

HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM IN POST-SOVIET RUSSIA

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ABSTRACT

T. JESSE DENT, JR.: Higher Education Reform in Post-Soviet Russia
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One of the critical tasks of post-Soviet Russia is the transformation of its education system. Focusing on higher education, I analyze recent higher education reform efforts in three broad periods. I begin with the Soviet legacy bequeathed by the seven decades of GOSPLAN/Party dominance, and then discuss the perestroika reforms that ended abruptly with the breakup of the Soviet Union. Second, I discuss the reform effort during the Yeltsin years. The new environment coupled with a default policy of decentralization and educational autonomy resulted in a laissez-faire period that produced a number of challenges and negative consequences for higher education. Third, I discuss Putin's approach to higher education reform in the second decade of post-Soviet Russia. I argue that Putin pursued a directed development approach where central authorities implemented regulatory and fiscal policy with the aim of realizing Putin's vision of a tiered system of higher education institutions in Russia. Next, I present a discussion of contemporary Russians' perspectives on higher education gleaned from recent surveys. I conclude that for the near future, leaders in post-Soviet Russia will continue to utilize tools and approaches similar to their Soviet predecessors—e.g., five year plans—and Russian society will continue to acquiesce in the plan.

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I

INTRODUCTION

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the establishment of the Russian Federation as its heir, post-Soviet Russia commenced an era of sweeping political, economic, and social change. Unfortunately, the first decade of post-Soviet Russia was a period of upheaval and crises. Indeed, Russia in the 1990s is often described as a “frontier-style” society because of the chaos and ruthlessness accompanying the haphazard and painful approach to privatization and the creation of a market economy. Also, the value or goal of equity and equality appeared abandoned and individual needs and rights were neglected. Consequently, there was wide dissatisfaction with all aspects of society and increasing calls for change. Ironically, leaders in post-Soviet Russia have attempted to bring about change in much the same way as their Soviet predecessors: They too have attempted to implement programs of political and economic change as “revolution from above,” with little or no base of support for their own variety of five-year plans.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze higher education reform in post-Soviet Russia. As emphasized in World Bank studies, developing the tertiary education sector is an important task in all societies as it is a critical pillar of human development. Higher education faces unprecedented challenges in the 21st Century arising from the impact of globalization, the increasing importance of knowledge as a principal driver of

growth, and the information and communication revolution (World Bank 2002). These challenges confront and require a response from all societies, including well developed societies such as the OECD countries. Transition societies such as Russia are confronted with an additional task: They must address a number of unresolved issues in their higher education systems—i.e., devising sustainable plans for expanding higher education, reducing inequality in access and outcome, improving the quality and relevance of higher education, and devising an implementing new and flexible governance structures and management practices (World Bank 2002, 1-2). How and how well have these kinds of unresolved issues been addressed in post-Soviet Russia is the focus of this paper.

I discern three distinct periods in Russia's recent experience in higher education reform. I begin with what I call the Soviet period and discuss the Soviet legacy in higher education, and analyze the short-lived higher education reform program under perestroika during the second half of the 1980s. Second, I discuss the reform experience in the 1990s, the Yeltsin years. I call this the laissez-faire period. By default, President Yeltsin pursued a policy of decentralization and autonomy for higher education institutions, essentially reducing the role of the state, especially in the funding of higher education. This represented a radical change in the environment of higher education and, as a result, reform was unable to achieve any real traction in the 1990s. Third, I discuss reform during the Putin years in the second decade of post-Soviet Russia. I call this the period of directed development as President Putin was more willing to use state power to control the development of higher education: He

implemented policies and funding mechanisms designed to develop his vision of a tiered system of HEIs. Next, I discuss public perspectives on Russian higher education after nearly two decades of post-Soviet experience and draw some conclusions.

II THE SOVIET PERIOD

For this discussion, the Soviet period includes the entire communist era. Although there were different leaders with their various agendas and programs, certain characteristic perspectives, beliefs, and practices transcended them all to produce a distinctive Soviet legacy. This chapter has two tasks. First, I discuss the Soviet legacy, outlining the characteristic features of the Soviet education system resulting from seven decades of communist rule. The consequence of deficiencies and inefficiencies in Soviet education policy was a bulky and outmoded higher education system with a dilapidated resource base and decaying infrastructure. Second, I outline and discuss the short-lived reforms under perestroika during the Gorbachev years, analyzing the goals and themes of the reforms. I conclude that although the Soviet education system was widely perceived as irreparably flawed, certain ideals such as equity, equality, free education and employment guarantees gained some currency among the Russian people, and persist even in the post-Soviet Russia.

The Soviet Legacy

Discipline and uniformity formed the cornerstone of Soviet education philosophy. In the higher education experience Soviet style, teaching involved instructors and professors passing along prepackaged material, and learning involved students' memorizing that material. Education was an important control mechanism

with close ties to the state and party. The goal of education was to fix students' personality to fit the needs of the economy rather than addressing the needs of individuals. Consequently, Soviet education performed a dual function. On the one hand, the system was supposed to produce good Soviet workers; this function is largely responsible for the proliferation of the highly specialized technical institutes in the system. On the other hand, the education system was supposed to enhance the Party's ideologies and influence in society; this function is partly responsible for the problem of boredom and low morale, and questions about the relevance of Russian education (Jones 1994, 3-4).

Centralization was the modus operandi of the Soviet system. Management of higher education institutions (HEIs) and education programs was high centralized. All institutions were state institutions and were funded solely by the state. While higher education was free for students who gained admission to an HEI, students had no say in what program they would pursue. The curriculum for the specific specialist tracks—nearly five hundred—and the number of specialists needed in the economy each year were all centrally planned. HEIs and local and regional authorities had little latitude of decision. Consequently, the system turned out inadequate number of specialists, often poorly and inappropriately trained. This contributed to chronic regional and sectorial labor shortages in the Soviet Union.

In addition, the Soviet system created a highly complex administrative structure in higher education. There was a plethora of levels and types of institution

whose boundaries were blurred. Even today university level education is grouped with four other levels of tertiary institutions under a category called professional education:

- Vocational education (nachalnoe professionalnoe obrazovanie);
- Non-university level higher education (srednee professionalnoe obrazovanie);
- University level higher education (vyssee professionalnoe obrazovanie);
- Doctoral study programs (aspirantura and doctorantura);
- Upgrading, retraining and LLL (poslevuzovskoe professionalnoe obrazovanie).

There remain serious questions about the interface of the various levels and types of HEIs, as well as the interface between higher education, other parts of the education system, and business and industry in the economy. To further complicate the system, over two dozen agencies in the central government were responsible for supervising HEIs, and the various ministries in the central government could establish their own institutes and universities (Jones 1994, 4-5).

Unfortunately, the most glaring feature of the Soviet legacy in education was the dilapidated and decayed physical infrastructure and material base of HEIs. The vast majority of students and staff lived and worked in squalor conditions. Professors struggled to subsist on or augment meager salaries, while students had to find ways to survive on or supplement meager stipends. The higher education experience levied a heavy tax on the physical and emotional well-being of students and staff.

The Perestroika Reforms

Despite the chronic deficiencies of the system and the proclivity for labor shortages, Soviet reform efforts approximated the shuffling and reshuffling of a worn out deck of cards. As Stephen Kerr observed, reform in the USSR from the 1940s up to the Gorbachev era mostly involved tinkering with the balance between vocational and

academic tracks in Russian education. Glasnost and perestroika, however, promised the opportunity for genuine change with the Gorbachev reforms of 1986-87. Gorbachev's goal was to improve the inefficient system of training, assigning, and updating workers. The underlying theory was that improving Soviet education would better serve the economy. The two principal goals of the reforms were first, ending the regional shortages in key industries, and second, accelerating the introduction of technology into the workplace through education-industry collaboration (Kerr 1992, 147-148). Kerr discerned three broad themes in the 1986-87 reforms: (1) forging new collaborative partnerships between science and higher education and modern industries and employers; (2) improving and updating the form, content and process of higher education; and (3) improving the organization and administration of higher education.

The first theme envisioned long-term collaboration in research and development activities through "scientific-instructional-production combines." The idea was to change the relationship among higher education, planning agencies and the industrial sector that would transform the training of specialist to ensure they acquired up-to-date and relevant skills. Government would provide some funding for the new schemes but firms and factories would provide funding as well. The collaborations were conceived as mutually beneficial to higher education and industry. Employers would have more input in the preparation of specialists, along with opportunities for incumbent employees to update their skills in continuing education and life-long learning programs developed by HEIs. HEIs would have the opportunity to

participate in research and development activities that will upgrade their knowledge of modern industrial needs. In addition, professional staff would engage in innovative activities gaining knowledge and experience with new technology and techniques what would enhance their instructional roles in the university (Kerr 1992, 147-148).

Unfortunately, the collaborations did not develop as predicted. At least three major factors militated against significant collaboration between higher education and industry. First, there were few incentives for industry to embrace the plan and to participate. Although there was much talk about changes in Soviet economy and society, most industries remained monopolies that were centrally controlled by their ministries. Well positioned decision makers at all levels tended to be conservers, safeguarding their standing and influence by supporting the status quo rather than embracing experimentation, innovation and change. Second, the reforms were based on faulty assumptions about the capabilities of Soviet HEIs. Perhaps barely five percent of HEIs had the research personnel, experience, and resource base to contribute to economic develop activities and to carry-on up-grading and continuing education programs. Indeed, most HEIs barely had the personnel and resources to carry-on their regular instructional activities. Third, attitudes about change curtailed progress. Although the old system had its problems, people understood the system and were very tentative about embracing new and unknown alternatives, and the potential threats inherent in new alternatives (Kerr 1992, 150-151).

The focus of the second theme—changing and upgrading the form, content and process of higher education—revealed some stark realities of the system. First and

foremost, there was the very poor preparation of Russian students for higher education on the input end, and the over-crowded fields of poorly prepared specialists on the output end (Kerr 1992, 152-153). Second, there were the deplorable living conditions of students. Most students had no alternative to over-crowded, dilapidated, unsanitary and rodent-infested student hostels, often located some distance from their universities in high crime areas. Student life was further frustrated by the lack of the basic goods for a minimum level and standard of living, e.g., personal hygiene products and staple food supplies. Third, work environment for students, faculty and staff was thoroughly depleted of any significant aesthetic or material stimuli to bolster teaching and learning (Kerr 1992, 154-155). Consequently, the experience was quite dismal for most in many HEIs, morale was low and the relationship between students, faculty and staff was strained.

The 1986-87 reforms were to address the issue of poor preparation of incoming students by raising and enforcing new standards for admission. While this measure would surely promote the admission of more high achievers from secondary school, there were inadvertent consequences. The raising of entrance standard promised to reduce the number of entrants from rural areas and from the families of farmers and workers (Kerr 1992, 152-153). Usually, only the well-positioned and well-to-do families in urban areas had knowledge of and access to the resources that could bolster their children's chances of winning positions in their preferred institutions.

Overall, progress in the goal of changing and improving the form, content and process of higher education was constrained by two factors, traditionalism and

scarcity. As Kerr points out in his analysis, traditionalism was pervasive in higher education. Any innovation had to overcome resistance from administrators, Komsomol, trade unions, and legal officials (Kerr 1992, 153). Further complicating matters was the potential for resistance and conflicting requirements and regulations from the plethora of central and regional agencies and officials managing HEIs. Kerr illustrates this point by highlighting how the effort to reduce and redefine the nearly 500 specialist concentrations to around 300 was impeded by staff in HEIs and the ministries who understood the old system and who perceived themselves as vested in the status quo. The scarcity of time and resources further constrained progress. The heavy teaching loads of faculty—equivalent to 9-11 courses per semester—left little time for redefining specialties and writing new curricula (Kerr 1992, 154). What is more, most professors had to pursue outside work to supplement their meager salaries (about 238 rubles per month). Most took part-time and adjunct positions in other institutions. Further, when time did permit, few HEIs had the resource base to redefine and redesign specialties. For seven decades the country was essentially disengaged from the international scientific and academic community, the global economic system and the international division of labor. The scarcity of working computers and Internet access further inhibited Soviet and later Russian re-engagement and connection with the larger world (Kerr 1992, 154-155). Indeed, this scarcity inhibited connectivity and collaboration among Russian institutions themselves.

The third theme of improving the organization and administration of higher education called for eliminating the highly complex and crisscrossing maze of bureaucratic regulation and control. Ironically, the idea was to centralize coordination and control of general policies in a single entity, effectively ending the control of several individual ministries. Progress in this effort continues to stall as multiple ministries remain the founder of multiple HEIs and are unlikely to relinquish authority over them voluntarily. A recent OECD study reveals the numbers.

Russian HEIs are supervised by 24 federal executive agencies. The largest founders of state HEIs are: the Ministry of Education and Science (337 institutions), the Ministry of Agriculture (58 institutions), the Ministry of Health and Social Development (47 institutions) and the Ministry of Culture and Mass Communication (44 institutions). Eight more ministries and agencies have at most two universities under their control. (OECD 2007, 37)

Not only has the administrative and supervisory structure remained largely unchanged, the web of officials and agencies often issued confusing and conflicting directives. The savvy officials at HEIs learned to cope with and respond to intrusive directives even when nothing was or could be done. They would respond as follows: "Measures have been taken." "The change has been made." "The change has been noted." Successful officials in the HEIs learned to play the game (Kerr 1992. 155-156).

The reforms also called for the election of rectors and improved evaluation of academic staff, administrators and institutions at all levels. Again, progress was slow. In 1988, 139 of 898 rectors had been elected. Of the approximately 400,000 staff of HEIs less than 2 percent had been evaluated. On the surface, it would appear that the HEI community would welcome more local autonomy and control. However, feelings were mixed at best. With local autonomy came the possibility of the return of the old

“Soviet bosses” phenomenon as rectors could monopolize power and abuse those new powers. Further, HEIs were apprehensive about the attending conflict that would accompany the power to resolve tough issues surrounding the allocation of internal resources, setting research and program priorities, and deciding the number and types of students served (Kerr 1992, 154-156).

In Kerr’s assessment—as well as my own assessment—the 1986-87 higher education reforms, like previous Soviet era reforms, changed little. Indeed, according to Kerr, Gorbachev’s reforms were characteristically Soviet, i.e., the reforms were a centrally developed plan; the plan was conservative in form and substance; popular inspection was illusionary; the design called for small adjustments to established structures and practices (Kerr 1992, 160). In the end, however, rapid changes in other parts of the society abruptly ended the Soviet Union and radically alter the environment of higher education. But while the USSR came to an end, the Soviet legacy would continue to manifest itself in the first decades of the post-Soviet Russia.

III

THE LAISSEZ FAIRE PERIOD: HIGHER EDUCATION DURING THE YELTSIN YEARS

The first period of post-Soviet reforms corresponds with the Yeltsin years, 1992-1999. The impending social and economic transformations of Russian society produced upheaval crises that presented both opportunities and challenges for higher education. In this chapter, I begin with a discussion of the new environment of higher education due the transformation of Russian society. Next, I discuss higher education reform in the 1990s, focusing on the shifting philosophy and goals of Russian higher education, the changing reform agenda, and difficulties in conceiving and implementing change. I end the chapter with some observations and conclusions about continuity and change in the 1990s.

The New Environment of Higher Education

As everyone observes, the most radical change of the environment of higher education was the breakup of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991. The establishment of the Russian Federation led by Yeltsin promised a more decentralized system and government based on democratic principles, and a market economy. In many ways, the 1990s were the best of times and the worst of times.

It was the best of times because of the impending transformation and the promise of new opportunities and a better life. The new Russian society would have a new base of support consisting of a new class of property owners, business people,

and large private fortunes in a liberal capitalist system. To achieve this, Yeltsin initiated a program to eliminate state-owned industries, to privatize the entire economic infrastructure, and to privatize most real estate including housing. Russia would also be reintegrated into the global economic system. Not only was it believed that this program would be implemented successfully, it would be generously financed by credits and loans from Western banks, governments, and international financial institutions, especially the International Monetary Fund (Medvedev 2000, 4-5).

It was the worst of times because the transformation created upheaval and cause great human misery. Relying heavily on advice and input from a few Western advisers, Yeltsin's shock therapy produced dire consequences for the vast majority of the Russian population. Thousands of Russians depositors were robbed of their savings by unscrupulous commercial banking practices and pyramid schemes. Those accounts—averaging around 1,600 rubles belonging to mostly older Russians—were an important source future private investment in Russia. Savings not lost in the banking system were devoured by high prices. The presidential decree of January 2, 1992 on price liberalization inflicted great misery (Medvedev, 28-30). While the end of shortages in consumer goods can be boasted early on in post-Soviet Russia, few people could manage the high and rising prices of goods and services. Likewise, privatization was not the panacea it was expected to be. While the transfer of apartments and dachas to their dwellers made many Russians happy homeowner owners for the first time, whispers and rumors about citizens being murdered and swindled out of their property by neighbors and friends abound. What is more, Russia won the reputation of

presiding over the biggest transfer of—or theft of—state property in world history (Medvedev, 87). Critics observe that Yeltsin’s presidential decrees and Anatoly Chubais’s tenure at the State Committee for the Management of State Property resulted in the transfer of valuable property and industries at bargain basement prices to a small group of tax-evading interests who became part of the infamous oligarchs.

Comparing post-Soviet Russia’s reform efforts with those of past Soviet governments, Roy Medvedev points to the use of five-year plans as the paradigm approach to development in the communist era since 1928. He argues that the most successful five-year plan was the eight plan from 1966-1970 (Khrushchev years), and the least successful was the twelfth, 1986-1990 (Gorbachev years). Conceptualizing the first years of post-Soviet Russia as a thirteenth five-year plan, Medvedev asserts

But when it came to the ‘thirteenth five-year plan, that is, the 1991-1995 period, to call it merely ‘unsuccessful’ would be a mockery. Appraising the results of those years, the authors of sober economic studies, not given to hyperbole, used words like ‘crash’ or ‘catastrophe.’ (Medvedev 2000, 138-139)

It was unfortunate, then, that social and economic upheaval and crisis formed the backdrop for higher education reform in the first decade of post-Soviet Russia.

Higher Education Reform in the 1990s

The key elements of a new conception of Russian higher education include increased institutional autonomy, de-politicized curricula, emphasis on democratic principles in university life and governance, new emphasis on the humanities, and the creation of a humanistic environment for teaching and learning. Harvey Blazer points out that during the early years of post-Soviet Russia reformers emphasized the

humanistic and personality focus of higher education reform. In defense of their position they cite several negative consequences that might prevail if Russian higher education did not change. First, democratic development might be impeded due to inadequate legal, economic, and political education. Second, the old system of training would render graduates defenseless in a market economic system and trigger a serious crisis among young people. Third, the old system would continue to weaken Russia's ability to compete in the global economy. Fourth, Russians might lose connection to their rich humanitarian culture if the old system were not reformed. (Blazer 1994, 31)

Recognition of these and other consequences should have provided a strong impetus for reform.

The major instruments utilized to realize this new conception of higher education include presidential decrees, the 1992 draft law on education, and the 1996 Law on Higher Education and Postgraduate Education.

There were two groups of provisions in the 1996 Law. The first group focused on the principles that should guide state policy in higher education. Chief among these were the sovereign right of citizens to make decisions about their own needs and goals in higher and professional education, and the guarantee of higher education free of charge on a competitive basis. The law also charge government with the task of integrating Russian higher education into the world higher education system while preserving and developing Russian achievements and traditions. Further, government policy should guarantee transparency throughout the system, provide state assurances

regarding the financing of HEIs, and promote and ensure wider access to higher education (OECD 1999, 10-11).

The second group of provisions focused on the actual changes desired in the higher education system—i.e., in the management and governance of the system, in the relationship between higher education and society, and in the HEIs themselves. To improve the overall system, they proposed to define the structure of the system and clarify the levels and time periods of study, and establish national standards. For the HEIs, they wanted to better define the titles of HEIs and strengthen institutional autonomy. To improve the management and governance of higher education they proposed to strengthen the legal basis for the management of HEIs and elaborate the legal basis for quality control, financing, and ownership of property. To strengthen the relationship between higher education and society, they desired to clarify the roles interrelationship between federal, regional, and local authorities, HEIs, the economy, and citizens of the Russian Federation. I would argue that such long lists of principles and plans included in reform legislation and decrees are just platitudes that seldom lead to significant change, unfortunately.

However, Blazer asserts that several initiatives during the early years of 1990s stand out as a real departure from Soviet practices. One example was the plan for education administration. Reformers proposed a decentralized administration with authority vested in local, regional and republic bodies. Decision making and regulation would be decentralized and UNESCO international standards for reporting and evaluating universities would be introduced (Blazer 1994, 32). Another example was

the proposal to reorganize Russian higher education system to consist of four levels— level one, incomplete higher education, 2 years study/training; level 2, basic higher education, 2 years beyond level 1; level 3, complete or specialized higher education, no less than 2 years beyond level 2; and level 4, graduate study leading to degree of kandidat, three years beyond complete or specialized higher education. The new multilevel system was enacted in 1992 as a voluntary system that would exist alongside the old system. HEIs were given the discretion to decide for themselves whether to adopt the new system in whole or in part (Blazer, 33-34). I think Balzer appropriately describes the introduction of this voluntary system as an “invitation to chaos” in Russian higher education.

Theodore P. Gerber also points to several key changes in the 1990s that he considers important. One change was the relaxation or end of government restrictions on new enrollments in each institution or specialization. Another was the rapid rise of newly permitted private institutions of higher education. Also, substantial cuts in state funding of higher education meant much smaller budgets, forcing HEIs to develop other means of funding. Consequently, state institutions began charging tuition and fees, signaling a substantial rise in the cost of education for Russians. Further, there was some relaxation of controls over admission procedures. These final two changes raise concern for Gerber. He asserts that “the decentralization of admissions procedures and the increased cost of postsecondary schooling could increase origins-based inequalities in access if students from advantaged origins can more readily

adapt to the changing admissions criteria at the local level and afford the increased costs,” compared to students from disadvantaged origins (Gerber 2007, 299-300).

I would add that decentralization and relaxation of controls provided opportunities for other negative consequences, as well. In the 1990s, the unrestrained growth of institutions claiming higher education status compounded the problems of an already problematic higher education system. In 1992, commercial universities were legalized and shortly after that, state HEIs were allowed to admit commercial student, i.e., fee-paying students. As officials at state universities observed the commercial institutions making money, they embarked on strategies to increase the number of fee-paying students at their own institutions. Consequently, the system was overrun with around 3,000 institutions, including existing HEIs and their various branches, new commercial HEIs and their branches, and new institutions of questionable capability and quality.

While the nature and result of Russian transition during the 1990s will be debated for years to come, it is quite clear that the environment of higher education had radically changed. Two examples illustrate this point. First and foremost is the changing role of the state. I would argue that with the abrupt formal end of the Gosplan/Party system of centralized regulation and control, HEIs were thrust into a kind of limbo as the new system had to be more fully articulated. What is more, the new system depended on the active participation of HEIs and their leaders to take on more responsibilities and leadership in the implementation process. Participation was slow in coming, however. Although recurrent social and economic depression and

crisis during the period inhibited participation, I would argue that the reluctance to act and take on responsibility for bringing about change was the result of the remnants of the culture of the old system. I think an OECD study states this best

. . . the Russian Federation's fundamental capacity to provide policy leadership for the nation and to uphold basic assurances regarding equity and quality across the diversity and complexity of the tertiary education system is increasingly in question. The capacity of (federal authorities) to pursue a constructive agenda is being undermined by several strong forces. These include the deepening centrifugal force of regional power, the tendency of rectors and university leaders to use their autonomy to pursue their own courses and to resist policy direction, and the federal government's weak financial leverage. As a result, the (country) is in a dangerous hiatus between outdated policies that block change, and unrealized policies that are need to guide, stimulate and facilitate change. In a time when rapid adjustment is critical to survival, the tertiary education system is drifting . . . unable to act (OECD 1999, 13-14).

The second example that illustrates the point that the environment of higher education had radically changed was the changing pattern of employment and labor demands. Jobs in production declined sharply forcing millions to search for other forms of employment. Fortunately, the service sector was growing rapidly and was poised to hire millions of workers who were demanding training and credentials in new fields, e.g., banking, business, insurance, legal services, etc. In the early years of post-Soviet Russia, HEIs had a dearth of resources and experience to cope with this change.

IV

DIRECTED DEVELOPMENT: THE PUTIN YEARS

The second period of higher education reform in post-Soviet Russia corresponds with the Putin years, 2000-2008. During this period, the state was much more vigilant and poised to regulate higher education. In addition to the prevalence of the state in every aspect of society, several other trends characterized the period that produced negative consequences for higher education. In this chapter I begin with a discussion of those trends and Russian observers' assessment of the conditions and status of higher education in the second decade of post-Soviet Russia. Next, I argue that President Putin's approach to reform is best described as directed development and discuss how he portended to utilize state policy and funding in a project to establish a tiered system of higher education in Russia. Next, I discuss Russia's participation in the Bologna Process and the issue of reintegrating Russia in the global system. I end the chapter with some observations and conclusion about the direction of Russian higher education in the coming decades.

The Status of Higher Education by 2000

As stated above, Putin's presidency marked the beginning of a period of increasing state regulation of political, economic and social life in Russia. During that time, several trends in higher education produced negative consequences that created

a very strong impetus for reform. First, the chronic shortage of financial resources in higher education promoted a form of entrepreneurship among HEIs characterized by an obsession with making money. Administrators, professors, staff, and students alike were preoccupied with making money. Consequently, many questionable enterprises and practices pervaded society and HEIs. Second, there was a sharp increase in the student demand for higher education alongside a sharp decline in the quality of education in both the state and private sector. This presented opportunities for questionable programs and institutions to appear to take advantage of those willing to pay for desired credentials. Third, there was an unfortunate decline in the status of the higher education profession in society. Decades of low pay (and sometimes no pay), heavy workloads and poor working conditions, tensions between instructors and students, along with the lack of equipment and information resources, all combined to tarnish the profession in the eyes of society. Consequently, with few young aspiring scholars and researchers, the higher education profession was aging and out-of-date. Fourth, Russian higher education was losing its polytechnic traditions. I would argue that two factors contributed to this unfortunate trend. One factor was that the chronic lack of funding in higher education had a crippling effect on the polytechnics. Lack of funds prevented the updating of technology, equipment, training, and informational resources. Indeed, the lack of working computers in HEIs and the modest allotments of time on those computers—e.g., forty-hour goal for the academic year—is an embarrassment by any standard. A second factor was the rise of the humanities, social sciences, especially economics, and business professions. Student and parent demand

was high and they were willing to pay for the credentials that would help them land good jobs in the new economy. HEIs competed for students and their funds.

What, then, were the consequences of all these trends and what should be done to reform higher education in Russia? In her 2001 article titled “What Is to Be Done with Higher Education?” Professor I. Bestuzhev-Lada, an academician in the Russian Academy of Education, lists several problems in higher education. First, there was a mismatch between training and employment. Bestuzhev-Lada points out that Russian HEIs were not producing the skill sets demanded by the modern economy and that the system produced too many degree holders who were poorly qualified. Second, there was the potential for bribery and corruption as student and parent demand for higher education, coupled with institutions’ scramble for funds made paying for admission and passing examinations a tempting option. Third, there was the proliferation of bogus institutions in response to increased demand and the relaxing of state controls. Fourth, student stipends were not adequate to support students; consequently, much of the students’ time involved providing for their subsistence, rather than concentrating on their studies. In addition, there was widespread demoralization in higher education. Faculty and staff were demoralized by low salaries, inadequate resources and facilities, and dictatorial management styles of supervisors and administrators. Students were demoralized by the litany of irrelevant courses, lectures and brutal examinations, along with the daily struggle for subsistence (Bestuzhev-Lada 2001, 28-29).

In 2009, Professors Salnikov and Burukhin , rector and vice rector of Obninsk State Technical University of Nuclear Power Engineering in the Kaluga region, describe what they perceive to be the major pressing problems in Russian higher education, echoing what have become perennial concerns in the post-Soviet Russia. They begin by observing the consequences of the uncontrolled growth of HEIs that began in the 1990s and the country's mounting demographic problems, i.e., a shrinking and aging population and an increasingly amoral and demoralized youth. One such consequence is the existence of non-viable HEIs that do not have the material-technical base required for the education process—libraries, labs, equipment instructors and instructional support staff. The proliferation of HEIs, new ones and branches of existing ones, has not been accompanied by the growth of higher education professionals—professors, instructors and research professionals. Indeed, the higher education professional community is aging and preoccupied with outside jobs and interests in their efforts to augment modest university pay and to find better work and conditions (Salnikov and Burukhin, 73). Further, Salnikov and Burukhin are concerned about the transformation of Russian higher education into mass higher education focused on making money rather than intellectual achievement. They cite as evidence the growth in the number of students attending state-run universities on a contract basis, and the substitution of formal interviews for admission examinations (Salnikov and Burukhin, 75). Still further, they point out a serious discontinuity in the Russian education system. They argue that one of the most serious problems affecting the activities of HEIs is that of preparing secondary school students to enroll in HEIs. Not

only is the population of secondary school graduates shrinking, the characteristics of that population indicate that new students are less prepared and less willing to do the work necessary for adapting to and succeeding in university level studies (Salnikov and Burukhin 2009, 83-87).

Putin's Assessment and Approach

In his keynote address at the 2002 Congress of Russian University and College Rectors, President Putin acknowledged the benefits of maintaining the best traditions and classical standards of the Russian education system (although he did not specify those traditions and standards) At the same time, he warned against sticking to some outmoded notions about education. He expressed special concern over dogmas and conservatism in education, and the prevalence of obsolete training received in Russian institutions. To illustrate his point, Putin pointed to the large number of college graduates in Russia, yet Russian companies had to invite cadres from abroad to meet their needs. Likewise, government organizations had a huge shortage of well-trained professionals. This was an indication that higher education in Russia was not keeping pace with changes in the national economy and major trends in the world economy (Itar-Tass 2002).

While a number of innovations and changes called for in Russian higher education may be attributed to Putin's government, I would argue that the important point is to understand the themes that constitute the "yardstick" Putin uses to assess the effectiveness of reforms—quality, accessibility, and relevance. All three themes were clearly addressed in Putin's 2004 state of the nation address. He acknowledged

the recent and rapid expansion of higher education in Russia and the world but decried the attendant lowering of teaching standards and quality. Regarding the issue of accessibility, Putin expressed concern that inadequate student stipends and the declining number of student hostels would render high quality education inaccessible to children from low income families in remote towns and villages. With regards to relevance, again Putin stressed the problem of the relationship between training and the economy, observing that over half the graduates of higher education institutions could not find employment in their specialties. Putin urged closer collaboration between national business interests and higher education, and the introduction of educational standards appropriate for the contemporary national economy and the global economy (Itar-Tass 2004).

In his efforts to develop Russian higher education in accordance with the principles of quality, accessibility, and relevance, Putin has introduced a number of controversial reforms. One such controversial initiative is the unified state examination (USE). The USE is a standardized exam designed to do two things—attest to the basic knowledge and skills of school leavers, and attest to the readiness of students to pursue university level studies. Officials introduced the USE on an experimental basis with the intention of fine-tuning the test in preparation for universal implementation in the future. For Putin and other government officials, the USE would make an important contribution to realizing the three values they wanted to implement in higher education—quality, access, and relevance. Yet, many educators have continually attacked the USE and worked to undermine the process. In an April 30,

2009 interview with the publication Russian Gazette's Michael Barshevsky, Minister of Education and Science Andrei Fursenko explained that the USE is really a mirror simply showing the ills of the education system. He asserts that "We always blame the mirror!" He believes that the country has to admit that, over time, teacher lost the art of teaching and pupils forgot how to learn. He suggests that instead of waging war against the USE, we all need to admit to the problem and devote energy to fixing the problem. In an interview with Kommersant on April 8, 2009, Fursenko explained how many split on the issue of the USE. He argues that many teachers and local officials oppose the USE because it estimates the efficiency of teachers and local officials and shows the rampant irresponsibility of a significant number of people in the education process. Therefore, many oppose USE because it reveals a lack of teaching and learning. On the other hand, many pupils and their families welcome the USE. The young pupils accept it because there is no risk: If they get a poor score it does not go on their certificate and they can retake it the next year. Families like it because they can save money as the USE eliminates the extra expense of paying for their children to travel and stay in another city for exams. I would add that perhaps the USE will help to level the playing field by giving greater access to higher education to a more diverse population of pupils through the country.

Another controversial initiative that generated criticism from rectors was the experiment with one of the new methods of funding for higher education, the personal state-backed education voucher. This new funding scheme was designed to achieve two purposes. First, it would provide greater access to higher education by

making funds available to a broad range of young people. Second, it would channel additional money into the system of state-run HEIs. Students would qualify for four categories of funding ranging from coverage of full cost to partial cost, depending on their scores on a standardized state test. The government gave the education ministry permission to experiment with the program for the 2003 and 2004 academic years. Critics of the plan expressed concern that the list of HEIs participating in the experiment was unclear and that the level of funding for the categories below full cost had not been determined. Many believed that the scheme would not bring in significant funding and would likely make the final situation worse. Officials at the education ministry countered critics arguing that the education voucher experiment “undermines the very foundation of preparatory courses, which bring HEIs substantial amounts of money, and it destroys the long-established practice of coaching for entrance exams . . . That’s why they are giving our idea a hostile reception.”

The over-arching goal of Putin’s initiatives is to develop a tiered system of higher education institutions in Russia. The top tier would consist of 10 to 20 leading national universities, essentially national research universities. The next tier would consist of 100 to 400 other universities offering bachelor and master’s degree programs. The next tier would consist of HEIs offering strictly bachelor level programs. Still being considered is a special category at the apex of the system for Moscow State University (MGU) and, perhaps, St. Petersburg State University (SPSU). MGU already has the distinction of being the only Russian HEI with its own separate line item in the federal budget.

In his April 8, 2009 interview with *Kommersant*, Minister Fursenko stated that he believes that about 1,000 HEIs, including their various branches is enough institutions for the system; however, the ministry had no strict administrative plans to close or reduce the more than 3,000 institutions. Rather, he argues that three mechanisms will suffice to force out non-viable entities. The first of these is tougher requirements for university status. Second, the government is encouraging and supporting university consolidation in the regions. The third mechanism results from the fluctuation in off-budget financing of higher education, i.e., paying students. As funds available for paying students shrink, there is the promise that only the higher quality, enterprising institutions will be able to attract and retain students, forcing others to go out of business.

In order to achieve that tiered system of HEIs Putin's utilized the project approach. In September of 2005 Putin announced four priority national projects— Education, Health, Affordable Housing, and Development of Agriculture. For Putin, all these areas are the most critical areas for two reasons. First, the four areas determine the quality of life and social well-being of society. Second, all four areas directly affect Russia's demographic situation and create a starting point for development of human capital.

Under the National Priority Project for education, the government supports innovative programs in HEIs on a competitive basis. The purpose of the project is to accelerate the modernization of HEIs, introduce new and sophisticated educational programs, integrate education and science, and to support new financial and

managerial mechanisms in HEIs. Institution may develop proposal for projects that will be implemented over two years and enter them in the competitions for grants ranging from 200 million to 1 billion rubles. Grants can be used to acquire laboratory equipment, to develop and acquire software and methodic data, to modernize physical infrastructure, and to raise qualifications and professional re-training of the scientific, instructional, and support personnel of HEIs.

The success of the competitive structure of the innovation in higher education program led to the adoption of that model for a National Research University (NIU) program. The aim of this program is to develop new institutional forms of organization of scientific and educational activities designed to respond to the human and scientific support requests in the high-tech sector of the Russian economy. Research universities are conceived as HEIs carrying out educational and research activities based on the principles of integration of science and education. Their most important distinguishing features include their ability to accomplish the following: generate knowledge and to ensure effective transfer of technology to the economy; carry out a wide range of basic and applied research; operate a highly efficient system for training of masters and highly qualified personnel; and, develop retraining programs and continuing education. All research universities must be an integrated scientific and educational center, or include a number of such centers as a set of structural units, and conduct research on the overall scientific direction and training for certain high-tech sectors. The main purpose of state support for national research universities is the derivation of world-class educational institutions, capable of assuming responsibility for the

preservation and development of human resources of science, high technology and professional education, development and commercialization of high technologies of the Russian Federation.

The federal government also supports the creation of new universities in Federal Districts. The first two were announced in 2007, one in the Southern Federal District and one in the Siberian Federal District. Plans for five more were announced in 2009 for the North (Arctic), Kazan (Volga), Ural, Far East, and Northwest. The purpose of this initiative is two-fold. First, they want to develop leading national universities with strong linkages to the economy and the social sphere of the district. Second, they want to be able to utilize these new federal universities in organizing and coordinating major socio-economic development programs in the territories and region.

Also, the government announced plans to create two world-class business schools—one in the St. Petersburg region and one in the Moscow region. The business school initiative is designed to address the country's serious deficit in competent managers, especially in the large and middle level firms, and to produce cadres of business leaders with the knowledge and experience to guide Russian enterprises through turbulent and uncertain global markets. The school at St. Petersburg is being developed at the elaborate palatial park Mikhailovskaya Dacha in Peterhof. Plans are to model it after Harvard, Stanford, and London, with strong linkages and exchanges with the same. The Moscow school at Skolkovo is being developed as private-state partnership. In addition to the government, Russian and foreign private investors and

companies constitute the initial partner-founders investing at least 5 million dollars each for the project. Estimates of initial private invest is \$300 million.

The project approach is consistent with Putin's apparent preference for a practical approach to problem solving. While his administration acknowledges that there are many pressing problems, they assert that there is no need to set a lot of targets for a year. Indeed, that would be undesirable. Instead, they believe it is possible to choose three or four key objectives and try to realize those, fully.

The Bologna Process

Bologna Process is an initiative of European states to establish the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), beginning in 1999. In their "Joint Declaration on Harmonization of the architecture of the European Higher Education System," popularly known as The Sorbonne Joint Declaration, they called on European governments to commit to progressive harmonization of their programs, by means of joint diplomas, pilot initiatives and dialogue among the various stakeholders. The governments of twenty nine European states answered that call when they signed the Bologna Declaration pledging to establish the EHEA and to promote the European higher education system. In the original declaration, participating governments agreed to implement six objectives. States agreed to establish easily readable and comparable degrees. This would facilitate the recognition of each other's degrees and training. Next, states agreed to adopt a system based on two main cycles—undergraduate and postgraduate, primarily bachelor and master degree programs. Closely related, states agree to organize the academic year into semesters. A European

higher education system based on two-cycles and semester would allow for increased mobility, as well as joint degrees and programs. Fourth, states agreed to establish a system of credits compatible with the European credit transfer system (ECTS). This is important for assessment and comparison of qualifications and requirements. It is especially important in promoting student mobility because the risk losing credit is a major obstacle to mobility. Fifth, states agreed to establish quality assurance mechanisms in cooperation with a European quality assurance regime. And sixth, states agreed to promote the European dimension of higher education, i.e., joint degrees, curriculum development, inter-institutional cooperation, mobility schemes, and integrated programs of study, training and research.

Russia joined the Bologna Process at the Berlin Conference in 2003, committing itself to the implementation of the Bologna process and achieving the priority intermediate objectives for realizing the EHEA by 2010. However, Russia seems to have stalled in implementing the main intermediate objective—the two cycle system in higher education. The law adopting the two cycle system was passed and signed into law in 2007. In 2009, the Ministry of Education and Science reported that only nine percent of students in HEIs were enrolled in two cycle system programs, while ninety two percent of Russian students continued to study in the traditional specialist, five-year programs. The Ministry reported good progress on the other two intermediate objectives. In 2009, Russia reported a functioning quality assurance system that had been reviewed against the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG); however, the system had not been subjected

to an external review and students have not been included in most quality assurance procedures. Russia ratified the Lisbon Convention in 2000 and created a National Information Center on Academic Recognition and Mobility (NIC/ARM) by the order of the Minister of Education in accordance with Article 10 of the Lisbon Convention. Russia's NIC/ARC has been actively cooperating with centers overseas on issues of recognition of documentation of education. It also maintains and publishes the list of accredited HEIs in Russia.

At the present time, it appears that the Bologna objectives are only marginally relevant to the current higher education agenda in Russia. Prerequisite to the Bologna goals, I would argue, is substantial progress in realizing the priorities in the current Russian agenda, i.e., modernization Russian higher education program to make it more relevant, to rehabilitate and reconstruct the material and resource base of the profession, and to redevelop the physical infrastructures of HEIs.

V

RUSSIAN PERSPECTIVES ON HIGHER EDUCATION

The Levada Center, the independent polling and sociological research organization established in 1987, conducts ongoing research on problems of education in Russia and publishes reports of their studies in the journal *Monitoring Public Opinion* and other publications. Analysts at the Center conclude that “the former, Soviet state distributive, departmental, hierarchical structures for the training of specialists, for the job placement of graduates and their perquisites and advancement, were not good enough under contemporary conditions or in the framework of a postindustrial open society (Dubin and Zorkaia 2010, 16).” They acknowledge that there was much excitement about the prospects for reform and change in the early years of post-Soviet society, but that much of the culture of the Soviet system survived. They argue that

. . . the rigid bureaucratic model of higher education of the Soviet type managed to emerge from the crisis that was due to the shrinking of state financing in the mid-1990s without any serious, systemic or long-term changes taking place . . . the corporation retained its structure and the state’s monopoly (over the kinds of activities to develop higher education) but it shifted the burden of the costs of its own maintenance onto the groups of the population for whom a higher education is a value and a goal (Dubin and Zorkaia, 17).

What do ordinary Russians think about Russian education, higher education in particular? Most recently the Levada Center studied the perceptions and assessments of Russian higher education by various social, demographic, and sociocultural groups

of Russians in a representative survey of urban population conducted in April and May of 2009. The survey was carried out on the basis of three samples. The first sample—1500 people—represent the urban adult population between the ages of fifteen and fifty nine. The second sample—350 people—represents Russia’s urban youth ages fifteen and twenty nine. And the third group—150 people—represents the highly educated defined, roughly, as those with a second higher education degree or are in the process of completing a second university degree. The respondents in the samples came from 119 cities of at least 100,000 in population. The survey was conducted on the basis of a uniform formalized questionnaire carried out using the personal interview method in the respondents’ homes.

The 2009 survey revealed that the overwhelming majority of the urban population and 89% of the youth population believe that higher education was essential for young people. The top three motives for pursuing higher education were expressed as follows: without higher education one will not be able to find a job that pays well; without higher education one will not be able to make a career; without higher education one will not be able to become a specialist in one chosen field of professional activity. Levada analysts stress the extremely high importance attached to money in the opinions and assessments higher education by most groups of Russians. The results of a 2003 survey (N=1300) contrast significantly with the 2009 results. In 2003, most young Russians were willing to accept a combination of a free and tuition-based education. At that time, sixty one percent of the young people surveyed were attending a HEI on a tuition-free basis, while thirty six percent were

paying for their education. Six years later, more young Russians were insisting on free education, with forty eight percent attending an HEI on a tuition-free basis and fifty one percent paying for their education. Also, both the 2003 and 2009 surveys reveal apparent ambivalence about higher education. If eighty seven percent of the population believes higher education is essential, fifty three percent of the respondents in 2003 and forty five percent of those in 2009 say that an education below higher education levels is sufficient for people like themselves.

According to the survey of young Russians, the vast majority of those who were enrolled in higher education or who had finished their studies at an HEI were satisfied with their chosen institution. Fifty one percent were completely satisfied, while 42 percent were satisfied with certain things and dissatisfied with others. Only four percent were completely dissatisfied with their chosen institution. The reasons for satisfaction and dissatisfaction are informative (respondents could list more than one thing). The main reasons for satisfaction cited most frequently by the respondents were the overall quality of instruction (47%), getting a good diploma leading, hopefully, to a good job (34%), the high professionalism of instructors (31%), and interesting courses and seminars (19%). Reasons for dissatisfaction centered on student perceptions of their inability to influence the process of their own learning, the array of special courses and seminars of interest to them and compulsory attendance of the required array of courses, and lack of opportunity to improve the quality of their education experience. Some also cited dissatisfaction with their small

or nonexistent stipend. In thinking about student satisfaction and dissatisfaction, however, analysts cautioned the reader about a serious discrepancy. They assert

It turns out that although they are in general highly satisfied with the prestige, equipment, and facilities of their institution, and with the knowledge that they are acquiring and the instructors who provide this knowledge, the students are rather poorly prepared to engage in practical activity after they have completed their studies; they did not have much of an opportunity to engage in professional practice, and they do not have much confidence that they can count on getting a good job. In other words, we again encounter the serious discrepancy between school and real life (Dubin and Zorkaia, 50).

Regarding the assessment of higher education, survey results indicate that the population at large as well as young Russians as a whole rate the quality of the professional training of students in Russian HEIs as primarily average. When it comes to the question of the quality of instruction, respondents give high marks to colleges and universities in the West while at the same time they make very general declarative and compulsory assessments of the overall superiority of education in Russia. The authors of the study point out, however, that although most Russians do not give high marks for quality of instructions, “the overwhelming majority of the respondents in all of the subsamples say that the quality of the teaching in the HEIs of the capital city (Moscow and perhaps St. Petersburg and other large urban centers) is higher or considerably higher than it is in the regions (Dubin and Zorkaia, 52).”

From the perspective of most respondents in the study, the present system of higher education in Russia is no match for Western educational standards. Study analysts assert that “what is most important is that the system of higher education in Russia is weaker than in the West when it comes to the training of specialists in the

professions that Russians consider to be the best ones for young people and offer the greatest promise of making good money.” Consequently, for sixty seven percent of the adult population and sixty nine percent of young Russians, “the most serious problem confronting higher education, one that needs to be solved in the next few years, is the high cost of the tuition (Dubin and Zorkaia, 54-57, 60-61).”

VI

CONCLUSIONS

After nearly twenty years of post-Soviet Russia reforms, higher education is still burdened with a plethora of problems. However, despite the difficulties attendant with the transition, in my view, Russia is making significant progress in modernizing HEIs and developing a tiered system of diverse institution. Although the model of higher education being implemented was largely conceived by the central government in a manner similar to the top-down approach to reform of the past, there appears to be increasing societal support for the plan. Although it is too early to measure the impact of priority projects, more and more HEIs are developing projects and competing for grant funds. What is more, OECD reviewers conclude that “Russian tertiary education is actively developing today, in line with international trends and the policy priorities in tertiary education aimed at enhancing equity, quality and effectiveness of tertiary education (OECD 2007, 34).

As state above, the Yeltsin years represent a *laissez faire* period when, by default, the government loosened the reins on higher education. I say by default as I would argue that leaders had no real alternative but to allow more autonomy. The state was preoccupied with the gargantuan task of transition and state coffers were practically empty. The result was a dearth of funds and the absence of a coherent

program for developing higher education. Despite this unfavorable environment, some progress was made. Perhaps the most significant example was the change in the formal legal basis of higher education. The 1992 draft law and the 1996 law on education, along with various presidential decrees provided a new framework for reorganizing and developing a higher education system with more decentralized control and greater institutional autonomy.

The Putin years introduced more central direction and control of HEI activities in the reform process. Putin interjected his vision of developing a tiered system of select HEIs with diverse missions and capabilities as the basis for modernizing higher education in Russia. Ironically, Putin adopted an implementation approach reminiscent of Soviet five-year plans. He instituted his own version of the five-plan with a series of projects and program designed to structure HEI activities in the directions of the new system. Several key program documents regulate higher education activities and constitute the framework for Putin project. The Conception for Modernization of the Russian Education system until 2010, established in 2002, formulates the priorities for education policy, of which the most important are ensuring equity, creating the conditions for the quality assurance, and improving economic management of the HEI system. On Priority Directions for Development of the Education System of Russian Federation was established in 2005. It supports activities to develop a modern system of lifelong professional education, quality assurance, access to high-quality secondary education, and improvement of the investment climate in the education sector. The National Project for “Education” plays a key role in stimulating innovations in

education. Under this Project, the content of higher education is to be modernized in accordance with national needs and global trends. Also, the status, welfare and qualifications of employees in higher education are to be improved.

Thus far, Putin's approach to higher education reform is highly structured but it has not presented itself as unreasonably rigid. I would argue that barring any national crises or wars, Russia will continue to design and implement plans with a limited number of specific objectives, and the Russian public and higher education community will continue to acquiesce in those plans.

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