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ARTICLES

The slow-motion collapse of Russian higher education

Russia was once a frontier of higher education, attracting top teachers and students worldwide. Today, Russian universities are being rapidly militarized while their overall quality has tanked. The fall began with the Kremlin's confused policy of trying to improve university quality, worsened at the 2010s authoritarian turn, and was finally exacerbated by the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

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Photo: David Gonzalez, Forskerforum

[**Edited on March 30, 2025**: fixed "Russian budget spending on higher education" graph, added context]

STAGE I: THE FAILED OPTIMISATION, 2003–2011

For quite a long time, the overall direction of Russian higher education was oriented toward integrating into the international, primarily Western, higher education space. Most importantly, it reformed and transformed its own higher education system.

In 2003, Russia joined the pan-European Bologna Process body of agreements on testing and education standards. The transition to the European education system began. Several significant institutional changes were made in universities' financing and governance structure.

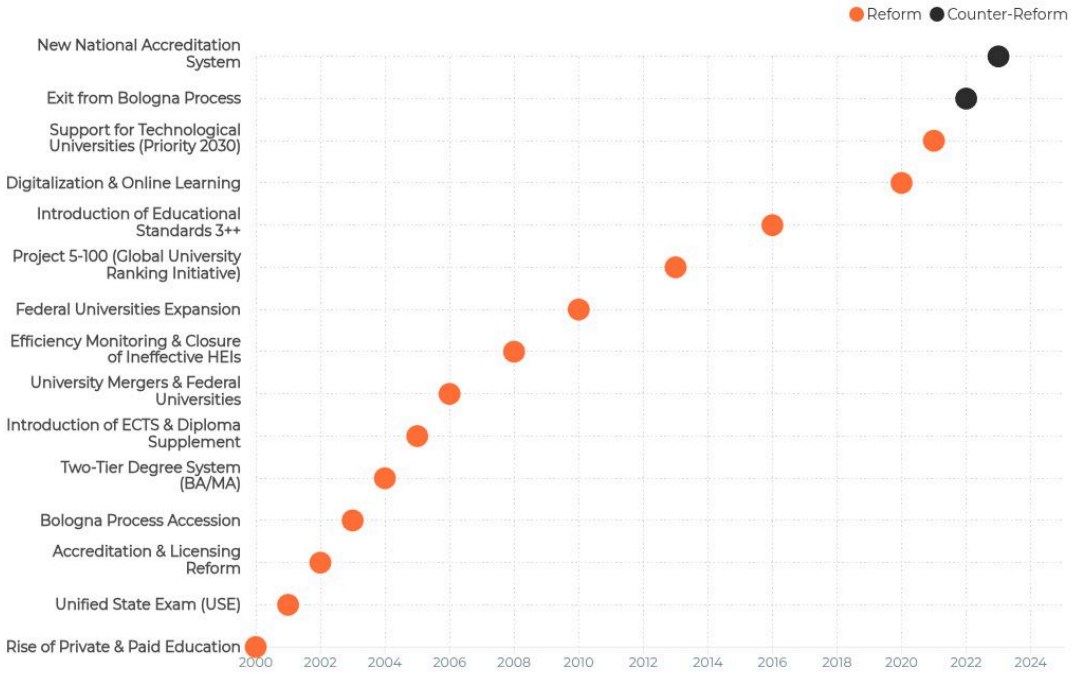
2004 the Federal Service for Supervision in Education and Science (Rosobrnadzor) was established. A unified state exam system was introduced, which greatly facilitated access to higher education for students from the country's underdeveloped regions.

The official goal of the reforms was to enhance the international recognition and quality of Russian higher education. The reforms spurred the emergence of the very category of a research university in Russia.

There was also an improvement in the rankings of universities; a noticeable increase in international publications; new laboratories; increased student and academic exchanges; intensified participation of Russian scholars in global research projects — and more.

Dual-degree programs began to emerge. In the Science at Risk report we found that in 2014, there were approximately 250 joint and double-degree programs with foreign universities in Russia, accounting for about 2% of all educational programs in the country. In the 1990s, around 50,000 foreign students were studying in Russia, but by 2022, that number had grown to 350,000.

Russian Higher Education reforms and counter-reforms



A Flourish data visualization

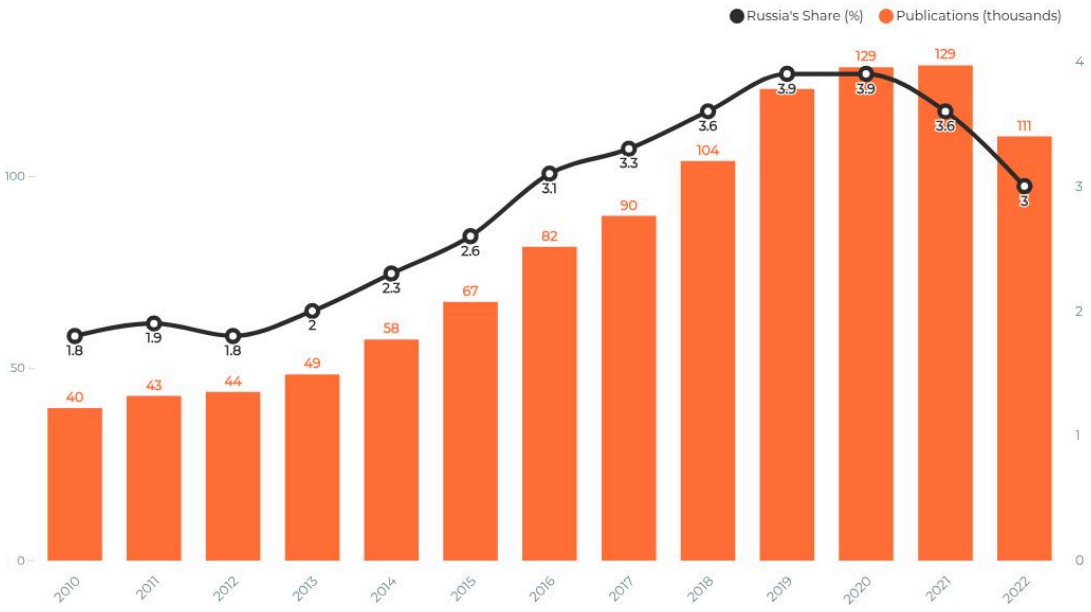
It should be noted that all of these achievements were, above all, distributed very unevenly. A significant portion of resources was allocated to so-called "efficiency pockets" — creating "flagships without a fleet," meaning highly developed universities and academic programs that had little to no impact on the broader state of higher education. The primary focus was on the Higher School of Economics (HSE), the New Economic School in Moscow, and the European University in St. Petersburg.

The Russian education system's over-centralization continued after the positive changes in the 2000s–2010s. The growing income disparities between different faculty groups, driven in part by larger payments for those publishing abroad, contributed to the rise of academic precarity. The institutional reform of universities (2006-2011) led to increased rectoral authority and a decline in internal self-governance structures.

The increase in international publications did not lead to a corresponding rise in citations. Instead, there came

a growing trend of publishing in predatory journals of low quality, which provide publication on a paid basis without serious peer review.

Publication activity of Russian scientists



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Scholars and researchers began to be actively replaced by bureaucrats — so-called “effective managers” — who implemented “performance contracts” based on requirements for regular publication activity combined with increasing teaching loads. One of the Russian scholars even called this the “feudalization of university life.”

In other words, many faculty members did not benefit from globalization and market-based measures to promote publication output.

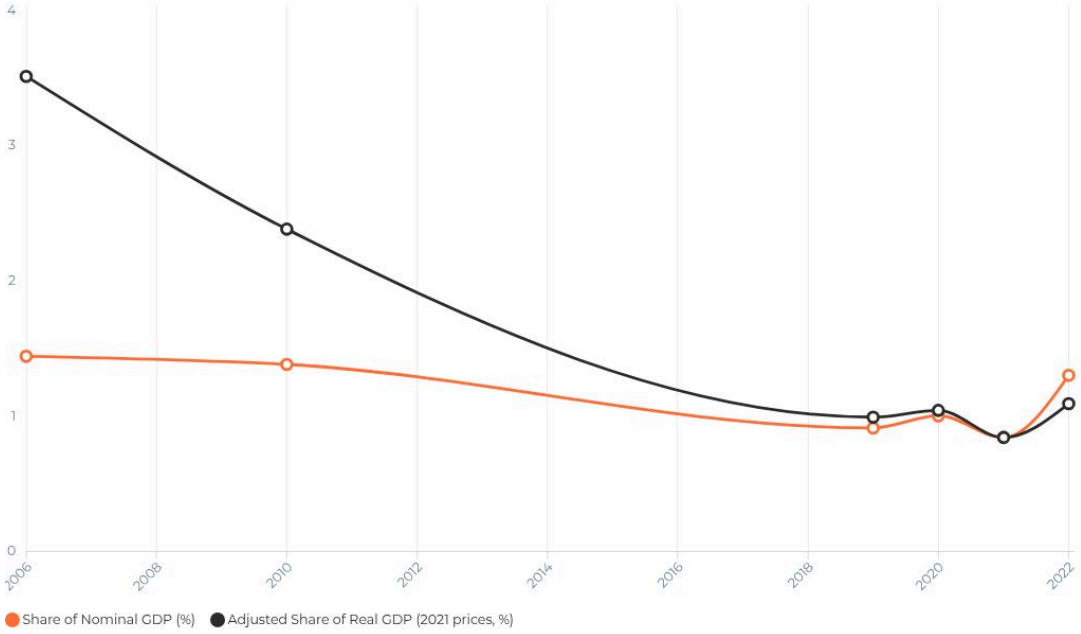
STAGE II: IDEOLOGY COMES INTO PLAY, 2011–22

The institutional transformation of Russian universities preceded the ideological restructuring. Indeed, during the initial phase of higher education reform, there was no intense

ideological pressure from the government. However, following the crackdown on the 2011–2012 protests and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the situation changed significantly.

First and foremost, the financial landscape shifted. A superficial analysis reveals a significant decline in overall higher education spending after 2014. Economic stagnation and the sharply rising costs, partly associated with Crimea annexation, led the Kremlin to reduce the number of carrots in the education sector and replace them with more sticks.

Russian budget spending on higher education



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Although the nominal share of spending on higher education appears to decline over time, the real share (adjusted for inflation) reveals significantly higher investment levels in earlier years like 2006 and 2010 compared to the more recent period.

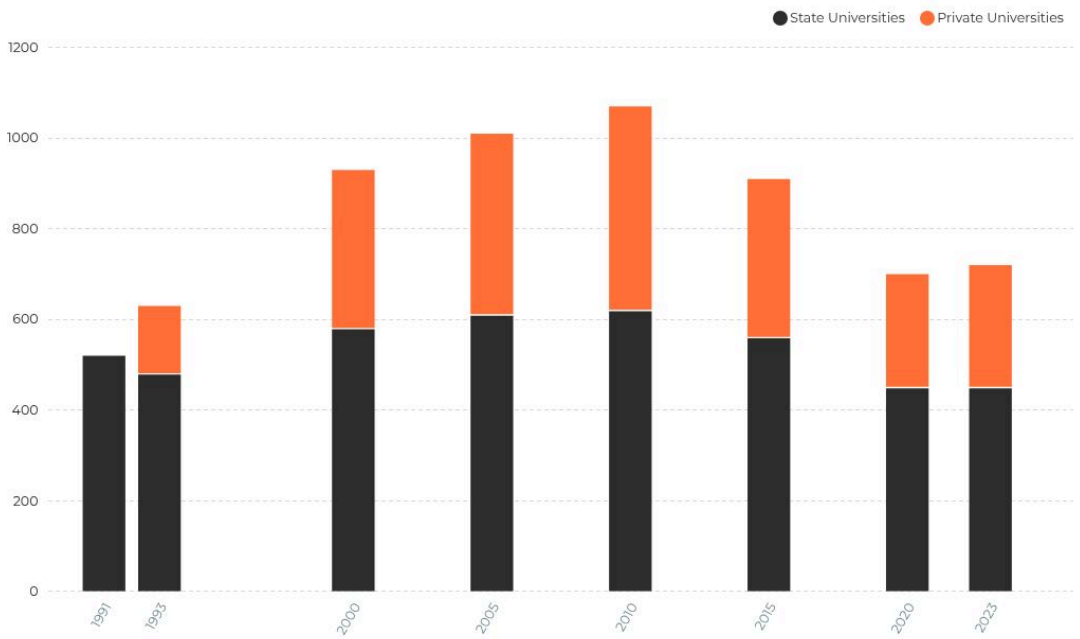
The presidential directive from Vladimir Putin to raise faculty salaries — issued without any additional funding — was implemented mainly through laying off professors. This

further increased the dependence of academic staff on university leadership and the Ministry of Education.

As a result of Rosobrnadzor's strict policies and the federal university initiative — which involved mechanically merging various institutions — the total number of universities declined, along with a further reduction in the number of faculty.

These practices, along with the degradation of self-governance structures and the precariatisation of a significant portion of faculty, led to a sharp decline in academic freedom.

Number of Russian higher education institutions



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After the 2011–2012 protests, in which many Russian university students participated, the state began increasing pressure on universities, primarily by demanding loyalty to the ruling regime.

Even then, the tools of such pressure included various practices of dismissing and expelling critically-minded professors and students, often carried out by the so-called

“Vice-Rector for Security,” typically a former or active FSB officer.

Amendments to the Federal Law “On Education” made student councils more dependent on university administrations, transforming them into mere decorations meant to legitimize administrative decisions.

Even in scientific publications, some Russian legal scholars are starting to call student councils a ‘part of the university administration‘. The overall university structures became strictly unitary, with faculties and departments losing many opportunities for autonomous decisions.

During this period, the attack shifted from university autonomy to academic freedom in teaching and research. An aggressive historical policy manifested in pressure on independent historians and the emerging fight against “LGBT propaganda.”

It affected both the position of the queer community within universities and the field of gender studies For example, Oleg Kluyenkov from Archangels State University was fired under the pressure of FSB because of his work in a queer rights organization

Many disciplines came under revision from the standpoint of “protecting traditional values.” Administrative mechanisms began to exert pressure on independent universities — for example, on the European University at St. Petersburg, which Rosobrnadzor shut down twice: in 2008 and in 2017.

Rosobrnadzor cited “violation of fire safety standards” and “a lack of a hall for physical exercise” as reasons for closures. If the real reason for the second closure is not entirely apparent (it could have been a building in the city center which the university lost), then the underlying reason for the first closure was the European Union’s decision to award the

university a grant to study electoral behavior — an action that displeased Putin.

"Foreign agent" law and rising anti-Western sentiment seriously affected the quality of teaching and research after 2015. Initially, only a few organizations were labeled as "foreign agents," but the law played a key role in fostering self-censorship and limiting cooperation, particularly with Western countries.

At the same time, the law on "undesirable organizations" placed anyone affiliated with the Soros Foundation under threat, as it became one of the first organizations banned in Russia in 2015. The Soros Foundation supported Russian science and education, especially in the 90s. Academia in Russia (as is still the case in much of Eastern Europe) owes a lot of its infrastructure to Soros.

One result of the campaign against the "Soros legacy" was the designation of Bard College (New York) as an "undesirable organization" in Russia in 2021. This effectively marked the end of the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences at St. Petersburg State University and the beginning of a broader crackdown on liberal arts in Russia, which came to be viewed as a "foreign" and alien educational model.

The rise in anti-Western sentiment also affected securitization in the natural sciences, particularly in applied fields. The number of espionage cases involving researchers from universities and scientific institutes—often individuals who had not violated any official restrictions but were nonetheless accused—continued to grow.

STAGE III: THE CATASTROPHE

Thus, the situation in Russian higher education began to deteriorate long before 2022. However, the absolute

catastrophe started with the full-scale invasion.

First, all academic exchange programs, research initiatives, and educational projects with the West were immediately frozen and closed. Many of those involved in creating and developing these projects left leading universities — they were either fired or resigned, and many left the country. Although small in number, Russian academic emigration largely consisted of leading educators and researchers, primarily in humanities and social sciences.

The number of scholars left is challenging to estimate: roughly 2,500 and 8,000 scholars from more than 130,000 researchers in Russia. Foreign students and faculty, primarily from Western countries, also began leaving Russia.

In April 2022, Russia was excluded from the Bologna Process and announced it would develop "its own, distinctive, nationally-based" educational system. The impact of the war on international publications is not yet highly noticeable, but studies show specific trends in censorship and self-censorship in the publication activity of Russian scholars.

This initiated a process of deglobalization of Russian higher education. In terms of the level of globalization of higher education, Russia has, within two years, reverted to the late 1980s while possessing a fraction of the scientific base the USSR had.

At the same time, there began an active militarization of Russian universities. In the war's first year, students and faculty were conscripted. Russian universities became part of the war machine, with military-educational centers rapidly developing and propagandistic lectures and meetings with "veterans of the special military operation" being held.

Denunciations of anti-war students and teachers flourished, and the activity of pro-war student groups intensified, engaging in active war propaganda and raising funds for the

Russian military. For example, historian Michail Belousov from Saint Petersburg State University was fired after a student reported Belousov to the authorities for an anti-war stance. .Children of Ukraine veterans or the veterans themselves are already studying and even teaching, aided by specially allocated funds from the state.

At the same time, the structure of control over universities and their faculty and students is strengthening. Coordinating Centers — one per region — have emerged "on issues of forming an active civic position among youth, preventing interethnic and interfaith conflicts, countering the ideology of terrorism, and preventing extremism."

Under this lengthy title lies an institution whose task is to search for "disloyalty" in social networks and educational activities. A specific "vertical of power" was created to control and discipline Russian universities.

A significant milestone in the ideologization of Russian higher education was the introduction of mandatory courses, two currently in place — "Fundamentals of Russian Statehood" and "History of Russia." Both courses are written from the perspective of Russian aggressive imperialism, and the time allocated to them is taken from hours meant for professional training.

These courses are often taught by outright propagandists who do not even have social science backgrounds. One of the quotations from the teaching recommendation is an illustration of the apologetic claims for all possible wars Russia could provoke on the post-Soviet territories: "*The Russian Federation is the successor state to the Soviet Union; the Soviet Union is historic Russia; fragments of the former Soviet Union that adopt an anti-Russian stance may be reassembled in the interests of the Russian Federation*."

Today, Russian higher education is undergoing a reverse transformation: from building modern global educational

projects to deglobalization, from democratic university governance to authoritarianism, and from an education free of ideology to one centered on ideological courses. Researchers collectively refer to all of this as the re-Sovietization of Russian higher education, which is entirely consistent with the aggressive weaponization of Russian universities in the era of aggressive war.