

RECONCEPTUALIZING ACADEMIC FREEDOM: INSIDE AND OUTSIDE PERSPECTIVES.

Introduction

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Смутные времена, непробудная страна – время для говоруна.

Troubled times, dormant country—time for a talker.

—Joker James, Russian singer and journalist in exile

This issue of *Laboratorium* took almost a year to prepare, with complex negotiations with the authors to find theoretical perspectives and appropriate language. Reviewers disagreed with each other, and the editors struggled to formulate recommendations and maintain the integrity of the issue. These practical difficulties highlight the multifaceted complexities of studying academic freedom, which are intellectual, empirical, and methodological in nature.

First, there is the epistemic complexity of studying science and academics. The usual defamiliarization and reflexivity of researchers' subjective position are difficult because they are routinized and embedded in other practices (Laudel and Gläser 2007). Another problem is the comparability of scholarly practices and objects of study in different disciplines (Gläser and Laudel 2015). Moreover, the level of scholar's expertise and success affects their assessment of the organization's situation and power dynamics during the data collection (Gläser and Laudel 2009). This complicates efforts to generalize findings across fields, regional contexts, and academic hierarchies.

Second, there is a lack of empirical data: Mostly, only information on democratic countries and aggregated data from higher education indices and statistics are available. Often, in the most complex or unusual cases of violations of academic freedom, we have access to only a small number of qualitative studies and speculative conclusion with broad generalizations (Altbach 2001). We have little understanding of other readings of academic freedom—for example, in religious states and states with rigid secular ideologies. We know little about the processes that occur in states for which we have little panel data. This makes new work on this topic more relevant, but it also makes it more difficult to generate hypotheses and triangulate results.

Third, latent power dynamics in universities complicate empirical analysis. Identifying the balance of power in individual disciplines and universities requires a deep dive into the situation. As large organizations, universities effectively apply decoupling and mimicry to new emerging practices (Song, Chu, and Xu 2021). For example, in Russia, in addition to official university leadership, other, informal or even hidden, networks and nodes of authorities suddenly appear at universities—governors, heads of local enterprises, consultants from the Shchedrovitsky Circle (a Marxist discussion circle from Moscow), business coaches, Cossack atamans, and police representatives from universities' security departments. Political processes hidden from view distort the formal indicators of the organization, adding to the complexity of organizing data collection and comparing organizations.

Fourth, multiple processes of social change collide and come together in the university. The modern university is a collision of multiple trends: massification of education (Smolentseva et al. 2018), student-centeredness, neoliberalism (Oliver and Sapir 2017), neo-managerialism (Alvesson and Spicer 2016), humanization and individualization of education (Heffernan, Wilkins, and Butt 2018). In Russia, as in a number of other authoritarian regimes, these trends clash with authoritarian modernization, patriotic youth policies, and outright censorship. The trends are contradictory, offering different sets of values and norms. As a result, their collision creates difficulties for academic integrity and also for studies of academic practices and rights.

Finally, there is the difficulty of identifying a distinct subject of academic freedom research that is separate from the study of human rights, the academic profession, and the university as an organization. Research on academic freedom is closely linked to the work of various stakeholders: human rights foundations, trade unions, think tanks, and professional associations (Andreopoulos 2020). In Russia, this is an emerging field with no established research agenda, which adds another layer of difficulty in defining priorities and separating studies from human rights reports.

The articles in this issue explore how authoritarian influences shape scholarship and higher education. Topics range from the impact of state ideology and censorship laws to case studies of authoritarian organizational management. The authors reveal that restrictions on academic freedom often operate in nonlinear ways: Bans do not immediately alter norms and practices, and the removal of restrictions does not instantly foster demand for new freedoms. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of the nuanced and evolving nature of academic freedom in restrictive contexts.

Dmitry Dubrovskiy reconstructs the history of ideas about academic freedom and the reactive nature of the research agenda. His main point is to demonstrate the relationship between the obstacles created by various actors (church, government, private donors) to academic inquiry and the concurrent development of both the concept of academic freedom and its study. The overview traces the earliest attempts to establish academic freedom as independence from the church, then examines the classical Humboldtian conception and the American interpretation. The author also explores how wars and other global catastrophes have influenced the academic free-

dom discourse, particularly the role of the two world wars and the use of academic boycotts in response to political events, concluding that academic rights closely parallel human rights in this regard: To paraphrase Alan Dershowitz, these rights are rooted in the recognition of historical wrongs. Dubrovskiy further emphasizes that global trends in academic freedom and its limitations are highlighted by relatively new initiatives, especially those that attempt to situate academic freedom within specific national and political contexts. The challenge posed by the particularism of academic freedom is relatively recent and has become a popular subject of reflection and study. The author summarizes that this duality—academic freedom as both a prerequisite for scholarly work and an object of critical scrutiny—underpins social science engagement with the topic. It highlights the concept's fragility and resilience under political and institutional pressures. The essay ultimately shows how the application and study of academic freedom are gradually taking shape over time.

An empirical study of repressive practices against academics with antiwar views after the outbreak of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine in February 2022 is presented in the article by Ksenia Fedosova and Tatiana Kuksa. Amid escalating state control and repression, universities have become key instruments in enforcing ideological conformity, often concealed by bureaucratic procedures and informal coercion. On the one hand, the authors describe the toolkit of university administrators: internal and external denunciations, routine surveillance, intimidation, disciplinary talks, and forced dismissal. On the other hand, they examine the responses of academics themselves—campaigns of mutual support on social media and the rallying of colleagues around the affected researcher to help them remain at the university or continue their career after dismissal. These dynamics not only reflect broader societal shifts but also reveal the precarious position of academics navigating a system increasingly aligned with state imperatives. The study combines the complexity of unraveling localized power dispositions with the difficulty of relying on existing theory and empirical research due to the specificity of the context.

The article by Elizaveta Belkina explores the understanding of academic freedom by Russian students in social sciences at the undergraduate level. The author shows how the current environment of Russian education and the peculiarities of specific organizations affect learning. The key element of academic freedom for students is the right to choose any topic for research and discussion, including scientifically and politically controversial ones. An important element of freedom of learning is freedom of expression in a broader sense—not only in the classroom but also in other spaces and outside the university. Finally, an important element of academic freedom is the right to form student organizations and to participate in the management of one's own learning process. It is interesting to note that students speak of academic freedom in both negative and positive terms: as freedom from constraints and freedom to enjoy learning and participate in extracurricular activities and study abroad. Belkina reveals how restrictions on freedom and measures taken by professors to mitigate their effects ultimately manifest themselves in the process and outcomes of learning and expands our understanding of the possible scope of academic freedom studies.

Ivan Kislenko's study examines the evolution of ideological practices in academic writing at two institutions during late Soviet and post-Soviet times, the Academy of Social Sciences (AoSS) and the Institute of Sociology (IS), by analyzing dissertation abstracts defended there from 1988 to 1998. While the assumption that both organizations retained some ideological patterns during perestroika is partially confirmed, IS showed significantly fewer ideological elements, reflecting its more liberal orientation after its restructuring in 1988. AoSS, under stronger Communist Party control, demonstrated a more conservative ideological stance, especially in philosophy and sociology dissertations. After the collapse of the USSR, ideological formulas in academic writing gradually weakened but did not disappear entirely, with AoSS undergoing a more pronounced shift toward liberalization, influenced by its transformation into the Russian Presidential Academy. "Objective criteria," as the author calls them—for example, references to Marxism-Leninism—persisted longer than "subjective criteria" (criticism of bourgeois society or science or, inversely, of Soviet society and ideology or perestroika/liberalization), highlighting the ritualistic nature of these ideological elements. The findings underscore the continuing impact of Soviet-era practices on post-Soviet academic traditions, which have been shaped by the broader political, economic, and administrative transformations of the period. The study demonstrates the difficulty of analyzing the influence of ideology because of its dual nature as both form and content and the problem of the clash of different trends—organizational, ideological, or disciplinary—in scientific organizations.

Alexander Osipov's essay reflects on the precarious conditions of research staff in hybrid (research- and practice-oriented) institutions and analytical centers, where academic freedom is increasingly overshadowed by issues of job insecurity and institutional performance. Precarity manifests itself in short-term contracts, exclusion from decision-making, and administrative discretion in the renewal of contracts, all of which inhibit creative work. These conditions are not solely the result of managerialism or austerity but are reinforced by institutions that prioritize symbolic status and rent extraction over knowledge production. Founders and administrators often focus on public visibility and quantitative metrics, favoring short-term, donor-driven projects and undermining long-term scholarly agendas. This trend aligns with broader societal shifts toward neoliberal values, where academic workers internalize precarious norms, individualize career strategies, and neglect collective demands for better working conditions. This framework highlights the critical need to examine the symbolic markets and rent-based relationships that shape institutional practices and their implications for academic freedom and knowledge production. The essay combines the epistemic complexity of analyzing and comparing the experiences of different researchers and deconstructing the effects of different trends within a scientific organization.

The study of academic freedom is a relatively young field. The development of the concepts of positive and negative freedom in the field of academic freedom study and the conflict between research, teaching, and social impact in advocating for academic freedom remain to be explored. It is important that academic freedom be

studied without exoticizing individual cases, and with a focus not only on developed democracies but also on those countries where higher education is developing in a nondemocratic context. This can shed light on the emergence of democratic processes within individual organizations of higher education and scholarship and their subsequent impact on the external environment.

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