Центр Независимых Социологических Исследований

CISRUS CENTER FOR INDEPENDENT SOCIAL RESEARCH - USA

Center for Independent Social Research

# RUSSIAN UNDERSTANDINGS OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM

## Report
## on the Results of Sociological Research

St. Petersburg

October 2020

The report is based on the empirical study carried out in January-June 2020.

Project participants: Lyubov Ezhova, Dmitry Dubrovsky, Irina Olimpieva.

Report editor: Irina Olimpieva

# CONTENT

## Introduction

No systematic analysis of the current status of academic freedom in Russia has yet been conducted. Those research studies carried out by the government within the framework of the reforms initiated in the fields of science and education pay no substantive attention to the effects of these reforms on academic rights and freedoms. Although information about the growth of political and ideological pressure on scientists and teachers is increasingly available in the mass media and on social networks, there is no general understanding of academic freedoms in Russia and of their dynamics—that is, how they have changed—in recent decades.

At the same time, the significant institutional changes that have taken place in science and education in recent decades, as well as the general strengthening of government control and supervision, have resulted in a contraction of academic freedom, a situation that requires further research and broad discussion.

How have relations between science and the government changed over the past 10 or 20 years? What do scientists themselves mean by "academic freedom"? What are the current restrictions on academic freedoms and what do they mean for Russian science and education? A study conducted in January-June 2020 by the Center for Independent Sociological Research sought to answer these questions.

The subject of the research is how representatives of the Russian academic-scientific community *perceive and evaluate* academic freedoms and their current status.

*Research method*—problem-oriented interviews. We conducted a total of 24 interviews with academics, educators, and experts.

Our respondents can be roughly divided into 5 groups:

- ✓ scientists and representatives of scientific institutions who turned out to be under pressure from the government (9 interviews);
- ✓ representatives of scientific institutions/universities that receive funding mainly from the state budget (5 interviews);
- ✓ representatives of non-governmental research institutions/universities (2 interviews);
- ✓ experts of the Russian and international scientific communities in the field of science and education (3 interviews); and
- ✓ representatives of public institutions, professional communities, and public figures (5 interviews).[1]

The interviews ranged in length from 40 minutes to 1 hour 30 minutes.

The sample includes not only scientists and teachers directly affected by the violation of their rights and freedoms, but also representatives of the administrations of state and

[1] The list of representatives is provided in the Appendix.

non-state scientific and educational institutions, public figures, and experts in the field of science and education. Our interviewees represent both central and regional universities. In effect, the sample was limited to scientists working in the social sciences and humanities. It focused mainly on universities, and, to a lesser extent, research institutions. The gender composition turned out to be male-dominant.

A qualitative methodology does not entail making overall evaluations based on quantitative measurements. Our task was to describe the spectrum of existing ideas related to academic freedom, highlighting the various ways in which it is perceived, as well as our respondents' opinions about the state of academic freedom in Russia today and its dynamics in recent decades.

The COVID-19 situation compelled us to conduct most of the interviews online, but this did not affect our respondents' high degree of interest in the topic and their willingness to discuss it, for which we are deeply grateful.

# I. Academic Freedom Insight

## 1.1. Academic Freedom as a Key Value of Scientific Activity

Academic freedom is understood as the ability of a scientist to do what is interesting to him/her and what is right in his/her own eyes. Although they used slightly different phrasing, almost all of our respondents agreed that academic freedom implies:

- ✓ independence in choosing a research topic;
- ✓ the ability to discuss the results freely and publish them; and
- ✓ freedom to choose topics (content) and modes (approaches) of teaching based on one's own ideas/understanding of what is important and useful for students.

Academic freedom appears to be the key value that attracts people to science and teaching. The attraction of a scientific activity lies primarily in the possibility to work on what is interesting, as opposed to, say, business, where the main goal is to make a profit.

Academic freedom is:

- ❖ *exploring what I want and how I want without pressure and any curbs; publishing texts that I believe are worthy of being published … without thinking about how this will be perceived; freedom from restrictions imposed by the State, at least (No. 1, V, M, the director of an institute)*[2]*;*
- ❖ *the right of a scientist, a researcher … to independently plan any of his/her activities related to science, research, and teaching. … You are completely independent in planning everything and do what you want without thinking that you might be punished for it (No. 2, V, M, a teacher);*
- ❖ *the opportunity to conduct research-based studies, teach one's own courses, carry out scientific leadership in line with the interests of science and education and not with the interests of any authorities, whether the university administration, local or federal authorities (No. 3, P, M, a teacher);*
- ❖ *the freedom to choose topics for discussion with students, to discuss research topics in any public place (No. 5, V, F, a teacher);*
- ❖ *the freedom to choose a topic and the opportunity to work on it within the scientific field and according to scientific standards; to obtain results and discuss them with colleagues (No. 22, NSI, M, the rector of a university);*

[2] The number of an interview, as well as the respondent's group—"Victims" (V), state institutions (SI), non-state institutions (NSIs), public figures and activists (PF), and experts (E)—gender, and professional status are indicated in parentheses following extended quotations. Short quotations incorporated into a sentence are accompanied only by the interview number. More complete information about respondents can be found in Appendix 1, "List of Respondents."

- *the ability of a scientist to take the scientific direction that he/she wants, regardless of the discourse or the scientific school to which he/she belongs and regardless of whether he/she comes to shocking or conservative conclusions (SI, M, the director of an institute).*[3]

Academic freedom, as the ability to freely choose a topic and openly express one's own opinion, is perceived as the kind of privilege of any scientific activity that *"should distinguish an academic employee from any office employee, where, in general, nothing is probably done without the permission of the administration" (No. 12).*

## 1.2. Academic "Absence of Freedom": Perceiving Freedom through Its Restrictions

Under the value-based understanding, academic freedom is a natural attribute of any scientific activity and a necessary condition for its efficiency. This is probably why academic freedom was more often defined in some interviews by reference to violations thereof. Respondents mainly talked not about how freedom is manifested, but about manifestations of the absence of freedom.

By analyzing some of the violations of academic freedom cited in interviews, we have been able to construct an image of academic freedom as understood by our interviewees, as well as to understand which aspects of academic freedom they consider most vulnerable today.

- **Internal Restrictions of a Scientific Field**

Internal restrictions are imposed by the scientific community itself. These are related to the need to follow certain methodological rules and procedures, as well as to observe *"ethical hygiene"* (No. 23) in research and teaching.

Since these methodological rules apply to all research, there is, in a sense, no such thing as absolute freedom in science:

> *Academic freedom is certainly not the freedom to do whatever you want, because in science there are a great number of severe restrictions, primarily related to the standards of acquiring knowledge, procedures and methods. And in this regard, there is no freedom at all. Freedom is absent (No. 22, NSI, M, the rector of a university).*

This kind of self-imposed restriction on academic freedom within a scientific field is seen as allowing scientists to take moral and ethical responsibility for the results they obtain, giving it a positive connotation. If freedom is an irresponsible desire to explore what one wants, one would prefer to be limited by a certain duty *"to respect the accepted criteria used for analysis so that one's point of view is respected and taken seriously" (No. 11).*

Within any scientific field, the essence of academic freedom is to provide *"a competition of scientific ideas,"* the collision of which should give rise to the scientific truth *(No. 22)*. Restricting such competition between ideas is a violation of academic freedom. In this sense, existing scientific schools, directions, etc., also act as internal restrictions on academic freedom:

- *academic freedom, first of all, is associated with the ability of a scientist to take the scientific direction that he/she wants, regardless of the discourse or the scientific school to which he/she belongs and regardless of whether he/she comes to shocking or conservative conclusions (No.13, SI, M, the director of an academic institute).*

The idea that academic freedom is restricted by the framework of a scientific field came up in a number of interviews, but this perspective of freedom was not the dominant one in our interviewees' narratives. Far more often, academic freedom was understood as freedom from any outside interference in an academic activity—as when a scientific activity comes under pressure due to external interests and goals that have nothing to do with science.

- **Organizational Restrictions: Employees vs. Administration**

The leading type of external restrictions are organizational ones, which are imposed by the administration of scientific institutions. Respondents' perceptions of academic freedom are shaped by the confrontation between scientific and managerial interests. Ideally, respondents agreed, the interests of the institution should not lead it to impose restrictions that limit scientists' freedom to choose research topics, methods and modes of teaching, etc.

Academic freedom in scientific institutions is directly associated with self-governance. The university "*by definition has always been an autonomous institution governed by its academic staff" (No. 24)*, enabling teachers and students to influence university life. That is why, according to some respondents, the basic decisions in scientific institutions should be taken "*by a team of professors with the participation of other interested parties, including students, some representatives of the administration… but the university base is a team of professors. It is they who create the university" (No. 16).*

The idea of academic freedom as university self-government is especially characteristic of respondents from the groups "Representatives of State Scientific Institutions" and "Experts," who emphasize the deep historical roots of university autonomy.

Academic freedom within the university is directly associated with *"liberal atmosphere," "university democracy," "university spirit,"* and the *"basic tenets"* of university life. The opportunity to work in such an atmosphere, as well as the freedom to choose a research topic, are perceived as benefits of scientific activity.

As the self-government system is dismantled, and with it the liberal atmosphere, there is a feeling that academic freedom is being violated:

- *I gave this situation some thought and understood that it was completely unacceptable for the university, precisely in terms of academic freedoms and self-*

*government practices. It is also unacceptable [to infringe on] the right of teachers and staff to take part in making decisions that relate to them and to the life of the university faculty (No. 3, V, M, a teacher).*

Interviewees' examples of violations of academic freedom in universities and research institutions fall into three categories: the academic councils and their downgraded importance, the cancellation of elections for rectors, and legal protection of researchers and teachers.

*The Role of Academic Councils*

Scientific/academic councils are mentioned in the narratives as voices that have historically expressed the interests of the academic community in dialogues with the university/institution's authority and management departments.

Traditionally, academic councils have held a key place in the self-government system of scientific institutions. Some of our respondents believe that broad powers should be delegated to the elected academic bodies, including "*making decisions about hiring, firing, awarding salaries, how to conduct a scientific policy, what research to do, and so on" (No. 9).* The elimination of self-government "*leads to the curtailment of academic freedom" (No. 19).* Where the managerial rights of scientific councils have been restricted, this has reduced the ability/power of scientific teams to influence the decisions taken in the university. When asked for examples of violations of academic freedom, respondents often cite the ongoing internal reorganization of universities, including the merging of departments and faculties without consulting the teaching staff (who are the representatives of these faculties). As a result, some effective research trends and established teams are being destroyed and research topics and modes of instruction are being forced to change.

*Election of Directors/Leaders*

University self-government is based on elections. The ability to choose rectors, deans, and heads of departments is perceived as part of the inalienable right of employees to influence university life and its organization.

During the ongoing reorganizations of universities, "*faculties are liquidated and institutes are created in their place,"* elective positions are replaced by appointed ones, *"departments fall under reorganization and in their place administration offices are created, so nothing is said about the election of leaders. The top-down vertical of power is vivid" (No. 19).* These reorganizations are perceived by the teaching staff as an attack on university democracy and academic freedom.

The example most frequently cited to show the decline in self-government is the cancellation of elections of rectors or else the transformation of these elections into a certain kind of imitation, as a result of which there is a "*change of a liberal leadership, taking into account the opinions of the entire academic council"* and "*a situation where a totalitarian leadership arises. Everything is kept in one person's hands" (No. 13).* Our

respondents unambiguously interpret these processes—where all the power is concentrated in the hands of the rector, who "*receives very significant bonuses as the power authority*" *(No. 24)*—as something that destroys traditional university democracy.

Such situations are especially painful when a new rector is not appointed from the teaching staff but comes from outside, often from a field that has nothing to do with science and education. Such "Varangian" rectors often prioritize certain business goals over the scientific goals that are responsible for institutional development. The situation becomes even sadder when individuals who have "*a dubious reputation in the academic world […], plagiarized their theses and bought their dissertations are appointed as rectors. And this trend is gaining momentum*" *(No. 21).*

*Legal Protection of Employees*

At the level of individual interactions with the administration, the violation of academic freedoms is associated with the declining legal protection of researchers and teachers.

In almost all interviews, one way or another, the topic of an *"effective"* labor contract, secured for 2-3 years—and often for just 1 year—would arise. Short-term contracts, which have become the norm of labor relations in the academic world, are regarded as an infringement of academic freedom, since "*a person should have a clear understanding of certain guaranteed rights. There must be stability, which would be ensured by a system of permanent contracts" (No. 15).*

Uncertainty regarding requirements and a lack of long-term guarantees make a teacher dependent on the administration, which can *"dismiss anyone on the basis of formal criteria" (No. 5)* without providing any explanation. Numerous examples of this were given in the interviews: "*It is a common situation for an employee not to know until December 15th whether he/she will be working at the university on January 1st or not" (No. 14).*

- **Institutional Restrictions: Scientists vs. Government**

Institutional restrictions on academic freedom are determined by government policy in the field of science and education.

The ongoing reforms of the scientific and educational fields, including the introduction of new standards and criteria for evaluating scientific and teaching activities, are perceived as destructive government intervention in science.

Most of the complaints from our respondents relate to the *"rampant"* bureaucratization and *"senseless"* scientometrics that have accompanied the reforms in science and education.

*Bureaucratization*

The growth of bureaucratization limits an academic's freedom to do what is interesting and what is important. In the most immediate sense, this is a function of the enormous amount of paperwork that teachers now have to do: "*they do not simply have time for*

*teaching itself, modernizing their courses, and studying new literature" (No. 3).* Over time, the awareness that requiring all this paperwork makes no sense "*strongly undermines self-respect. Why am I here at all doing this? This puts a person in a very bad situation, I would say. And this negatively impacts freedom because a person ceases to respect what he/she does" (No.16)*

Bureaucratization makes the self-government of scientific institutions weaker and weaker. The more paper flow appears, *"the more levels of bureaucracy and new hierarchies are created" (No. 3)*, making it more difficult for researchers to be heard by the highest-level authorities.

Bureaucratization creates an opportunity for repression, making researchers and teachers even more powerless in the face of an administrative board. Our respondents are far from putting forward conspiracy theories that bureaucratization is imposed specifically for these purposes, but they admit that it is very convenient "*to use it as a repressive tool" (No. 23).*

Without exception, bureaucratization causes strong emotional irritation among respondents from all groups: *"these are boxes and boxes of papers, reports for each standard and other stuff" (No. 23); "an absolutely insane amount of paperwork to fill out" (No. 18); "micromanaging of teachers' work" (No. 8); "instructions are blatantly meaningless, […] invented somewhere, I don't know where" (No. 16)*, etc.

*"Scopus Disease"*

The introduction of bibliometric criteria for evaluating scientific activity arouses no less protest in our respondents. *"'Scopus disease,' when the university authority began putting tremendous pressure on teachers, forcing them to publish their papers in journals indexed by the Scopus database" (No. 3)* is seen as a senseless pursuit of publication at the expense of quality.

The rigid stimulation of publication activity leaves a scientist no discretion to determine how to use the results of research:

- *The centralized attempt to control scientists' publications (their number) is, in principle, a restriction on a scientist's academic freedom, because it dictates how much he/she needs to write. It pushes him/her to write about certain topics and publish results in certain journals. This zone of freedom, which relates to choice—in what language I should write, where to publish—is becoming less free, and under a broad interpretation of academic freedoms can, it seems to me, be considered as an example of restriction of freedom (No. 17, E, F, the director of a research center).*

The bibliometric evaluation system imposed from the "top" is perceived as the interference of the government in the internal processes of a scientific institution and as one more restriction on university self-government. For example, the low score assigned to monographs and academic books in the new ranking system has hit literary scholars and historians hard, as a monograph has traditionally been considered the

most important scientific achievement in these fields. Although a few institutions have managed to defend their internal ranking systems, they are very much the exceptions to the rule.

The general opinion is that the importance that the new system attaches to publication activity is unjustifiably exaggerated and harmful to science. This leads to *"distortions"* of the comprehensive ranking system where *"a number of no-less-important university activities fade into the background" (No. 15).* Other consequences include *"the degradation of scientific texts"* and the prosperity of *"trash journals" (No. 18)* as a result of *"the pursuit of publications."*

- **Contextual Restrictions: The Impact of Politics and Ideology**

Contextual restrictions mainly imply political and ideological pressure on science. Academic freedom in this sense is defined as the ability "*to carry out a scientific activity in any format without regard to the political situation, but with the focus on science alone" (No. 7)*—that is, the independence of scientists and teachers from political demands, ideology, and censorship.

The contextual restrictions mentioned by interviewees are both direct—in the form of persecution for political and social activity—and indirect—through the establishment of explicit and tacit restrictions on teaching certain courses and researching certain topics. Contextual restrictions on academic freedom are also felt as excessive control by law enforcement and internal security agencies.

*Political Persecution*

Interviewees mentioned instances where both institutions and individual scholars and educators had been persecuted for their political views and social activism. These included:

- the assigning of "foreign agent" status to a research institution, which limits the institution's opportunities to cooperate with government institutions or obtain data for research while simultaneously strengthening government control over the institution's activities;
- the dismissal of teachers and academics actively involved in political or social activities not endorsed by the political regime—with a critical comment to foreign media sometimes serving as a pretext;
- administrative pressure on teachers: warnings and threats, interviews with the representatives of "first departments," disciplinary penalties, and financial punishments.

Almost all respondents from the "victims" group in our study were dismissed precisely because of their public or political activity or for critical comments made to mass media or on social networks.

Characteristically, there are no direct prohibitions on (opposition) political or public activity *per se*. Formally, teachers are punished not for their political views, but for

violations of the internal order or non-compliance with the requirements of teaching assessments.

The principle of selective law enforcement is obvious, as only certain teachers are punished for common violations and disproportionately stringent requirements are imposed on "undesirable" staff, who are under certification. This is greatly facilitated by the rise in bureaucracy, which *"creates a permanent possibility of making legitimate legal claims against practically any teacher. So it's likely a story about the fact that all the existing regulations/indicators should be implemented—well, let's just say, I'm not sure if these regulations can be implemented at all" (No. 14).*

To put pressure on critical teachers, state law enforcement agencies operate not directly, but through the administration of scientific institutions. It is easier for managers to fire/punish a troubled teacher than to clash with the authorities.

The political persecution of scientists is not perceived by all our respondents unequivocally as a violation of academic freedom. Some of them believe that political persecution has nothing to do with academic activity because *"academic freedom is not identical to freedom of speech. When scholars act as publicists and commentators, this is about free speech, not academic freedom" (No. 22).*

Other respondents, mainly community activists and representatives of the "victims" group, perceive political persecutions—such as *"dismissal from work and the expulsion of students from universities for expressing a political view"*—to be *"tough violations of academic freedoms" (No. 20).*

*Ideological Restrictions*

Ideological restrictions relate to the choice of research topics and courses taught. These two positions directly affect academic freedom.

Like political pressure, ideological restrictions are latent and take *"very strange forms" (No. 5).* Censorship as such does not exist, but there is an "*understanding of what is possible and what is not,"* "*which topics are allowed and which are not, and sometimes if you touch 'what is not allowed,' it results in troubles" (No. 24).* It is understood which conferences are permissible to attend and which it is better not to go to, which well-known researchers can be invited to a seminar and which cannot:

- *and there are no direct bans. It is kept in mind what the consequences might be. But even on research topics, they say: "This is, of course, interesting, but we will not research it." Or they say: "This is under no circumstances [to be studied]. This topic … or let's retitle it so that it will not be clear" (No. 1, V, M, a director).*

Some disciplines, such as gender studies, are found to be ideologically undesirable. "*It is very difficult to conduct gender studies in Russian universities; there are few such places where it is possible" (No. 6).* Universities do not include these topics in their programs, because these topics "*are completely censored."* Where such courses already exist, they are closed "*without any explanation. Well, it was done on the pretext of curricula optimization" (No. 8).*

Similarly, criticism of the authorities is not prohibited, but there are implied prohibitions and tacit censorship, which "*is quite strong, but often it is not direct, and it is not easy to identify" (No. 6).*

Ideological pressure can take aggressive forms—including criminal prosecution of scientists—when it comes to particularly sensitive national topics, such as, for example, studies of the history of the Great Patriotic War and Stalin's repressions. But even then, ideological restrictions are not openly articulated and other formal reasons are found for imposing punishment:

- *Historians who deal with the 20th century and the most painful things like war—because war is not only a victory, as we know—[often face] repression. And these historians were struck first. We see that now we have Memorial—foreign agents, people are there, Yuri Dmitriev is in prison (No. 16, PF, M, a university professor).*

Ideological regulation of research topics also occurs in a milder form, through the state's funding mechanisms. Some of our interlocutors believe that the grant system is not fundamentally ideologically neutral and that funds from any source *"one way or another have an ideological target" (No. 22).* In this sense, the Russian funds are no exception. Other respondents, however, consider that Russian government funds demand a particularly *"ideologically correct"* research result (No. 1).

*Self-Censorship*

The choice and wording of research topics and the dissemination of results are influenced not so much by censorship as by self-censorship. Self-censorship occurs 1) when researchers or educators themselves limit the scope of their research and publications; 2) when they refuse to discuss acute political issues with students or 3) to supervise theses on difficult political issues (for example, about rebels [No. 3]); and 4) when they do not want to publish the results of their research for fear of negative consequences.

The lack of clear rules of the game when it comes to relations with the government, combined with increased control over universities—including by the security forces—creates an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, a breeding ground for self-censorship.

Self-restrictions must be practiced not only at the individual level, but also at the level of institutional leadership. The unclear nature of some prohibitions and the vagueness of rules of the game in relations between scientific and supervisory institutions mean that university administrations prefer to play it safe and prohibit everything to the maximum rather than risk violating tacit prohibitions. Thus, self-censorship comes from the top management, shaping the system of *"unwritten rules"* within universities:

- *At the Higher School of Economics, I was told, there was an unwritten rule that Russia could be classified as an authoritarian state in the text of a paper, but that it was advisable not to do so in an abstract or a title (No. 7, V, F, a university graduate).*

Even though the phenomenon of self-censorship is unequivocally and negatively assessed by all respondents, some of our interlocutors believe that self-restrictions often lack sufficient objective grounds and speak not to government pressure, but to the excessive caution of scientists themselves.

*Control by Security Forces and Agencies*

Tightened control by the security forces and agencies as well as the activation of "first departments" serve to create "*an atmosphere of suspicion"* concerning scientists' international contacts (No. 15). This distrust has a detrimental impact on the liberal atmosphere of scientific institutions.

The most striking example of an attack on international contacts, and one which was repeatedly cited in our interviews, was the recommendations of the Ministry of Science and Education issued in August 2019, which listed desirable contacts with foreigners.[4] Although these recommendations were subsequently retracted, the fact that this document was issued in the first place speaks to the attitude of the higher governmental structures.

The general strengthening of the authoritarian nature of the political regime also affects university self-government. The weakening of procedures for election to government bodies is echoed in imitation intra-university elections, which undermine the principle of self-government and the liberal atmosphere of universities. The kinds of flagrant violations cited in our interviews regarding the procedures for electing rectors, the emergence of denunciation practices, and the monitoring of staff and student activity on social networks (No. 8, No. 6) are only possible only in the context of the general political degradation of the country's democratic institutions.

[4] According to the Order, Russian scientific institutions must notify the Ministry of Education and Science about any planned meeting with foreign colleagues 5 days in advance, providing a list of participants. A meeting with a foreigner must be attended by at least two Russian scientists. Contacts with foreign colleagues outside the university and working hours are possible only if permitted by the university authority. After the meeting, it is necessary to draw up a report with a brief description of the conversation, attaching scans of the participants' passports to it. When visiting scientific institutions, foreigners can use recording and copying devices "only in cases described in the international treaties of the Russian Federation." See https://meduza.io/news/2019/08/14/minobrnauki-uzhestochilo-pravila-kontaktov-rossiyskih-uchenyh-s-inostrannymi-ih-zastavyat-poluchat-razresheniya-na-vstrechi-i-pisat-otchety.

## 1.3. Perception of Academic Freedom

- **Types of Academic Freedom Perceptions**

All our respondents have a similar understanding of academic freedom as a key value of any scientific activity, the essence of which is the ability to explore what is interesting, to discuss and publish research results, and to teach what seems important in the way that seems right.

They differ, however, in their views of what limits academic freedom in practice. Thus, looking at which situations were cited as examples of restrictions on academic freedom and which restrictions were seen as the main ones, we can identify three types/models for how our respondents understand freedom.

1) "Academic" view—emphasizes the individual autonomy of a scientist to conduct scientific research. The main restrictions are considered to be the "internal" regulators of a scientific field: the requirement to follow a scientific method, the ethics of research (and teaching), and the restrictions imposed on competition between scientific ideas.

Institutional restrictions are regarded as inevitable costs of the external environment that can reduce the effectiveness of scientific activity, but which should not be considered a constraint on academic freedom.

Political and ideological persecution is understood as describing violations of political rights and freedoms, freedom of speech, etc., rather than academic freedom. In this sense, repression of scientists is no different than repression of other citizens who publicly express their political or civic position.

2) "Institutional" view—emphasizes the specifics of universities and scientific institutions as spaces of especial freedom.

Academic freedom is associated with self-government, a liberal atmosphere, and the autonomy of universities/research institutions. The main threat is seen as the interference of "corporate interests" in science and ineffective governmental regulation. At the same time, institutional (governmental regulation) and organizational (administration) restrictions are practically intertwined.

The persecution of academics and teachers for their political views and social activism is considered unacceptable, but is understood more as a violation of freedom of expression than a restriction of academic freedom. When expressing his/her opinion in a public space, a scientist should not speak on behalf of his/her institution.

3) "Contextual" view—based on the idea of a special critical mission of science, and especially the social sciences, in society.

This approach emphasizes political and ideological restrictions, considering political persecution for comments and public activity that support the political opposition to be a direct violation of academic freedom. This perspective on academic freedom is primarily relevant to representatives of the social sciences. It is understood that a social

scientist expresses in the public space not just his/her point of view, but an expert opinion based on the results of research. It is believed that the product of scientific research should become the property of society, rather than of a narrow group of experts. Therefore, restrictions on the ability to publicly express one's views and expert knowledge regarding the government, society, political power, etc., is a direct restriction on academic freedom.

Organizational and institutional restrictions are seen in many ways as the result of political and ideological pressure from the government.

- **Freedom from Government Intervention**

Due to the qualitative nature of our research, we cannot determine which type is dominant in the Russian scientific community. We can only talk about our respondents. Judging by which aspects of academic freedom were discussed in all interviews and which ones were the most sensitive, academic freedom is mainly associated with the freedom from government interference in the activities of scientific institutions.

Due to universities' high level of dependence on the government, institutional management is perceived not as an autonomous governing body, but as an extension of state control. Therefore, any pressure on the self-government that exists within many scientific teams is interpreted as direct government intervention. This perception is typical, first of all, for the informants from the universities where reorganization and change of management took place.

- **Academic Freedom in Academic Discourse—Updating the Concept**

Speaking about the situation in science and education our interlocutors, as a rule, did not touch on academic freedom unless the interviewer asked them a direct question. Numerous instances of governmental and managerial intervention in scientific activity were discussed in terms of their impact on performance, rather than as a violation of academic freedom. The term "academic freedom" seems to be an alien one in our respondents' narratives about organizational and institutional change; there is no sense that scientists and teachers think in this "frame of reference."

The low popularity of the concept may be attributed to the fact that academic freedom, as a key value of scientific activity, is perceived as a natural condition of scientific activity that does not require special reflection and comprehension ("*in general, when you have to do routine things, you do not particularly evaluate what freedom is and what restrictions there are on this freedom" (No. 6)*). This is likely why many respondents struggled to answer a direct question about the definition of academic freedom (*"I can't tell right now," "at least, please, a hint," "I haven't thought about it," "I don't know"*).

Another possible explanation is that the concept of academic freedom is not enshrined in the Russian legal framework and has a historical background.

- **Politicization of the Concept of Academic Freedom**

The term "academic freedom" was actively used by respondents only when speaking about political and ideological pressure. In narratives about contextual restrictions, the concept of "academic freedom" becomes central. Political persecution and ideological prohibitions are directly associated with the word "freedom."

The growth of political and ideological pressure from the authoritarian regime intensifies the politicization of the concept of "academic freedom." Defending against the contextual restrictions, the academic community is inevitably drawn into political confrontation with the government or political system. This is true of any scientists and teachers working in the social sciences and humanities, not only those who are politically and socially active.

- **Restrictions of Academic Freedom as a "Necessary Evil"**

In general, our respondents perceive academic freedom as a kind of ideal that cannot be achieved in reality. Restrictions, then, are perceived as a "necessary evil" that always exists and which must be tolerated because science does not exist in a vacuum. The "reasonable" restrictions are perceived as the norm and do not cause any protest. This applies to all types of restrictions, chiefly "internal" but also organizational, institutional, political, and ideological.

Protest occurs when restrictions go beyond "reasonable" limits and begin to seriously impact the quality of scientific and teaching activities. At that point, restrictions start to be perceived as interference with science.

The transition from "reasonable" restrictions to "rampant" ones has already occurred at the level of organizational and institutional changes. Reforms in the fields of science and education, including the strengthening of the power vertical, have gone beyond the usual organizational and institutional restrictions, according to our respondents. Innovations are perceived as destructive state interference with the development of science.

As for political and ideological pressure, the situation is ambivalent. Although political persecution is universally condemned, it is perceived as a violation of academic freedom only by socially active representatives of the scientific community. The latter are also sounding the alarm about the strengthening of ideological pressure and increased control from the security forces. Others see indirect political and ideological pressure within the framework of "necessary evil"—that is, as new rules of the game in relations with the government that do not have a serious impact on scientific activity.

- **Freedom to Speak in the Public Space**

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of academic freedom is the ability to speak out in a public space outside the university:

- Can a scientist indicate his/her affiliation when expressing an opinion in a public space?
- Should scholars' ability to express an opinion in the mass media or another public forum be classified as academic freedom or does this fall under freedom of expression?

On the first question, our respondents are inclined to believe that in a public space, a scientist should not speak on behalf of his/her scientific institution, but only express a personal position. This is explained by the fact that the opinion expressed by one person may not be shared by other representatives of a scientific institution.

The answer to the question of whether academic freedom is confined to within the walls of the university is not so unambiguous. Some of our respondents are supporters of the "classical" model, which assumes that the fundamental freedom of teachers and students is the freedom to teach and research within the university. On this view, the main task of the university community is to protect freedom within the university from outside attacks. Speeches in a public space fall outside this framework.

Others lean toward the "activist model," which emphasizes the social mission of the academy and considers the public activity of teachers and students to be an inextricable part of academic freedom and academic rights.

# II. The Current State and Dynamics of Academic Freedoms

### 2.1. Assessment of Academic Freedom in Russia: Current State

The overall assessment of academic freedom in Russia is extremely poor. With the exception of one respondent who rated its current state as *"quite high,"* none of our interlocutors rated it at more than 6 points out of 10; the average assessment was 3-4 points.

Certainly, these figures should not be taken as a strict indicator of the level of academic freedom. Instead, they indicate the scale of the difficulties that our respondents face in their work. Given the various criteria on which our interlocutors evaluated the situation, the low overall scores signal a clear problem in this area.

As a rule, the current situation was assessed by reference to the past, i.e., by evaluating the dynamics and trends of the existing restrictions. These will be discussed in subsequent sections.

When assessing the state of academic freedom, our interlocutors were thinking primarily of government interference in science in its various manifestations and at different levels.

- **The Situation in the Social Sciences**

All of our respondents, in one way or another, acknowledged that the social sciences and humanities are far more susceptible to restrictions on academic freedom than the technical and natural sciences. This is due both to the history of the development of these sciences in Russia and to the specifics of their interaction with the government.

In the natural and technical sciences, it is easier to *"work in compliance with the state agenda"* than in the social sciences. If the goal is to achieve a high rating in terms of publication activity, then it is much more difficult for the social sciences *"to take a visible position in the international space"* (No. 17). The social sciences in Russia are still playing catch-up, so they would need to make a serious qualitative leap to become visible in the international space, whereas the successes of the natural and technical sciences have long been recognized internationally.

Social scientists and humanities scholars also find themselves under greater pressure from publication requirements because the new system used to evaluate scientific work does not take into account the specifics of the humanities. As discussed above, monographs have historically been the ultimate achievement for scholars in the humanities, but they earn few points in the new system.

Due to the ongoing "hunt" for publications, the social sciences and humanities have turned out to be more susceptible to "Scopus disease" than other disciplines, with all the ensuing consequences, including "garbage publications" and a high level of self-citation.

Another challenge for the social sciences and humanities relates to their critical function and high ideological burden. The problem is that these fields do not always produce results that meet the ideological expectations of the government. As a result of increasing government control, they find themselves more susceptible to censorship and self-censorship.

Although some of our interlocutors urged to *"not exaggerate"* the level of censorship and self-censorship in the social sciences (No. 22), most of respondents generally agree that ideological restrictions *"primarily affect the social sciences" (No. 24). "Humanities and social scientists are a greater threat [...] they are somehow closer to such soft power things, to the painful things of power" (No. 23).*

The social sciences are also distinct in the sense that their research output should become the property of the general public, not just of a narrow group of experts. According to Michael Burovoy, who came up with the concept of "public sociology," the main consumer of the scientific product produced by the social sciences is society. It is not surprising, therefore, that social scientists are more likely to appear in a public space outside the university. Since these public speeches or presentations are usually critical, it is the social scientists who most often become the targets of political repression and ideological persecution.

- **Feedback Issue**

A theme that runs through our interlocutors' narratives is the feeling of powerlessness to change or even influence the situation in scientific organizations and at the institutional level.

Teachers and researchers "*have no tools, no resources, nothing ... the teaching staff are simply reduced to silent executors of the will of the university administration" (No. 8).*

Even when obvious legal/regulatory violations are observed, employees of scientific institutions cannot argue with the decisions made by the authorities. *"If you play against the university administration, at best it will end in a draw" (No. 1).* This is clear from the examples cited in interviews: 1) an imitation election for the position of rector, held with flagrant violations of all possible democratic procedures; 2) structural reorganizations carried out without the agreement of scientific teams; 3) biases in qualification certification of politically active teachers and their dismissal. The impunity of the authority creates an atmosphere where employees "*have reason to be careful and think twice about whether they should come forward and say something that would go against the opinions expressed by the university administration" (No. 15).*

The legal and political environment in which institutions and universities exist is not conducive to protecting freedom within an institution. Seeking protection from external law enforcement agencies—such as the prosecutor's office, labor inspector, etc.—is generally fruitless and sometimes even worsens the situation if complaints or appeals unexpectedly become known to the entity that gave rise to the claim (No. 13).

Employees of regional universities are especially vulnerable, as in the event of their dismissal, they will have to look for new jobs in often poor regional markets and try to overcome the "*tarnished history/reputation" (No. 4)* created by their dismissal.

At the level of institutional interactions, there is limited scope to influence government policy and decisions by the governing institutions. Our respondents talk about poorly functioning feedback channels and state institutions' limited interest in entering into dialogue with scientists.

Members of public bodies representing the interests of the scientific community, such as the Presidential Science Council, should be appointed from among the members of the scientific community, but *"we know that other people are appointed for it" (No. 21).* The Council under the Ministry of Science and Education *"consists, in fact, of educational bureaucrats" (No. 19).* In general, *"there are no institutions that reflect the opinion of university teachers" (No. 15).*

This does not mean that there are no feedback mechanisms at all: *"You can say what you are worried about, you are welcome to write complaints to a virtual receptionist."* Yet there are no "*mechanisms for articulating any ideas or other views on how things should be in general … the leverage of any public opinion on government policy is practically suppressed" (No. 24).*

At the same time, some of our respondents believe that there are a number of feedback mechanisms—there are "*all kinds of public councils, where many of our colleagues are the members, both under the President and under the Ministry, and in other governmental bodies"*—but that *"it only helps to express a position and make some kind of claim" (No. 23).* The problem is the state's lack of desire to use these mechanisms. This is especially true for the social sciences and humanities, which want to discuss information unpleasant to the state. As long as "*our authority listens only to what it wants to listen, no matter what mechanisms we use, things will stay as they are now" (No. 11).*

Public channels of interaction with the government—such as petitions, letters, and appeals to various bodies (up to the President himself)—operate poorly. One reason for this seems to be *"the number of people who are willing to sign such things. This number is not very big" (No. 7)* and it is on the decline. When people see the inefficacy of such actions, they simply stop participating in them, because *"they are not effective"* and they do not feel that these actions *"can change anything" (No. 18).*

Attitudes toward more radical actions in the form of open protests are very different. Among our respondents, there are some representatives of public organizations who believe that only by self-organizing as a scientific community of teachers, students, and Ph.D. students can the position of community members be conveyed to the government. Others, however, take the opposite view, arguing that "*any attempts at more decisive intervention only cause the deterioration of the situation" (No. 23).*

As it stands, protest mechanisms do not work. *"The mobilization capacity of independent institutions is not great […] there is a scattering of lonely individuals who resent, criticize, and sometimes get involved in top-down initiatives. In general, one cannot expect any effective influence" (No. 15).*

As one of the few examples where the voice of the scientific community was heard, our respondents cited the cancellation of the "infamous" order regulating interactions with foreigners who visit universities.

DisserNet is another example of an effective public initiative that is unambiguously appreciated. The project has a real impact: "*it puts some pressure on the Higher Attestation Commission, the higher certification commission of the Russian Federation, forcing or pressuring it to reward scientific degrees after checking the authors' integrity [...] the emergence of this social measure has influenced the state in the sense that state universities and councils have begun to impose stricter requirements on dissertations" (No. 22).*

Although the existing feedback channels do not work well, they should still be used, according to some interlocutors, because *"a drop of water can pierce rocks" (No. 23).* For example, there are some indications that the numerous petitions and public claims criticizing the Publications Performance Evaluation (PPE) will be effective and *"[the methodology] will change, amendments will be made" (No. 17).* Other respondents have become disillusioned with petitions and letters, and now sign only those that they cannot but sign for moral reasons (No. 18).

- **International Cooperation**

When speaking about international cooperation, our respondents identify the following types: invitations of foreign scientists to Russia, joint projects (institutional cooperation), international conferences, and international funding.

Almost all respondents say that international cooperation today is influenced by the general domestic political background, increased government control, and some changes to Russia's position in the international arena associated with *"recent historical events, sanctions, and mutual alienation" (No. 22).*

In general, the possibilities and restrictions in international cooperation differ greatly between the leading (central) and regional scientific institutions, as well as between state and non-state scientific organizations. Different scientific disciplines may also face specific restrictions on their international cooperation.

Cooperation continues to develop successfully at the level of international partnerships between large state funds. Leading state institutions and universities, which are well integrated into the Russian grant system, do not feel any particular restrictions (at least according to those of our respondents who belong to the leadership of these institutions): *"we cooperate well, everything is great" (No. 18), "scientific life develops as it must develop […] there are no problems here" (No. 13).*

At the level of individual interactions and cooperation between scientific groups, meanwhile, the influence of the general political and international situation—particularly sanctions—is visible. Representatives of state scientific institutions complain about the lack of large international projects supported *"with good funding"*

*(No. 13).* Political isolation becomes an obstacle to institutions' integration with the countries of the European Union, which "*is hardly possible now after 2014" (No. 18).*

At the level of individual cooperation, respondents gave examples of cases where invited European researchers suddenly refused to come to Russia after sanctions were imposed. As a result, such international contacts "*are carried out in a very reduced format" (No. 24).*

The "research vector" to the East that follows Russian foreign policy and its influence is also noted: "*the vector to the East changed our activity in the field of international cooperation" (No. 24).* Whereas cooperation with China is actively stimulated by the government, *"other contacts that we used to have are dying off" (No. 24).*

The development of cooperation at the institutional level and at the level of individual contacts is influenced not so much by direct prohibitions as by *"the atmosphere of suspicion" (No. 15).* Governmental hyper-control leads to ridiculous situations where *"all foreigners should be seen as people who potentially carry evil and malicious ideas. If we accept this point of view, then no international cooperation is possible" (No. 15).*

This is embodied by the infamous recommendations of the Ministry of Education and Science that were mentioned above: *"Broadly speaking, a teacher at Kazan University is now allowed to drink coffee in a coffee shop with a colleague from Germany only if he/she has a signed permission slip from the rector" (No. 3).*

Although the recommendations were retracted following protest from the scientific community, the response to these recommendations is quite indicative of the differences between different universities. Whereas the leading scientific institutes did not care much about these recommendations considering them to be the product of "*poorly thinking bureaucrats" (No. 18),* the regional institutions took the Ministry recommendations as a guide to strengthening control over foreign contacts, and some universities used these recommendations to develop internal regulations that took the form of an order.

The development of scientific contacts is hindered by the inconsistency of government policy. On the one hand, there is a call to intensify international cooperation, without which it is impossible to share Russian science with world leaders. On the other hand, government structures are creating ever more numerous formal obstacles to cooperation. "*If a person comes with a visa for scientific collaboration, it makes teaching taboo; teaching is not allowed in this case. If a person comes with a visa giving him/her the right to teach, then becoming involved in scientific work is taboo" (No. 23).*

The field-based disciplines of science are heavily affected by visa complications. Thus, anthropologists cannot include foreigners in regional field research, since getting permission for this is "*a big headache—very problematic*" *(No. 23).*

Scientific institutions also differ greatly in terms of their use of foreign funding. There is a gulf between state and non-state institutions. For non-state institutions, accepting financing from foreign sources carries the risk of being branded a "foreign agent." This forces private universities to decline the support of international funds and turn to Russian sources. *"These sources are not big enough to finance international cooperation*

*and this is the reason why it has been reduced" (No. 22).* Since many private universities, *"as less stable institutions,"* have historically relied on foreign financial support, they have effectively been *"deprived of oxygen" (No. 17).*

That being said, some private research institutions that have already been labeled foreign agents have actually strengthened their international cooperation, since it is the only source of funding available to those who carry the stigma of being a foreign agent. They find that partners from foreign funds have "*much more interest*," offer "*many more opportunities*" than before (No. 1).

Since there are no direct prohibitions on foreign funding, the decision not to take it is likely self-censorship: private universities voluntarily and proactively refuse to take any foreign funding so as to avoid creating any additional justification for the intervention of regulatory bodies.

At the same time, state universities "still have the opportunity to run international educational programs, research programs, and joint research projects" (No. 17). They "receive foreign funding and it allows them to be successful in collaborative cooperation" (No. 22).

Whether a scholar is able to travel to conferences also depends on the type of research institution at which he or she works. Leading institutions included in the Russian grant programs tend not to have any problems: "*More and more Russians are attending conferences thanks to improved [governmental] funding*" *(No. 18).* Others complain that "*Well, of course, they continue to travel to conferences, but the question is how long it will last because the institutional level is not enough to support it any longer*" *(No. 24).*

In general, "*people have begun to travel more to the West" (No. 18),* due not least to the fact that the new generation of scientists speak English better and may receive Western funding to travel to conferences. Some employees have the opportunity to go to conferences at their own expense, "*so as not to have to write a report describing what I did there, what I saw, etc.*" *(No. 13).* At the same time, if a person is not at work and lacks official permission to be absent, this can be considered a violation of the rules and a reason for his or her dismissal. Several of the "victims" among our respondents had faced such situations.

### 2.2. Assessment of State Science Policy

In interviews, many respondents complained about the ineffectiveness of the state policy applied in the field of science and education. The low professionalism of administrative institutions is seen as the reason for excessive government interference in scientific and educational activities.

Respondents' main complaints relate to the lack of long-term goals, *"real strategy" […] "There are some random jumps one way and then the other" (No. 18).* The reforms in the field of science and higher education—inter alia, the reorganization of universities, the turnover of the rectorate corpus, new evaluation criteria, etc.—are not seen as a

elements of a well-thought-out agenda, but rather as a *"specific emergency reform, where something is discussed at night and then announced in the morning"* (No. 12).

Inconsistency and poor coordination of actions is another important criticism leveled at government policy: *"one hand does not know what the other hand is doing and they work toward different goals" (No. 23).*

The defining feature of the Russian government policy is excessive control, a desire to *"come up with the rules for all institutions and all fields. These rules are to be 'top-down', not taking into account the differences between universities and scientific fields" (No. 17).*

While almost all of our respondents agree that state supervision has been stepped up and that the new reforms have resulted in additional restrictions, they understand the reasons for this differently.

Some believe that the government's reforms are logical and generally motivated by good intentions: *"at least some of the reforms are needed to make the situation better" (No. 18).*

Similarly, some suggest that state bodies simply cannot conduct reforms effectively due to the incompetence of their management structures. This point of view is expressed through the following opinions:

- The replacement of rectors, which has caused great outrage in scientific institutions, has a certain logic. Professors are traditionally considered a *"conservative group" (No. 17)* who oppose all change. In a situation where a "breakthrough" in science and education is needed, the appointment of a "Varangian" who is a good manager to replace a longtime rector from the old cohort of professors is completely justified.
- The government is *"stupid if it takes such stupid decisions" (No. 17).* The absurd requirements of scientometrics exist because *"the officials completely misunderstand how citation works in science, etc."* But at the same time, this should not be understood as a *"special strategy"* aimed at the destruction of the established rules. "*The same can be said about bureaucratization. I don't think it was conceived as some kind of repressive tool; it has just grown by itself, but it is very convenient to use it as an instrument" (No. 23).*
- The policy aimed at getting rid of ineffective universities, of which the government has been making active use in recent years, malfunctions because the employees of the Science and Education Supervisory Service (SESS) have a very low level of competence: *"in all respects, the SESS experts are worse than the average university teacher" (No. 17).* In the views of these experts, an *"ineffective university"* is understood to be a private university, with the result that the first universities to be affected by the policy are in fact the effective private universities.
- The adoption of the law on foreign agents has a logical explanation: "*the anti-ideological request is a tool to stop financing from abroad that had been allocated to projects intended to criticize the authorities and existing order."* If Russia itself

began to finance similar projects in other countries, these respondents say, the reaction of those countries would be similar (No. 22).

Other scientists take the opposing position—namely that the state deliberately limits academic freedom by embedding science and education in the political "vertical," causing scientific institutions to lose their autonomy. This is primarily a concern for the social sciences and humanities, which can pose a threat to the political regime:

- The replacement of rectors is aimed not so much at improving the efficiency of universities as at increasing their dependence on the government. *"Universities are expected to produce specialists loyal to the authorities and who can influence public opinion*" including social researchers and journalists;
- Reorganization reforms within universities are primarily aimed at faculties and departments in the humanities and social sciences. These university divisions are more susceptible to "optimization," merging, and division: when one faculty is united (merged) with the others, they all lose their autonomy and self-governance;
- The SESS policy of closing down ineffective universities is intended mainly to shut down "breeding grounds for dissident voices" that produce opposition and critics of the political regime.

Although our interlocutors had different views of why government control had been strengthened, they almost all agreed that the reforms did not improve, but rather worsened the situation, and *"so far nothing good has come of it, at least for the humanities, as far as I can see" (No. 18).*

### 2.3. Academic Freedom Changing

In the course of their interviews, respondents were asked to describe the level of freedom in the academy and its dynamics since the 1990s (including on a scale from 1 to 10 points). Although answers varied depending on the age of the respondent, in general, a negative dynamic dominated the assessments. Whereas interlocutors ranked the freedom of the 1990s as complete freedom—9-10 or even *"20 points" (No. 24)*—they ranked freedom today at around 3-4 points, with one respondent wryly observing *"I can express all my views with the help of the Criminal Code" (No. 11*).

According to older respondents, the best time for academic freedom was the 1990s (8-10 points on a 10-point scale), when *"in terms of freedom of expression and academic freedom, in particular, Russia was one of the freest countries in the world" (No. 11).*

These years are characterized as *"turbulent, crazy, a wonderful and terrible time" (No. 10)* when it was possible to explore and write about *"everything…and no one would be punished for it, and no one was afraid of anything,"* even if there was *"a very complex infrastructure and material support."* All in all, *"people knew less, but they could do what they wanted" (No. 1).* During this period, there was an *"exchange of opinions,"* which has ceased since 2002 *(No. 11).*

Self-governance flourished in universities: rectors and deans were elected by direct elections and monitors were elected in student groups. There was no "bloated" administrative apparatus, no stratification of salaries, no regulations guiding work with international universities. Teachers themselves developed courses according to their own ideas and convictions as well as students' needs (No. 3, No. 8).

Yet absolute freedom had its drawbacks. Behind it *"there was nothing"* (No. 24). The complete absence of *"restrictions"* (No. 21), whether on the academic environment or *"social censorship,"* resulted in *"university staff [starting to publish] complete nonsense" (No. 11).*

Likewise, freedom of teaching, in the absence of quality control, allowed *"completely unqualified teachers"* to work in universities and led to "*indifference"* toward students' learning outcomes *(No. 14).*

Young respondents, who were not working in the 1990s, see other periods as the best time for academic freedom. Thus, one interlocutor said that in 2014-2015 *"there was a feeling that everything was possible (discussion clubs, debates)" (No.6).* (Here, however, it should be borne in mind that we are talking about the Higher School of Economics, which has until recently had special privileges in terms of academic freedom.)

Between the 1990s and the present, the years 2000, 2010, 2012, 2014-15, and 2019 are mentioned as turning points in the dynamics of academic freedom.

The year 2000 is associated with the end of the unlimited freedom that characterized the 1990s and the beginning of reforms in science and education. Since then, not only academic freedom, but *"all freedoms in this country have been narrowed" (No.2).* Since the beginning of the 2000s, the power vertical gradually begun to shape and "*the mechanisms for expressing opinions and moods have disappeared"* (No. 24).

2010 is considered a turning point because it was the year when the *"Concept of Information Security was adopted" (No. 1*). That year, the influence of law enforcement agencies became noticeable. At the same time, bureaucratization increased in universities and teaching and management practices began to change *(No. 3).* At the same time, academic freedoms were restricted: *"Fortunately, it did not happen as quickly … as some government people would have liked, but unfortunately, it happened faster than academicians expected" (No. 16).*

After 2012, the reforms entered their active phase. For the Academy of Sciences, this meant the dissolution of the Russian Academy of Sciences in 2013, while for universities it entailed their reorganization, the replacement of rectors, and amendments to university Charters. The reform was associated with the introduction of new criteria used to rank the effectiveness of universities, scientific institutions, teachers, and scientists. All of these factors resulted in the growth of bureaucratization. There was pressure on teachers/researchers to publish their papers in Web of Science- and Scopus-ranked journals, as this directly impacts the position of a university in the World Ratings; criteria used to evaluate the efficiency of individual teachers were introduced.

2012 is also associated with Putin's return to the presidency after the *"'vegetarian' Medvedev period" (No. 2). "After Putin's election in 2012 and all those rebels on Bolotnaya*

*Square, new restrictions and penalties appeared" (No. 2).* According to others, there was no visible deterioration of science in 2012, but this is *"a story about wasted time and lost opportunities"* (No. 14).

The next turning point was the events of 2014 (the annexation of Crimea). *"Crimea was the catalyst; before Crimea, there were no restrictions" (No. 2*). Increased political tensions, the imposition of sanctions, and certain limits on international contacts affected scientific activities. Since 2015, respondents have noted a new strengthening of the control of security forces.

Young respondents saw 2019 as another turning point, indicators of which were the closure of the student talk show "To the Point" (which had reportedly extended an invitation to Lyubov Sobol) and the closure of the student journal *Doxa* (No. 6).

With the adoption of the new constitutional amendments, some new restrictions are also expected, at which point *"the situation will become tough"* (No. 11).

## III. Science and State: Trends in Recent Decades

The interviews contain significant information about major changes in science and education and how the relationship of these institutions with the state is changing. Our interlocutors mostly note negative trends, although there are references to some positive ones.

### 3.1. The "Nationalization" of Science as the Main Trend

The main trend of recent decades has been the "nationalization" of science and education against a backdrop of the *"verticalization of power" (No. 24*). The decline in the autonomy of scientific institutions and the increase of governmental interference in science and education were mentioned in all interviews. Our respondents, with a few exceptions, take a negative view of these changes.

How is the "nationalization of science" manifested and what are its consequences?

*Cancellation of Elections of Rectors, Imitation Elections, and the Appointment of Rectors through the "Top-Down Method"*

The elimination of concerns about re-election means that the new leadership does not answer to the scientific team, but rather aspires to meet the expectations of the upper echelons of power, by which it has been appointed. Thus, the new cohort of rectors is directly integrated into the government power vertical.

On the one hand, according to our experts, the replacement of ex-rectors with some effective managers is strategically justified during radical reforms of the science and education system, when a "breakthrough" in the development of science is needed. Reform is invariably associated with the destruction of old rules and systems. Rectors, who themselves are members of the scientific team or representatives of the professoriate, are unlikely to be able to make the necessary changes, which inevitably destroy the established order and often contradict the interests of longstanding professors.

On the other hand, our research suggests that the replacement of ex-rectors with new managers has been extremely ineffective and has primarily had a detrimental impact on the liberal atmosphere of universities and scientific institutions.

*Weakening Self-Government within Scientific Institutions and Universities as a Necessary Step to Build Up the "Power Vertical"*

The role of academic councils and the participation of academicians and teachers in strategies aimed at the development of scientific institutions are declining. Changes to the Charters of many universities since 2015 have altered the status of some scientific units, making their leaders not elected but appointed.

The longstanding question of whether the university's priority is professors or students now has a simple answer. *"Today, in general, the controversy is over, because managers hold the main roles in the university" (No. 24).*

*Government Supervision of Scientific Institutions and Universities Is Intensifying*

"Rampant bureaucratization"—where one is required to complete an incredible amount of meaningless paperwork—is the result of strong government supervision. For teachers, this is a nonstop work over adjusting of curriculums content according to constantly changing bureaucratic demands. Bureaucratic reports take significant time and effort, and as a result, the effectiveness of scientific and teaching work is reduced.

Scientometric criteria used to measure the productivity of scientific work are another instrument of direct regulation, which turns into "Scopus disease" for the social sciences and humanities.

Strong government supervision has a logical explanation, since *"the government, as it is providing resources, would like to see quick results in exchange" (No. 17*). Although the trend toward strong government supervision of science and education is typical of most European countries—in this sense, *"we are in line with other countries" (ibid.*)—the peculiarity of the Russian situation is that the government does not just dictate certain "goals" to scientific institutions, but directly interferes in the internal management of universities by building up the power vertical, which imposes on employees the specific procedures and mechanisms for achieving the desired/expected outcomes.

*Strengthening of State Ideological Control in the Social Sciences and Humanities*

In addition to the formal bureaucratic control of administrative institutions, informal ideological pressure and control from security agencies and law enforcement structures are increasing. Since the state's ideological policy remains vague, it is often unclear whether it is ideological or bureaucratic reasons that dictates the repressive actions of these bodies against certain scientific institutions. The primary objects of such control are the social sciences and humanities.

*State and Foreign Funding: Ratio Change*

The "expulsion" of foreign funds from Russia after 2010 and the general anti-Western ideological backdrop have resulted in a significant reduction in foreign funding for the social sciences, which has been problematic for many non-state organizations.

The decline in foreign funding is generally assessed negatively by our respondents, as state funds cannot completely substitute for foreign funding. Equally importantly, the foreign funds "*contributed to the development of competition" (No. 18)*; had an educational aspect, because they acquainted Russian scientists with international standards; contributed to the integration of Russian science into the international scientific environment; and created *"the opportunity to share the international experience" (No. 15).*

At the same time, some respondents see the change in funding as positive. *"The ideological and anti-ideological demand for the social sciences made the state to look at their direction" (No. 22).* The scientific policy has been developed, state funding has been improved, *"funding to the social sciences has been nationalized,"* and this is good. Project 5-100 is cited as one positive change; another is the active role of the Russian Scientific Fund in supporting Russian research (No. 22).

Our respondents' attitude toward government money is also ambiguous. Whereas some welcome the increase in government support to the social sciences, others believe that government money is *"toxic"* because if you take this money, you automatically become a *"state agent" (No. 1),* whereas the question of who funds research should not be asked at all.

### 3.2. Differentiation between Universities

The government science and education policy has deepened existing differences between universities, in particular spatial/geographical ones. Moscow universities have disproportionately more institutional opportunities than regional scientific universities, including those in St. Petersburg, and this discrepancy has been amplified by the reforms rather than reduced.

Our respondents also report that a certain group of universities *"have special relationships with the powers-that-be" (No. 1).* The most prominent representative of this category is Higher School of Economics, which actually works as an expert center under the government and presidential administration. Up to a certain point, these universities have been given some privileges in the field of academic freedom, inter alia the freedom to criticize the powers-that-be. In recent years, however, they too have begun to face severe restrictions.

Differences between universities are also evident in other activities of scientific institutions:

*International Contacts and Cooperation*

As already noted, state and non-state universities have different opportunities to use international contacts and, most importantly, different motivation to develop these contacts. Regional universities are more sensitive in responding to "tacit" restrictions imposed by the government on international cooperation.

*Foreign Funding*

Non-state universities have stopped using foreign funding for fear of being stigmatized as foreign agents, whereas state universities do not face such restrictions.

*Role of Regulatory Organizations*

Non-state universities are more likely to be subject to government control and inspections. They are suspicious and unreliable by nature. The image of an "ineffective university," in the eyes of SESS, is a non-state university (No. 17); as a result, effective non-state universities are forced to make much greater efforts not to attract the attention of regulatory bodies.

*Stigmatization of Non-State Institutions*

Scientific institutions that have the status of foreign agent fall into a separate category. Universities do not seek to develop cooperation with such institutions. This is not yet true of those state universities with "special status," which are freer to choose partners, nor of cases of long-term cooperation between foreign agents and state universities. However, foreign agents' search for new partners and their expansion of cooperation with universities is becoming difficult.

### 3.3. Changing the Format of Relations between the Scientific Community and the Government

*Confrontation vs. Cooperation*

The government is increasingly perceived in the scientific community not as an ally, but as an opponent, if not an enemy: *"The government is terrible"* and *"scary" (No. 16).* In their narratives, our interlocutors make frequent comparisons with the Soviet past and Soviet practices of persecution targeted at dissent and putting pressure on science.

These changes are especially noticeable in comparison with the 1990s and early 2000s, when scientific institutions and universities had great autonomy and the government barely interfered in their work.

At the level of universities and institutes, the confrontation between science and the government is taking place in the relationship of professors/researchers with the administration. These relationships are increasingly characterized by confrontation and struggle. University administrations (especially where there has been a change of leadership) are increasingly a conduit of government interests and take little account of employees' interests.

*A Crisis of Confidence*

We can talk about a crisis of confidence between scientists and the state institutions that govern science and education. The authorities, represented by officials, do not trust scientists and express their distrust in an ever-increasing number of formal controls (*"We do not trust what you are doing; you are probably deceiving us. And we must control*

*it" (No.16)*). Scientists, in turn, do not trust officials—whose actions are driven by bureaucratic logic and not by the interests of science—to be competent.

Confidence, however, persists within scientific communities at the interpersonal level, since scientists still know *"who is who" (No.23)* In some scientific institutions with strong academic traditions and high ethical standards, where former leaders have not been replaced with "Varangians," the confidence that exists within scientific teams has been preserved and is carefully guarded. Confidence within the academic community remains a tool to help resist bureaucratic pressure from the government.

*Minimization of Feedback Channels and of the Ability to Influence Government Policy*

Our interlocutors note the steady minimization of feedback channels between the scientific community and the government. On the one hand, this is due to the poor performance of the formal institutions that represent the interests of the academic community in governmental bodies. Councils and commissions under the governmental bodies are only advisory in nature. The principles according to which they were organized do not reflect the diversity of interests and opinions of the scientific community.

On the other hand, it is said that the government itself is showing less and less interest in the opinion of the scientific community. Government policy is increasingly being shaped at the management levels of the top echelons of power without regard for the opinion of scientists.

Direct communication channels, such as petitions, letters, and protests, are also becoming less effective, as the government often ignores such forms of feedback.

### 3.4. Informality Dominates

The dominance of the informal over the formal is once again gradually being asserted. The strengthening of government control over scientific institutions and the establishment of unrealistic bureaucratic indicators has led to more and more *"imitation of activities*" for the purposes of scientific institutions' reports.

> *There are more and more situations where we say: "No, this is formal, but, in fact, it is not true. No, this is what we have so far, but formally, the picture is different" and this, it seems to me, is the main result of the last 10 or 12 years of our relations with the government (No. 23).*

Practices and knowledge gained during the 70 years of the Soviet power are employed: *"We find all kinds of ways out, and ways to act outside the stupid rules*." But the *"colossal human and financial resources"* that are currently being spent on bending the formal rules deserve to be used in a more productive way (No. 23).

The dominance of the informal is becoming increasingly evident in ideological relations between the government and the social sciences. Since ideological prohibitions are not openly articulated by the government, acceptance of the rules occurs at the informal level: *"everyone understands everything" (No. 24), "it is better not to stick your head out again" (No. 23), "you can be fired, you can be imprisoned, if you get in the middle" (No. 17).* Formal reasons unrelated to the real reasons for dismissal are also used to punish political activity.

Uncertainty and informality become a breeding ground for self-censorship. Some respondents say that the once-liberal atmosphere of universities has been replaced by an atmosphere of fear in proportion to the uncertainty and informality of the rules at a given institution.

## Conclusion: Expectations and the Prognosis for the Future

Although a question about expectations was absent from the interview guide, sometimes it was logical to continue conversations with respondents by asking about expectations. Indeed, many, though not all, respondents voluntarily started discussing the future without being prompted by a special question from the interviewer.

*Low Horizon for Planning*

It is difficult to talk about the future in the context of uncertainty about government policy, a lack of strategic guidelines, and a generally unstable political situation. The lack of institutional prospects makes it difficult to develop strategies for development. Today *"it is more important to support what we have [now] and respond appropriately to new challenges" (No. 1).*

*Low Odds of Political Regime Change*

The gloomiest expectations are associated with the growing pressure of the political regime. The social sciences and humanities are more dependent on the political situation than others. The ongoing strengthening of the Russian political regime leaves no hope for positive change. There are some fears that *"what is possible now will not be acceptable tomorrow" (No. 14).* The ideological pressure on the *"social and humanitarian space"* will increase, *"Western influence will be limited by the government,"* and *"the academic community will gradually die" (No. 21).*

*Improvement of International Relations*

Respondents' hopes are pinned on the lifting of sanctions and the normalization of international relations, which should also have a positive effect on relations between science and the government. *"When our relations with America improve, for various reasons and different purposes, liberalization occurs in the country" (No. 16).*

*Education and Science are Needed by the State*

Less pessimistic forecasts are based on the fact that *"even under the current political regime,"* certain rational measures can be taken to reduce the bureaucratic burden on science, *"and this is already a relief" (No. 16).* The main hope is that education and science are needed by the state. Therefore, common sense should prevail in relations between science and the state.

*"Perhaps the moment will come when there will be a certain awareness that this kind of over-statehood … will hinder and slow down [further development of science]" (No. 24).*

## *APPENDIX 1. List of Respondents*

| *Interview* | *Professional affiliation* |
|---|---|
| **Group 1: «Victims»** | |
| # 1 | Head of Research Center |
| # 2 | Lecturer at regional university |
| # 3 | Former lecturer at federal university |
| # 4 | Former lecturer at regional university |
| # 5 | Former lecturer at federal university |
| # 6 | Journal editor |
| # 7 | HSE graduate |
| # 8 | Former lecturer at federal university |
| # 9 | Former lecturer at regional university |
| **Group 2: Employees of state scientific organizations** | |
| # 11 | Former dean of the university |
| # 24 | Dean of the university |
| # 12 | Director of the Russian Academy of Science institute |
| # 13 | Director of the Russian Academy of Science institute |
| # 15 | Dean and former Vice-Rector of the University |
| **Group 3: Experts** | |
| # 17 | Director of the Research Center for Science and Education |
| # 14 | Lecturer at federal university |
| # 18 | Director of one of the divisions of the Russian Academy of Sciences |
| **Group 4: Employees of non-governmental organizations** | |
| # 22 | Rector of a non-state university |
| # 23 | Head of department of a non-state university |
| **Group 5: Public figures, members of professional associations** | |
| # 19 | Head of the trade union |
| # 20 | Public figure, one of the founders of *Dissernet* |
| # 16 | University professor, member of a public organization |
| # 10 | Activist of the trade union of university solidarity |
| # 21 | *Dissernet* Activist |