

Academic Exodus from Russia: Unraveling the Crisis

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Abstract

This paper explores the impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on Russia's academic sector, relying on the limited evidence available. The invasion has triggered an academic exodus from Russia, with both immediate and far-reaching consequences. These consequences range from the interruption of ongoing research projects and the termination of international collaborations to the emergence of an intellectual void, raising concerns about the future of academic pursuits in Russia. Conventional models for understanding academic mobility, which primarily focus on professional and economic incentives, prove inadequate in accounting for the complexities introduced by geopolitical strife, international sanctions, and curtailed academic freedoms. This paper calls for an interdisciplinary approach incorporating perspectives from political science, sociology, and international relations for a richer understanding of academic migration in conflict-affected settings. The Russia-Ukraine war serves as an important case study, shedding light on the vulnerabilities of academic sectors, even in the aggressor country where the physical conflict is not occurring, and offering broader insights for the field of academic mobility.

Keywords: Russia; Ukraine; Academic Mobility; Geopolitics; Sanctions; War; Academic Freedom.

В данной статье рассматривается влияние войны между Россией и Украиной на российский академический сектор, на основе имеющихся ограниченных данных. Российское вторжение вызвало отток академических кадров из России, что имеет краткосрочные и долгосрочные последствия. Результатами являются приостановка как текущих исследовательских проектов и прекращения международного сотрудничества, так и возникновение так называемой интеллектуальной пустоты. Она, в свою очередь, приводит к опасениям относительно будущей академической деятельности в России. Традиционные модели понимания академической мобильности, сосредоточенные в основном на профессиональных и экономических стимулах, оказываются неподходящими для учета текущих сложностей, которые вызваны геополитическими разногласиями, международными санкциями и ограничением академических свобод. Данная статья предлагает междисциплинарный подход, который включает в себя подходы дисциплин политологии, социологии и международных отношений для более глубокого понимания академической миграции в условиях конфликта. Война между Россией и Украиной служит важным примером, который показывает уязвимость академических секторов даже в стране-агрессоре, где отсутствует физический конфликт, и предлагает более широкое понимание для академической мобильности.

Introduction

The migration of intellectuals is not a new or isolated event as it frequently unfolds against the backdrop of significant societal upheavals, capturing the confluence of economic, political, and ideological factors that drive individuals away from their home countries. Academic migration driven by geopolitical or domestic turmoil is not unique to Russia. Nevertheless, its case offers valuable comparisons to other historical and current instances. The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 triggered a notable exodus of Russian academics, particularly among Jewish intellectuals who had previously experienced systemic discrimination (Kot et al., 2020). In the 1990s, Russia experienced significant academic migration, notably to Germany and Israel, encompassing 5%-10% of the professionals in science and education sectors. This migration phase saw a substantial exodus of physicists and mathematicians, raising alarms over a potential brain drain. The departure of up to 40% of high-level theoretical physicists and significant percentages of other key scientific personnel not only denoted a loss of immediate intellectual capital but also posed challenges to Russia's scientific and technological development aspirations. Key factors prompting this migration included disparities in remuneration, research infrastructure, and career prospects, reflecting the systemic lags in Russia's development trajectory (Latova & Savinkov, 2012). This migration of intellect had a long-lasting impact on academia in post-Soviet countries, especially Russia, mirroring similar situations in other countries. For example, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 led to a mass departure of academics in the face of ideological repression and international sanctions. Likewise, South Africa experienced an exodus of academic talent post-apartheid, largely for economic reasons (Hugo, 1998). More recently, the Syrian civil war led to a significant outflow of academics and researchers, who have been fleeing amidst a humanitarian crisis (Akkad, 2022). In Syria, this extensive departure of scholarly talent not only deepens the immediate crisis but also threatens the long-term capacity for academic and societal reconstruction, much like the lasting consequences seen in South Africa and Iran.

Each of these instances of academic migration shares common elements, including the loss of talent and enduring impacts on respective academic communities. However, they also present unique challenges. While economic instability drove academics away from South Africa, ideological shifts and geopolitical isolation played a major role in Iran and post-Soviet Russia. The crisis in Syria presents an even more complex scenario, as it involves both a loss of talent and the immediate physical safety of scholars. The variety of elements in each scenario highlights the complexity of academic migration, emphasizing the need for a detailed exploration within specific geopolitical settings. Therefore, this essay turns its attention to the current Russia-Ukraine war as a contemporary example of another significant wave of intellectual migration.

In the context of Russia-Ukraine relations, the war not only alters the geopolitical landscape but also disrupts the academic ecosystems both in Ukraine and in Russia. The war places Russia in a precarious position on the world stage, inviting economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation that indirectly bear upon its intellectual community. These changes exacerbate existing challenges within Russian academia, such as political influence or limited academic freedom, and serve as a catalyst for increased migration. This has immediate implications for international collaborations, affecting both Russian institutions and their international partners, and potentially leading to a realignment of intellectual networks.

This essay synthesises both recent non-academic and academic sources to explore the migration of Russian intellectuals in the wake of Russia's war in Ukraine. By meticulously examining and synthesizing available research findings, news articles and commentary, government and institutional reports, online portals and databases, we have developed an integrated narrative that captures the dynamics of the exodus. Our methodological approach, therefore, is rooted in critical analysis of literature, aimed at distilling key insights to offer an informed perspective on the crisis.

This subject of exodus is not merely a topical issue of the day; it is an urgent matter that requires scholarly scrutiny. While there has been a smattering of non-academic discourse on the immediate ramifications, the evidence on the scale of the exodus and the impact on Russian academia and its international collaborations remains largely uncharted territory.

Background

In the decade leading up to the Ukraine war, Russia experienced notable transformations in its higher education and research sectors. A series of reforms characterised this period, enhancing the global visibility of Russian academia. Yet, as will become evident, these advancements have faced significant threats due to subsequent geopolitical events.

Government policy played a crucial role in shaping Russia's higher education trajectory. Noteworthy policies included performance-based monitoring that led to institutional mergers and reorganisations (Platonova & Semyonov, 2018), reforms to the regulatory framework (NCPA, 2019), and the development of research-intensive universities (Fedyukin et al., 2022). A flagship initiative was the 5/100 project, formally launched by the Russian Ministry of Education and Science in 2013. The project aimed to elevate at least five Russian universities into the top 100 worldwide by 2020. This was planned to be achieved through targeted improvement in research output and fostering international collaborations (Chankseliani, 2022; Fedyukin et al., 2022; Platonova & Semyonov, 2018). Although the project did not fully achieve its ambitious targets, its impact is undeniable. By 2021, 16 out of the 40 Russian universities featured in the QS rankings were participants in the 5/100 project. This marked a twenty-fold increase in the number of Russian universities in the QS rankings compared to 2013. Notably, at the onset of Project 5/100, none of the participating universities were represented in these rankings. However, by 2021, half of the participant universities, 10 in total, secured positions in the top 100 subjects and sectors, thereby affirming the project's success in enhancing the global competitiveness of Russian higher education, as corroborated by a 2021 analysis from the Higher School of Economics (2021).

Participant universities also notably increased their contributions to top-tier research. By 2018, they accounted for half of the top 10% of Russia's most highly cited academic papers, up from 24% in 2013 (UNESCO, 2021). Moreover, the decade saw an overall surge in scholarly publications from Russia. According to Web of Science data, Russia's academic output rose by 66%, from roughly 28,115 publications in 2008 to approximately 42,291 in 2018 (Chankseliani et al., 2021).

The period also marked an expansion in Russia's international academic collaborations. Since the end of the Cold War, Western and Russian higher education institutions have cultivated connections, encompassing academic exchanges, curriculum development, and joint research projects (Burakovsky, 2022). The data indicates that the proportion of internationally collaborative Russian research output rose from 31% in 2009 to 39% by 2019 (Chankseliani et al., 2021). These international collaborations provided Russian researchers with broader platforms to disseminate their work.

Russia was also successful in attracting high-calibre, experienced academics—both Russian and foreign—alongside promising young talent. Additionally, the country broadened the scope of educational programmes offered in collaboration with prestigious global institutions and research centres (UNESCO, 2021)

In summary, the decade before the war with Ukraine was a period of considerable transformations in Russian academia, marked by reforms, increased global visibility, and a surge in research output. However, as will be explored in the sections that follow, this promising trajectory has been abruptly and profoundly disrupted by Russia's war in Ukraine.

The Immediate Effects and Exodus

The onset of the Russia-Ukraine war on February 24, 2022, has had a devastating impact on Russian academia, leading to a comprehensive breakdown of scholarly relationships with the West. Economic sanctions coupled with a worldwide academic embargo have led to severed partnerships, suspended collaborative initiatives, and frozen financial transactions, causing a severe dip in research funding and halting numerous ongoing projects (Hunter, 2022; UK Government, 2022).

The political environment created by the war has further intensified the academic isolation of Russia, setting the stage for a series of unilateral actions by various countries. Many Western nations have not only cut off scientific ties but also imposed restrictions on collaborative endeavours, further crippling Russian academia. For example, the United States has limited its research collaborations with Russia in response to the war (Ambrose, 2022). These actions are not isolated events but form part of a broader trend among European countries, which have taken decisive measures in curtailing their academic

and research engagements with Russia. CERN, the European Organisation for Nuclear Research, also decided to terminate international scientific cooperation with Russian Federation (CERN, 2023).

Germany suspended all academic and research collaboration with Russia. This halt, initiated by the German Ministry of Education and Research echoed the sentiments of the German Rectors' Conference. It covered ongoing and planned activities, freezing research projects and other academic relations between German and Russian institutions. The Ministry criticised Russia for its grave breach of international law and for alienating itself from the international community. The severance of academic ties was part of a wider expression of solidarity with Ukraine from academic institutions across Europe and beyond, aligning with appeals from Ukrainian academics for international support against Russia's aggression (Havergal, 2022).

Denmark also severed academic relations with Russia and Belarus due to the invasion of Ukraine. Danish Research Minister urged universities to halt research and innovation cooperation with institutions in these countries and to avoid new exchanges. This move sent a clear message that aggressive actions result in international isolation, aligning Denmark with Germany in condemning Russia and Belarus's actions while showing support for Ukraine. This decision also put pressure on other European nations contemplating whether to cut scientific ties amidst the ongoing crisis (Matthews, 2022).

Dutch universities halted their academic and research partnerships with institutions in Russia and Belarus, responding to a plea from the Dutch Ministry of Education. This decision aligned with similar moves by Germany, Denmark, Latvia, and Lithuania. The freeze encompassed financial exchanges, data sharing, and the barring of Russian and Belarusian academics from events and peer-review processes for research proposals. While the Dutch academic entities supported this decision, they expressed regret over its impact on education and research. The Dutch Education Minister acknowledged the temporary jeopardy to academic freedom but deemed the action necessary due to the grave situation in Ukraine (Upton, 2022).

While international sanctions and academic embargoes have severely hindered Russian academia, the country's own internal policies have compounded these challenges. Stricter controls over foreign academic interactions and increased crackdowns on internal dissent have served to further isolate Russian scholars and students who remain in Russia. Over the past 18 months or so, the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation has taken stringent measures by designating 69 out of 114 organisations as 'undesirable' foreign and entities operating on Russian soil (Ministry of Justice, 2023). This includes the classification of various research institutes, such as the German non-governmental organisation Zentrum für Osteuropa- und internationale Studien (Prosecutor's Office, 2023), the Vienna-based Central European University (Lebedeva, 2023), and Free University—an educational initiative consisting of educators and researchers who were dismissed from Higher School of Economics. These actions have had profound implications for the academic landscape in Russia, leading to heightened difficulties and limitations for those involved in scholarly pursuits and research.

Notably, ideological constraints on university activities have been on the rise. Various manifestations of ideological indoctrination have emerged, including a reduction in dissenting voices against the war (CurrentTime, 2023), public actions endorsing the ongoing war (pguas.ru, 2022), lectures delivered by military personnel (RSUH, 2023), and the expansion of ideologized educational courses within universities (Vedomosti, 2023). These developments contribute to a climate of ideological influence that affects the academic landscape.

These internal measures, coupled with the international isolation, have derailed what was once a promising trajectory for Russian academia. As a result, a growing number of scholars and students find themselves disconnected from the global academic community, prompting them to seek opportunities abroad (Burakovsky, 2022). An open letter condemning the war garnered 8,500 signatures from Russian scientists, signifying a broader discontent and online chat rooms dedicated to academic relocation have amassed around 6,000 members (Balahonova, 2023; Re: Russia, 2023).

While the migration of Russian academics following the dissolution of the Soviet Union unfolded over extended period and was influenced by evolving political or economic landscape, the exodus precipitated by the recent conflict appears to be more immediate. The rapid escalation of the Russia-Ukraine war seems to have catalysed a swift response marked by a certain sense of urgency, reflecting the acute impact of sudden geopolitical turmoil on individual lives and careers.

This exodus spans a range of countries. The most popular countries for prominent Russian academics are Germany, the United States, and Israel (Talanova, 2023). Also, migrants have been choosing Latvia, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Dubai, Turkey, Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Mongolia, and Latin American countries (Boutsko, 2022; Kamalov et al., 2022; Lem, 2022a; Tropiano, 2023). The selection of destination countries by Russian academics amidst the exodus appears to be influenced by a confluence of factors not limited to well-developed academic infrastructures. Language compatibility, the presence of existing diaspora communities, and the perception of a country's political stability and openness to immigrants might also play roles. Additionally, the relationships and collaborations that academics have built over the years can influence their choice of new location, providing a sense of stability and familiarity in times of change.

The departure, often not officially announced, is driven by an adverse political environment, restrictions, and a fear due to potential imposition of martial law making future departure impossible (Boutsko, 2022). More specifically, academics cite the lack of academic freedom, the criminalisation of free speech on certain topics, and severed international ties as some of the driving factors behind their decisions to leave (Interfax, 2022; Lem, 2022a).

It is important to note that incidents targeting academics have been a recurring concern, posing a substantial risk to those scholars who lack the means or ability to relocate. In response to these challenges, T-invariant and the CISRUS Centre initiated a project dedicated to the documentation of violations pertaining to the rights and freedoms of scientists and educators. This project aims to shed light on the issues faced by academics, particularly those who are unable to seek refuge elsewhere, thus bringing much-needed attention to their plight (T-Invariant, 2023).

For those leaving, the term 'Russian Europeans' has been coined. The term reflects a moral stance against the current political situation in Russia. However, the ability to leave is seen as a privilege, and the departure is characterised by some as a form of personal surrender, marking a failure in their lifelong missions, yet with a hope of return if political conditions ameliorate (Boutsko, 2022). The exact number of academics, researchers, or scholars who have left Russia following the onset of the war in Ukraine has not been clearly documented in the sources available. According to the latest investigation of Novaya-Europe, roughly 2500 scientists left Russia (Levin, 2024). This estimation is based on the data from the international ORCID database –the database contains information about more than 20 million researchers worldwide. As of October 2023, ORCID had registered over 130,000 scientists with at least one affiliation related to Russia. According to the study, the percentage of researchers changing their affiliation from Russian to foreign remained steady at 10% from 2012 to 2021. However, in 2022, 30% of ORCID-registered scientists moved abroad from Russia. Prior to this Novaya-Europe, after reviewing open sources, reports at least 270 university staff from Moscow and St. Petersburg's top universities, including 195 Russian scientists, have left Russia since the war began. HSE saw the most departures at 160, followed by St. Petersburg State University (35), and Skolkovo Institute of Science and Technology (32) (Talanova, 2023). Only the German Alexander von Humboldt Foundation helped 62 scientists to leave Russia (Balahonova, 2023). These figures represent a conservative estimate, drawn only from cases that could be validated through open sources. The real number can, in fact, be considerably higher (Balahonova, 2023; Talanova, 2023).

While the exact percentage of academics who left Russia or are considering leaving Russia and their chosen destinations is not explicitly documented in the sources, there is a broader trend of intellectual flight from Russia. Young Russians and students are particularly keen to leave, with one survey indicating that one in three Russian students expressed a wish to depart from the country (Moscow Times, 2023). In addition, there is evidence on the exodus of other high-skilled individuals working in software development (Wachs, 2023), tech or media digital industry (Tropiano, 2023), and art and culture (Kamalov et al., 2022). It has been observed that since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the country has been facing a significant exodus of individuals, marking the largest since the October Revolution of 1917 (Boutsko, 2022).

Hanson and Baltabayeva from Arizona State University conducted in-depth interviews with 47 Russian emigres. The participants, aged between 25 to 40, were highly educated, significantly more than the average population in Russia, and predominantly employed in the tech or digital media industry. These migrants were unified in their opposition to the prevailing Russian regime, a stance that had previously led to detentions due to their political activism, illustrating a generational and geographical polarisation. Although none suffered physical harm, the psychological strain of the war was

evident, with many expressing a mental anguish that interfered with their daily routines. Interestingly, the desire to leave Russia had been a lingering thought for many participants, often fuelled by a mental dissociation from the conventional Russian ethos of enduring adversities. The war became the tipping point, pushing many to seize what they perceived as their last opportunity to leave (Tropiano, 2023).

Thus, the Russia-Ukraine war has triggered an immediate and substantial crisis in Russian academia, marked by financial constraints, international isolation, and a notable intellectual exodus. The consequences of this crisis can pose an existential threat to the future of academic and research development in Russia.

Implications for the Future

The immediate effects of the Russia-Ukraine war on Russian academia are undoubtedly profound, causing disruptions in ongoing research projects, severed international collaborations, and a climate of uncertainty within academic circles. These immediate consequences, however, are just the beginning of a broader spectrum of implications for the future. Beyond the present turmoil, it becomes evident that the academic exodus and the academic isolation caused by international sanctions are only the tip of the iceberg in a much larger context of challenges and transformations that lie ahead. This section delves into the long-term consequences of these events and their potential impact on Russia's academic and research landscape.

In the wake of these immediate challenges, the long-term consequences of the Russia-Ukraine war on Russian academia loom large. As international partnerships dissolve, the ongoing projects are halted, and collaboration with Western institutions becomes increasingly uncertain. Data from technology firm Digital Science reveals that the war has already impacted Russian academics' research collaborations with colleagues in the West, while simultaneously amplifying China's role as a co-author in scholarly papers—hinting at a potential pivot towards China as Russia's main research ally (Lem, 2022b).

Moreover, the departure of top-tier researchers and academics signifies a rapid erosion of intellectual capital, a resource that took years, if not decades, to cultivate. The repercussions of this brain drain extend far beyond the war's immediate impact, casting a shadow over the future of academic and research alliances in Russia. The nation's reputation in the global scientific community is at stake, as its academic and research communities risk isolation from the global research landscape.

Economic sanctions, imposed by Western nations and compounded by Russia's financial constraints, further complicate the research landscape. These measures limit access to external funding and research grants, hindering the allocation of resources. As a result, a dwindling pool of qualified researchers must grapple with the challenge of sustaining high-quality research in an increasingly difficult environment.

The quality of higher education in Russia is also likely to deteriorate, as experienced educators and researchers take their expertise abroad. These effects paint a bleak picture for the nation's academic and research landscape, potentially setting back its scientific endeavours for years, if not decades.

The emigration of highly educated individuals, who could have been leaders for anti-authoritarian movements, creates a paradox. It might inadvertently relieve the Russian government of some internal pressure. In other words, while this exodus appears to be a brain drain, it could also serve the interests of the Russian government by eliminating potential nodes of opposition to the regime and its war efforts (Tropiano, 2023).

Looking ahead, the Russia-Ukraine war is poised to have a significant and lasting impact on Russian academia. It may reverse years of research and higher education advancements, posing a formidable challenge for the nation to rebuild its intellectual capital and research capabilities in the post-war era.

In light of these additional complexities, an interdisciplinary approach to studying academic mobility becomes imperative. Incorporating perspectives from political science, sociology, and international relations can provide a more nuanced understanding of the factors that influence academic migration during times of geopolitical conflict. This crisis offers an opportunity to develop new theoretical frameworks that can better account for the impact of geopolitical and conflict-related factors on academic migration.

In summary, the exodus of academics and researchers is not just a short-term crisis but a long-term detriment to Russia's research capacity and, by extension, its socio-economic and political development. The exodus has broader implications for Russia's position in the global research community. As its pool of academic talent disperses, Russia faces the risk of becoming increasingly marginalised, with its contributions diminished and its global influence waning.

Concluding Thoughts

The current exodus of Russian academics both mirrors and contrasts with the early post-Soviet migration flows, highlighting an evolving landscape of migration drivers and destinations. Whereas the migration in the 1990s was largely driven by economic instability and better opportunities abroad, the current wave is more spontaneous and driven by immediate geopolitical crises and concerns for personal safety and academic freedom. Understanding these patterns is crucial as they not only reflect the immediate impact of the Russia-Ukraine war but also signify deeper shifts within the Russian academic milieu over decades. These historical and current trends reveal the academic sector's sensitivity to broader socio-political shifts.

The Russia-Ukraine war is expected to have a significant impact on Russian academia, potentially reversing years of research and higher education advancements. The exodus of academics will pose a severe setback, making it a challenging journey for Russia to regain its previously acquired intellectual capital and research capabilities in the post-war era. The ongoing migration of Russian academics due to the Russia-Ukraine war calls for a reassessment of the conventional frameworks used to understand academic mobility. Traditional models have largely focused on professional and economic incentives, such as research funding, career advancement, and institutional reputation. While these have been effective in explaining migration in stable geopolitical environments, they are insufficient for addressing new variables introduced by the war, such as international sanctions, breakdown of diplomatic ties, and restrictions on academic freedom.

In light of these additional complexities, there is a need for an interdisciplinary approach to studying academic mobility—one that incorporates perspectives from political science, sociology, and international relations. Such a framework would offer a more nuanced understanding of the factors that influence academic migration during times of geopolitical conflict. The current crisis offers an opportunity to develop new theoretical frameworks that can better account for the impact of geopolitical and conflict-related factors on academic migration.

In summary, the Russia-Ukraine war holds significant ramifications beyond its immediate geopolitical scope. It brings forth challenges that require a more integrated and interdisciplinary approach, opening avenues for future research. These issues are not just pertinent to Russia or conflict zones but hold critical implications for the field of academic mobility and the stability of academic ecosystems globally.

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