



NATIONAL RESEARCH UNIVERSITY  
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**‘FORMALIZING THE  
UNFORMALIZABLE’:  
DISCURSIVE RESISTANCE TO  
UNIFIED STATE EXAMINATION BY  
THE TEACHER COMMUNITY**

BASIC RESEARCH PROGRAM

WORKING PAPERS

SERIES: EDUCATION  
WP BRP 51/EDU/2019

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**‘FORMALIZING THE UNFORMALIZABLE’:  
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This paper investigates the logics of teachers’ discursive resistance to the Unified State Examinations (USE) almost two decades after its introduction into the Russian education system. By drawing upon NVivo-aided Discourse analysis of online teacher discussions, interview and focus group data, the analysis critically examines the pedagogical underpinnings of USE vis-à-vis the traditional assessment system in the teaching community in two Russian cities: Moscow and Rostov-on-Don. Drawing on the concept of ‘actually existing neoliberalisms’ the analysis shows how, when interpreted through the lens of grassroots pedagogical values, the semantics of the globalized concepts of ‘educational standardization’ and ‘standardized testing’ takes on domestic culturally-specific meanings complementary and, at times, contradictory to the intended ones. In Russia specifically, the notion of ‘standardization’ comes into conflict with the pedagogical idea of a creative personalized and, therefore, profoundly ‘non-standard’ education, while academic assessment continues to be perceived as the non-quantifiable and subjective outcome of teacher-pupil interaction over time. The analysis underscores the interpretative and symbolic dimensions of educational policy and calls for more nuanced efforts to culturally tailor and translate borrowed educational meanings on the part of educational elites.

**Keywords:** neoliberalism and education, Unified State Examination, post-Soviet Russia, standardized testing, discourse analysis.

**JEL Classification:** Z

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## **Introduction and problem statement**

2019 marked 10 years since Russia's transition from the traditional system of university examinations to a standardized national test for university admission. The Unified State Examination (USE) was widely considered one of the 'pillars of modernization' (Gounko & Smale 2007) in post-Soviet Russian education and a fundamentally new and progressive initiative. It was developed and launched on an experimental basis in 2001 as a combination of school leaving tests and university entry examinations, which was meant to eliminate the widespread corruption in university admissions and equalize educational opportunities for students in central and rural parts of Russia (Shishkin 2003, Smolin 2005, Osipyan 2007, Prakhov 2015).

Ever since its trial in 2001, USE has stirred up heated debate in the public and professional communities and continues to be highly controversial. Evaluations of USE have ranged from 'a key direction in the modernization of education' to 'a three-letter outrage' (Smolin, 2005: 41). While some consider the exam to be the driving force of the modernization reform of post-Soviet education, others remain skeptical about the role of the exam in reforming Russia's educational landscape. Proponents of USE maintain that being implemented alongside other reforms, USE had great potential to create equal opportunities for access to higher education, prevent corruption, and make higher education a more demand-driven industry. Opponents put forward serious objections to the universal use of the examination and pointed out new opportunities for malpractice, lack of regional infrastructure for test administration, the absence of public control and transparency in the exam administration and score reporting. USE faced particularly staunch resistance among the teaching community. From the start, Russian teachers opposed the exam by emphasizing its 'foreign' and 'borrowed' nature and that it copied Western-style standardized tests, in particular the SATs in the US: 'a Russian version of America's most-maligned standardised exam – the Scholastic Assessment Test' (Gessen 2003: 13, as cited in Gounko & Smale 2006: 333).

As the development and implementation of the exam was sponsored by a multi-million dollar World Bank loan (Gounko & Smale 2007), the exam's origin and financing became another a point of contention. The reform of school-leaving and university entrance exams was commonly perceived as a by-product of the 'bureaucratic games' played by anonymous pro-Western ultra-neoliberal law-makers. The debate often evoked suspicion of a Western conspiracy and was framed in terms of 'the brain drain' and 'the destruction of education.' Conceived as a product of pernicious Western influence, standardized testing was seen as hindrance to the educational process and burden for teachers. Finally, the issues of the exam format and implementation were also contentious, with teachers and school administrators debating the logistics surrounding exam administration, including cheating, score calculation and conversion, and technical issues.

Since the early 2000s, the exam has undergone several rounds of improvement in terms of both content and logistics and has been fully institutionalized as a major academic assessment tool in Russia. While some in the teaching community and society at large revisited their initial apprehension of the exam and accepted its benefits, many others have remained steadfast opponents of USE. 'Almost 15 years later, USE has not become recognized by Russian society as a legitimate way to evaluate students in either schools or universities' Gel'man and Starodubtsev (2016). The idea of 'standardized testing' and the standardization of education continues to face particularly staunch resistance in the teaching community. The idea of standardized testing continues to be castigated by teachers as 'bad,' 'unfortunate,' 'incommensurable,' 'Anglophone' or 'Anglo-centric,' 'inorganic,' and

‘foreign.’ It is often referred to as a ‘fashion whim’ and an ‘empty box’ that was artificially forced on the Russian education system.

Meanwhile, state-of-the-art theories of change place teachers and their beliefs at the centre of the education reform paradigm (European Commission 2017, OECD 2018). Evidence-based education policy frameworks suggest that democratic education reform is most effective in the form of a ‘change sandwich,’ (Trowler 2003), i.e. driven by bottom-up pressures, supported by governance structures and guided by a unified national vision. Education policy is seen as a multi-stakeholder activity, with grassroots policy actors, primarily teachers, functioning as active reform agents, whose consensus of, ‘ownership’ (OECD 2018) of or resistance to policy is crucial for both policy formulation and enactment. Teachers’ socio-cultural interpretations of reform initiatives are believed to trickle back into national policies and structure the horizons of action. The persistent intractability of policy issues is often rooted in conflict over symbolic meanings, rather than practicalities, made by interpretative communities in particular policy spaces (Yanow 2000).

As a product of ‘authoritarian modernization’ (Gel’man and Starodubtsev 2016), USE has resulted in widespread compliance but a lot of resistance, whether unspoken or outspoken. Many Russian teachers found themselves in a position whereby they teach for USE in their daily routine while remaining silent opponents of the test. As Piattoeva & Gurova (2018) conclude in their study of teachers’ perception of the neoliberal audit and performative culture, Russian teachers face a situation whereby they ‘have to choose whether to sin against the children or against the Ministry’.

This paper takes the first step in disentangling the policy predicament surrounding USE through revisiting the issue of teacher resistance to USE almost two decades after its first introduction. Drawing on interview and focus group data it unpacks the covert pedagogical and ideological underpinnings of teacher perception of USE. The research questions guiding the analysis are:

1. What are the logics of teacher resistance to USE, in particular, and the idea of standardized assessment, in general?
2. What are specific pedagogical and cultural frames that contemporary teachers draw on in opposing the idea of educational standardization?

The paper is structured as follows. Following the introduction and problem statement, I outline the theoretical frameworks adopted and describe the data and methodology. I then provide a brief background to the introduction of USE in Russia and describe the three main logics of resistance identified in the data. Those are: standard versus non-standard, quantity versus quality and foreign versus domestic. I conclude with a summary of findings and a discussion of the implications of the findings for educational research.

## **Theoretical considerations**

The analysis straddles discourse-oriented policy studies and studies of neoliberal globalization. For discourse studies, I draw on the conceptualization of ‘discourse-driven’ social change (Ball 1994, 1998; Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999; Van Dijk 2008; MacLure 2003), Fairclough (1992, 2001), and interpretative policy analysis (Lemke 1995; Yanow 1996). Those approaches view policy as discourse; and policy interpretation as a crucial variable of social change. Teacher discourse is seen as one of the main manifestations of policy interpretation for the mutual adaptation and clarification of the intended and interpreted policy meanings. In the process of ‘de-coding’ policy scripts, teachers rely on

cultural frames of reference, ideological preferences and value judgments.

Discourse reveals the extent to which policy scripts are internalized by educational stakeholders. Unresolved conceptual tensions, a lack of shared vision among educational stakeholders, and ambiguity or confusion are often indicative of a symbolic contest over broader social meanings in the process of re-negotiating educational values (Fullan 1993; Ball 1994; Yanow 2000; Hargreaves and Fullan 2009). Furthermore, as this paper demonstrates, the persistent intractability of certain social issues and bottom-up societal resistance are often rooted in contestations over symbolic meanings made by the interpretative community in a particular policy space.

For neoliberal globalization in education, the paper draws on the concept of ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Peck and Tickell 2002; Collier 2005; Hirt, Sellar, and Young 2013), which views neoliberalization not as a hegemonic project but rather an open-ended process of mutual renegotiation and embeddedness (Collier 2005). The discursive interaction between educational globalization and indigenization calls forth a variety of ideological tensions, triggering unexpected local responses and resulting in complex, nuanced and often contradicting articulations of neoliberalism, or its ‘actually existing’ manifestations. These local manifestations are context-specific and path-dependent and are defined by cultural patterns, local institutional frameworks, and political regimes. They may include various discrepancies between discursive resistance and compliance in ‘actual practices’ (Brenner and Theodore 2002).

Grassroots pushback against neo-liberal reforms in education is believed to be especially pronounced in former social welfare states, where such neo-liberal concepts as standardization, managerialism and commercialization have been contrasted strongly with the historical values of egalitarianism, philanthropy and state paternalism (Davies and Bansel 2007; Eagleton-Pierce 2016; O’Brien 2017). Creative appropriation and resistance are seen as a natural part of the neoliberalisms occurring ‘on the ground’ (Hirt, Sellar, and Young 2013, 1). The framework adopted here therefore allows a discussion of the mutual embeddedness of socialist legacies and capitalism in post-Soviet contexts.

Bringing the two theoretical approaches together, I look at post-Soviet teacher discourse as a forum of resistance, adaptation and re-negotiation of the idea of standardized testing. I examine educational standardization as one major conceptual building blocks of neoliberal ideology, and identify the culture-specific interpretative schemes concealed behind the shared global policy language.

## **Data and methodology**

The analysis draws on 15 semi-structured interviews and 4 focus groups conducted in 2017 and 2018 in Moscow and a large provincial city in the Southern Federal District of Russia – Rostov-on-Don. Fieldwork was preceded by desk research which focused on analyzing the key points of contention around the notions of USE, educational standards, standardized testing and standardization as manifest in online teachers’ debate. Online empirical sources included ‘*Uchitelskaya Gazeta*’ (‘The Teachers’ Gazette’), ‘*Pedsovet*’ (‘The Pedagogical Council’) and ‘*Zavuch.info*’ (‘Principal’s Info’), which re-emerged in the mid-1990s as venues for educational debate and retained significant influence among the reform-conscious teachers and citizens. Those online sources were used to identify recurrent themes and tensions to be further examined in interviews and focus groups. A combination of interviews and focus groups ensured an iterative process whereby in-depth individual

accounts were juxtaposed and tested against group discussions, while focus groups encouraged brainstorming, and the generation and discussion of new ideas and crystallizing attitudes and messages (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2002). The use of data triangulation through desk research, interviews and focus-groups enhanced the quality, richness and validity of the empirical data.

The teachers selected for interviews and focus groups ranged in age from 23 to 57 and represented a wide spectrum of school subjects, from Math and Biology to Literature and Foreign languages. Teachers of school subjects in which USE is not conducted – for instance, Physical Education and Music – were excluded from the sample. The dataset draws on a purposeful sample which included male and female teachers of various age groups and types of schools (private and state). Focus groups included 6–8 participants and they differed from interview participants. The total number of teacher participants was 39. The in-depth semi-structured interviews ranged in length from one to two hours. The general framework of themes explored included: a) teachers' professional and personal experience with USE, b) their subjective attitudes to USE, its perceived advantages and disadvantages, c) drivers of the standardization reform, d) the comparison of USE with the preceding assessment system, e) teachers' suggestions for improvement and teachers' prognoses for the future of standardized testing. The focus groups were held in a professional setting equipped with a one-way mirror and conducted by a professional moderator. The principal investigator of the study was present behind the mirror providing guidance to the moderator. The focus groups were video-taped while the interviews were audiotaped. Both interviews and focus groups were fully transcribed and anonymized.

The overall methodological approach adopted is discourse-analytic, grounded in the constant movement between the theoretical frameworks and the empirical data, and with sensitivity to social meaning being important in the analysis (Fairclough 1992; Lemke 1995; MacLure 2003). The unit of analysis is an interpretative frame, a stable cluster of culture-specific meanings shared by the society in a particular socio-historical locus. A fine-grained textual analysis identified competing discourses in national policy texts and the tracing of policy paradigm shifts (Fairclough 1992; Lemke 1995; Van Leeuwen 1995; Taylor 1997). The analysis encompasses two levels: thematic and conceptual. The thematic analysis was carried out with the help of the content-analysis package NVivo7™. NVivo7™ was used to store, sort and categorize the corpus material, identify recurrent themes and concepts and code them into broader categories for analysis.

### **Background: the introduction and the role of USE in the Russian post-Soviet education system**

In the Soviet-era system of education, there was no single nationwide school leaving or university admission test, and the university selection procedure was based on a series of competitive, predominantly oral, entrance examinations. The co-existence of separate final school exams and university entry exams created a number of tensions within the system. Individual universities determined their own entrance exam procedure, minimal passing scores and grading criteria, and in practice had a monopoly and complete discretion over admissions (Osipyan 2007, Prakhov 2015). Among other things, successful admission was contingent upon the completion of special preparatory courses provided by the university (and often directly taught by admission committee members) or upon taking additional classes with private tutors (who also often worked at the university) (Prakhov 2015). Due to widespread nepotism and corruption, the criteria for admission were often not students'

academic achievements, but personal connections and higher social status, manifested in the ability of the applicant's family to invest in pre-entry coaching (Prakhov 2016). The system thus favored graduates of elite schools or applicants whose parents could afford private tuition from university faculty, putting at a huge disadvantage students from remote and rural regions of Russia.

By adopting a single state examination, designed and produced by the Ministry of Education, the Russian Government authorized a major shift from the Soviet-era system of separate final school examinations and university entrance examinations. The introduction of USE was meant to improve the transition between secondary and higher education by increasing transparency, fairness and efficiency. Specifically, as an external tool for assessing school leavers' performance, its purpose was to eliminate institutional barriers between secondary and higher education, introduce an independent quality control mechanism into Russian education, enhance school-leaver mobility, equalize territorial, social and economic differences between students from urban and rural areas, and eliminate corruption (Shishkin 2003, Smolin 2005, Osipyan 2007). As stated by then Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, 'the essence of the USE examination is to provide an opportunity for a young person living in the most remote village to apply to any prestigious higher education institution without leaving their home' (as cited by mon.gov.ru, 2008). The test was also aimed at reducing opportunities for corruption through the use of more secure testing grounds, including computer software and specially trained independent experts. With one major standardized test used across the country, school leavers had to take fewer tests which reduced exam anxiety and exam-related stress. The new testing system was also meant to 'objectify' the process of academic assessment by obtaining more reliable data that would be comparable across schools and universities.

The introduction of the exam was marked by a litany of technical issues. Challenges included obtaining certified copies of exam results and providing an adequate level of technology necessary for exam implementation and processing across the whole country, including computers and a secure internet connection in remote areas. Multiple violations were routinely reported by monitoring bodies including allegations of teachers assisting students in taking the test and leaking the answer keys (Smolin 2005, Gel'man & Starodubtsev 2016). Some researchers suggest that USE scores were excessively politicized or misused by the government (Piattoeva 2014, Gel'man & Starodubtsev 2016). Within the logic of 'governance by numbers', USE scores were widely used as criteria to evaluate the performance of regional educational authorities (Piattoeva 2014, Gel'man & Starodubtsev 2016).

At the same time, USE has allowed school leavers to send in their results to several universities at a time, which effectively increased access to higher education for students from remote areas. Research has shown that with the introduction of USE, first-year students' social background has diversified significantly (OECD 2007, Bolotov 2008, Efendiev & Reshetnikova 2003). The proportion of students from poorer families and from remote rural areas has also increased (Efendiev & Reshetnikova 2003). An OECD survey, conducted in a number of Moscow and regional higher education institutions, revealed that the results of USE correlate with student achievement within the first study term, suggesting its strong scientific basis and predictive power (OECD 2007). According to the former Head of the Federal Monitoring Agency for Education and Science, Viktor Bolotov, the correlation between USE scores and first year university examination grades was higher than with the

grades of traditional oral examinations (Bolotov 2008). Bolotov & Lenskaya (1997: 5) summarize the role of the USE in the standardization reform as follows:

The system of external standardized exams, regardless of all the criticism, has played a very important role: it has dealt with the obsolete, subjective and time-consuming system of dual, mostly oral exams, upon leaving school and entering university. This has brought more equity of opportunities, particularly for students of remote Russian regions who can now enter the best universities without spending a lot of money on travel. External exams have provided excellent feedback into the system, allowing decision makers to compare schools and university entry requirements. These are exams that play the role of outcome-based standards today: in the absence of well-defined and measurable school standards, they offer a set of norms school graduates must comply with and do so transparently. There is room for improvement as regards the quality of individual test items and elements of procedures, but the benefits clearly exceed the drawbacks [translation by the author].

The introduction of USE into the Russian education system received mixed responses from the international community and domestically. With the transition from secondary to higher education at the heart of the testing reform, USE provided a valid, practical solution to a variety of long-accumulated structural weaknesses in the system. It signified a strong governmental commitment to enhance educational equity and introduce a mechanism of quality control into testing procedures. Despite the drawbacks of the system, the Russian and international expert community saw USE as an integral part of a larger systemic reform, which had great potential for creating equal opportunities for access to higher education, preventing corruption, and making higher education a more demand-driven industry.

### **Standard versus non-standard**

The government positioned USE as a progressive approach to testing and in contrast with the Soviet rote learning and oral exams. The Soviet model was contrasted with the Vygotskian approach, which was presented as newly re-discovered and organically harmonious with the idea of standardized testing. The teaching community, in contrast, saw the ends of the paradigm as completely reversed: the new approach was seen as foreign and imposed, associated with rote learning and ‘die casting’, while the Vygotsky-inspired domestic pedagogy was seen as ‘non-standard.’

The predominant frame evoked by school teachers in interpreting standardized testing is the opposition of the borrowed ‘standard’ with the indigenous pedagogy seen as profoundly ‘non-standard’. The pedagogical backbone of the resistance is the notion of ‘non-standardness’ and ‘oneness’ in the sense of individual uniqueness of a human being. The ‘non-standard’ (adj.) in this paradigm is interpreted as ‘one’ or ‘one of a kind;’ while ‘non-standardness’ - as ‘uniqueness’ or ‘equality within individuality.’ These are opposed to the ideas of ‘sameness,’ ‘same as everyone’ and ‘equally depersonalized’ – all epitomized, in the



eyes of teachers, in the notion of ‘standardization<sup>1</sup>.’ In a featured article of *The Teachers’ Gazette* (September 2010), Ludmila Malenkova says:

I have been dealing with nurturing students all my life and I cannot remain unemotional about the idea of this expressed in terms of ‘educational standards.’ A lot of new words are coming into use these days: ‘technology,’ ‘monitoring,’ ‘service,’ and ‘standard.’ It’s impossible to remain unemotional about all these changes. Vladimir Levi<sup>2</sup> once wrote that there are no standard children. Vladimir Monomach<sup>3</sup> was fascinated by the great variety of people’s faces, and especially by the fact that each face is unique. In one of his letters to me, Dmitry Likhachev<sup>4</sup> wrote: ‘Paradoxically, dissimilarity draws together, whilst similarity, sameness and standardness leave us indifferent. It’s possible to fall in love with an unpretty face but it’s impossible to fall in love with a standard, mass-produced face.’ What we are doing here [by introducing standards into the system of education] is trying to come up with a method of die-casting or stamping. What’s the pedagogical value of this?

In discussing the idea of educational standards, the passage invokes ‘technology,’ ‘monitoring,’ and ‘service’ as an associative line that links educational standardization to production in a market economy. These notions are dismissed by the author as inorganic to the humanistic pedagogical paradigm. The latter is evoked with a reference to the influential Russian thinkers Vladimir Levi and Dmitrii Likhachev, whose views on education were rooted in the ideas of personal development through the learner’s natural curiosity and creative potential. The backbone of those ideas is the notion of ‘non-standardness’ and ‘oneness’ in the sense of the uniqueness of each human being.

Furthermore, non-standardness is rooted in the ideals of nurturing and a humanistic pedagogical paradigm based on child development through the learner’s natural curiosity and creative potentials. In pedagogical terms, therefore, the adjectival use of ‘standard’ is associated with the cliché, the impersonalised and the mass-produced, while ‘non-standard’ stands for the free and the creative.

Echoing Malenkova’s sentiment, several years later, a Moscow teacher argued:

R: Nowadays a school leaver is supposed to be ‘adapted’ [to the new market realities], performativity and success are being propagated, all of this is infiltrating our schools. I think the

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<sup>1</sup> The ‘sameness’ versus ‘oneness’ distinction has a long philosophical standing which has been described by the social philosopher Erich Fromm (Fromm 2000: 20-21): ‘In contemporary capitalistic society the meaning of equality has been transferred. By equality one refers to the equality of automatons; of men who have lost their individuality. Equality today means ‘sameness’ rather than ‘oneness.’ It is the sameness of abstractions, of the men who work in the same jobs, who have the same amusements, who read the same newspapers, who have the same feelings and the same ideas. Contemporary society preaches this idea of individualized equality, because it needs human atoms, each one the same, to make them function in a mass aggregation, smoothly, without friction: all obeying the same commands, yet everybody being convinced that he is following his own desires. [...] Just as modern mass production requires the standardization of commodities, so the social process requires the standardization of man, and this standardization is called ‘equality.’

<sup>2</sup> A renowned Russian writer and psychologist.

<sup>3</sup> Grand Prince of Kievan Rus’.

<sup>4</sup> A distinguished Soviet scholar, known as the ‘guardian of national culture.’

school should be classical, the school is the school. [...] We can't avoid this [reform] because people in the Ministry of Education think that that's how things should be. They are drawing on the experience of their Western counterparts. But the Russian mentality does not fit [Western] standards. Our children don't fit [that model]. Our mentality is different, our minds are more free than the 'standardized' European system (Focus group [FG]1, Moscow, 2017).

In contrasting the ideas of 'non-standardness'/'oneness' with those of 'standardness'/'sameness,' teachers interpret 'standardness' within a knowledge-centered, rationality-oriented and outcome-based pedagogical paradigm, where the sole purpose of education is to transmit to the younger generation the ready-made socio-cultural heritage of adults. The interpretation of 'non-standard' here is based on the idea of cooperative problem-solving through creative (non-standard) tasks, resulting in independent (non-standard) thinking. The standard is unequivocally associated with rote learning, 'robotization,' and the mechanical application of rules. Under standardized testing the uniformity of educational instruction is seen as a depersonalized mechanism for mass-producing 'cogs' in a planned economy:

R: I disagree with the USE system. It's nothing but rote learning and cramming. Our children are taught to think inside the box and to cram for a specific task. Creative thinking has no place in USE. It's all die-casting (FG2, Rostov-on-Don, 2017).

I: Are educational standards necessary at all?

R: I am not sure but if so, they must be very flexible.

I: But are they necessary? Perhaps an individual approach would be more [appropriate]?

R: Well, if there were no system at all things would collapse. So there's got to be [standards] but they must be flexible. So, there should be rules and exception to those rules. For instance, if a new Lomonosov [a non-standard creative personality – EM] shows up one day, he should be admitted [into the system]. (Interview [INT] 5, Moscow, 2018).

The metaphors of 'die-casting' and 'stamping' generates an image of the child as a *tabula rasa*, onto which a readily available set of beliefs and morals are imprinted by the educator. These metaphors are associated in teacher discourse with the long-standing domestic concerns over pedagogical violence most vocally expressed by Leo Tolstoy (Tolstoy 1989). Tolstoy called the knowledge-centered paradigm a form of 'moral despotism,' arguing that no learning can be achieved through putting the educator in a superior position and imposing a 'standard' procedure on the process of education. When teaching is merely knowledge transmission and the educator is merely a manager, claimed Tolstoy, the outcome of the educational process is akin to die-casting or 'the tendency of one man to make another just like himself' (1989). Instead, Tolstoy promulgated and popularized humanistic education based on the cultivation of a creative and artistic personality through active, conscious and guided exposure to domestic culture by a pedagogue-humanist.

In the teachers' discourse non-standard pedagogy is closely associated with educational equality. Interestingly, in the Russian language the word 'ravnj' ('equal,

‘egalitarian’) has produced two derivatives within the teacher narrative: ‘*vyravnivanie*’ and ‘*uravnilovka*.’ While the general lexical meaning of both is principally the same (‘make equal’ or ‘level out’), the evaluative frames of reference of the two are diametrically opposed. The concept of ‘*vyravnivanie*’ is perceived as borrowed from the Western discourse of educational modernization. In a value-neutral context, it corresponds to the concept of equality, unification, or leveling out of educational opportunities. ‘*Uravnilovka*’ is an indigenous concept denoting adverse aspects of unified educational provision, such as ‘averaging out,’ ‘impersonalized uniformity,’ and ‘one size fits all.’ ‘*Vyravnivanie*’ is mainly employed in official discourse as a progressive concept denoting the equity and equality of educational opportunities. As such, it is construed in opposition to ‘*uravnilovka*,’ which in official discourse is portrayed as the grey uniformity of the Soviet times. In public discourse, the paradigms are reversed. The two terms are used with opposite evaluative judgments: contemporary reform initiatives are castigated as ‘*uravnilovka*’ (‘one size fits all’) and ‘*vyravnivanie*’ is equated with fair educational fair educational provision and assessment.

I: What happened to the individual approach?

R: It has been completely lost due to the one-size-fits-all approach (FG1, Rostov-on-Don, 2017).

Finally, the notion of standardized assessment appears to be reciprocally linked to the concepts of pedagogy and culture, with the humanistic pedagogical model of education seen as the foundation of culture. In discussing the cultural suitability of the standardization reform, one teacher argues, ‘What exactly do the designers of standardised testing expect of the Russian system of education? Standards are supposed to correlate with the value system which comes down to one of two: nurturing a personality or breeding one for the needs of the innovation economy?’ In its appeal to domestic pedagogical and cultural values teachers see the idea of standardised assessment *a priori* incommensurate with the local value system. As another teacher put it, ‘the Russian government is trying to formalise that which is principally unformalizable.’

### **Quantity versus quality**

Another logic of the resistance to standardized testing rests on the opposition of educational quantity versus quality. Similarly to such concepts as beauty and truth, quality in education is perceived in absolutist terms and seen as indivisible into proximal components. The quality of teaching and learning is self-evident and uncompromising: one can instinctively recognize quality when one sees it (Harvey & Green 1993). As one lay commentator on the standardization reform observed, ‘Quality is like love – everyone understands what it means but no one is able to come up with a precise formula’ (uchportal.ru, 2014).

The indigenous notion of ‘non-standardness’ described above reinforces the conceptualization of educational quality as a holistic characteristic pertaining to the highest standard of educational provision and assessment. Just as educational quality is perceived as a uni-dimensional, absolutist and immeasurable quality of educational system, the issues of assessment are also conceptualized in holistic and qualitative, rather than quantitative, terms. Thus, popular pedagogical discourse continues to see the process of learning and assessment as intimately subjective and irreconcilable with standardized measurement: no standardized testing can assess the quality of student achievement better than the teacher through the observation of their students throughout the year:

I: What is the best assessment tool then?

R: I find USE very contentious. [...] The [traditional] 5-point system may not be perfect but it has a personal dimension. With USE there is no individualized element of assessment (INT3, Moscow).

I: How is USE different [from traditional assessment]?

R: It's written, it's no longer oral. But the point is, the teacher has to know the pupil's level. Through conversations, through prompts. If the pupil gets momentarily confused and doesn't answer a test question.. It wouldn't happen in an oral exam because the teacher knows what the pupil really knows or does not know. The teacher can help with a prompt and guide the pupil to answering the question (INT1, Rostov-on-Don).

The very idea of 'objectivizing' and quantifying educational outcomes through USE is viewed as the disintegration of the learning process and a displacement of student individuality. Instead, learning and assessment are seen as a profoundly subjective and resting on prolonged teacher-student interaction in and outside of classroom. Assessment is inbuilt into the pedagogical process; it is an undifferentiated ever-creative process of assessment through subjective observation by the teacher of an individual pupil. Standardized testing is seen as a fragmentation of the organic system through artificial intervention. Through a comparison with various forms of arts, such as the theatre, the idea of quantifiable outcomes is ultimately discarded as contradictory to the essence of educational quality:

'The very idea of 'standardized assessment' is absurd. It's as ridiculous as quality control at a classical music concert or an art gallery' (zavuch.info, 2017).

### **Foreign versus domestic**

Finally, almost two decades after the introduction of USE into Russian education system, standardized testing continues to be seen through the prism of the 'Russian vs. Western' and 'authentic vs. borrowed' divides. USE is perceived as a hostile element that has been forced on the system from the outside in the 'pursuit of time' and as 'a courtesy and reverence to western education' and an 'outcome of political games':

I: You said standardized testing is a foreign idea. Why is foreign necessarily bad?

R: To be honest with you, if one is to compare Russia and the West, I would be a patriot. I find it deeply offensive that Russia, with our history and our [distinguished] pedagogy, might have to borrow [from the West]. We have to have our own thing (INT9, Moscow, 2018).

I: Why was USE introduced in the first place?

R: To pay respect to the West (FG2, Rostov-on-Don, 2017).

The analysis reveals a continued perception of the exam as a threat to or the destruction of Russian education. The perception persists that USE was specifically designed with the purpose of dumbing down the nation and weakening the Russian education system:

I: You referred to USE as a ‘counter operation’. Why so and who is carrying it out?

R: I think it’s carrying out by Western people. [...] It’s pretty clear to everyone.

I: Why is Western necessarily bad?

R: It suits their society, their life is different than ours. A Russian person is a thinking person. And with this USE system, the Government no longer needs thinking people. [...] The pupils are being Xerox-ed and die-cast (FG1, Moscow, 2017).

Teachers’ resistance is accompanied by the suspicion of a conspiracy by Western agencies to ‘colonize’ the country through the imposition of neoliberal social reforms. Questions are often raised about the hidden agenda of the reforms: who the unknown bureaucrats masterminding the reform are and what constitutes its real objectives. It is clear that the messages of increased equity and transparency that lie at the heart of the standardization reform in Russia have not trickled down to a significant share of grassroots agents.

## **Conclusion and discussion**

While many teachers discuss various technical and implementation drawbacks of USE, such as imperfect test items or exam-related stress, the backbone of teachers’ continuous resistance is pedagogical and symbolic in nature. The analysis shows that the symbolic and policy values of USE presented by the government are yet to be internalized by Russia’s pedagogical culture. The major logics of resistance identified in the discourse of contemporary teachers are standard versus non-standard, quantity versus quality and foreign versus domestic.

The pedagogical framework employed by the teachers is rooted in the domestic humanistic tradition of nurturing students through creative learning and personal interaction. While the official discourse construes the progressive idea of educational standardization in opposition to the ‘grey uniformity’ of Soviet-era schooling, the teachers’ discourse castigates the standardization reform as a total displacement of personality. The indigenous notion of ‘non-standardness’ reinforces the conceptualization of educational quality as a holistic characteristic pertaining to the highest standard of educational provision and assessment. As a result, the very idea of ‘objectivizing’ educational outcomes through USE is conceived of as a disintegration of the learning process and a displacement of student individuality and standardized assessment is associated with ‘assembly line’ or ‘cut and dry’ production. Quantity is associated with a one-size-fits-all approach, depersonalization and superficiality. Instead, the domestic pedagogical paradigm sees assessment as a profoundly qualitative matter impenetrable to formal measurement and quantification. Assessment in school is seen a personalized continuous process of interaction between the teacher and the student in the context of individual students’ perceived abilities, deficiencies and limitations. Finally, USE is perceived as a foreign element borrowed from the West and forced on the Russian system of education as a result of political games.

Theoretically, the analysis underscores the discursive dimension of educational reform. Specifically, in terms of actually existing neoliberalisms, the analysis reveals little room for local socio-cultural adjustments and suggests insufficient effort from the reform masterminds to reconcile the obvious ideological schisms between borrowed neoliberal and

traditional pedagogical values. A number of crucial questions about the new forms of pedagogical engagement have been raised by the teaching community over the years but left unaddressed. Among those are: How does standardized testing reconcile with the domestic idea of ‘non-standard’ pedagogy? How does standardized testing relate to domestic notions of educational quality? How does the traditional assessment system correlate with USE? What is the role of teacher subjectivity in the new assessment paradigm?

The conceptual frames employed in the teachers’ discourse are long-standing, path-dependent and historically justified, while the borrowed pedagogical meanings are seen as superficial and imposed. As a result of an under-conceptualization of the new meanings by the Russian educational elites and the inertia of educational meanings in general, teachers’ discourse finds itself stalled and extremely polarized. Instead of negotiating the traditional and the borrowed meanings, it continues to draw symbolic boundaries between the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’, the ‘domestic’ and the ‘foreign,’ the ‘Russian’ and the ‘Western,’ ‘quality’ and ‘quantity.’ While national educational values are notoriously resilient and conservative, post-Soviet teachers’ discourse on standardized testing is clearly ‘lagging behind’ (Ogburn 1957) post-Soviet educational developments. As a result, there are notable discrepancies between discursive resistance and ‘actual practices’ (Brenner and Theodore 2002): teachers routinely teach for USE in their classroom while remaining opponents of the new testing system.

The implications of these findings for the studies of neoliberalism and education concern the role of teachers in policy interpretation and enactment and the role of educational elites in negotiating borrowed pedagogical meanings. The analysis above once again showcases the complexity of neoliberalization, particularly in the area of the cultural translation of borrowed discursive meanings, as a process largely independent of top-down policy intervention by the agents who prescribe them. Russia’s case is specifically illustrative of how, in the absence of targeted cultural adaptation, the rationalizations adopted by the Russian reformers to legitimize the neoliberal reform, have become filled with meanings that are dramatically different and sometimes directly opposed to the ones found in the globalized scripts (Minina 2014; Minina 2016a; Minina 2016b). As I have demonstrated elsewhere (Minina 2014), the idea of maximizing human personality through competition, choice and standardized assessment has been interpreted in Russian education as a complete displacement of personality. The concept of quality assurance through nationwide educational standards has been conceived of as quintessence of authoritarian state control (Minina 2016a). As shown in this paper, the notion of the educational equality through quality standards has been perceived in terms of pedagogical reproduction of sameness and averageness. As a politically imposed discourse and a product of ‘authoritarian modernization’ (Gel’man and Starodubtsev 2016), the institution of standardized testing in Russia still requires a substantial degree of state-led alignment vis-à-vis cultural norms and patterns of thought among the teacher community.

Support from the Basic Research Program of the National Research University Higher School of Economics is gratefully acknowledged. TZ-31 “Cultural barriers to modernizing Russian education among professional teacher and parental communities.”

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