



THE WAR IN UKRAINE: POSITIONS AND THE FUTURE OF RUSSIAN UNIVERSITIES

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Why are the universities important?

There are numerous ways how universities change societies and contribute to the accelerated development of nations. Universities are clusters of “creative capital”. They are hotbeds of innovation and entrepreneurship and provide students with the skills to compete in increasingly global workplace. Universities have a tremendous ability to attract global talent to cities and nations. Internationalization of universities helps create lasting links into global networks. Academic mobility and research collaboration extend intellectual and cultural interaction and in doing so help to develop a country’s international relations through national smart foreign policy.

However, two considerations should be made to clarify this nice picture. First, all said above describes the roles of *good* universities (those that are good not by national but by international standards). Second, most of the positive changes brought by universities can occur *only* when universities are true part of global educational and research space. Take this “international dimension” from a university – and there will be no positive contribution.

Russian Universities: The situation before the war

Before the war in Ukraine, the situation with universities in Russia was not only far from the ideal described above, but almost paradoxical. In fact, there were two parallel worlds. One was the world of official policy and propaganda “at the top,” where President Putin was declared to be the personification of Russia, and all his actions without exception were unambiguously correct. At the same time, it was possible to work without censorship in universities - to read courses based on English-language sources, and to engage in genuine academic research. Moreover, publications in peer-reviewed English language journals were the main criterion for the effectiveness of a university professor. (In fact, I was paid a premium for criticizing the Putin regime.) This gap between official rhetoric and (relative) academic freedom was especially great in comparative politics and international relations.

It is worth pointing out, however, that this gap was wide in the universities of Moscow and St. Petersburg, and much less visible in the regional universities, where only a few teachers entered the international research space.

At the same time, it was intuitively clear that this situation was not sustainable and could hardly be maintained for long. The balance was slowly but steadily shifting in favor of “officialness”, the state was “infiltrating” the universities.

After Russian invasion in Ukraine (24.02.2022)

The war came as a shock to the universities, and it was all the more surprising that the reaction of the university administrations was very quick. As early as March 4, the Russian Union of Rectors adopted an appeal stating that: a) the most important thing now is to support the country and *the army* and rally around the president; b) universities have always been a *pillar of the Russian state*; and c) the main duty of teachers is to conduct a continuous educational process, fostering patriotism in young people. This appeal was a series of very clear signals.

After (and before) the rectors' appeal, university teachers signed anti-war and pro-war statements, but it was the rectors' appeal that was in fact decisive. These signals set the stage for other administrative measures that are fundamentally changing both the place of Russian universities in the world and the position of faculty members within universities.

On March 21, the federal government agreed with the proposal of the Ministry of Higher Education and Science to suspend the accounting of the indexation of publications of Russian scientists in international databases and participation in foreign academic conferences. Quotability in foreign scientific publications has been until recently one of the most important criteria for the Ministry of Education and Science to measure the effectiveness of a scientific institution (and individual researchers). The Ministry now is busy with the creation of the national system of evaluation of the results of academic research.

As for the educational courses, the "dangerous" ones (which explain Russian political regime or Russian foreign policy) are either cancelled or transferred to "non-dangerous," loyal instructors. In addition, lists of students who have participated in anti-war protests are compiled, and the administration holds conversations with the students, while at the end of conversation a student must swear to do that "never again".

The university is a complex bureaucracy where program and curriculum changes do not happen quickly. So far, to observe are "point" changes. I assume that administrators are waiting until the end of the academic year to make big reforms over the summer.

In the current situation, university teachers have no options that do not imply significant losses and risks. The most radical way out is to leave the university and leave Russia, but few take advantage of this option. Understandably, this is an extremely difficult decision. Others, shocked and frightened, stay at the university, some of them simply do not recognize or accept reality, trying to distance themselves from it and speaking of the war as a kind of "natural disaster". Some decide to adapt (though I am not sure they understand the extent of this "adaptation") and to work "as usual".

To conclude

The statement of the Union of Rectors of Russia clearly shows that there is no "union" as a collective actor that protects the autonomy and interests of universities, which are different

from the current interests of the Russian state. The rectors have not made the slightest attempt to coordinate themselves on a position that differed from that imposed by the Presidential Administration. Their main priority (not of the Union, but of its members) was their own professional survival.

It was this statement that signaled the closure of Russia's educational and academic space from the global world. It is clear that the universities that have been most deeply integrated into international cooperation will suffer the most from this closure. This is primarily the Higher School of Economics.

Being locked up inside the country, the university system will quickly come to an equilibrium: there will be no more parallel worlds. There will be no exceptions like HSE.

What is going on is terrible, but, alas, not surprising. The war simply instantly led to an outcome that was inevitable anyway.