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“Freedom of Academia in and out: Social Sciences and Humanities in the Time of Geopolitical Crisis” A review of the conference held at Yerevan State University on October 19-21, 2023

Ալեքսանդր Աղաջանյան, Դմիտրի Դուբրովսկի

«Ակադեմիական ազատությունը ներսում և դրսում. հասարակագիտական և հումանիտար գիտությունները աշխարհաքաղաքական ճգնաժամի պայմաններում». 2023 թ.

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CONFERENCE REVIEW

“Freedom of Academia In and Out: Social Sciences and Humanities in the Time of Geopolitical Crisis” A Review of the Conference Held at Yerevan State University on October 19-21, 2023

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The field of academic freedom includes a number of themes and approaches ranging from the “classic” issues of freedom to teach and to study; the freedom to express yourself, for both instructors and students; the freedom from external pressures initiated by both government and private actors; and through the issues of how to reconcile scientific “neutrality and objectivity” with “extramural” ethical and political agendas. The conference held on October 19-21, 2023, at Yerevan State University could not cover all these issues in an equal way, but all of them came up during the panel and round table discussions that gathered almost fifty participants around the world³.

The central issue of the conference was the effects of Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine, started in 2022, heavily affecting the situation in the academia in the region and creating new inevitable challenges. Later in this

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review, we will turn to these challenges as they were addressed at the conference. It should be said, however, that this special emphasis was treated and discussed within the larger, classical frame of the field, and we are going to start with this general frame.

A keynote speech by Kasia Kaczmarek, Research Fellow at the University of Edinburgh, focused on issues of internationalization of higher education - the process that brings into communication and exchanges that academic institutions provenant from countries with different political regimes and varying states of academic freedom. Even though academics can share similar views on their professional work, they are constraint by the relevant policies of their institutions and governments. The author suggested a few particular ways to address these constraints by including specific requirements for upholding academic freedom in collaboration agreements. Additionally, she emphasized the importance of actively researching and publishing materials on all particular cases of academic freedom violations.

Sona Balasanyan, Associate Professor at Yerevan State University and Executive Director of Caucasus Resource Research Center (CRRC), addressed the issues of academic freedom from inside the Armenian academia that went through profound if not difficult and uneven restructuring in the course of post-Soviet transition, and then, more recently, after the democratic turnover of the 2018 “Velvet revolution”. Like in Kaczmarek’s case, internationalisation brought both new guarantees and new challenges, aggravated by the complex regional geopolitical dynamic. Nutza Kobakhidze, a Georgian scholar working at Hong Kong University, looked at similar post-Soviet opportunities and constraints experienced by the Georgian academic institutions.

As said earlier, the conference on academic freedom nowadays could unlikely proceed without discussing how the catastrophe of war - in particular the Ukraine war - affects academic rights and freedoms. Most of the presentations at the conference dealt, in one or another way, with how war impacts various aspects of understanding and functioning of academic freedom in the post-Soviet space.

In another keynote address, Dmitry Dubrovsky from Charles University and CISR provided an overview of how the war has affected academic

freedom, primarily in Ukraine, due to military aggression, and in Russia due to intensified militaristic propaganda and ideological pressure. His presentation raised questions about how to define the status of scholars in exile and the new challenges facing academic freedom in the contemporary political situation.

This theme was actively discussed in various presentations at the conference that mainly focused on the impact of war on the methodology of teaching and studying social and cultural processes and their ethical dimensions. For instance, Joseph P. Wood from the University of Alabama at Birmingham dedicated his presentation to how the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and other regional conflicts have affected the practice of teaching English literature in post-Soviet higher education institutions, particularly in Armenia and Georgia. His primary focus was on foreign educators' challenges when teaching in countries with different political traditions and on the ethical dilemmas that arise in such situations.

Research, like teaching, faces constant new challenges. Svetlana Epyleva, CISR and Bremen University, discussed the ways the attitudes towards the Ukraine war have been studied, during the last months, in a few Russian provincial regions, posing a fundamental issue of how a social scholar, working with this material, can - or should s/he? - keep an “ivory tower” academic neutrality putting one’s civil position aside. She came up with a strategy of holding researcher’s political positioning while keeping a neutral communication with the respondents with different views (for example, supporting the Russian invasion in Ukraine). Olga Brednikova, a researcher from CISR-Russia, in her presentation highlighted the same dilemma: indeed, the war poses significant challenges to methods and ethics in field research. This includes, for example, ethical considerations when studying people who have recently experienced tragedy; the distinction between research and volunteer work; and the critical question of whether Russian researchers can interview refugees from Ukraine.

A similar issue was addressed in the presentation by Iryna Maidanik from the Institute for Demography and Social Studies, National Academy of Science of Ukraine. She discussed how the war altered the migration landscape within Ukraine and shifted the focus of migration research. Oleg

Reut from the University of Eastern Finland also addressed complications of the research methods in the study of transborder memory studies, in a situation when Russian-Ukrainian conflict has dramatically challenged ethical premises of research and questioned the prospects of future reconciliation and “common memory” between people of the two nations.

The increased state control over Russian universities became a topic of discussion in the presentation of Darya Geraschenko, a researcher from the European University at St. Petersburg. She examined the news feeds of the websites of several universities. She established a connection between the level of their promotion of pro-war news and their degree of dependence on the state for funding. Universities heavily reliant on state funding more actively published pro-war news, while universities involved in international exchanges were less so.

Tatiana Kuksa, an independent scholar, and Ksenia Fedosova, Academic Bridges Lab, touched upon the issue of intensified ideological pressure in Russian universities, mainly focusing on the structure and logic of such pressure. They highlighted how formal and informal pressure mechanisms on the Russian academic community intersect. Marina Bezmaternykh, Groza Project, specifically discussed Russian universities' practices in violating student activists' rights and examined the resistance against the dominant authoritarian discourse, which is emerging in Russian universities today. Continuing this theme, Ester Gallo and Cristina Mazzero from the University of Torino compared student activism related to repression in Turkey and Belarus. They showed how the demand for students' agencies in academia is a part of a broader issue of academic rights and freedoms.

Total state control over the social sciences creates a sense of suffocation, particularly for public sociology. Professor Elena Zdravomyslova from the European University of St. Petersburg touched upon this issue in her presentation, discussing strategies that public sociology can employ in such situations. Given that this situation threatens the existence of objective sociological research, the author suggests possible “survival methods” in both research and teaching in this hostile environment, including using alternative platforms, coded language, or emigration. Illustrating these same

challenges for social scientific research in this new situation of ideological pressure, Arseny Verkeev from Ruhr University analyzed how sociological surveys in Russia have become tools for authoritarian propaganda and the legitimation of military actions, and explored the ways of getting an objective picture in opinion polls when both sociologists and respondents face restrictions on freedom.

Elena Pavlova and Viacheslav Morozov, both from Tartu University, also explored the concept of hidden resistance, framed as the search for potential strategies. Referring to the famous concept of James Scott, they found such a resistance strategy in "hidden transcripts," which represent a form of intellectual response to harsh repression, often employed by the marginalized and oppressed.

Emigration, as has been stated in the discussions, is another response to authoritarian pressure. One of the significant consequences of the departure of anti-war scholars and educators from Russia has been the emergence of many "independent researchers" who cut from their home institutions and are not affiliated with those in host countries. Dmitry Rudenkin from the Academic Bridge Lab made several observations regarding how this status of "independence" affects the freedom of academic research; he also identified major problems related to this status: the issue of funding and the problem of identification. Julia Sineokaya, Director of the recently created Independent Institute of Philosophy in Paris, represented a possible way the emigrated scholars, driven from their home institutions by the ideological critics (in this case, in Russia), can institutionalize themselves into a new community abroad. Sineokaya's account of "patriotic" anti-westernist assault against the Russian Institute of Philosophy, which led to the emigration of a few scholars, resembled the examples of para-scientific theories blossoming under Russia's current regime, analyzed by Ilia Kukulin from Amherst College in his paper. One of such examples was the newly created "theory of destructology" that posits the opposition of "Russian traditional values" to those harmful foreign ideas that threaten the nation's spiritual health. "Theories" of this kind, when tacitly supported by the authorities, are a true danger to academic freedom.

Another important question discussed in the conference panels and round tables, was the one on how prepared the Russian academia is for the post-colonial agenda after the war in Ukraine led to an explosion of post-imperial and post-colonial reflections. Viktoriia Poltoratskaia from Central European University answered this question negatively based on her interviews. Her research allows for an assessment of the speech strategies chosen by the respondents: the "Russia as a victim" strategy, the "evil Russia" strategy, and the "business as usual" strategy. Importantly, all these strategies fall short of a critical post-colonial reflection.

Alexander Vileykis from Almaty Management University explored examples of how the Russian academia works, in fact, as a colonizing institution, within the frame of Russia's Kazakhstan policy. His presentation examined how academic cooperation is used by Russia to increase control and deepen inequality between the Kazakhstan and Russian higher education systems. Sergey Golunov from the same Kazakh university discussed the leading schools of international relations research in Russia and Kazakhstan, especially while relating to, or criticizing their own government's foreign policies, and he found many similarities.

In contrast, Gleb Yarovoy from the University of Eastern Finland presented a different reflection on the issue of colonialism, showing how the Russian academia itself can be seen as "subaltern," dependent on the Western science, and, consequently, how Russian academics can be seen as *both* colonizers and colonized. Meanwhile, Teodor Gerber from the University of Wisconsin talked about the current prospects of Russian studies in the United States and how decolonization is perceived as a possible goal within this field. He noted, however, that according to his research, a significant portion of American instructors do not consider this task a priority, while, in fact, many believe that decolonization has already been "to some extent" accomplished.

Overall, the conference raised several significant questions and identified a range of topics for ongoing discussion.

The conference showed, first of all, how the continuing political turbulence worldwide affects the work of academic scholars and university professors, especially within the fields of social and human sciences. While

strategically, in the long run, the scientific objectivity continues to be a golden dream and a yardstick of responsible teaching and research, the academia is in no way an “ivory tower” isolated from the complex life around it, and every academic faces his/her own choice to correlate the research with ethical dilemmas and political agendas.

This problem of academic (in)dependence is closely related with the concept of academic freedom: in fact, the claim of freedom requires reflexivity about how this freedom can be perceived and used. The freedom of teaching and research can be limited from both outside - for example, when autocratic institutions oppressively restrict it, as it is now the case in Russia and many other places - and from inside, because every researcher and teacher face internal hindrances that stem from conscious or unconscious biases; in many cases, these biases can also be framed as public positioning and even moral obligation. It goes without saying that this kind of dilemma acquires a particular sharpness and complexity in the times of societal and geopolitical conflicts. The problem is fundamental - it is fundamental for academia but in fact it brings us to the general issue of objectivity and personal integrity that cannot be treated at length at this review.

Secondly, at a more “technical” level, the conference raised the problem of the relevance of research methods, in the social sciences and humanities, in times when the access to sources is limited - either because of the war, such as the war in Ukraine, or because of the political and ideological limits and pressures imposed by the regimes, or finally because the potential respondents/informants within the war-torn countries are unable or unwilling to freely express themselves, or convey clichés of the official hegemonic discourse rather than their own opinion.

Thirdly, the conference addressed the nature of academia as an internationalized and multicultural community, and the consequences this implies - again, in the time of obvious tensions and uncertainties. An ideal, free academia is by definition an “international” with no borders, which is, as an objective, an important stimulus; on the other hand, in reality, it is clearly never the case. Not only political borders become impenetrable during the international crises; more than this, the explicitly expressed positions, coming from within and from outside the academia, create

ruptures and mutual “canceling” of otherwise collaborating institutions (again, the example of cutting off ties between Western and Russian academics after the start of the Ukraine war comes as a fresh example). The political troubles multiply the number of those who become “independent” (as those thousands of scholars who left Russia or Belarus after 2022); this raises the issue of whether this status of non-affiliation creates more opportunities or problems for these “independent” scholars and make their research ever more “independent” in terms of the highest principles of the academic objectivity.

All these issues are not new, as they have been discussed at least since the time when the problem of academic freedom took shape in the western universities; yet the current crisis made these issues really intense and acute, both in professional terms and, in a way, even existentially problematic for some - that is, the conference such as this was somewhat more than a regular academic gathering, because it forced people to face questions they might have ignored in their previous academic career.