

The European University at St. Petersburg: a case study in sociology of post-Soviet knowledge

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Abstract The article presents results of an ongoing study of centers of intellectual innovations in post-Soviet Russia. Using the European University at St. Petersburg as the main object of their analysis, the authors demonstrate how new models of academic careers, which became available in the 1980s and 1990s, were eventually institutionalized as new models of knowledge production and educational practices. Supported by American foundations, this private university had to invent a new institutional structure and to position itself within the field of higher education, still mostly dominated by the state.

Keywords Sociology of education · Sociology of knowledge · Academic careers

On February 8th, 2008, at the request of the state fire inspection agency, the Dzerzhinsky District Court shut down the European University at St. Petersburg (EUSP hereafter), a small, private, postgraduate institution specializing in the humanities. The closing followed on the heels of a grant issued by European Union to a group of EUSP researchers for the purpose of monitoring the upcoming Duma elections. That both then-president Vladimir Putin and his assistant Sergej

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Jastržemskij should mention the university's activities as an example of the European Union's interference in internal Russian affairs points to the political nature of the shutdown. Major Western scholars stood up to support the university, including Noam Chomsky, Alain Badiou and others, as did academicians of the Russian Academy of Sciences (the RAS hereafter). The first director of the Academic Institute of Sociology, Vladimir Jadov, for instance, claimed that

the faculty of this university can compete with the best in the world... The European University is one of only a few in the country whose example should be followed. It is hard to imagine that it will be kept closed long enough so as to risk losing the academic year. Were this to happen, it would be to the serious detriment of our students, to the reputation of the Ministry of Education, and to our country's dignity in the eyes of the world community.¹

Many rank and file professors and students added their signatures to petitions supporting the university.² By the end of March 2008 EUSP was re-opened.

The defense, however, was not unanimous. Unlike many high-level intellectuals associated with the RAS, university professors were not so quick with their support. The rector of the prestigious St. Petersburg State University, Ludmila Verbitskaja, pointedly "declined to comment" on the situation but nonetheless added: "I have long said that they should have simply become a part of our university."³

Such displays of support (or lack thereof) demonstrate the unique position that EUSP has assumed in the worlds of the post-Soviet Academy, the Russian universities, and intellectual circles of Western Europe and the United States. It is this very position, its history, and its effects on the sphere of academic knowledge in post-Soviet Russia that will be the foci of this article.

The post-Soviet academy: the Soviet origin of a new order

Intellectual professions and the professional careers of intellectuals, that is to say, of specialists in the realm of knowledge production, changed radically in Russia at the end of the late 1980s and the start of the 1990s. First *perestroika* and later the new political and economic regime opened up new career opportunities for now-former Soviet scholars and teachers within the field of academic and cultural exchange. At the same time, the period also put an end to the governmental subsidies that used to support the professional careers of Soviet intellectuals. Also, with the fall of the "Iron Curtain," the Russian public gained access to foreign scientific literature, some in translation, which made possible the reception of Western theories. Finally, the arrival in Russia of European and American foundations provided those knowledge producers who were able to compete successfully in the grant market

¹ Jadov (2008) Accessed April 12, 2009.

² "Pod ugrozoy suščestvovanie unikal'nogo učebnogo i issledovatel'skogo centra..." *Polit.ru*. February 21, 2008. Electronic document: <<http://www.polit.ru/dossie/2008/02/21/eu.html>> Accessed April 12, 2009.

³ Demina (2008) Accessed April 13, 2009.

with access to financial support during a period of economic crisis; this support lent them relative independence from state scientific and educational institutes. Graduate students and researchers could now travel abroad to participate in scientific and scholarly programs. Some of these scholars managed to secure permanent positions in Western universities. Others changed professions in order to emigrate.

These new opportunities were emerging amidst the still impressive remnants of the Soviet educational system; the major educational and scientific institutions of the Soviet period remained intact, constantly reproducing the basic organizational principles of Soviet social science. Yet, the 1990s were also marked as a period when new institutions of intellectual production started to appear. While mostly oriented towards Western science, these new institutions were, to varying degrees, still dependent upon post-Soviet academia.

This article focuses on those scholars in the humanities and social sciences who in the late 1980s and early 1990s used newly emerged opportunities to create new—post-Soviet—professional contexts and new forms of knowledge production. The European University at St. Petersburg became one of the few post-Soviet places that provided an institutional ground for intellectual careers of the new type.⁴ From the very moment of its creation in the 1990s, the university was presented as a “counterweight” to the state universities, the loyal heirs of the Soviet educational tradition.

Using interviews with professors and researchers at the European University at St. Petersburg conducted in August and September of 2008, this article traces the emergence of a unique academic position within the field of Russian humanities that allowed EUSP to balance its relations with Western academic practices and Russia’s educational establishment.⁵ Theoretically, the article continues the trend of sociological investigations of knowledge production started most notably by Pierre Bourdieu and his followers in Russia.⁶

New features of the new university

One of the key elements that radically distinguishes EUSP from the state universities is the almost total inversion of the symbolic hierarchy of disciplines and departments. Within the symbolic hierarchy of disciplines in (post-)Soviet universities, mathematics and the natural sciences traditionally dominate over the humanities. More specifically, within the humanities themselves, history and philology tend to be privileged over the social sciences.⁷ This “ladder” of academic

⁴ At the moment, the European University awards bachelors and candidate of science degrees in political sciences and sociology, economics, anthropology, and art history.

⁵ At the request of the respondents, their names have been changed or concealed, with the exception of those of the rectors and founders of the university.

⁶ See e.g.: Bourdieu (1984), Bikbov and Gavrilenko (2002), Sokolov (2008), Penzin (2008).

⁷ Take the example of Moscow State University (MSU), one of the oldest and most prestigious centers of learning in the country, where the most prestigious academic careers are to be had in the faculty of the Mechanics-Mathematics Department as well as in the natural sciences. The math department compares favorably with the best in the world and regularly organizes independent comparative research.

prestige was significantly transformed at EUSP. From the beginning, the university saw itself as a center for the humanities, which, unlike natural sciences, “experienced the strongest blow in Stalinist times,” as one of the university’s organizers puts it.⁸ Moreover, the university had no departments of “hard sciences.” Mathematics, for instance, was present only within the Department of Economics, and even then only in the form of game theory. The Department of Political Science and Sociology (hereafter DPSS) aspires, not unsuccessfully, to the role of leader within the university by outpacing other disciplines, while at the same time, according to several respondents, the economics department is falling out of the university hierarchy.

How did the European University, whose founding faculty included so many former Soviet scholars, manage to distinguish itself so strongly from the institutional successors of the Soviet universities and academic centers, which tend to reproduce old structures of Soviet science? We suggest that at the core of this difference lies a particular institutional framework that made possible new types of academic careers for Russian intellectuals in the 1980s and 1990s.

The establishment of EUSP was the fulfillment of a dream to create a university independent from the state. The intersection of three factors made this possible: (1) the political will of Anatoly Sobčak, the city’s liberal mayor at the time⁹; (2) the efforts of Western-oriented researchers within the Russian Academy of Sciences and—to a lesser degree—within Russia’s university community, and (3) the policies of the American foundations that decided to support the project.

The particular educational and academic profile of EUSP was to a great degree determined by the professional biography of its first rector, Boris Firsov. A sociologist by training, he became acquainted with Mayor Sobčak during the *perestroika* era through the liberal social-political club “Leningrad Tribune” (*Leningradskaja tribuna*).¹⁰ Sobčak asked Firsov to lead the project to create a new

Footnote 7 continued

Mechanics-Math and the natural sciences account for the university’s reputation abroad and their members enjoy the top administrative positions in the university, including the Rectorship. The most prestigious of the “backwards” humanities departments are philology, history, and economics. At the bottom of MSU are the social sciences, which collectively serve as the perpetual butt of criticism, ridicule, and irony. A similar state of affairs exists at other major state universities. These differences in intellectual prestige between departments, with some modifications, are maintained at major Russian universities and are strengthened by the structure of the division of labor between the departments: Mathematics and the natural sciences bring the university international acclaim and maintain its position in the international rankings of educational institutions (as measured, for instance, by the number of professional citations the faculty accrue). The social sciences, with their low standards for students and teachers alike, exist largely to bring in money that is then used to secure the financial solvency of graduate students pursuing more prestigious diplomas. The departments of philology, history, and economics reside somewhere in between these two poles, with the same division of labor between sub-departments (*kafedry*) operating within each department.

⁸ Interview with Boris Firsov, the founding Rector of EUSP. Conducted in August 2008.

⁹ Anatoly Aleksandrovič Sobčak (1937–2000)—Russian politician during *perestroika* and first mayor of St. Petersburg. For details see: Anatoly Sobčak. *For a New Russia: the Mayor of St. Petersburg’s Own Story of the Struggle for Justice and Democracy*. New York: Free Press, 1992.

¹⁰ Leningrad Tribune was organized in 1987 as a social-political club for the liberal-democratic intellectuals of the city.

university, whose original nucleus was to be made up of Firsov's colleagues and friends within academia. As the head of a research institution within the Academy of Sciences, Firsov had access to a wide network of scholars who shared his views and interests. As Firsov recollected during an interview:

Sobčak called me on the 28th or 29th of January, 1992 and we had a conversation. He told me that it was necessary to found a new university, an independent one... And I became chair of the Organizing Committee. The whole committee was composed through the 'snowball' method. I would find one guy, and through him we'd find a third. Then a fourth. Of course, we looked for people who would get along harmoniously, people of the same worldview. We looked for democratically oriented, analytical, smart people well placed in the academic world. We wanted people with whom we shared a moral platform... people we could trust in every sense of the word: personally, academically, morally... I suggested that we create a university for graduate students only because improving graduate studies was one of the weightiest tasks then facing Russian education... But where to get the faculty? Lure them away from other universities? We found them in the Academy of Sciences. We decided not to deal with the people from other universities in the city.¹¹

The "snowball" method resulted in a rather homogeneous group of "founding fathers" who chose the rest of the faculty. The homogeneity of their initial set of mutual interests was largely determined by the similarity of their habitus and was mitigated only slightly by the preferences of the Western foundations. It is hardly surprising that this selection strategy produced a group of people whose social trajectories were also very similar: Many members of the Organizing Committee enjoyed successful careers in the Soviet academic system while having somewhat tense relations with the Party and state structures. The academic career of the first rector is a good example of this general trend.

Firsov's professional biography oscillates between that of a Party functionary on the one hand and that of a scholar and an academic administrator on the other. Several important "failures" made his relationship with the Party apparatus ambivalent. Though at one point a Party activist, he voluntarily refused a career in the Party apparatus in favor of "science." As a result, in the early 1960s (the period of "the Thaw") he became the director of the Leningrad television studio (the only studio in the city and the second largest in the country). However, in 1966, at the insistence of the Leningrad Regional Party Committee (*obkom*), he was driven out of "television paradise" for his excessive liberalism. After graduate training and a fellowship at the London School of Economics and Political Science, he became the head of a division at a new academic institute (in Firsov's own words, it was a period of "renaissance" in his relations with the Party). Soon thereafter, however, one of the projects in his academic division was deemed too politically risky, and the project was abruptly closed. Later, in October 1984, Firsov received another reprimand (*vygovor*) from the Leningrad Party *obkom*, after which he was relieved of his responsibilities and was sent into "ethnographic exile" (to the Institute of

¹¹ Interview with Boris Firsov, first Rector of EUSP. Conducted on August 20, 2008.

Ethnology of RAS). His former sector was disbanded. Such relations with the Party apparatus in part explain Firsov's later involvement with the liberal movement "Leningrad Tribune," where he would come into contact with other future members of the Organizing Committee. While in "ethnographic exile," he also met future leaders of EUSP. One of them was the ethnologist Nikolaj Vakhtin, whose father had "signed some sort of letter relating to the Sinyavsky and Daniel affair, to Brodsky... he was not a dissident, but he was well known in those circles."¹²

Future deans and chairs at EUSP had similar biographical trajectories, marked by a history of "failures" and "tensions" in relations with the academic power structure. Such failures, however, were not simply the result of measured dissent; Jews and people of low social origins experienced similar hardships in their careers. In fact, these Soviet scholars of the humanities worked on topics that were ostensibly safe from the point of view of the political censors precisely in order to avoid confrontation with Party officials. For instance, the future dean of the Department of History at EUSP studied Russia's Middle Ages, rather than his real interest—political history.

By the end of the 1980s, the core group associated with EUSP exhibited similar academic, as well as political, dispositions. Many newcomers, for instance, were recruited from liberal social movements like "Leningrad Tribune." Liberal political views, "a Western orientation" and a more or less pronounced opposition to the Soviet political regime and its relationship to the Soviet university system united the members of the committee. It was this shared outlook that determined the nature of the core group, whose members would later consider themselves "a band of enthusiasts," to use the phrase of Nikolaj Vakhtin.

Ambivalent relations with the Leningrad State University (the main university in the city), as well as with the state and Party apparatus shaped the founders' collective desire "to rescue education from the state," even though this desire was realized through the active support of Anatoly Sobčak, the city's mayor.¹³ One member of the Organizing Committee recalls: "The university was to provide the kind of learning that was lacking in the Soviet system of higher education. Back then, this goal was seen as clearly anti-Soviet: to discuss things that otherwise were silenced, to re-orient people's brains towards the European way of thinking."¹⁴ Another member described the new university as a "chance to start something with a clean slate... by taking European educational standards as our foundation..." This was an idea reflected in the selection of the future faculty, too: "We did not hire...former stars. Old Soviet professors? No, thank you. We didn't want them. Their discourse, as they say these days, was not a good fit with our own" (see Footnote 14).

Another key factor in the story of the university's creation was the role played by the American foundations that financed the new school. As they were practically the sole sources of funding, their bargaining position was particularly strong on the question of selecting faculty and organizing academic programs. According to

¹² Interview with Nikolaj Vakhtin, Rector of EUSP. Conducted on August 25, 2008.

¹³ Interview with Boris Firsov, first Rector of EUSP. Conducted on August 20, 2008.

¹⁴ Interview with a professor at EUSP. Conducted on August 24, 2008.

Firsov, it was Sobčak's idea to ask the Soros Foundation for funding: "He turned to Soros, who gave him \$50,000. Back then this was an astronomical sum."¹⁵ The university has long been financed by three foundations: Soros, Ford, and MacArthur. They continue to provide the annual budget of EUSP, although the faculty members collectively decide on the precise distribution of funds.

Opposition to the Soviet system of higher education and—to a lesser degree—to the Soviet system of academic research, along with a pro-Western orientation were the founding ideological principles of every department at EUSP. However, the university was far from uniform, as different departments adopted different strategies for dealing with Soviet academic and educational legacies. Remarkably, apart from the DPSS all divisions of EUSP are for the most part involved—albeit differently—in the reproduction of Soviet academic traditions.

EUSP, the state university, and the Academy of Sciences

The similarities in the professional trajectories of the university's founders in large part determined the nature of EUSP's links with the post-Soviet world of academic science (and, to a lesser degree, with the university system). With a single exception, all of the new departments were modeled after their Soviet predecessors. Apart from those of faculty members associated with DPSS, the academic profiles of EUSP's faculty exhibited the same dual quality: their topics and their approaches, while somewhat marginalized, were nonetheless acknowledged, if not rewarded, in Soviet times. The changes of the 1990s the existing hierarchy of academic interests; themes and approaches that were once considered of secondary importance quickly occupied the top of the symbolic hierarchy. The European University to a large degree followed this inversion and strengthened its effects through its departments. For instance, the first faculty members of the Departments of Ethnology and of Art History were philologists, linguists, and ethnographers from the Tartu School or were otherwise closely related to Juri Lotman and his followers. In Soviet universities, Lotman's semiotics had an inferior (and sometimes underground) status. However, at the same time, semiotics remained both legitimate and popular in certain circles of Soviet academics. In the early 1990s, this field of study, already respectable abroad, acquired wider popularity in Russia as well.

In other words, the European University at St. Petersburg emerged as an institutional platform for types of intellectual careers and competencies that were considered inferior or even illegitimate within the Soviet university system. Research themes that used to be major stumbling blocks to a career in Soviet universities attained legitimacy—be it Lotman's semiotics, game theory, or the history of academic censorship and repression. This new, inversed hierarchy of academic interests not only found institutionalized support at EUSP, but also received powerful support from financial donors. Perhaps more interestingly, the institutionalization of this inversed symbolic order became a crucial mechanism of upward mobility for young intellectuals. Their success was all the more visible

¹⁵ Interview with Boris Firsov, first Rector of EUSP. Conducted on August 20, 2008.

against the backdrop of the economic crisis of the 1990s. Ensured by grants from three major American foundations, salaries of EUSP's faculty were a perennial object of undisguised envy for non-EUSP scholars.¹⁶

The foundations' considerable financial support made possible yet another important move: EUSP was able to institutionalize a new type of relationship between students and professors. Higher salaries meant that faculty did not need to hold multiple jobs (a widespread practice in the 1990s) and had sufficient time to conduct research projects, which in turn facilitated teaching.¹⁷ This strong emphasis on research *and* learning/teaching expected from all faculty and all students significantly distinguished EUSP from "classical" (i.e. Soviet) universities and brought it closer to the tradition of Soviet research institutions associated with the Academy of Sciences.¹⁸

This dual relationship with the Soviet educational legacy would remain a typical feature of EUSP, as the oscillation between rejection and reproduction of Soviet academic traditions determined the very core of the new university's organization. While establishing an institutional order that was free from the strict administrative hierarchies and career constraints of the Soviet Academy and universities, the founders of EUSP's departments nonetheless reproduced some basic features of Soviet knowledge production. One of these features was a strong institutional investment in maintaining and reproducing the so-called "scientific school," i.e. a relatively stable constellation of themes, approaches, and methods. Within EUSP, this emphasis on stability implied not only the reproduction of academic "skills," but also the controlled transmission of key academic positions. Stability of the scientific school, then, meant stability of the academic order itself.

A characteristic feature of a successful "scientific school" is its ability to include multiple generations of scholars, that is to say, its ability to produce a system in which older scholars can exercise some academic patronage over their junior colleagues and thereby ensure the reproduction not simply of thematic approaches, but also of the social group itself.¹⁹ For instance, the founding dean of the Department of History remembers, "I started graduate school in December 1956. I went where I did because of the noted historian Boris Aleksandrovič Romanov... He had around him a tight circle of students; I would call them his closest students. From that group there are now two academicians... a corresponding member of the

¹⁶ Precise figures are, unfortunately, unavailable; however, one respondent outlined the situation for us: It used to be the case that student stipends were greater than the salaries of professors at state universities, "but now loaders in warehouses make more than EUSP professors."

(Interview with Nikolaj Vakhtin, Rector of EUSP. Conducted on August 25, 2008).

¹⁷ By Western standards, the workload of professors at state universities is immense. Lectures and seminars may take upwards of 20–25 hours per week, and many professors are forced to teach in several universities and colleges at once to maximize their income. This leaves absolutely no time for research.

¹⁸ Unlike in Soviet universities, scholars associated with the Academy of Sciences spent all their time doing research. Funded by the state, research institutions did not admit undergraduate students, but accepted a small number of graduate students and postdoctoral fellows who were expected to collaborate closely with their academic advisors.

¹⁹ Alexandrov (2006) Electronic document Accessed April 13, 2009.

Academy... a former director of our institute... And now he has brought this entire circle into the institute.”²⁰

A similar “patriarchal” model of relations in the academic sphere—“Romanov treated us like sons”—was reproduced at EUSP in the case of the founding dean’s successor. “I wanted *him* to be my successor,” said the founding dean of a colleague who was to receive not merely an appointment at the new institution, but a high administrative position, thereby continuing the tradition of the “Petersburg School” internalized in the appointee’s alma mater: “I am thankful to the institute. It was there that I learned how to do high science... and several crucial principles. For instance, one that I call the transparency of scientific writing, argument, and work with material. All of this was inculcated in me there” (see Footnote 20).

This case is far from being an exception. When arranging the first teaching contracts, the organizers of the departments invited their own teachers and students to EUSP. As one of them described it: “Say we introduced a course... so I’d invite my teacher, because there’s no one in Petersburg who could do it better.”²¹ This tradition of “academic incest” remains more or less intact. The best students at EUSP become professors in their own departments, reproducing the system that originally produced them.

The Department of Political Science and Sociology: a break in succession

Describing temporal changes of social hierarchies in his work on French academia, Pierre Bourdieu introduced the notion of “the order of succession” to highlight temporal gaps between successive academic positions. According to Bourdieu, there is a certain expectation about the “normal” correspondence between a scholar’s age and his/her position. That is to say, subjective aspirations are linked with objective conditions; individual dispositions are harmonized with available social positions. Temporal gaps between academic qualifications and academic positions ensure the security of those who occupy top positions in the academic hierarchy and, at the same time, offer younger generations of scholars a chance to “inherit” the positions of the elders, along with their scholarly “traditions,” “academic ethos,” etc.²²

It was precisely this path of “normal reproduction” that the organizers of EUSP had in mind when selecting students and hiring their colleagues from the Academy of Sciences. By and large, the European University was just a new institutional space that continued to rely upon the same old patron-client pattern of teacher–student relationships. The Department of Political Science and Sociology was not meant to be an exception. The founding rector, sociologist Boris Firsov, could not become the dean of the department, but the position was held in waiting for one of his disciples, a specialist in public opinion polls with whom he had worked for a long time at the institute and whose career had suffered, like Firsov’s, in 1984 after

²⁰ Interview with a professor in the Department of History. Conducted on September 10, 2008.

²¹ Interview with the dean of the Department of Art History. Conducted on September 18, 2008.

²² Bourdieu (1984).

the shutdown of the division that studied mass communication and public opinion.²³ The candidate, however, refused the position and an unknown young sociologist Nikolaj Y. was hired instead. Firsov recalls, “For the dean position at DPSS, we had planned on Oleg N.... He and I were friends from the sociology institute, but for family reasons he had to go to America. The department was left without a leader. Later, I called Stanislav P. ..., a researcher at the Sociology Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences, who proposed candidate Nikolaj Y. ... We checked him out, and he became the founding dean. I didn’t know him personally.”

In comparison with the other deans of EUSP, the dean of DPSS was much younger and had no particular reputation in the Russian educational or academic establishment. He was a Cambridge graduate who had only recently returned to Russia. While at Cambridge (and before his departure), he maintained his connections with a group of Soviet sociologists around Firsov. For the university, which was to become a “window on Europe,” a Cambridge graduate and a student of Anthony Giddens, one of the most respected theorists known to Russian social scientists, was just the thing. Nikolaj Y. seemed to be a perfect fit for the role of “founder” of sociology at EUSP. His long-term fellowship in England put him on a fast track that circumvented the “normal” career path. At the same time, the fellowship experience became the source of new, *formative* academic and administrative skills, which contrasted greatly with the standard Soviet education.

The biography of the founding dean of DPSS largely determined the specifics of the department. First and foremost, Nikolaj Y. started hiring scholars whose professional trajectory resembled his own. However, unlike the Organizational Committee, whose members were selected on the basis of their political views, the main criteria for selecting DPSS faculty was professional experience obtained in Western educational institutions and certified by a Ph.D. As Nikolaj Y. put it in an interview:

In order to found a new university, a new environment, we needed people who had first-hand knowledge of the Western educational model, who knew how to work, who knew the standards. Sergej L. and I found Anton M. and met with him at Berkeley, where he was on a grant. We also invited Piotr A., because Alexej P. still hadn’t arrived from Michigan. The goal was to find as many Western Ph.Ds as possible, so that we wouldn’t have to explain anything to anyone, or argue with them about anything.²⁴

Unlike other departments at EUSP, the faculty of DPSS clearly abandoned the dominant model of reproducing Soviet academic traditions. The “order of succession” was dismantled; the core faculty of DPSS were people of the *same* academic generation, without any elders to succeed. Moreover, DPSS had no room for its own recent graduate students either. As a faculty member explains, “The

²³ “Talented scientists, professionally advanced scholars... were conveyed—it can’t be said in other way—by the institute’s directorate to the department (*sektor*) of the regional problems of socialist competition.” (Boris Firsov. Interview with Vladimir Kozlovskij, *Žurnal sotsiologii i sotsial’noi antropologii*, 1999. Vol. 4. P. 5–22).

²⁴ Interview with a professor of DPSS. Conducted on August 25, 2008. All names have been changed.

decision was made that we would not hire our own students—or, at least, not before a long period of time has passed... We don't need clones of ourselves. Until those whom we taught become independent scholars, we don't need them."²⁵

One crucial biographical feature that distinguished the founding dean of DPSS and his colleagues was something that one might call “worldliness” (*svetskost'*), which was manifested in their particular sensitivity to “hot topics” (*modnost'*), in their high professional mobility (geographic as well as academic), and in their emphasized distancing from “traditional” (Soviet) science and its establishment. The faculty members who came to work for DPSS had often found themselves adrift in the academic institutes and were employed only to satisfy the Soviet Union's truancy laws. Some even opposed the Soviet academy through participation in oppositional social movements or fashionable intellectual circles. One of the professors at DPSS remarked, “My interests lay in an entirely different sphere, in counter-cultural company, the café Saigon,²⁶ in get-togethers... In general, I did not consider myself a sociologist.”²⁷

Despite the fact that from its very beginning DPSS identified itself as the center of *professional* sociological work, it continued to invite to teach those scholars who perceived professional academic careers negatively. Members of DPSS hired later, at the end of the 1990s, for instance, were similarly not interested in the dominant versions of the social sciences and preferred instead to pursue their own intellectual interests. One of the youngest members of DPSS recalls: “For me, being a sociologist means not wanting to isolate myself in the world of science only, because if you enter it completely, then everything else is closed to you. Instead, I wanted to travel though all these various worlds. For instance, there were drug dealers in Koupčino. I saw how they live, and I think that's how I became a sociologist, by following my interests...”

Perestroika became a turning point for many groups of Soviet intellectuals. Yet, unlike some academic social scientists who used this fluid period to advance their careers *within* the existing academic hierarchy, DPSS sociologists used *perestroika* as a chance to define their professional identity in the discourse of Western-style social science. For them, sociology was an extension of their personal interests and a form of their public involvement. In some cases, their individual research interests suddenly attracted a lot of academic attention.²⁸ But in all cases, the accumulated

²⁵ Interview with a professor of DPSS. Conducted on August 10, 2008.

²⁶ The Café Saigon was legendary in the 1970s and attracted many representatives of Leningrad's (St. Petersburg's) counter-culture. For details see: Elena Zdravomyslova. “Kafe Saygon kak obščestvennoe mesto” in *Graždanskoe obščestvo na Evropeyskom Severe: ponjatie i kontekst*. Spb.: CNSI, 1996. Electronic document: http://www.cisr.ru/files/publ/wp3/wp3_Zdravomyslova.pdf. Accessed April 13, 2009.

²⁷ Interview with a professor of DPSS. Conducted on August 15, 2008.

²⁸ For instance, for the future sociologists DPSS, interest in social movements and the fieldwork that resulted provided far more reliable data than did the questionnaire surveys that dominated traditional sociology. Suddenly there existed a “sociology of social movements” and the constructivist method with in-depth interviews.

cultural capital (acquired through parents or education) was used to build a new academic career.²⁹

Thus, for many members of DPSS, it was the Department (*Sektor*) of Social Movements established at the local research division of the St. Petersburg branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences³⁰ that played a crucial role in their professional careers in the late 1980s. The Department of Social Movements brought together academic “outsiders,” nominally listed at the Academy of Sciences as scholars and researchers. At the same time, the department began to bring in Western Sovietologists interested in grassroots political movements in the USSR.³¹ These contacts were helpful for developing new intellectual interests among future sociologists and political scientists at EUSP. Thanks to their knowledge of languages and their interest in the new, the progressive, and the fashionable, these world-wise “marginals” managed to establish lasting links with international scholars and thereby advance their own academic careers.

The story of this new generation of Russian intellectuals is also the story of a new professional ethos that started taking shape in the 1990s. For older generations, the social sciences continue to perform a social and political function. As one scholar put it, “You must serve society ... This is the role of science in general and of sociology in particular: to demonstrate for those in power the tendencies of the contemporary world.”³² The members of DPSS take a different view of the “social function” of the social sciences: “I do not share this point of view... If someone wants to improve the general quality of life, he should do charity work or something. The task of science is first and foremost that of scientific cognition. The more it is advanced, the more the task of science is fulfilled.”³³

These two poles—“the West” and the Russian academic establishment—would structure the internal and external spaces of EUSP. The Department of Political Science and Sociology was the epitome of this trend: The more it distanced itself from official post-Soviet science, the closer it got to the world of Western intellectual ideas.

²⁹ For instance, despite the fact that one of DPSS respondent had a rocky relationship with traditional social science, she well understood and commanded early on the cultural competencies needed to be a scientist. Her father was one of the pioneers of academic sociology in the USSR, and she had studied philosophy at Leningrad University (now St. Petersburg State University). She also learned English early in her career (like her colleagues in the Department of Social Movements at the Institute for Socio-Economic Problems) in order to communicate with international Sovietologists who came to the country in the late 1980s and who first exposed her to Western sociology.

³⁰ The Department was established at the Institute for Socio-Economic Problems (ISEP).

³¹ One respondent recalls: “At the end of the 1980s there were suddenly opportunities for contact with the outside. Political scientists came from all over wanting to examine the reality of the Soviet Union. They came to write their dissertations and hoped to do empirical research. On the one hand it was really interesting, and on the other it was competition. They were coming from Berkeley, these teachers. They wanted to get to know us, as we were the front line. We knew English and we studied social movements. They were dragging through the literature; we’d talk about everything with them...”

³² Interview with a professor in the Department of Sociology at the Russian State Humanitarian University. Conducted on July 18, 2008.

³³ Interview with a professor in DPSS. Conducted on August 27, 2008.

“Western” science and the European university

From day one, the entire faculty of EUSP had some experience of international academic exchange. However, the success and recognition of the university’s faculty abroad was determined to a large extent by two factors: the level of demand for “the Russian take” (particularly in the sphere of topical political themes) and the degree of interest in those Soviet scientific schools that were known in the West before the fall of the Iron Curtain. A member of the History Department discusses the unexpected success in Europe of his work on the development of Russian politics:

I helped to organize an international conference on the 1917 revolution, then my book, on language and symbols of the Russian revolution came out ... and after that everything suddenly took off. Right away there were conference invitations, two publications in foreign languages, several trips, including one to England, and everything else.³⁴

Another scholar from DPSS points to the importance of Western audiences’ expectations: “I suppose the majority of my publications in Western journals were about Russia... That’s what the market wants today... There were a few times when I would simply add a piece on Russia [to the already existing text], but it would be such a mechanical addition that I would have to take this piece back out. These are the rules of the game. I’m not particularly fond of them.”³⁵

The type and level of involvement in the international knowledge market differs from one department to another. However, there seems to be one persistent trend. Usually, the department’s participation in the international exchange of ideas is determined by the type of competency that was acquired and developed in the late Soviet universities and academic institutes. DPSS used a different strategy. Supported by the Western foundations, members of DPSS used the very process of institutionalizing new forms of professional competency, previously unknown in Russia, as a way of building individual careers in the new university environment. In short, DPSS became an importer of Western sociological and political science traditions to Russia.³⁶

³⁴ Interview with a professor in the Department of History. Conducted on September 27, 2008.

³⁵ Interview with a professor in DPSS. Conducted on August 19, 2008.

³⁶ The teachers at DPSS would put on the syllabi of required readings names that would never even be heard spoken in the sociology departments of state universities (for instance, Foucault, Latour, MacIntyre, etc.). EUSP’s private status meant that DPSS faculty could bring Western practices to Russian soil and design courses according to their interests. In Russia until 2007, state university syllabi had to be approved by a central Ministry of Education. As a result, EUSP syllabi could be built around specific sets of authors (for example, there were courses on the “theory of praxis” and “comparative mafia”) or around themes currently of interest in the West. Whereas the departments of sociology at state universities had very vague and general courses like “Value Attitudes of Moscow’s Youth” and “Globalization and Russia,” EUSP started off with a very different standard. Typical graduate-level courses included “The Communal Apartment as a Social Institution” and “Soviet Underwear: Between Ideology and Everyday Life.” It is interesting that several key social scientists from the RAS openly admitted the superior quality of the work being done at EUSP while reprimanding the seemingly frivolous scope of the research agenda.

This trend is especially visible against the background of other departments. The Department of Art History is a good case in point. This is the only department that is not funded directly by Western donors; its budget comes from various sources, and its place in the university's structure is, most likely, determined by the department's close connection with the major art institution in the country—the State Hermitage Museum. The international success of the department's faculty has been declining and could hardly compete with the popularity of DPSS's professors who openly admit that they have more invitations from abroad than they can accept.³⁷

Also different is the attitude to the Soviet academic legacies. As the dean of DPSS admits, from the point of view of Western scholarship, the methods and topics of Russian sociology are “uninteresting and savage (*dikie*).” The dean of Art History describes his unwillingness to practice contemporary (Western) approaches to art as follows:

Why doesn't the department study contemporary art? Because the department is called the department of art *history*. I am absolutely certain that I have no idea what contemporary history is. [The Russian historian Vasili] Klučevsky considered anything less than sixty years old not to be historical; it's contemporary...I have very old-fashioned views on this, as on many other things...In the West, they fully consider the study of the contemporary to be a science. The closer to yesterday it is, the better. And if it's happening today, hurry up and write your dissertation about it. This might make for very interesting reading, but science isn't just about compiling facts, it's about the study of phenomena that have fully formed.”³⁸

Academic politics: the best among equals?

Diverse strategies of succession and departure from the Soviet academic traditions undertaken by different departments also manifested themselves through diverse models of control and decision-making. On the one hand, all EUSP departments have much less centralized academic power structures than do the departments at state-funded universities. Partly, this has to do with the fact that the traditional center of decision-making—the dean's office (*dekanat*)—is financially “lifeless” (*obeskrovlen*) at EUSP. Unlike the large humanities departments at the “major” universities, which (could) have a constant flow of cash from students' tuition, bribes, and commercially provided services, EUSP's departments are not financially viable.³⁹ Moreover, departments do not fully control their budget. Financial subsidies from Western foundations and income from the endowment are spent only in accordance with a collectively approved plan. The salary bonus for professors

³⁷ Interview with a professor of DPSS. Conducted on August 20, 2008.

³⁸ Interview with a professor in the Department of Art History. Conducted on September 20, 2008.

³⁹ For instance, for information of the latest financial scandal to rock St. Petersburg State University see: Anna Puškarskaja. “K Medvedevu obratilis za popečitel'skim sovetom”. *Kommersant*, March 25, 2008. Electronic document: <<http://www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=1143559&NodesID=7>>. Accessed April 13, 2009.

who perform administrative duties is quite small, and as a result, taking on administrative responsibilities, including those of a dean, is not in itself as attractive a career move as it is at the major state and private universities in Russia. Nor does a dean at EUSP exercise indomitable personal prerogative. In fact, most administrative decisions are taken by the Faculty Council, an organ comprised of the entire teaching staff.

At the same time, however, in all departments except DPSS, the dean retains some prerogatives in the administrative sphere and that of education policy (as is the norm at many post-Soviet educational establishments). These prerogatives are further strengthened by long terms of office and the lack of term limits. In contrast to this, at DPSS, the office of the dean rotates. Officially, the dean is chosen by a faculty council to serve for a three-year period as is required by university regulations. In reality, however, all of the department's members take turns handling the administrative functions of the dean, switching off once or twice a year. This not only prevents the consolidation of power into the hands of one person, but also thwarts the power hierarchy within the university. "It becomes impossible to influence a dean," noted one faculty member.⁴⁰ As a result, the affairs of the department are more independent from the rector and central administration. "All decisions are taken by all the members and are only reached through consensus; the dean has no authority. Our department is a republic," one member of DPSS concludes. Each member represents the same generation and has the same social status and the same academic gravitas: "This is equality, but equality in which we are all powerful."⁴¹

Nominally, all the departments at EUSP are equal. However, there are fundamental differences in the departments' histories that influence not only the models of administration pursued by each, but also the essence of the professional ethos and understanding of academia shared by the members of each university unit. These inter-departmental differences have produced a volatile educational setting, causing various tensions within the university to arise. Yet, at the same time, these differences also define the balance of power, which is heavily shaped not only by the identities of individual departments, but also by their positions within larger academic contexts in the country and abroad.

Apart from different standards and approaches used by each department, the nature of the inter-departmental tension is also determined by two competing orientations. Some departments increase their standing by forging strong alliances with major academic institutes. For instance, representatives of the Russian Academy of Sciences were among the founders of EUSP, and some of them joined the university's Board of Trustees, which was chaired by Mikhail Pjotrovskij, the director of the State Hermitage Museum. The second orientation is determined by the policies of the Western foundations that through their funding and influence significantly determined the university's policy—for instance, by accepting or rejecting initiatives or appointments. This bifurcation can be traced within the

⁴⁰ Interview with a professor in DPSS. Conducted on August 28, 2008.

⁴¹ Interview with a professor in DPSS. Conducted on September 9, 2008.

university as a whole *and* within individual departments themselves. Academically, these competing loyalties are often manifested as competing academic interests. Themes associated with the “Western” version of science and promoted by the policies of the foundations are often considered to be of little significance in the Russian academic tradition, which is itself being reproduced at EUSP by the faculty members associated with the Russian Academy of Sciences.

It would be hard to map out a clear hierarchy of departments within EUSP, but nonetheless, it would be fair to say that DPSS presents itself as the department whose standards and administrative model should be emulated. Even though all our respondents stressed the formal equality of departments, it was not hard to trace in their descriptions several important traits of the ongoing struggle between the departments to establish a dominant system of academic classification. In this struggle, criteria of success, acclaim, and perfection are, perhaps, the most visible sites of contestation. The point of contention, of course, is not the set of criteria itself, but the position of leadership that the right to set such criteria implies. In response to a question about the hierarchy of departments, one history professor answered:

No, there is no hierarchy, at least not yet...But if you mean departmental chauvinism, then the worst offender is definitely DPSS. There's a kind of feeling of being the coolest and better than all the others. It's because they are the most active with fundraising and with some other projects and programs. Therefore, sometimes people in DPSS look at the whole picture through just their department's eyes, and this, of course, is not right.⁴²

One of the main symbols of this struggle is the “employment book” (*trudovaja knizhka*), the official record of one's primary place of employment, which is kept by the employer.⁴³ Boris Firsov, the founding rector, said in his interview that from the very beginning he intended the university to be the primary place of employment for the entire faculty. However, many faculty members hired by EUSP never broke ties with their initial employers, citing the instability of the new institution as their main reason. DPSS was the only department whose faculty members linked their entire academic careers with EUSP. As a result, their “employment books” became not only a sign of their superior loyalty, but also a sign of their moral superiority. Oleg Kharkhordin, a professor at DPSS, explains:

All the other departments have few permanent professors. They all have their “backup” academic institutes where they can earn some money on the side and to which they can always return. We came to build a new field for discussion. We came not to earn some money on the side, but to do something totally different.⁴⁴

⁴² Interview with a professor in the Department of History. Conducted on September 28, 2008.

⁴³ Since the Soviet period, every employee has had to have such a book, which is issued and subsequently updated by his/her employer. It is an official document used for calculating retirement benefits.

⁴⁴ Interview with a professor in DPSS. Conducted on September 10, 2008.

Somewhat ironically, this “chauvinistic” defense of a special role for DPSS in the European University at St. Petersburg underlies the overall dilemma of DPSS. Because of their professional links with *Western* academic institutions and foundations, they could commit themselves to just one institution. At the same time, because of their strained connections with *Russian/Soviet* academic institutions, they had no obvious place to which to retreat. Yet despite their predominantly Western orientation and affiliations, DPSS faculty members used the fact of their full employment at the European University to reproach colleagues from other departments with insufficient institutional loyalty.

As the history of the university demonstrates, DPSS’s strategy brings good results. When asked to name the best department at EUSP, Nikolaj Vakhtin, the current rector, responded: “This is a complicated question. Though, it begs the answer: DPSS. Informally, as well as formally.”⁴⁵

Emerging in the 1990s with the support of major American foundations, EUSP institutionalized new ways to study the humanities in post-Soviet Russia. These new approaches were fairly autonomous from the academic traditions of the Soviet/post-Soviet educational establishment, inspired by the international market of ideas. The new university institutionalized new forms of intellectual careers that would have been impossible in Soviet Russia. In a unique way, these new intellectual trajectories combine individual ambition for international recognition with the existing division of academic labor within Russia. At the same time, these scholars must mediate their own academic interests with the demand for “Russian themes” that interest Western scholars.

It is hard to tell how viable this institutionalization actually is. In the last few years, the “self-sufficiency” (*samostojanie*) of EUSP has become much less certain. The foundations have begun “to wind up” (*svoračivat’sja*) their activities in Russia. Some are withdrawing in a planned manner (like the Soros Foundation), and others do so in response to increased government pressure. Hence, as Vakhtin, the rector, explained in an interview, EUSP’s three biggest problems are:

Money, money, and money. The transition from funding based on Western grants to funding that comes from Russian business is not simple. State institutions may not give us money directly; it’s a violation of the Budget Code. Hence we are left to find new sources of funding, namely Russia’s own foundations, companies, private individuals.

Together with the decline of faculty salaries and of funding in general, the uncertainty of the European University’s position is further heightened by increasing ideological pressure from the government. It is in this situation of financial uncertainty and ideological constraints that the search for new sources of funding and the creation of new programs attractive to potential students become the keys to ensuring the university’s survival. In that respect, it is telling that the Office of Development, which is responsible for the financial makeover of the university, is headed by the members of DPSS.

⁴⁵ Interview with Nikolaj Vakhtin, Rector of EUSP. Conducted on August 25, 2008.

The search for funding is further complicated by the strained relationship between EUSP and the post-Soviet educational establishment. Even the most adamant opponents of Soviet science began to take part in conferences and conventions organized by practitioners of “official” science. One such professor, also the head of the Office of Development, attributed his decision to participate in the National Congress of Russian Sociologists to the reality of the political-economic state of affairs:

My colleague, Igor N., has been trying to convince me that we must *start* attending these conventions (*s'esdy*) of those who call themselves sociologists. These discussions have been going for the last year and were partly inspired by our fundraising efforts. It is not easy to answer to the question: ‘If you are all so clever, why doesn’t the country support you?’⁴⁶

Given their biographies and ambitions, the faculty members of DPSS are logical candidates for recently opened and future administrative positions at EUSP, despite all of the ways in which they are not representative of the university as a whole. Their academic credentials link them closely with Russia and prevent them from integrating seamlessly with Western academic institutions. At the same time, their isolated position in Russia forces them to build bridges with its academic and educational communities. EUSP provided them with an institutional home. With nowhere else to go, they appear to have very little choice but to put their own educational ambitions aside in order to secure the administrative and financial future of the republic of knowledge that they represent.

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⁴⁶ Interview with Professor of DPSS, the vice-rector for development. Conducted on September 24, 2008.