

Are Russian academics illiberal?

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Severing ties with Russian universities will do the opposite of what's intended, and strengthen Putin's isolationist supporters

In a recent open letter, more than 200 rectors of Russian universities [expressed unconditional support](#) for Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine. The letter shocked many Western scholars. The European University Association [suspended](#) the membership of universities who signed the letter, and the breaking of academic ties with Russia has increased.

But the cost of severing these ties is clear: any measures imposed against Russian academics are likely to damage the more liberal camp while benefiting their more conservative opponents.

The rectors' letter shattered the view of academics as the part of Russian society closest to the Western middle classes in attitudes and values – the people who, in general, [oppose the authoritarian tendencies of the Russian state](#). Now, they're being seen by some as the regime's accomplices.

Both views regard Russian academics as a homogenous group, when in reality there are political differences – between, roughly speaking, conservative isolationists and internationally focused liberals.

Administrators vs academics

The political stances of high-level administrators at Russian universities are not representative of the academic community. Indeed, the divide between scholars and administrators is much wider than in most European countries.

Rectors often start out as academics, but the path to leading administrative positions drives them away from their peers early in their careers. As [recent analysis](#) shows, those who become rectors usually serve for many years in less important administrative posts, such as vice-rectors.

They have to spend most of their careers cultivating relations with previous rectors, ministerial bureaucrats and local political elites, and usually become members of the ruling party, [United Russia](#).

The Russian Ministry of Education and Science and regional governors have long influenced the selection process for rectors (once a position voted on by faculty). Most rectors are directly appointed, giving them even more reason to regard themselves as state bureaucrats rather than representatives of the university community, and part of an isolated group, enjoying luxurious – by Russian academic standards – salaries.

The cost of political non-compliance is high: any expression of disloyalty could lead to their losing, first, their post, and then possibly their freedom. A recent [study](#) found that 6% of rectors wound up in prison, usually due to alleged financial crimes committed while in office – the fate of many

bureaucrats leaving public service.

Political polarisation

It is misleading to think of Russian academics as a single community sharing certain attitudes or values. In the social sciences, at least (a discipline that has ballooned in recent years), the academic community is deeply divided along political lines.

In a 2018 [study](#), 251 sociologists in St Petersburg (approximately two-thirds of the total) were asked about who offered them a job, whom they collaborated with on research projects and so on, as well as their political opinions.

The conclusion was that they were likely to maintain academic ties with those sharing the same political views. Individuals with different political preferences clustered at different organisations, and had varying views on whether Russian social scientists should integrate more closely with global science, or develop their own sociology.

On average, sociologists are more liberal than the Russian population. Following Russia's 2008 war with Georgia, [87% of Russians](#) believed that Russia was right to intervene in Georgia; only 6% disagreed. Among sociologists, 61% agreed, while 34% disagreed. Even more tellingly, in 2009, among St Petersburg sociologists, 41% supported same-sex marriage, while 57% were against (nationally, the idea never rose above 5% in support).

This pattern of political polarisation is present in other disciplines. Last autumn, more than 6,000 Russian economists were asked to nominate Russian economists who "had made the most important contributions to economic research in the last five years".

Nominations tended to fall along political lines. For example, of those who nominated the liberal Sergei Guriev – former rector of Moscow's New Economic School and currently professor at Sciences Po in Paris – 61% also strongly disagreed with the idea of state surveillance of emails and other online information. By contrast, of those who nominated Sergey Glaziev – a Russian nationalist politician and advisor to Vladimir Putin – only 43% were against online surveillance.

As one might expect, members of the liberal flank of Russian academia are currently active in the anti-war movement, signing [petitions](#), [raising funds to help Ukrainian refugees](#) and taking part in street protests. Equally predictably, conservative academics are publicly expressing their support for the invasion.

University rankings

Since the 1990s, the conservative and liberal camps have competed for influence on Russian science and research policy. Until recently, the liberal group had – paradoxically – greater support from the Russian government.

The reasons were twofold. First, Russian state bureaucrats suspected the older, more conservative establishment of being inefficient or simply corrupt – a suspicion based on numerous stories of misconduct, from plagiarism to selling fraudulent degrees.

Second, the liberal camp was able to provide what their competitors could not. The Russian state regards science (alongside sport and art) as a matter of international prestige and an instrument of soft power, and is extremely sensitive to how its academics compare with those from other countries.

The authorities' major aim in recent years has been to get Russian universities into leading international rankings. This requires publishing extensively in international journals. The isolationist academic camp is far removed from the global intellectual scene, so the bureaucrats had to turn to their liberal opponents, however disagreeable the latter's political beliefs were.

Not surprisingly, conservatives were the most ardent critics of rankings and numeric performance indicators, while liberals favoured them. Such measurements buttressed the liberal camp. This influence, which is obviously limited, permitted certain levels of academic freedom at leading research universities, as well as openness to global intellectual currents – and probably contributed to the fact that university-educated younger people are by far the least likely to say that they “support the special military operation in Ukraine”.

But these liberals are currently being undermined by Western sanctions. QS and Times Higher Education (THE) – two of the three most important providers of university rankings – have announced that they will not collaborate with Russian institutions.

THE has promised to “take steps to ensure that Russian universities are given less prominence in the rankings” – thus giving the conservative side a nearly unbeatable argument as to why these rankings should be ignored. After Clarivate, the owner of a major citation index, said it will stop including new Russian and Belarusian journals, the Russian government announced that indexed papers will no longer be regarded as a performance target.

In the same vein, stopping collaborations with institutions overseas weakens the position of international-minded scholars in Russia. As well as losing income, they also lose value in the eyes of their superiors, increasing the probability of them being fired. They are also losing professional ties and opportunities for building international research profiles, which could serve them if they have to emigrate. The costs of voicing dissent are rising.

Severing academic ties with Russia is likely to tip the balance of power in favour of the conservative wing, consolidating its control over universities and research institutes and silencing their liberal opponents. Surely, this is the opposite of what is intended.

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