

New laws that cast NGOs as “foreign agents” illustrate the threat to academic collaboration in Russia.

by Blog Admin

In July, the Russian government passed a law forcing foreign funded NGOs to register as “foreign agents”. [Elena Omelchenko](#) and [Anna Zhelnina](#) write that this law is part of a trend for Russian authorities to attack social scientists that collaborate outside of the country and are funded by ‘western money’. This attitude threatens to seriously undermine the development of the social sciences in Russia.



There can be no overstatement of the current threat posed to Sociology and sociologists in Russia today. Our concern arises, on the one hand, from a recent anonymous publication that appeared on one of the regional news portals which, at first glance, might be treated with a pinch of salt rather than viewed as the start of some wider campaign against academia. On the other hand, however, the confidence with which this self-same denunciation is written and the relative depth of knowledge of the author (evident from the extensive use of quotations and references), as well as the willingness of the portal to allow itself to be linked to such a document, is clear evidence that such texts have an audience and are shored up by well-known legislative innovations that give the green light to routine attacks on social scientists funded by ‘western money’.

The tone, arguments and language of the text resemble a classic [Stalinist] denunciation; this suggests that those who ‘ordered’ and those who ‘supplied’ it aimed not only to discredit the work and reputation of a research centre that is genuinely active and widely known (in Russia and Europe), but hoped that this kind of text would ‘help’ the responsible structures deal with an organisation that receives ‘dubious’ grants from the European Commission and other ‘western foundations’ and conducts ‘dubious’ research, and which thus fits the bill of a ‘foreign agent’. This, in the opinion of the author will no doubt improve the spiritual, moral atmosphere not only in the university but also in the city and maybe the country as a whole, as well as put these incomprehensible sociologists in their place at last and teach them to call things by their name.

Perhaps a response would not have been warranted had it not been for one important detail. The text clearly presumes that it is in the nature of any social scientist who has grown up or been educated in the USSR or post-Soviet Russia to continue to harbour the fear that at ‘the necessary moment’ they will be required to prove their loyalty and supply the authorities with ‘the correct’ facts and figures. Such publications are not only alarming in their own right, but should also generate concern that sociologists will start to ‘give themselves up’ and provide confessional testimonies. And one more thing – such texts are premised on the assumption that they can elicit a wave of ‘righteous anger’ among the population since the discovery of new enemies of Russia facilitates vigilance, the preservation of national security and the erection of a barrier against the pernicious influence of the West. Until recently it seemed that denunciation and persecution were things confined to the past that, while we remembered those terrible episodes of Soviet history, could never return. It is deeply regrettable to recognise that these genres are not only returning but that the current socio-political circumstances and the psychology of the Russian population provide fertile soil for them to grow. Moreover, just as before, one of the preferred targets of



this genre is academia.

Recently on an Ul'ianovsk regional news portal material was published in which the scientific-research centre 'Region', which has existed for 17 years as part of Ul'ianovsk State University, was made out to be a 'foreign agent'. The author of this slander declared that, in the guise of a sociological centre in Ul'ianovsk, there is a 'foreign agent', which over the many years of its existence 'has succeeded in collaborating with many overseas structures' (there follows a list of leading research centres and academic funding bodies in the United Kingdom, Germany and the USA). Moreover, the anonymous author informs us that, 'Of course, nobody has reflected on the consequences of the use of the results of research transferred by 'Region' across the border'. The fact that these 'overseas structures' are well established and recognised academic organisations or that the results 'transferred across the border' are open, scientific data published in publically accessible journals and books in accordance with normal global academic practice, does not prevent the anonymous denunciator from accusing the research centre virtually of espionage.

One might have turned a blind eye to this paranoid nonsense, if it were not that its publication in Live Journal and then on the news portal signified a worrying tendency that cannot be ignored. By this we refer to the danger of an instrument for defamation and slander being put in the hands of disingenuous critics and malevolent individuals. While legislators claim that the term 'foreign agent' will be applied only to a limited number of organisations of a political nature, financed from abroad, this article is evidence that this label can be used as a weapon and applied to all those unwelcome in current arguments and games. It does not matter to the author that 'Region' is not even a non-government organisation but a research centre within a state university: having been labelled a foreign agent, accused of connections with 'western structures' and sending 'information across the border', a mechanism for the generation of suspicion and doubt has been put in motion.

The terminology used by the author of the denunciation was returned to general use in the law on non-governmental organisations, amendments to [which were passed](#) in the summer of 2012. According to these amendments, non-governmental organisations receiving any financing from abroad should be recorded as 'foreign agents', pursuing foreign interests on the territory of Russia. And, just recently, as this text was being prepared, there occurred another event that might be considered part of this same trend to seek out internal 'enemies'; the State Duma approved immediately at both first and second readings amendments to the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, in accordance with which it [will be possible](#) to 'call any unwelcome or "uncomfortable" person' a spy or traitor on grounds of his/her communication with foreign structures and foreigners alone. The vagueness of the terminology is another means for allowing manipulation and slander. The threat is growing to sociological and other research that concerns current social problems; the interest and search for information potentially uncomfortable for the state (and this includes all information, even public opinion about social problems) and its subsequent presentation at international conferences can be rendered as verging on the criminal.

The research community needs to be alert to this situation since among their sphere of interests are social processes and their critique. Sociology is by nature a critical science involving the generation of reflexivity in the public sphere as well as drawing attention to inequality, the unwritten rules of the game and power relations and alternative opinions and cultures. That position makes it vulnerable to all kinds of manipulation and accusation.

It is a part of normal global practice for researchers to engage in international collaboration, open publication of research results, including in international publications and the receipt of grants from international funding bodies. And, in normal circumstances, this is perceived as worthy and an achievement rather than as grounds for accusations of untrustworthiness. Here, however, we find that when a research centre located outside of 'the capitals' achieves international recognition, it becomes not an object of pride but, on the contrary, of attack.

This story should make us reflect on the prospects for Russian academia and for Sociology in particular. It appears that Sociology in Russia can exist in only one of two forms: as a totally servile sphere of activity, demonstrating complete loyalty to the authorities and rejecting any criticism of the status quo; or as a 'stooge of the west' serving someone else's interests. Here we see the imprint of Soviet times when

science could never be understood as pure science and there was a constant search to uncover political 'interests' at work in research.

It appears that in Russian society the receipt of 'western money' continues to signify only the 'sale' of data to western 'enemies'; everything done on 'enemy' money is automatically perceived as untrustworthy and selling out. Normal academic practice is removed from the field of science and placed in the field of political intrigue; political and market rhetoric of 'supply and demand' substitutes academic logic. The tone of the discussion is determined by the traditional suspicion that good research doesn't need external funding underpinned by a banal, envious concern that 'money isn't given for nothing'. And nobody bothers to consider that even Russian state scientific funding bodies have programmes jointly with the Germans, French and other overseas funders that aim to develop international academic collaboration. The combination of 'suspicious' contacts with the west and the study of current and socially significant problems suffices as signal enough to state universities that, for their own security, it would be wise to steer clear of such unreliable elements.

The problem is compounded by the fact that the new Russian legislation provides an easy mechanism for launching political intrigue, denunciations and everything that we know from those dark pages of Soviet history. The interests of Russian science, and even state interests, become secondary (logically one might assume that a strong, internationally authoritative Russian science capable of supplying high quality and reliable data would be to the benefit of the Russian state). In fact priority is given to trivial political squabbles and the opportunity to label an unwelcome competitor a 'foreign agent' or to ruin the reputation and insult an unwanted opponent.

This notorious legislation allows any member of the public to feel they have the right to evaluate the quality of academic output. This legislation has returned to everyday speech the Stalinist language of hatred and enmity, which can be manipulated in one's own selfish interests. But it is not the law in and of itself that is frightening so much as the categories legitimized by it, which can be used by any 'concerned citizen'. Its black and white understanding, that allows for no nuances, and demands no particular understanding, is easily accepted by public discourse. Academia is either 'ours' or 'hostile'. If you take money from western funding bodies you are a 'foreign agent'. If research results show something unfavourable about contemporary Russia, it is slander that has been 'paid for'. That attitude, together with the presence of a legitimated 'language of enmity' may prevent the further development of the social sciences in Russia – a danger in the face of which the Russian academic community must rally together and speak out with one voice.

This article first appeared on the MYPLACE project [blog](#). For more information on the MYPLACE project, visit the project's website: [HERE](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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