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World-class universities in Russia: a contested norm and its implementation

Article

Accepted Version

Crowley-Vigneau, A. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5781-8837, Kalyuzhnova, Y. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5781-8837 and Baykov, A. (2023) World-class universities in Russia: a contested norm and its implementation. Journal of Studies in International Education, 27 (3). pp. 539-556. ISSN 10283153 doi: 10.1177/10283153221105322 Available at https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/105733/

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To link to this article DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/10283153221105322

Publisher: Sage

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World-class universities in Russia: a contested norm and its implementation

Cite as: Crowley-Vigneau, A., Kalyuzhnova, Y., & Baykov, A. (2022). World-class Universities in Russia: A Contested Norm and its Implementation. Journal of Studies in International Education. https://doi.org/10.1177/10283153221105322

Abstract

So-called 'world-class universities' emerged on the global higher education scene following the Second World War. Their development in countries around the world, particularly since the early 2000s, has evolved into an international norm, although not without debate and contestation. This paper applies Constructivist theory to reflect on how local contestation affected the implementation of this norm of world-class universities in Russia, at a time when the internationalization of higher education was a national priority (i.e. before the beginning of hostilities in Ukraine). The authors employ process tracing to follow the norm from its emergence on the international stage to its contemporary adoption by Russia with Project 5-100, drawing on a case study based on 22 targeted expert interviews to identify the types and roots of resistance in Russian universities. The findings indicate that Russian contestation reflects in most cases difficulties adapting to new requirements and the fear of being left behind rather than an overall rejection of the international norm of world-class universities. The study reveals that international actors are essential not only to norm diffusion on the international stage, but also during domestic norm implementation as they are instrumental in overcoming contestation.

Keywords: world-class university; Constructivism; norm contestation; transnational networks; Project 5-100; Russia

Introduction

The international norm of world-class universities emerged after the Second World War, gained momentum in the 2000s, when several countries explicitly set out to make their university systems globally competitive, and reached maturity in the early 2010s with the growing power of global university rankings and a critical mass of countries creating their own excellence in higher education programs. Defined as outward-looking, cosmopolitan, autonomous, research-intensive and stakeholder-oriented entities, world-class universities are capable of delivering a high-quality education and attracting the best students and researchers. At the time when this international norm (i.e., world-class universities) was rapidly acquiring salience worldwide, Russia was in the midst of a comprehensive overhaul of its higher education system, as part of a bid to tackle the severe economic and financial setbacks it faced in the 1990s. The demand for a new generation of universities that could provide a high-quality education to shore up the national economy during the 2000s, turned in the 2010s into the more ambitious project of putting in place a globally competitive higher learning system. The research and analysis underlying this paper was carried out by the authors in 2020-2021 before the eruption of hostilities in Ukraine, which have had a profoundly disruptive effect on the internationalization of the Russian higher education sector.

This paper draws on Constructivist theory to make sense of the evolution of the international norm of world-class universities and to determine the factors that influence its national implementation. The authors examine why and how this international norm made its way into the Russian higher education system and argue that the widely present contestation, normally viewed as a sign of dissatisfaction with the outcomes of internationalization, is a

natural part of the implementation process which can be built up upon to improve the quality of excellence initiatives. The paper shows how norm contestation theory can inform the debate on world-class universities and characterizes the specificities of Russian higher education and the circumstances, which resulted in the creation of Project 5-100 – the Russian manifestation of the international norm. Launched in 2012, Project 5-100 is a governmental initiative designed to improve the international competitiveness of Russian higher education by boosting the performance of a select number of Russian universities. The single case study rests upon the analysis of 22 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders from 16 Russian universities and high-level foreign and Russian policy-makers directly involved in Project 5-100.

The paper discusses how, in the Russian case, contestation mechanisms are a necessary stage of the process of creating world-class universities rather than a rejection of internationalization initiatives. The study allows the authors to determine the types of contestation experienced in the Russian higher education system and to identify their underlying causes. The study reveals that international actors are essential not only to norm diffusion on the international stage, but also to domestic norm implementation. They can contribute to minimizing contestation by helping academic staff and university management adapt to change.

Contestation in norm theory

This study applies Constructivist norm theory to the study of excellence in higher education initiatives in an attempt to reveal how resistance affects their long-term implementation. Scholarly literature on the power of norms to instigate change in international politics flourished in the 1980s and 1990s, with an emphasis being placed on the emergence and diffusion of certain norms, as well as internalization mechanisms (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Defined as ‘collective expectations for proper behaviour’ norms were shown to affect

the behaviour of states but also to shape the identity of societies (Katzenstein, 1999, p.5). The role of activism in promoting norm diffusion came to the fore with the literature on Transnational Advocacy Networks (Keck & Sikkink, 1998) and norm entrepreneurs (Sunstein, 1996). Early scholarship assumed that mature norms would experience no difficulties reaching compliance and would over time acquire robustness through moral consciousness-raising, institutionalization and habitualisation (Risse et al., 2009). The focus has more recently shifted to analysing normative changes and emphasizing the relativity of the concept of 'inter-subjectivity' of norms in the light of contestation mechanisms (Wiener, 2014).

Contestation came to be viewed as 'a range of social practices that discursively express disapproval of norms' and which could be explicit or implicit (Wiener, 2014, pp.1-2). Wiener differentiates between reactive contestation, associated with norm violation, and proactive contestation, whereby actors express disagreement with a part of a norm or the way it is being implemented. When considering resistance to norms, identifying the type of contestation may help gauge the risks it poses to the norm and find a way of limiting resistance. Furthermore, actors who disagree with how a norm is locally applied may be met halfway by the government, leading to a compromise in its specific institutional design and contestation may in time lead to a strengthening of the norm. Indeed, a norm is considered robust when it has managed to overcome challenges (Deitelhoff & Zimmermann, 2020). Contestation of the fundamental validity of the norm or its underlying principles may be more difficult to overcome, causing in some cases norm erosion.

While international contestation could result in the death of a norm (Kutz, 2014); resistance would need to be widespread and involve antipreneurs, actors working transnationally 'to defend the normative status quo' (Bloomfield, 2016, p.2). Local contestation is, on the contrary, more frequently associated with norm reinforcement as it incites governments,

institutions and enforcement entities to perfect the local adaptation of an international norm making it more legitimate. Norm theory contends that during the implementation of a norm, contestation, particularly at a local level, offers no reason to believe the norm has started to decay (Wiener, 2014). One analysis of contestation with respect to the norm of world-class universities in Taiwan reveals that disenchantment with internationalization programs has led to policy reorientations towards meeting local needs (Lo & Hou, 2020). This contestation, described as a balancing of local, national and global targets (Yang et al., 2021), need not signify the end of internationalization as such. As norm theory makes clear, contestation can be transformed into a productive force to rationalize the local implementation of international norms (Deitelhoff & Zimmermann, 2020).

Transnational networks have been described as international actors that help to diffuse norms internationally and promote their adoption by national governments. Their role after norm institutionalization during the domestic implementation phase has been partially overlooked in the literature. While scholars have argued that international norms are locally reconstructed during their domestic implementation (Acharya, 2004), the process is attributed to interactions between domestic politics and international institutions rather than to transnational networks operationally helping on the ground.

World-class universities as an international norm

The model of a world-class university took shape progressively in the West after World War II, with a number of universities purposefully developing characteristics that would enable them to adapt to new economic realities and social values. US governments dedicated significant resources to higher education in order to promote research and economic development, leading to a competitive differentiation among universities. The benefits of these synergies became apparent to European countries, and over time governments linked policy goals of sustaining economic growth to a transition to a new model of universities.

International rankings of universities rose to prominence in the 2000s, allowing students to select the top-rated programs, further spurring on competition among universities (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007). While a handful of leading, mostly Western, universities set the trends and crafted the norm of world-class universities, a number of national governments explored different paths in trying to compete with the leaders (Escher & Aebischer, 2018). Even though they adopted diverse strategies, these countries nevertheless encouraged universities to boost research capacities by offering financial incentives in order to make them globally competitive (Fu et al., 2020).

In 2009, responding to the changes underway in the higher education system globally, the World Bank created programs to support university competitiveness in developing countries and released *The Challenge of Establishing World-Class Universities* (Salmi, 2009). This codification of the norm gave additional impetus to internationalization processes and coincided with a second wave of governments developing targeted excellence in higher education initiatives including Russia and Spain. Alongside defining the concept of a world-class university, the World Bank publication addresses the rhetoric of norm contestation and some bones of contention which remain discussed by scholars to this day such as Western elitism, the power of discourse in achieving excellence, the lack of direct ties between progress in rankings and system improvement and the role played by international rankings in both institutionalizing Western hegemony and marginalizing the humanities (e.g. Guo et al., 2021, Maesse, 2017, Cremonini et al. 2014). The global diffusion of excellence in higher education programs, the emergent power of rankings and the support of an international organisation mark the 'coming of age' of the norm of what constitutes a 'world-class university' that reached its tipping point in the early 2000s, thus becoming a mature norm. The tipping point refers to the moment in the evolution of a norm whereupon a critical number of actors accept it, which leads to an acceleration in its adoption by other actors.

Nonetheless, although the development of new projects to create world class universities is on the rise in many countries, the criticism of excellence initiatives has developed a new focus, highlighting internal problems linked to their implementation, e.g. the formalization of inequality between universities in a country (Lo & Hou, 2020), the standardization of universities that partake in government-imposed excellence programs (Dong et al., 2020), and the limited impact of the projects on universities' performance (Fu et al., 2020). In other words, when Russia set out to adopt the international norm of world-class universities with its Project 5-100, contestation was already brewing internationally.

Case study of Russian Project 5-100 for world-class universities

Project 5-100: Context of adoption, organisation and outcomes

The transition from the Soviet higher education system to a more internationalized one began in the 1990s with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The 1990s saw the unfolding of two distinct trends: the liberalization of the market shortly followed by an economic crisis and the start of a government initiative in 1992 to reorganize the higher education system. Several programs were created to support the higher education system including the Federal Universities project, focused on the development of the Russian regions, and the National Research Universities project, emphasising the development of research within universities. Decree No. 599 of May 7th, 2012 marked the launch of the *Russian Academic Excellence Project* (or Project 5-100), the Russian implementation of the international norm of world-class universities (see Appendix 1 for an analysis of their common features). The initiative aimed to improve the international competitiveness of the Russian higher education system and was allocated between 9 and 10 billion roubles yearly between 2013 and 2020 (Governmental Decree 211 2013). Among the 54 universities that applied to Project 5-100, 15 were selected in May 2013 and another six joined in 2015 (see Appendix 2 for university

profiles). Among the 21 universities participating in Project 5-100, 12 are comprehensive, covering a wide range of subject areas and nine are specialised, mostly in natural sciences. Only one university was specialised in social sciences. Most specialised universities selected for the project are located in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, while the comprehensive universities represent Russia's main federal regions.

Project 5-100 was structurally organized to promote the sharing of international best-practices, with Transnational Expertise and Experience Networks embedded in the project's institutional framework and in the rules governing its implementation (Crowley-Vigneau et al. 2021b). Foreigners played a decisive role in the International Expert Committee (responsible for strategic decision-making), in the Project Office (in charge of the roll-out of the initiative), in International Advisory Boards (that guide universities' development) but also within consulting and rating agencies assisting universities (Crowley-Vigneau et al. 2021b).

An analysis of the outcomes of Project 5-100 points to an improvement in the performance of universities participating in the project. Econometric studies concluded that the initiative had a statistically significant positive effect on the efficiency of the participating universities (Shibanova et al., 2018, p.1) and on quantitative university research performance (Matveeva et al., 2020). A review of Russian universities' results in different institutional rankings confirms the project has had an overall positive impact on their competitiveness: Russia went from having 2 universities in the top 400 of the Higher Times Education Ranking of World Universities in 2012 to 4 in 2020, from 2 universities in the CWTS Leiden ranking for 2011-2012 to 10 universities in 2020, from 7 universities in the top 500 of the QS institutional ranking in 2010 to 16 in 2020. Nineteen Russian universities made it in 2021 into the Shanghai Global Ranking of Academic Subjects, six into the top 100.

Nevertheless, while Russia's world-class universities project had an overall positive impact on the higher education system, contestation mechanisms ran in parallel with the new project from its inception.

Contestation of world-class universities

Both international and Russian scholars have for several decades been vocal about the limitations and risks associated with the norm of world-class universities (Lo & Hou, 2020; Maesse, 2017; Torkunov, 2017). The model of world-class universities fits into the broader doctrine of a neo-liberal higher education system characterised by the 'corporatisation and privatization of universities': Management practices from the corporate world are introduced into universities, academic work is valued if it serves business interests and translates into direct economic gains (Gill, 2016, p.41). The international norm of world-class universities was perceived in Russia by academics and the population at large as a continuation of the controversial economic liberalization of the 1990s, which was associated with a significant decline in the quality of higher education (Kniazev, 2002).

The dominating 'managerial' and internationalization discourse promoted by the Russian government has been contested by clusters of academics, including a sizeable number of influential members of the Russian Academy of Science, who resent the changes in the structure of academic programs and the ensuing increase in their workload (Abramov et al., 2016). The risks to academic autonomy have also been associated with accountability pressures, the reallocation of resources to activities that impact a university's rank, the growing role of administrators and the Federal bureaucracy in university decision-making (Guba 2021).

The launch of Project 5-100 elevated the contestation discourse from disparate universities to governmental level, with some high-level members of the government questioning whether the norm of world-class universities was suited to Russian universities. Olga

Vassilieva, Minister of Education and Science of Russia (2016-2018), criticised the project inaugurated by her predecessor, Dmitry Livanov, noting that the funds allocated to Project 5-100 could have been better spent otherwise.

Contestation of the neo-liberal model and its incarnation in Project 5-100 in Russia focuses on the risks associated with unlimited internationalization. The international norm of world-class universities posits that in order to be internationally competitive, universities need to modify the content of educational programs, management practices and organizational culture. When developing international dual diploma programs, Russian universities have to be prepared to undergo foreign certification processes. To integrate fully into the global academic community, scholars need to become fluent in English, participate in international conferences and learn about the peer-reviewed submission process to international journals. The new principles of the neo-liberal model such as self-help and autonomy may come in conflict with fundamental Russian social principles such as state paternalism.

The clash of different ideological frameworks has an impact on the implementation of international norms. The neo-liberal model rests upon strong political, social and economic institutions, and countries with institutions based on national rather than international value systems may encounter additional resistance in developing world-class universities. Deficiencies in institutional autonomy and strong state control over higher education have also been blamed for Russia's difficulties in creating world-class universities (Oleksiyenko, 2021).

National values can give a whole new meaning to international norms but the adoption of dual frameworks can also create some contradictions. The implementation of Project 5-100 unleashed a whole new wave of contestation: the initiative was criticized for precipitating a further decline in the quality of education and research (Torkunov 2017).

The focus on short-time objectives and encouraging opportunistic behaviour are some of the most frequently recurring criticisms (Yudkevich et al., 2015). Conflicts of interest related to rating agencies providing consultancy services (Chirikov, 2021) and discrepancies in ranking calculation methodologies (Kaycheng, 2016) have also been described as damaging for the development of universities. The pressure to publish in international journals and a lack of research awareness have resulted in anxiety and the development of semi-legal practices. Although capable and internationally-oriented Russian scholars are increasing their publishing output in reputable journals (Moed et al., 2018), the country is experiencing a 'predatory boom' resulting from the 'low quality of research evaluation' that is often restricted to counting articles indexed in Scopus, a database that indexes a large number of unscrupulous journals (Sterligov & Savina, 2016, p.12). Designed to encourage scientists of all levels to perform research, the incentivization system has made Russian academics vulnerable to predatory journals. The Russian contestation of international journals is also rooted in a fear of discrimination spanning a wide spectrum from a perceived in-built preference for articles written by native English-speakers to a rejection of the Russian world-view. The idea that leading Russian scientists should be encouraged to publish their work in, and thus increase the visibility of Russian journals rather than Western ones, has also been voiced in the criticism of Project 5-100 (Crowley-Vigneau et al. 2021a).

Overall, the literature reveals the existence of multi-faceted criticism surrounding Project 5-100, but does not qualify the types of contestation or analyse its impact on the implementation of the project.

Findings

The analysis of primary and secondary sources as well as of twenty-two original semi-structured interviews conducted in 2019-2021 with Russian and international experts helped to identify the types and origins of contestation in Russian higher education, and reveals the

ways in which resistance was pre-empted and addressed within Project 5-100. The sample was designed to include high-level stakeholders of Project 5-100 with first-hand experiences of dealing with local contestation as well as detractors of the initiative. The research methodology is presented in Appendix 3 and the list of interviews in Appendix 4.

Types of Contestation to Project 5-100

Determining the impact of contestation on the implementation of Project 5-100 requires an analysis of the various types of resistance and dissatisfaction that emerged in different categories of universities, both participants and non-participants of the project. An analysis of expert interviews reveals that some of the most critical comments regarding Project 5-100 were formulated by representatives of universities from the underperforming group. The criticism concerned performance review procedures, strategic mistakes resulting from the increased pressure to be competitive and the prioritization of national ambitions over local development.

Project 5-100 is about change at all costs. Experienced university leaders […] are publicly shamed during meetings for silly things such as not respecting the presentation format, for not speaking English... Interview 1 Siberian Federal University

We're so desperate to improve our ranking results that now we have a third of the classroom in some programs that can't understand Russian and can't follow the lessons at all. [Interviewee refers to efforts made to enroll foreign students]

Interview 2, Samara National Research University

Our mission was always to support the economic development of our region, by training specialists for small to medium businesses. [...] Now we are running after the chimera of international fame.

Interview 3, Far Eastern Federal University.

Universities that applied to participate in Project 5-100 but were rejected were also sources of discontent. Experts in this category of universities echoed some of the dissatisfaction over international goals being prioritized over national or local ones but also raised additional questions related to the impossibility of surviving as a university specialized only in social sciences and the limited prospects of Russia being able to perform well in a system which was designed by Anglo-Saxon universities.

We are not part of Project 5-100, so we don't get the funding, but our work is assessed based on the same criteria. [...] We are the leading international relations university of Russia but in order to be competitive in terms of publishing we need to grow to other subject areas. In fact, we are planning to open up a medical school.

Interview 4, Interview Moscow State Institute of International Relations

The prioritization of 1% or 2% of Russian universities is destructive to Russian education as a whole. [...] The marginalization of some regional universities could lead to yet further migration to Moscow and Saint Petersburg.

Interview 5, St. Petersburg State University of Economics

The government should use existing assets to develop a Russian higher educational model which would be envied the world over, like the Soviet one, rather than be a second-rate performer in a system in which the rules of the game have already been written.
Interview 6, Voronezh State University.

Overcoming contestation

Interviews offer an overview of the different types of contestation but also reveal that attempts were made to prevent and overcome contestation by addressing the main bones of contention. A significant part of the resistance to Project 5-100 was identified above as an inability to adapt to new requirements and the fear of exclusion. Contestation was addressed by involving an international network to help with the domestic adaptation of the international norm of world-class universities and by seeking compromise with discontented universities. Project 5-100 created an institutional platform allowing the sharing of foreign expertise and experience as illustrated by the following examples:

Half of the members of the International Expert Committee, created to devise the strategy of Project 5-100, select and control the progress of participating universities are foreign experts in higher education. These international experts were marked out by respondents for their objectivity, their fairness, lack of vested interests and practical advice. Key motors of change, they improved the reputation of the project, with even ardent critics of Project 5-100 in underperforming universities recognizing their positive contribution to the quality of teaching and research in universities. The fact that no universities were exempt from the scrutiny of the Expert Committee and the requirement that rectors and vice-rectors answer in person and in English to a committee with no vested interests had a leveling effect, creating a sense of justice, increasing the credibility of the project and reducing contestation.

The integration of foreign experts into the official structure of Project 5-100 helps to avoid corruption and favouritism.

Interview 7, Lobachevsky University

The foreign International Expert Committee members can say things that Russians might not feel comfortable saying.

Interview 8, World Bank/ US university.

The international network that helped to adapt the international norm of world-class universities to local conditions also comprised foreign academics. Project 5-100 together with other Russian internationalisation initiatives (e.g. 'Megagrants', 'Export of Education', Global Education' programs) led to an increase in the cooperation between Russian and foreign universities and to an inflow of leading scholars to help develop Russian academic research. The 'pairing-up' of Russian universities with foreign universities of a similar profile led to the sharing of best-practices. International publishing requirements, initially the object of great controversy in universities, as perceived both as pointless and unachievable, became less daunting with the help of foreign experts.

I have published a lot in Russian journals but the rules of the game in publishing became so different with 5-100. [...] The creation at FEFU of innovative research clusters allowed for an exchange of best practices with foreign scientists. We learnt by co-authoring articles with them how to overcome our frustration and publish in foreign indexed journals.

Interview 9, Far Eastern Federal University

Our foreign leading researcher has worked with the laboratory to develop solar panels based on perovskites, making our university a leader in renewable energies.

Interview 10, National University of Science and Technology

The creation of international advisory boards also gave universities both an incentive to change and practical advice about how to do it. Their members offer strategic recommendations on how to be competitive in the global educational market, on research projects worth pursuing, tailored advice on human resource, curriculum and governance issues. Involving prominent international experts also enabled universities to boost inter-university cooperation and improve the acceptance of Project 5-100. By adapting the strategic recommendations to specific conditions, these boards helped localise the international norm of world-class universities.

Receiving constructive recommendations on our performance from foreign board members is different from being criticised by government officials who have never done our job.
Interview 11, Novosibirsk State University

The Board members offer valuable advice adapted to our University: they recommended that we develop our research on environmental sciences based on our unique geographical position, that we study the results of climate change by measuring changes in temperatures and predict how it could impact shipping routes.
Interview 12, Tomsk State University

The international network helping to prevent contestation also comprises external consulting agencies that universities participating in Project 5-100 were encouraged to use to draw up a roadmap for their development. These agencies (mainly PwC and Mc Kinsey) are described by respondents as instrumental in aiding with the implementation of Project 5-100, through the sharing of best practices and their involvement in joint research. Educated

in leading universities abroad but familiar with the Russian context, consultants helped universities identify and overcome structural and human resource problems, thus pre-empting and managing internal resistance.

Consultants helped us create a really productive partnership with MIT and the French Ecole Polytechnique resulting in joint research and transfer of best practices.
Interview 13, National Research Nuclear University.

We had to learn from 'spin doctors' how to increase the visibility of Russian higher education and improve the acceptance of the project here in Russia and abroad.
Interview 14, 5-100 Project Office.

While their influence is controversial, international ranking agencies had a significant impact on Project 5-100, with the name of the initiative directly referring to the ambition to have five Russian universities in the top 100 globally. Ranking agencies collect data from universities in order to create the ratings and are in constant interaction with them, providing consultations to universities on a regular basis. Providing an objective benchmark against which to assess universities' performance, rating agencies pre-empted accusations of unfair treatment and reinforced the credibility of Project 5-100.

What other independent source do we have to measure the progress of our universities and decide which ones deserve funding?
Interview 15, Ministry of Science and Higher Education

International rankings have a bias in favour of Anglo-Saxon universities but at least in Russia when we use them, we know we are all being assessed based on objective criteria.
Interview 16, University of Tyumen

Discussion

Effects of contestation on Russian higher education

The effects of contestation on the national implementation of the international norm of world-class universities depend on the forms contestation takes. While localised and explicit criticism targeting a concrete aspect of norm implementation can be addressed by engaging in negotiations or developing compensating measures to support specific populations, implicit criticism, taking the form of an 'overall failure' narrative and sabotaging compliance with new regulations, can be more difficult to deal with as it can lead to widespread covert inertia. Contestation of Project 5-100 in Russia, as reflected by the case-study, is localised and concentrated in two categories of universities: (1) Regional comprehensive universities participating in Project 5-100 that did not manage to improve their performance in international ratings, were severely criticised for their results and were concerned about the reputational consequences of being excluded from the project. (2) Those specialised in social sciences that were candidates for Project 5-100 but were not selected to participate.

Localised contestation as witnessed in the Russian case is concerned primarily with some aspects of the application of the international norm of world-class universities through Project 5-100 rather that the validity of this norm. The criticism is focused on the abrupt way the leadership of universities is treated, the neglect of some essential quality indicators and the rejection of some categories of universities from the project. This type of contestation is fuelled by the inability to adapt to new requirements, the fear of not being competitive or of being left behind. It does not endanger the implementation of the project if the dissatisfied parties are brought to the negotiations table in time and compromise solutions are found. The decision not to exclude underperforming participants from Project 5-100 appears as a compromise to ensure that regional comprehensive universities retain a good reputation and remain attractive to local students. Likewise, several universities specialised in social

sciences, both participants (the Higher School of Economics) and non-participants of Project 5-100 (Moscow State Institute of International Relations), have been supported in their strategic decision to branch out and become more comprehensive, for example by opening medical schools, in an attempt to become more competitive.

Reactive contestation criticising the values underlying the new norm and aimed at returning to a purely national education system presents greater risks, especially if it is extensive. The contestation experienced in Russia, but also in Taiwan (Lo & Hou, 2020), China (Lin & Wang, 2021) appears to be proactive, as it has largely translated into new governmental policies focused on the improvement of previous internationalization projects rather than their rejection. Resistance has also been described as an unavoidable stage in the transition of a university to excellence (Jiang et al. 2018). The corrective measures born from the contestation and that focus on promoting diversity among universities, quality and effectiveness in the teaching process, social responsibility towards regional economies and preserving national values appear as fine-tuning designed to help communities adapt to the irreversible and necessary trend of internationalization in higher education rather than attempts to overturn it. Project 5-100 participants show increasing internationalization, possibly linked to the acceptance of the international norm of world-class universities, as reflected by the share of papers co-authored with foreign colleagues from 33% in 2012 to 44% in 2016 (cf. 27% to 31% for non-participants), the proportion of international students studying in Russian universities from 8% in 2015 to 11% in 2018 (cf. from 4% to 5% for non-participants) and the share of international faculty from 1% in 2015 to 4% in 2018 (cf. from 0% to 0% for non-participants) (Guseva et al. 2021, Matveeva et al. 2021). The conclusion of Project 5-100 in 2021 and launch of the new 'Priority 2030' initiative (Decree 3697-p, 2020) reflect this intention to continue the internationalization of higher education but also a new focus on supporting regional comprehensive and universities specialised in

social sciences. The new initiative's inclusion criteria share common features with Project 5-100 and reflect a continuing effort to implement the international norm of world-class universities, with participating universities being selected on a competitive basis, the focus being put on R&D potential, the capacity to attract funding from businesses and to become regionally and globally competitive.

Reducing contestation with international networks

The findings of this study also indicate that international networks can help stifle discontent and overcome resistance in the national implementation of an international norm. The activism of advocacy networks supporting norm diffusion on the international stage finds its continuation during the implementation phase through the activities of networks working on the ground and bringing in their expertise and experience. By helping with norm localization, promoting international best practices and fostering a productive dialogue, this type of network contributes to overcoming resistance. International actors can play a critical part in ensuring that a norm reaches compliance by helping with its adaptation to the national context and acceptance by a majority of stakeholders. Inviting international experts to assess the performance of universities in Project 5-100 was an important step in improving the governance of the project. Using international rankings as reference points is controversial, as they favour comprehensive universities over specialised ones, exact sciences over humanities and suffer from methodological and ethical flaws (Chirikov 2021, Kaycheng, 2016). However, in countries with low levels of trust in national reporting systems and statistics, international rankings are widely accepted as a preferred alternative. Enlisting the support of international experts in advisory boards and joint research projects helps with the implementation of the new rules. While contestation runs in parallel with Project 5-100 and has not been entirely overcome, the involvement of an international network acted as a

protective factor against resistance in two ways: It provided an impartial evaluation of university performance thus limiting the possible scope of accusations of bias, favouritism and corruption. It reduced the potential number of detractors by facilitating the process of change and helping academics and university management meet the new requirements. International networks may also, by helping the internationalization of higher education succeed, contribute to reducing the brain drain of Russian academic community, with faculty members less likely to emigrate if they work for universities with a global reputation (Lanko, 2021). The Russian case study shows that local contestation is an ongoing process that goes hand-in-hand with the localization of a universal norm, and which, under the right circumstances and with the support of transnational networks, does not threaten the implementation process.

Conclusion

This article shows that the concept of world-class universities is in fact an international norm and traces its evolution from its emergence on the international stage to its adoption and implementation by the Russian government. Transnational Advocacy Networks (Keck & Sikkink, 1998) which support norm diffusion on the international stage find their continuation during the implementation phase through the activities of Transnational Expertise and Experience Networks (Crowley-Vigneau et al. 2021b), that share best practices and foster a productive dialogue. International actors play a decisive role in helping to localize international norms, transforming sporadic resistance into an institutionalized deliberation process that can be built up upon to improve norm legitimacy. In the Russian case study, contestation runs in parallel with all stages of the evolution of the norm of world-class universities, is concentrated in under-performing universities and those excluded from Project 5-100 and takes the form of resistance to reform and resorting to suboptimal practices. Contestation in Project 5-100 is managed by institutionalizing an international

network of experts to improve the governance of the project and help local stakeholders adapt to change. States faced with resistance from academics and the population rarely entirely roll back on their internationalization programs, resorting at worst to putting them on hold or implementing corrective measures. However, the eruption of hostilities in 2022 in Ukraine and Western sanctions present serious challenges to Russia's ambition of becoming an international center of excellence in research and education. In March 2022, the departure of foreign faculty members, the suspension of student exchange programs by Western universities, the cancellation of grants and the exclusion of Russian scholars from international conferences are the first indications that the goals of the new 'Priority 2030' program aimed at 'raising global competitiveness' may be hard to attain. It seems likely in the light of recent events that the priorities for Russian Higher Education could be redesigned to focus more attention and resources on internal objectives such as the replacement of foreign-imported technologies, the development of the Russian regions and improving living standards. The confrontation with the West also reinforces Russia's turn to Asia in all spheres, including research and education, and may lead to a new ambition of showing that internationalization is possible without the West.

Appendix 1 Features of world-class universities and of Project 5-100

Features of a world-class university according to the World Bank	**International assessment criteria**	**Corresponding features of Russian Project 5-100**

Expanding cooperation with business	High levels of technology transfer	Requirements to commercialise research findings, to create research-parks, business-incubators and to support new start ups at universities
Research-intensive	Publications in indexed journals	Faculty members assessed based on h-index, publications and citations in international journals, Funds allocated to attract leading researchers
An international reputation	High positions in international rankings, brand recognition	Positions in global university rankings as an assessment criteria for participating universities
Global attractiveness	Admissions selectivity	Percentage of foreign students as an assessment criteria for participating universities
Trains professionals needed by the economy	High demand for the university's graduates on the labour market	Graduate employability as an assessment criteria for participating universities
Abundant resources	High funding levels from both private and state sources	State funding of project but requirement it be matched with equivalent amounts of private funding

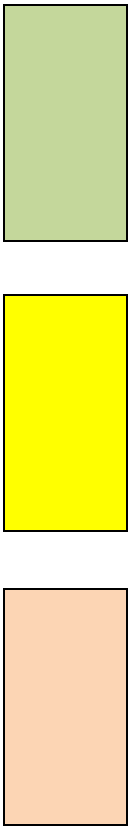
Favorable governance	Institutional autonomy, academic freedom	Centralised governance with limited institutional autonomy and academic freedom but involvement of international experts to improve governance

Sources: Author table based on Salmi 2009 and Project 5-100's official website https://www.5top100.ru/en/

Appendix 2 List of universities of Project 5-100

Name of University	**City**	**Year joined project 5-100**	**Type**
Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University	Kaliningrad	2015	Comprehensive
Higher School of Economics	Moscow	2013	Specialised
Far Eastern Federal University	Vladivostok	2013	Comprehensive
Kazan Federal University	Kazan	2013	Comprehensive
Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology	Moscow	2013	Specialised
National University of Science and Technology	Moscow	2013	Specialised

National Research Nuclear University	Moscow	2013	Specialised
Lobachevsky University	Nizhny Novgorod	2013	Comprehensive
Novosibirsk State University	Novosibirsk	2013	Comprehensive
First Moscow State Medical University	Moscow	2015	Specialised
Peoples' Friendship University of Russia	Moscow	2015	Comprehensive
Samara National Research University	Samara	2013	Comprehensive
Saint-Petersburg Electrotechnical University	Saint Petersburg	2013	Specialised
Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University	Saint Petersburg	2013	Specialised
Siberian Federal University	Krasnoyarsk	2015	Comprehensive
Tomsk State University	Tomsk	2013	Comprehensive
Tomsk Polytechnic University	Tomsk	2013	Specialised
University of Tyumen	Tyumen	2015	Comprehensive
ITMO University	Saint Petersburg	2013	Specialised
Ural Federal University	Ekaterinburg	2013	Comprehensive
South Ural State University	Chelyabinsk	2015	Comprehensive



Source: Author illustration based on Russian Order 398-p

Appendix 3 Research Design

The study was guided by the research question: How has local contestation affected the implementation of the international norm on world-class universities within Russian higher education and how might it be overcome? A qualitative and analytical research strategy was selected as the gathering of information to answer a "how" research question seeking explanations needs to be inter-personal and based on interactions with people on the ground. A qualitative approach allows to study in-depth a phenomenon without restricting the scope

of potential answers, thus facilitating the discovery of causal mechanisms. The authors conducted 22 expert interviews were from 2019 to 2021 with Russian and international experts in higher education (see table 2). The selected experts are chancellors, vice-chancellors or deans of sixteen leading Russian universities, key policy-makers in the Russian Ministry of Science and Higher Education, directors of rating and consulting agencies managing the teams involved in Project 5-100 and a representative of the World Bank. The sample was designed to include high-level stakeholders of Project 5-100 with first-hand experiences of dealing with local contestation as well as detractors of the initiative. Maximal representativeness is ensured by including experts from universities participating in Project 5-100 and from universities not selected for the project. International ethical best practices were complied with during the interview process, including the use of consent forms and information sheets, and the respect of respondents' anonymity. Interview transcripts were manually coded in three stages and process tracing[1] was employed as the principal method to determine how the international norm on world-class universities brought about the adoption of Project 5-100 and how contestation impacted its localization. More specifically, process tracing allowed the authors to identify causal relations between pre-existing identity and structural factors in different universities and various types of contestation, by tracing back how each institution became involved with Project 5-100 and assessing the degree of participation of international networks. A semi-structured interview approach was selected, as using a questionnaire helps guide the discussion in order to obtain the necessary information and open-ended questions allow participants the opportunity to

[1] Process tracing is a method used in International Relations studies to analyze the causes of a political outcome.

share their insights. Interviews were transcribed within two days of being carried out and preliminary coding was performed immediately, resulting in a large number of different themes being identified. First-level coding allowed the researchers to regroup preliminary codes for different categories of interviews (Project 5-100 participants, non-participants and other organizations) and second-level coding resulted in the merging of the codes for all interviews. Findings were peer-debriefed and their validity was checked against secondary sources of data.

A limitation of this study is that conducting one expert interview in sixteen different universities (and six other types of organizations) does not guarantee that the respondents' answers perfectly reflect the official position or overall perception of Project 5-100 in that institution. However, the careful selection of interviewees as influential people either academically or administratively within their university ensures that their opinion is not marginal and reflects at the least one of several competing perceptions of Project 5-100. The opportunity to spend 'time on the field' in eleven universities, visiting different departments and laboratories, having informal conversations with various faculty members also helped to understand the general attitude to Project 5-100 within each structure. Claims about the acceptance or rejection of the international norm on excellence in higher education are made based on a sample of several universities with a similar profile and are triangulated with secondary data such as the review of statements given by university management to the media and academic publications on the impact of the excellence initiative, particularly in the universities' internal journals (e.g. Novosibirsk State Pedagogical University Bulletin, Vestnik RUDN, HERB of the Higher School of Economics).

Additionally, an analysis of the financing allocated to participating universities based on the 2020 review of their performance (Russian Order 398-p, 2020) reveals three groups: high performers, average performers and low performers (Table 3): higher-performers which

were allocated maximum funding (the Higher School of Economics, Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology, National University of Science and Technology, National Research Nuclear University, Tomsk State University, ITMO University), average performers which received moderate funding (Kazan Federal University, First Moscow State Medical University, People's Friendship University of Russia, Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University, Tomsk Polytechnic University, University of Tyumen, Ural Federal University) and underperforming universities which received minimal funding (Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University, Far Eastern Federal University, Lobachevsky University, Samara National Research University, Saint-Petersburg Electrotechnical University, Siberian Federal University, South Ural State University). The categories were correlated with expressions of contestation among interviewees, to reveal the typical profiles of participating universities dissatisfied with the project. Resistance was also examined among universities that applied to participate in Project 5-100 but were rejected.

Appendix 4- List of Interviews

Interview number	Gender	Place of work	Relationship to Project 5-100	Nationality	Interview Language
1	F	People's Friendship University of Russia	5-100 participant	Russian	Russian
2	M	Far-Eastern Federal University	5-100 participant	Russian	Russian
3	M	Siberian Federal University	5-100 participant	Russian	Russian

4	M	National University of Science and Technology	5-100 participant	USA	English
5	F	Lobachevsky University	5-100 participant	Russian	Russian
6	F	Tomsk State University	5-100 participant	Russian	Russian
7	M	Higher School of Economics	5-100 participant	Russian	English
8	M	National Research Nuclear University	5-100 participant	Russian	Russian
9	M	Samara National Research University	5-100 participant	Russian	Russian
10	M	Novosibirsk State University	5-100 participant	Russian	Russian
11	F	University of Tyumen	5-100 participant	Russian	Russian
12	M	Moscow State Institute for International Relations	5-100 non-admitted candidate	Russian	Russian
13	M	St. Petersburg State University of Economics	5-100 non-admitted candidate	Russian	Russian

14	F	Voronezh State University	5-100 non-admitted candidate	Russian	Russian
15	M	National Research University of Electronic Technology	5-100 non-admitted candidate	Russian	Russian
16	F	Skolkovo School of Management	Not candidate to 5-100	Russian	Russian
17	F	QS Ranking Agency	other	UK	English
18	F	Ministry of Higher Education	other	Russian	Russian
19	M	World Bank/US university	other	USA	English
20	F	5-100 Project Office	other	Russian	Russian
21	M	U.S university	other	USA	English
22	M	PwC consultancy agency	other	Russian	Russian

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