ANALYSIS

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May 2026

Universities in wartime Russia:

Political adaptation since the invasion of Ukraine

Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

Imprint

Publisher
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung e.V.
Godesberger Allee 149
53175 Bonn
Germany
https://www.russia.fes.de
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Editing Department
International Cooperation Department,
Russia Program of the FES

Responsibility for content and editing
Alexey Yusupov

Photo credits
Cover: Illustrations Pexels.com / Evgenia Kirpichnikova

May 2026

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Introduction

How have the positions of Russian universities evolved since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, and how are they adapting to the new political circumstances within the country? In addressing this question, we can distinguish between long-term trends observable over the past few years and the novel developments of the past year. This study examines both.

The paper begins with a review of the existing literature on universities in Russia following the outbreak of what many refer to as "the Great War". It then considers the fundamental factors that have shaped Russian higher education institutions over the long term. The central section analyses the survival and resistance strategies adopted by academic communities in response to growing authoritarianism and military censorship. The paper concludes with a brief assessment of the present situation.

Albert Hirschman's triad of *"voice, exit, and loyalty"*[1] serves as the methodological framework for the core analysis. This marketing model is particularly apt because, over the past three decades, the Russian state has subjected society – and particularly higher education institutions – to an unprecedented neoliberal experiment on human nature. In a country that had existed for decades under a planned economy, the collapse of the socialist system elevated the market and market logic to the status of a universal organising principle across all spheres of life. Universities were no exception, as the state compelled them, like everyone else, to "integrate into the market". Paradoxically, even under conditions of deepening dictatorship, market rationality continues to dominate the management and organisation of higher education. A perspective informed by market theory therefore remains relevant to the present analysis.

The empirical focus of this study is on faculties and curricula in the social sciences and humanities, particularly within Russia's most innovative and liberal higher education institutions, including the Higher School of Economics, the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, the European University at St Petersburg, the Russian State University for the Humanities, and the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences (Shaninka). It is precisely these institutions and fields that have suffered most acutely from the recent political transformations.

The author's perspective draws on 25 years of experience within Russian higher education, including service from 2010 to 2022 as head of department and later dean of the Faculty of Political Science at the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences, a Russo-British institution widely known as "Shaninka". Continuing contacts within Russia, combined with analysis of publicly available sources, provide the empirical basis for the observations and conclusions presented here.

The central argument advanced here is that the current threats to academic freedom in Russia stem from the persistent fusion of neoliberal economic policies, Soviet-era behavioural patterns and the ruling elite's uncompromising rejection of democratic values. The consequences of 24 February 2022 endanger the further dehumanisation of Russian education. Resistance to these pressures is largely passive: the academic community adapts to intensifying authoritarianism through escapism, self-censorship and quiet forms of sabotage. The authorities are increasingly forcing the European roots of Russian academia underground.

At the heart of this analysis lies an unresolved dilemma: will Putin's political system disintegrate in the coming years, or will it endure, eradicating the remaining fragments of academic freedom and liberal education in Russia? At present, no definitive answer can be given.

1 Hirschman, A.O. (1970): *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty. Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 21–43, 76–105.

Review of research on the current state of universities in Russia

The most comprehensive study of the situation in Russian higher education to date is the report by the German NGO Science at Risk, which examines the state of academic freedom in the Russian Federation.[2] The report concludes that Russia has failed to preserve the gains in academic freedom achieved during the post-Soviet period. Since the onset of Russia's war against Ukraine in 2014 – and especially since the full-scale invasion of 2022 – freedom of research and teaching has declined sharply under the combined pressure of intensified repression, ideological *perestroika* and military censorship. Academic staff and students face administrative coercion and, in some cases, criminal prosecution, while newly introduced compulsory ideological courses promote anti-Ukrainian narratives and militaristic propaganda. The rupture of ties between Russian academics and international institutions, together with the country's withdrawal from the Bologna Process, has left the academic community increasingly isolated. The process has also eroded institutional autonomy and expanded state interference in university governance through security service–linked supervisory bodies.[3]

As a result, Russian universities have become tightly controlled spaces, sustained by a distinctive infrastructure of surveillance and repression that suppresses dissent and cultivates an atmosphere of fear, gravely undermining freedom of expression.

Scholars within Russian universities have paid particular attention to the transformation of teaching and research in the social sciences. Margarita Zavadskaya and Theodore Gerber, for instance, analyse the loss of academic freedom in Russia based on interviews with sociologists conducted in the spring and summer of 2022, following Russia's unprovoked assault on Ukraine.[4]

Similarly, Igor Chirikov draws attention to the transformation of Russian universities into instruments of warfare: institutions now directly support military activities, reproduce official narratives legitimising the war and demonstrate loyalty to the regime by suppressing anti-war protests among faculty and students, thereby serving as echo chambers for state propaganda.[5]

Journalistic investigations of Russian higher education concentrate primarily on repression and the public display of pro-war sentiment within academic communities. A report by the human rights organisation OVD-Info, released in the autumn of 2024, recorded the highest number of administrative cases against academics with anti-war views – 71 – in 2022. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, 23 criminal cases have been initiated, primarily in connection with public statements about the war. However, such cases declined in 2023 and 2024,[6] mainly because university staff and students sharply reduced their public activity. The publication T-Invariant continues to monitor academic repression, documenting new cases quarterly.[7]

Meanwhile, an investigation by the émigré journal Doxa has highlighted that, under the dominance of pro-war rhetoric, the principal objective of Russian universities since 2022 has become the inculcation of patriotism.[8]

Finally, researchers Ilya Matveyev and Evgeny Roshchin highlight the "hidden transcripts"[9] of resistance within the Russian academic community. In their interpretation, this concealed resistance is as widespread as compromise, opportunism and conformity. Academic professionalism itself, particularly within the social sciences, has become a form of resistance. The pursuit of rigorous and honest scholarship, open classroom debate and professional solidarity is an enduring strategy adopted by many academics. Thus, while academic freedom in Russia has effectively ceased to exist, academic resistance endures.

2 Mierau, J. (ed.), Trubnikova E., Dubrovskiy D., Albitskii, Y. (2024): *Academic Freedom in Russia: State Repression and Its Influence on Academic Practice*. Science at Risk Monitoring Report. Berlin: Science at Risk.

3 Ibid., p. 38.

4 Zavadskaya, M. and Gerber, T. (2023): Rise and Fall: Social Science in Russia Before and After the War, in: *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 29: 108-120.

5 Chirikov, I. (2023): Weaponization of Russian Universities: A Neo-Nationalism and University Brief. Research & Occasional Paper Series, Vol. 13, p. 2. Center for Studies in Higher Education, University of Berkeley.

6 "Libo gosudarstvennoe mnenie, libo nikakogo": kak presleduyut prepodavateley, kotorym vmenili antivoennuyu pozitsiyu. OVD-Info, 1 September 2024. Available at: https://reports.ovd.info/teachers#1 (last accessed 24 October 2025).

7 Chronicles of the Persecution of Scientists No. 24. T-Invariant, 31 August 2025. Available at: https://t-invariant.org/2025/08/chronicles-of-the-persecution-of-scientists-no-24/ (last accessed 24 October 2025).

8 Reyting Z-universitetov. Doxa, 8 June 2025. Available at: https://doxa.team/articles/universities-z-ranking (last accessed 24 October 2025).

9 Matveev, I. and Roschin, E. (2025): Insights from Russia on Academic Freedom During War, in: *Academe Magazine (Winter)*. Available at: https://www.aaup.org/academe/issues/winter-2025/insights-russia-academic-freedom-during-war (last accessed 24 October 2025)

The conditions of existence of Russian universities

An examination of how Russian universities have adapted to wartime conditions must begin with a concise overview of the key factors shaping their institutional situation and educational activities. The first, and perhaps most striking, is the continued dominance of neoliberal economic policies in higher education. During the 2010s, policymakers definitively reclassified education in Russia as a service industry. The university's principal objective thus became financial self-sufficiency: generating income and ensuring profitability. This imperative extends to all university subdivisions, faculties, departments and individual academic programmes.

With Western funding expelled from the country, domestic businesses deprived of "long-term money" and state funding reduced under wartime conditions, the only remaining means of maintaining profitability has been the recruitment of fee-paying students. However, even this source of revenue is declining because of a fall in effective demand. The consequences are felt most acutely in the social sciences and humanities, many of whose programmes are being curtailed or closed altogether for financial reasons. This tendency is likely to intensify further in the years ahead.

The second major factor concerns the resurgence of Soviet-style administrative practices in the governance of education. This long-term tradition is most evident in the Ministry of Education's heightened bureaucratic control, which now requires universities to report on virtually every aspect of their operations. University administrators must seek official approval even for an individual employee's dismissal date. The personal data of all faculty members, in both state and private universities, are now recorded on a unified government-controlled web portal. Academic publications and social media activity are subject to constant monitoring by both university authorities and the state security service.

Among the measures contributing to the re-Sovietisation of higher education, particular attention should be paid to the reinstatement and expansion of ideological disciplines within all professional training programmes, irrespective of institutional type or ownership. The teaching load in history has more than doubled for all students. A new interdisciplinary course, Fundamentals of Russian Statehood, grounded in a conservative value system and promoting the notion of Russia as a "state-civilisation", has been made compulsory nationwide. In addition, many institutions have introduced Fundamentals of Military Training and a national security course. Together, these initiatives consume a substantial portion of students' classroom time, diverting their energy and attention towards highly ideological subjects that bear little relevance to their academic or personal interests. Most students, understandably, approach these courses pragmatically, attending them, passing the examinations and then forgetting all about them.

The adaptation process through Hirschman's lens

The adaptation of the Russian university community to conditions of intensified state intervention, ideological coercion and repression of dissent can be analysed in terms of Albert O. Hirschman's triad of *exit*, *loyalty* and *voice*. Within this framework, loyalty denotes acceptance of the altered rules of the game and varying degrees of compliance with them; exit refers to the abandonment or external relocation of certain activities; while voice signifies attempts to express dissatisfaction and influence change, however limited. Each of these responses is observable in Russian higher education today.

Exit

Exit strategies within Russian universities may be classified as either *soft* or *proactive*. A *soft exit* involves duplicity and quiet sabotage of state-imposed politicisation. The European University at St Petersburg, for example, now emphasises programmes deemed safe by the regulatory authorities, foregrounding art history rather than, as before, political science or sociology. *Proactive exit*, by contrast, entails creating institutional footholds abroad to preserve international academic connections. The private Synergy University, for instance, has established a branch in the United Arab Emirates. Its Dubai campus offers undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in non-political fields, such as international business, hospitality and tourism management. This tactic allows the university to maintain educational standards comparable to those of Western institutions in specific professional areas by expanding its activities into third countries.

Loyalty

The second primary mode of adaptation is loyalty, which manifests in two principal forms: *proactive* and *opportunistic*.

Proactive loyalty involves enthusiastic participation in the politicisation of academia and in aligning institutional agendas with state ideology. An example is the Ivan Ilyin Higher Political School, founded by Alexander Dugin at the Russian State University for the Humanities. According to the émigré magazine Doxa, leading exponents of proactive loyalty – so-called "Z universities" – include St Petersburg University, the Higher School of Economics and Moscow State University.[10]

Opportunistic loyalty, by contrast, centres on pursuing state-funded research projects in line with official narratives, such as studies of the "national idea" or the notion of the "global majority" in the Global South (replacing the notion of ethnic minority). It also encompasses the cultivation of partnerships with non-Western powers, notably China and India. Recent analyses indicate a marked increase in research on Chinese and Indian themes within Russian social sciences and humanities scholarship.[11]

Over the past year, instances of *proactive loyalty* have become nearly ubiquitous. In summer 2024, the predominantly émigré alumni and former staff of the European University at St Petersburg were shocked to learn that the university's leadership had purchased a military vehicle for front-line use, a gesture rewarded with an official certificate of gratitude from the army unit that received it. The act provoked widespread condemnation on émigré social media. Shortly beforehand, the university's long-standing Centre for Modernisation Studies, founded in 2008, had been closed, and its director, liberal scholar Dmitry Travin, dismissed. These developments coincided with a law-enforcement investigation into the university's possession of "extremist" literature.

Proactive loyalty has effectively become a requirement for university rectors and senior administrators, many of whom rationalise it as a means of protecting their institutions and staff, while preserving limited informal freedoms. Thus, public displays of loyalty often coexist with covert efforts to shield scholars resisting the politicisation of academic life.

Voice under constraint

The notion of voice – the articulation of dissent – remains the most constrained element of Hirschman's triad in today's Russia. Open opposition within universities is rare and fraught with risk, yet isolated examples persist.
The author is aware of cases in which local academic communities have successfully resisted the introduction of additional patriotic courses, though not the compulsory Fundamentals of Russian Statehood, now universal across institutions. In some instances, faculty and administrators have prevented the inclusion of courses such as Introduction to Military Service or History of Religion in their curricula.

10 Reyting Z-universitetov. *Doxa*, 8 June 2025. Available at: https://doxa.team/articles/universities-z-ranking (last accessed 24 October 2025).

11 Mierau, J. et al., see n 2 above, pp. 31-33.

In another example, a philosophy lecturer, obliged to teach Fundamentals of Russian Statehood but personally opposed to it, deliberately provoked denunciations from patriotic student activists at the start of the academic year, thereby securing his removal from the course, but without dismissal. He subsequently returned to research in his longstanding area of interest, far removed from the current political agenda. Such acts of resistance are fragile and opportunistic, but they do demonstrate that the voice of dissent, though subdued, has not been extinguished entirely.

In sum, opportunistic loyalty currently dominates the adaptive strategies of Russian universities under wartime conditions, with proactive loyalty steadily expanding, particularly among large or formerly liberal institutions. Soft exit remains more common than proactive exit, while voice persists only in exceptional, localised forms, often expressed through cautious sabotage or strategic retreat. Hirschman's framework thus reveals a system in which compliance and withdrawal prevail, and dissent survives only in whispers.

Forms of resistance within the academic community

How do professors and students resist the intensifying triple oppression – economic, administrative and ideological – imposed upon Russian universities? The responses of academic and student communities to these pressures may be characterised by accommodation and adaptation. Most professors and students, who privately reject the war and other actions of Vladimir Putin's regime, maintain an outward posture of loyalty while resorting to what James C. Scott has famously termed the "weapons of the weak".[12] This mode of passive resistance manifests itself through three interrelated behavioural patterns: escapism, self-censorship and sabotage.

Escapism

A widespread form of resistance takes the shape of escapism in the form of a retreat into "pure scholarship" and withdrawal from the public sphere. For many academics, particularly in the social sciences and humanities, this retreat is both an ethical refuge and a form of self-preservation. It entails focusing on narrowly specialised or apolitical research topics, avoiding public engagement and seeking intellectual autonomy within the confines of the classroom or laboratory. However, this strategy, while allowing individuals to preserve professional dignity, exacts a heavy toll on disciplines historically engaged with questions of society, politics and culture.

Self-censorship

Closely connected to escapism is the practice of self-censorship. The most common example occurs when references to what have been designated "foreign agents" or "undesirable organisations" are quietly removed from students' dissertations and publications. Such measures usually do not come from above; instead, faculty or students themselves initiate them as pre-emptive acts of caution.
As respectable researchers of the issue have observed, self-censorship arises not from explicit coercion but from the anticipation of repression.[13] Awareness of the state's boundless capacity for punitive action leads individuals to regulate their own speech and behaviour, thereby reproducing control through internalised discipline.

Sabotage

Finally, the most subtle yet significant form of academic resistance is sabotage. One striking example concerns Russia's ostensible withdrawal from the Bologna Process following the invasion of Ukraine. In 2022, the Russian government announced its intention to abandon the two-tier system of undergraduate and master's degrees, and the Ministry of Education subsequently issued an order halting admission to these programmes from 2025. In practice, however, the reform has been implemented mainly in name only. The two-tier structure continues under new labels: "basic higher education" has replaced the undergraduate level, and "specialised higher education" has replaced the master's degree. This semantic sleight of hand preserves the institutional and curricular framework of the Bologna model, leaving open the possibility of a swift reintegration into the European higher education system should the political situation change.

To sum up, resistance within Russian academia today is primarily passive and adaptive rather than confrontational. Through escapism, self-censorship and quiet bureaucratic sabotage, faculty and students sustain fragments of intellectual autonomy while navigating an environment of pervasive fear and control. These "weapons of the weak" do not overthrow the system, but they do prevent its total colonisation of academic life, allowing space, however limited, for the preservation of professional integrity and critical thought.

12 Scott, J.C. (1987): *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press, pp. 28-47.

13 Roshchin, E. (2025): Professorial Silence: Academic Freedom, Domination, and Self-Censorship in Contemporary Russia, in: *The Journal of Politics*. Available at: https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/736025 (last accessed 24 October 2025).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is worth assessing the prospects for the development of university education in Russia if Putin manages to retain power for another decade or longer. Given all the factors outlined above, one may predict the final decline of the social sciences and humanities, predetermined by the ideological pressure exerted by the state and the decline in the population's purchasing power.

The reduction in funding and the drive toward curricular standardisation have led to a deterioration in the quality of education, particularly in the social and human sciences. The introduction of new ideological and militaristic courses, along with a sharp increase in the number of hours devoted to teaching history at Russian universities, has, in the short term, resulted in the collapse of a humanities education system that had been developing for decades. Thus, last year saw the near-total hollowing out of philosophy teaching in Russian universities. Some universities have now reduced the general course in this discipline to just ten lectures, offering half as pre-recorded podcasts and delivering the other half online. In effect, this means the destruction of philosophy as a subject, once a core component of higher education and a prerequisite for all academic specialisations. Universities have now reassigned the teaching hours formerly allocated to philosophy to new, ideologically driven courses, while standardisation has trivialised the discipline.

Respondents from Russia note a continuing decline in the prestige of university education as such. An increasing number of applicants now prefer colleges – vocational institutions offering training in skilled trades – to universities. The former popularity of journalism and law has waned under conditions of restricted freedom of speech and the absence of the rule of law, as well as because of the peculiar dynamics of the labour market. The younger generation of school-leavers now tend to seek employment in the IT sector or to earn a living through manual labour.

Overall, under the combined influence of ideological and market forces, one can expect a further comprehensive dehumanisation of Russian education. The full scale of the impending catastrophe will become apparent only when it has reached its logical conclusion.

About the author

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The Russian system of higher education is losing its academic freedom and humanistic substance: universities now serve as instruments of ideological control and militaristic propaganda, leading to the dehumanisation of higher education.

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Universities adapt to authoritarian conditions through Hirschman's triad of "loyalty, exit, and voice", where opportunistic and proactive loyalty dominates, while "voice" and forms of hidden resistance remain marginal and risky.

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Professors and students survive by using the "weapons of the weak" – escapism, self-censorship, and sabotage – which reflect the broader condition of the Russian academic environment as a space of passive resistance to dictatorship.

Further information on this topic can be found here:
↗ **www.fes.de**

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