

Quasi-Feudalism in Higher Education? RECTORS AND POLITICS IN RUSSIA

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The rectors of higher education institutions in Russia hold important academic positions, ones that tend to come with social, financial, and political benefits. Due to the scale of many Russian institutions, the number of people deferential to rectors can equal the population of small towns. As such, rectors sometimes can wield semi-autocratic powers. This memo examines the role of Russian rectors within their own universities, the influence they have in local political environments, and their relations with federal higher education authorities. Empirically, this memo is partially based on an analysis I conducted of the biographies of 1,060 rectors of Russian universities and educational institutions.

The System

The Russian president appoints the rectors of the country's two main universities, Moscow State University and St. Petersburg State University, while the prime minister appoints rectors of all nine federal universities.¹ In addition, the heads of military academies and some other specialized universities are appointed by their corresponding ministries. In the rest of Russia's universities and institutions, rectors are elected by staff and student representatives. However, incumbent rectors tend to have sufficient informal power to secure a loyal majority in electoral assemblies. In many cases, alternative candidates are just puppets of the frontrunners who exist only to make the process technically valid. One could say that the autocratic management system of Russian universities is quasi-feudal. This manifests itself as one might expect: through

¹ The list of federal universities includes: Baltic (Kaliningrad), Far Eastern (Vladivostok), Kazan (Volga Region), North Caucasian (Stavropol), North-Eastern (Yakutsk), Northern (Arctic) (Arkhangelsk), Siberian (Krasnoyarsk), Southern (Rostov-on-Don), and Ural (Yekaterinburg). Federal universities are ostensibly leading universities in Russia in both education and research and receive special financial support from the federal government. In fact, they suffer from the same problems as "ordinary" universities, including over-centralization of governance, low salaries for academics, corruption, clientelism, and a lack of academic mobility.

arrogant and disrespectful treatment of subordinates, the use of luxury items (bought by their universities) at the workplace,² and pressure on staff members who disobey their informal orders (such as giving high marks to well-connected students). The majority of university trade unions have their place in the hierarchical system and are reluctant to defend the rights of employees.

The huge difference between the salaries of rectors and of faculty is a main feature of the quasi-feudal system. The incomes – salaries plus bonuses – of rectors are typically dozens of times greater than the incomes of regular academics. According to 2013 data from the Ministry of Education and Sciences (MES), the median annual income among some 300 rectors was approximately \$122,000, while several rectors earned more than \$400,000 (incidentally, the majority of rectors ignore the MES directive to post their salaries on university websites). In comparison, an associate professor (“docent”) at a provincial university might earn a salary of under \$5,000 a year – comparable to the salaries of local shop employees.

The huge and non-transparent powers of rectors provide space for considerable malpractice: financial machinations, procurement-related kickbacks, administrative-academic tourism, protection of well-connected students, jobs for friends and relatives, and so on. It is common in Russia for rectors’ spouses, children, and other relatives to work at the same university, often as a head of department or administrative unit. This practice is especially persistent at private universities, many of which are nothing more than “diploma mills.” While composing my database, I managed to identify more than 50 private universities where between one and four relatives of the rector worked as top managers.

Of course not all Russian rectors are corrupt. The problem is the universal lack of systemic mechanisms to prevent abuses of academic power. However, there is little ground to believe that the current approach to university governance structures – omnipresent and autocratic – will be changed.

Rectors and their Political Environments

One of the main tasks of a rector is to establish good relations with the regional political base. This means, among other things, being responsible for stability in student communities that are typically multiethnic and politically unreliable, preventing active student participation in protests and opposition events and occasionally mobilizing students for pro-regime activities and electoral turnout (many polling stations are situated in universities or dormitories).

Top university managers periodically have to meet the informal requests and demands of influential local figures (like politicians, police, security officials, and businessmen), like ensuring good grades for their relatives, a successful defense of a postdoctoral thesis or second degree, or procurement contracts for firms they informally

² For instance, there were some scandals in 2012 when universities tried to buy luxury cars for their top managers. In one case, a university was ready to pay more than \$160,000 for two cars. See: “Minobrnauki prokomentirovalo zayavki vuzov na zakupki doroqih inomarok,” *RIA Novosti*, September 1, 2012 (<http://ria.ru/society/20120901/734933376.html#ixzz284UHnxal/>).

control. While rendering such services can be profitable for rectors and sometimes even for their universities, it can also be quite disastrous for them to quarrel with such influential people. Indeed, such quarrels potentially turn into threats of dismissal for rectors or even prosecution over some “violation,” while their universities receive unscheduled audits of their educational activities or face fire, sanitary, and safety inspections, any of which could paralyze the university’s work for a long while.

Many rectors willingly enter regional and federal politics. On the one hand, it gives them a chance to increase their personal status and opens room for parallel or future political careers. One of the most recent examples is the appointment of Dagestan State University rector, Murtazali Rabadanov, to mayor of the city of Makhachkala in June 2013. For candidates seeking a rector’s position, membership in United Russia increases their chances. On the other hand, United Russia readily includes rectors of state universities in party councils, as it gives the party a more intellectual image. Seven rectors are members of United Russia’s Supreme Council, headed by former parliamentary chairman Boris Gryzlov. On the whole, among those rectors of state universities who have a right to be members of political parties,³ at least 39 percent, according to my calculation, are members of United Russia, while only one percent (6 rectors) are members of A Just Russia—with the Communist Party, the Agrarian Party, and the Patriots of Russia represented by one rector each. Because rectors of private universities, which tend to provide a lower quality of education than state universities, generally cannot contribute much to improving the intellectual image of the ruling party, it is no wonder that the share of prominent members of United Russia among them is much smaller; according to my imprecise estimate it is likely to be no more than 10 percent.

Rectors and Higher Authorities

Similar to hierarchical relations in feudal times, rectors, while having autocratic power inside their universities, are rather vulnerable in their relations with federal authorities. MES or the other federal ministries or agencies to which universities are subordinate have wide powers to force rectors to retire “voluntarily,” often using financial leverage or the university evaluation process, or remove them from their posts for various reasons such as “insufficient efficiency of management” or some other “violations.”

The rotation process has been going on rather intensively. More than two thirds of the current group of rectors (and acting rectors) at state universities were appointed since 2005, while approximately 40 percent were appointed since 2009. Approximately 25 percent are new since 2011. MES usually appoints an acting rector until institutional elections are set, and the new head has enough time to secure the loyalty of the representative electoral assembly. Federal authorities possess the right not only to approve or dismiss rectors, but to reject any candidate running without providing a reason. Since 2006, allegedly in order to prevent “random people” from becoming

³ Rectors of universities belonging to military, police, and some other services legally cannot be members of political parties.

rectors, candidates have had to receive the preliminary approval of special attestation commissions, consisting of representatives of various federal and regional bodies as well as civic organizations. This means that, to be qualified, candidates need connections to the MES, other federal or regional bodies, or, better yet, the support of United Russia.

At the same time, attestation commissions can hardly be considered a filter against the increasing number of formally-eligible retired high-ranking officials who consider a rector's position attractive for their own income and prestige. When Saratov Governor Dmitry Ayatskov became director of the Stolypin Volga Regional Institute it was akin to the granting of a fiefdom to a vassal in the Middle Ages. The massive influx of such former officials to leading positions in Russian universities is a worrisome trend of the Putin era. One problem is that the majority of such officials in their own turn received postdoctoral degrees under dubious circumstances. In total, according to my estimation based on biographical analysis, about ten percent of current rectors (including those of some federal universities and other universities with special status) obtained their academic degrees under questionable circumstances.

The relationship goes both ways, to some extent. While rectors are heavily dependent on federal authorities, they are also the key partners to the state when it comes to higher education reform. Rectors are organized in associations, and they and their deputies participate in numerous meetings organized by the MES. The voices of rectors and their deputies are typically (if erroneously) portrayed as voices of their university communities.

Conclusion

The typical role of rectors in the Russian higher education system is contradictory. While they have autocratic power inside their own university, their position vis-à-vis federal authorities and the regional political environment are rather vulnerable. To strengthen their positions, rectors usually have to demonstrate loyalty toward those in power and to periodically satisfy their informal requests. For the same purpose, many rectors participate in regional political life as prominent members or supporters of United Russia.

The arbitrary power of rectors is probably one of the key factors corrupting Russia's higher education system. This, above all, undermines the quality of assessing student performance and the proper education of young people as a whole. It creates fertile ground for pressuring teachers while they evaluate students, for unfair academic staff selection policies, and for inequitable distribution of resources to teachers and students. To fight these malpractices requires democratic governance together with independent trade unions and student organizations, transparency of information, enforcement of codes of ethics, and other such reforms.

However, the ruling regime is not interested in reforms that would weaken control; they seek to do the opposite, especially in politically-unreliable universities. They prefer that universities be governed by loyal rectors, including former officials with dubious academic careers. As we see from the current "reform" of the Russian

Academy of Sciences, the regime aims to reduce or liquidate autonomous academic governance in institutions where it still tries to exist.

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