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Carole Sigman

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Carole Sigman¹

**The ‘return of the state’ and the circumventions of the reforms in today’s
Russia. The case of universities**

If there is no doubt that the state is back in Russia, the question is how. In the 1990s, regional authorities, public services, and strategic branches of the economy became more and more autonomous from the central state. One of the reasons is the deep economic crisis that followed the collapse of the USSR and struck down the new Russian federal state.

Since the early 2000s, the federal executive power has tried to regain control over these sectors of society. And the unexpected oil windfall, which appeared in 2004, gave the central state tremendous resources to restore the so-called "vertical of power".

Many works on this “return of the state” tend to focus on coercive measures that are used, for instance: the arrest of representatives of various elites, the elimination of opposition press, the intimidation of the most active NGOs, the sidelining of opposition parties and leaders who do not play the game, the strict supervision of street demonstrations by the police, and political assassinations.

However, the vision of a regime based on coercion alone and entirely managed from “above” can be questioned. Because it does not take into account another dimension, which is as important: federal authorities have set up soft mechanisms of domestication based on the actors’ interests, incentives and competition.

These technologies remind what is called the “new public management”. But they more generally remind a form of domination mentioned by Max Weber, which arises from the

¹ Tenured senior research fellow at the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS), Institut des sciences sociales du politique (ISP, CNRS/Université Paris Nanterre/ENS Paris Saclay).

configuration of interests in which actors are caught. In this type of domination, as Weber explains, “the dominated persons, acting with formal freedom, rationally pursue their own interests as they are forced upon them by objective circumstances”². In other words, because of his position in the game, an actor—for example, a monopoly on a market—can force others to submit to his conditions without having particular authority over them. Weber clearly distinguished this form of domination from that exerted by virtue of an authority (rational-legal, charismatic or traditional), which is based on the “power to command and duty to obey”³. However, there is an advantage, in my view, not to separate these two ways of approaching domination. In the case of contemporary Russia, they even appear to be closely intertwined, for it is, to a large extent, through their ability to reconfigure the interests of actors that the federal state authorities succeed in restoring their authority as political power.

These soft domestication mechanisms implemented by the federal state arouse resistance, though. If actors by and large comply with the new rules of the game, they also seek (even when it comes to public institutions) to partially escape from them, making thus domination rather uncertain.

In most cases, this is not a frontal opposition to reforms, but discreet modes of resistance, obeying precautionary imperatives. They can very well be implemented by institutions playing a key role in the architecture of reforms. In this situation, the executive power is condemned to bargain with the powerful actors of the sectors concerned, because the “vertical of power” cannot be established nor maintained without their support.

I would like to illustrate these processes by examples taken from higher education. This sector is considered as crucial by central authorities to restore Russia’s “greatness” on the international scene. Ambitious reforms have thus been undertaken to make universities more “efficient”. I will concentrate here mainly on public higher education institutions (HEI), private ones being relatively marginal in Russia.

In the first part, I will present the reforms which aim to put the federal authorities back at the center of the game by transforming the way the university sector is operating. In the second part, I will show how some actors try to resist by partially working around or evading reforms

² Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 943. For the original text see *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1972), 542-4.

³ Max Weber, *La domination*, Paris, La Découverte, 2013, p. 45.

in order to preserve their autonomy. In the last part, I will focus on the bargaining activity central authorities are brought to develop to maintain the “vertical of power”.

First of all, two words on higher education on the eve of reforms. In Soviet times, higher education was public, mainly state-funded, free-of-charge (since 1956), and relatively centralized. If universities were firmly controlled by the political power, they nevertheless were granted some autonomy. For example, they recruited their students by organizing their own entrance exams, and, since the late 1980s, rectors (U chairmen), who had been appointed by the supervisory authorities since the Revolution, have been elected by their own institutions.

During the 1990s, the academic world experienced major upheavals. Universities became increasingly independent from the federal Center, as the latter was unable to finance them minimally. They managed to survive by charging a growing number of students with tuition fees, opening up new courses, creating branches in other regions, etc. These survival strategies produced new forms of solidarity between faculty members and university administrators, transforming HEIs into “muddling-through communities”.

1. The reforms since the mid-2000s

One of the main problems top government officials faced in the early 2000s was this “wild” autonomy of universities. They also considered that the Russian higher education system was losing ground internationally and that the leading universities were mainly responsible for it. So they set out to transform the sector by putting universities in competition.

One of their first initiatives was to bring out “national champions” and organized a series of tenders to this end. 45 top universities (9% of state universities) and 100 medium-range universities (20%) were selected and received more or less prestigious labels and substantial additional funding. Universities were also put in competition as far as their basic allocations and the recruitment of their students were concerned.

They were granted managerial “autonomy”. This is not the wild autonomy of the 1990s, but an autonomy strictly supervised by the central state, which aims to domesticate universities by removing safety nets. For example, universities are now fully responsible for their funding since the state is no longer legally bound to fund them in a sustainable and sufficient manner.

Finally, the ministry of Education created in 2012 a system of yearly assessment of universities. This “Monitoring” plays a decisive role in the allocation of public funding and, in the event of poor results, may lead to the liquidation of a university (which is either merged to another one or closed).

The federal state uses these institutional mechanisms to restore its formal authority and to bring university managers and faculty members to meet the targets it sets. These two groups of actors do so all the more willingly as they have themselves - or believe they have - an interest of doing so.

2. Resistance by bypassing or evading reforms

Despite this rather efficient system of control, actors do not necessarily fully comply with the new rules of the game and may develop soft resistance to preserve their relative autonomy. For example, university administrators manipulate some of their statistical data for their institutions to appear as close as possible to what is expected by the central authorities.

They can also invent alternative institutional devices to those imposed by the central state. This is the case with the Olympiads, which were invented by top universities to circumvent the Unified State Exam. This example is worth analyzing, because it is very revealing of how the “power vertical” works.⁴

The Unified state exam (*Yediny gosudarstvennyy ekzamen* or YeGE) is a school leaving qualification designed at national level, identical for all high school seniors of the country and administered by the central state. It has been experimented in several regions since the early 2000s and, in 2009, it became compulsory all over the country and replaced universities’ own entrance exams. Top universities immediately realized they would lose control over recruiting students, especially the best ones. After resisting for a while, they bargained with the ministry of Education: they accepted the YeGE against the right to organize “Olympiads” to select the best students. Olympiads are subject-specific competitions (in mathematics, physics, etc.), organized by universities for secondary school students, and some of these Olympiads (I will come back later to this point) give the winners the privilege to enroll in the best universities without paying fees (fees are, in this case, paid by the state).

⁴ For a more detailed analysis, see Carole Sigman, « Contourner la compétition par la compétition : les universités russes et les olympiades », *Revue française de sociologie*, 62, 1, 2021, p. 33-60.

The Olympiads, which are at first sight quite a marginal phenomenon, have developed so much that they now affect the entire student recruitment system. Most universities are involved in Olympiads, even when they have no chance of attracting the best students, because, in the extremely competitive game imposed by government reforms, Olympiads have become a major element of university reputation. As a consequence of this proliferation, even if a tiny minority of students is recruited through the Olympiads and is concentrated in a very small number of universities, all universities carefully scrutinize the results of their candidates at the Olympiads, even when they recruit them through the Unified state exam.

So top universities managed to impose an alternative definition of student recruitment and excellence. The Unified state exam is no longer the only test that high school seniors pass, nor is it the only criterion of judgment for their admission at university.

3. The accommodations and ambivalence of federal authorities

The proliferation of Olympiads went out of control and overwhelmed leading universities as well as the ministry of Education. Top universities feared a devaluation of their own Olympiads, while the ministry feared the marginalization of the EGE. Both were therefore brought to cooperate to channel this process.

To succeed in imposing the Unified state exam, the ministry was led to legitimize the existence of Olympiads, i.e. a circumvention of its own reform. It assists the leading universities to regulate Olympiads. Each year these universities establish a restricted list of Olympiads that is automatically approved by the ministry. These Olympiads, considered as the best ones, are the only ones (besides, of course, the All-Russian State Olympiad) to legally give the winners a privilege to have a free-of-charge place at a top university. The olympiads which are not in this list cannot offer such a privilege.

There is, however, a limit to these bargaining relationships, beyond which central government officials tend to resort to more classic forms of coercion, as if they have no complete confidence in their own incentive-based system of control. The way they hold rectors under control is a prime example of this.

Rectors are key figures in the implementation of reforms. In the 1990s they used to be entrepreneurs at the head of their fiefdoms. They are now supposed to be “transmission belts” of the federal center. Federal top officials strive to make them more dependent on the Centre

and to move them away from their “rank and file” (i.e. deans, department directors and other faculty members).

The first technique consists in having the rectors of some thirty top universities appointed by their supervisory authorities. All other rectors (I remind) are elected by their universities.

Another technique is to tolerate their sometimes extravagant income. This tolerance reminds the situation of entrepreneurs who made their fortunes in the 1990s. For not having fully played the game in the eyes of the Kremlin under Vladimir Putin, some of them had serious trouble with the law. Rectors, too, know they are vulnerable and can be denounced by federal authorities at any time. By the way, some of them have already been arrested for corruption.

Such domestication by example is likely to have significant effects on *all* the rectors.

As a conclusion, the system of control through competition has indeed enabled the federal authorities to subordinate universities and their members, to transform their identities and the way they perceive their own interests. But the logic of competition itself generates unintended effects, which are the result of various strategies implemented by actors aiming at protecting their autonomy. The only way the federal power can try and control these effects is to bargain with these very actors. Competition as a driving force of control makes domination partial and uncertain, even in a system labeled as “authoritarian”.

The “power vertical” is, as a matter of fact, a possible configuration of what is called “authoritarianism”, and it is not made exclusively of state coercion and violence. Several authors have pointed out how authoritarianism is a fuzzy category, mixing elements that a classificatory thought would attribute either to democracy or to authoritarianism. Here, there is a combination of coercive measures and soft forms of domination, which leaves the actors a room to play with the rules. This configuration implies a self-limitation on their part, because, even if coercion is so far rarely used in higher education, actors know that it can be mobilized at any time. This possibility alone, which is in fact an uncertainty, is sufficient to constrain their behavior, expectations and anticipations. Thus, the development of discreet and hushed modes of resistance, rather than public and frontal ones, can be observed. But the central authorities, too, must show self-restraint: if their reforms target and endanger institutions that matter in a sector, they must bargain with them in order to see their reforms implemented.

The art of circumventing reforms is as complex as the art of bargaining to limit these circumventions. And both are all the more difficult to spot and observe that they take discrete forms; it is even on this condition that they can be realized.