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THE WEAPONIZATION OF RUSSIAN UNIVERSITIES
A Neo-Nationalism and University Brief*

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Starting this year, tens of thousands of Russian freshmen found themselves attending a new mandatory course – “Foundations of Russian Statehood.” Swiftly designed under the auspices of Putin’s administration, this ideologically charged course aims to position Russia as a unique civilization-state, bolstering Putin’s political narrative and providing justification for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Consider, for example, this excerpt from the course's instructional video: "The 'Russian world' extends beyond current Russian borders, transcending ethnicities, territories, religions, political systems, and ideological preferences." As this curriculum becomes standard in Russian universities, it contributes to the emerging trend of weaponizing Russian universities and turning them into instruments in Russia’s war of attrition with Ukraine and its broader stand-off with the West.

The following discusses this weaponization process and the impact it is having on Russian universities, faculty, students, and the academic communities they belong to. It is regrettably a story of back to the future, reminiscent of the Soviet era of repression and attempts at control and manipulation of academics.

The Driving Forces

The increasing weaponization of Russian universities is both historically rooted and motivated by immediate political imperatives. In our chapter on Russia in the recent book *Neo-Nationalism and Universities*, my colleague Igor Fedyukin and I argue that for much of its history, the Russian state has maintained a tight grip on its universities, directing their missions and controlling operations. Moments of relative independence have been few and far between. Under Putin's reign, this trend has not only persisted but intensified and universities have further lost their remnants of autonomy. They have seen a decline in academic and civil liberties, increasingly aligning with the political and ideological positions of the government.

Given this backdrop, the recent militaristic pivot of Russia's stance — especially its confrontational posture towards Ukraine and NATO — is mirrored in the transformation of all of its social institutions, including

* Selected contributors to the book *Neo-Nationalism and Universities: Populists, Autocrats, and the Future of Higher Education* (Johns Hopkins University Press, [Open Access via Project Muse](#)) were asked to provide brief updates to their cases studies.

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universities. The weaponization of higher education in Russia isn't an anomaly; it's a reflection of a broader strategy that leverages every societal pillar for political ends.

Yet, to solely attribute this shift to deep-seated historical tendencies would be an oversimplification. There are more immediate triggers at play. Universities, even under tight state control, have frequently served as arenas of relative freedom, often diverging from, if not outright criticizing, the prevailing ideology. Various surveys conducted in the first months of the war in 2022 revealed that support for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine was lowest among students and academic professionals. Specifically, fewer than half of the students and approximately 10% of those employed in the academic sector endorsed the invasion. For a regime deeply focused on consolidating its ideological narrative, such statistics stood out sharply, suggesting profound underlying discord.

Putin's administration attempted to sway universities in anticipation of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Since the mid-2010s, political pressures on Russian universities have been mounting. This encompassed attacks on university autonomy, increased precarity of academic jobs, explicit endeavors to regulate academic freedom and international collaborations. Dozens of politically outspoken faculty members were fired sending a chilling ripple through the higher education sector. Yet, from Putin's perspective, these measures aren't enough to transform universities from mere silent bystanders into weapons during the war.

Unpacking Weaponization

The weaponization of Russian universities unfolds across three broad areas. First, universities are engaging in activities that directly bolster the war effort. Second, they contribute to crafting the ideological narrative justifying the war and disseminating propaganda. Finally, by suppressing anti-war voices among faculty and students and pressuring other academics to display their loyalty, these institutions are increasingly morphing into echo chambers supportive of Putin's regime.

A marked shift from the period before the full-scale invasion is the way universities are militarizing. For example, a number of Russian universities have supported fundraising efforts to purchase drones and ammunition for the Russian military. At institutions like Irkutsk National Technical University and Voronezh State University, faculty members were reportedly required to allocate 10% of their monthly salaries to support the military. Additionally, universities have played a role in glorifying students and staff who actively participate in the war, promulgating their stories through media outlets.

As Russia increases its mobilization efforts for the invasion, it provides a range of incentives to those who join. Apart from monetary benefits and medical services, higher education is a key part of this package. Children of participants in the Ukrainian conflict are now offered preferential admission and full tuition coverage at their chosen institution.

University curriculum is also becoming more militarized. Beginning this academic year, all students will be required to take basic military training at their universities. According to the requirement of this training, students are expected to learn how to assemble and disassemble firearms and machine guns and receive training in the combat use of hand grenades. They will also be educated to evaluate "international and domestic events and facts from a patriotic perspective." Furthermore, the number of universities housing military training centers in Russia has surged to 120. These centers provide military training within universities, catering to the specific demands of the Russian army.

Moreover, universities are playing a pivotal role in aiding the military to seize control of institutions in occupied Ukrainian regions. Currently, almost two dozen Russian universities have forged "partnership

agreements” with occupied Ukrainian universities. Under these agreements, Russian universities are implementing russification programs at occupied universities, ensuring their compliance with Russian government’s regulations and political agenda. An eventual goal of these programs is the indoctrination and ideological molding of Ukrainian students and faculty living at the occupied territories.

The second pillar of weaponization of Russian universities is their growing involvement in shaping and promoting pro-war ideologies. The new mandatory course, "Foundations of Russian Statehood," introduced across all higher education institutions, aims to influence students' perspectives and justify the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. An increasing number of individuals affiliated with universities are advocating for heightened conflict against the West.

Illustratively, a recent paper by Sergey Karaganov, a professor from HSE University Moscow — an institution once recognized for its highly selective admissions and Western orientation — contends that Russia "should carry out a preemptive nuclear strike on Europe" to "break the West's will" and secure victory in the war against Ukraine. The research priorities of universities are shifting, focusing on validating the war against Ukraine and promoting further territorial acquisition. Such ideologies, in essence, serve as weaponry, perpetuating and rationalizing the ongoing war.

Finally, there has been an intensified clampdown on faculty and students opposing the war in Russia. Last year’s legislature aimed to ban anyone who has been exposed to "foreign influence" from teaching at schools and universities. The definition of foreign influence was intentionally made broad, and the designation of “foreign agent” could be given quite arbitrarily to anyone criticizing the government. Several prominent academics were removed from universities after being labeled as "foreign agents."

Another method to suppress dissenting students and faculty involves laws that criminalize public anti-war statements, accusing them of discrediting the Russian army. If a student or faculty member faces such charges, university administrations can expel them for violating the ethical code. Mikhail Belousov, an associate professor of history at Saint-Petersburg State University, serves as an example. After he posted statements against the war on social media, pro-war activists reported him to the university administration. As a result, not only was he dismissed, but a criminal case was initiated against him. Often, anti-war sentiments are twisted to portray faculty or students as breaching academic ethics, and these allegations are frequently cited as reasons for dismissal.

In addition to these repressive measures, the Russian government has sought to weaponize universities in more covert ways. Recognizing that a substantial part of the academic community might not be in full support of the war, yet unwilling to openly criticize it, the government is attempting to co-opt them. It involves drawing faculty and students into government-backed initiatives or events that propagate pro-war ideologies, thereby forcing academics to publicly demonstrate their loyalty. This strategy serves a dual purpose: it establishes a semblance of unanimous support for the war among the academic community while also implicating academics in war propaganda. Making faculty and students complicit ensures that widespread dissent or backlash at universities is even less likely.

These examples highlight the increasing weaponization of Russian universities during the war with Ukraine. The changes are driving Russian universities away from Western academic models, gradually turning them into instruments of war.

Where Will Lead?

As a response to weaponization, Russian higher education is becoming increasingly isolated, limiting its capacity for global influence. Foreign universities, governments, and foundations are cutting ties with Russian institutions to protect themselves from weaponized universities and minimize reputational risks. The joint statement endorsing the war, signed by over 300 rectors of Russian universities shortly after the full-scale invasion began, was a significant catalyst for this widespread disengagement. As a result, collaboration with Russian universities has become increasingly toxic. This dynamic is pushing the Russian higher education system into isolation, with significant implications for the future of research and international cooperation.

Part of this process is accelerating brain drain: the conflict has intensified the departure of international and Russian academics, as Russia's efforts to attract foreign scholars are undermined. Universities will face challenges in recruiting internationally and retaining talent, while also contending with budget cuts and the prioritization of military spending.

Universities in Russia are experiencing a structural transformation, marked by decreasing transparency. As they distance themselves from Western models, these institutions are reverting to Soviet-era approaches to higher education. This shift includes reintroducing elements like vice-rectors responsible for student moral development and the ideologization of curriculum. The re-Sovietization trend in Russian universities is expected to intensify during the war.