PONARS Eurasia
NEW APPROACHES TO RESEARCH AND SECURITY IN EURASIA

Influencers, Echo Chambers, and Epistemic Bubbles

RUSSIA'S ACADEMIC DISCOURSE IN THE WAKE OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

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Moscow's aggression against Ukraine and Russian troops' atrocities against the Ukrainian people have unleashed an outpouring of condemnation around the world. Sweeping economic sanctions imposed on Moscow have spilled over into the cultural, sporting, and educational realms. Some American universities moved quickly to cut their partnerships and financial ties with Russian academe. Others issued powerful statements denouncing Russia's war and expressing support for Kyiv. As more universities, professional associations, and academic journals consider some form of response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, questions about the Russian academic community's intent and the scope of educational boycotts have been debated.

This memo sketches out the relationship between Russia's scholarship on international relations (IR) and Moscow's foreign policy decision-making to offer a background for these debates. It uses the concepts of "influencers," "echo chambers," and "epistemic bubbles" to describe the space where the mainstream academic discourse about Russia's foreign policy takes place. Much of the scholarship in the field of Russian IR takes place in an epistemic bubble that has been cut off from sustained interactions and funding from non-Russian sources. Echo chambers that deliberately amplify the government's assertions are maintained by an elite community of experts affiliated with select academic institutions connected to the Russian state. A smaller group of influencers has direct access to government decision-making, which it exploits to influence the political elite and public views. When top decision-makers release their claims about Russia's foreign policy, echo chambers entertain and develop these political positions. Validated in echo chambers and propagated by influencers, these ideas then re-enter foreign policy discourse. This dynamic leads to the dangerous transformation of ideological constructs into Russia's "truths" and "post-truths" about the world.

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A Comprehensive Study of Russian IR and Russian Foreign Policy

Conclusions presented in this memo are informed by a large-scale study of the co-evolution of Russian IR and Moscow's practice of international affairs. We examined Russian IR textbooks designed for university students and instructors as well as publications from the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO) of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS), the Valdai Discussion Club, the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), and the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISI). In addition, we examined articles published by *International Trends: Journal of International Relations Theory and World Politics* and *Russia in Global Affairs*. Only a handful of IR textbooks with national significance have been published in Russia. Their relative significance is thus much higher compared to the impact of individual textbooks in the US. All textbooks were produced by leading Russian IR scholars working under the auspices of elite Russian institutions—the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), the Lomonosov Moscow State University (MGU), and the Higher School of Economics (HSE), and all have been recommended by the Russian Ministry of Education for use across the Russian Federation. Almost two hundred public speeches delivered by top Russian policymakers were analyzed using Atlas-ti, a qualitative data analysis software package. We supplemented these data sources with the citation rates of the top Russian political scientists and international relations scholars by Russian media.

An Epistemic Bubble in Russian International Relations

Russian IR is a young discipline that emerged in the post-Soviet context, giving rise to a range of intellectual perspectives—from more conservative traditions of geopolitics and realism to liberal and constructivist views. Following the Soviet Union's dissolution, multiple Western foundations and the U.S. State Department funded programs to professionalize, train, and support Russian scientists. These efforts gave rise to prominent liberal thinking in Russia's international relations, which flourished in the 1990s but was soon supplanted by a variety of realist positions. Over time, the dominant conservative and geopolitical thinking metamorphosed into a sizable epistemic bubble characterized by a homogeneity of approaches and isolated from alternative views. The studies that have come out of this epistemic bubble produced conceptual innovations by fusing traditional realist concepts with cultural and civilizational arguments. Ultimately, however, they have been united around a foreign policy orientation aimed at defending Russia's national interests and prestige in global affairs.

Two developments have stimulated the emergence of an epistemic bubble in Russian IR. First, there has been a decade-long decline in academic freedoms in Russia and growing state control over its education and research. Following the passage of the infamous "foreign agents" law in 2012, the Russian government launched investigations into the universities and programs receiving funds from abroad and deported many Western scholars. The main financial sponsors of the liberal brands of international relations

research, such as the MacArthur and Open Society foundations, were banned (Open Society) or closed down their offices in 2015 in the midst of the legal crackdown on their operations (MacArthur). In 2014, the Russian government extended state control over the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS), which lost the right to manage its property. State bureaucrats took leading posts in RAS research centers and other academic institutions.

If not under direct state control, many IR departments and programs in public universities have been led by "old-school" scholars professionalized and socialized in Soviet academe. This older generation of Russian scholars has been unable to rid themselves of the style of research practices that were characteristic of the Soviet scientific enterprise. They view the officialdom as an epistemic authority and uncritically embrace highly ideological explanations for foreign relations. Their leading positions enable them to exert considerable influence on the research and teaching practices at their home institutions.

State censorship and control of academia through funding mechanisms, a centralized process of textbooks' approval, and policy orientations of Russian academic journals have curtailed the informational and resource landscape for a younger generation of scholars, leading to further coalescence of official positions and findings of academic research. Many scholars have tended to reproduce the types of knowledge that correspond to Russia's foreign policies and official discourse. In Russian scholarship, they habituate the language of official claims, such as condemning NATO's "encroachment" on Russia's "sphere of influence" or referring to Russia's aggression against Ukraine as a "crisis."

The Government's Echo Chambers

Russia's international relations academic community is spread around several dozen major universities offering graduate and undergraduate degrees in international relations. Many academics are members of various university-based, private, and state-sponsored think tanks and research centers, producing a mixture of research, policy-related work, and advocacy.

The heavyweights in this infrastructure are three public universities— MGIMO, MGU, and HSE—and four think tanks—the Valdai Discussion Club, the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISI), and the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy (SVOP). MGIMO, MGU, and HSE have several research centers, labs, and programs involved in applied foreign policy work. They supply government agencies with research products on all aspects of Moscow's foreign policy. In addition to engaging with the Russian government and domestic audience, these institutions and think tanks have developed multiple international partnerships with research centers and universities around the world.

While these elite institutions house academics with a range of theoretical perspectives and political views, they have emphasized global issues and questions of importance to the

Russian government and, with the notable exception of HSE, stayed clear of serious criticism of the Kremlin's foreign policy. Celebrated as a stronghold of liberal views, HSE became embroiled in a series of political scandals in the years preceding the war that resulted in the curtailment of its academic freedoms.

With the end of the liberal era in Russia, many publications by leading scholars of these institutions and research products coming out of the think tanks have tended to amplify the government views (select examples of individual scholars' publications from these elite institutions are here, here, and here). For example, concerning Russia's war in Ukraine, publications from elite think tanks have approached what they call a "crisis" or "conflict" in Moscow's relations with Kyiv through the prism of post-Cold-War relations between Moscow and Washington. They have placed the onus of responsibility for the breakdown in Russia's relations with the West on the United States, which has been unwilling to listen to Moscow's security concerns and treat Russia as an equal. They have blamed the United States for seeking access to the Ukrainian security portfolio and viewed Russia's "conflict" in Ukraine as inevitable due to the failure of all parties to understand each other's positions.

Direct linkages between these elite institutions and the Russian government are the chief avenues for state influence on their work. MGIMO is both a public university and a think tank under the umbrella of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID). MID and the Russian Ministry of Education and Science are among the founders of RIAC. Various research centers and labs at MGU and HSE have been funded to work on government projects. The Valdai Club is managed by SVOP, RIAC, MGIMO, and HSE and is closely associated with the Russian president. RISI was part of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service but became directly accountable to the Russian president.

The status and very existence of elite institutions and think tanks in Russia depend on thriving interpersonal relations between the experts and political power holders, ensuring direct state funding and intellectual sponsorship. An affiliation with a major think tank is a mark of prestige and a guarantee of access to power holders who frequent the meetings and conferences organized by the elite institutions.

In contrast with scholars in epistemic bubbles, who merely reproduce government positions due to their limited exposure to other voices, echo chambers amplify and reinforce official positions and insulate them from criticisms. One of the prerequisites for membership in elite expert circles involves general agreement with a core set of beliefs. In addition, the experts trade their ability to criticize the official line of the Russian government for access to key decision-makers. By participating in an echo chamber, elite experts and policy-makers bounce information off each other, which, in turn, reinforces the pre-existing views resulting in the confirmation bias over the desired policy positions.

Academic Influencers

Influencers in Russian IR are a small group of elites who claim expertise on various topics of Russian foreign policy and global affairs. However, their academic authority has been inseparable from their proximity to the government. Access to top-level decision-making has turned these individuals into key media personalities, allowing them to make frequent appearances on TV and leave commentaries about Russia's politics in popular newspapers and journals. In 2021 Daily Moscow prepared the ratings of the most influential political scientists and international relations scholars cited my mass media sources. A similar rating effort was carried out by Medialogia in 2016.

Among key trends contributing to the emergence of influences in IR, which is neither new nor unique to modern Russia, has been the movement of academics into politics and politicians adding degrees and academic ranks to their government portfolios. Not only have these political functionaries-turned-academics begun disseminating their political views under the guise of academic publications, but they have also been able to join the faculties of leading Russian universities. This, in turn, has enabled them to influence Russian scholarship and teaching. Vladimir Medinsky is a point in case. An ultraconservative nationalist political figure and writer accused of plagiarism, Medinsky left a heavy imprint of his dubious scholarship on the teaching of Russia's history through his curatorship of the textbooks that portray Moscow's invasion of Crimea as "peaceful."

Trusted sources and transmitters of official positions, influencers have been instrumental in shaping and giving credence to government views. Sergey Karaganov, for example, who holds leadership positions in the SVOP and HSE, has had direct access to the Presidential Administration. A long-standing presidential advisor involved with the conceptual grounding of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Karaganov coined a new approach to Russia's foreign policy. Dubbed "constructive destruction," it advocates for "the collection of [Russian] lands," including Ukraine, as a necessary step in the creation of a new security order favorable to Moscow. Sergei Markov, who leads an institute of political research at MGU, compared Kyiv with a "loaded pistol" aimed at Moscow. Markov accused Washington of turning Ukraine into an "anti-Russian tool" and asserted that any means would justify transforming Kyiv into a Russia-friendly country. Vyacheslav Nikonov, who heads the Russkiy Mir Foundation and chairs the School of Public Administration at MSU, penned several articles stoking fears of violence against ethnic Russians in Ukraine and offering quasi-historical justifications for a single Russian-Ukrainian nation.

Conclusion

Looking at the state-academe nexus through the framework of influencers, echo chambers, and epistemic bubbles reveals a dangerous symbiosis of politics and a large corpus of IR scholarship in Russia. It also illuminates important differences in the

mechanisms connecting policy and research. If scholars in the epistemic bubble rely on limited training, resources, and information that leads to the reproduction of ideologized knowledge, academics in the echo chambers may do so deliberately for reasons of prestige and access. Influencers offer direct support to the Kremlin in an effort to shape, legitimize, and publicize political views. In the end, though, all these social structures are spaces for excluding, minimizing, or undermining alternative and critical views.

The different mechanisms that bring about and sustain epistemic bubbles, echo chambers, and influencers call for distinct interventions to break ties between the state and academia. Epistemic bubbles often form with no malevolent intent through processes of community formation facilitated by state censorship and resource limitations. Removing obstacles to accessing, using, and reproducing alternative information may pop the epistemic bubble but will have little impact on echo chambers and influencers of academic knowledge. The members of echo chambers are dependent on the state for their reputation. To break an echo chamber requires delinking the well-being and prestige of academic elites from the state. It is rather difficult, if not impossible, to change the beliefs and practices of influencers, though can be done through a process known as a "social epistemic reboot."

For the time being, Western institutions should deny every opportunity to the propagandists of Russia's aggression by severing ties with academic and private educational establishments that openly support the war or provide a professional home to influencers exalting its purpose. Academic journals and online platforms that accept contributions from Russian scholars should single out one-sided research emerging from the academic bubble and require this group of scholars to take alternative perspectives and counterpoints seriously. And all scholars of Russian politics and foreign relations should continuously self-reflect on how their research and public statements may inadvertently give credence to the logic of Russian foreign policy that can provide justifications for real-life expressions of imperialism and ethnonationalism, and, ultimately, war.

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