in religious extremism in one way or another become victims of questionable dismissals and nonrenewal of contracts, no matter on which side – the prosecution or the defense – they spoke. Recently, both liberals like Doctor of Philosophy, Professor Ekaterina Elbakyan,²⁷ who defended Jehovah's Witnesses, accused of extremism, Doctor of Sciences, Professor Alexander Panchenko, whose conclusions on the activities of the religious group “Evening light” diverged from the conclusions of the “official experts” of St. Petersburg State University, but also Professor, Doctor of Sciences, Larisa Astakhova, who, on the contrary, doubted the “religiosity” of the Church of Scientology,²⁸ lost their jobs. The most vivid motive for persecution for independent scientific judgment was manifested in the non-renewal of the contract for Alexander Panchenko, who was at the time the Professor of St. Petersburg State University, and headed the program “Sociology and anthropology” at the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences of St. Petersburg State University.

Panchenko himself describes this story on his Facebook page as follows:

Due to the fact that the Prosecutor's office opened a case on recognizing the texts of a Pentecostal pastor as extremist. The expert opinion on the case by the prosecution was written on behalf of the Center for opinions

of St. Petersburg State University, and, as the author notes, “contained gross errors and, without a doubt, was biased and tendentious”. Due to this, “I agreed to participate in the expert work and together with a specialist in linguistics I wrote a “responding” conclusion, which significantly shook the position of the prosecution. Signing the expert opinion, I did not hide that I work at St. Petersburg State University. On the contrary, I believed that this should be a kind of alarming signal, indicating the low level and the bias of expert opinions, which seem to support the academic authority of the university. However, the bureaucrats of St. Petersburg State University held a different opinion: in August this year, the university administration struck me off the list of teachers without explanation”.²⁹

Thus, there is a tendency for censorship to extend to the expression of any opinion that in one way or another does not coincide with the opinion of the authorities or, most likely, with the opinion of law enforcement agencies.

In connection with the establishment of conservative and protective ideology in higher education begin to transform or make entire disciplines disappear as “irrelevant” for a special Russian civilization. Thus, the topic of human rights³⁰ almost disappears from teaching, and research in the field of queer sociology is in fact banned. The place of religious anthropology in many universities has taken on an aggressive sectarianism, directly addressed in their programs to the Orthodox sectarians.

A SPECIAL PLACE among the challenges to academic freedom is the historical policy of the modern Russian state, in which “the memory of the victims is replaced by the memory of the executioners”.³¹ This directly concerns history as a science, and specific historians. Although the attempt to create a Commission “to counteract the falsification of history”³² was not successful, the message itself was read: since then, attempts, for example, to investigate general Vlasov of the Russian Liberation Army faced accusations of non-patriotism and extremism,³³ and since a certain time it has meant the possibility of criminal prosecution under the article “rehabilitation of Nazism”.³⁴ Thus, the greatest repercussion was caused by the case of the historian Kirill Alexandrov, who was denied the degree of doctor of historical sciences for the alleged “rehabilitation” of Vlasov of the Russian Liberation Army because of an entirely historical work, and his article about Bandera and the Banderovites was recognized as extremist and included in a list of extremist materials.³⁵

Thus, ideological control over science, together with espionage, begins to directly influence the state of academic rights and freedoms. However, the most vulnerable are those who either

teach or demand respect for human rights at the university, and then the loss of employment is the result of a direct ideological confrontation with the rector, such as for the author of this text.³⁶ However, another part of the problem is the activity of the Russian state in increasing the workload, reducing real wages and all that is the essence of the so-called neoliberal reforms in the higher education system in Russia, and the pressure on those teachers and employees who protest against such developments.

Charybdis of neoliberalism

I must say that Russia’s accession to the Bologna system as a whole seems to have had a positive effect, but under the slogan of higher education reform at the moment the “optimization” of the staff list of universities and in general, a kind of corporatization of university life. Of course, in general, this is a global process and it affects Russia as well,³⁷ but in Russia the onset of corporate ethics and neoliberal reforms on the universities faced with the weakness of university independent trade unions (in fact, the country has one independent university union – University solidarity), and with an extremely weak idea of the form and possibilities of teaching and student resistance to economic pressure from the state and university authorities. Among the economic problems of the universities, the leader of University solidarity Pavel Kudukin names the increase in the load, the increase in the number of students, the volume of classroom load. At the same time,

“TEACHERS WHO DARE TO RAISE ISSUES OF VIOLATION OF THE RIGHTS OF THE LGBT COMMUNITY EXPERIENCE REAL DIFFICULTIES AT WORK, INCLUDING DISMISSAL.”

the increase in the workload is accompanied by an actual decrease in wages, while the salaries of rectors are growing, apparently, in the opposite direction of the teaching staff. Finally, the introduction of the so-called “effective contract” leads to the fact that the responsibility of teachers, for example, put receiving and managing external grants (which in connection with the reduction of the funding of science in general is difficult to plan), writing an unthinkable number of scientific works in combination with increased load – all this leads, rather, to a tragic fall of either the quality of education, or the depth and seriousness of publications,

but for the bureaucratic system, apparently, this is not the main criterion for education and science.³⁸

In fact, the tradition of the academic precariat³⁹ is beginning to be established, first of all, through a system of short (annual) contracts, which are de facto the same form of an atypical employment contract as in other countries. The form of an “effective contract” – in which the renegotiation of the contract is made directly dependent on certain “indicators” – raises the question of how much this definition can be extended even to those who receive “long term” – that is, three and five-year contracts.⁴⁰ Additional factors that exacerbate the subjective feeling of fear of job loss are both the constant reduction of part-time workers and the forced transfer of half-time for those who previously worked full-time (with the aim of a fictitious

“increase” in wages of employees of state-financed organizations).

It is quite revealing that even mild resistance to such powerful economic pressure on the teachers from the only independent trade union University solidarity leads to excesses; so, when you try to carry leaflets in support of the illegally dismissed from the State University for the teachers’ council – the co-chair of the trade union University solidarity, Professor of Moscow State University, Mikhail Lobanov, and organizing secretary, Yuri Bredelev, were beaten. The beating was supervised by the chief of the university security.⁴¹ However, not only protests against low wages and high workloads lead to layoffs. For example, the protest of the dean of the Moscow State Timiryazev Academy (Russian State Agrarian University) against the building development on the academy’s experimental fields, led to his dismissal, and to sending his supportive students to the police, who clearly intimidated the students who had organized pickets to protest against the dismissal of the dean.⁴²

I must say that the use of police and special services was particularly noticeable in the situation of pressure on students in the preparation of the 2018 World Cup. Police pressure was exerted on students who protested against the organization of a fan zone near Moscow University.⁴³

Finally, the latest events of general civil protests, first of all, the latest in 2018 – March 26, and their continuation in honor of the Russia Day on June 12, seriously affected the situation of the rights of students. Most of the protesters were students and schoolchildren, and they are currently under pressure in the form of all kinds of threats from the university administrations, and from public statements about the inadmissibility of “extremist actions” (meaning civil protests), in some cities even exams were scheduled on Sunday to prevent the participation of young people in the protest.⁴⁴

Conclusion

The strengthening of authoritarian tendencies – Crimeanization of public life (especially noticeable after the annexation of Crimea), put the academic community in Russia in difficult conditions.

On the one hand, all protests, both political and civil, are fraught with job losses, or even criminal prosecutions, which are simplified by the new amendments to the law on rallies, marches and demonstrations. On the other hand, the general financial crisis, fear of losing jobs and the weakness of the trade union movement make it almost impossible to put up serious resistance to direct violations of academic autonomy, as well as to regular violations of academic rights and freedoms. Although the logic of corporatism is now threatening in general, also universities in the US and Europe, but in Russia, this logic meets with the logic of authoritarian government, due to the loss of autonomy, directly transferable to the campus, and, at the same time, the weakness of civil society and professional community. In this regard, a rather strange picture is emerging: if in the USSR the academy was rather more free in relation to society as a whole, then in the period of perestroika and the early 1990s

the situation equaled and, finally, the neoliberal reforms of 2000 and the strengthening of authoritarianism in the academy led to the fact that the actual freedom of teachers and students became less than in society as a whole. Apparently, this partly explains the for the external observer incredible picture of the mobilization of student protest in modern Russia, which gives some hope for a change in the situation of democracy in general, and of academic rights and freedoms in the Russian academy, in particular. ✖

Dmitry Dubrovskiy, PhD, Higher School of Economics, Moscow,
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