

# HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



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Copy Editors: Joey Easton and Jared Namenson  
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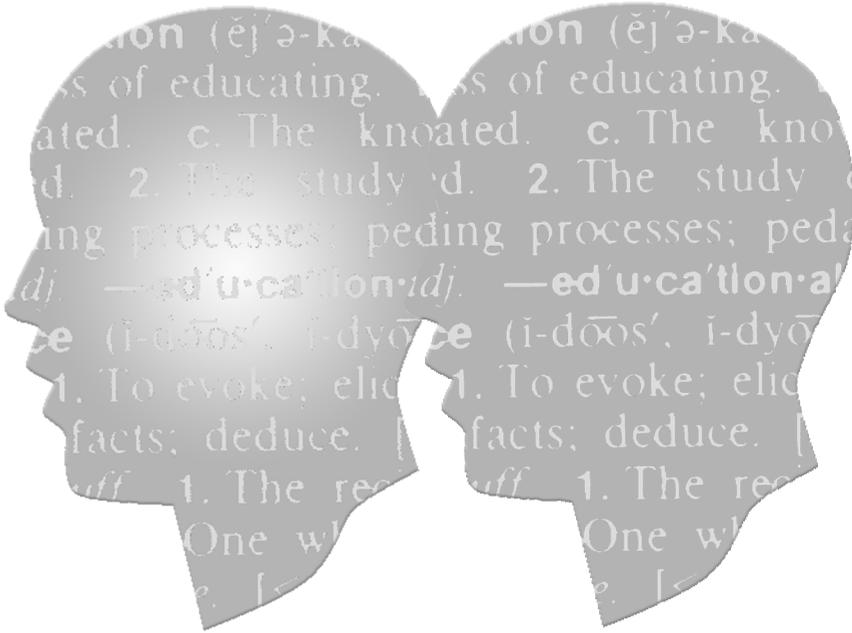
The *Higher Education Exchange* is founded on a thought articulated by Thomas Jefferson in 1820:

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

In the tradition of Jefferson, the *Higher Education Exchange* agrees that a central goal of higher education is to help make democracy possible by preparing citizens for public life. The *Higher Education Exchange* is part of a movement to strengthen higher education's democratic mission and foster a more democratic culture throughout American society. Working in this tradition, the *Higher Education Exchange* publishes case studies, analyses, news, and ideas about efforts within higher education to develop more democratic societies.

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# AN ISLAND OF DELIBERATION IN AN AUTHORITARIAN ENVIRONMENT

## The Case of Russia

Denis Makarov

Given the chance, how could Russian students benefit from practicing deliberation? What challenges would deliberation present to university faculty in contemporary Russian society? This essay will focus on these two significant questions out of dozens of findings from the report *Classrooms for Democracy: Experiments with Deliberation and Russian University Students*.

The purpose of this research, carried out from 2006-2013 by the Foundation for the Development of Civic Culture and the Department of Political Science and Sociology of the Moscow State Pedagogical University, was to discover how deliberative, democratically oriented communication in the classroom might help higher education institutions become better agents for carrying out responsible civic and democratic missions.

### Students and Deliberation

We worked with three groups of college students that received varying exposures to deliberative theory and practices:

- **control students** were those enrolled in standard Russian college courses who were not exposed to concepts of deliberation;
- **course students** participated in a theoretical course entitled Theory and Practice of Deliberative Democracy;
- **forum students** participated in in-class deliberative forums.

The project progressed through five stages. In stages one and two, an analysis of the status quo of Russian higher education's civic mission was conducted. This included identifying students' political attitudes, perceptions, and even a "general presence of the political" in contemporary higher education. We discovered how and to what extent Russian students were politicized—or not.

Based on outcomes from stages one and two of the research, we developed approaches for helping students bridge the *civic* and the *political* within the

curriculum by developing new explorations in a deliberation-based course. Theory and Practice of Deliberative Democracy was launched at stage three in the fall of 2009. The course had significant impact on the course students, as the findings indicate. Compared to the control students, the course students appeared better informed, more reasonable, and had better self-identity as “young political beings.” Stage four of the project, during the 2010-2011 academic year, included in-classroom issues forums. These deliberations were based

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on five public issues, named and framed using the National Issues Forums format as an example. This research helped us understand how different (both civically and po-

litically) the forum students were from the control students, but also from the course students. Stage five was carried out during the academic year of 2012-13. In this stage, findings were synthesized and critically analyzed to identify the challenges inherent in introducing Russian college students to public politics and the prospects for doing so.

### ***Impact of Deliberation***

Our research suggests that when college students are exposed to the concept of public politics, and have opportunities for practical experiences in deliberation, many impacts occur. These include:

- the development of civic and political skills for a better society;
- a broadening of experience and knowledge;
- an increase in students’ deliberative “nature”;
- the development of a culture of engagement and participation;
- an ability to negotiate conflicting positions; and
- the development of tolerance and appreciation of others.

### ***Development of a Civic and Political Citizenry***

A better civic and political citizenry is one in which like-minded individuals devote their personal knowledge, values, skills, and efforts to changing their community, nation, and world for the better. Have we seen any transformation towards this abstract “citizenry”? The answer is yes. The course students rediscovered

that they were, indeed, civic and political creatures, not just bolts inside some paternalistic state's mechanism. Now they have this knowledge, and can use it when there is an opportunity. In contrast, the forum students did not study deliberative theory, but they *exercised* democratic communication in a practical way. Both groups liked their experiences. However, the forum students expressed their interest in learning more about the historical and theoretical grounds for deliberation. The course students seemed puzzled about how the theory of what they learned could work in real life. The course students definitely wanted to go beyond just theory. Both groups, either intuitively or rationally, were pondering the question, "What does it really mean to be a better civic and political citizen?" and were willing to explore this question.

### *Broadening of Experience and Knowledge*

Without a doubt, this impact was the easiest to notice and measure. Through the course on deliberation, our students' understanding and knowledge of the civic and political was getting more rational and comprehensive. By the end of the course, the students had made their own discovery that, in some cases, *political* and *civic* might be almost synonymous. We believe this was the result of the exercises in which students were trying to discover politics in social settings and learn where people use democratic interaction tools. For many of them, civic action *could* become political action as well.

For the forum students, because of their personal experiences with deliberation, the forums became a vivid political action; they probably would not have identified communication as a political action if they had not participated in these gatherings. Unfortunately, the broader experience that the course and forums students have access to offers few chances for practical implementation outside of the school. Still, the experience enhanced their personal development, and could be called upon during social activities and occasional discussions on campus until there is growth of Russia's civil society.

### *Increase in a Deliberative Nature*

An increase in the deliberative nature of students has been noticeable among the forum students. With only a few exceptions, we cannot say the same about the course students. It would appear that deliberative practice is more likely to bring about civic progress; it is not enough to simply learn the theory of deliberation, you must try it. Most students were excited about communicative democracy (one of the terms we use for public deliberation in Russia), and shared their positive impressions afterward. We believe that

deliberative “potential” is inherent in the human consciousness. We make personal decisions by communicating and negotiating within our own “management centers” in our heads. If an issue that we are trying to resolve is complicated, we weigh the pros and cons, refer to moral standards, and consider different approaches to its resolution. Although the deliberation is natural, it is not always easy to apply it when communicating with others, especially if you are shy or feel pressure from other people in a conversation. According to the forum students, deliberative discussions that we had on different issues helped them liberate their civic potential to work and make decisions with others. It has helped them achieve a better clarity on the issues and identify the natural gifts in themselves and their class peers as “political citizens.” The next outcome follows naturally from this.

### *Development of a Culture of Engagement*

In an ordinary forum, the self-discovery (independently, or with the encouragement of the moderator) of an “essence” of civic and political can start to occur with the introduction of engagement and participation. Then, some time after that, students begin to feel and look more comfortable, obviously beginning to enjoy this deliberative form of participation and engagement—this alternative approach to a civic life. They definitely begin to see themselves as citizens, and can now discover that politics is not as complicated and far away as it seemed before. The more you exercise this culture, the higher efficiency you have. By the end of stage four of the project (after the forum experiences), most students who participated wanted to use the deliberative method elsewhere—in their families, communities, and NGOs. This was clearly indicated in our interviews with them. We cannot say it was a mass phenomenon (we were, after all, aware of what country our project was taking place in), still it was a small victory over the “politics as usual.”

### *Ability to Negotiate Conflicting Positions*

We identified both individual and group psychological changes within the course students and the forum students regarding their ability to negotiate conflicts. However only the most diligent of the course students were able to demonstrate this through their participation in class discussions. Building on their theoretical knowledge, they were able to articulate a way to move from conflict to negotiation. Almost all the forum students, regardless of their diligence to their studies, were able to effectively benefit from participation in a deliberative forum. Does this mean that one does not have to be a very well-

educated person to be a good citizen? Yes, it does. In everyday life, many people come to forums having no idea about the theory of deliberation, but they often appear to be the most civically engaged when the forum starts.

### *Development of Tolerance*

Unfortunately, the Russian social environment lacks a Western level of tolerance and positive attitudes toward fellow human beings. Many Russians would prefer to blame their political elites for spreading common aggressiveness and disrespect, but these elites are not raised outside, so the sins of elites are first of all societal sins. Our deliberative course and the forums provide therapeutic effect in regard to the development of tolerance and appreciation of fellow human beings. Course students and forum students seemed to become atypical Russians, at least right after the completion of their programs. Many course students were rationally projecting their new, more tolerant and more respectful attitudes toward others because they obtained knowledge on how important it was to respect and tolerate diversities. The forum students were not necessarily that inherently rational. Their care and appreciation was built upon evidence that it was easier to discuss and solve an issue in an environment where people care about what they do jointly, where they accept the right to express different opinions, and where the advantages of being and feeling equal are experienced.



### **Challenges for Faculty**

In addition to the student-focused findings from this multi-year research, challenges for faculty who are trying to introduce public politics and deliberation in the classroom were also identified. Among the major challenges for faculty are:

- the absence of civil society;
- psychological resistance;

- societal stereotypes and mindsets;
- political climate and ideology;
- theorization of the learning environment;
- lack of knowledge and experiences.

### *Absence of Civil Society*

Issues around a weak, if not an absent, independent civil society is Russia's current reality. Thus, there are difficulties with explaining to students what the active life of a democratic citizen could look like. Of course, there are organizations like the Russian branch of Greenpeace or the Moscow Helsinki Group, but recent legislation makes it risky to associate with international organizations and Russian NGOs that receive grants from international donors. There are officially approved youth organizations, but these are not good examples of independent civic associations. There are a few pure civil society examples, but their representation and capacity are minimal and are definitely insufficient for such a large country as Russia. It might appear problematic these days to teach students about "a Western interpretation" of democracy and build projects within some institutionalized organizations with independent funding. That is why we, along with some of our colleagues around Russia, have been using educational institutional spaces for implementation of encouraging civic activism projects. Our courses, and hundreds of forums conducted over the last two decades in secondary schools, colleges, and universities, become our small contribution toward the creation of civil-society models and development of civic practices in Russian classrooms.

### *Psychological Resistance*

Another challenge is psychological resistance. It is pretty natural to live the way your parents, grandparents, etc. have lived for centuries. It is easier to consider yes-no solutions instead of multiple options that require you to leave your personal comfort zone. It is easier to have someone decide for you or on your behalf, and it is easier to do nothing rather than be faced with hard choices. "Psychology of a shell" was discussed a lot. In various cases, Russians try to hide themselves inside a personal comfort shell and wait until some situation turns better by itself. Only extreme threats of extermination (like Napoleon's or Hitler's invasions) could wake them up and unite them against an outside threat. This explains why we had many upset voices, especially in the control students and the course students. They were skeptical about the applicability

of Western liberal democracy and its methods in a Russian reality. It doesn't mean that they were supportive of the existing so-called "sovereign democracy" doctrine. Democracy requires the public to be public, to have critical thinking, and to no longer be docile. All these, and many related behavioral aspects, require major changes within individual and mass psychology, and could not always be achieved easily or fast enough.

### *Societal Stereotypes and Mindsets*

Psychological resistance goes arm-in-arm with societal stereotypes and mindsets, rooted in feudal and authoritarian habits that remain part of living in contemporary Russia. One of the most dangerous stereotypes that students were aware of is a long-term notion of a hostile environment or conspiracy plot against Russia and Russians. Unfortunately, no form of public deliberation can fully defeat this myth that goes back to the time of Ivan the Terrible, if not earlier. According to another stereotypical mindset, the Russian nation was chosen by God. Moscow will sooner or later become a World's Savior Center—the so-called Christian's Third Rome. This makes millions of people still believe their path and faith are the only right ones. For millions of Russians, the antichrist, sooner or later, will come from the West for the final battle between God's people (Russians) and the antichrist army (the West). Another stereotype is the presumption that only a strong and authoritarian leader can protect Russia and guarantee unity and prosperity to its people. The harm done by this mindset is obvious; if you always rely on some strong leader you won't leave any political space for yourself, for a public, or for civil society, and won't deserve a better alternative to some outdated political regime in general.

One more interesting mindset is an "Oblomov Phenomenon" or "Oblomovshina"—a life philosophy of indecision, laziness, apathy, and inertia, described by the Russian novelist Ivan Goncharov in 1859. Goncharov's main hero, Oblomov, a young educated upper-class aristocrat, had thoughts about a better future, but never got beyond dreaming and philosophizing about that future. Goncharov presented an image of Oblomov as the quintessence of many Russians—expecting something but doing nothing in support of the expectations. The novel is well known in Russia and the problems raised by Goncharov were often a page of discussions about politics and public activism.

### *Political Climate and Ideology*

It would be a mistake to think that the times of ideological pressure left with the old Soviet system. Ideology is once again present and getting stronger,

simultaneously with a tougher political climate. Unfortunately, ideology is slowly but gradually seeping back into the academy. While at the beginning of this project in 2006, students and faculty were talking about more freedom in the classrooms than anywhere else in the society, these voices were becoming quieter from year to year. By 2010, it became obvious that the academy was

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itself under the mild pressure of the Kremlin's doctrines. Although no official laws in this regard have been announced, it was ubiquitously "recommended" at the schools' highest

administrative levels that possible "Western" influences and contact should be limited and monitored. All international programs and even visits of Western professors had become impossible without administrative confirmation and/or special approval. Needless to say, this remains the case today.

### *Theorization of the Learning Environment*

As one of the research team's members, Dr. Olga Krasina in 2007 identified a serious threat of general "theorization" within the Russian academy. Courses connected to political issues, even those adopted from other countries, were mostly translated with input on theory, with full or partial ignorance of practical components (especially those that seemed too different and non-applicable to the Russian reality). As a result, a lot that could have been really useful for developing an active citizenry is still missing. We were glad to see that our deliberative theory course had become a better alternative to this situation. The forums, from one side, were greeted by our students with great appreciation. From another side, our colleagues who were against it have criticized us, calling the forums "non-serious games inside the cathedral of education." In other words, deliberative forums and involved faculty were blamed for "using a non-scientific approach to society's issues and non-pedagogical methods of teaching." It came as no surprise that we have been further criticized by our opponents wherever it was possible. For example, our appeals to students to use forums elsewhere outside of the classroom have returned with criticism "not to provoke youngsters to [oppose] official politics," and to "leave education space for education."

### *Lack of Knowledge and Experience*

Despite this opposition from some colleagues, we do not want to blame them for being necessarily engaged and influenced by new ideological trends and political climate change. We think the main problem is with the lack of knowledge and understanding. As citizens, these critics might perform even poorer than some of the control students. The younger faculty at least have more chances for improvement. Most professors, especially those who are close to the administrative level, are “the children of the Soviet academia.” Their knowledge and mindsets, framed somewhere between old authoritarian concepts and the currently popular critique of Western liberal democracy, might not allow them to accept deliberation as a universal tool. It is also clear that they are not ready to sympathize with any progressive—albeit innocent—Western tools if they carry a hint of critique about domestic political concepts and political leadership.

But there are also faculty who *do* want to make a difference. They are not necessarily much younger, but some of them have been introduced to alternative experiences, either through partnership projects with foreign universities or having been participants in international academic exchange programs. There are others who do not have access to international programs but at least participated in our various seminars and public-politics workshops, and/or took part in deliberative forums. We have had a group of professors (Dr. Chulkinov, Dr. Provalova, Dr. Kolosov, and a few others) who have been involved in our earlier projects and were positively influenced by the significance of the effect that deliberation had on students and the general public. Still, a lack of personal experience in “communicative democracy” continues to be a challenge in our work and research.

### **Prospects for Today’s Russian College Students**

In 2009, when we were exploring students’ attitudes toward politics, we asked questions about the status of Russian democracy and asked students to forecast its future. In accordance with the processed results, an average rounded status of Russian democracy was given a “+3” value within the scale of -10 to +10. Almost 70 percent of students believed at the time that the “+3” value would drop in the near future. These Russian students were, unfortunately, right.

We were also very interested in hearing students’ opinions of the general applicability of democracy to the Russian political reality, especially taking into consideration the complexities of its long-term nondemocratic tradition. The majority of our respondents did not agree with the myth of the inapplicability

of democracy for Russians. That gave us hope, yet the question of the future of Russian democracy is still up in the air. We sincerely hope they will be right again and democracy might become a reality in Russia.

As for the important question of the prospects for the current generation of college students in Russia, it does concern Russian students and faculty a lot. Polarization goes along two major possible scenarios. First is a continuation of non-democratic tendencies in Russian political development. Second is the hope that the Russian civil resistance movement will lead to an awakening and development of civil society that will influence the course of political events before Russia can roll back to “authoritarian highhandedness.” The current compromise—the official, Kremlin-invented concept of a special Russian type of “sovereign democracy”—is not, in reality, a compromise between two options. Rather, it is a “retouch” of the *former* political regime that helps the *existing* regime justify some of its strategies and actions that are not understood within commonly accepted democratic thoughts and principles in the world. The last things that Russian students would want are potential social explosions and instability. At the same time, all the student groups either intuitively or rationally understood the necessity for changes in the political and civic environment in Russia. But these changes should be implemented gradually, in small steps. In a civil society desert, they feel their schools are still the best socializing agents for providing knowledge and skills. They think that it is, indeed, a mission of their universities and their faculty to present and try new forms of democratic communication in the classroom, despite any obstacles from either inside or outside.



# CONTRIBUTORS

DAVID W. BROWN is coeditor of the *Higher Education Exchange* and coedited two recent Kettering publications: *Agent of Democracy* and *A Different Kind of Politics*. He taught at Yale's School of Management and the New School's Milano Graduate School. Brown is the author of *Organization Smarts* (Amacom 2002), *The Real Change-Makers: Why Government is Not the Problem or the Solution* (Praeger 2011), and *America's Culture of Professionalism: Past, Present, and Prospects* (Palgrave Macmillan 2014). Brown has a forthcoming book, *Assumptions of the Tea Party Movement: A World of Their Own* (Palgrave Macmillan 2016).

LEONARD CASSUTO is the author or editor of eight books on American literature and culture, most recently *The Graduate School Mess: What Caused It and How We Can Fix It* (Harvard University Press, 2015), which was inspired by the monthly column "The Graduate Adviser," which he writes for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Other recent books include *The Cambridge History of the American Novel* (General Editor, 2011) and *The Cambridge Companion to Baseball* (2011), winner of the Best Anthology Award from the North American Society of Sports Historians. His book *Hard-Boiled Sentimentality: The Secret History of American Crime Stories* was nominated for an Edgar Award and named one of the Ten Best Books of 2008 in the crime and mystery category by the *Los Angeles Times*. Cassuto is also an award-winning journalist who writes on subjects ranging from science to sports. His website is [www.lcassuto.com](http://www.lcassuto.com).

TELMA GIMENEZ, an associate professor at the State University of Londrina, is an applied linguist interested in citizenship education and democracy. She holds a PhD from Lancaster University (England) and was an International Fellow at the Kettering Foundation in 1997.

ETANA JACOBI is a program associate at the Kettering Foundation and an associate at the National Issues Forums Institute. She also serves on the boards of the Center for Civic Engagement and the Kalikow School of Government, Public Policy, and International Affairs at Hofstra University. Jacobi graduated Phi Beta Kappa and summa cum laude from Hofstra University with a BA in political science and global studies.

DENIS MAKAROV is the executive director of the Foundation for the Development of Civic Culture, an NGO that promotes civic and democratic values in post-totalitarian environments. From the collapse of the Soviet Union until 2012, Denis also worked for the Secondary and Higher Education Systems in Russia and abroad. He is an associate professor of political science, Fulbright recipient, and an expert in the fields of civic education, Russian politics, and various community development programs that encourage public participation in governance.

DAVID MATHEWS, president of the Kettering Foundation, was secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare in the Ford administration and, before that, president of the University of Alabama. Mathews has written extensively on Southern history, public policy, education, and international problem solving. His books include *Politics for People: Finding a Responsible Public Voice*, *Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy*, and *The Ecology of Democracy: Finding Ways to Have a Stronger Hand in Shaping Our Future*.

DEBORAH WITTE is a senior associate with the Kettering Foundation. She has been coeditor of the *Higher Education Exchange* since its inception in 1991.

# *Kettering Foundation*

200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459 (937) 434-7300; (800) 221-3657  
444 North Capitol Street, NW, Suite 434, Washington, D.C. 20001 (202) 393-4478  
[www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org)

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