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LIBERALIZATION OF RUSSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE GLOBAL ERA: CHALLENGES AND OUTCOMES

[Луговской А.В. Либерализация российского высшего образования в глобальную эпоху: вызовы и результаты]

It is discussed the issue of liberalization in Russian higher education. The research aims at looking into the problem of liberal education from the perspective of global challenges and local responses, which lead to controversy. The main outcome of such discrepancies is dehumanization of Russian higher education, which serves as an effect of knowledge economy and practices of interpretivism in governance. The conclusion drawn is that true liberalization cannot be implemented with the educational system leaning towards extreme forms, either of the world globalism influence or Russian traditionalism. The independently thinking and ideologically free human should be placed in the center.

Key words: liberalization, globalization, liberal education, humanities, dehumanization.

Globalisation as we see it now has affected every sphere of human activity. Education, and higher education (HE) in particular, is no exception to that. The educational landscape presents a vivid example of how global processes are evolving. The process of globalisation has been intensified due to the implementation of the Bologna process in Russian HE. The Bologna process has overall facilitated the liberalisation of local educational systems, primarily through the expansion of liberal arts programmes [31; 5]. However, in the past few years the country has changed its course towards nationalisation and partial isolation, which challenged the newly emerged traditions. The challenges have especially affected liberal education from the point of view of both its form and content. The article aims at analysing the reasons behind the process of Russian HE dehumanisation and estab-

lishing the effects and outcomes of the newly emerged processes through the lens of global tendencies. The article will examine the controversy in Russian liberal and humanities education. It will first define the terms and theoretical underpinnings used. After that it will look at the background of liberal education in Russia and will go on to discuss the external and internal reasons that undermine true liberal education and humanisation both in educational practice and theory.

The research is methodologically underpinned by the constructivist ontological position postulating that social phenomena are constructed ideas that are reviewed and reworked by the social actors [20, p. 25]. The piece of research uses secondary sources as a data collection method. As to data analysis, observation and textual data analysis were employed.

Liberal education in the context of globalisation

To start with, it is crucial to define what is meant by liberal education, global-isation and how these notions are related. A Dictionary of Education defines liberal education as follows: an education which liberates the pupil or student from errors in their thinking by encouraging the acquisition of genuine knowledge through a process of rational thought and reflection. The liberal knowledge thus gained is seen as quite distinct from the types of learning which are acquired through practice or whose purpose is to equip the learner with the ability to carry out particular tasks or activities [6].

Although it is now argued that liberal education is not tied to particular subject matter [8, p. 4], traditionally this kind of education is supposed to include liberal arts, among which the humanities (languages, literature, philosophy, art, music, history and religion) play an important role. As it is seen from the definition above, this type of education is focused on one's ability to reflect and question themselves and the world around. This article looks at liberal education as a process and product of the education provided by the humanities and liberal arts, since it is such disciplines that have traditionally focused on preparing a critically thinking, reflective and reflexive human thus giving substance and value to the idea of human, both free and independent.

When it comes to globalisation, these notions take on a different shape. Inda and Rosaldo define globalisation as 'the intensification of global interconnectedness' [10, p. 7], which means that flows of goods, people, capital and ideologies are interconnected and they go beyond national boundaries. Globalisation has had

a special impact on higher education. The problem with this notion is that there is no single understanding of it, although much research has been done into it. For Altbach globalisation is viewed in terms of broad trends that affect different spheres of life including education [1]. Some scholars emphasize that globalisation has become equal to internationalisation [30]. However, although internationalisation is related to globalisation, it is a different concept which can be viewed as a dimension within a global educational flow [13].

Most researchers argue that globalisation in education entails a reaction from local settings, and the global trends undergo transformation. It led to the introduction of such concepts as *glocal* [25], or *glonacal* [18]. The ways global trends are handled at local levels can vary. Sometimes they are subject to manipulation, interpretation, or resistance [30]. Sometimes they take a selective character. This is a common case with liberal education and the humanities. As Altbach puts it, these areas of knowledge are still largely nationally based; what may slightly change is the approaches to their interpretation or research [1].

The problem with liberal education and the humanities in the context of globalisation is that they are usually underestimated or even ignored. Globalisation became a means for national economies and educational systems to go on a race with modern technologies, quantitative achievements and other measurable indicators of success, whereby the human factor is ignored. According to Nussbaum, in the near future instead of complete and independently thinking people nations will be producing 'generations of useful machines' [21, p. 2]. In the case of Russia, the situation can even be worse. This will be discussed later.

In the core of the theoretical constructs underlying this study are two major theories: the theory of knowledge hegemony and the theory of the interpretive approach to governance. The first one is derived from the knowledge economy paradigm. This paradigm has evolved in the past few decades. What constitutes its theoretical ground is that knowledge and people who possess knowledge are crucial for development [7, p. 7). Knowledge is a new good which is produced, distributed, sold, and used as a means of power. As Coulby and Zambeta point out, 'knowledge may be becoming the world's most important and valuable trading commodity' [4, p. 39]. Since knowledge is key to education, it is placed in the centre of the educational agenda. But the problem is that this knowledge is very partially selected – what really counts is the knowledge which has certain economic or

political weight. Knowledge in this respect is hierarchic, i.e. some types of knowledge become more valuable than others. Weiler argues that in science different domains of knowledge receive unequal redistribution, with natural sciences and more "exact" forms of knowledge taking privileged positions [32]. It means that liberal sciences and the humanities are usually undermined because of their "vague" status and impracticality: they do not produce material goods and benefits, and are hard to be transformed into money.

Since today's knowledge economy deals with technology, specifically with information communication technology and marketization, it sometimes leaves no space for the human, the reflective human who asks inconvenient questions and tries to make sense of what is happening around. In this respect knowledge hegemony can be understood as the dominance of such a knowledge paradigm which pursues the aims of particular groups and elites and ignores interests of others. As Harding argues in her work, the whole academic discourse after the Second World War and the Cold War has been influenced by Western scientific rationality and technical expertise underpinned by Western governments and corporations which have often viewed other types of scientific enquiry, particularly social sciences, as an obstacle [9].

As for the second theoretical ground, interpretivism in governance, its key idea is that patterns and rules are contingent and are not always properly interpreted or translated when transferred into new settings. There can be different reasons behind this: the ideas can be misinterpreted and altered because of various assumptions, beliefs, ideologies, language and signifying practices shaped by cultural, political and other underpinnings [3].

When it comes to education, interpretivism may play a significant role. Vaira writes that 'national and local politics, economic and culture metabolize, translate and reshape the global trend in the face of their cultures, histories, needs, practices and institutional structures' [30, p. 493]. Government and educational institutions can have their vision and what they do is borrow ideas and practices from the outside and transform them to produce renovated outcomes. Knight emphasizes that institutional interpretation can go in two ways: narrow and broad. In the first case the institution tries to implement statement and directives into the already existing international dimension of its activity. In the second case statements and directives set new agendas [13, p. 16].

Liberal tradition in Russian higher education: historic background and today's context.

Liberal education is not a new phenomenon in the Russian academic reality. With the introduction of the first universities in the first half of the 18th century, the best traditions of European liberal HE, particularly German, were borrowed. The universities of that time became a platform to introduce the ideas of French Enlightenment in Russian HE through reading and discussing works by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Denis Diderot.

However, during the Soviet period, Russian HE was seriously challenged by the newly emerged trends. Saltykov names the three major features that impacted on the development of HE at that time. The first feature consisted in the fact that a big proportion of research was allocated to special scientific centres belonging to the Academy of Science. The second feature was that over the years, the structure and programmes of the Soviet HE system were dictated by the state. Education was marked by the dominance of technical and natural sciences and underrepresentation of liberal arts and the humanities. Besides, students did not have selective courses: the programmes were set once and for ever and everyone had to study for their degree for all five years (the "specialist" degree) with the same students in the same classes. Ideological dependency implies that communist and socialist ideology dominated in the whole educational space. All university students were to study the history of the communist party of the Soviet Union, but did not have access to lots of theories emerging and spreading in the West [27].

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many Eastern European countries developed a course towards democratisation and liberalisation [12, p. 2]. Although Russian HE was still tightly regulated, some new tendencies were revealed. After the introduction of the Law on Education in 1992, there was given the right to establish private universities, the number of which grew dramatically. On the one hand, they provided HE with lots of liberal arts and humanities programmes. On the other hand, the abundance of institutions led to a situation when a significant part of such institutions compromised quality assurance and was primarily focused on gaining profit [34].

The situation started to change after 2003 when Russia joined the Bologna process. Many scholars admit that the outcomes of the Bologna process for the Russian educational reality are controversial. In particular, the criticism refers

to the idea that the process has been mostly focused on organizational structures and formalism rather than on the content of education and quality assurance [28; 23]. On the other hand, the key underlying principles lying behind the Bologna process are liberal in their essence given that the word "liberal" itself means "accepting different opinions and ways of behaving" and emphasizes "a lot of personal freedom" [16, p. 867]. The fundamental principles underpinning the Bologna process had been formulated back in 1988 in *Bologna Magna Charta Universitatum*. In particular, to such principles belong the following: 'research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic powers', and that the university is 'rejecting intolerance and always open to dialogue' [17].

However, the changing agenda within the Russian society of the past few years has challenged the process of liberalising education for both economic, political, and social reasons. As liberalisation mostly concerns human values, the effects the current changes bring about are mostly of dehumanising character. The next section will be devoted to the analysis of the effects and reasons of dehumanisation and de-liberalisation of Russian HE.

Dehumanisation of higher education: what is left beyond the taboo.

First and foremost: there is a big concern among Russian educational theorists about dehumanisation of education and the crisis of the humanities. Even a quick glance at the titles of articles published in recent years can serve as proof: *The Crisis of Humanities Knowledge: Difficulties in Diagnostics* [22], *What is Happening to Humanities Education?* [24], *Humanities Education: Decay From Within* [26]. The main facets of this crisis are commercialisation, technocratisation and standardisation, which testifies to the fact that Russian HE is undergoing a critical phase underpinned by global processes.

First of all, Russian HE is oriented towards the production of a certain type of person who meets the requirements of the global marketized world. Education is viewed in terms of goods and possessions that one can have if they pay enough. The same regards the humanities. They become a kind of luxury which adds to what one has already obtained. Pokrovskii argues that 'knowledge of the humanities becomes just one more form of prestigious consumption' [24, p. 25].

Second, today's education is focused on the development of certain kinds of knowledge and skills which suit best the technocratic society. The technocratic para-

digm implies that education prepares a specialist well equipped in terms of skills and abilities to compete and contest [14, p. 46]. It uses knowledge oriented practical rationality and undermines individuality and uniqueness of the human being.

Besides, another reason behind dehumanisation is given to standardisation. Standards of quality assessment of both school graduates and university students in the form of unified tests and various quizzes became the measurement of one's academic performance. The educators emphasise that within this approach, there excluded many other important issues (such as ethics, morality, patriotism, etc.) which do not fall under qualitative measurement [14; 15].

The negative effects if studied more thoroughly point at "the invisible hand" of some globalist discourses which shape local settings. On the other hand, the local response to global challenges may also take extreme forms. For example, the message from the *Bologna Declaration* of educational co-operation as a universal value to strengthen 'stable, peaceful and democratic societies' [29, p. 1] can be regarded as ambiguous in Russia, since the whole idea of Western democracy is viewed as a threat to Russian traditional values. This enables some theorists to refer to a different concept within the globalisation framework, the concept of Westernisation, which considers globalisation as a Western, mainly American, project [11].

One should not also diminish the role of Russia's history and culture which have evolved under the strong influence of conventional traditions and values. One of such values is collectivism. The idea of collective self before the revolution of 1917 was expressed through the concept of collegiality (sobornost'), and later, in the Soviet time, through Marx's concept of the free human who is able to exist within the collective whole [19]. It inevitably challenged the idea of an individual's freedom, both personal and academic, as the social dimension of an individual's life is only one of the facets of human complexity.

As a result, today's Russian HE system is faced with competitive discourses emerging from the clash of both the outer and inner forces. Theorists' attempts to offer a solution to the problem usually result in abstract generalisations in terms of "returning to the basics" and developing "humanistic potential" [24, p. 28], or providing "fundamental knowledge" [33, p. 2541]. Educators take the idea of humanism at face value without attempting to formulate it in more precise words. But such conceptualisations may have a high degree of bias behind them. Bérubé and

Ruth argue that there is nothing timeless or universal about human knowledge: when someone claims timelessness, they move toward ideology and imperialism to defend their narrow perspective as a dominant group [2, p. 30].

What kind of human is it that serves as an ideal for those who express their concerns about de-humanisation and de-liberalisation? This seems to be a rhetorical question since to answer it one has to trace back the whole history of philosophical and anthropological thought, which simply looks impossible, at least within the limits of this article. The problem with Russian liberal and humanities education is that it offers its own model of the humanistic worldview, which appears to be controversial in its essence. But if we ignore the true essence of the liberal and humanist human, who is able to think both independently, freely and critically, we can simply throw the baby out with the bathwater and create a crossbreed who will have the worst of both worlds.

The article considered the notions of globalisation and liberal education. It has been discussed that these notions are interconnected since globalisation produces a lean toward practical and technical knowledge rather than the one developed through the humanities. The article studied the background of liberal education in Russia and revealed that it has always been challenged for both external and internal reasons. Besides, it was discussed that the problem of dehumanisation, which is viewed as part of the liberal crisis in Russian HE, takes a limited scope but produces broad generalisations.

Overall, it can be concluded that if it comes to true liberalisation, the national education system should avoid going to extremes and take into account the idea of the human themselves, independent of the conventionalities of ideologies, and able to think freely and have access to knowledge and decision making. However, for more thorough analysis one has to look into the deeper correlation between liberal education and the humanities. It would enable to specify the major sources of influences and the dominance of any of them in this discourse. Another implication would be about the nature of globalisation in Russian HE, more precisely about what is left behind the frames of globalisation and how the emerging discrepancies are reflected in Russian philosophical and educational literature.

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