World-class universities cut off from the West: Russian higher education and the reversal of the internationalisation norm?

Article

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Abstract

The western-style internationalisation of Russian universities, which guided the evolution of the country's higher education sector for over three decades, has been challenged by Western sanctions following the 2022 Russian 'Special military operation in Ukraine'. The authors show through the prism of constructivist theory how the norm on the internationalization of higher education characterised by the strive for westernised world-class universities was adopted and then came to unravel in Russia. A qualitative case study based on 42 expert interviews and an analysis of political discourse and legal documents reveals how the key features of the internationalization of Russian universities are being challenged. The authors contribute to the expert literature the notion of 'norm reversal', defined as the process whereby an institutionalized and internalised international norm is 'cancelled' in a specific country. The paper shows that the reversal in Russian higher education, which was initially 'circumstantial' is becoming 'intentional', with legal documents being drawn up to accelerate and claim ownership of it.

Key words
World-class universities, constructivism, norm theory, norm reversal, sanctions, Russia

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia focused on internationalizing and liberalising its higher education system by adopting what appeared to be global quality standards promoted by the World Bank, the European Union and the United Nations, by forging partnerships with universities worldwide and by launching government-sponsored excellence in higher education initiatives such as Project 5-100 (Froumin & Lisyutkin 2018). The accomplishments of Russian universities and their efforts to improve their global recognition led to a substantial remodelling of Russian higher education, with a few leading universities producing competitive research and offering a high-quality education (Matveeva & Ferligoj 2020, Agasisti et al. 2019). However, the Russian armed engagement with Ukraine (2022) and the ensuing Western sanctions overhauled the situation by de facto blocking off Russian universities and academics from the western academic arenas or severely limiting their access thereto.

In this paper, constructivist theory is employed as a framework to shed a light on the doing and perceived undoing of internationalization processes in Russian higher education. The paper presents the norm on the western-style internationalization of higher education 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 et al. 2022) and describes the context in which it was adopted, institutionalized and then overturned in Russia. The authors introduce the theoretical concept of 'norm reversal', defined as the process by which an institutionalised and internalised international norm is 'cancelled' on the scale of a country. We set out to determine whether Russia is currently experiencing a reversal of the norm of western-style internationalization by considering how its main features have evolved since February 2022. The study also attempts to understand the trigger of the changes

in Russian universities, beyond the 2022 Russian 'Special military operation in Ukraine'[1], by analysing whether the decision to end or reroute internationalization processes originates from Western partners as part of non-official sanctions against Russia or from the Russian government's resolve to retract from cooperation with the West.

The qualitative case study is based on forty-two expert interviews conducted with faculty members of Russian universities between February and May 2022 and an analysis of political discourse and legal documents from the same period. The findings reveal that the main criteria of internationalization of Russian higher education, from the participation in the Bologna process to student mobility and cooperation with foreign institutions, have been seriously affected by the crisis. Not only do they suggest that the influence of western-style international norms is just paused or put on hold, but that changes in legal and political circumstances have led to a normative U-turn. The paper demonstrates that although the reversal in Russian higher education was initially 'circumstantial' and due to exogenous factors or changes in conditions on the ground, it is becoming 'intentional', purposeful and goal-directed, with legal documents and political discourse attempting not only to anticipate the reversal but also to claim ownership of it.

1- Theorising norm reversal

The 'constructivist turn' of the 1980s led to the rapid development of norm theory, which posits that actors are guided in their actions by standards of appropriate conduct more than by a rational calculation of their interests (Checkel 1998, p324). Norms have been defined as 'collective expectations for proper behaviour for actors with a given identity' (Katzenstein et al. 1999, p.5). Most studies have focused on analysing the diffusion of liberal norms by Western actors and equate it with positive change on the international stage, suggesting that intersubjectivity cannot exist for 'bad norms' (Großklaus 2017). The focus was initially placed on norm emergence, diffusion and internationalisation, with the development of increasingly refined norm dynamics models including the norm life-cycle, the evolutionary pattern and the spiral model (Finnemore & Sikkink 1998, Nadelmann 1990, Risse et al. 1999). The impact of normative behaviour on different communities and the ways socialisation mechanisms impact norm diffusion were the object of multiple empirical studies. While attention was initially focused on uncontroversial norms that had already undergone successful diffusion, pointing to a case selection bias (McKeown 2009), more recent research has outlined the challenges norms encounter in each phase of their evolution.

Reflections on localisation have led to new insights on how international norms fit in with local values and legal frameworks and how norms are frequently reconstrued before being internalised (Acharya 2004). Contestation, defined as 'a range of social practices that discursively express disapproval of norms' (Wiener 2014, p2) can influence norm development in different ways. *Reactive* contestation accompanied by frequent violations and disagreement with the content of a norm can result under certain circumstances in norm decay or even norm death (Kutz 2014). *Proactive* contestation concerned primarily with the way a norm is being implemented can be built up upon, by fostering a discursive interaction and seeking a compromise on the norm's institutional design, to improve norm robustness (Deitelhoff & Zimmermann 2020). The idea that internalised norms are unlikely to be overhauled is

[1] As defined by the Russian government

increasingly called into question as a growing number of global norms based on universal principles are being transgressed by powerful states.

Studies of norm dynamics have shown that norms frequently expire but the mechanisms of their regression remain understudied (Großklaus 2017). Norms erosion as a research topic has expanded from the analysis of exceptional, deviant cases resulting from the actions of non-liberal states to being a mainstream, mass phenomenon with liberal states routinely acting as norm violators. Erosion cascades have been identified in the cases of the nuclear taboo, the norms on human rights, sovereignty, torture and the non-use of assassination (Tannenwald 2018, Dunne 2007, Thomas 2005). The idea that norms enter death cycles with downward spirals is, however, too restrictive and fails to show how norms undergo parallel but opposing trends in different parts of the world and can be reborn after severe degeneration processes. Frequently put down to external shocks, norm regress is rarely considered as stemming from a fundamental disagreement with the values or worldview underpinning an international norm.

The causes of reverse cascades are multiple and each stage of the norm life-cycle presents its vulnerabilities including internalization. Studies of norm decay show that institutionalised international norms with poor compliance can be hollowed out of their substance and substituted by competing norms (Brown 2020). Inertia at any stage can lead to norm erosion and the institutionalisation of a norm by a government, if simply symbolic or disingenuous, can disrupt and undermine the norm both locally and internationally (Elgstrom 2000). As norm-breaking becomes a common practice, the stigma attached to it disappears, setting in motion a reverse-cascade and spelling the death of the norm (McKeown 2009). Normative 'deconstruction' is most often described as a progressive process that unfolds at the international level.

This paper contributes to the Constructivist literature the notion of 'norm reversal', which is theorised as an abrupt and country-specific cancellation of a mature norm that was previously institutionalized and internalised. Norm reversal can be 'circumstantial' and spontaneous, associated with exogenous factors, or 'intentional' and result from political decision-making. Both cases of reversal lead to a normative U-turn in a short time period (six months to a year). The causes for norm reversal may be uncontrollable (a frequent example is 9/11) or originate from changes in policy choices (e.g.: change of political party in power). Both factors can jointly exercise an impact as norm reversal can be motivated by political and economic concerns, which themselves are caused by shock events representing inflection points in national policy-making. A circumstantial norm reversal may naturally prompt an intentional reversal, as governments may have no smarter political choice than to renounce on an international norm that cannot be implemented due to new circumstances. Likewise, an intentional reversal may lead to an effective circumstantial reversal, i.e. the impossibility to readopt a norm after its official rejection, either due to changes in legal and political conditions or to the need to 'save face'. Norm reversal differs from norm regress in that the former is country-specific while the latter refers to the level of acceptance of an international norm in larger segments of the global community. While norm regress can be compared to the chipping away of a norm facing contestation and localised infractions, 'norm reversal' is a mechanical undoing of the main features related to the national implementation of an international norm.

It should, however, be noted that even in the event of complete norm reversal, the situation can never be identical to the one before the norm was adopted. In this light, the essence of reversal may be the undoing of policies adopted as a result of an international norm or the discourse of rejection and denial rather than a return to *status quo ante* practices. This paper considers the

norm on the western-style internationalization of higher education and analyses the conditions of its adoption and then reversal in Russia.

2- The norm on the western-style internationalization of higher education and its Russian adoption

During the second half of the 20th century, higher education systems across the world underwent significant changes in order to adjust to the economic, social and political processes under way. A select number of universities, specifically in Western countries, set out to become globally competitive by developing leading centres for research and teaching, capable of attracting students and faculty members from all over the globe. The analytical framework of economic globalization is useful in accounting for the trend towards the internationalization of universities, the competition that emerged between higher education institutions and the focus on research and development (Chow and Leung, 2016). The Western perspective on internationalization, which is the object of this study, proliferated further after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the renunciation of the Soviet higher education system. The latter had promoted internationally an alternative model of universities characterised by practical training, centralisation and uniformity (Kuraev 2016). In the Soviet system, universities also played a key role in diffusing abroad the official ideology and the Kremlin tended to view higher learning educators as a vector for political messaging (Oleksiyenko et al. 2018).

The European Union actively participated in the Western trend of internationalisation of higher education with the Bologna process in 1998 which led to the declaration by 29 ministers of education to create a European Higher Education Area by 2010. The Bologna process aims to increase the mobility of students and academic staff, the competitivity of universities in Europe and the comparability of the qualifications they deliver (Ganzle et al. 2008). One of the goals of the process was to allow European universities to compete effectively with US universities. The trend resulted in a rise in tuition fees, the development of universities as brands and an increase in value on the job market of having graduated from a renowned university (Walker 2014). Universities were increasingly stakeholder-oriented and started to be run like businesses, with a parallel managerial hierarchy dealing with marketing and commercial tasks (Becker and Eube 2018).

The trend of internationalization rapidly spread throughout Europe to Southern America, Asia and Africa, affecting to some extent at least, the majority of states. The focus was put on developing world-class universities capable of supporting national economies in times of globalisation and developing synergies between the public and private sectors. The trend of building world-class universities was strongly supported by states, with the US and UK governments funding post-WW2 a number of research and development initiatives to support their most promising universities. Several decades later, excellence in higher education programs being launched in France, Spain, Italy, China, Taiwan, South Korea, Russia, the Emirates and other countries. By injecting funding in the most competitive universities, the Chinese projects 211, 985 and the Double First-Class Strategy set out to increase the visibility of Chinese higher education abroad, attract international students and improve the country's prestige globally (Gao & Li 2022, Zong & Zhang 2017). Global rankings play a key role in spurring on the competition between universities by producing ratings that allow students and faculty members to select the best programs and institutions and by exerting an influence on employers (Luque-Martinez & Faraoni 2019, Marginson & van der Wende 2007). The internationalization of higher education and the endeavour to create world-class universities

has been described as an international norm that was supported and diffused by the European Union and the World Bank in the 2000s (Crowley-Vigneau et al. 2022).

The World Bank describes the Western vision of internationalisation as the endeavour to create world-class universities defined as institutions that are competitive, research-oriented, cosmopolitan, forward-looking, autonomous and capable of attracting the most able students and faculty members (Salmi 2009). The World Bank offers practical assessment criteria and recommendations by narrowing down the more comprehensive definition of internationalisation offered by specialists in higher education. For example, internationalization has been summed up as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education" (Knight 2008, 21), but also as a phenomenon with cultural and social dimensions which should be less focused on neoliberal elitism and short-term results and more concentrated on providing a global quality education for all (de Wit 2019).
The Word Bank promoted the internationalization of higher education by sponsoring different programs to support the creation of competitive universities in developing countries so as to aid their economic development. The norm has grown in resilience over the past decade, in spite of various bouts of contestation which have criticised: the standardisation resulting from excellence in higher education initiatives; the pressure put on academics by administrators; the elitism resulting from performance-based state funding; the degradation of the quality of higher education stemming from a focus on ranking criteria; the institutionalization of Western hegemony; academic identity conflicts; unfair promotion of English and the brain-drain resulting from the desire to attend top-ranked universities (Li & Xue 2021, O'Connell 2015, Cremonini et al. 2014, Deem et al. 2008)

Russia began its Western-oriented internationalization process of universities in the 1990s after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The adoption of the 1992 federal Law on Education was designed to de-centralise the higher education system (Filipov 2000). The reform process was challenged by the 'perpetual' financial and economic crisis of the 1990s that left universities largely under-funded and led to some brain-drain of Russian academic staff (Kazantsev & Borishpolets 2013). Russia joined the Bologna process in 2003 during the Berlin Conference and its participation in 301 Tempus-TACIS projects increased the mobility of Russian researchers and accelerated Russia's adaptation to new social and economic standards (Ganzle et al. 2008). While Russia adopted some of the most visible parts of the Bologna Process (split between BA and MA degrees, life-long learning, credit transfer and accumulation, joint degrees), the reforms faced resistance and were criticised for spreading the European culture beyond EU borders, the worsening of the quality of education and excessive bureaucratisation in implementing accreditation processes and new quality standards in Russia (Plaksiy 2012, Davidov 2005). The Bologna process was also controversial because of the alleged transfer of power to supranational bodies, the role played by market forces and the standardisation of education that it entailed (Telegina & Schwengel 2012). The internationalization process of Russian universities was, from the outset, accompanied by a feeling of regret of the past greatness of the Soviet educational system and the desire to retain an influence on former Soviet republics in the educational sphere. By establishing branch campuses and promoting academic cooperation, Russia sought to exercise soft power in the 'near abroad' in line with its foreign policy priorities (Chankseliani 2021, Mäkinen 2016, Lebedeva & Fort 2009). During the 2000s, the focus was placed on post-crisis reform and the Russian government launched several programs aimed at supporting regional higher learning institutions (Federal Universities project) and at developing academic research (National Research Universities project).

As the Western norm on the internationalization of higher education spread rapidly and the focus on developing world-class universities increasingly became a global priority, the Russian government announced its own Excellence in Higher Education initiative in 2012, Project 5-100. The goal was to make Russian universities globally competitive and increase their positions in global rankings by allocating generous funding to a select number of promising universities in order to develop research, reform educational programs and increase accountability. Project 5-100 was criticised inside Russia for excessive spending and its focus on Western principles, and abroad for 'reputation management over integrity in governance' (Oleksiyenko 2022). However, it put Russian higher education onto the track of competitive internationalization, raising its universities' visibility through international rankings (Crowley-Vigneau et al. 2022). The project had a strong global component and the performance of universities was assessed by an International Expert Committee counting numerous foreign experts, capable of sharing best-practices and speaking their mind. The governmental financing of the project did not, however, enable universities to develop institutional autonomy, partnerships with the private sector remained the exception rather than the rule and the bureaucratic load of universities only increased during the 2010s (Froumin & Lisyutkin 2018). The norm on the internationalization of higher education underwent a rapid expansion in Russia: in spite of local contestation, there was a general acceptance that internationalization was a necessary trend and universities strived to attract foreign students, to improve their organization and to develop partnerships with foreign universities. The norm suffered its first setback when Project 5-100 came to an end in 2020 and was replaced by the Priority 2030 program, an initiative more cautious in its internationalization targets and putting more readily the focus on meeting the needs of the national economy. The Russian 'Special military operation in Ukraine' and Western formal and informal sanctions against Russia however represent a major rupture event emptying of its substance the norm of Western-style internationalization in Russian higher education. The mobilisation of Russian men to join the army and internal political changes were accompanied by an outflow of Western faculty members and the departure of some Russian professors and students. Changes in Russian legislation (31.07.2023 amendment to Federal Law n389) allowed qualified employees to keep working for Russian universities from abroad, making it difficult to assess the impact of these migration flows on the research potential of these universities.

4- Methodology and findings

Methodology

This study aims to develop an in-depth understanding of the challenges to the internationalisation of Russian higher education brought about by the 2022 Russian 'Special military operation in Ukraine' and Western sanctions. The causes, context and consequences of the 'Special military operation' can be studied through various sources[2]. This study sets out to determine whether Russia is currently experiencing a reversal of the norm on internationalization of higher education by considering how the main features of internationalization (presented in Appendix 1) have evolved since February 2022. Our research question is two-fold: is the norm on the Western-style internationalisation of higher education being reversed in Russia and who called a halt on the internationalization of Russian universities?

[2] For different perspectives see Charap & Priebe 2023, Hunter 2022, The Institute for the Studies of War 2023, Masters 2023, Mearsheimer 2022.

It is necessary to clarify conceptually that the norm on the Western-style internationalisation of higher education is not synonymous with, but is closely associated in the Russian case with the development of world-class universities. The two phenomena developed largely in parallel with one feeding into the other after the breakup of the Soviet Union. For example, the ambition to cooperate with universities abroad could only be satisfied if Russian universities were to acquire an international standing.

This qualitative study is based on forty-two interviews that were carried out between February and April 2022 with Russian and foreign faculty members of thirteen Russian universities. The interviewees were permanent or adjunct faculty members at Russian universities before February 2022 and include both Russians and people of other nationalities. Eight out of ten of the foreigners working in Russia left the country during 2022, two remained. The data collection comprised interviews but also time spent on the field to understand the changes in operational processes on the ground (one month altogether spent split between 7 different universities). The interviews and field notes were transcribed and coded in two stages in order to find verifiable answers to the research questions. The limitations of this study are that it offers a subjective perception of the changes under way in Russian higher education based on the reflections of a limited group of interviewees. A selection bias may exist due to the fact around only half the initially-selected pool of respondents agreed to be interviewed. Another limitation of this study is the difficult, rapidly-evolving context of the confrontation between Russia and Western countries and the fear among some respondents of 'saying the wrong thing' or in some cases to a desire to toe the official line. However, the value of respondent feedback lies not only in the analysis of what respondents said but also in what they felt the need to say. The authors were able to take cues from respondents' behaviour, as the interviews were carried out face-to-face. The authors were able to establish a trusting relationship with many respondents, calling upon them to check the veracity of the findings. Ethical best practices were respected, with information sheets presenting the goals of the study supplied to all participants and additional measures taken to ensure the anonymity of participants. Findings were triangulated with primary (decrees, laws, meeting minutes) and secondary (news articles) sources of information.
More information on the data collection, processing and analysis is presented in Appendix 2 together with the detailed list of interviews. Appendix 3 presents the official documents and discourses which were used to understand the political context/legal framework.

Findings

The findings suggest that the norm on the western-style internationalisation of higher education is undergoing a partial reversal process in Russia characterised by geographical changes to the internationalization of the student body, resulting from the suspension of credit mobility and degree mobility, logistical challenges to the internationalisation of the faculty with fewer lecturers coming from overseas and fewer academic exchanges being organised, and challenges to the internationalization of research resulting from sanctions. The reversal is also officially reflected by the country's departure from the Bologna process, the shutting down of normal political relations with the West and the 'turn to the East' and Global South.

Changes to the internationalization of the student body

The first finding is that the internationalization of the student body in Russian universities, which was a key feature of project 5-100 and of the norm on world-class universities, is facing unprecedented challenges in the current context.

Student mobility is a key feature of the norm on the internationalization of higher education and Russian universities have experienced a significant decrease in the number of western students as well as the number of their own students interning in Western Europe. Russia's official suspension from all structures of the European Higher Education Area, which was announced on April 11th by the Bologna Follow-up Group found its echo in Russia's withdrawal from the Bologna Process in May 2022 and the rejection of some of its determining features such as the Bachelor/Master split. Russia's suspension from Erasmus exchange programs put an end to credit mobility with EU countries. Degree mobility was also compromised as almost all bilateral partnerships with western universities were placed on hold. The most significant outflow of foreign students was noted in March-April 2022, with one Moscow university reporting the departure of a third of foreign students and 90% of students from Western countries over that period. While all respondents agreed that the participation of Western students for the academic year 2023-2024 would be lower than for the previous year, some pointed out that the inflow of students from CIS and Asian countries would remain unchanged or may increase. This viewpoint is corroborated by preliminary data indicating that the top 100 Russian universities have kept a stable 12% of foreign students in their overall study body (RAEX 2023), although the exact share of Western students has not been divulged. The qualitative findings suggest, however, that student mobility between Russia and the West will remain difficult during the next few years. The main trigger of this reversal of mobility is the informal sanctions adopted by Western universities. Respondents reactions to recent changes reflect different perceptions of student mobility and the Bologna process within the country.

> "Some students left Russia at the start of the armed conflict, others waited until they received messages from their embassies calling upon them to go home. Some opted to remain enrolled and follow the courses online, others dropped out completely through fear their degree would not be recognised back at home."
>
> Quote 1, Russian Dean

> "My days are exhausting. 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 collaborating with since the 1990s, knowing that regardless of what I say or do, the outcome of the meeting is predetermined."
>
> Quote 2, Russian Dean of foreign programs

> "We have been running this dual Master's program together for 15 years and the relationship was broken off in a day with a dry, accusatory email."
>
> Quote 3, Russian Program Coordinator

> "Russia is and will remain an attractive destination for students from CIS countries, China and Africa. Students from the US and Western Europe only ever represented a small and symbolic fraction of Russia's foreign student population."
>
> Quote 4, Russian Rector

> "The truth is that the Bologna Process is outdated on a global level and lacks consistency. This is as good an opportunity as any to try and find a better system."
>
> Quote 5, Russian Lecturer

"The two-tier Bologna system is much more interesting than what we had had before and what we can possibly come up with now, in a hurry and in isolation. The opportunity of Bologna to adjust your program of study to your needs and ambitions is extremely valuable and will find no equivalent in the new system."

Quote 6, Russian Professor

"It's not like Russian universities have opted out of internationalisation but rather that they are putting up a brave face about being excluded, trying to find a silver lining in a highly disruptive situation."

Quote 7, American Associate Professor

Challenges to the internationalization of the academic body

Having an international and diverse professional body is another key feature of internationalization, which is inscribed in the international norm, was promoted by project 5-100 and is assessed by international rankings. Russian universities are currently experiencing a reversal of the internationalization of their academic body. 2022 was marked by an outflow of foreign faculty members, leaving for political and economic reasons. While the West is scrutinizing and pressuring its citizens working in Russian universities to leave the country, the Russian government is tightening its control on employees from "unfriendly countries". Decree 645 dated April 13th complicated the obtention of visas for foreign faculty members and enhanced background checks.

"A formal protest was launched by students of the Higher School of Economics with students complaining about the discrepancy between the cost of education and its deteriorating quality, due to the departure of their best foreign professors."

Quote 8, Russian Program Director

"The profile of our English language BA program will change for sure, we have lost half of our native teachers who will be replaced by Russian staff."

Quote 9, Russian Vice-Dean

"My primary goal is to pay off my student loan and from Russia this was no longer possible due to the volatility of the currency and the difficulties to transfer money. I now teach in Mexico."

Quote 10, French Lecturer

"I have stayed on in Russia because it would be a betrayal of my students to leave. I have been here for fifteen years and have never broken a contract. What's surprising is the number of Russians who, out of kindness or dislike, tell me I should really be on my way back home."

Quote 11, American Associate Professor

Difficulties in the internationalization of research

Competitive research and publishing in leading journals, cooperation with global education associations and rating agencies are also central to the norm on higher education. Project 5-100 required participating universities to employ international consultants to design their strategy,

to submit data to ranking agencies such as QS and HTE, to participate in international conferences, develop joint research projects with foreign partners and publish in leading international academic journals. Interviews reveal unprecedented challenges to the internationalization of research, reflected by the suspension of all joint projects with Western partners in 2022, with even personal relationships between scholars being put to the test. The commitment of publishing houses not to discriminate against authors based on nationality is compromised by numerous academics refusing to review papers on Russia. The decision to keep access to knowledge open in Russia (Springer-Pleiades statement 2022) has not been followed through as most universities are not able to renew subscriptions to international journals and all Coursera courses created by Russians have been de-activated. As a result, the Russian priorities in terms of research also changed: publishing in international journals has ceased to be a requirement for doctoral students (Recommendation N 7/1 of March 18, 2022) and researchers (Decree 414 of March 19, 2022) who have been asked to privilege the implementation of discoveries and the sharing of results in Russian journals.

> "I have been participating in the post-Soviet studies panel for decades through good times and bad, and the exclusion of Russian scholars from the International Studies Association conference is an indiscriminate measure which seals shut the dialogue between the US and Russia."
>
> Quote 12, Russian Professor

> "My article on the regulation of technical innovations, accepted in December 2021 by a Q1 legal journal, was subsequently rejected in February 2022 because 'unpredictable political circumstances made it unacceptable for publication'. They recommended I take my paper to a Chinese or Russian journal, which is very telling about their derogative attitude to foreign journals."
>
> Quote 13, Russian Area Coordinator

> "We have been cut off from international online databases and I cannot access the articles that I need to conduct my research. I am concerned about my academic future but this idea that we can emigrate and pick up our work when we left it off is an illusion".
>
> Quote 14, Russian PhD student

> "The way our work is evaluated has changed overnight, the main scientometric indicators used to be reports delivered at leading international scientific conferences, the share of articles co-authored with foreign scientists and the participation of foreign scholars in our labs. Now we are asked to publish in Russian periodicals, present at Russian conferences and use our research results in industry".
>
> Quote 15, Russian Laboratory Director

> "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."
>
> Quote 16, Russian Dean

An official turn from West to East?

The reversal of the norm is also perceptible in official measures taken by the Russian government to sever ties with the West and develop cooperation in higher education with other parts of the world.

Russian state programs supporting higher education have significantly changed in recent years. While project 5-100 focused on preparing a small group of universities to rise in global rankings, the Priority 2030 project privileges regional development and national priorities with the emphasis being put on developing competences and technical solutions to replace those lost due to the sanctions. Although there is evidence that Russian world-class universities are being challenged by the rupture in relations with the West, Russia's ability to reach out to other parts of the globe with which it still has relations and continue to implement joint projects depends on a number of factors including whether Russia can maintain its academic potential, and on the willingness of people on the ground to embrace the 'pivot to Asia'. The rejection of the West serves as an incentive to revise academic programs both structurally and in terms of content, to create new partnerships and goals at a time of upheaval during which most respondents note a lack of initiative and a fear of taking a wrong step. Others remark that the bulk of their cooperation was not with Western universities and that the new Russian system should be rebuilt keeping in mind the national economy's priorities, the expectations of partner institutions in other parts of the world and the need to correct excesses related to Russia's accelerated internationalization program.

> "The Ministry of Education and the Foreign Ministry have asked us to review the regulatory framework for agreements between Russia and the United States in the field of scientific and educational cooperation with a view to their termination or suspension".
>
> Quote 17, Russian Program Coordinator

> "The new focus on supporting the IT industry against the backdrop of Western sanctions includes tax incentives, competitive loans, exemptions from inspections from regulatory authorities and other preferences for organizations developing domestic solutions in the field of information technologies".
>
> Quote 18, Russian Director of Business Incubator

> "There is this Russian saying: 'Taking initiative is punishable', this is what we all fear and we believe it is best to wait out this crisis than rush and make a wrong decision."
>
> Quote 19, Russian Dean

> "The desire to work with Asia is not as strong as it needs to be for Russian universities to remain truly international. […] The West remains more attractive for some, regardless of political events."
>
> Quote 20, Russian Program Coordinator

> "About a decade ago, our university made the strategic choice to branch out towards Asia and now we really are ahead of the new trend. The advantage of cooperation with China is they treat us like equals, not like a charity project."
>
> Quote 21, Russian Rector

> "One of the favourite devices of an administrator is a shredder. There is a tangible reluctance to put anything down in writing. The flurry of new rules of unknown origin has left everyone looking behind their shoulder."

Quote 22, American member of University's Scientific Advisory Council

5- Discussion

The findings suggest that the norm of the Western-style internationalization of higher education is undergoing a reversal. The main features of internationalization in Russian universities, such as the number of foreign students and faculty members from western countries, the country's involvement in the Bologna process, the participation of academics in international conferences, publications in leading journals and student mobility have been put into question by the 2022 'Special military operation' and Western sanctions. Although internationalization is not synonymous with westernization and Russian universities have developed active cooperation mechanisms with other parts of the world, the possibility of effectively pursuing internationalization and developing world-class universities in complete isolation of the West appears challenging: the norm is strongly anchored in Western practices and in large part governed by Western informal as well as formal institutions.

The 'pivot to Asia' and the focus on diversification of partners promoted at governmental level sees a new effort to promote cooperation with universities in China, India, South Africa and Azerbaijan. Foreign students from these countries have started to replace western students in Russian universities and new partnerships are being struck up for joint research. It could however be compromised by a deficit of mutual trust, arising from a lack of practical experience at the grass roots level and differing business cultures (see quote 20). The current situation resembles more stagnation than it does reversal in some respects: cooperation agreements have been suspended rather than abrogated, Russian scientists have been temporarily excluded from international conferences and many scholars are in a state of shock and disbelief.

However, the change in discourse suggests that a reversal has begun: the government and university management are concentrating their efforts on deliberately undoing features that played a significant role in integrating Russian universities into the global higher education market, potentially complicating its future reintegration. The past shortcomings of excellence in higher education projects such as project 5-100 are feeding the animosity against Western educational standards, and the 'vanity' of having top-ranked universities is being contrasted with the public usefulness of having universities serving the national economy and society as whole. The exclusion and humiliation currently being experienced by Russian scholars may foster resentment and harden their political commitment to a national higher education system (quotes 12-14). The reversal is also characterised by the fact the country is looking backwards rather than forwards for the optimal educational system. The Soviet educational system is often taken as a model of what Russian education should become.

The theoretical concept of norm reversal denotes a process of undoing of changes brought about by a norm rather than the complete return to a previous historical situation. While Soviet universities and research centres may serve as inspiration when designing a new autarkic or 'turned to Asia' Russian higher educational system, the historical structures, social institutions and intersubjective processes can never be fully recreated. The reversal is characterised by the intentional rejection of past reforms due to changes in legal conditions and international political loyalties. While the 'Special military operation in Ukraine' and official Western sanctions have had an impact on Russia's economy, it is unofficial measures taken by Western

academics, universities and publishing houses that appear as the main trigger for the reversal of Western-style internationalization in Russian higher education.

The question whether Russia's higher education truly integrated Western internationalization norms in the 2000s or simply made a pretence of doing so in order to gain global recognition and learn from the best practices may impact the assessment of the reversal which is underway. Some aspects of the norm, such as institutional autonomy and partnerships with businesses, may have be neglected in the Russian interpretation and implementation of Western-style internationalization. Although one respondent questioned the depth of the reforms undertaken in the 2000s and 2010s, particularly within the framework of the Bologna process and project 5-100, the majority testified to the fact that Russian universities underwent significant and meaningful reforms. Additionally, the constructivist literature suggests that even extreme cases of insincere mimicry (and there is no tangible evidence that this was the case in Russian higher education) may lead in time to normative compliance (Finnemore & Sikkink 1998).

The findings reveal that the legal and political impossibility to pursue Western-style internationalization resulting from the boycott by the West of Russian academics were the primary factors in determining the reversal of the norm in Russia. The intention to reform the university system did not precede but resulted from this exclusion, was a pragmatic reaction to it. The decision to leave the Bologna process was a direct consequence of Russia being suspended from the area, the 'pivot to Asia' was reinforced by the departure of Western students, the focus on Russian publishing flows from the difficulty to access Western journals and the praise of Soviet standards results from the need for new organizational principles for Russian universities (quotes 7, 13). The refusal to cooperate with the West, on the exceptional occurrence when it originates from the Russian side, is linked to the need to anticipate an upcoming rejection. The leadership of universities has attempted to claim ownership of the reversal, which is perceived as unavoidable, and attempts to frame it as a positive outcome for Russian higher education (quotes 17, 18). Hence, circumstantial reversal (unavoidable and linked to changes in legal and political conditions, in this case to Western unofficial sanctions) is rapidly turning into intentional reversal (with the government embracing and building up on the change of circumstances).

Even as it becomes intentional, the reversal in Russia could face some resistance as the norm on internationalization has been internalised in some universities and a number of academics are reluctant to abandon their newly acquired ways. Nevertheless, the informal sanctions make it difficult for academics to pursue their activities and to 'stay in the loop'. Current events have taken an emotional toll on Russian academic staff (quotes 19, 22). It is unclear as yet who gains from the current 'remodulation' of Russia academia which is orchestrated at governmental level and precipitated by the West. The long-term impact of the reversal of the western norm on internationalisation on Russian higher education depends on the level of isolation Russian universities could come to experience and the country's ability to forge new academic and institutional ties with other parts of the world. If Russia were able to create a competing vision of internationalisation, for example through a partnership with BRICS countries, then the breaking of ties with the West would have fewer repercussions on the organization and content of Russian higher education and research.

Conclusion

This study examines the challenges to the internationalisation of Russian higher education brought about by the 2022 Russian 'Special military operation in Ukraine' and Western

sanctions. The authors trace through the prism of constructivist theory how the norm on the internationalization of higher education was adopted, institutionalized and subsequently rejected in Russia. A qualitative case study based on expert interviews carried out with faculty members and administrators of Russian universities and an analysis of political discourse and legal documents revealed that the main criteria of western-style internationalization of Russian higher education, from the adherence to the Bologna process to student mobility and cooperation with foreign institutions, have been seriously compromised by the crisis. The authors contribute to the literature the notion of norm reversal defined as the country-wide cancellation of an international norm that had previously been institutionalized. It suggests that the influence of international norms is not just paused, but that changes in circumstances can lead to a normative U-turn. The paper shows that the reversal in Russian higher education, which was initially 'circumstantial' and due to exogenous factors or changes in political conditions on the ground, is becoming conscious and purposeful, with legal documents and political discourse being constructed not only to accelerate the reversal but also claim ownership of it. However, intentional reversal makes a return to Western-style internationalization more difficult for the future. Moreover, whereas normative reversal is here defined primarily as a localised phenomenon, it may have an impact on the international norm of the internationalization of higher education which has undergone some criticism in other parts of the world as well being blamed for chiefly advancing Western economic interests.

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