

# THE IDEOLOGICAL STRUGGLE BETWEEN UNIVERSITIES — IS THIS POSSIBLE IN RUSSIA?

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The ideological positioning of the universities found in Russia is extremely hampered, since we really have no clearly defined ideology. I can hardly think of even one major university where its heads do not agree with the position voiced by state officials at the highest level, just as **I can hardly imagine a rector who is publicly against modernisation**. When something other than the term ‘modernisation’ becomes the key word of political rhetoric in the country, there will also not be any opponents to that concept.

## *‘Aboriginals’ and ‘globalists’*

Of course there is a widespread idea that some classical universities are inclined towards conservatism. But how can they be otherwise? A university’s autonomy, the limits of which are relative everywhere,

enables it to not undergo changes too rapidly — even under the circumstantial pressure of prevailing beliefs — and to change things according to the inner logic rather than a desire to placate. It is impossible to find an optimal balance between conservatism and sensitivity to new things on the basis of formal and universal criteria. Therefore, most often when it seemed that universities had become stiff and stagnant, efforts were not directed at radically transforming those existing universities and faculties, but rather towards establishing new research and educational structures, including entirely new universities with a new team of instructors.

Something like this is now happening in Russia. Nevertheless, I think that there is no university — neither among the old ones nor among the new ones — that is actually ready to assume the role of a think tank. But we need to make things clear here. If we are speaking not about universities in general but about such centres that have emerged within their structure, then why can this not be the case? Some teachers or even students may become leaders in terms of public opinion under certain circumstances. At the same time, it is not possible to shift this feature to the whole university. Here, the time horizon should be treated with circumspection.

Maybe right now, at the same time as I am speaking of the comparatively insignificant role that universities play in politics, some dilatory and underlying work is being carried out at one or two of these institutions by a new generation of thinkers, who we will listen to with either great delight or great horror in just a few years’ time. **With regard to the significance of universities as a place for the social formation of the ruling strata, this is growing naturally and will continue to grow further.** Differences in the views and teaching styles of the professors found at

different universities should also see some kind of continuation, including in the political sphere itself. But this is a matter for the future. It seems impossible to me to judge the preferences of all students, regardless of the fact that I have taught a lot of different students and at many different places.

It seems to me there does not exist so much a definite trend as a rather interesting division, which does not necessarily coincide with dissociation according to political preferences. However unscientific it may sound, I tend to call this the **division between the ‘aboriginals’ and ‘globalists’**. The first of these associate both their future life and career to the places that are native to them and, in general, it is very seldom and with great reluctance that they tend to go anywhere — especially abroad. The ‘globalists’, on the other hand, realise their wish to visit other places through distinctive life strategies. Once again, there is nothing political in this division. Rather, to be more precise, the political aspect here runs much deeper than is the case with the usual opposition of ‘the old’ and ‘the new’.

Many of ‘the old’ enjoy the benefits of scientific tourism, while people trying to work at the international level may end up limiting themselves by reading everything that is now available thanks to networks, while not moving away or attempting to see how everything is in reality with their own two eyes. If we use the terms of the sociology of mobility by John Urry, we can speak about ‘embodied (corporal)’ and disembodied mobility. I would not bother mention that had I not found out that **the value of personal contact with Western science, with the scientific culture of Western universities that is so evident to me, is not at all plainly evident for many students and young teachers**. It is too early, though, to say how strong this tendency is and what it should eventually mean for the general state of the

intellectual environment.

However, I can easily recognise a person who has never lived in the West, undergone a training course in a Western university, written articles for Western scientific magazines, or who limits his acquaintance with the world of science to cocktail parties held at congresses. I can easily recognise them by the way they present themselves in public, which is, as a rule, quite original.

### *Modernisation vs. the status quo*

Of course everybody knows that the State University-Higher School of Economics (HSE) is a liberal institution and that Moscow State University has a greater inclination towards conservatism, as is the case with virtually all old major universities. At the same time, MSU is such a mountain that one cannot compete with it. Although HSE is developing dynamically, I can hardly imagine that, one day, we will have such faculties as the faculties of biology, geology, geography, chemistry, etc. It would also be wrong to see our university as a strict army of liberals moving according to a single will in a single formation.

The liberalism put forward by HSE is the liberalism of the inner structure that presupposes the potential co-existence of extremely different points of view. This is specifically the reason that HSE is effective: **our university is a comfortable intellectual field for carrying out intellectual work, at both the functional and fundamental levels.** I am confident that this is the foundation of its superiority over other similar institutions. In our life, it tends to be enough to have a determined, distinct, mature position in regards to every key matter, which permits us to find oneself in an adversarial position, whether it be with unclear preservationists, reformists or modernisers who have another view on the essence of the process. In this way, our departments may find itself at the forefront of any heated debate or discussion.

By the way, I find the term 'modernisation' as unsuitable here. We can explain the matter as though there is some modern, some real



modern state that we are heading towards but cannot reach (this is the reason behind all that talk about lagging behind, running after, and catching up modernisation, giving rise to the senseless category of transit), and that this trek can only be achieved at the cost of narrowing the field of possible thinking.

It is another matter that it is deemed as better to recognise the necessity of moving in this direction rather than insisting on the status quo. And in this respect, it is clear why there is no easy answer to the question about the role of universities. There are different kinds of universities and **higher education does not guarantee that graduates will be orientated to that which is modern.** Where have all our conservative thinkers and politicians come from? Is it truly the case that they have had a poor higher education? And what are the criteria of good education anyways? If a person is good at this or that exact science or technical field, does this automatically mean that he or she will be a supporter of modernisation?

The secular rational culture that was cultivated in the universities of the USSR promoted modernisation, by whatever name, because in the early Gorbachev period the good argued with the better about what path to modernity is correct – the communist version or the capitalist one. According to the old pattern, one could count on the idea that more education brought us closer to modernism. But nowadays, nothing is clear except for the fact that a good training in particular fields can

assist future efficiency, regardless of whether we are speaking about financial management or fundamental science.

But the **basic pattern of modern as the absolute measure of any educational results is not suitable to anyone.** There is much that should be reconsidered, particularly with respect to the situation with the division between academic and university institutions. There are many problems with the Academy of Science. But I still cannot imagine that universities will ever have the capacity to swallow all capable scientists. This also concerns the scientific field that I am best acquainted with – sociology.

It would be naive to think that nobody needs academic sociology and that this discipline is simply begging for a piece of the budget pie. Sociology is a necessary part of our present-day life, which is impossible to pursue without the existence of major research centres, long-term projects, and the like. No university-level sociology – no matter how many research centres may operate under the auspices of individual universities – can substitute it.

However, as to the question of why one of these research centres is called the Academy of Sciences and why it occupies a place at the highest level relative to other institutions active in the sphere of organised learning and knowledge-building (or to be more precise, power-knowledge) is the most intriguing question of our times. ■

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