

## Education Reform in Russia

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### Abstract

Recent reforms have muddled the Russian education system. They have added bureaucracy, reduced state funding, and threatened to dramatically cut the number of professors. Combined with the radical restructuring of the Academy of Sciences, the changes amount to an assault on the Russian intelligentsia, which so far has been powerless to push back against the onslaught.

### Losing the Soviet Legacy

Since the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the extensive and effective system of education and scientific research built during the Soviet era has suffered hard times. This educational colossus once stood as a proud accomplishment of Communist rule. Now the underfinancing of the 1990s combined with the ever-increasing bureaucratic burden imposed since 2000 has dropped the system into decay and disrepair.

### Unintended Consequences of the Bologna Reforms

Ten years ago, in October 2003, Russia joined the all-European Bologna process, which sought to unify the requirements and approaches to higher education across all European universities. The reforms led to the establishment of two levels of higher education, the bachelor and master's programs, which replaced the previous 5-year "specialist" degrees. At the same time, the Russian system retained its two-tier post-graduate education in the form of the Candidate of Sciences (roughly, a PhD equivalent) and advanced Doctoral degree (close to the German Habilitation required for a Full Professor's position).

In general terms, the new system should resemble the American model, with 4+2 years of education. However, the hybrid that the reform produced led Russian universities to combine too many features of the old "specialist" education with the new 4+2 division producing the result that the bachelor's degree does not really offer a general higher education, but a truncated specialist course of study. After that, the MA level is a strange addition with no practical value for the student. Since many young people at that age have started to work and MA programs cannot provide them with jobs, salaries, or stipends to finance their living expenses, few young people choose to pursue a master's degree.

However, the universities are now funded by the state depending on the number of students they enroll, and that means that the university bureaucracy does not permit any student to be expelled. A professor would have to devote a lot of energy and aggravation to remove a bad student, so few instructors choose to do so. Allow-

ing such low performers to stay in the system is another blow to the quality of the education system and the results that it delivers.

### Added Bureaucracy

The "return of the state" since 2000 revived and increased bureaucratic controls over every aspect of life in Russia. In the universities, the new trend meant rapid growth in the number and complexity of the forms that professors must complete, and the quantity of reports they must file with different levels of the administration. Every single course of lectures a professor teaches now must be accompanied by a 200-page document describing the content of the course, its place in the overall curriculum, as well as explaining the links of each topic to the "competencies" that the course develops in the students. "Quality control procedures" introduced in many Russian universities following the recommendations of the Bologna process in practice mean additional levels of oversight for the paperwork, as well as detailed and regular checks examining the general coherence of the paperwork, which often has little relationship to the real life problems of teaching or research.

Another source of bureaucratic pressure came from an attempt by the state to distinguish between "good" and "bad" universities. In order to sort the one from the other, the Ministry invented many criteria and required every university to report the extent to which it complied with these benchmarks. Within the university, the new demands produced a nightmare of internal bureaucracy, requiring the faculty to produce reports on the "number of small enterprises" they founded, level of salaries their graduates earned, the quantity of foreign students they attracted, and numerous other indicators. The rational requirement for publications in good peer-reviewed journals in many cases was accompanied with a demand to list non-existent or hard-to-find bibliographic details for old publications (such as their DOI numbers).

Relatively low salaries, the heavy bureaucratic burden and never-ending reforms repelled talented young people from pursuing academic careers in Russia, leading to a further deterioration of the education system.

## Ranking Universities

For several years, the Russian government tried to impose a hierarchy of universities on the institutions that had once been largely indistinguishable. Two universities—Moscow State and St. Petersburg State—received special statuses; several big universities (mostly in the capitals of the federal districts) were enlarged at the expense of the smaller institutions in surrounding areas, and received the title of “Federal Universities.” Then, many universities received the rank of “National Research Universities.” Each of these was entitled to special funding, but so far there is no evidence that they perform any better than their peers. The newly elevated universities were unable to attract new faculty or better students because of the low mobility of the population in Russia, and consequently did not improve their performance.

The latest attempt at differentiation was a competition that the state organized for universities that wanted to achieve a top spot in the world university rankings. The idea was to choose 15 Russian universities and provide them with additional funding in order to help them break into the international top 100. Russian academics criticized the idea because it diverted resources away from mid-level institutions and created “Potemkin villages” in the higher education system, but the project is still being implemented.

## Burst of Reform

An explosion of reforms announced by the Russian government in the education sphere in late 2012 interrupted this slow motion deterioration of the system. First, on December 20, the government issued a new State Program on the “Development of Science and Technologies”; then, on December 30 Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev approved a road map of “changes in the social sphere aimed at increasing the efficiency of education and science.” Finally, on December 31, President Vladimir Putin signed into law a new piece of legislation entitled “On Education” that went into effect on September 1, 2013.<sup>1</sup>

Russia’s professors quickly discovered that the Road Map provided for a 44 percent cut in jobs at Russian universities over the course of five years. Partially, the cuts are explained by the demographic situation since there will be fewer college-aged youths in the coming

years. But the document also raises the student-professor ratio from 9.4 to 12. In absolute figures, this change means firing almost 140,000 professors from the current approximately 318,000.

The promise that Putin made to double professor salaries during his presidential election campaign and repeated immediately after his return to the Kremlin was now universally understood to be an attempt to cut the number of positions in order to increase salaries without increasing total funding for higher education.

This realization led to numerous protests, loud journalistic investigations, and the creation of an independent trade union for university professors called “University Solidarity.”<sup>2</sup> The indignation in the university collectives did not alter the ministry’s decision, and the summer enrollment campaign witnessed severe cuts in the number of state-funded places in universities throughout the country. However, the social norm in Russia now requires that almost everyone receive a college education, and parents preferred to pay the tuition costs so that their children can matriculate to university. Accordingly, the immediate result of the government’s new policy was to force parents to pay tuition rather than reduce the number of professor positions.

Still, there were several purely bureaucratic ways to protect jobs, for example, eliminating part time jobs could count as abolishing a full time position. Those professors who worked part-time were either fired or given full positions in the departments. The normal workload also increased—while work requirements are set by the university, the ratio of students to professors is decided in Moscow, and the funding goes along with those figures.

## Attack on the Academy of Sciences

In the midst of the student enrollment campaign, the government struck another blow, this time against the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS). New legislation introduced on June 27, 2013, provided for the radical reform of the oldest scientific organization in Russia by reassigning research institutes from reporting to the Academy to a newly established federal agency, created from the merger of the RAS and two professional branch academies—the Russian Academy of Medical Science and the Russian Academy of Agriculture.

Scientists protested. Academicians took to the streets and picketed the State Duma, while seventy members of the Academy signed a declaration refusing to join the new “academy”. Famous scholars organized support from all over the world, and slowed the legislation; the final reading was postponed until September. However, even the all-Academy protest demonstrations,

1 Podpisan zakon ob obrazovanii, December 31, 2012 <http://kremlin.ru/news/17251>; Ob utverzhenii plana meropriyatii (“dorozhnoi karty”) “Izmeneniya v otraslyakh sotsialnoi sfery, napravlennye na povyshenie effektivnosti obrazovaniya i nauki.” Rasporyazhenie ot 30 dekabrya 2012 g. No. 2620-r <http://government.ru/docs/3391>; Ob utverzhenii gosudarstvennoi programmy “Razvitiye nauki i tekhnologii”. Rasporyazhenie ot 20 dekabrya 2012 g. No. 2433-r <http://government.ru/docs/3346>

2 <http://unisolidarity.ru/>

petitions, and maneuvering by the recently elected president of the Academy Vladimir Fortov failed to save the cause; on September 27 Vladimir Putin signed the law and the Russian Academy of Sciences ceased to exist in its traditional form.

### Conclusion

All these events produced wide-spread indignation within the academic community, both in universities and research institutes, but demonstrated that the scholars had no leverage or political influence. The Communist Party of the Russian Federation was the only

Duma party that protested against the law (and thus won additional esteem from the academics), but that was a lost cause.

At this point, the Russian academic community is suffering under attack from the state and has little hope of emerging victorious. However, this is the first time that academics are beginning to build real horizontal structures that can offer some kind of resistance and attract the sympathy of the public. The current regime is no longer afraid to reveal itself as an anti-intellectual force in Russian life, but such a tactic will eventually backfire.

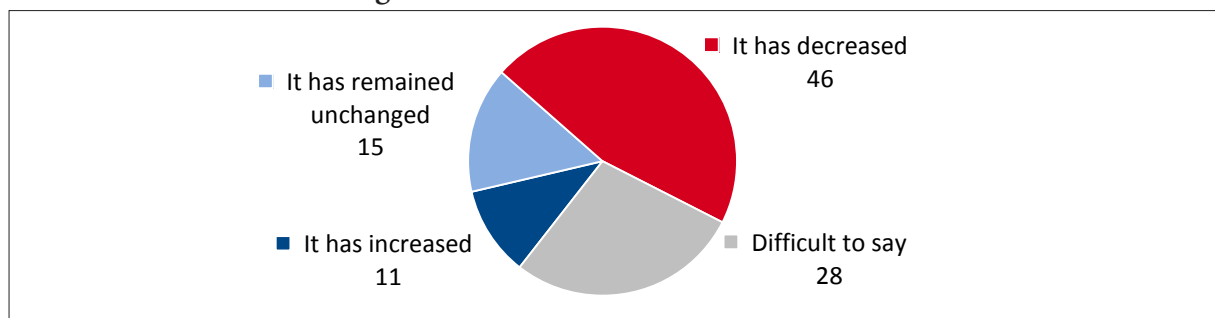
#### *About the Author:*

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## OPINION POLL

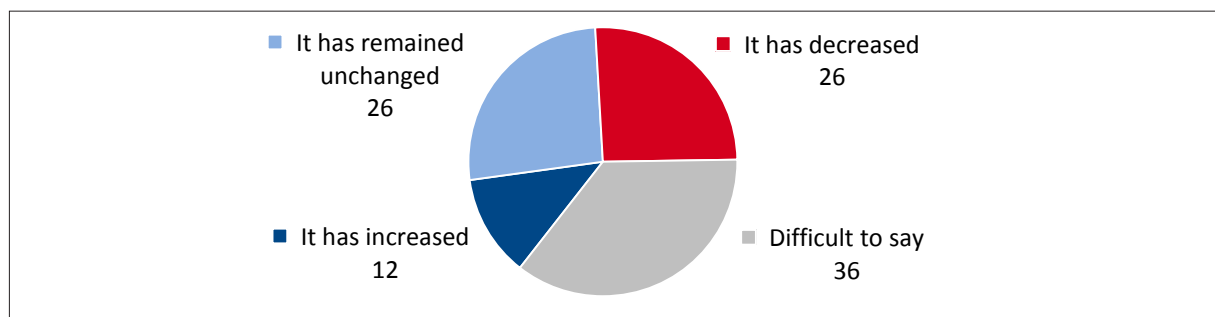
### The Academy of Sciences in the Eyes of Russian Citizens

**Figure 1: What Do You Think—Has the Authority of the Academy Increased, Decreased or Remained Unchanged Since Soviet Times?**



Source: representative opinion poll by the Public Opinion Fund (Fond Obshchestvogo Mneniya), N = 1500, 25–26 May 2013, <http://fom.ru/obshchestvo/10943>

**Figure 2: Has the Authority of the Academy Increased, Decreased or Remained Unchanged in the Last Two or Three Years?**



Source: representative opinion poll by the Public Opinion Fund (Fond Obshchestvogo Mneniya), N = 1500, 25–26 May 2013, <http://fom.ru/obshchestvo/10943>