

# THE HIGHER SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS ALWAYS TENDED TO A CONSENSUS OF OPINION

Lev Yakobson



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But I would never wish to work at any university that has become some kind of political grouping.

Let me explain this in terms of the Higher School of Economics. In the public's opinion, HSE is associated with liberal views. And we have no regrets about this. But we have always tended to avoid demonstrating a unanimity of opinion. **The only criteria in our recruitment of employees at HSE is a candidate's professional competence.** Among the teaching staff, you will find that there are supporters of the idea of limiting governmental economic activity, as well as those who support an increase in governmental activity. There are those who lean towards social-democratic ideas and there are also the so-called great power nationalists. It is apparent that our staff members conceive their political agenda in rather different ways, and this is for good for our students.

A university should exist and develop as a community of scholars, who are capable of interesting each other through their professional activity. And those students who are entering a given university should have the opportunity to get acquainted, in an open-minded setting, with the various elements of the ideological spectrum.

**RJ** *Dear Lev Ilyich, do you think, that Russian universities have a role to play in terms of the formation of a political and ideological agenda? Do they fulfil this function?*

The agenda is formed by the political class. While the political class in any country is indeed formed by leading universities, they serve not just as sources of knowledge, but they also define positions. As well, what is also of equal importance is the fact that the individuals' social networks and their network of mutual support is formed there. Universities are associated with their graduates and those instructors who are visible in the political field.

**RJ** *Are there other universities, other than the Higher School of Economics that are realising themselves in the political sphere?*

I will emphasise once again that the perception that HSE's staff collectively follows one political line is mistaken. The same can be said about Moscow State University, for instance, or Saint Petersburg State University, or Moscow State University of International Relations. None of these institutions of higher education practice censorship of political views. The predominance of supporters of this or that political line, not even quantitatively speaking, but in terms of the predominance of such individu-

als amongst widely recognisable people in Russia – this, of course, is another issue. In this respect, Moscow State University may be more conservative than is the case with Saint Petersburg State University, while the latter also tends to be more conservative than HSE.

**RJ** *Is it possible to paint the picture of there being some discrepancies between the liberal and conservative wing of Russian power in relation to MSU and HSE?*

I wouldn't say that MSU is connected with one power wing, and that HSE has relations with another. The discrepancies between them appear to be somewhat different. **MSU has closer contacts with Moscow City Hall, while HSE tends to more intensively interact with the federal government.**

Actually, the significance of ideological discrepancies within state authorities is exaggerated, as I see it. Indeed, in bureaucratic circles, including those at the highest level, one can notice different nuances of their perception of the world. But when it comes to practical decisions, conflicts and coalitions tend to be defined not by ideas, but by interests. And they, more or less, yield to endorsement. I do not believe in being governed by philosophers. It is a good thing that under the disorder of our 'Plato-like figures' – by this I mean our expert community, not specifically those people who write smart books for a very narrow circle of people – the authorities appear to be more or less pragmatic. But it is quite another issue that, during the process of task setting, this pragmatism is often combined with proposals that are irrational in terms of their realisation.

We often define the intolerance to everything of western origin as being conservatism. And similar views that are expressed in any typical western-European parliament are generally

considered to be liberal. In this context, any German social democrat, representative of the Green Party or a member of Christian Democratic Union can be seen as a liberal. According to such approach, I am also a liberal, although Bjork is actually closer to me than Mill. Conservatism in this context is rather widespread within society and the echelons of power, except in its highest echelon. Traditionally, our government is one that is European in nature. Of course, it cannot be considered as classical European, but it is not the only one. **One can sometimes encounter conservatism at MSU in the form of antagonism towards the West, while in HSE this is highly unlikely.** In my opinion, that is an advantage, as we are speaking about what is virtually a purely negative program. It is pointless to see such a program as a continuation of Slavophilism or even to somehow relate it to Orthodoxy. To shorten this discourse, let's recall Alexei Khomyakov, for example, but not by reducing him to several word quotations, but as a real person who was alien to painful psychological complexes or narrowness. This is not to mention Vladimir Solovyov, who would most certainly be considered to be a 'heavy liberal'.

**RJ** *In the United States, members of the Republican Party send their children to specific colleges to pursue their studies. Is that correct? Do you agree that the movement towards the scientific explanation of various ideologies is a necessity for Russia? Do you think that maybe we should move towards turning universities into think-tanks related to various ideological directions? Would such a move help to structure the Russian political sphere?*

What we really lack is the variety of think tanks. We need independent expert centres with different orientations. **Universities are not a 'brain trust'.** Indeed, in the United States, there are universities that are traditionally more conservative or more liberal (I would like to recall that, in America, those who are considered to be liberals tend to be somewhat left of the centre, while market fundamentalists tend to be ultra-conservatives). Nevertheless, the strongest universities are rather politically neutral. They often tend towards a liberal trend, but this happens because the typical professor is also more liberal than the typical farmer, for instance. Just the same, even farmers also find those sharing the same ideologies as them within the same universities.

If we speak about Russia, under the current sub-marginal conditions of socio-economic education and political culture, it would be terrible if universities were to be transformed into collective agents of propaganda.

The structuring of the political realm will arrive at some level of stability only on the basis of the development of civil society from the grass roots. Unfortunately, this process is not occurring very fast, but it can nevertheless already be felt. What is important here is not to interrupt it and instead, participate in it. This also concerns genuine university self-administration as opposed to the actual 'privatisation' of some universities by some rectors, who in some cases even manage to pass them on to someone inside their own family. ■

*Lev Yakobson was speaking with Liubov Ulianova*

## DO NOT TRY TO TURN A PERSON AGAINST HIGHER EDUCATION



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**W**ith all its drawbacks, the educational system of Russia is good namely because it takes into consideration individuals' needs. Nowadays, the fact is that people attend universities and this means that this institution possesses real social weight. **Any attempts to turn a person against higher education are doomed to failure.**

The humanitarian dimensions of technologies, with due respect, cannot be taught in vocational schools or in technical schools. The so-called 'university-based abstract humanitarian issues' are something that occurs in practically any professional activity. We can find them even with respect to digging a hole in the ground. In this context, the working place of the foreman of the yard-keepers, a plant manager or a secretary happen to differ very little.

**It is a great illusion that higher education can be of no use to someone.** This is more-over the case for the country as a whole. It is another matter that it is important to thoughtfully establish the balance between the different levels of education, in order to more effectively link an individual with a suitable working place that he would be willing to occupy and can apply for. That is a separate task; however, it cannot be resolved according to a method of voluntarism — that is to say, it cannot be achieved simply by reducing existing levels of higher education.

If the national government is intent on increasing the prestige of some professions, huge resources will also need to be invested in the cultural sphere, not to mention increasing the salaries of museum attendants, librarians, teachers, doctors and engineers. If nothing is done in that regard, then everything will remain unchanged, just as it is now, when the production of lawyers and economists within society exceeds the needs of the market by several times.

In the post-industrial era, an individual with a solid humanitarian and economic education behind him has the possibility of finding something for himself in these or numerous other related fields. The most important core element of modern education is the ability to re-learn, to adapt oneself to new technologies, and to move somewhat like a boxer with respect to his attempts to avoid receiving a blow. This is the exact purpose of realising a Master's Degree programme. Therefore, everything depends not so much on the number of places of this of that profile at institutes of higher education with different specialisations, but is actually dependent on the quality of the education received by those occupying those places. The market will reasonably manage to absorb everyone who obtains a high quality rather than a slapdash education. ■