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David Mandel

"OPTIMIZING" HIGHER EDUCATION IN RUSSIA

University Teachers and Their Union "Universitetskaya solidarnost'"

ibidem

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1. Introduction

In 2012, soon after his election to a third presidential term as president, following a four-year stint as prime minister (to avoid modifying the constitution), and in the wake of an unprecedented wave of popular protests, Vladimir Putin issued his “May Decrees.” Notable among them was the government's commitment to increase the salaries of doctors, scientific researchers and university teachers to double the average in their respective regions by 2018.[1] But then on December 30 of that year, the government issued a “road map” for education, revealing that the salary increases in higher education would be paid for, not by significant new government funding, but by “optimization,” which would eliminate 44% of the current teaching positions in higher education. This was justified in part by a forecasted drop in student enrolment.[2]

Thus opened a new, accelerated period of reform of higher education. This book examines the impact of these reforms on the condition of Russia's university teachers and the collective efforts of some teachers, a small minority, to organize themselves in an independent trade union to defend their professional interests and their vision of higher education.

Apart from the subject's intrinsic interest, an in-depth examination of this specific aspect of social policy provides valuable insight into the nature of the Russian state, as well as into the condition of “civil society,” in particular the popular classes, to which Russian university teachers belong according to their socio-economic situation, if not necessarily their self-image.

The policies promoted by the Russian government in higher education are not unique to that country. Over the past few decades, similar policies have been promoted, in various forms and degrees, in many countries. Many academics who read this book will recognize tendencies at work in their own countries and institutions. But rarely have these policies assumed so grotesque and destructive a form as in Russia.

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[1] http://www.rsr-online.ru/doc/2012_06_25/6.pdf (accessed May 30, 2018)

[2] http://legalacts.ru/doc/rasporjazhenie-pravitelstva-rf-ot-30122012-n-2620-r/ (accessed May 30, 2018)

It has been observed that neoliberalism, whatever its ideological justifications, is, in reality, the policy of the bourgeoisie when it does not encounter serious popular resistance.[3] There is resistance in Russia, but for both historical and contemporary reasons it is very weak. The Russian case can, therefore, be read as a cautionary tale by anyone who holds a humanistic conception of higher education.

This research was conducted over several years. It included lengthy stays in Russia, during which I was conducted interviews and held informal discussions with university teachers and union activists. I also participated in union educational activities, meetings, conferences, and protests. The study also makes use of government and union documents, as well as published scholarly studies and articles from the press and the social media.

Since I do not believe that neutrality is possible in the study of study significant aspects of society, I will make clear my social and ideological commitments. I have long been active in my own university’s trade union, the first accredited professors’ union in Canada, and in its efforts to resist neo-liberal pressures. I have also long been involved in trade-union educational activities in Russia. Notwithstanding those commitments, I have tried my best to make honest use of all the materials that were available to me and did not select or distort facts in order to support a *parti pris*.

A note on terminology. The Russian term *professor* is not usually used generically to denote “university teacher”, as is often the case in North America for tenured or tenure-track teachers. In this text, the term *professor* will be reserved for holders of the Russian title (roughly equivalent to “full professor”). “University teacher” will be used as the generic term. Other titles for teaching positions in

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[3] M. Dudcik and A. Reed Jr., “The Crisis of Labor and the Left in the U.S.,” in L. Panich and G. Albo, eds., *The Socialist Register 2015*, Merlin Press, London, U.K., 2015, p. 373, note 10.

Russia and their rough North-American equivalents are: *assistent* (teaching assistant), *prepodavatel′* (lecturer), *starshii prepodavatel′* (senior lecturer), *dotsent* (associate professor)—the most numerous category.

2. Overview of State Policy

a. The Soviet Period

University teachers were held in high regard in Soviet society, and university teaching was a coveted profession. In that relatively egalitarian system (even considering the privileges of the *nomenklatura*), a *dotsent*, the equivalent of a North-American associate professor, the most numerous category of teaching personnel, earned approximately double the average wage and could expect to obtain an apartment. A *professor*, a title awarded on the basis of major published research, earned double that amount.[4] Performance bonuses, beyond the guaranteed part of the salary, were relatively small and stable.

While some research and publishing activity was generally expected, most universities, with the exception of a few élite institutions, focused on teaching, with more advanced research being conducted in the network of institutes belonging to the Academy of Science. Accordingly, while the teaching load could be relatively heavy—300 or more academic hours[5] for a *dostent* (but 120-150 for a *professor*)—it was manageable. In some institutions, such as Moscow State University, every fourth semester was free for the purpose of research.

Looking back to the Soviet period from 2017, professor of philosophy V. Afanas'eva of Saratov State University recalled: "In the 1980s, when I was pondering a career, to become a *professor* was not only interesting and respected, but practical too. Indeed, a *professor* was doing work that he loved. On the face of it, he did not work too much—it looked like a few hours a week. And he received the wage of a Norilsk miner.[6] He could allow himself to buy a cooperative apartment in the city's centre and a *dacha* on the Volga. And he came to the cashier for vacation pay with a small suitcase, since the money would not fit into a briefcase. *Professors* were respected, honoured; legends were told about them; each one was unique, irreplaceable, and therefore beloved."[7]

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[4] M. Matthews, *Education in the Soviet Union: Policies and Institutions since Stalin*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982, p., 147. A certain decline in the relative remuneration of academic staff began in the 1970s. A. Smolentseva, "Challenges to the Russian Academic Profession," *Higher Education* no. 45, 2003, p. 409.

[5] An "academic hour" is 45 minutes.

[6] Mining was one of the highest paid professions (outside of the nomenklatura),

There was no concept of tenure in the Soviet Union, but once hired, university teachers could expect to keep their jobs for life, as long as they conformed politically. Party membership, not easy to obtain for intellectuals in the later Soviet period (unlike workers, who sometimes resisted insistent invitations to join), was obligatory in politically sensitive disciplines, such as economics, history, or philosophy, which were under strict ideological control. Sociology, banned under Stalin, was resurrected after his death, but mainly as an applied (fact-gathering and analysis), rather than theoretical discipline. Courses in Soviet Marxism and party history were obligatory for students in all disciplines.

Power in the educational system, as in all social and political institutions, was highly centralized. Organization and financing were decided and administered centrally. In universities and in the more specialized institutes of higher learning subordinated to the various economic ministries, a strong basic education was combined with specialized training that prepared students for future employment. Tuition was free, and students who performed well received stipends, which could easily be supplemented by summer jobs. Employment after graduation in one's field of specialization was guaranteed—the state's job assignment was mandatory.[8]

Teaching personnel in institutions of higher learning, unless they were members of the party committee or held administrative positions, did not participate in important decisions. The most

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and the nickel miners of Norilsk also received a hefty northern supplement.

[7] V. Afanas'eva, "Pyat' prichin po kotorym ne sleduet stat' professorom," *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, Mar. 20, 2017, https://www.kp.ru/daily/26655.5/3676180/ (accessed Aug 21, 2018)

[8] D. Platonova, D. Semyonov, "Russia: the Institutional Landscape of Higher Education," in J. Huisman et al., ed, *25 years of Transformations of Higher Education Systems in Post-Soviet Countries*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2018, p. 1.

significant decisions were taken centrally beyond the university, including the disciplines and subjects to be taught, admission quotas, educational standards, workloads and remuneration.

The Trade Union of Workers of Education[9], Higher Schools, and Scientific Institutions embraced all the employees of these areas, including the administrators. It functioned in practice as an arm of the state and of the local university or institute's administration. The main focus of their activities was the administration of social benefits. After 1985, especially under Gorbachev's *perestroika*, central state control of education was somewhat relaxed, but the union never assumed a significant degree of independence from the university and state authorities, nor did its basic functions change.

The October Revolution opened and greatly broadened access to higher education for the children of workers and peasants, and also for their adult members. And while the state clearly emphasized the role of education in the formation of the skilled labour force required for economic development, it also framed education's mission in humanistic terms, as favoring the spiritual development of individuals and of society as a whole.[10] The downside of this professed humanism was the imposed, crude "ideologization" of higher education, which included mandatory courses in "marxism-leninism," the history of the Communist Party, and the like.

Soviet parents often invested considerable energy and financial resources in their offspring's accession to higher education, which was a prestigious and widely-shared goal. Evening and extramural higher education was also widely developed, the law providing special conditions for working students enrolled in these programmes. Students in higher education were generally motivated to learn, since at least equally well-paid jobs not requiring higher degrees were available in industry. For those enrolled in full-time programmes, the university years became a cherished period of their lives, and the friendships established then often endured long afterwards.

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[9] *Prosveshchenie* – literally "enlightenment."

[10] A. Smolentseva, "Where Soviet and Neoliberal Discourses Meet: the Transformation of the Purposes of Higher Education in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia," *Higher Education*, December, 2017, pp. 1096, 1098.

b. The “Wild Nineties”[11]

The decade under Boris Yeltsin, the first president of the newly-independent Russian Federation, came to be known popularly as the “wild[12] nineties.” This was a period of what Marx had termed “primitive accumulation”—the forced dispossession of toilers of their means of subsistence. The latter, according to the constitution inherited from the Soviet Union, were the collective property of the nation as a whole. The rapid privatization of the economy in the course of the 1990s assumed the form of massive corruption and theft. These were not only tolerated, but actively promoted by the government. [13]

Formally, the new Russian state was, and still is, a democracy. But since Yeltsin’s coup d’état and artillery bombardment of the Supreme Soviet (the dominant state institution at the time) in October 1993, the executive branch of the government has been free of any significant outside control. Under this “managed democracy”, the state’s tolerance of individual and collective freedoms (which remain, nevertheless, significant on the background of most of Russian history) is conditional upon their not limiting the government’s freedom of action in matters that it considers important.

“Shock therapy,” a policy of forced, rapid transition to capitalism, actively promoted by the G-7 and the international financial institutions that they dominate, thrust Russia into one of the deepest and most prolonged depressions experienced by an industrial society.[14] Throughout the decade, the government was determined to stay this course, regardless of the social and economic costs to the mass of the population, which was unable to mount effective resistance.

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[11] For a useful overview of the institutional changes in higher education in Russia since the end of the USSR, see D. Platonova and D. Semyonov, “Russia: The Institutional Landscape of Russian Higher Education,” in J. Huisman et al. (eds.), *25 years of Transformations of Higher Education Systems in Post-Soviet* Countries, Palgrave, London, 2018.

[12] “Likhie”—literally “dashing” or “daring.” But in this case, “wild” seems more appropriate.

[13] On primitive accumulation and the resulting nature of the state in Russia, see D. Mandel, “Primitive Accumulation in Post-Soviet Russia,” M. Vidal, et al. eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Karl* Marx, Oxford University Press, N.Y., 2019, pp. 739-54.

By 1998, real GDP had fallen to around a quarter of its 1992 level. Popular incomes plummeted, along with the state's social spending. Government expenditure on higher education as a part of GDP fell in this period from 1.21% to 0.040%; funding per student decreased by 70% compared to the end of the 1980s.[15] Besides a catastrophic reduction of teachers' salaries, institutions of higher learning struggled to survive by attracting various forms of non-state funding: tuition-paying students, commercial use of real-estate under their control, the sale of services, grants from private sources. These activities were legalized by the 1992 Law on Education, which also permitted the establishment of private universities.

In these conditions, the centralized control of education of the Soviet period necessarily gave way to broad decentralization and so expanded autonomy of educational establishments, as there was no other way for them to survive.[16] It was not until well into the next decade that the state began to intervene actively again in higher education.

For university teachers, the freedom to teach, to conduct research and to publish was the main positive outcome of the Soviet Union's demise. While the government still formally required its approval of programmes, in practice teachers were free to teach as they wished. "It was a period of full freedom—you did what you wanted," recalled an economics teacher at Moscow State

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[14] J. Stiglitz, *Globalization and its Discontents*, W. Norton, N.Y., 2002, ch. 5.

[15] Banque européenne de reconstruction et de développement, *Rapport 1998*, cited in E. Kniazev, "Les problèmes nouveaux posés par la gestion d'une université russe," *Politiques et gestion de l'enseignement supérieur*, vol. 14, n° 1, 2002, p. 121; T. Klyachko and I. Rozhdestvenskaya, *Obrazovanie*, Institut perekhodnogo perioda, Moscow, 1999, p. 4.

[16] A. Smolentseva, "Challenges to the Russian academic profession," *Higher Education*, 45: 2003, p. 397.

University. "It was the most interesting and creative time. I wrote a textbook that passed through three editions. There were a lot of different views, discussions, arguments. It was interesting!" "From an intellectual point of view, the 1990s were the best years of my life," recalled a philosophy teacher at St. Petersburg's Mining University. "We obtained access to books and translations and we could teach and say whatever we liked, without fear."

This new intellectual freedom had the most meaning for teachers of the humanities and social sciences, since the natural sciences had not been subject to significant ideological control. But changes in this period also allowed a measure of teacher participation in university affairs, notably in the election of department chairpersons, faculty deans, and rectors, as well as in decisions regarding hiring and promotion of colleagues.[17]

The early 1990s also saw the introduction of employment contracts. Formally, teaching positions were to be filled and five-year contracts awarded through open competitions, on whose basis departments made recommendations to the institution's elected academic council. In practice, however, teachers in this period could count on keeping their positions. Departments also obtained a decisive voice in decisions regarding promotions.

The dark side of this newly-found freedom and opportunities to participate in university affairs was a dramatic decline in salaries. The average salary of a university teacher in 2000 was a mere 1,226 rubles (approximately $US 40).[18] Moreover, the payment of wages and salaries in the 1990s was often delayed, sometimes for weeks and even months, this in conditions of hyperinflation without indexation. A Moscow teacher recalled that "Salaries were so insultingly low that they barely covered the cost of transportation to and from the university." Many with better options simply left the university, contributing to Russia's massive brain drain.

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[17] For a discussion of this issue, see A. Kosmarksii, "Universitety stali gibridom patriarkhal'nhykh demokratii s prepriniamtel'skikh avtokratiyamy: sotsiolog Mikhail Sokolov o tom, kak ustroena vlast' v rossiiskikh vuzakh," *Indikator,* Sept, 25, 2018, https://indicator.ru/humanitarian-science/intervyu-mihaila-sokolova.htm. (accessed Aug 21, 2019)

[18] A. Smolentseva, op. cit. 409