First published in "A Fractured North – Journeys on Hold," edited by Erich Kasten, Igor Krupnik, Gail Fondahl 2024: 249 – 262. Fürstenberg/Havel: Kulturstiftung Sibirien. — *Electronic edition for* dh-north.org

13 WHAT WENT WRONG BETWEEN EAST AND WEST? AN ASSESSMENT USING THE EXAMPLE OF EUROPEAN-RUSSIAN SCIENCE PROJECTS

Martin Gross

Preliminary remark

Since 1998, I have worked for many years as a coordinator in various European-Russian science projects. The aim was to support the reform of the Russian higher education system. I have come to love this huge country and have taken many people to my heart. Therefore, I am all the more shocked to discover that some – or even many – of my former colleagues now loudly welcome the current war in Ukraine.[1] We worked together, celebrated and traveled together, over long distances from Moscow to Irkutsk.

With them I got to know different universities and cities such as Izhevsk, Perm, Yekaterinburg, Tyumen, Omsk, Novosibirisk and Irkutsk. They accompanied me to the northern branches of their universities in Gubkinsky and Surgut. But for the last two years I have been hearing from some colleagues that Russia is defending its existence against Ukrainian fascism and Western hegemonism. It is a fight to the death. It may not be the majority of former colleagues who support the war, but it is a strong minority. The others keep their distance. They remain silent or express vague "worries" or "regrets" and hope to meet again soon.

In the discussion about this war, many reasons are given for its acceptance among the Russian population: a lack of democratic traditions, for example, or allegiance to the state, or media alignment. I don't want to contradict that here, but I do want to concentrate on the aspect of the West's policy towards Russia. In order to start a reunion or even a new beginning at some point, we should understand what has gone wrong on our side in East-West relations in general – and in our reform projects in particular.

At the beginning of these projects, I was still quite euphoric about making a small contribution to a new European peace order, an era of democracy and civil society. That sounded so much like improving the world. But this reform euphoria was already a first misunderstanding. By this time, the Russian population had long since lost all faith in reforms. "Reform" was a euphemism for the brutal privatization policy of

1 https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/1293274/umfrage/umfrage-zu-den-zustimmungswerten-fuer-wladimir-putin-in-russland/ [accessed: 13.01.2024]

Yeltsin and his Western economic advisors. The result was a greedy society in which a few oligarchs were able to enrich themselves excessively while the population became impoverished without any security: unemployment insurance was non-existent, the healthcare system was at rock bottom, pension levels were a mockery and crime was at an all-time high.

A look at inflation in the 1990s gives an idea of the economic decline: in 1991, for example, a kilogram of beef cost 15 rubles, but in 1997 it cost 16,000 rubles. The price of frozen fish rose from 2.3 rubles in 1991 to 10,000 rubles in 1997. The price of butter rose from 12 rubles per kg in 1991 to 23,000 rubles in 1997, while the price of cotton shirts rose from 46 rubles in 1991 to 58,000 rubles in 1997. The State Statistics Service of Russia[2] lists around 85 goods and services whose price development was subject to this inflation. The currency reform of 1998 illustrated the extent of the crisis: 1,000 old rubles became 1 new ruble, a conversion of 1,000:1. We called the 1990s the "reform years;" the Russians called them the "catastrophe years." There could not have been a greater misunderstanding And even then it was clear why many colleagues had such a high opinion of Putin: "He stopped the reform chaos."

University cooperation

The EU had set up the so-called "TEMPUS program" for cooperation in the higher education sector, which financed reform projects with up to €500,000 over three years.[3] In the early 1990s, TEMPUS was aimed at the Phare countries, i.e. the countries of Central and Eastern Europe wishing to join the EU, in order to support their integration. From 1994, TEMPUS was then also opened up to TACIS countries,[4] i.e. the former Soviet states, the CIS states such as Armenia, Georgia, Belarus and also Russia. This expansion seems to me to be based on a second misjudgment: the CIS states were tacitly equated with the "candidate states," although accession to the EU was not on their agenda. This was probably particularly true for Russia, where there was definitely no willingness to join and reforms of all kinds had already lost the trust of the population. In the blind theory of reform in the 1990s, the West had assumed that a reform process in Russia would be similar to that in Poland or the Baltic states, for example. In hindsight, this proved to be a fundamental structural error: instruments aimed at EU accession were also intended to support reforms in Russia that were not aimed at EU accession, but at a Western society. The EU objectives at the time read like this:

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2 https:/rosstat.gov.ru [accessed: 13.01.2024]

3 Bericht der Kommission an den Rat: Final report on the second phase of the TEMPUS program (1994–2000).

4 TACIS: Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States.

> The European Community launched two programs (Phare and TACIS) to support the Central and Eastern European countries and the countries of the former Soviet Union in their transition to democracy and a market economy and to ensure political stability in the region. (…) The reform and transformation of the partner countries' educational structures and systems was necessary to prepare citizens for the challenges of a competitive economy and a multi-party system in which civil society was to play an increasingly important role.[5]

All the misinterpretations are now assembled here: the equal treatment of the Phare countries and the TACIS countries and the assumption that Russia was also transforming into a Western society, into a "democracy," a "market economy," a "multi-party system," and a "civil society."

It should perhaps be added that democracy, multi-party system and civil society have long been declared goals of the Russian government and, as far as I know, are still enshrined in the Russian constitution today. All the more reason for us Western partners to feel called upon to support these goals. We did not do this in the knowledge that we were imposing a system on the Russian Federation that it did not want. However, we had to realize more and more that the policy practiced looked very different from the declared goals. By the year 2000 at the latest, a shift away from the West had been felt at various political levels.

The concept of wanting to support Russia in this process presupposes that Russia wants to achieve the stated goals of its own accord. As this was not the case to the extent desired by the West, support soon became an imperative: "Develop democracy and civil society!" Where there is no intention to join, there is also less willingness to reform, or at least less willingness to reform in the Western sense. Dialogue or exchange of experience would have been possible, but instead the offers of cooperation were geared towards integration. But integration meant that Russia had to move closer to European standards.

> Tempus is the European Union's programme which supports the modernisation of higher education in the Partner Countries of Eastern Europe, Central Asia, the Western Balkans and the Mediterranean region, mainly through university cooperation projects. It also aims to promote voluntary convergence of Partner Country higher education systems with EU developments in the field of higher education.[6]

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5 Bericht der Kommission an den Rat: Final report on the second phase of the TEMPUS program (1994–2000). p. 3. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/DE/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX-:52004DC0109 [accessed: 13.01.2024]

6 This is the standard formulation on the websites of the Tempus projects at the time, cf. e.g. http://www.intercentar.de/nc/print/en/intercentar/tempus/, see also: https://int.sumdu.edu.ua/en/international/862 [accessed: 13.01.2024]

For Katrin Böttger (2015), the current EU-Russia conflict is based on misunderstandings following the end of the Cold War. The West assumed that there were complementary interests, which led to a policy of integration. Russia was to be integrated into the common European house. In terms of higher education policy, this meant integrating Russia into the Bologna Process, a process from which Russia has since officially withdrawn (cf. Klomfaß 2011; Lenz 2011).

This was the end of a misguided development. The distrust grew slowly, and it grew out of the many frictions in everyday working life that resulted from an overambitious reform process. I would like to expand on this thesis by looking at the details of the project work.

The misunderstanding of the willingness to reform

European funding for international projects was only available if "reform relevance" was demonstrated and "innovative" results were defined. Innovation and social relevance were therefore essential prerequisites. They were called "lighthouse projects," which were supposed to have an impact on society. What should the reforms consist of? The EU formulated possible outcomes:

- new curricula, teaching methods and didactic material;
- training for the university's management and staff;
- policy documents and recommendations;
- new structures in the institutions, such as offices for international relations;
- computerization of university facilities and libraries in particular.[7]

In our projects, we therefore experimented with new course content (practice-oriented), new forms of learning (less memorization, more application skills), problem orientation, individual study planning, self-determined learning, credit points, elective options, semesters abroad, etc. Implicitly, however, this meant for the Russian side their adaptation of the university standards of the West. The proposal to carry out "training courses" is also aimed at communication in which one person has knowledge and expertise that they pass on to others - an asymmetrical relationship with little equality.

Nevertheless, many Russian colleagues were curious to learn a lot about "Western" teaching methods and teaching content and to experiment with them themselves. This was especially true for younger colleagues, while some older colleagues saw the achievements of their professional lives devalued. Suddenly, they were confronted with the impression or accusation that they had practiced outdated teaching methods.

7 Bericht der Kommission an den Rat: Final report on the second phase of the TEMPUS program (1994–2000). p. 4. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/DE/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX-:52004DC0109 [accessed: 13.01.2024]

Now I am quite a fan of modern forms of teaching. I am definitely a fan of problem orientation and individual study planning. But slowly, slowly. Expecting too much triggers defiant reactions. Missionary zeal stirs up mistrust. We actually know that.

Problem analysis

Let's take a look at some examples of undesirable developments in an overambitious reform policy: project applications usually begin with the request: "Analyze the problems and needs of the partner country." European reform policy is problem-oriented, it wants to analyze and tackle problems. The more serious the problem, the more promising the funding. In the case of the projects I supervised, for example, the problem of delinquent young people emerged (a phenomenon that could not be overlooked in Russia at the time). Cooperation between social scientists and social institutions from the field would have had good prospects for funding. Russian colleagues were in favor of this, but their superiors in the city or regional administration were not. The reaction of the higher authorities was: "We have no problems." There was an understandable aversion to foreigners snooping around in local problem areas and then pulling the ideal solution out of a hat, such as "socio-pedagogically supervised youth camps."

I can also understand how uncomfortable some Russian colleagues must have felt when describing their country's shortcomings to a German – in a country where for a long-time naming problem led straight to the prison camp.

One of the problems we wanted to tackle took us to the north, to the Khanty-Mansiysk Okrug and the Yamal-Nenets Okrug. The starting point was the preparation of a project application that wanted to use thermography to explore the energy efficiency and thus the savings potential of Siberian residential buildings. We traveled north with our Russian colleagues, took initial samples of thermography from various buildings and identified certain differences between different types of buildings. Perhaps most problematic, however, were two findings:

Firstly, the horrendous heat loss through the so-called fortochki, small ventilation flaps in a window used to regulate the room temperature where there are no heating valves, became apparent. The corresponding thermal images showed bright yellow blazing spots at these points.

The second finding was somewhat surprising: the older wooden buildings had much better insulation values than the new multistorey residential buildings (I won't address the comfort and hygiene conditions of these wooden houses here).

We were asked about another problem in passing: whether it would be possible to use thermography to detect oil leaks in pipelines that are invisible to the naked eye under the snow. An attempt was made, but with no result – except that we were refused visas for a later visit to Russia (without explanation). Someone said somewhat laconically at the time: "We must have been digging a little too much into problems."

Analyzing problems without approval from the highest authority is itself a problem. I suspect that our Russian colleagues have now also lost the courage to explore problem areas on their own.

Incidentally, this also results in a very unequal working relationship when one partner is supposed to help the other to solve their problems. And I can well imagine what some Russian colleagues remember when Putin talks about the hegemony of the West. This in no way justifies this war, but it explains why some colleagues think it is justified.

Definition of goals

In his article, Erich Kasten (*this volume*) points out that project goals should not be set unilaterally, but in close consultation with the partners. This is in line with the recommendations of the EU Commission for the preparation of university projects. However, this always became difficult when our colleagues proposed project goals that were not accepted by their higher authorities (see above: a project on juvenile delinquents or on the thermography of buildings).

Another obstacle to the definition of project objectives was the narrow focus of EU projects on training, knowledge transfer and know-how. As an example, I would like to mention the preparation of a project for the modernization of waste disposal. The EU guidelines allowed funding for training and fact-finding trips, but the Russian colleagues said: "What are we supposed to do with training? We already know what modern waste disposal should look like. We don't lack the knowledge, we lack the money. Instead of spending 500,000 euros on training, you could buy us a modern garbage truck or at least parts of a pilot plant that we could have scientifically supported."

We could only refer here to the provision that EU funds could not be used for tasks that were regular state tasks of the Russian Federation, but only for irregular special programmes – for example, training and knowledge transfer. The scientific support of a pilot plant could have been financed by the EU – but only the scientific support, not the pilot plant or parts of it. "Tempus" was explicitly a university programme, not a structural programme. A project did not come about under these circumstances.

And with that, we had a second problem, which Erich Kasten also addresses (Kasten, *this volume*). The defined goal of the project was sometimes an unfavorable compromise between 1) what the Russian authorities allowed, 2) what the EU would finance, and 3) the interests of our university partners. From this point of view, the project goal that was finally defined was sometimes a second-choice goal, with the consequence that the commitment of some colleagues was also rather second-choice.

Specific, measurable results

The above-mentioned difficulty was exacerbated by another claim of the reform projects: they were to lead to results that were specific, measurable, attractive and verifiable. This puts every project under enormous pressure. You can't just sit down together and exchange experiences: every dialog has to have a specific result, e.g. study content, curricula, teaching methods.

One should perhaps add: The ratio of approved to rejected project applications was around 1:15, so an applicant had to come up with quite a few ideas to present regarding the needs analysis, reform relevance and project results in an "attractive" way.[8]

Another example: For a three-year project on "drug help," we had the idea of developing a module in social education courses that would supplement Russian drug prevention with elements of drug help. Scientists and students should be prepared for dealing with addicts, which had previously been taboo. Drug addiction had previously only been a case for the judiciary. We came up with our proposals for drug help: offers of talks, medical support, acceptance, everyday counseling, etc. That sounded pretty relevant and innovative at the time, and the Russians said: "Yeah, sure, we'll do that. No problem." However, hardly anyone was prepared for this. In the first year of the project, a series of "training courses" were therefore held for Russian social workers and social scientists, partly on site in Russia and partly in Amsterdam, Copenhagen and Hamburg. At the beginning it was interesting and lively, but then the Europeans wanted to talk about counseling services for addicts. The Russians asked: "Why should we also counsel addicts?" – "Low-threshold services," we answered: "Create motivation to quit, prevent them from dropping out of society completely." We talked about "risk of infection" and "risk of debt, crime, social isolation, legal advice." Then there was the topic of "fixer rooms", where addicts could receive sterile syringes and inject heroin legally – and medical help would be provided in emergencies. With each of these concepts of a "drug help" study module, it became less likely that it would ever be taught in Russia. The main problem: there is no point in planning counseling for addicts as long as they are officially seen as criminals and not as people in need. In this sense, our workshops were just a showcase for the West: look what we have to offer addicts. The Europeans (and I too) were correspondingly self-confident and even arrogant; the Russians were bitter.

Some of us Europeans found it difficult to remain calm in the face of a drug policy that offered addicts nothing but withdrawal or prison - for years. Sometimes we said: "You can't deal with addicts like that" – and the Russians replied: "You don't need to tell us how to deal with our addicts."

Conclusion: Even the seemingly simplest elements of drug help proved to be impracticable. The goals were too ambitious, the possibilities too limited, the prin-

8 The length of such applications, including a detailed description of the results, the work steps and the costs of each work step, was 60–80 pages.

ciples too different (the addict: should they be treated as a criminal or as someone in need?). While it became clear to us "Western partners" early on that the above-mentioned "garbage project" could not be realized, this only gradually became clear to us in the course of the "drug project", which was not least due to the fact that the Russian side still believed in its realization for a long time. Indeed, in the end, a module "Drug Help" for socio-pedagogical courses of study was developed, and the mission was fulfilled; but the module soon disappeared from the curricula.

Today and in retrospect, I think that instead of conducting training courses and producing a study module on "drug help" as a binding result, a more non-binding exchange of experiences with Russian social pedagogues would have been good for the working atmosphere among colleagues and would also have been more in line with the incompatibility of the systems. To "support" reforms that nobody really wants means imposing reforms. I wouldn't say that my colleagues didn't want reforms, but not in such a rush, not so far-reaching, not so western-dominated. Many Russian colleagues with a monthly salary of around € 200 may have said to themselves: If I want to work on a €500,000 project, then I have to name a few urgent problems and show a corresponding willingness to reform, while fully understanding the intrinsic futility of the Western objectives.

At times, the focus was on short-term financial interest – along the lines of: "If we don't get what we need most, then at least we'll have a few trips financed." (Cf. Erich Kasten's comment on short-term financial interests – *this volume*)

Incidentally, our projects with their "training courses" were a kind of tutoring – tutoring in student mobility. And tutoring is hegemonic, no matter how nicely it is sold as "reform support". In this respect, I can well understand when Igor Kuziner mentions that Western scientists often acted like "wealthy envoys of an extraterrestrial civilization" and made arrogant comments about the competencies of Russian scientists (Kuziner 2024: 73).

State standards and curriculum

In a three-year project to reform law studies, we came across the Russian "state standard" system from around 2002: it meticulously defines the content and scope of seminars for all subjects and all years of study – in "study groups," Upon enrolment, first-year students are divided into study groups (practically school classes) in which they complete their entire five-year course of study. This results in a binding timetable for all students, something like this: Monday 8:30 "Traffic Law I," Monday 10:00 "Criminal Law I," Monday 12:30 "Family Law II." This means that there are 26–34 lessons per week, with correspondingly little time for individual work and correspondingly few options for deepening expertise in a particular subject area and deselecting other subject areas. Various authors mention the school-based studies in Russia, but

do not describe in detail how such a school-based course is an obstacle to international cooperation if integration into the European Higher Education Area is the aim.[9]

Our project, which aimed to introduce new teaching content, quickly reached the limits of a packed working week. Where should new teaching content be taught when the weekly timetable is already overcrowded? We were able to play a little trick, i.e. reduce a few lessons here and there to create a little space for "new teaching content." But without sustainability. Although the funding conditions required that reforms must be sustainable, the free space that we had provisionally created was dropped from the program the very next academic year.

One should perhaps add: During the crisis of the 1990s, lecturers' salaries had been drastically cut, with the result that lecturers were still earning a living from their part-time jobs well into the 2010s. Lawyers wrote expert opinions, doctors treated private patients, English teachers translated business correspondence. At the same time, the lecturers had to follow a curriculum that prescribed a weekly working time of 40 hours, most of which were pure teaching hours.

Under these circumstances, it was difficult to impose additional reform tasks on the overburdened lecturers. To be clear: it was not a fundamental aversion to reform; often it was simply exhaustion that caused an overambitious reform program to fail.

Mobility

Mobility, i.e. stays abroad by lecturers and students, was one of the central concerns of EU higher education policy.[10] In one of our projects, Russian students were to be given the opportunity to study at a European university for three months. According to the above-mentioned state standard, however, they would have had to attend exactly those seminars at the European host university that were planned for them at their home university (e.g. "Traffic Law, Introduction," "Criminal Law I," "Family Law II," etc.). This made a stay abroad absurd, because the students there were supposed to study precisely what could not be studied at their home university – or not of the same quality. Far too ambitious and doomed to failure was the attempt to adapt to the European mobility system, which stipulates that all coursework completed by a student at the host university should be recognized at the home university – as the equivalent of home achievements, i.e. without "catching up."

9 Pieter Dhondt (2014) counts among the "Challenges of international cooperation", for example: "efficient and innovative approaches in teaching and learning, such as student-centered learning and the socio-personal development of students, experiments with self-evaluation and other current approaches to learning outcome assessments." See also Levress (2022).

10 Compact measures – e.g. targeted support for mobility – are seen as valuable and flexible mechanisms for reform and should be encouraged. See for example: Commission of the European Communities, Tempus II Program Interim Report, March 1998. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/DE/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:51998DC0379&from=nl [accessed: 13.01.2024]

The students in our project, who spent three months in the West, were therefore subject to contradictory requirements: The EU mobility program demands that they do not have to catch up on any lessons at home. In contrast, the Russian state standard demands proof that the students have attended the required seminars at home and passed the corresponding examinations. How was this contradiction resolved in our case? With a sly smile, the Russian colleagues organized "correspondence courses," i.e. they distributed the relevant course material from the local seminars by email to their students studying in the West. Students therefore had a double job: that of the host university and that of the home university. And the exams they were supposed to take in their home subjects on their return? "Well, (said the colleagues) we can be a bit flexible. We can manage that, no problem." It should be clear that this "flexibilized" solution could not last.

Teaching traditions

In our projects, we tried to strengthen individual learning, that is: to supplement "teacher-centered teaching" with "student-centered teaching: autonomous learning, exemplary learning, teamwork, mood courts, etc.." Our mantra: students do not have to know all subject areas, but they must learn to familiarize themselves with different subject areas as required - to learn to learn. To the Russians, this all sounded a bit like a gimmick and a waste of time, which we could easily have accepted if our project proposals had not specifically included a reform of the forms of learning. So, we pushed for "innovation." And our Russian colleagues initially initially "grinned and bore it."

In seminars on German literature, for example, we tried to get into conversation with the students: How they liked a certain novel, whether they found the plot plausible, how they explained the reaction of certain protagonists, whether they could sympathize with one or the other character, whether they recognized themselves in the problems and solutions. In short we tried to create and reflect on an individual and subjective approach to literature. The reaction of lecturers and students was "why do German lecturers drag their students into a conversation? They should just tell them what they need to know for the exam (author's date of birth, author's political point of view, message of the novel, possible literary prizes, etc.)." The students themselves thought it was a waste of time to ask for subjective assessments of a novel. "It's nobody's business what I think about a novel. I just want to know which questions have to be answered in the exam."

The relationship between lecturers and students was correspondingly resolute. "Teacher-centered" teaching sometimes tends towards a degrading command style: "You still haven't understood that!" As a European partner, one is tempted to intervene in a mitigating way here. But you have to be aware that this is also perceived as

interference. "It's none of your business how I treat my students. They are brought up differently than your students. If you aren't strict, they won't do anything."

Status issues

This brings me to another phenomenon: status issues. Europeans are no strangers to status issues, but they are relaxed about them. During visits to the West by Russian colleagues, however, it has happened that a professor has complained about being given a smaller hotel room than his colleague, whom he considers to be less prestigious. The Russians seem to see a hidden message in this: "What are the Germans trying to tell us?" So we later always sent a hierarchy list to the hotels where we wanted to accommodate Russian guests (which was of course also controversial among the Russians). Similar questions of status also arose when it came to table arrangements: who sits next to whom at dinner and at what distance from the host? And in what order are the toasts said? I have to admit that we Europeans had little sensitivity here.

Hospitality or stinginess? For the Russians, it was a matter of course to accommodate and feed their European guests in the finest surroundings. Money played a subordinate role, they always had some kind of undefined coffers. For the Europeans, things were somewhat different: The funders demand budget discipline and low-cost solutions. Accommodation in a 4-star hotel is not "eligible." You can't invite Russian guests to a luxury restaurant every evening either. And during the day, the canteen has to suffice.

At this point, however, it would also be necessary to talk about the opposite tendency: Younger and financially weak colleagues in particular would like to reduce comfort and representation as much as possible in order to be able to receive the freed up residence allowances in cash to take them home with them. Instead of going to a restaurant together, they fed themselves with food from a discount shop and often formed "overnight couples" who preferred a double room to a single room if they could pocket the difference in expenses.

Financial issues

This brings us finally to financial issues. The EU is suspected by its citizens of wasting money. All the more reason for it to demand meticulous documentation for all project expenditure: Travel, salaries, materials, etc. The manager of a project thus also becomes the controller. This is already unpleasant for German participants, but for Russian colleagues it is often unacceptable. Why did a Russian colleague take a cab to the airport instead of the metro? "Please explain, please provide evidence." Or: "Where is the printer that was purchased for the Russian library – not in the

dean's office, please?" At such moments, the project managers become the most hated persons in the project. They interfere. As a foreigner, they keep a close eye on Russian colleagues. This is an almost inevitable consequence of an ambitious and highly financed project, but for the Russian colleagues it has a degrading effect. For a while, this feeling can be glossed over with a few pleasantries, but over time it intensifies into a general unease towards the West.

The financial issues also include salaries. For work directly related to the project objectives, fees could be paid from project funds – but according to national rates. A Russian colleague could then claim the equivalent of two or three euros per hour, his German colleague perhaps 40 euros and a Norwegian colleague 75 euros. "That's an outright injustice," said the Russians. "This is the principle of national equal pay" said the EU. People working on projects should receive no more and no less than their colleagues directly at the same institute. And that brought us to the next problem. You could see it that way, but it overlooked the fact that the Russian colleagues who officially earned one or two euros per hour as lecturers could easily earn two or three times as much in their part-time jobs. So it is understandable that they had the impression that the EU was feeding them with handouts.

Moreover, the Russian colleagues would have liked to receive their fees in cash and in euros. "Not possible," said the EU. The money is transferred to the respective university (transparency and obligation to provide receipts). These fees were then passed on to the colleagues in rubles from the university budget there, with the usual deductions. "Then we might as well do without it" (said the Russians). In other words, the more we got into the details of the work, the more annoyance and resentment grew on both sides. And if we had known how difficult it would be, we wouldn't have started. I'm not saying that the whole project work was in vain. Both sides gained a lot of experience about the other system and friendships were formed that still exist today despite corona and the war. However, experiences and friendships are not what the TEMPUS program would understand by "specific and measurable results."

Conclusion

The list of these examples could be extended indefinitely. What they all have in common, however, is that they are based on a misjudgment of the possibilities for reform. They stem from an overly forced effort to integrate Russia into the European higher education area, i.e. to bring it up to EU standards. Three factors stood in the way: an increasingly restrictive, anti-Western policy, a miscalculation of Russia's willingness to reform on the part of the EU, and funding conditions that ignored the incompatibility of higher education systems.

But even if the immediate project goals were only achieved with difficulty and disappeared after a short time, these projects left their mark. Both Western and Russian

colleagues had many suggestions for improved studies and for equal cooperation. We may be able to build on this in the future.

At this point, it is interesting to note a question raised by Igor Kuziner: that of a Russian special path in history (Kuziner 2024: 73). For a long time, he himself was of the opinion that the theory of Russia's special path had been refuted, as Russia could not escape the conditions of globalization. In view of the developments since February 2022, however, the question arises as to whether this war cannot be traced back to a specifically Russian history. The examples I listed of the differences between the higher education systems could also corroborate the theory of the Russian special path. The European reform projects would then have failed precisely because they paid too little attention to this special path.

Incidentally, of course, the question arises as to the extent to which there is not a special path for every nation, i.e. special conditions must be observed. On the other hand, the idea of a Russian special path must not be abused in order to defend its very own (rather restrictive) relationship to human rights, democracy and social commitment, which is supposedly anchored in the Russian national character.

The reference to Eastern European countries, where this adaptation to EU standards was supposedly easily achieved, is not entirely accurate. Perhaps the Eastern Europeans did not want reforms of all kinds first and foremost; rather, above all they wanted to get away from Russia. And a quick accession to the EU offered certain guarantees for this. This brings us back to a fundamental problem: while the Eastern Europeans saw themselves freed from Russian dependence, Russian nationalism was ignited by the feeling of being shunned by all these other nations: by Poles, Balts, Romanians, etc.. This was all the more reason for them to insist on their national heritage and identity. For many Russians, it is not only socialism that has failed, but also the national pride of a superpower – two rather bitter experiences that have left a deep mark on Russian society.

To the EU's credit, however, its insistence on social, legal and health standards in Eastern Europe has prevented predatory capitalism similar to that which characterized Russia in the 1990s. In places where EU accession was not imminent, Yeltsin and his oligarchs could apparently only agree on "privatization" and "deregulation," while other standards, as described, failed due to the opposition of the systems.

To conclude, the analysis of the mistakes and some tactlessness on the part of the West is no justification for the war or the enthusiasm for war. However, a look at the history of a failed reform policy makes it clear why many Russian colleagues accept Putin's turning away from the West and his accusation of hegemonism. The overambitious, sometimes arrogant efforts to Europeanize Russia are an inglorious contribution to the prehistory of the war.

But what will happen now? How do we re-enter into conversation with each other? For the time being, it will not be possible to do more than maintain personal contacts: to send congratulations on a birthday, to inquire about health or children, to exchange scientific tips, to "hibernate."

In the longer term, with a hopefully changed Russian policy, "low-threshold" forms of cooperation will be preferred. No hegemony, no adaptation, no ambitious goals, just exchanges, visits, roundtables, joint publications. It makes sense to talk about the differences between the systems, if the differences are acceptable. Low-budget projects, with low-threshold offers, are also largely exempt from financial controls. Russians who visit us cover their travel expenses; we cover the costs of accommodation, food, activities and publications. No Russian needs to be watched.

However, it is to be feared that such a development will be a long time coming. Currently (in March 2024) the fronts are hardened. The signals that Russia is sending do not give hope for a change in domestic and foreign policy. Instead, under the pressure of the Ukraine war, the policy of Western countries is more likely to change, in the sense of strife, self-interest and a strengthening of nationalist tendencies. Putin seems to be right: democracies are divided internally and weak externally.

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