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Article

Accepted Version

Crowley-Vigneau, A., Baykov, A. A. and Kalyuzhnova, Y.
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5781-8837> (2022)
Russian higher education under sanctions: a constructivist
perspective. Polis Political Studies, 2022 (4). pp. 47-62. ISSN
1684-0070 doi: 10.17976/jpps/2022.04.05 Available at
<https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/111640/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Identification Number/DOI: 10.17976/jpps/2022.04.05
<<https://doi.org/10.17976/jpps%2F2022.04.05>>

Publisher: Political Research

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Russian Higher Education under sanctions: A Constructivist perspective

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Crowley-Vigneau A., Baykov A.A., Kalyuzhnova Y. Russian Higher Education under sanctions: A Constructivist perspective– Polis. Political Studies. 2021. No. 5. P. 8-24. <https://doi.org/10.17976/jpps/2022.04.0x>

Abstract. Constructivists have convincingly shown through norm theory and multiple case studies that ideas can be more influential than material conditions in determining political and social outcomes. This paper analyses the capacity of norms to resist shock events that bring about a radical change in material conditions and demonstrates that significant disruptions in the context of norm implementation can lead to normative U-turns. The authors theorise norm backtracking based on the case of the Russian higher education sector, revealing how the 2022 armed-conflict in Ukraine and Western sanctions have affected the implementation of the norm of world-class universities in Russia. The findings of the qualitative case study based on 24 expert interviews suggest that although internalised norms can survive shifts in material conditions, the need to readapt them to an evolving context and to new political goals results in their distortion. The international norm on world-class universities, implemented in Russia through Project 5-100 and the Priorities 2030 initiative, is facing exceptional challenges which have led so far not to the rejection of the norm but to its remodelling to meet new objectives. The impact of Russia's normative "redesign" in the sphere of higher education also ushers in a new stage in the life of the international norm on world-class universities marked by a rejection of the Western-centric model.

Keywords: Norm contestation; world-class universities; norm backtracking; Russia; sanctions; Priorities 2030 initiative

Constructivist norm theory has convincingly shown through multiple case studies that ideas can be more influential than material conditions in determining political and social outcomes. While scholars were originally criticised for focusing on "nice" and successful norms, more recent literature has also come to investigate how different challenges may lead, under specific circumstances, to "reverse cascades", norm decay and even norm death. True, in providing a comprehensive overview of norm agency and localisation mechanisms, the literature has failed to offer any insights into the impact of abrupt and profound changes in material conditions upon norm implementation. This paper draws on Constructivism as a framework to make sense of new trends in the globalisation of higher education, particularly by exploring the norm on world-class universities and its Russian implementation. The paper is set at a time of high and rising tensions and rapid change as the new wave of official sanctions of Western countries against Russia linked to the February 2022 crisis in Ukraine are being rolled out.

Contributing to the existing literature, we introduce in this paper the novel concepts of "norm backtracking" and "norm redesign" in an attempt to provide a

theoretical framework to interpret the significance of recent events on the evolution of the norm of world-class universities. We define “norm backtracking” as a set of decisions that “undo” the effects of an international norm that had previously been institutionalised. The normative U-turn can be motivated by grave political and economic concerns or precipitated by shock events representing turning points in national policy-making that may be difficult to avert. “Norm redesign” is defined by the authors as a form of norm adaptation that results from a high-level, usually state-led, decision to modify aspects of an international norm to make it better suited to new material or ideological conditions. “Norm redesign” differs from norm localisation in that it implies an intentional reformulation of the content of the international norm that aims to change not just local but also international perceptions. Norm redesign may be deployed as a means to avoid norm backtracking.

The paper was designed to answer the following research question: Have Western sanctions led to a redesign of the norm on world-class universities in Russia and what might be its global consequences?

The qualitative research design adopted by the authors has enabled them to study how rupture events and significant changes in a country’s material and ideological positions affect the implementation of institutionalised norms based on the single case-study of Russian higher education. The authors conducted twenty-four interviews with key stakeholders of Russian universities, students and foreign experts previously involved in the internationalisation of Russian higher education to gauge the impact of recent political changes on Russian universities. The findings were triangulated with other primary and secondary sources of information including media and academic articles, statistical data, legal documents and publicly available transcripts of meetings of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation.

The internationalisation of Russian higher education began in the 1990s and became a government priority in 2012, with the launch of Project 5-100 aimed at boosting the global competitiveness of Russian universities. The 2022 deployment of Russian troops in Ukraine and the ensuing western sanctions posed unprecedented challenges to the internationalisation of higher education and represented a marked change in material conditions, with exchange and dual degree programs with western universities being suspended *en masse*, cooperation in research put on hold and Russian scholars being ostracised from international conferences and other academic fora. However, this context presents an opportunity to theorise on how norms undergoing a successful implementation respond to substantive alterations in material conditions.

Recent events have caused serious disruptions to the implementation of the norm of excellence in higher education in Russia, endangering some of the pillars that had made the achievements of Project 5-100 possible. The internationalisation of a university is strongly associated with its capacity to attract talents irrespective of their nationality, to recruit foreign students and faculty members, and to engage in international research projects. Yet, we argue that, whereas the changes underway present some signs of norm backtracking, the strength of the internalisation and benefits reaped from the norm may stimulate academics to remodulate the norm on the ground in order to avoid its death. The government may likewise push back the more reactionist pressure groups and pursue the internationalisation of higher education, in part due to an unwillingness to write off the funds and efforts previously dedicated to meeting this goal. Our findings suggest that norm backtracking is less

likely to occur than norm redesign, which refers to the transformations the norm will undergo in Russia in the challenging new political context to avoid decaying. In line with other countries contesting the Westernisation of global higher education like Taiwan and China, Russia may seek to promote a new version of the international norm of world-class universities rather than backtracking or abandoning it altogether. The redesigned norm would share common features with the initial model, but may emphasize other aspects of internationalisation such as linguistic diversity, the importance of using more varied criteria to assess excellence, the need to rehabilitate the humanities and to judge universities' utility by their contribution to the development of their national economies and local communities.

The paper provides fresh insights into the Russian higher education system during a time of upheaval. It also contributes to norm theory by analysing norm backtracking and norm redesign and by showing that the spread of ideas characteristic of norm diffusion can be curtailed by changes in material conditions.

The rest of the paper proceeds in five sections: the first situates the novel concepts of norm backtracking and norm redesign in the broader context of the Constructivist literature, the second presents the international norm on world-class universities and the context of the globalisation of Russian higher education. The third part spells out the methodology and research design. The penultimate part dissects the findings of the expert interviews and the fifth engages in a discussion of the implications of the case-study for the academic field.

Norm backtracking and redesign in Constructivist IR theory

The late 1980s were characterised by the emergence of Constructivism in IR theory and the widespread acceptance that immaterial sources of power can determine both structure and agency in the international system. Scholars showed that norms, defined as 'collective expectations for proper behaviour', could both constrain and enable the behaviour of states and individuals [Katzenstein et al. 1999: 5]. By theorising the norm life cycle and the factors leading to norm emergence and diffusion, M. Finnemore and K. Sikkink [1998] demonstrated that norm entrepreneurs, sometimes taking the form of Transnational Advocacy Networks, had the power to bring about change globally, sometimes going against the interests of national governments (e.g., boomerang effect). Agency plays a key role in understanding political phenomena (with states themselves being described as complex networks) and in overcoming social cleavages [Semenenko 2021]. Normative power gets its strength from the fact that it linked to discursive identity practices and cannot be instrumentalised [Pavlova & Romanova 2017]. Early studies focused on 'nice norms', arguing that norms that are good for society were more likely to become widespread and thus neglected the potential spread of immoral and/or pernicious norms [McKeown 2009]. In the same vein, scholars originally assumed that after it had cascaded, a mature norm would experience no difficulties with subsequent implementation as it would have acquired a wider appeal [Crowley-Vigneau 2022]. Early empirical cases also suffered from a selection bias leading to the assumption that the vast majority of international norms ran successfully through the different stages of their life cycle. In an attempt to present a more balanced perspective on normative processes, recent literature has shifted focus onto identifying the different challenges that norms encounter at each stage of their development, the role of antipreneurs in advocating the status quo, and the effects of resistance to norm implementation [Bloomfield 2016]. Framing new norms was

shown to run a high risk of failure [Payne 2001] and the likelihood of conflicts between new norms and existing legal frameworks – to be high [Wiener 2014].

Threats to norms are now largely attributed to powerful norm antipreneurs who lobby in favour of maintaining the status quo, and the likelihood of norm death is more commonly linked to a norm's intrinsic qualities including how adaptable it is to change and to its level of integration in an international regime [Panke & Petersohn 2016]. The effects of contestation depend on whether the disagreement concerns the content of the norm or the way it is being applied. Although frequent and severe violations are typically regarded as causes for norm decay, limited and local contestation has come to be increasingly associated with norm reinforcement and endurance [Deitelhoff & Zimmermann, 2020]. For example, controversies regarding the application of norm on the Responsibility to Protect, and discursive reactions to its violations led to, contrary to previous theoretical assumptions, to a strengthening of the norm and its growing institutionalization [Badescu & Weiss 2010].

Contestation concerning the validity of a norm (as opposed to the modalities of its implementation) or conflicts with other international norms or national legislation, organized in powerful resistance movements, may lead to norm death [Kutz 2014]. The adoption of international norms in an unwelcoming national context with a government opposed to change (at least in the sphere that the norm seeks to modulate) is deemed an unlikely scenario. Norms either are institutionalised because of a government's willingness to right a situation or through the boomerang effect because local populations have put pressure on their national government through the international community. However, the literature does not consider the impact on norms of rapid changes in economic, social and political conditions in a country. An eruption of hostilities, and/or economic and information warfare often leads to the rejection of previously institutionalised norms, particularly if they are perceived as emanating from countries regarded as politically hostile. Nevertheless, although the contemporary Constructivist literature recognises the challenges that norms encounter at different stages of their evolution, the whole spectrum of difficulties has not thus far been fully researched. Indeed, this is particularly relevant with respect to cases of institutionalised norms being reversed due to a change in a country's political agenda and its material conditions.

For the purpose of this paper, we define "norm backtracking" as a process that reverts the effects of an international norm that had previously been considered institutionalised. Consequently, norm backtracking as a localised phenomenon may not lead to norm regress. The theoretical assumption that norm backtracking in some countries is more impactful on the global perception of a norm than in other countries bears some truth as in the case of US abandoning the norm prohibiting torture [see McKeown 2009]. This perspective can nevertheless lead to a bias in assuming that there are few global consequences when non-liberal or small countries reject an international norm. While most international norms do not die [Panke & Petersohn 2016], localisation processes have been found to significantly modify norms, at the local but also, by extension, at the international level [Acharya 2004]. Norm backtracking is a localised phenomenon that may not necessarily result in norm regress. 'Norm redesign' is defined by the authors as a form of norm adaptation that results from a high-level, usually state-led, decision to modify aspects of an international norm to make it better suited to new material or ideological conditions. "Norm redesign" differs from norm localisation in that it implies an intentional reformulation of the content of the international norm that aims to change not just

local but also international perceptions. “Norm redesign” may be deployed as a means to avoid “norm backtracking”.

Pursuing this line of inquiry, we set out to investigate how norm backtracking impacts an international norm through normative redesign processes. The paper also enquires into how norm backtracking works, as deliberate measures or unavoidable circumstances that overturn a norm may create confusion, leading to contestation.

The Norm on World Class Universities

The endeavour to develop world class universities has been defined as an international norm according to which higher education institutions should strive to be outward-looking, cosmopolitan, autonomous, research-intensive and stakeholder-oriented entities, capable of delivering a high-quality education and attracting the best students and researchers [Crowley-Vigneau 2022]. The norm originated after 1945, mostly in Western countries and rapidly spread across the globe as states realised the economic, technological and reputational benefits of having competitive and internationally-oriented universities [Salmi 2009]. The analytical framework of economic globalisation is useful in accounting for the trend towards the internationalisation of universities, the competition that emerged between higher education institutions and the focus on research and development [Chow & Leung 2016]. In the mid to late 20th century, leading universities in the US discovered how productive partnerships between the public and private sectors could be, as exemplified most vividly by the Silicon Valley. In the UK, a select number of universities promptly followed suit. The World Bank became actively involved in diffusing the norm of world class universities across the developing world through publications stressing that success is above all characterized by internationalisation, a high demand for graduates on the labour market, ground-breaking research, highly qualified faculty members, an international acclaim, high funding levels from both private and state sources, and expanding cooperation with business and industry. The surge in tuition fees, particularly in Anglo-Saxon universities, came as a reaction to the growing cost of the services rendered, the increased demand for university places and the value associated with a top university's degree when securing employment [Walker 2014]. These factors resulted in a change in the business-model of universities, which increasingly became more stakeholder-oriented [Becker & Eube 2018]. The emphasis on research and educational programs to train the new types of professionals sought after by a transnational economy was accompanied by a new social trend, with the elites in various countries choosing to send their offspring to study in the most prestigious universities [Arar 2013]. Studies have shown that education abroad – such as the European Erasmus programme - has become an effective way for graduates to distinguish themselves when seeking employment in increasingly congested labour markets [Brooks & Waters 2011]. The international norm also resulted in a change in the business-model of universities, which became progressively more stakeholder-oriented [Becker & Eube, 2018]. The reliance on international rankings to assess the performance of universities led to the empowerment of rating agencies (such as *QS* and *Times Higher Education*). The demand for consultancy services in higher education grew rapidly with experts defining new business strategies to help universities compete on what was turning into an effectively liberal market.

National governments played a key role in creating incentives for universities to evolve in line with the international norm, launching state-funded projects aimed at

rendering their higher education systems more competitive. For example, China's Projects 211, 985 and Double First-Class Strategy were conceived to increase the visibility of the Chinese higher education system worldwide by upgrading infrastructure in universities, opening laboratories, attracting international faculty and scholars, encouraging the mobility of Chinese academics and cultivating partnerships between business and universities [Gao & Li] 2020; Huang 2015]. France, Japan, South-Korea, Taiwan and other countries have unveiled a series of projects with a similar goal. While the norm has been diffused revolutionised higher education systems the world over, it has come under vehement criticism for depriving academics of a say in a university's development, for privileging income over quality, for promoting a western rather than a universal perspective on higher education as an institution and for putting the social sciences at a stark disadvantage.

The liberalization of higher education and its regulation by market mechanisms have also raised concern in Western Europe, particularly in countries like France and Germany, which have their own specific traditions regarding the funding of universities and equal access to free higher education. In China, Russia and non-western parts of the world, the correlation between westernization and internationalisation has, too, been highly controversial, especially in times of heightened political and geopolitical tensions. A survey conducted in Chinese universities revealed that students question the prominence of English in the university's curricula and the unidirectional orientation of internationalisation between China and the developed Western world [Guo et al. 2021]. Faculty members, for their part, criticise the pay gap between western professors and local hires and the widespread use of American textbooks that do not reflect the Chinese worldview [ibidem]. In Russia, the strive for world-class universities was blamed for a decline in the quality of education and research, as it is said to excessively focus on fulfilling formal criteria to appear internationally competitive rather than on genuine capacity building [Torkunov 2017]. The narrow definition of academic excellence promoted by the norm on world-class universities and the push towards homogenisation have led to the suggestion that the internationalisation of higher education has reached its limit in some parts of the world [Lo & Hou 2019]. As a result, governments are now looking to execute corrective strategies to ensure their universities serve to showcase the culture and promote the country's worldview rather than compete in a westernisation game in which they started out at a disadvantage and are unlikely to make it to the top.

The norm's implementation in Russia

Russia embarked on the internationalisation of its higher education system during the last decade of the Soviet Union's existence by initiating partnership agreements and exchanging ideas with countries from outside the Soviet bloc, particularly the United States. This process accelerated in the 1990s with the liberalization of the market shortly followed by the protracted economic crisis which adversely affected the performance and identity of universities. The government initiative in 1992 amounted to a complete reorganization of the higher education system in Russia. During the 2000s the focus was placed on post-crisis reform. Furthermore, those years were marked by the involvement of international organizations (OECD, World Bank) in the modernization of Russian Higher Education and the globalization of higher educational systems. Starting in the 2000s, the government has launched several large-scale initiatives of its own to reform and

sustain the accomplishments of its higher education system, including the *Federal Universities* project, the *National Research Universities* project, the *Mega-grants* project. These projects and the recognition of their limitations laid the foundations for a new truly international project, which would make Russian universities competitive on the international stage. Indeed, while the international norm on *world-class* universities was gaining momentum globally, Russia was itself at a turning point, poised to embrace the international norm on *world-class* universities. By 2010, the *National Research Universities* and other leading internationally oriented universities had internalised the need to be internationally competitive and were already proactively searching for funds to realize this ambition. The internationalisation of these universities was perceptible as they were eagerly forging partnerships with foreign universities, establishing numerous dual degree programs, improving their teaching of foreign languages, expanding the scope of student and faculty exchanges, diversifying and internationalizing their curricula, adopting various foreign best practices, submitting information to ranking agencies, stepping up their publishing activities in international journals, etc. Finally, decree No. 599 of May 7th, 2012 “On measures to realize state policy in the sphere of education and science” ushered in the Project 5-100, a clear sign of Russian readiness to formally adopt the international norm.

Within the framework of Project 5-100, which ran from 2012 to 2021, 21 Russian universities were selected on a competitive basis by an international committee to help improve the global reputation of Russian higher education. Each university received an average of 9 billion roubles yearly to implement a strategic roadmap aimed at increasing the quality of research outputs and increasing their international outlook [for a detailed review of project 5-100 please see Crowley-Vigneau et al. 2021a]. Internationalisation formed the backbone of the project: global rankings were used to assess universities’ progress, international partnerships with foreign universities involving joint research and student exchanges were strongly encouraged and foreigners played a major role in all of the main regulative bodies of the project. As a consequence, the Russian education system, regardless of controversies inside and outside the country regarding the project, became more competitive, more transparent, and more outward looking. Between 2010 and 2020 the number of Russian universities in QS institutional rankings doubled. As Project 5-100 drew to a close, a new “Priorities 2030” project was designed by the government to continue supporting the development of Russian universities. Nonetheless, although the design of the new project does reflect the continued desire to pursue the internationalisation process and attract foreign students and faculty members as a means to improve the country’s soft power, it also signalled new strategic priorities for the development of Russia’s universities in 2021. The ‘Priorities 2030’ has a much broader coverage than the previous project with over 100 participating universities, contains a dedicated track for universities committed to the development of the Russian regions, and its wording and assessment methods suggest it focuses more on national economic and technological priorities than on international goals and reputation building [Crowley-Vigneau et al. 2021b].

Research methodology

This paper was designed to answer the following research question: Have Western sanctions led to a redesign of the norm on world-class universities in Russia and what are its global consequences? The qualitative research design adopted by

the authors allows to study how rupture events and changes in a country's material and ideological positions affect the implementation of institutionalized norms based on the single case-study of Russian higher education. The conducting of qualitative interviews and the study of primary documents reflect how the prioritization of internationalisation which commenced in the 1990s and reached its peak with the implementation of project 5-100 underwent was challenged in 2022 with the start of hostilities in Ukraine and the adoption of a wide range of sanctions by the Western world against Russia. The study is based on two levels of analysis, the national level which considers how the localization of the norm changed in Russia after the 24th of February 2022 and the international level which analyses the impact of the Russian backtracking on the global norm of world-class universities. The study is carried out within a constructivist worldview which contends that reality is best understood when considering both objective facts (in this case coming from the detailed analysis of legal documents and statistics) and perceptions of current events by key stakeholders (interviews with academic and administrative staff of universities).

The authors spent 'time on the field', a total of 21 days between February 25th and March 30th at six major Russian universities of different profiles to assess how changes were perceived by different categories of staff and conducted twenty-four interviews with key stakeholders of Russian universities and foreign experts previously involved in the internationalisation of Russian higher education. The list of interviews is available in Appendix 1.

The paper is set at a time of high tensions and swift and profound change. The new wave of official sanctions of Western countries against Russia in connection with the 2021-2022 crisis in Ukraine is wide in its scope targeting the Central Bank and Russia's official reserves, the air industry, commercial banks, entire industrial sectors, as well as freezing the assets of a growing number of individuals. Although the decision was made to allow the export into Russia of most day-to-day consumer goods, a number of companies have, under public pressure, retracted from the market, including foreign consultancy agencies, commercial banks, oil companies, clothes and commodities stores. The deepening confrontation between the West and Russia affects all areas of production and society, including higher education, as will be analysed in the upcoming section.

Findings on the impact of the 2022 sanctions on the internationalisation of Russian higher education

Government policies surrounding the higher educational system have for the last two decades supported its internationalisation and global competitiveness, as described in section 3. Recent events have seriously disrupted the implementation of the norm of excellence in higher education in Russia, threatening to thwart some of the pillars that made the achievements of Project 5-100 possible.

The internationalisation of a university is strongly linked to its capacity to attract talents, students and faculty members, irrespective of their nationality. Most reputable institutional ratings of universities rely on the share of foreign faculty and students as criteria to rank universities. In February 2022, Russia experienced a significant outflow of foreign nationals, prompted by embassies' exhortations to leave the country.

Among the reasons cited on US embassy's website are: "the potential for harassment against US citizens by Russian government security officials, the Embassy's limited ability to assist U.S. citizens in Russia, COVID-19 and related

entry restrictions, terrorism, limited flights into and out of Russia, and the arbitrary enforcement of local law. U.S. citizens should depart Russia immediately.” Emails with similar content were sent by EU members states to all their citizens. The fear of economic instability and the difficulties linked to transferring money out of the country also explain the outflow of foreigners from Russian universities, as illustrated by these interview excerpts.

‘When your embassy tells you to go home, you go home. Macron has a better understanding of the situation than we do.’

French student, Russian university

‘I feel terrible about resigning like this in the middle of the semester with my students relying on me and I would desperately want to stay in any other situation but this is how it is. With hindsight it may turn out that this will have been a mistake.’

American lecturer, Russian university

‘It’s no secret that Russia offered competitive salaries to young western scholars, much better than at home, and although I enjoyed my time in Moscow, my goal is and was to pay off my mortgage, which I cannot do now as foreign transfers are restricted and the rouble is unstable’.

UK Associate Professor, Russian university

While some foreigners have clear reasons for leaving, others are more conflicted about the situation or chose not to cut off their ties with Russia completely.

‘I started this year a Bachelor program in Russia, it was an unusual decision but my family supported it. Now I think I might leave at the end of this semester as my diploma will likely not be recognised or have any value when I get home’.

German student, Russian university

*‘I asked the university if I could teach online which they accepted, so I moved back to live in Poland with my family. Whether I still teach at **** next year will depend on what the situation will be in September 2022.’*

Polish Professor, Russian University

A number of foreigners have made the choice to remain, for different reasons. The first category believe the West has been taken over by a sense of alarmism and believe the Russian perspective on current events. The second is pragmatic and believes that the country will pull through this difficult economic situation and that they have too many assets or bright prospects to close shop.

‘I’m not going anywhere. I can’t see any bombs falling on my head. The embassy wants to move us around to serve its political agenda.’

Italian Associate Professor, Russian university

‘I have a good job, a big flat and I don’t worry about energy bills. My children are settled in a Russian school, my Russian wife doesn’t want to emigrate. I can’t uproot my life and it wouldn’t help anyone. Strictly symbolic gestures are pointless.’

Australian lecturer, Russian university

There are, however, serious challenges to enrolling new students in programs targeted at international students. The instability causes worries among parents and the suspension of dual degree programs has also made the product range on offer less attractive. Even though different nationalities display various reactions, the instability of the rouble, the difficulties making international transfers and the banning of direct flights between Europe and Russia cause some concerns that foreign students may have difficulties paying for their education once abroad and returning home for the holidays.

"We expected a serious cut in our foreign student numbers and even considered moving some of our programs completely online. However, so far, the vast majority of students have stayed. Enrolment of international students for the 2022-2023 academic year is slow for the moment, though it may pick up closer to the summer."

Russian Vice-Rector, Russian university

"After this preparatory course, I will study medicine at RUDN next year. I will have a grant and my costs of living will be less than I had initially planned."

Prospective student from Kazakhstan

A vast part of Russian universities' cooperation agreements with foreign universities have been suspended. Some believed that Russian universities may be sources of resistance and may line up their positions with the West in the early days of the hostilities, but this did not turn out to be the case.

"I used to manage international cooperation and now I oversee the breaking up of relations. I spend my entire days hearing out the complaints of representatives of foreign universities we have been cooperating with since the 1990s, knowing that regardless of what I say or do, the outcome of the meeting is predetermined."

Dean of foreign programs, Russian university

"Two thirds of our cooperation agreements, including student exchanges and dual degree programs with foreign universities have been suspended. Establishing this cooperation was a long process so I hope the freeze in relations is temporary."

Master Program's coordinator, Russian university

"We have suffered some setbacks but we will rebuild new trustworthy partnerships. Since 2010 some of our most productive and dynamic partners have been in China and Asia. The advantage is they treat us like equals and don't act at every turn like they are doing us a favour."

Rector, Russian University

The threats to academic research in Russia are considered significant but diffuse. Academic partnerships and transnational collaborations are key factors that drive national research programs. The multiplication of academic publications in leading international journals during the course of project 5-100 testifies to the rapid diffusion of savoir-faire when Russian academics collaborate with foreign partners. However, these skills do not disappear the moment the cooperation breaks off and Russian authors may continue to contribute to global research. However, the reaction of the Russian side to ties being indiscriminately broken off is largely negative and may affect the ability and willingness to re-establish international partnerships at a later stage.

"We received a message from the editor in chief of our journal, with whom we have been working for thirty years, stating that he wishes to resign from his position in light of recent events. As academics, we feel betrayed as we think this decision benefits no one."

Chief Editor, Russian academic journal

"The cancelling of the post-Soviet studies panel at the International Studies Association conference in 2022 and the exclusion of Russian scholars is an indiscriminate measure and closes the dialogue between the US and Russia. We are proud people, when they want us back, I know for sure I won't be participating."

Professor, Russian university

"To prevent the humiliation of being excluded from APSA, we decided to anticipate the situation and give up on our membership."

Partnership organizer, Russian university

International journals and publishers have also adopted their own set of sanctions against Russian academic research. Alongside posting statements condemning events in Ukraine on their official websites, Springer, Elsevier, Cambridge University Press and others have restricted the access of Russian universities to subscriptions to international journals. The review process of articles submitted by Russian authors or authors affiliated with Russian institutions to international journals has changed and rejections are frequently guided by political rather than academic motivations. Academics who have always been the motor for liberal ideas in Russia are rejected by the international academic community.

"After a double-blind peer review requesting only minor corrections to my paper and very positive feedback from the editorial team in January 2022, the rejection of my resubmitted article in March 2022 by a major international journal was upsetting. [...] They clearly stated that no one had any interest in publishing papers by Russian academics anymore and suggested in a very derogatory way that I submit to a Chinese or Russian journal."

Professor, Russian university

"It was fortunate that I submitted my paper in 2021. The editor noted that the article was excellent and would be published according to our previous agreement. They also wrote had the article been received after February 24 then they wouldn't have felt comfortable with going ahead with the review process as most reviewers are not open to analytical pieces about Russia."

Lecturer, Russian university

"The integration of Russian academics in the global community was considered since the 1990s a plight by some critics as it led to an influx of liberal ideas and a brain drain. They are now delighted as the boycott of Russian scholars plays right into their hands. We need to be less emotional and to think through our approach to this issue more clearly."

Head of Department, UK university

The rapid development of Russo-phobia in the West is coupled in Russia with the beginning of a concerning trend: the emergence of "Westophobia" and a blanket rejection of ideals and principles which were previously highly valued.

"Russian academics, along with salads, fish, dogs, vodka, Dostoyevsky and anything else sounding remotely Russian, have been made to decide whether to reinvent themselves as something else, compromise their identities and livelihoods or be excluded from all international conferences."

Doctoral student, Russian university

"If the West wants Russia to adhere to its worldview, they have a strange way of doing things. The main mediums that fed the desire for change such as Netflix, Instagram, or study and travel opportunities abroad have disappeared. People are more likely now than ever to toe the official line."

Italian Associate Professor, Russian university

"Our position in global rankings, if we are actually included next year, will drop considerably. The quality of teaching and research will not have fundamentally changed however. What does this tell us about international rankings? That they are instruments the West uses to further its political agenda."

Associate Professor, Russian university

In light of the sanctions, the breaking down of many forms of academic partnerships and the impossibility of meeting some of the goals incorporated in the Priorities 2030 project, the government has started to adapt its requirements for universities to the new context. Universities' performance in the Priorities 2030 project is assessed based on national criteria developed by the Russian Ministry of Science and Higher Education rather than on international rankings, as was previously the case for Project 5-100. The project's focus is increasingly placed on developing the Russian regions rather than being globally competitive. Scholars in the exact sciences are increasingly encouraged to publish their most competitive findings in Russian journals, so as to increase their international visibility. Incentives are being given to scholars and experts to develop solutions to replace the import of goods and services, particularly in the IT sphere.

"Incentives and funding are being handed out to those who can contribute to mitigating the effects of the sanctions and create Russian alternatives to Western services. In light of bans on Western social media platforms, IT experts were released from conscription."

Lecturer, Russian university

"After the 2014 sanctions we had to develop our domestic meat and milk products offer to meet demand, which in fact we did. Now we have to bring together researchers and engineers to fulfil a technical gap. This will take longer."

Lecturer, Russian university

"During the meeting of the 21st of March [2022], Valery Falkov reminded us that the Priorities 2030 project was continuing and that we would be held accountable for our result in the autumn. He did however note that the main goals for universities today is to return to in-person education after two years of remote teaching and to help new Ukrainian students adapt."

Rector, Russian university

"We have turned our perspective on publishing upside down. We don't want to use foreign journals to increase the visibility of our scholars, we want our scholars to boost the reputation of our journals."

Discussion section: Defining new development priorities

The findings suggest that the norm on world-class universities is facing in Russia unprecedented challenges in 2022 as a result of Western sanctions that have shaken the foundations of the internationalisation of Russian higher education. Although it is still early to estimate the full impact of the changes, clear challenges have already been identified such as the suspension of academic partnerships, dual degree programs and student exchange programs with foreign universities, the exclusion of Russian scholars from academic conferences and the cancellation of Russian participation in joint research projects. The lack of agreement on the fair conditions for a peace deal in the 2022 Ukrainian conflict suggest that both formal and informal sanctions will be maintained over the course of years, making their effect more tangible and durable for Russian universities. The goal of having world class universities in Russia, at least as defined by Western ranking agencies, may no longer be attainable in these conditions.

Yet, while the norm of world-class universities may be at risk of backtracking in Russia due to factors exogenous to the higher education system, the organizational and academic changes implemented since the 1990s may still live on, particularly if there is no intentional political backtracking on matters of internationalisation. Although the new directions established for the Priorities 2030 project emphasise in 2022 regional development, import substitution and the development of national assessment criteria for universities, both political discourse and legal documents seem to imply that Russia does not wish to go back indiscriminately on years of internationalisation efforts. Rather, the emphasis is being shifted to adjusting to new realities, activating the potential of Russian research and creating new partnerships based on the wealth of experience of “forced” internationalisation in the hey-day of Project 5-100. While the changes described in the findings section do present some signs of normative backtracking, the strength of the internalisation and benefits reaped from the norm may stimulate academics to innovatively remodulate the norm on the ground to avoid its death. The government may likewise push back the more reactionist pressure groups and pursue the internationalisation of higher education, in part due to an unwillingness to write off the funds and efforts previously dedicated to meeting this goal.

The norm of world-class universities is at a turning point in Russia, as decision-makers are weighing their options. While circumstantial backtracking is unavoidably under way, it need not turn into a political attempt to rub out decades of internationalisation. Talk of intentional de-Westernisation, such as closing programs taught in English, is likely to face resistance. Strong internalization of the norm of world-class universities provides protection against complete normative backtracking. In spite of the sanctions, personal relationships in academic cooperation could prove resilient and go dormant only ready to re-surface once the public eye has turned elsewhere. One of the questions persists whether institutional partnerships were operating long enough for strong personal relationships to be established. While formal cooperation platforms usually fade and give way to more informal types of communication, the abruptness of the transition and the stigmatization of Russian scholars may compromise relationships on the ethical level. Another challenge is self-censure from Russian scholars whose fear of

rejection may lead them to curtail their international interaction and not submit their papers to international journals.

However, complete norm backtracking is not only a bleak but also a relatively unlikely prospect as a situation can never be identical to the one before the norm was adopted. Any changes in localization processes may lead to norm redesign, leading itself to a modification of the norm on the international stage. Different paths for internalization may come to the fore with Russia's turn to Asia becoming more pronounced in an attempt to show that internationalisation should not be confused with westernisation. In this case, one would see the Russian government doubling down on its own international rating agency idea and emphasizing the importance of non-Western ranking metrics but also developing exchange and research programs with more Asian universities. Interestingly, this focus of academic independence and the academic pivot to Asia started well before 2022 and could be traced back to 2014 when the first sanctions were adopted against Russia over Crimea.

The impact of Russia's normative redesign in the sphere of higher education points to a new stage in the life cycle of the international norm on world-class universities. The literature on contestation shows that several non-western governments have expressed doubts whether their excellence in higher education programs truly benefit their countries, with the cases of Taiwan, China, South-Korea being the most studied [Guo et al. 2021]. The imperative to develop along western lines in order to compete with leading universities has led to a blind acceptance of foreign organisation models and sometimes values. Counterintuitively, the rejection of this mimetic behaviour underlying the acceptance of the norm of world class universities may prompt non-western countries not to retreat to their national systems, but to come up with a conceptually new model of higher education. The redesigned norm would share common features with the initial model, but may emphasize linguistic diversity, recognise the importance of using more varied criteria to assess excellence, reinstate the humanities and value universities' utility and applied outcomes for their national economies.

Conclusion

International norms have the power to change reality by remodelling identities. They have been shown, on several occasions, to be more influential than material realities in shaping global and national outcomes. The academic literature offers a wide review of such success stories but also investigates the challenges that international norms encounter at the hands of antipreneurs. Norms have been found to be vulnerable to opposing ideas and counter-framing which can lead to contestation, decay and even death. This paper expands the list of possible threats to norms, showing that even mature and little contested norms can be vulnerable not only to counter-ideas, but also to changes in material circumstances. Major material challenges to norm implementation, such as in this case-study the practical impossibility for Russian universities to integrate in the international higher education market due to sanctions and growing Russo-phobia, can lead to norm backtracking. This U-turn may start off as unintentional and then be lobbied by various factions and gradually lead to an intentional cut-off from internationalisation. The modified norm embraced by Russia will likely be characterised by a pivot to Asia, a rejection of western-styled values, procedures and institutions, but also a more global perspective on what a truly international academia might look like, showcasing a potential path for a non-western internationalisation of Higher Education.

Appendix 1 List of Interviews

Interview	Date	Position	Place of work	Nationality
1	25/02/2022	Associate Professor	Russian University	British
2	25/02/2022	Professor	Russian University	Polish
3	26/02/2022	Lecturer	Russian University	American
4	28/02/2022	Doctoral Student	Russian University	Russian
5	03/03/2022	Student	Russian University	French
6	03/03/2022	Student	Russian University	German
7	03/03/2022	Associate Professor	Russian University	Russian
8	08/03/2022	Associate Professor	Russian University	Italian
9	09/03/2022	Lecturer	French University	French
10	09/03/2022	Vice-Rector	Russian University	Russian
11	10/03/2022	Lecturer	Russian University	Australian
12	15/03/2022	Prospective student	Russian School	Kazakhstan
13	17/03/2022	Advisor	Ministry of Science and Higher Education of Russia	Russian
14	17/03/2022	Project manager	Priorities 2030 committee	Russian
15	23/03/2022	Lecturer	Russian University	Russian
16	24/03/2022	Master programs coordinator	Russian University	Russian
17	24/03/2022	Dean for Foreign Programs	Russian University	Russian
18	25/03/2022	Professor	US University	American
19	25/03/2022	Head of Department	UK University	British
20	28/02/2022	Professor	Russian University	Russian
21	29/02/2022	Chief Editor	Russian Academic journal	Russian
22	29/02/2022	Rector	Russian University	Russian
23	30/02/2022	Partnership organizer	Russian University	Russian
24	30/02/2022	Lecturer	Russian University	Russian

DOI: 10.17976/jpps/2022.04.0x

РОССИЙСКОЕ ВЫСШЕЕ ОБРАЗОВАНИЕ В УСЛОВИЯХ САНКЦИЙ: КОНСТРУКТИВИСТСКИЙ ВЗГЛЯД

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Статья поступила в редакцию: 15.04.2022. Принята к печати: 17.05.2022

Аннотация. Конструктивисты убедительно показали с помощью теории норм и многочисленных тематических исследований, что идеи могут быть более влиятельными, чем материальные условия, в определении политических и социальных результатов. В данной работе анализируется способность норм противостоять шоковым воздействиям, которые приводят к радикальному изменению материальных условий, и показано, что значительные сбои в контексте реализации норм могут привести к нормативным разворотам. Авторы с точки зрения теории рассматривают «разворот норм» на примере российского сектора высшего образования, раскрывая, как вооруженный конфликт 2022 г. на Украине и западные санкции повлияли на внедрение нормы университетов мирового уровня в России. Результаты качественного тематического исследования, основанного на 24 экспертных интервью, свидетельствуют о том, что, хотя интернализованные нормы могут пережить сдвиги в материальных условиях, необходимость их адаптации к меняющемуся контексту и новым политическим целям приводит к их искажению. Международная норма, касающаяся университетов мирового уровня, реализуемая в России в рамках Проекта 5-100 и инициативы «Приоритет 2030», сталкивается с исключительными вызовами, которые привели не к отказу или развороту нормы, а к ее ремоделированию для достижения новых целей. Влияние российского нормативного «редизайна» в сфере высшего образования также открывает новый этап в реализации международной нормы для университетов мирового уровня, отмеченный отказом от западноцентричной модели.

Ключевые слова: оспаривание норм, университеты мирового уровня, изменение нормы, Россия, санкции, инициатива «Приоритет 2030».

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