

MSU IS CONSERVATIVE IN AN ACADEMIC SENSE

Vladimir Mironov



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is Russian scientist, philosopher and professor. He is currently Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy at Moscow State University (MSU) and is a Corresponding Member of the Russian Academy of Sciences. He has written more than sixty scholarly papers, including 'The philosophy and metamorphosis of culture' (2005)

RJ Dear Vladimir Vasilyevich, do you think that, in Russia or, perhaps it would be even better to say, in Moscow, there is a definite ideological positioning of the largest universities? There exists an assumption that MSU is becoming a think tank of ideology, which is formulated by the party in power and Russian conservatism.

Such an assumption sounds unappealing. **Absolutely all educational reforms carried out in the country in recent years embody the realisation of proposals put forward by the State University-Higher School of Economics (HSE).** Notably, these reforms were carried out by the government that is criticised by MSU – recall, for instance, the Unified State Exam (USE) at the very least. It is hard to imagine that such critics belongs to a structure, which you imagine as positioning itself as presenting the ideology of the 'party in power' and, on the con-

trary, that the lobbying of these reforms is realised without its support.

The State University-Higher School of Economics (HSE) is a new university and a peculiar experiment for our country. And it is exactly the government that created all of the necessary conditions for this institution, that could be only a dream for rectors of other institutions of higher education – beginning with the premises themselves right through to the allocation of wages. As a young institution of learning, HSE has so far been unable to achieve the replenishment of its own staff (this is one of the major tasks of any university).

Just look how many teachers have migrated from MSU to HSE, also including leading staff members. In addition, I cannot really understand the active 'enlargement' of HSE. All sorts of new faculties have been opened, despite the fact that HSE is renowned primarily in the spheres of economics and management. By the way, it also publishes one of the country's best analytical journals, devoted to educational problems, which has come to occupy a powerful publishing niche. I believe that, while positioning itself as an institution that provides expertise in the area of reforms, it would be reasonable for this institution to focus specifically on this direction. Any attempt to create a university in the image and likeness of 'big brother' is reminiscent of models of a 'catch-up economy'.

The numerous reformist projects offered by HSE have not worked, namely because they were too theoretical and unrealistic. Take for instance the proposed system of national nominal monetary obligations, according to which the winner of the Unified State Exam can enter an institution of higher education and also receive a definite sum of money in order to finance his university studies. Conceptually, this idea looked very impressive, but to put it into practice would require too great a sum to finance the highest USE results, and that has turned out to be impossible.

Indeed, Moscow State University is conservative, not politically speaking, but in an academic sense. There are very simple criteria to estimate universities, which provide results in any case. The best institutions tend to be those that are older, and this is the case for a good reason. Namely, in due order, a university relies on its own rich history and the level of cultural development in the country.

This is precisely why **the conservatism of Moscow University is one of an academic character**, which would otherwise be impossible without the existence of intra-university democracy, which has always been a factor that has helped MSU to defend its position.

RJ What can you say about the Faculty of Political Science, which is often perceived as a personnel school for the United Russia Party?

I do not see any problem in the establishment of a Faculty of Political Science per se – this is a natural process of the institutionalisation of an independent academic discipline. The fate of philosophy lies in the process of the spin-off of new faculties, the latest of which include the faculties of psychology and sociology. One may be surprised by the pace at which this process has occurred, which hardly encourages the realisation of high quality. But this has already happened, so now let it be. I wouldn't necessarily associate this fact with 'a demonstration of the political conservatism of MSU', which is more oriented toward the ideology of the United Russia party. And I wouldn't categorical attribute HSE to a demonstration of the spirit of liberalism. Actually, in our country, it would be seem somewhat strange to engage in a discourse about pure liberalism. There is the position of the party in power, which deems itself as being conservative (although it has mysteriously managed to link this concept with the idea of modernisation). But in this case such form of conservatism might have seen some contradiction with respect to the liberal ideas that are usually associated with HSE. However,

in reality, as I have already stated, this is the very reverse of what has actually happened. At least in the educational sphere, **state authorities have come to somewhat rely on the ideas of reformists from HSE.**

Public policy in our country represents a sort of political carnival where the players guise themselves with masks. 'Rub' a liberal or a reformist a specific way and you will find a right-wing conservative. Look closely at a conservative and you will see a left-wing revolutionist. It is for this reason that it would be better to avoid labelling, otherwise there is always a chance of making a mistake.

Your idea of having two polar images is very beautiful. The one that is conservative, including its political aspects, is Moscow State University; and the liberal university is the Higher School of Economics. But is this dichotomy really necessary? The answer is on the surface. Dividing the leading institutions of higher education into different camps should permit pigeon-holing them into a situation, whereby they may have to bear responsibility in the case that failure results in the sphere of education. It will always be possible to find the guilty parties on either this or that side. This is the reality of politics.

I am personally sceptical about those reforms occurring with respect to our education. It is especially hurtful when ideas with reference to the global experience in education have managed to penetrate even the highest level. For example, the USE in such a comprehensive form as we now have, cannot be found anywhere in the world, except perhaps Egypt and China (which are gradually moving away from it), let alone in other European countries. In order to verify this, it is enough for everyone to get acquainted, via the Internet, with Western educational systems and the practice of selecting students for entry to institutions of higher education.

By investing money in science, the government should be taking this risk based on the understanding that a fundamental breakthrough may only eventually lead to economic benefits much later than the breakthrough is actually made, as this is typically how things occur. Physics, who are accused of doing nothing but sitting in their labs and drinking tea, may come up with a breakthrough in ten years' time that

will cover all of the expenses invested in their activity. I believe that it is absolutely a mistaken approach to treat education as, in first order, a service-driven industry in which employers' opinions predominate, and it is clear that they hardly need anything, for example, associated with classical



philology. Education, along with everything, is a systematically important part of culture and should not be reduced to 'baking' the cadres important for today's economy in some kind of university kiln. Certainly, this would result in a notable decrease in the level of education.

RJ *Are you referring to government or business?*

That is a good question. Certainly, I also mean business. But business is not able to play the role of the responsible sponsor in every instance. In Germany, for example, the presence of business in state universities is rather limited. It is logical, of course, that if business proceeds to invest money, it will transform higher education to fit its own needs.

The American system is, maybe, an exception to the rule. As soon as we made the transition to fee-based education, we encountered a whole series of peculiar situations. For instance, a big businessman came and indicated that he is ready to finance the training of linguists (philologists), in response to which he is asked 'what do you need as an outcome?' and he answers 'Two to three languages and some country-based studies, but, by all means, no Latin or classical philology. This is a

real incident based on my experience as vice-rector. But to realise these demands, there is no need for a university education — it is enough for someone to simply attend good training courses. While one can indeed live without Latin, philosophy, and history, we must also take into account the cul-

tural losses, which, by the way, may easily convert into economic losses.

In order to add some optimism here, I will say that some of the recent decisions taken in the sphere of education are positive in my opinion. For instance, there is the rating of institutions of higher education according to different levels and, in particular, the special status of MSU and Saint Petersburg State University. Under these circumstances, this is good even in terms of its politically strategic approach. However, in general, the level of education is declining and there are objective reasons for this happening. However, let's preserve the 'isles of quality' and give them an opportunity to realise the newest educational programs and technologies. If, as the Minister of Education has indicated, it is reinforced by reduced numbers and greater restrictions on those institutions of higher education that have the right to issue master's degrees, the situation may very well be normalised. For somebody it may be the case that they only need someone holding a bachelor's degree, while for others, a bachelor's degree may even seem like a luxury. ■

Vladimir Mironov was speaking with Boris Mezhuiev