

The Sovereign State and Education in Russia: Facets of Power and Zones of Contention

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Starting from 2011 the whole plethora of educational issues in Russia moved to the center of sharp public debate. Unlike in previous years when all imperfections of Russian educational system were duly recognized but never openly discussed, the new wave of public criticism spanned from plagiarism to corruption in awarding academic degrees, from state's attempts to impose rigid regulatory standards in many disciplines (especially history and literature) to migration of scholars and scientists to the West, etc. The harsh polemics was definitely closely related to what sociologies would have called "the revolt of the angry middle class" that constituted the core of anti-Putin opposition. In fact, the whole variety of invectives against specific elements of educational policies boiled down to the issues of efficiency and the limits of the governmental interference in the affairs of (both secondary and higher) educational institutions, and to the toolkit that the state applies for imposing its rules of control over this domain.

In this paper we shall argue that the key contradiction in state's education policy in Russia is its oscillation between the neoliberal disengagement from the sphere of education (in terms of funding and providing social security to both students and professors), on the one hand, and the trans-political (in Baudrillard's sense) expansion of its ideological apparatus. In particular, in this paper we are going to examine:

- the key areas of contention that arise as effects of state's policies in the sphere of higher education. The main zones of conflicts result from much more

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robust and energetic than earlier public interventions from professional community of educators who started raising their demands for drastic changes in state policies towards universities and academic institutions.

- the main instruments of domination the state uses in managing the educational sphere. We are going to unveil the different mechanisms of administrative, communicative and symbolic power the state applies and practices in its educational policies.

- the sources and conditions of politicization of educational debates. Education is definitely political since it touches upon the issues of hierarchies and resistance, fully visible in the public debate in Russia.

Crisis in Education: Introducing the Topic

One of the most important achievements of the USSR was a high level of education it provided to its citizens; the proofs for that were impressive space research program as well as many successes in engineering, math and natural sciences demonstrated by the Soviet Union. Since the time of the Tsarist Empire universities were among the major state's tools for modernization of Russia. Education produced professionals that ultimately changed the society.

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reasons to consider Russia a world power. It is education that can help to form prerequisites for democracy through demands for institutional rather than personalistic principles of state governing.

The institutional design of the sphere of education and science in Russia is complicated, as it includes hundreds of universities responsible to the Ministry of Education and Science, tens of other higher educational institutes (mostly they also call themselves "universities") offering specific professional training (like medical university or agricultural universities) responsible to the branch Ministries; but also huge Russian Academy of Science that was until September 2013 a self-governed but state-funded hub of research institutes with mostly tiny teaching responsibilities. While Ministry of Education and Science is considered more reform-leaning, the Academy of Sciences seemed to be more independent from the state, thus possessing more power to defend academic freedoms from bureaucratic encroachments. However, during the Summer of 2013 the new legislature was adopted by the State Duma making Academy of Science merely a "club of academicians" while the governance responsibility was transferred to the newly established governmental Agency of Scientific Organizations¹.

There are many problems at both secondary and higher levels of Russian education. Russian schools are trying to adapt the old Soviet system of "polytechnic" education to the demands of a changing society. The former system was characterized by an accent on



science and math and the virtual absence of options for pupils, while the new situation requires high school graduates to possess social and decision-making skills and a better cognition of the society. In parallel, the state also wants to impose a larger dose of patriotic education, while the Russian Orthodox Church is lobbying to include Orthodox religious education in school curricula.

There is a widespread opinion in Russia that the quality of Russian higher education is deteriorating². Demographic decline, combined with growth in absolute and relative number of students in society, leads to a loss in the quality of education and the creation of a large stratum of low-skilled college graduates with high ambitions whose educational level does not correspond to labor market demands.

Russia's population trends demonstrate a dramatic drop in the number of Russian youth of student age (17 to 23)³. This follows a steady growth across

the previous two decades, when universities launched new programs and opened new teaching positions, and new private universities mushroomed. With the demographic trend reversed, universities did not cut student slots accordingly, with more students in the relevant age group enrolled than ever before. This means, among other things, that the average level of student aptitude is today significantly lower. At the same time, in the summer of 2013 the quantity of children that started school had increased. In some regions in Russian South urgent call for the teachers mobilized many of those who already retired. They do not consider themselves underpaid because they combine salary with the halves of their regular retirement payments.

However, underpayment is another serious issue in Russian universities. If the economic crisis and constant budget deficit in the 1990s made low levels of income bearable at that time, in the 2000s, with growing societal and governmental wealth, the level of

faculty salaries made it clear to professors that their work is not respected by the state. This underpayment is the most important reason for young graduates not to choose academic careers in Russia, and instead to prefer working in public service or business, or even to emigrate. No young graduates want to make a career in the sciences or academia at large, since this basically leads to financial deprivation. As a result, the quantity of younger faculty members decreases and the quality of education deteriorates. Even eminent scholars cannot rely on their ratings and expect better payment than their less successful colleagues get. This unfair situation pushes the most energetic scholars to look for a job in other countries. The only university that offers competitive salary for the professors is Higher School of Economics that enjoys close links to the government and has the nickname "laboratory of reforms".

The demographic downturn and rigid link between the number of students

and budgetary funds available for universities has led to a virtual ban on student dismissal (or at least introduction of highly complicated procedures for it). This both increases professors' workload and decreases the quality of study.

Russian Education Policy Debates

While the Kremlin habitually exhibits progress in the Russian higher education system by showcasing projects such as the Skolkovo Institute of Technology and mega-grants provided to foreign scientists, the real situation is far different. The country's educational system is in a period of instability. Objectively, current team at the Ministry of Education adds turbulence to this situation. There is no strategy in reforms while many measures are being prepared secretly and suddenly taken. The tactics aim only at survival, and bureaucratic intuition teaches the minister and his deputies that only president Putin's opinion matters. Direct appeals from the society, including the latter from MPs are totally ignored.

There are massive and chaotic mergers of universities, new assessment criteria for university faculty and staff, and the controversial implementation of the pan-European Bologna system, to name a few.

The Russian educational machine has been reforming, but until now there have been no substantive public discussions about education (neither as a "service" nor as a tool for societal modernization, among other topics). The government's public discussion on the draft law "On Education" was limited to bureaucratic technicalities. The real stakeholders of this particular reform – the intellectual slice of society – were unhappy to be treated as an object rather than the subject of change.

There are several ongoing educational reforms, developing on both international and domestic levels. Thus, in 2003 Russia joined the Bologna process of European standards that introduced Bachelor's and Master's degrees

instead of Soviet-type, five-year specialist degrees. These new degrees appeared to serve the purpose of imposing a higher-level MA program above the masses of BA-receiving students while enabling the Ministry to choose what universities could continue to offer graduate-level education.

Between December 2010 and February 2011, a bill on new education law was introduced and debated. The legal changes were shaped by the need for a new umbrella law to replace an older set of education laws, which have been amended many times in the course of the ongoing reforms. After the discussion revealed many problems both in the state of Russian educational system and in the proposed measures, the legislation was postponed, yet for the rest of 2011 and the most of 2012 the debates continued. The State Duma adopted the law in December 2012. However, no vital amendments suggested by professors were made in the final version of the law that came into effect in September 2013. Communist Party tried to capitalize on the issue by proposing its own variant of legislation but it could not influence the outcome.

In reforming the educational policies, the state experimented with different instruments, making it hard to see the entire picture. The Ministry of Education tries to restructure the educational infrastructure by reducing the total number of universities and creating a formal hierarchy among them. The establishment of universities with special status – Moscow and St. Petersburg State Universities, federal universities, and research universities – was the most significant of recent steps. However, to ensure the quality of education, the Ministry chose a bureaucratic path: it multiplied paperwork and reporting procedures for universities and professors (in particular, it required comprehensive sample lectures to prove the quality of lectureship). Finally, the Ministry of Education introduced a system of universal examinations for all high school graduates, the *Edinyi Gosudarstvennyi Examen* (EGE), which has been introduced as the only basis for deciding on university enrollment.

The idea behind this innovation was to fight corruption during entrance examinations and to provide better access to the higher education for children from remote parts of the country.

However, the Ministry of education and science failed to assess its reforms from key stakeholders' points of view. By creating different levels of universities – federal, national research, and "other" – the state can harm academic schools, especially in the social sciences and humanities. New research universities, selected basically on natural sciences criteria, often lack qualified sociologists, historians, or linguists. The country's leading school, the Moscow State University, has an infamous sociology faculty, which moves from one scandal after another⁴, while the second-ranked St. Petersburg State University has problems with its history faculty⁵. In the meantime, some universities with highly qualified humanities or social science departments, but with no strong natural science departments, might be placed in the lower category, perhaps with the possibility, as universities fear, of being closed. That is, for just one instance, a possible fate of the Russian State University for the Humanities that can boast many leading scholars among its faculty but was nevertheless placed in 2012 in the list of "inefficient" universities for, as many believe, not being able to prove "efficiency" of purely humanitarian education it provides.

The reforms being discussed could also leave some regions without institutions of higher education, which may cripple them in the future. Now there are universities in all 83 regions of Russia, but some of them cannot compete academically and are supported for political reasons. This problem is closely connected to the low mobility of faculty and student populations, something that has many causes including high relocation costs and the lack of a tradition in many Russian universities of hiring outsiders to teach.

The EGE, while reducing corruption at the university entrance, has also highlighted differences in control over

implementation in different regions of Russia (several republics, for example, demonstrated well beyond average or even statistically impossible results). During 2013 examination campaign the assignments, along with the correct answers appeared on the internet sites hours or even days before the exam dates; the investigation of the cheating (and obvious corruption) was started but the results of the EGE were upheld. Ministry did not synchronize the time of the exams according to the time zones though it could really help to avoid many scandalous situations. Instead it appealed to police every time when the tests were uploaded to the Internet but didn't take very simple and transparent measure to resolve the situation. Moreover, the exam has made it more difficult for universities to admit extraordinary students as it does not leave any space for creativity; the universities have no discretionary powers to take this or other personal achievements into account.

Educational standards

Educational standards are among the pivotal instruments the state used for controlling this domain. The Soviet school pledged to introduce children to 'the basics of scientific knowledge.'⁶ The core of the new educational standard is replacement of basic knowledge with new 'skills and competences'. The main theoretical concept here is 'universal studying action' (универсальное учебное действие). The Soviet school pledged to introduce children to 'the basics of scientific knowledge'. When new standards of education were discussed after the fall of the Soviet Union, the government insisted that 'new paradigm' should turn from knowledge to skills. Nevertheless, some knowledge was preserved in a form of 'educational minimum'. For example, the knowledge of hundreds of dates and names was declared essential for historical education. More than a hundred of literary works and almost 70 terms in theory of literature were set up as 'a minimum for literary education.' In practice, this minimum (which was very wide, in fact, and looks rather like 'maximum' for many

foreign scholars) shaped school curricula and content of textbooks. Only after exhausting mandatory minimum, may authors of curriculum and textbooks include their own suggestions and vary their approaches to teaching.

According to the 'Law on Education', new standards have to be developed by scholars in pedagogy and approved by the State Duma every 10 years⁷. Standards consist of three parts: 'Standard for grammar education (1-4 grades)', 'Standard for common education (5-9 grades)', and 'Standard for higher education (10-11 grades)'. First two parts passed through the public discussions and Duma approval relatively smoothly. The problem occurred with the last part of standard. In the first draft only three disciplines were proposed for 'free of charge education': sports training, general security and a new discipline 'Russia in the World'. The last one had never been taught at school before. There was neither description nor even common understanding of the goals of this unexpected discipline. Educational community started protesting against the proposed approach, and the motion in the Duma was delayed.

In March, 2012 with Putin reelected Russian President, the discussions about new standards were intensified. A special presidential envoy - Mikhail Koval'chuk, director of Shubnikov's Institute for Crystallography, Dean of Physics at St Petersburg State University, and director of Kurchatov's Nuclear Center - was appointed to finalize the document. He is a person close to President Putin, and belongs to so called 'St Petersburg cohort' of President's close associates. After two or three meetings with educational bureaucrats chaired by him the final document was rapidly sent to Duma. In summer, 2012, during vacation time, the new standards were approved. The final document was not discussed publicly, and few knew its content before the publication. In the version six or seven disciplines are mandatory for studying: math, Russian language and literature, foreign language, history, sports, and general security.

Just a year later, in June 2013, deputy Minister Natalya Tretyak announced that 'new standards are unclear for parents and children' and should be totally rewritten. This statement made major publishing houses enraged because they have just spend huge sums on licensing the textbooks *according to the spirit and demands of new standards*.

It is Russian language and literature that ignited major debates. Since the beginning of the 20th century these were two separate disciplines. In fact, literature as a school discipline lost its 'minimum for literary education'. Another trick might be the ... 'and' that left open the question of whether the word 'Russian' refers not only to language but to literature as well. If so, then this was really narrowing the field of study: there was never such a discipline as 'Russian literature' in Russian school, and literature included French, German, English, Greek, Latin, American, Danish and other writers.

At the same time, according to the 'Law for Education', each school had to present its own curricula in all disciplines. Preparing new systemic curricula without any guidance is a hard task for school teachers. In order to help them, the Institute for Methods and Content of Teaching at the Academy of Education published 18 curricula models in all educational fields that are covered by teaching at school. The set was purely experimental: though new standard had been approved by the Duma and became a law, it comes into effect in 2020 only. So, there was no haste to approve it so early. But, since it was approved, experimental work on new content of education should have started. Following the new tradition of public discussions in education, experts offered their suggestions for teachers. In 17 curricula the introductory part was identical, and all elements of those curricula were to be used by teachers without exceptions. The only curriculum that rather *recommended* than *obliged* was the curriculum in literature for 10-11th grades⁸. Nevertheless, some politicians started attacking this document blaming it in 'destroying national traditions of



Lomonosow Moscow State University

teaching literature'. It became obvious that the political elite doesn't want to lose control over the content of school reading. In January 2013, the Ministry of Education published a list that contains 100 book titles for 'after-school' reading. This was not practiced even in the Soviet times.

President Putin himself interfered in the discussion on teaching literature at school: in 2009 after talk with Natalia Solzhenitsyna, the writer's widow, he pledged to include 'GULAG Archipelago' to 'the list for mandatory reading'. Now the list of his comments and remarks has become much wider. On 9 February President Putin gave a speech at 'Russian Parent's Resistance' convention organized by a controversial figure with nationalist reputation Sergei Kurginian. Putin regretted that some pieces of classical writers disappeared from the school curriculum – like 'A Man in a Box,' 'A Lady with a Dog' by Anton Chekhov, 'The Bronze Horseman' by Aleksander Pushkin, etc. The very situation when highest-ranked politicians point to the names of the writers they want to be read at school is a useless attempt to replace

the professional work of a community of experts with a direct order .

New Avenues for Public Activity

As we have mentioned, the state policies toward education oscillate between two different models. On the one hand, the state tries to disengage from its financial obligations in higher education. During the 2011-2012 election cycle, both Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin promised to rapidly increase the budget for defense and law enforcement, while lowering education to the list of budgetary burdens alongside the pension system. Underfunding and unbearable bureaucratic paperwork combined with the de-facto disappearance of self-governing university structures led to uneasy feelings of university faculty and staff. The new "On Education" law limits educational guarantees for Russian citizens and shrinks job opportunities for faculty and staff. Already, in late December 2012, Medvedev signed a "road map" that stipulated harsh funding cuts in education (up to 40%), increased the workload of university staff, and aimed to shut down many universities

as allegedly ineffective. It is only logical that all of this provoked multiple objection resolutions and open letters, some of which were signed by whole university segments (e.g., the Faculty of Philology at Moscow State University and the professors of Omsk State University).

Besides, within the structure of relations between the state and educational bureaucracy, on the one side, and professors and students, on the other, as it was shaped by 2011, there were virtually no levers that the latter could use to influence the decisions of the former. Yet on the other hand, as we are seeing increasingly robust attempts by professional educators to define themselves as a community based on certain normative backgrounds, we also see how the education system has been explicitly politicized by the Kremlin. The financial misconduct and exorbitant salaries of top university managers became a matter of public concern⁹. Street protests in Moscow and other big cities in 2011-2013 were supported by large segments of both students and professors. An initiative group created a "University Solidarity" union¹⁰ to

defend the interests of teaching staff vis-à-vis university administration and state bureaucracy. And academicians of Russian Academy of Sciences twice voted against re-appointment Mikhail Koval'chuk the head of the Crystallography Institute in May 2013, thus firing him from that position.

Looking on the picture from this analytical position, we can see that one of the possible explanations of the abrupt "reform" of the Russian Academy of Science, as well as 40% cut of the professor's job within three years have two aims; not only to economize and balance the State budget, but also to undercut the basis of the "smart resistance" to the regime.

In the following sections we shall scrutinize the newly appeared issues of education that provoked harsh criticism from significant parts of educational community and thus turned into islands of politicization of educational discourses and practices.

Campaign against rigged dissertations

A new turn in the debates on the imperfections of Russia's educational system is the growing protestation of scientists and scholars against the large-scale discrediting of academic standards by the wide-spread use of plagiarism. A major fuel to the fire has been the so-called "Dissergate"¹¹, a series of scandalous affairs about fraudulent dissertations. University educators themselves started investigations into these matters and led public campaigns against such wrongdoings (often using social media) that made the state react. Finally, the whole "fraudulent ring" forging fake dissertations at Moscow State Pedagogical University was exposed, and the head of the dissertation board of that university professor Alexander Danilov was fired. The most widely covered cases were the firing of a MGIMO professor who faked his U.S. diploma and professor from Moscow State University whose plagiarism was clear and publicly available.

Of course, even in countries like Germany, unpleasant incidents with plagiarism happen, but the difference is that in Russia, academic malpractices are systemic in a sense that most of them are defended by the "corporate solidarity." The creeping and unofficial commercialization of the very process of defending dissertations (informal gratitude to members of Academic Councils, unofficial payments for having complex paperwork completed in time, etc.) has had devastating effects on the quality of academic degrees awarded by Russian Universities.

The public campaign has already achieved partial success – the Ministry of education and sciences revoked several degrees and their investigation caused resignation and reputation losses of several Duma deputies. However, by March 2013 the deputies started a counterattack targeting at Minister Livanov and trying to cover the real problem with their faked dissertations with the smoke of PR offensive. In May deputy Minister of Education and Science Igor Fedyukin who was the head of ministerial commission for investigation of fake dissertations resigned from the Ministry under apparent attack from the politicians possessing plagiarized degrees. Some fake degree holders were disclosed, like a chair of security committee of Duma Vladimir Vasil'ev, but haven't been stripped from his doctoral title. So, message that was sent through firing Igor Fedyukin, was received and well understood ... By bureaucrats, at least, but not by the scholars.

During the 2013-2014 academic year, the "Dissernet" community exposed not just personal cases, but several networks that produced fraudulent dissertations in many subject areas and using several dissertation councils. The very fact that the reputation of several leading Moscow-based universities was at stake underpinned the gravity of the issue. Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev addressed the issue by promising "not to blow up the whole dissertation landscape" that was understood as an indulgence to the false "scholars" and led to another campaign for revoking

fake dissertation degrees without limitation period (now it is established as 10 years since the thesis defense, but for those who falsified their dissertations before the new rules were adopted, it is just three years after which term they are considered "real scholars")¹².

Patriotic Education

With all its inefficiency and corruption, the Russian state always tried to play the guiding role in streamlining professional debates, especially on such politically sensitive issues as the proverbial "falsification of history." Since independent voices among historians were rather weak, it looks expectable (by the logic of the state bureaucracy) to continue its trans-political (i.e., in Baudrillard's terms, constantly expanding into other spheres, including culture, arts, sports, education, etc.) hegemony by imposing what is considered the right way to teach social disciplines at school. What makes these attempts questionable is not only Putin's habitual zeal for unification – as exemplified by his idea of a single history textbook for a huge country that has different historical experiences and attitudes to its past – but also a series of proposals that unveil the most parochial and even uncivilized facets of the ruling group.

The most shocking recent notions was a statement by the head of the Commission on Preservation of Historical & Cultural Legacy of the Public Chamber who suggested that teaching foreign languages might be discontinued in Russian schools as a measure to block emigration and as a tribute to the alleged "self-sufficiency" of the Russian language. Characteristically, no disclaimers from state officials followed. Another eye-opening proposal was to exclude from Russian literature textbooks 19th-century Saltykov-Schedrin satirical masterpieces because of alleged extremism found in the works.

Literature suddenly moved into the center of the public debates in January 2013 due to other reasons. On January 23, the leader of Just Russia, Sergei

Mironov, gave a speech in the Duma where he attacked the new literature curriculum for the 10-11th grades. He accused the educators (headed by Professor Boris Lanin) of destroying the tradition of teaching classical literature. According to Mironov, some of the classical writers were replaced by modern authors, such as Viktor Pelevin, Asar Eppel, Liudmila Ulitskaya, while others were simply expelled from the curriculum. He saw the roots of a new pedagogical approach in the fact that professor Lanin had been a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center and Kennan Institute, and, what was even more dangerous, he was a Facebook friend of U.S. Ambassador Michael McFaul. Mironov's speech was supported by several members of the Public Chamber led by former spy-trained officer Pavel Pozhigailo, who tries to get rid of all authors of literature textbooks for the sake of his own that has never been published or used in teaching, as well as by Sergei Neverov, vice-speaker of the Duma, by the communist leader Gennady Zyuganov, and, finally, by President Putin on February 9. *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, *Literaturnaya gazeta*, *Komsomolskaya pravda* and *Pravda* were involved in ugly campaigns full of rhetoric harkoning to the late 1930s. Unfortunately, anti-Semitic sentiments accompanied many writings around this discussion. Alas, only a few constructive voices were heard, including those of the editor-in-chief of the pedagogical journal *Literatura* Sergei Volkov, and TV-anchor philologist Alexandr Arkhangelskii. The fact is that all accusations against proponents of a more innovative teaching of Russian literature were made in vain, since none of the mentioned classical writers was pushed out from the curriculum. As the Academy of Education of Russia explained, the new curriculum was recommended with experimental status starting only from 2020.

Another illustrative case was a new edition of the old idea of a "unified" history textbook to replace several textbooks nowadays recommended for schools. Putin aired this idea on February 19, 2013, assuming that the new textbook should be written

"without internal conflicts and double meanings". After that, the two recently formed associations, the Russian Historical Society and the Russian Military Historical Society, both of which are managed by politicians with no credentials in the field of history, rushed to draft a new textbook. All this was done in spite of the sharp criticism from professional historians, most of whom disliked the very idea of a single, state-sponsored historical narrative.

The politicization of the whole range of educational issues was due not only to the Kremlin's overt intervention in the debate on such issues as history, literature, and even physical culture. What is consequential is that the Putin regime gave a green light to the seemingly grassroots though surely Kremlin orchestrated, activities of groups like the All-Union Parents Resistance (Sergey Kurginian) who overtly advocate nationalist and explicitly anti-liberal approaches to education. It is obvious that the ruling elite tries to represent a new moral majority. Another Kurginian organization, "Sut' vremeni" ("The Essence of Time") distributed thousands of flyers with professor Boris Lanin's portrait blaming him for destroying Russian tradition, morality, and education system. Trying to have an upper hand in such pseudo-cultural accusatory campaigns, the regime distracts the public focus from its

own moral vulnerability, and attempts to wrap up the remnants of civil society, while provoking an atmosphere of a "cold civil war," which in particular appears aimed squarely at Russia's free-minded professionals and intellectuals.

Minister Livanov declared in June 2013, that he learned an idea of united textbook in literature, and he is ready to act into this direction if a decision will be taken. He stressed that he has nothing against the united textbooks in all 18 school disciplines. His deputy Mrs Tretyak added some fog to this charming educational landscape explaining that there may be 'several united textbooks in history'. 'Several only textbooks' is what we have now in Russia, and what kind of improvement is the ministry offering? Well, the weather forecast is useless while Zeus is waiting for lightning himself.

A Biopolitical Turn in Education?

The state policy toward secondary education also contains strong biopolitical components. Health Ministry has recently produced a test to unveil not only drug consumption among adolescents but their sexual liaisons as well ("Did you have sexual intercourses which you regretted next morning?" – reads one of the questions in a worksheet recommended for



secondary schools)¹³. President Putin personally has suggested that no pupil, even with disabilities, has to be exempt from lessons of physical exercises, and that the Soviet-era GTO ('Ready for Labor and Defense') norms of physical fitness have to be restored¹⁴.

One heated issue involves sexual orientation. Some disciplinary techniques the Ministry of Education attempted to introduce involved drug testing of students and questionnaires about early sexual experiences, also became a matter of public scrutiny. A highly illustrative case of this type of biopolitical debate involved parents who demanded the firing of a Moscow school teacher who was seen at a meeting against anti-gay legislation.

Repressions Ahead?

University-educated professionals strive to build civil society networks, widely using for this purpose internet¹⁵. Social networks not only helped to organize mass protests, but to establish horizontal nets discussing professional, social, and political problems. There are signs that some groups of university students have begun to be viewed by some government bodies – such as the section of the Ministry of Internal Affairs that deals with “extremist” activities – as potentially dangerous.

The stakes are getting higher with the start of direct repressions against free speaking professors in several regions of Russia. The pretext was the “foreign agent law” that requires registration of NGO’s receiving foreign funding¹⁶. Many university professors were active members of NGOs and recipients of foreign grants. In Kostroma in early April 2013 the prosecutor’s office accused NGO “Kostroma Center of Support of Public Initiatives” in breaking the law by organizing a seminar on “Reset of the Reset: Where do the US-Russian relations go?” (with participation of the US Embassy official and using American grant)¹⁷. In Krasnodar on April 12, 2013 the director of grant programs of another NGO, South Russian Resource Center, professor of

political science at Kuban State University Mikhail Savva was arrested by FSB and accused of misappropriation of the regional budget grant money (about \$12,000). The arrest followed several articles published by Savva with harsh criticism toward FSB regional branch dealing with NGOs, and is widely believed to be purely political.

This was the first time when a university professor is being arrested under such pretext¹⁸, and several influential scholars, including academician Valery Tishkov (head of historical section of Russian Academy of Sciences) – and many more colleagues from different universities – publicly condemned such an action of FSB. These policies further alienate professors from the state and push them into cooperation and network-building¹⁹.

The activists of the new trade union “University Solidarity” are already met with a harsh pressure from the side of university rectors. In one of the cases, the rector of Moscow Pirogov Medical University Andrei Kamkin even published an “open letter” calling trade union activists “dirty scum” and pressing them by establishing the requirement to stay in office for seven hours five days a week – an unexplainable and unreasonable demand for the university professors²⁰.

On May 28, 2013, rector of the New Economic School in Moscow and one of the leading economic experts of the government Sergei Guriev resigned from his position and announced that he would stay in France. He explained the decision to emigrate by the investigation that was launched against him and other experts within so called “the third YUKOS case”. During spring 2013 he was interrogated three times and felt unsafe to stay in Russia any more.

Notes:

¹ In June 2013 Minister of Education and Science Livanov announced the governmental plan to “reform” Russian Academy of Science, and, despite harsh protests from the scholars, it became the law on

September 27, 2013. The reform subordinated academy to the state agency and undermined the foundation of its independence.

² Since 2005 when the whole issue of Russian Journal *Voprosy Obrazovaniya* (*Journal of Educational Studies*) was devoted to the problems of quality the situation went further down. See: *Voprosy Obrazovaniya*. 2005. Vol.1. <http://vo.hse.ru/arhiv.aspx?catid=252&z=257>

³ According to the results of the national census of 2010, the number of youth aged 18 to 22 in 2013 is 8.3 mln, while the next (younger) 5 year cohort consists of just 6.6 mln. The two previous (elder) groups included 12.1 and 11.9 mln people respectively (see: http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/Documents/Vol12/pub-02-01.pdf)

⁴ See, for example: *Ekspertnoe zaklyuchenie Rabochey gruppy Obschestvennoy Palaty RF po situatsii na Sociologicheskoy fakultete MGU* (Expert assessment by a working group of the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation on the situation at Sociology faculty of MSU). <http://www.sociolog.net/zaklyuchenie.doc> or *From Russia With Hate: Paul Cameron @ Moscow State U. Sociology Dept.* // <http://www.beyondhomophobia.com/blog/category/junk-science>

⁵ Ten years ago conflict between then-dean Igor Froyanov and large part of the faculty led to the exodus of leading scholars from the department; the loss that is still felt. See for the description of the conflict: Tatiana Voltskaya. *Istericheskiy fakultet (Hysterical Faculty)* // Itogi. 2000. #48. (28.11). <http://www.itogi.ru/archive/2000/48/116735.html>

⁶ J. Voogt and T. Plomp (eds.), *Education Standards and Assessment in the Russian Federation: Results from Russian-Dutch Cooperation in Education*, Acco, 1998.

⁷ See more details in A.V. Kourova, R.A. Ashmore, *Russian Education Reconstructed: Perestroika*, Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 2004, and B. Eklof, L.E. Holmes, and V. Kaplan (eds.), *Educational Reform in Post-Soviet Russia: Legacies and Prospects*, Frank Cass, 2005.

⁸ Lanin, B., L'vova, S. (eds.), *Russian Language and Literature*, Curriculum for 10-11th grades, Moscow: Ventana-Graf, 2012. 152 pp.

⁹ The Ministry of Education and Science required University rectors to declare their earnings on their university web sites by April 2013; almost nobody followed the demand, and the Ministry published the data on its own web site in June 2013; some salaries were as high as 71 mln Rubles a year (about \$2,29 mln) and median salary is about 3,6 mln Rubles (\$116 thousand) with 13% flat tax rate, while full professor's salary is usually on the level below \$12 thousand a year. See: <http://минобрнауки.рф/%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8/3432/>

¹⁰ See: <http://freeuni.ru/>, <http://unisolidarity.ru/>

¹¹ This informal group of scholars has their own working web site where the members can try the suspicious dissertations: <http://disernet.org/>

¹² Dmitry Medvedev. Soveshchanie s Vice-Premierami... ob usovershenstvovani sistemy attestatsii nauchnykh kadrov. September 30, 2013 // <http://government.ru/news/6265>

¹³ Minzdrav ne otstayot ot shkolnikov, RainTV web site, February 20, 2013, available at http://tvrain.ru/articles/minzdrav_ne_otstaet_ot_shkolnikov_proverjat_polovye_svjazi_o_kotoryh_sozhaleli_utrom-337105/

¹⁴ Putin zapretit osvobodhat' shkolnikov ot urokov fizkul'tury, March 13, 2013, available at <http://top.rbc.ru/society/13/03/2013/849053.shtml>

¹⁵ See: Habermas, Jürgen (German, 1962, English Translation, 1989), *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Thomas Burger, Cambridge Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

¹⁶ No NGO did voluntarily register as such, as no NGO consider its work as "political".

¹⁷ See, for instance: http://www.president-sovet.ru/blogi_soveta/chikov/perzagruzka-perezagruzki/

¹⁸ Mikhail Savva was freed from jail on December 4, 2013, his freedom being the first example in a line of amnesties and pardons to several prisoners, the next being Greenpeace activists, Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Pussy Riot punk group members. Still, Savva's trial is going on, and the accusations are still in force.

¹⁹ The state also tries to establish control over the Internet, the major vehicle for protest mobilization. The founder of the major Russian social network vkontakte Pavel Durov sold his share in the company to the Kremlin-associated business group that ignited fears of the increasing state control over the personal online behavior. On the February 1, 2014, the new law went into effect, permitting authorities to block any internet site without court ruling, another step towards consolidating control.

²⁰ Andrei Kamkin. Open Letter "Gryznaya pena ili istoriya o tom, kak možno zloupotrebyat zakonami RF" // <http://rsmu.ru/12657.html>. For the response of the activists see: *Otvetnoe otkrytoe pismo...* // <http://unisolidarity.ru/?p=1767>