

• Author: [Kirill Shamiev](#)

[The Closing of the Russian Mind](#)



On April 1, 2016, the accreditation of the European University in St. Petersburg (EUSP) was suspended, then renewed on May 6. In June 2016, Vitaly Milonov filed a complaint against the university to Rosobrnadzor [The Federal Service for Supervision in Education and Science]. On December 9, its licence was revoked, and returned again on December 13. In summer 2017, following lengthy court proceedings, the university was forced to give up its licence voluntarily, and it can no longer acquire a new one. The university was also evicted from the building in which it had been based for [over 20 years](#). During all this time, famous cultural figures and scientists regularly expressed support for this small private university in St. Petersburg. Even Vladimir Putin signed three resolutions in support of the university. [The Ministry of Education recognised](#) the European University as being the best in terms of scientific research and financial performance. The European University's situation is a shining example of the paradoxical way in which Russia is developing – education and science are no longer apolitical, and frustrate the Russian state's conservative-militarist element.

We may consider that the main goal of Russian higher-education policy is to get five Russian universities into the world's Top 100 by 2020 (the "5-100" programme, formalised in Putin's '[May decree](#)'). Apart from this, in order to raise the number of Russian scientists' publications in magazines indexed in the Web of Science database to 2.44%, the decree envisages measures to increase the scientists' level of funding. Despite general criticism of some indicators, the decree as such has been received positively, given that Russian universities

were awarded hefty funding for the first time in many years, and researchers were openly encouraged to integrate into the world scientific community. Furthermore, the system of “mega-grants” introduced in Russia in 2010 provides scientific organisations with an opportunity to receive from dozens to hundreds of thousands of roubles in funding for long-term collective research. It is obvious that the authors of the new policy have high hopes for science and technology – fields in which Russian research has always been more competitive. These expectations have been partially fulfilled: Russian universities hold the highest positions in [“engineering and technology”, “physics”, and “natural sciences”](#). Social and humanities studies have also significantly improved their positions. Nowadays, Russian universities [are among](#) the 51-100 best in “sociology”, “politics and international relations”, “law”, and “economics”. Nevertheless, Russia [failed](#) to reach its goal of 2.44% of Russian publications in the Web of Science Index by 2015, despite all the improvements. The Ministry of Education has recently [demanded that MEPHI return](#) the 22.5 million roubles it received from the mega-grants programme, for failing to fulfil the conditions of the contract.

Carrot-and-stick

An important feature of the 2012 policy for Russia’s integration into world science is its strict focus on independent quantitative indicators: the number of scientists’ publications in international journals, and universities’ ratings in international rankings. Universities were offered funding opportunities in exchange for evident improvements of their positions in independent ratings.

As demonstrated by research into the field of [higher education](#), the most important condition for science’s effective development is finding the optimal balance between scientists’ independence (freedom to choose research topics and training-programme content) and control over compliance with contract conditions. Following this logic on a Russia-wide level, it appears that, on the one hand, the state should not interfere with scientific work, but on the other hand, it should control the effectiveness of universities and individual scientists in terms of their use of budgetary funds and performance of educational tasks. Examples from European and American universities show that it is possible to control them without state involvement – through reputation and academic culture, and by making educational institutions’ income dependent on the relevance of their research projects and their graduates’ success on the labour market. Integration into world science allows every Russian university to receive independent external evaluations, use them to improve their performance, and (like in the case of the “5-100” programme) to receive additional funding.

Nevertheless, not every university can make use of such “pockets of effectiveness”. There are around 1000 higher-education organisations in Russia, and only 21 universities participate in the “5-100” programme. Approximately 200 teams of researchers [have received](#) mega-grants. Yet, all Russian universities are currently under scrutiny from the Federal Service. Numerous requirements concerning study programmes, curricula, “pool of assessment tools”, and thesis-reviewing rules do not seem to sit well with academic freedom. Moreover, [the majority of Russian universities](#) could be closed merely due to the requirements regarding equipment and infrastructure – they are unlikely to have the necessary amount of ramps, special lifts, wheelchairs and software for people with disabilities. Hence, Russian universities are now forced to be not only educational organisations, but also experts in lobbying and GR services.

Of course, Rosobrnadzor’s requirements for such giants as NRU HSE, MSU, MSIIR and SPbSU are not as strict as for less influential universities. With Sergey Kiriyyenko as a member of NRU HSE’s supervisory board, and Dmitry Medvedev chairing the SPbSU’s board of trustees, those universities have much less to worry about when faced with new inspections. Other universities, however, are left to mediate between Rosobrnadzor’s insurmountable requirements and their personnel’s ability to conduct high-quality research and teach efficiently under the constantly changing requirements for various “pool of assessment tools” and study curricula. Besides, [according to research by Katerina Guba and Margarita Zavadskaya](#), private universities experience stricter and more frequent inspections than state ones. Inspections of private universities often result in their closure, while the worst-case scenario for state universities is closure of their branches or revocation of their educational programme accreditations.



* Data for 2012-2015.

The European University case

The revocation of the European University's educational licence evidently reflects the supervising authority's discriminatory policy. This case, however, is different from others due to indications that the attack on the university was intentional, and aimed to destroy the organisation.

Firstly, there were chronologically persistent attempts to exert pressure on the university. Rosobrnadzor had initially tried to revoke its accreditation, but gave it back after the university corrected all irregularities. Later, at the height of the State Duma election campaign, Vitaly Milonov and a range of other anonymous "activists" filed complaints to the supervising authorities, based on which the university was subjected to 11 unscheduled inspections by supervisory control bodies. Many of those inspections failed to find violations on their first attempts, so they were repeated [2-3 days later](#). At the end of 2016, the university recovered its licence through the courts, and retained it until summer 2017, thanks to ongoing court proceedings. Vitaly Milonov's role in this process is also suspicious. He [was allowed to participate in the elections following a scandal](#), defeating in the primary Yuri Shuvalov, a member of the ruling council of "United Russia", who is considered to be a close affiliate of Boris Gryzlov. Milonov has accused Shuvalov of assault and buying voters, while Boris Gryzlov has long been denouncing Alexei Kudrin, a member of the university's board of trustees, [emphasising the differences in their political and economic views](#).

Secondly, the attack on the university is ideological. Vitaly Milonov had repeatedly spoken out against the university, pointing out his discontent regarding its research of gender- and LGBT-related issues. Activists had [staged protests](#) in front of the university in winter, holding "The Organisers of Coloured Revolutions are Trained Here" and "The Research Papers of This Educational Establishment are Anti-Russian" banners. Publications with similar accusations against the university [appeared](#) on pro-Kremlin websites.

Thirdly, the EUSP is pressurised not only by Rosobrnadzor, but also by the Administration of St. Petersburg. The university has been evicted from its building, which it occupied for over 20 years. Shortly before that, the EUSP [announced](#) negotiations with the city authorities over a 35-million-euro plan to renovate the building.

Fourthly, the European University's experts are working for the Centre for Strategic Research (CSR), headed by Alexei Kudrin. The CSR's "Institutions and Society" department [is headed](#) by Maria Shklyaruk, a [research fellow](#) at the Institute for the Rule of Law. University experts are engaged in a project to reform the penitentiary and law-enforcement systems, [aimed at](#) reducing the *siloviki's* pressure on businesses and state prosecutors' [advantages](#) in courts. The reform strategy was submitted to Vladimir Putin back in May 2017, two months before Vitaly Milonov filed his complaint.

Finally, Vladimir Putin had formally [supported](#) the European University three times. First, he made positive remarks about renovating the university premises, then agreed that it should keep its educational licence, and, lastly, he responded positively to the university's appeal to retain its building. Nevertheless, presidential support did not help the university.

Educational policy

Russian higher education policy resembles the Russian National emblem. One of the eagle's heads is looking westwards and encourages successful educational establishments to integrate into world science; and the second is demanding that universities follow strict rules and regulations, while frequently punishing the most vulnerable of them, *i.e.* private universities. Yet, since 2014, one of the heads has grown more powerful, allowing more state control through repressive laws and unenforceable requirements. The European University was the first victim of this mutation. Its situation shows that Russian universities should be more cautious. After some non-commercial research organisations (such as the Centre for Independent Social Research and Levada-Centre) were branded as "foreign agents", universities have also been dragged into politics.

Russia is far from the first of the post-Soviet countries to unleash such a policy. The European University's situation bears a strong resemblance to the [closure](#) of the European Humanities University in Belarus. In that case, Lukashenko's government forced the university to relocate to Lithuania due to its [failure to provide](#) hot, dietary meals and sporting equipment. Who knows, maybe the Baltic countries will soon receive another

university, this time from Russia?

Tags

[academic freedom](#)

[human rights](#)

Category

[Politics](#)

© Intersection - for republishing rights, please contact the editorial team at intersection@intersectionproject.eu