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The contradictions of internationalisation and "pockets of effectiveness" in Russian higher education

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Academic Freedom in a Global Context

Authoritarian Modernisation and Academic Freedom: the Contradictions of Internationalisation and “Pockets of Effectiveness” in Russian Higher Education

Modernisation autoritaire et liberté académique : les contradictions de l'internationalisation et des « poches d'efficacité » dans l'enseignement supérieur russe

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Introduction

- 1 The Russian democratic path was relatively short-lived. Arguably, already in the early 2000s, the country displayed elements of a hybrid regime. In 2010, Russia was described as a competitive authoritarian regime, and currently figures on the list of consolidated authoritarian regimes.¹ These assessments coincide with a bleak view of state capacity, captured with considerable force by the *bad governance* concept.²
- 2 The Russian government, for various reasons including the urge to boost its own legitimacy, has for a long time relied on the rhetoric of modernisation. Higher education and research, in turn, have been considered among the most important aspects of the modernisation drive. The special place those sectors acquired is linked to the status accorded to education and research in the Soviet Union times and to newer arguments in support of the knowledge economy.

- 3 HE and research sectors continue to be regarded by the Russian authorities as an important source of international prestige³ and as a domestic popularity booster. Suffice to say that the 1st of September - which is when university term starts in Russia - also marks the Knowledge Day (*Den' znanii*), a popular festivity established in the Soviet era. Russia continues to have internationally competitive education, primarily in the STEM disciplines.⁴ President Vladimir Putin avails of the advice of a special institution, the Presidential Council for Science and Education (*Sovet pri prezidente po nauke i obrazovaniyu*), which raises the influence of this sector within the government structure.
- 4 Some argue that the model of authoritarian modernization can be successful.⁵ In terms of the attempts to modernize Russian HE, a few initiatives, such as the Higher School of Economics and the Tyumen School of Advanced Studies, look like potential success stories.⁶ However, the process of reforms carried out under the banner of modernization, and at times accompanied by such labels as “Westernization” and “Europeanization”, has been overwhelmingly focused on the technical adjustments and the incorporation of elements of managerial culture, while ignoring the wider context of political change. Many see the latter as crucial for the sustainability of modernisation interventions.⁷ Indeed, and as we show in this article, neither authoritarian modernisation, nor the “pockets of effectiveness” it created, have solved the many problems pervading the HE system. Authoritarian modernisation has, in effect, proved detrimental to the fundamental aspect of higher education and research - academic freedom.
- 5 In what follows, we highlight that in the area of HE and research, modernisation needs to be analysed concomitantly with the process of HE internationalisation. Both have been regarded as two sides of the same coin by the Russian government. However, the specific understanding of those concepts and their opaque practical implementation resulted in a situation where neither internationalisation nor modernisation are successful in guaranteeing a comprehensive, long-term protection of academic freedom. To support our argument, we discuss the components of HE modernisation in Russia and present four cases, all of which in specific time-periods could be regarded as pockets of effectiveness: the Smolny College of Liberal Arts and Science, the Tyumen School of Advanced Studies, the Higher School of Economics and the European University at St Petersburg. A close analysis of those cases allows us to show the tension at the intersection of a specifically understood and implemented modernisation and the value of academic freedom.
- 6 The article proceeds as follows. First, we outline our conceptual framework. We then employ it to describe selected attempts at modernising the HE sector in Russia. Next, we introduce the four case studies. These cases help us assess the delivery of the public good of higher education and research as well as the extent to which localised efforts have a bearing on the HE sector reform as a whole. In the concluding section, we offer our assessment and highlight the tension between prestige-driven internationalisation, short-termist modernisation and the politics of fear, which all contribute to the erosion of academic freedom.

The Conceptual Framework

- 7 The terminology used to analyse the process of reforms undertaken or proposed in post-Soviet Russia is relatively broad. *Selective modernisation*, for instance, gained traction as a counterweight to Dmitry Medvedev's rhetorical programme of *comprehensive modernisation* that was supposed to be based on democratic values and institutions.⁸ Selective modernisation was employed to emphasise the controlled manner in which different sectors should undergo reforms. While selective modernisation is at times presented as synonymous with authoritarian modernisation,⁹ its phraseology is less explicit in describing the wider political context in which the reforms take place. Authoritarian modernisation is more exact in that regard.
- 8 The concept of authoritarian modernisation has a number of other analytical advantages. It highlights the reliance on singular, technical policy interventions aimed, primarily, at achieving economic growth. These are not accompanied by any significant political modernization, which is usually understood as the introduction of political freedoms.¹⁰ In contrast to the liberal modernisation model, which assumes that liberalism and reforms proceed simultaneously, authoritarian modernisation problematizes the relationship between the two. It draws our attention to a paradox where the process of designing and implementing reforms that may cater to the broad swathes of society does not need to be accompanied by legitimacy and accountability on part of the reformers, given that - under authoritarianism - both are either scarce or nonexistent. The concept's analytical purchase is broader still. It helps one explore whether lasting and meaningful reforms are possible without political liberalisation. In this article we focus primarily on this latter aspect.
- 9 The literature offers a few ways of assessing the scale and durability of modernisation reforms. The assessment has been undertaken with the help of concepts such as: islands of excellence,¹¹ pockets of efficiency¹² and pockets of effectiveness.¹³ In this article, we draw on the pockets of effectiveness concept due to its focus on public sector reform.¹⁴ The term was coined with the view to distort the weak state narrative, often applied to developing countries. While the concept indicates that, within a generally poorly performing public sector, there may exist organisations that deliver public goods effectively,¹⁵ it does not take this relatively positive outcome for granted. According to the proponents of the concept, it remains a valid and necessary research question whether small-scale public-sector reforms can trigger broad sector-wide improvements.¹⁶

Attempts to Modernise Russian Higher Education

- 10 Irrespective of the elevated status the ideal of science enjoys in Russia, the HE and research sectors have been experiencing significant and prolonged challenges. Admittedly, while contemporary Russian government's HE policy was criticised for its conflicting aims,¹⁷ the Russian HE sector has been undergoing continuous reform, the impetus for which came from both state and non-state actors.
- 11 Drawing on our conceptual framework, in this section we identify the following elements of authoritarian modernisation in Russian HE reform. Firstly, modernisation has been understood by the Russian authorities primarily as synonymous with

introducing greater internationalisation and managerialism. Second, in parallel to and irrespective of modernisation, over the years a number of authoritarian-type institutions and practices have been established in Russian HE, in particular: excessive centralisation of the decision-making process, the principle of control and oversight (rather than trust) and a legal system that stimulates self-censorship.¹⁸ In the remainder of this section we describe each of those in some detail.

Modernisation understood as Internationalisation and Managerialism

- 12 During the 1990s, a steep decline in funding was identified as the fundamental challenge to HE and research. The negative trend in research funding has not been entirely reversed over the following two decades,¹⁹ while many of the HE sector reforms undertaken in the 1990s and the early-2000s closely followed neoliberal policy prescriptions.²⁰ Reforms advancing HE marketisation led, on many occasions, to a growing disregard for professional values,²¹ while greater emphasis on performance indicators stimulated opportunistic behaviour among academic staff.²²
- 13 Ignoring these wider challenges, the government undertook to increase the internationalisation of several Russian universities and to elevate their standing in global university rankings. Two projects in particular were to assist in meeting this goal: the National Project ‘Science’ (*Natsionalnyi Proyekt Nauka*) and the Russian Academic Excellence Project, commonly known as *5-100*.
- 14 *5-100* was launched following the 2012 presidential decree. It formed part of a larger package of reform measures called *mayskiye ukazy*.²³ Two among the programme’s overall aims concerned internationalisation, and were phrased in the following way: ‘Internationalization in all spheres, development of infrastructure to recruit the best scientists, faculty, managers and students [...] bringing the university educational programs in line with the best international examples’.²⁴ Over the following years, selected Russian universities received substantial financial help and, by the year 2020, at least five of those universities were supposed to reach top positions in internationally recognized rankings.²⁵ This specific goal has not been achieved.²⁶
- 15 The National Project ‘Science’ (*Natsionalnyi Proyekt Nauka*), envisaged for the years 2018–24, is another government-sponsored initiative which includes internationalisation among its aims. Its three objectives are to: i) secure Russia’s place among top five states leading in science and technology; ii) make Russia an attractive workplace for leading Russian and foreign scholars, including promising young researchers; and iii) increase research funding.²⁷
- 16 Simultaneously with rolling out these highly selective support programmes, the Russian government started ascribing new roles to academia. Universities started to be perceived as prestige boosters on the international stage.²⁸ For individual universities, the internationalisation drive, which has plentiful potential benefits associated with knowledge co-creation and sharing, morphed into a necessary task and a performance indicator. A skewed motivation structure drove university leadership to seek managers who could “do internationalisation” for them.²⁹
- 17 Already in the early 2010s Russian scholars identified managerialism as an important challenge to both academic freedom and university autonomy,³⁰ while the Soviet legacy

has been seen as exacerbating the problems typically associated with managerialism.³¹ Russia imported and adapted a number of practices, which, taken together, created the Russian version of managerialism in HE and research comprising, in particular: the model of entrepreneurial university, performance-based management, commercialization of scientific results and optimization of teaching staff.³² Contemporary analyses of Russian HE point to several detrimental consequences of managerialism. One of the most prominent repercussions is that the introduction of managerial practices is seen as having degraded the role and status of the faculty and individual academics in the university structure.³³

Centralisation, Control and Oversight

- 18 The higher education and research sectors are highly centralized especially with respect to their funding structure, with the state budget as the major source of funds. The Universities have never been granted a degree of financial independence that would allow them to take strategic decisions regarding their development.³⁴ HE is also under tight central control in the area of quality assurance and the structure of the degree programs. Currently, two main institutions share responsibility for the HE sector: the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (MSHE) and the Federal Service of Supervision in Education and Science (Rosobrnadzor). Centralization, while a characteristic feature since at least the times of the Soviet Union, has been on the increase in contemporary Russia, especially in comparison to Russia of the 1990s and the early 2000s. The centralisation process included the concentration of research funding in large institutions and the introduction of governmental oversight over rector appointments. A recent in-house analysis of the obstacles to scientific development in Russia concludes that research management does not prioritize creating new scientific knowledge that would be recognized by the international academic community.³⁵ This particular framing of the challenges, however, suggests that the failure lies with the amorphous body of research management, rather than the government and its policies in the area of not just higher education but also civil liberties. The latter, as this section shows, has fundamental importance.
- 19 The principle of academic freedom is clearly encapsulated in the Russian Constitution. Article 44 states that “everyone shall be guaranteed freedom of literary, artistic, scientific, intellectual and other types of creative activity and tuition”.³⁶ Academic freedom is explicitly mentioned in the legal law “On education” (Chapter 47) and the definition is commendably comprehensive. Academic freedom, according to this law, encompasses: the “freedom of teaching, expression of one’s opinion, freedom from interference in professional activities; freedom of choice and use of pedagogically justified forms, means, methods of teaching and upbringing”, as well as the “right to carry out scientific, scientific-technical, creative, research activities, to participate in experimental and international activities, developments and in the introduction of innovations”, and “the right to participate in the management of an educational organization, including in collegial management bodies, in accordance with the procedure established by the charter of this organization”.³⁷ Especially interesting is the right “to participate in the discussion of issues related to the activities of an educational organization, including through management bodies and public organizations”.

- 20 However, the right to participate in international activities has recently been considerably undermined by the adoption of the amendments to the Law on Education. The amendments were popularized by the media under the name 'Law on educational activities' (*Zakon o prosvetitel'skoi deyatel'nosti*).³⁸ These amendments are primarily the result of the work of two commissions set up in the State Duma and the Federation Council. As the State Duma explains on its website, the aim of the amendments is to 'protect Russian citizens, primarily schoolchildren and students, from anti-Russian propaganda presented under the guise of educational activities'.³⁹
- 21 These changes reinforce the authoritarian-conservative turn in domestic politics that characterized Vladimir Putin's third presidential term (2012-18), which restrained the pursuit of research and teaching. A number of changes to legislation with no apparent links to academia put increasing limitations on the contours of the public debate in Russia and indirectly restricted academic freedom.
- 22 There also exists a host of laws which indirectly undermine academic freedom. On the surface, they do not seem to concern the realm of higher education and research but in practice they can be harmful. A growing number of regulations restrict the freedom of speech and information. Their restrictive character is exacerbated by the vagueness of the legal formulations these laws use. As a result, they can be interpreted broadly and can become a tool of confronting and/or silencing scholars. One example is the so-called "foreign agent" law. This legal provision requires non-profit organizations that receive foreign donations and engage in vaguely defined political activity to register and declare themselves as foreign agents. Recent amendments to existing laws broadened the "foreign agent" category. As a result, it can now be extended to individuals. Any Russian citizen can be recognised as a foreign agent if they have a foreign source of income and cooperate with "foreign agent" media, including social media platforms. This means that the label can potentially be applied to anyone, including scholars.⁴⁰
- 23 Public speaking on the part of scholars and students' political activity have been a contentious issue at least since the 2019 protests against persecution of the students and faculty members for their opposition activity. Yegor Zhukov was an undergraduate student at the Higher School of Economics, HSE, when he got arrested following an unsanctioned opposition rally in summer 2019. Zhukov was subsequently beaten just hours after he had posted a video on YouTube explaining how he first got enrolled and then, after less than two hours, eliminated from a list of students admitted to a Master's degree at the Higher School of Economics.⁴¹ Another example of how state authorities attempt to increase control over the universities was the District Attorney Office's request for information about students and staff supposed oppositional activities, participation in protests, and involvement in "undesirable organizations", in a letter to the Russian Academy of National Economy and Public Administration under the President of the Russian Federation.⁴²
- 24 Having discussed elements of authoritarian modernisation in the reforms that have been affecting the HE sector, we now move on to the second element of our analytical framework, namely the concept of pockets of effectiveness. Analysing our four cases, we are interested to see whether the four universities effectively deliver the public good of higher education and research and whether their localised efforts have any bearing on the public sector reform as a whole.

Case study 1: The Smolny College of Liberal Arts and Science

- 25 Our first case study focuses on an attempt to introduce internationalisation. For some time, this attempt could be assessed as highly successful, if on a rather small scale (vide our ‘island of success’ term). However, with time, and due to the consolidation of non-democratic regime and the increasing crackdown on dissent, this island of success proved to be relatively short-lived and ultimately futile in terms of protecting academic freedom.
- 26 The Smolny College of Liberal Arts and Science (also known as the Smolny Institute or simply Smolny) was established in 1997 as a result of an agreement between St. Petersburg State University (SPbGU) and Bard College, New York. The main goal was to create a college of liberal arts and science, the first institution of this kind in the history of Russian higher education, and to enhance simultaneously international cooperation in the HE sector between Russia and the US. The other key objective was to develop and disseminate the Russian version of liberal education (*artes liberales*) in Russia.⁴³
- 27 The College awarded dual diplomas for Russian students and participated in the internationalization of Russian HE. Leon Botstein, back then Bard College President and now the Chancellor of the Open Society University network, actively supported this collaboration. The founding fathers of this college included Prof. Nikolay Kopusov and Dr. Valery Monakhov. Alexei Kudrin, the then Minister of Finance of the Russian Federation, was actively involved in the development of Smolny College. At the start, Kudrin was a member of the Advisory Board, and since 2011 he was Dean of the newly established Department of Liberal Arts and Science.⁴⁴ Alexei Kudrin’s support made this project financially viable: half of St. Petersburg State University’s endowment formed part of the Smolny endowment⁴⁵. These funds served partly to increase the salary of Smolny academic staff.
- 28 Since 2011, about 2,000 Russian students obtained double diplomas from St. Petersburg State University and Bard College. Alexei Kudrin was awarded a Bard College honorary doctorate. The Smolny Institute achieved recognition as one of the most prestigious departments within SPbGU, with substantial student application rates and a significant position amongst the humanities and social science departments in Russia. Lecturers received additional funds. About one third of the Smolny budget, according to Susan Gillespie, the then Vice-rector of Bard College, was provided by the US partner.⁴⁶ Smolny’s international cooperation was additionally strengthened through a series of joint courses with Bard College. At the same time, it was popular among American students to study Russian abroad.⁴⁷ The project was even considered as a possible stopping point during President Obama’s visit to St. Petersburg for the G-20 meeting in 2013.
- 29 The liberal arts model has since been taken up by some of the leading Russian universities. Liberal arts colleges have been created at the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences (Shaninka), the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA) and Tyumen State University. In addition, Northern Federal University, Astrakhan State University and Perm State National Research University include some elements of *artes liberales* in their curriculum.⁴⁸

- 30 The establishment at Smolny of the Andrew Gagarin Center for Human Rights generated numerous tensions between the SPbGU authorities and the Smolny Institute. Once such “incendiary” incident took place in 2010, when Viktor Shenderovich, a famous Russian journalist and opposition activist, delivered a speech to Smolny students. Following the creation of the Commission against the Falsification of Russian History,⁴⁹ the then-Smolny Dean, Nikolay Koposov, and Smolny lecturer in human rights Dmitry Dubrovsky, organized a protest against state attempts to constrain the freedom of historical research in Russia.⁵⁰ This displeased the SPbGU management, which also expressed disappointment at Dubrovskiy’s comment for *The New York Times* about possible restrictions of academic freedom for the sake of export control.⁵¹ In the aftermath, the SPbGU proposed to sign ‘amendments’ to employment contracts, which had the effect of preventing faculty members from making public comments without a direct permission of the university.
- 31 As a result of such tensions, the founder of Smolny, Nikolay Koposov was firstly removed from his position as Dean, and subsequently also expelled from his professorial position.⁵² One of this article’s authors (Dmitry Dubrovskiy) ultimately lost his position of a lecturer in human rights, following several official reprimands from Smolny governing body for his human rights work.⁵³ As a scholar in exile, he was supported by Scholars at Risk and taught human rights at Columbia University for two years.⁵⁴ Prof. Ivan Kurilla, a renowned historian, had his contract with Smolny cancelled several months after he had signed it. Dr. Karine Clément, a research fellow and former lecturer at Smolny, was first pushed out of the country, and finally banned from entering Russia due to allegedly posing a threat to Russian security.⁵⁵
- 32 As a result of the pressures, Smolny faculty attempted to effectuate a separation from SPbGU. Promises were made that a new Smolny University of Liberal Arts and Science would open. However, Smolny’s endowment and the building it was located in - the Bobrinsky Palace - turned out to be the bone of contention. SPbGU’s senior management insisted on keeping both the endowment and the building, despite the fact that Smolny invested in its renovation.
- 33 In March 2021, the State Duma, the Russian parliament, adopted amendments to the Russian Federal Law on Education, which increased the state’s control over educational activities under the pretext of preventing foreign interference.⁵⁶ The justification declared that the amendments were necessary to prevent a “broad spectrum of propaganda activities, including those supported from abroad and directed at discrediting Russia’s public policy, revising its history, and undermining the constitutional order”.⁵⁷ A donation of 500 million USD from the Soros Foundation⁵⁸ to Bard College was used as a pretext to wage a campaign against Smolny and Bard College.⁵⁹ The Russian General Prosecutor Office declared Bard College an ‘undesirable organization’, which means that those cooperating with Bard College are at risk of persecution and can be fined or face criminal charges.⁶⁰ As a consequence, the cooperation between Bard College and the Smolny Department of Liberal Arts and Science was ceased. The Bard College President, Leon Botstein, termed it ‘a terrible blow against cultural and human exchange between our two peoples’.⁶¹
- 34 The last development of this case is quite remarkable - the only representative of Bard College in Smolny - lecturer Michael Freese - was detained and later deported from the country with a five-year ban on entering Russia.⁶²

- 35 As this case demonstrates, not every kind of internationalisation is desirable. A political imperative and SPbGU's diminished autonomy contributed to tarnishing the long-lasting cooperation, in spite of its excellent results. At the same time, anti-Americanism, which became the government's official stance, contributed significantly to undermining the project. Smolny could now be labelled unpatriotic or even "anti-Russian". In addition, the project's dependence on Alexei Kudrin's support made it liable to perturbations within the governing elite and ultimately undermined its sustainability.

Case study 2: The Tyumen School of Advanced Studies and the Pitfalls of Managerialism

- 36 Our next case illustrates the negative consequences of managerialism, in particular its contribution to sparking conflict between the faculty and university governing bodies. The development of liberal education in Russia, pioneered by the Smolny Institute in collaboration with Bard College, stimulated the establishment, in 2017, of the Tyumen School of Advanced Studies, TSAS, within the Tyumen State University and as part of the 5-100 programme.⁶³ The aim was to create an innovative research institute within a fairly traditional Russian university. Valery Falkov, the then-Tyumen State University rector, and as of January 2020, Minister of Science and Higher Education, actively supported this endeavour. Ex-Skolkovo Professor and Berkeley alumni, Andrey Shcherbenok, became the director of TSAS and was responsible for the project's development strategy.⁶⁴
- 37 At first, TSAS drew the attention of many young researchers. A substantial number of them came from outside of Russia, lured by the relatively high salary, the promised freedom to create interdisciplinary research groups, independence and self-governance. Andrey Shcherbenok described the project as possessing a "high degree of autonomy".⁶⁵
- 38 However, not all the promises materialised. The teaching load started to grow and the Academic Council, a body guaranteeing faculty participation in decision making, was dissolved in 2018. Natalia Savelieva, one of the academic employees, described her experience in an auto-ethnographic text in the following way: "Faculty members were immediately overwhelmed with an enormous number of time-consuming tasks ... The idea of '256 hours maximum per year for teaching and the rest of time for research' immediately transformed into '256 hours per year of teaching, plus administrative work, plus membership in commissions, plus designing new electives, master programs and majors, plus redesigning of what we've already designed'".⁶⁶
- 39 In Savelieva's view, the management style was chaotic. TSAS faculty members were obliged to follow both interior instructions of TSAS and official regulations of Tyumen State University, despite their incongruence. To justify these practises and regulations, TSAS Director tended to refer to his experience at the Skolkovo School of Management.⁶⁷
- 40 Several international research fellows, currently affiliated with TSAS, responded to an anonymised questionnaire about academic freedom and faculty rights at TSAS. Most of them admitted that an authoritarian style of governance was introduced by TSAS

managers, and that elements of censorship are implicit in the contract.⁶⁸ Indeed, research fellows had to sign the working agreement with the following points:

Refrain from mentioning the university and the department if an employee publicly reports in the media or in an interview on the Internet, refers to problems that cause serious social differences and / or do not correspond to an objective representation of the employee's professional activity in Tyumen State University ... refrain from public statements, judgments and assessments regarding the activities of the University and its administration.

- 41 In addition, the publication in non-academic sources, on social media in particular, had to be pre-moderated (i.e., censored) if the employee mentioned their affiliation with the University.
- 42 The case of Tyumen SAS illustrates how managerialism - without academic self-governance - may adversely affect an ambitious research- and internationalisation-oriented project. The abolishing of the Academic Council and pressure on faculty members created the atmosphere of anxiety and fear detrimental to the prospects of what intended to be an island of success.

Case study 3. The Higher School of Economics

- 43 The Higher School of Economics, HSE, which Vladimir Gel'man recently described as an example of authoritarian modernization, serves here to illustrate the selectiveness of reforms implemented in the early-1990s.⁶⁹ For the purpose of this article, the HSE case also shows that pockets of effectiveness cannot be considered entirely independent of the political context and are to a significant extent dependent on the continuous support of those within the ruling elite. They may also be adversely affected by changes in the elite structure.
- 44 The HSE was created in the 1990s by a group of progressive faculty members of Moscow State University in response to a serious underdevelopment of the social sciences, and in particular Economics, in Russia. The HSE was considered, following its first rector, Yaroslav Kuzminov, definition, a "favourite toy of the ruling liberals".⁷⁰ The HSE was constructed as a special project. What distinguished it was its funding that was sufficient to secure faculty salaries at the Western European level (those salaries have been in stark contrast to average academic salaries in Russia).⁷¹ In the 1990s, the HSE served as a think-tank for Russian reformers, and conducted applied research for a number of key state institutions, in particular: the Central Bank, Ministry of Economic Development, Ministry of Science. In 1999, the President of HSE Evgeniy Yasin and rector Yaroslav Kuzminov took part in the preparation of *Strategy 2010*, an official multi-year economic plan. HSE was also actively involved in elaborating *Strategy 2020*.
- 45 In 2015, RosBusinessConsulting reported not only active collaboration between the HSE and Russian authorities, but an increasing number of state-supported projects undertaken by the HSE which made the HSE the main partner of the government among Russian universities.⁷²
- 46 The distance between Russian politics and the HSE started shrinking after 2014 when the head of Presidential administration was appointed head of the university's Advisory Board. The same year, the HSE rector Kuzminov was elected to the Moscow City Duma (2014-2019) and was appointed Chair of the Moscow branch of the All-

Russian People's Front, a political coalition. Over this period of time, state subsidies for the HSE rose by 30 %.⁷³

- 47 Personal affiliation with the political mainstream and a close relationship between university authorities and the government could partly explain the success of the School, as well as its exclusive position in the system of Russian higher education. Officially under the supervision of the Prime minister, rather than the Ministry of Education⁷⁴, the HSE was relatively free from the pressures regularly exerted by the Russian bureaucracy on other higher education institutions.
- 48 Due to its active involvement in the preparation of state strategic projects, the university enjoyed both - special protection and relative autonomy. We can agree with Vladimir Gel'man that this high degree of autonomy, the effective leadership of Rector Kuzminov and the constant support "from above" guaranteed the HSE progressive and noticeable development, and made it recognizable not only in Russia, but also abroad, with a relatively high placement in the QS World University ranking.⁷⁵
- 49 For a considerable period of time, the HSE was recognized as one of the freest and most independent state educational institutions in Russia, mostly because of its special relations with the state and due to high levels of internationalisation. According to the university's website:
- "HSE aims to become a full-fledged player in the international academic community. We realize that achieving this goal is possible only when faculty and students - our primary resource - see themselves as part of the international academic world. The Office of Internationalisation strives to create a friendly environment in our university that allows internationally and locally recruited faculty, staff and students to share a common language in all senses of this expression."⁷⁶
- 50 The HSE founder and its first rector, Yaroslav Kuzminov, addressed academic freedom in his 2007 article, in which he stated that "the atmosphere of academic freedom is valuable because it allows you to create comfortable conditions for people of creative work".⁷⁷ Back in the day, the HSE was not bowing to pressure. For instance, in 2009, in a letter to Kuzminov, Deputy Chief of Moscow's Main Directorate of Internal Affairs (*Glavnoye upravleniye vnutrennikh del goroda Moskvy*), General Aleksandr Ivanov, suggested expelling students detained during their participation in anti-government rallies in 2008. The HSE rector explained that the university would not persecute students for their political activity, adding also: "Any involvement of universities in politics, be it in the interests of the authorities or against them, is unacceptable. In all historical situations, states or political groups that tried to involve schools and universities in the implementation of current political goals were doomed to a totalitarian impasse."⁷⁸ In 2011, Alexei Navalny, a renowned critic of the Kremlin, was invited to participate in an open debate with Kuzminov at the HSE.⁷⁹
- 51 Following 2014, against the backdrop of a constantly more pronounced conservative and authoritarian turn, conflicts started erupting at the HSE. Professor Gasan Guseynov's case⁸⁰ resulted in a de facto ban for students and academic staff from mentioning their affiliation with HSE in discussions on "controversial" political issues. Another controversy was related to the HSE students' political and civic activism. Their participation in opposition protests in Moscow in the summer of 2019, subsequent arrests and trials, generated waves of support from fellow students and faculty. This prompted the HSE management to promote the concept of a "university beyond politics".

- 52 Against the backdrop of growing tensions within the HSE, the expulsion of a dozen leading faculty members in 2020, officially due to curriculum changes, led many observers to interpret it as a politically motivated action. They identified the move as a revenge for active political position and criticism of the new amendments to the Russian constitution.⁸¹ Most of those expelled created the Free University, a new independent virtual higher education project.⁸² Yaroslav Kuzminov's resignation in 2021 triggered the wave of speculation as to his motives, with some media outlets suggesting his expulsion or Kuzminov's unwillingness to strike ever more difficult compromises with the state authorities.⁸³
- 53 An increase in authoritarian tendencies following the annexation of Crimea narrowed down the autonomy of a university that used to be considered a beacon of liberalism and revealed tensions inherent in the authoritarian modernization model. If academic freedom and university autonomy are fundamental to the HE sector and research, the HSE can no longer be considered a pocket of effectiveness. Indeed, as the former HSE professor Elena Pamfilova summed up: "There is such a concept as the island of integrity - in theory, even in the most corrupt regimes, you can build an island of transparency. But no one has succeeded - everyone is trying, there are experiments, methods. But in the end, the environment still begins to eat up the shores of this island".⁸⁴

Case study 4: The European University at St Petersburg

- 54 Our last case describes a pocket of effectiveness that, according to state authorities implementing authoritarian modernisation, went too far in realising the goal of internalisation and academic freedom. The case shows that the pockets of effectiveness cannot thrive on their own terms but are strictly dependent on the overall goal of authoritarian governance.
- 55 In contrast to the top-down internationalisation espoused by programmes such as 5-100, the European University at St Petersburg (EUSP) has undertaken a bottom-up internationalization effort. The EUSP drew on the international pool of researchers to build its faculty and gained international recognition as a prestigious university. Its embeddedness in international research networks, however, did not prevent the Russian government from exerting pressure on the university since the late-2000s and waging a two year-long intensively hostile campaign between 2016 and 2018. In that period, it lost its teaching licence and its accreditation. The height of the governmental pressure coincided with the official discourse praising and advocating for the internationalisation of the higher education sector.
- 56 The EUSP is a non-profit autonomous HE organization. It was created in 1994 on the basis of a decree issued by St Petersburg's then-mayor, Anatoly Sobchak. For the first time, the EUSP was closed for several weeks in 2007, officially due to failing a fire-safety inspection. Many, however, have linked the closure to a EUR 700,000 research grant EUSP received from the European Commission for an election monitoring research project.⁸⁵ The reasons behind the university's 2016 problems are unclear. The official complaint to the prosecutor's office was made by Vitaly Milonov, then-deputy to St Petersburg Legislative Assembly, from the pro-Kremlin United Russia party. Milonov

expressed dissatisfaction with the university allegedly ‘forcing’ students to write about protecting the rights of sexual minorities.

- 57 The EUSP’s problems provoked either outrage or a feeling of resignation among academics, including charges of systematic discrimination against private research universities by the Russian state.⁸⁶ The EUSP seems to have approached the goals and mission of modernising Russian education and research too literally.⁸⁷ It appears the island of effectiveness should not be too successful, lest it encounters problems. Moreover, the EUSP – which regained its teaching licence in August 2018 and in 2019 regained its accreditation – illustrates that non-state universities depend to a very large extent on state authorities.

Conclusions

- 58 In his recent work considering bad governance in Russia, Vladimir Gel’man places the term *success stories* in inverted commas to indicate that what may appear a success, needs to be thoroughly and critically analysed.⁸⁸ This article discussed the key elements of authoritarian modernization in the Russian HE sector and considered whether four cases, at the moment of their creation and initial work considered pockets of effectiveness, can still retain this status. We have shown the limitations of authoritarian modernisation, drawing attention to the fact that even narrow parameters of change have been effectuated without lasting results.
- 59 Modernisation of the HE sector in Russia has been contradictory and wasteful in terms of resources. Top-down internationalisation of Russian universities has proceeded simultaneously with attacks on institutions that had for a long time been successful in building genuine international collaborative ties. Government-driven internationalisation has also been accompanied by government-promoted anti Westernism, as well as restrictions on foreign funding and constraints to public debate. As a result, repression of academic inquiry and free speech do not just loom large on the horizon, they have become the lived reality for many scholars and students. The state and university management have accelerated their efforts to prevent scholars from participating in the public debate, reaffirming the opaque and contradictory ‘wisdom’ of a saying dating back at least to the Soviet times: *tishe edesh, dalshe budesh* (the quieter you travel, the further you get).

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ABSTRACTS

The text relies on the concept of authoritarian modernisation to explore the challenges to the higher education (HE) sector and academic freedom in Russia. We show that elements of modernisation, coupled with Russia's participation in the global process of HE internationalisation, have created pockets of effectiveness. However, these have not solved the many problems pervading Russian HE. We argue that modernisation, in the form in which it has been implemented in Russia, has, in effect, proved detrimental to the fundamental aspect of higher education and research, namely academic freedom. To support our argument, we discuss the main elements of modernisation and internationalisation in the Russian HE system and supplement our analysis with four case studies: the Smolny College of Liberal Arts and Science, the Tyumen School of Advanced Studies, the Higher School of Economics and the European University at St Petersburg. These cases allow us to show the tension between specifically understood and undertaken modernisation and academic freedom. More specifically, we highlight the tension between prestige-driven internationalisation, short-termist modernisation and the politics of fear, which all contribute to the erosion of academic freedom.

Cet article s'appuie sur le concept de modernisation autoritaire pour explorer les défis posés au secteur de l'enseignement supérieur (ES) et à la liberté académique en Russie. Nous montrons que les éléments de modernisation, associés à la participation de la Russie au processus mondial d'internationalisation de l'enseignement supérieur, ont créé des « poches d'efficacité ». Cependant, celles-ci n'ont pas résolu les nombreux problèmes de l'enseignement supérieur russe. Nous soutenons que la modernisation, sous la forme dans laquelle elle a été mise en œuvre en Russie, s'est, en fait, avérée préjudiciable à l'égard de la condition fondamentale de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche, à savoir la liberté académique. Pour étayer notre argument, nous discutons des principaux éléments de la modernisation et de l'internationalisation dans le système d'enseignement supérieur russe et complétons notre analyse par quatre études de cas : le Smolny College of Liberal Arts and Science, la Tyumen School of Advanced Studies, la Higher School of Economics et l'Université européenne de Saint-Petersbourg. Ces cas nous permettent de montrer la tension entre la modernisation et la liberté académique. Plus précisément, nous mettons en évidence la tension entre l'internationalisation axée sur le prestige, la modernisation à court terme et la politique de la peur, qui contribuent toutes à l'érosion de la liberté académique.

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