



Higher education in Soviet and Russian welfare states: hybridization, continuity and change

Ekaterina Shibanova & Sergey Malinovskiy

To cite this article: Ekaterina Shibanova & Sergey Malinovskiy (2021) Higher education in Soviet and Russian welfare states: hybridization, continuity and change, European Journal of Higher Education, 11:3, 273-291, DOI: [10.1080/21568235.2021.1945475](https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2021.1945475)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2021.1945475>



Published online: 29 Jun 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 49



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)



Higher education in Soviet and Russian welfare states: hybridization, continuity and change

Ekaterina Shibanova  and Sergey Malinovskiy 

Institute of Education, HSE University, Moscow, Russia

ABSTRACT

This research explores the interrelations of higher education and welfare state models in the USSR of the 1960–1980s and Russia of the 2000–2020s. We first address the extent to which the provision of higher education aligns with the key imperatives of welfare redistribution: eligibility, state-market balance, and equality. Second, we schematize the values – instrumental, positional, intrinsic – of higher education that influenced well-being in the Soviet Union and Russia. We argue that the provision of higher education in these two state regimes complies with the political economy of two welfare models, suggesting a continuity across socialist and corporatist traditions. In the USSR, higher education was a part of a hybrid comprehensive-corporatist welfare model. Formally a universal right, it can be conceptualized as a state asset and a privilege attached to the class, entailing high intrinsic value. Higher education provision in Russia aligns with the conservative pattern while preserving traits of the socialist past and liberal transition. State commitment in the provision of public higher education and moderate marketization frame the hybrid nature of higher education as a social right and commodity with high instrumental and positional values.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 15 February 2021
Accepted 15 June 2021

KEYWORDS

Higher education; welfare state; post-Soviet transition; Russian higher education

Introduction

After World War II, advanced industrialized countries developed several varieties of social-welfare programmes (Wilensky 2002), accreting a conception of the welfare state as government-ensured minimum standards of well-being granted to every citizen as a matter of social right. The golden age of the welfare state broadened collective responsibility for individual well-being. Welfare states extend beyond legislative norms and institutions for social provision to ensure individual and collective well-being within a nation-state (Bloch et al. 2016). Welfare states might be understood as models for the production and redistribution of well-being in contemporary societies.

Education is historically an integral part of welfare states. However, the place of higher education in welfare states is under-investigated. Because of relatively modest enrollment rates and a tendency to associate higher education with science and elite professions,

CONTACT Sergey Malinovskiy  smalinovskiy@hse.ru  Institute of Education, HSE University, Moscow, 101000, Potapovskiy lane 16/10, Russia

higher education was long considered as a sector apart from the welfare state. This would change over time as higher education became universalized. It came to be understood as increasingly essential to producing individual and collective wellbeing, and an important tool for economic growth and social cohesion. Yet only recently have scholars begun to include higher education under the conceptual umbrella of welfare-state formation.

Scholarship on welfare states has been elaborated primarily through the study of Western democracies; to our knowledge, higher education in the Soviet Union has not yet been studied from the welfare perspective. Research on this issue in post-Soviet countries, including Russia, is scarce and hampered by the transitional nature of these states. To begin to fill this gap, we here explore the interrelations of higher education and welfare state models in the USSR of the 1960-1980s and Russia during 2000-2020s. Our analysis is focused on Soviet and Russian political economies and higher education systems in their institutionalized forms. In the interest of clarity and brevity, we do not here consider the turbulent periods of post-WW II recovery and the first decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The paper is organized as follows. We first build our analytic framework by conceptualizing the position of higher education within the larger apparatus of welfare states generally. We regard the extent of welfare coverage and the conditionality of access to welfare provision, state commitment and commodification in provision, equity of redistribution, as core features distinguishing different welfare models. Next, we sketch the welfare-state models of the USSR and Russia. The communist regime introduced a specific form of a party-led, comprehensive welfare regime that became a cornerstone of Soviet state-building. Within this regime, formally egalitarian and universal social rights paradoxically amplified the social hierarchy of a quasi-corporatist society. Hybridization of postsecondary forms, together with a conservative political turn, set the subsequent Russian model, where basic welfare is a social right guaranteed by the state, but social stratification remains because social provision beyond the basic level is highly conditional upon family resources. Third, we present case narratives on the place of higher education in the Soviet and Russian welfare states. We argue that higher education in the USSR and Russia aligns with the general principles of welfare redistribution and has a substantial influence on individual well-being. We conclude by problematizing continuity and change between the Soviet and Russian welfare models as they implicate higher education. Although Russian higher education reflects global institutional patterns, it retains many features of the Soviet era due to substantial continuity between the welfare models of the Soviet and post-Soviet epochs.

Higher education and the welfare state: conceptual perspectives and analytical framework

Regardless of whether education is considered to fall within or beyond the boundaries of the welfare state, empirical studies demonstrate a nexus between welfare regimes and skill structure (Allmendinger and Leibfried 2003), patterns of participation in education (Andres and Pechar 2013), educational opportunity, and public expenditure (West and Nikolai 2013), and educational inequality and social mobility (Blossfeld 2016). Scholars of welfare policy have begun to lend more attention to higher education due to its increasingly decisive role in the distribution of life chances. Willemse and de Beer

(2012) argue that institutional characteristics of higher education systems roughly comply with the welfare typology from the perspective of two concepts central to the welfare state: decommodification and stratification. Pechar and Andres (2011) found that higher education policies relating to participation, tracking and vocational specificity, funding, tuition, and financial aid correspond with the welfare models of a given nation-state. The distinction between welfare models lies at the junction of complementary domains: the labour market, social policy, and human-capital formation regimes. The latter, including the balance of higher education and vocational/technical education (VET), has become a central component distinguishing political-economic models of human capital formation (Iversen and Stephens 2008). All of this scholarship suggests that a welfare-state framework is a useful analytical tool for studying higher education.

Our focus here is, first, the extent to which the distribution of higher education is consonant with the imperatives of the welfare state model in the USSR and Russia; second, the place of higher education in the production of individual and collective well-being. For the first dimension, we rely on the framework developed in the germinal work of Esping-Andersen (1990), who identified schematic models of welfare regimes (liberal, social-democratic and conservative), which became the most common heuristic for comparative analysis of educational policies across nation-states. Drawing on this tradition, we highlight the features that are crucial in distinguishing between the welfare models and are relevant for higher education.

We consider the extent to which the design of higher education provision aligns with the key redistributive imperatives of welfare states: who is covered by provision and under what conditions (eligibility), who is in charge of welfare production (the extent of state versus market commitment), and how equal is access to welfare (equity of redistribution).

Eligibility underlies the very concept of decommodification, a concept central to Esping-Andersen's framework: 'if social rights are given the legal and practical status of property rights if they are inviolable, and if they are granted on the basis of citizenship rather than performance' (Esping-Andersen 1990, 21). Regarding higher education, eligibility can be defined by the extent of coverage and conditionality of access (Willemse and de Beer 2012). Educational attainment is one of the most commonly investigated characteristics differentiating welfare regimes (West and Nikolai 2013; Blossfeld 2016). Even if legally guaranteed for everyone, the acquisition of higher education requires an initial level of educational competence in addition to other rules and restrictions defined by states and/or education markets. Mass and less conditional coverage indicates a higher public commitment to higher education as a part of the welfare state package.

State-market balance is rooted in the political cultures of particular nation-states, revealing the preferences of major social groups and classes over the redistribution of social provision. State-market balance reflects the extent to which higher education is perceived as a tool for producing individual well-being versus shared public goods. Greater marketization is more consistent with a commodity conception; access under a commodity logic is conditional upon family resources, with the scope of provision defined by demand and supply. By contrast, greater state commitment is more consistent with the idea of higher education as a right. However, the latter does not exclude either market mechanisms of distribution or conditionality of access.

Equity of redistribution, meaning the capacity of a social provision to increase or mitigate social stratification, is also a central concept for distinguishing welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen 1990). Social and educational stratification are closely interdependent aspects of any political economy. All welfare states contribute to class structuring through education in different ways and to different extents: the relationship between social status and the level of education attained varies in strength across welfare state models (Beller and Hout 2006; Blossfeld 2016).

In light of the above, our task here is to conceptualize higher education as a social right or commodity in the welfare models of the USSR and contemporary Russia. The balance between these metaphors, which are hardly mutually exclusive, lies at the core of each regime's welfare model.

Second, we examine higher education outcomes in terms of the production of well-being. In contrast with welfare provisions known as *social transfers*, providing direct pecuniary value for their recipients, higher education provides indirect, *ex-ante* influence on wealth redistribution, producing multiple benefits with varying degrees of tangibility. We adapt McCowan's (2012) conceptualization of higher education and its values – instrumental, positional, intrinsic – to disentangle higher education's impact on individual and collective well-being. Higher education can produce *intrinsic* value for welfare when it confers knowledge and worldviews that contribute to life enjoyment and satisfaction. Higher education's instrumental value comes from labour-market economic returns to individuals that enable them to satisfy their material needs. Finally, higher education is a positional good, providing status and other social advantages to those who have relatively more of it than others do. Even in the absence of economic returns, higher education attainment lends status in social hierarchies and therefore is directly related to individuals' overall well-being.

Universal, publicly funded access complies with the social-right conception of higher education and makes its instrumental and positional values comparatively less pronounced. In the opposite case, the leading role of the market in distribution implies that higher education is a privately held commodity with consequently higher differentiation of economic returns, and a more competitive hierarchy of the distribution of jobs, life chances and social status. This distinction is consonant with the higher education policy patterns in the countries, representing the social-democratic (Nordic) and the liberal (Anglo-Saxon) ideal-typical welfare models, respectively (Iversen and Stephens 2008; Pechar and Andres 2011; Triventi 2014). In conservative welfare regimes (continental European) social rights are attached to class, access to public goods is largely determined by the state and mediated by social and professional status, with the essential role of education in maintaining social stratification (Beller and Hout 2006; Pechar and Andres 2011).

Although the post-Soviet states deviated from the ideal types, scholars expected that they would eventually align with them (Esping-Andersen 1996). Even while this never completely happened in Russia, the key imperatives of the ideal models were varyingly inherent in both the Soviet and Russian higher education, depending on the historical period.

Soviet and Russian welfare states

Certain imperatives have been consistent across the past century of Soviet/Russian history. The October Revolution launched a 70-year experiment of formal eradication

of private ownership and an official project of building a classless society. The Soviet state governed all social spheres according to the administrative-command principle of redistribution. Prices and quantity of assets used in production, including the structure of educational attainment, were subject to scrupulous planning. Labor, a fundamental right and obligation of the Soviet citizen made employment status the main condition for welfare entitlement (Rimlinger 1971). ‘Loitering’ and the accrual of unearned income were criminal offences. Redistribution of all goods was officially egalitarian; no individual was legally allowed to appropriate the surplus value of labour or otherwise accumulate capital. By the 1970s, the Soviet welfare model came to its *imago* form and exhibited its famous features of universal accessibility, comprehensiveness, and low standards of provision (Iarskaia-Smirnova and Romanov 2009). The entire working population could rely on the universal state system of free healthcare, education, social assistance and family allowances.

This comprehensive welfare state was simultaneously a key ideological weapon for social cohesion and the core of *de facto* social stratification. Quality of provision differed for those employed in industrial and rural sectors, privileged party elites, the military, and workers in certain industries favoured by the Soviet state. A sophisticated system of fringe benefits, based on political power and status, was even more important in stratifying the society than income. Central players in the Soviet regime were granted privileges such as access to special hospitals, drugs and food supplies. Differentials in benefits were pronounced both across social hierarchies and also within particular strata (Radaev 1991). The Soviet welfare system was nevertheless effective in mitigating economic differences through progressive taxation and mostly universal benefits, and thus economic inequality in the USSR was much lower than in the Western democracies (Novokmet, Piketty, and Zucman 2018). The Soviet redistributive system emphasized universalism and equality, but also sustained stratification in the distribution of benefits, a signal trait of corporatist-statist redistributive models.

After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the Russian political economy underwent unconstrained and all-encompassing liberalization followed by the introduction of basic market foundations, decentralization of welfare provision and the turbulent individualization of risks. Vladimir Putin’s third term in office (2012–2018) was marked by a conservative turn in all major spheres of social life and public policy: the revival of the Russian Orthodox Church; an official state discourse of stability, sovereignty and a new nationalism; socially conservative legislation; and a dominant-party regime based on a conservative, centrist party. Backed by the centralization of political authority, the state re-nationalized strategic industries, placed loyal elites and businesspersons at the commanding heights of the economy (Vasileva 2014) and established patrimonial state capitalism (e.g. Becker and Vasileva 2017).

A strong socialist legacy is still evident in the contemporary Russian political economy, as a high proportion of the population is covered by universally accessible (if poorly funded) public services including childcare, healthcare and all levels of education. Since the mid-2000s, revenues from high hydrocarbon prices have amplified a Russian welfare state that pursues populist strategies to sustain legitimacy amid low political competition (Cerami 2009). Mass welfare coverage is not only a Soviet legacy but also a key element of the social contract and political viability of the current state regime – a quite typical state of affairs for post-communist autocracies (Beloshitzkaya

2020). Most Russians remain in favour of an all-encompassing welfare state (van Oorschot and Gugushvili 2019) and consider the state responsible for maintaining social justice.

Keeping in mind the continued transition and hybridization of its welfare programs, Russia seems to have acquired features of a conservative political economy: etatisation, market coordination, rigid social stratification. Social mobility is stable (Yastrebov 2016), the level of redistribution is low and not alleviated much by the tax-benefit system except for a moderate impact produced by the pension program (Popova, Matytsin, and Sinnot 2018). Russia still tends to spend more public resources on social security than on education¹ – a clear priority of conservative welfare regimes (Hega and Hokenmaier 2002).

We argue that in both the USSR and Russia, the distribution of education aligns with the principles of welfare redistribution and substantially affects individual well-being.

Soviet higher education: right, privilege, state asset

The right for free public education on equal terms at all levels was constitutionally guaranteed throughout most of the Soviet period, except for 1940-1956, when Stalin introduced a system of fees for upper-secondary and post-secondary education. With that exception, postsecondary provision was completely statist and free, even while access to higher education was conditional and not universal.²

The access to higher education was conditioned by ideologically driven affirmative actions and by state planning of enrollment rates. At the very first stages of its existence, the Soviet government prioritized enrollment for those coming from working-class and rural/peasant origins. Entrance examinations were abolished and *rabfak* (preparatory faculties for workers) created. The next step was to introduce positive discrimination to ensure that those coming from privileged backgrounds had limited access to universities (Shpakovskaya 2009). The general policy of post-WWII ‘proletarianization’ continued attempts to prioritize enrollments from the working-class and rural areas. This included generous quotas for applicants with two or more years of work experience in production – reaching 80% in some institutions (Matthews 2012), and the introduction of evening and correspondence programs. These measures helped to increase the share of working-class and rural-origin students from 40% at Khrushchev’s to 60% at the beginning of the Brezhnev era (Gerber and Hout 1995).

Simultaneously this policy was aimed at restricting access to higher education for all except workers and peasants. Khrushchev’s reforms faced disapproval among members of the intelligentsia, who consistently sought for their children to enter higher education without work experience. Direct quotas for those with work experience were later abolished and the interests of the intelligentsia were restored (Shpakovskaya 2009). Policies encouraging ethnic diversity included quotas for non-Russians, with the notable exception of Jews, who continued to face systematic discrimination in access to higher education (Checinski 1973). Demand for higher education in the Soviet Union always exceeded the number of available places. Enrollees were allowed to take examinations only at one institution each year, and admission was highly competitive: by the 1970s, the average competition was 4–5 applicants per place (Shpakovskaya 2009).

The idea of higher education as a social right barely drove enrollment dynamics. Nor was the supply of higher education shaped by a goal of expanding participation. It was rather a matter of planning for the provision of skilled professionals to meet the official needs of industries for personnel – *cadres*. Enrollment rates indicate that planning for postsecondary enrollment was fixed at least during the last three decades of the USSR (see Figure 1). Postsecondary institutions were integral components of the planned economy. Most institutions were subordinated and governed by branch ministries of the Soviet state. The system could also be called ‘corporatist,’ as the state took jurisdiction over the selection, training, and employment of university-educated persons (Froumin, Kouzminov, and Semyonov 2014). The state controlled postsecondary provision through university funding and governance; a Party committee existed in each higher education institution and controlled promotion for administrative jobs (Matthews 2012). The state centrally determined the subjects for entrance examinations and the curriculum for each field of study (in addition to obligatory ideological and military training) with no student discretion over courses of study.

Enrollment rates and the cost of training in each institution and field of study were subject to a scrupulous planning system. Particular categories of universities served

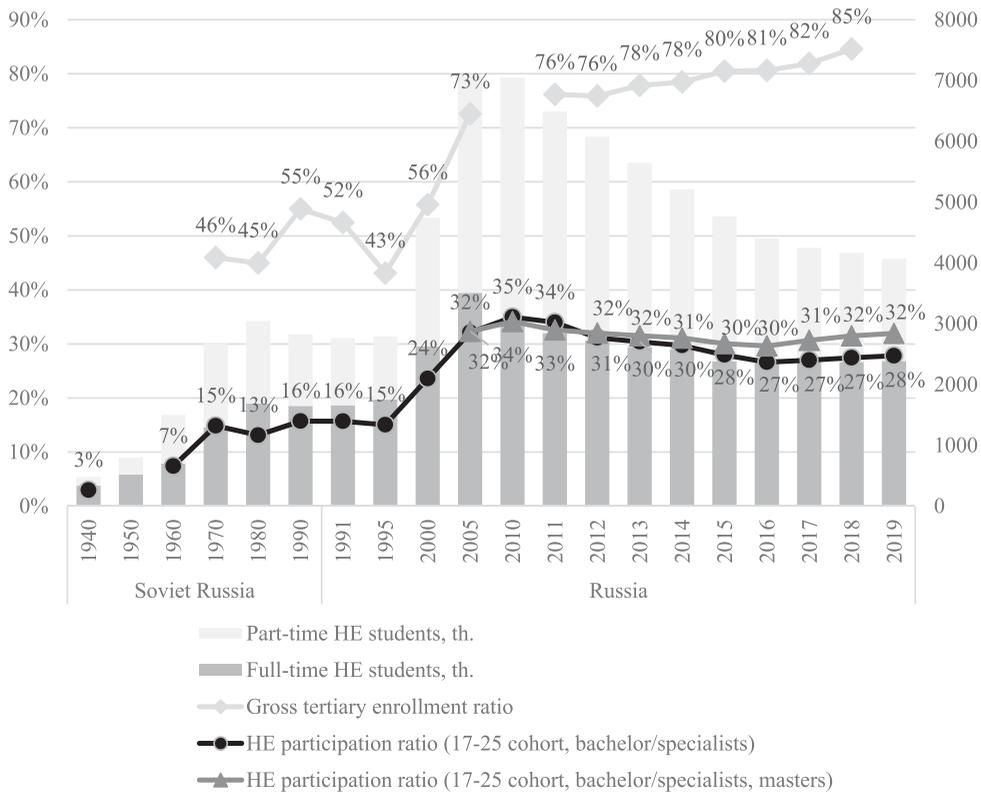


Figure 1. Higher education enrollment rate for 17–25 age cohort, tertiary education enrollment rates, and the number of students in USSR and Russia. Source: the authors. HE – higher education. Database Education Indicators (2020). <https://issek.hse.ru/mirror/pubs/share/352549981.pdf>. Data World Bank. <https://data.worldbank.org/>. Rosstat. <https://rosstat.gov.ru/>.

specialized purposes. For example, the leading industrial and technical institutions served as the research centres for particular industrial sectors, developed curriculum and training for those sectors, and filled official needs for human capital in specific regions (Platonova and Semyonov 2018). Rigid tracking and high selectivity in admissions were inextricably incorporated into the planned system of labour-force production, otherwise, the need for blue-collar workers would not be fulfilled. In this context, higher education was a machinery to provide cadres, a state asset within the overall system of production: to be produced by the state, but not bought or sold.

Such a stratified and narrowly specialized postsecondary regime contributed to differentials in access depending on social origin. At the beginning of the Khrushchev period (the mid-1950s), only one in twenty eighteen-year-olds had the opportunity of attaining a full-time postsecondary education, a pattern that continued through the 1970s (Zajda 1980). Access to better schooling, resources and *svyazi* (social bonds) conditioned greater access to higher education for children of more educated parents and *nomenklatura* (administrative elite; Gerber 2007). Moreover, children from more privileged families had access to the only possible direct monetary relationships in education: the shadow market of private tutoring, one of the guaranteed ways to ease enrollment in the best universities (Matthews 2012). Bribery was also common, particularly among those with higher incomes and the *nomenklatura* (Tromly 2013).

By the time students from peasant and working-class backgrounds reached more places in technical and pedagogical institutions, the intelligentsia had managed to regain some of their advantages by enrolling their children in programs of study in the humanities at the leading comprehensive universities (Shpakovskaya 2009). Although to our knowledge no systematic analysis was conducted on this issue, statistics indicate that workers and peasants from rural collectives were less likely to be enrolled in Moscow universities. Dobson (1977) showed that members of these groups were twice as likely to be enrolled at universities in the provinces. Moreover, children from less privileged families were dramatically underrepresented at Moscow State University, the most prestigious institution in the USSR, where fewer than one third were of worker or peasant origins in 1969-1970.

In sum, state commitment to higher education in the Soviet era can be defined simultaneously as a formal right and a state-managed asset, in practice disbursed through centralized authorities for the official purpose of optimizing the Soviet economy and strengthening the overall society. Higher education was more a privilege of social position due to conditionality in its distribution and comparatively low enrollments, rather than a right of citizenship.

How did higher education contribute to well-being in the USSR?

While higher education gained its utilitarian importance for the economy and society under strict state control, it was also subject to cultural shifts of *ottepel'* (thaw, circa 1955-1965), post-war recovery and optimism (Vail and Genis 2020). Higher education simultaneously served hidden stratification by providing access to non-manual labour for university graduates, sustained a socialist alternative model of welfare to the rest of the capitalist world, and produced a fleur of otherness until it disappeared in the Perestroika anxiety.

The intrinsic value of higher education in the Soviet Union was certainly high, defined through a commingling of diverse discourses. The first would be the official ideological

view of higher education and universities as sources of the new knowledge crucial for building a strong, industrialized communist state and rivalling the United States. This discourse was present throughout Soviet history and was especially relevant for engineers and other applied scientists in the immediate post-WWII period. The prestige of these fields was supported by state propaganda celebrating scientific achievements (see e.g. Josephson 1997). Optimistic and creative engineers were among the most popular literature and cinema characters – they were the new heroes of the promising epoch of the 1960s. Positions of scientists, and particularly physics, were sacral – they were the promised people of a bright future: honest, witty, and brave (Vail and Genis 2020). In this way, universities played very important ideological and diplomatic roles in the Soviet project in addition to utilitarian ones.

For everyday Soviet citizens, the instrumental value of higher education was not the key lure. The Soviet state went to great lengths to equalize returns to education in the labour market; employment was obligatory, graduates were centrally distributed to job positions. On average, wages of university graduates were lower than of those with degrees from vocational institutions due to high labour market coordination (Matthews 2012). Basic welfare services were equally accessible regardless of educational attainment. There is no good data to compare fringe benefits that accrued to different status groups in the Soviet era, but it is more likely that they were differentiated upon industry or *nomenklatura* status rather than educational attainment.

Student status itself ensured some additional government benefits: state-ensured scholarships and housing. Yet neither benefits were especially generous. Only 45% of students were placed in university dormitories in the 1970s, while the others could opt either for private accommodation or live with relatives (Matthews 2012). Scholarships provided a humble standard of living (at least during 1960-1970-s, *ibid*), and allowed students to study full-time without relying much on employment or family contributions.

Instead, the primary motivation for Soviet families to attain higher education was the reproduction or advancement of status and quality of life for their children. Most importantly, higher education paved the way to escaping lives of manual labour. Research and teaching in a university was a more prestigious occupation for the intelligentsia than administrative posts, even while the latter entailed higher privilege and power. Teaching was also seen as more prestigious than employment in the manufacturing sectors (Tromly 2013). Additionally, in many cases, university enrollment enabled delay or avoidance of military service.

A university degree could be a mechanism of intergenerational upward mobility. Going to university was one of the few opportunities to move from a small town or village to the more physically comfortable and culturally diverse big cities. At the same time, the positional meaning of higher education was intertwined with its cultural prestige in ways that put it in tension with official Soviet values of communal equality. Attaining higher education meant being special in several dimensions. As Tromly (2013) put it, in the post-WWII imagination, a person with university experience had *kul'turnost'* – civility and decency – and could reasonably be expected to exhibit exemplary citizen behaviour. Such people would be presumed to read and own sophisticated books and lead different lives. Children of educated parents continued to enter universities in higher proportions despite all state policies towards equalization of educational opportunities for the working class. They mocked the system of compulsory employment or

enrolled into part-time programs to be then transmitted into full-time programs. *Intelligentsia* was an end in itself, and as long as they could preserve their status, they did so.

In sum, Soviet higher education was institutionally organized in line with the governing principles of the other social spheres and carried the characteristics of both socialist and corporatist welfare state models. On the one hand, it was radically decommodified. All the educational provision was free, public and formally eligible upon citizenship. Wage and income differentials were compressed by central regulation, and professional skills barely had market instrumental value. Higher education played an important role in Soviet society as an ideological project at both the national and the global levels. Building socialism in a single country demanded the mass creation of a new Soviet person, imbued with the ideals of the emerging state order. The ideologization of provision and absence of market returns from higher education emphasized its particular intrinsic value.

On the other hand, higher education was an integral element of corporatist bureaucratic allocation of resources. A complex system comprising general and specialized educational institutions for every possible specialization was incorporated into the Soviet state apparatus. Trained people served as productive resources: enrollment rates in post-secondary education were subject to careful planning based on the expressed needs of specific industrial sectors, with centralized and mandatory job placement upon graduation.

The project of Soviet higher education exceeded utilitarianism and ideology: it served the general maintenance of the Soviet order, contributing to a peculiar form of stratification in a formally classless society. Constitutional right to free higher education was in reality attached to the class position: affirmative action policies were beneficial for workers, while cultural capital conditioned access for the *intelligentsia*.

Russian higher education: right and commodity

Scholarship on higher education transformation in post-Soviet countries is dominated by accounts of change emphasizing isomorphism with Western models and neoliberalism (see Huisman, Smolentseva, and Froumin 2018 for a detailed discussion). Yet the case of Russian higher education indicates a more complex reality. As in the USSR, the Russian Constitution *de jure* guarantees the right to free enrollment in public higher education, contingent upon demonstrated fitness for admission as assessed by formal examination. From this angle, higher education in Russia corresponds to the universalist logic of a right of citizenship. In practice, the scale and conditionality of postsecondary provision in Russia suggest the simultaneity of conditioning by global-isomorphic and state-specific context.

In the early years of post-Soviet Russia, mandatory job placement for graduates was abolished, and a private and fee-based higher education quickly emerged to meet fresh demand for university credentials that might provide advantages in labour markets. Families' demand for higher education, especially degrees in economics, business, and related fields, grew quickly, driving rapid growth in the market of part-time and low-quality providers. This new market shifted the balance of public and private in the system and placed a greater burden on those seeking to acquire higher education credentials. They become paying customers. Remarkably, this rapid commodification of higher

education doubled the overall participation rate during the first decade of the post-Soviet transition (see [Figure 1](#)). Paradoxically, partial state withdrawal expanded postsecondary provision and eased access to higher education for the working class (Konstantinovskiy 2018).

Since the 2010s, the Russian state has strengthened in general and has recommitted to higher education in part to counteract commodification and take control over the market, in part to ensure minimum quality standards and enlarge public externalities produced by higher education institutions. Still strongly relying on policy borrowing of Western imperatives, the new statist trend comprised active steering of the system, building heavy-handed coordination, enhanced material supporting selected universities, consolidation of enrollment in big public providers and suppressing diploma mills (Malinovskiy and Shibanova 2019). State commitment to provide mass and free higher education, being a part of the post-Soviet political pact, fits paternalistic popular aspirations: according to surveys, households prefer publicly funded higher education of a standard quality over even minor investment in better quality.³

However, higher education in Russia can hardly be called decommodified. More than half of students pay tuition fees, and more than half of the system funding comes from private sources. Renewed state intervention in the sector ended the market-driven expansion of the immediate post-Soviet period, primarily due to the government closure of many private institutions. During 2012–2018 about 1000 higher education institutions (mostly branches, private and part-time programmes providers) were eliminated through the revocation of operating licenses, reorganizations and mergers (Malinovskiy and Shibanova 2019). The sector is a dual-track model: one track is for fully state-funded students with stronger academic records; the other is for fee-paying students with weaker academic records often attending the same institutions (Smolentseva 2020). Redistribution of public places in higher education is a quasi-market, where competition is organized through a performance-based scheme, with the state being the principal rule-setting authority, the primary buyer and provider of services.

State-led consolidation of enrollment in public universities, including tuition-paying students, was marked by a gradual decrease in both enrollment rates (see [Figure 1](#)) and public funding (0.5% of GDP dedicated to higher education in 2019).⁴ These figures reflect the move to a conservative pattern of the lower overall degree of state commitment to higher education provision (West and Nikolai 2013) rather than an intention to universalize it as a social right. A parallel increase in VET enrolment features a conservative relative emphasis on specific skills as well (Iversen and Stephens 2008).

Admission procedures formally favour universal eligibility by means of a uniform state examination, introduced in 2009. However, the conditionality of provision emanates from state expectations over public externalities of higher education. For instance, a significant percentage of students (fixed in the legislation) are enrolled within quotas: those from social groups of particular state patronage (e.g. disabled persons, orphans, war veterans, military personnel, state servants) and those involved in targeted (incentivized) recruitment in the state interest.

Although the Soviet planning of cadres was abolished under the subsequent state regime, in the contemporary period publicly funded enrollment allocation is centrally coordinated among the key actors: federal and regional authorities, big state enterprises and rectors of leading universities. State coordination is aimed at aligning the structure of

skills produced with the official needs of federal and regional economies. Russian universities are highly integrated into the national-goal setting through regular performance monitoring and national strategic programmes. Etatisation manifests in universities' constrained autonomy, and direct subordination of almost all institutions to the Ministry of Higher Education and Science or sectoral authorities – another legacy of Soviet times. In these ways, publicly funded places are burdened by multiple public externalities, and the same is partially true for fee-funded places, concentrated in the same programs.

The introduction of market mechanisms in the immediate post-Soviet era was accompanied by growing social stratification based on postsecondary attainment. Postsecondary access and quality differentiation came to be more associated with family background. The cost of higher education to those who obtain it has been constantly rising and now comprises ~38% of an average household income,⁵ making family resources crucial to attaining a fee-based place. Additionally, access to publicly funded places has become more stratified by wealth over time (see Figure 2).

The structure of the educational system contributes to maintaining social stratification. In Russia, the general upper secondary track favours access to universities, especially prestigious ones, and increasingly serves children of wealthier and more educated families (Khavenson and Chirkina 2018). Vocational tracks serve students with less privileged backgrounds and often lead to immediate entry into the labour market. For some, this is a bypass strategy to avoid unified state exams and proceed to higher education institutions of lower quality (Yastrebov 2016). Lower vocational tracks tend to serve the students from the least-privileged backgrounds (Dudyrev, Romanova, and Travkin 2019).

Both active state intervention and marketization forged stratification of the Russian postsecondary landscape. Recent government policy aimed at stratifying the entire sector into functional types: world-class research-intensive, regional flagship, specialized technical and sector-oriented, and mass-absorbing institutions. Consolidation of resources and enrollment made the gap between the leading and the mass-absorbing sectors very prominent. For instance, 53 leading universities (out of ~ 900 public institutions) accumulate ~39.7% of the total public funding and ~20.9% of students in the public sector.⁶ Unsurprisingly, family background conditions access not only to higher education but also higher quality. Segregation by parental background and institutional selectivity have increased over time (Figure 3).

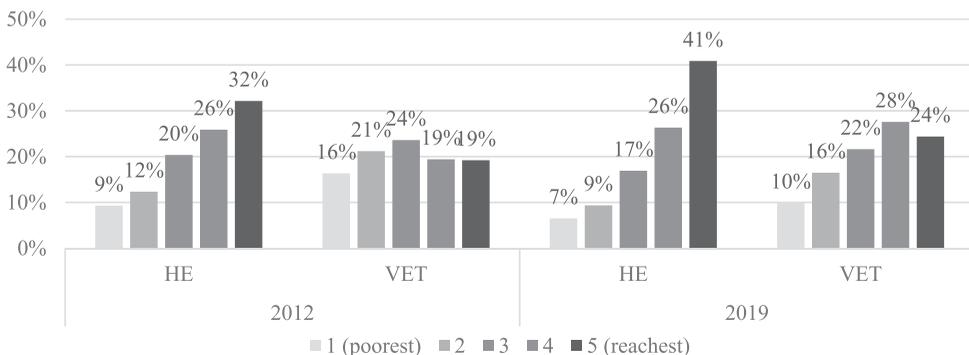


Figure 2. Participation in higher and vocational education by quintile of parental wealth, 2012 and 2017. Source: the authors. HE – higher education. Rosstat. <https://rosstat.gov.ru/>.

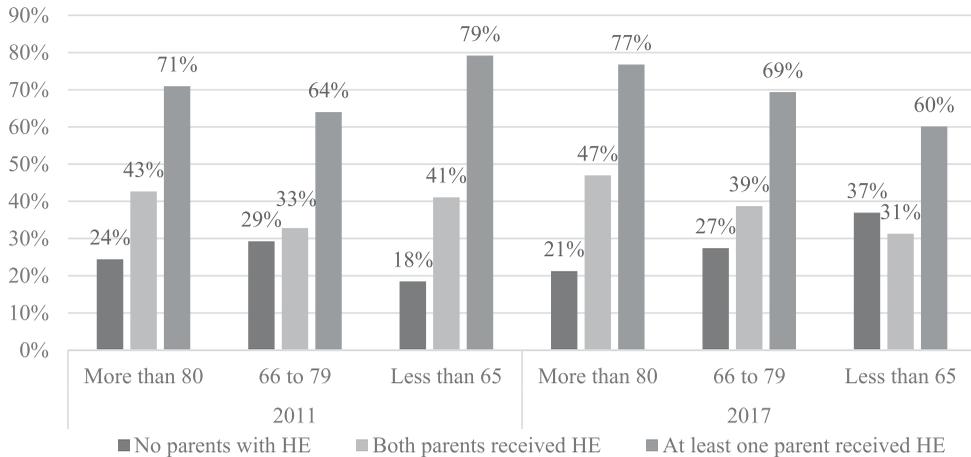


Figure 3. Participation in higher education by parents' education and higher education institutions' selectivity (in terms of average unified state examination scores). Source: the authors. Higher education institutions are grouped according to the average unified state examinations scores of enrollees: more than 80, ranged from 66 to 79, and less than 65. HE – higher education. HSE Monitoring of education markets and organizations, MeMo, 2011, 2017. <https://memo.hse.ru/>

As in the other domains of social provision, higher education coverage remains mass even in the light of a gradual decrease, but eligibility is far from being universal or unconditional. On the one hand, eligibility is conditioned by state needs and, on the other – by family resources that are crucial for buying quality beyond the basic level. Higher education is a right for particular societal groups and a commodity for others. Russia's most privileged families increasingly have access to both.

How does higher education contribute to well-being in contemporary Russia?

Despite all structural transformations, higher education is commonly desired in Russia. However, the values that higher education produces for individual and collective well-being changed substantially since the Soviet period.

In contrast to the USSR, today higher education attainment not only contributes to an increase in social and professional status but also produces instrumental value due to the emergence of the job market premium and economic returns. Significant wage premium varies depending on fields of study and prestige of universities (Roshchin and Rudakov 2016), constituting up to 40% compared to upper-secondary school graduates, and maintains high demand for higher education. In addition, higher education degrees pave the way to better social provision and halve the risk of unemployment compared to average workers (Gimpelson 2019).

As in countries of conservative welfare regimes, wage disparities for different levels of education are high and contribute to the general social structuring. The division between vocational and academic tracks is crucial for social stratification in Russia: a higher education degree is essential for getting any kind of white-collar and prestigious job in public discourse (Khavenson and Chirkina 2018). Social benefits attached to professional occupations, prominently structured into low-skilled and high-skilled workers, further enhance stratification.

Nevertheless, higher education preserved some intrinsic value, entrenched in popular aspirations. After the post-Soviet transformation, higher education became a norm for all

social groups (Konstantinovskiy 2018) despite the popular discourse on ‘higher education degrees overproduction’ (Bessudnov, Kurakin, and Malik 2017) and growing enrolment in vocational institutions. Approximately two-thirds of the population believe stably over the last two decades that higher education is essential for succeeding in life (FOM 2020).

The values of higher education reharmonized along with the shift in the political economy model. The market fostered social stratification and tolerance to social inequality and differentials in welfare provision. Higher education in Russia is a vital prerequisite for social status rather than a way to preserve the inner circle or promote *kulturnost*: its instrumental value is reinforced by its positional capacity to secure families’ social position.

The intrinsic value arguably became much more obscure than in Soviet times. It can be further speculated that the Soviet idealistic beliefs about higher education were diluted in pragmatic rationales. The percentage of those believing that higher education is needed to acquire knowledge or because it is a ‘common thing’ is equal to the percentage of the population rationalizing higher education attainment through better job placement (FOM 2020).

The imperatives of the liberal, comprehensive socialist and conservative models are noticeable in the institutional organization of higher education in Russia.

The newly born market economy provided university degrees with high instrumental and positional values and made them a central commodity for well-being. At the same time, mass higher education became a part of the post-Soviet social contract, reinforcing the state’s mandate to ensure social rights in all domains of public policy. Marketization is expressed in a specific dual-track model and is neither extreme as in the liberal democracies nor absent as in the social-democratic countries. The state-driven concentration of public funds in universities, growing vocational specificity, emerging elitism of higher education, align with the stylized facts of conservative models (Iversen and Stephens 2008). Higher education is now deeply implicated in social stratification. Decrease in mass-absorbing private sector and concentration of marketization in public universities let the better-off families maintain their status either through free access or through the purchase of education of higher quality.

Conclusion

Higher education is an important component of Soviet and Russian welfare regimes, and the character of those regimes has shaped the postsecondary provision in both epochs.

The Soviet state exerted almost complete control of resource allocation for individual and collective well-being. Soviet welfare provision was statist-paternalist, comprehensive, and redistributive. By virtue of its role in an elaborate system of benefits for political elites and privileged industries, the Soviet welfare state was also corporatist and status-reinforcing. Contemporary Russia is a parastatal economy, paternalistic and autocratic regime preserving features of the Soviet welfare model that contribute to its legitimacy. The contemporary Russian welfare model preserved marketization of the transition period, then took a definitive statist path with a tendency toward only modest redistribution. Both Soviet and Russian welfare regimes are hybrids of the ideal-typical models. The Soviet regime was mostly socialist but had corporatist traits. The Russian regime acquires the features of the conservative model but maintains traits of both the socialist past and market features that emerged during the post-Soviet turbulent transition.

Under the Soviet regime, higher education was completely state-governed and fully integrated into the machinery of a centrally planned political economy. It also was a part of ideological training and state-building. Planned enrollment rates were part of a coordinated effort to manufacture labour force and social cohesion among classes.

The post-Soviet transformation of the Russian higher education system cannot be fully explained either by notions of path dependence or convergence with global patterns. Rather, the evolution of higher education was consonant with more general models of welfare-state building and came through stages of unconstrained liberalization and state noninvolvement, state-led modernization in the global fashion, and full-fledged state reassertion. The hybridization of imperatives aligned Russian higher education with the features of conservative pattern with moderate decommodification, strong etatism and embeddedness into social stratification.

In the Soviet era, higher education was defined as a social right, constitutionally guaranteed by the state, and free to citizens. Nevertheless, higher education attainment was highly conditional and not universal, as access to postsecondary education was mediated by the centrally planned system and the contingencies of political influence and privilege. The post-Soviet higher education order is shaped in part by these earlier commitments to public provision and centralized control, and in part by a market logic that enables economically privileged families to access higher education to their advantage.

Social status conditions attainment under both regimes – whether in relation to social class (officially, privileges belonged to the working class, but intelligentsia was still more advantageous in gaining access to higher education) in the Soviet era or to economic power in the contemporary regime.

In the USSR, the state disposed of the citizens' right and determined the need for cadres. Statist regulation of the labour force production, employment, remuneration, and benefits guaranteed that higher education would majorly lead to non-monetary, intangible gains.

The internal value of higher education was extremely high in the USSR. Under sometimes paradoxically interrelated discourses of the communist cultural and enlightenment ideals, arms and industrialization race, higher education generated the sacred images of the new-era heroes – scientists, and the sense of being special. It also generated positioning value – at times undetectable, but undoubtedly present in the friend-or-foe sense; it allowed avoiding manual labour, provided options for non-official income (from tutoring or other private practice). In contemporary Russian economy, positional and instrumental values of higher education are high, as it directly affects income and employment benefits, guarantees access to senior positions, preserves and enhances social stratification. In the sense of intrinsic value, higher education is a common thing to do, a need for a 'normal' person and is hardly associated with heroic and romantic imageries that higher education produced in the Soviet era.

Notes

1. Based on Rosstat data (accessed August 5, 2020), (<https://rosstat.gov.ru/>) and OECD (2019), Pensions at a Glance 2019: *OECD and G20 Indicators*. Paris: OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/b6d3dcfc-en>.

2. However, according to World Bank data, only the US could surpass the USSR in tertiary enrollment ratios during the 1970-s – 1980-s. URL: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR> (accessed January 15, 2021)
3. Authors' calculations based on HSE University. 2020. "Data from: Evaluation of social tension risks and measures proposed to increase social sustainability" (dataset). Accessed September 10, 2020. Available upon request.
4. 0.8% in 2010, authors' calculations based on Rosstat Database (accessed August 5, 2020), <https://rosstat.gov.ru/> and Roskazna (accessed August 5, 2020). <https://roskazna.gov.ru/>
5. Authors' calculations based on Rosstat Database (accessed August 1, 2020). <https://rosstat.gov.ru/>
6. A leading higher education institution is a special legislative status (Ministry of Higher education and Science decree №1272), guaranteeing advanced funding and increased autonomy in teaching standards. Authors' calculations based on data on 896 (53 of which are the leading institutions) public institutions from the Monitoring of higher education institutions' performance Database, 2020 (accessed June 1, 2021). <http://indicators.miccedu.ru/monitoring/?m=vpo>

Acknowledgements

We sincerely thank Mikael Börjesson, Tobias Dalberg, Manja Klemenčič, and especially Mitchell Stevens for their comments on the earlier versions of the article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The reported study was funded by Russian Foundation for Basic Research, project number 20-313-90058.

Notes on contributors

Ekaterina Shibanova is a Researcher at the Institute of Education, Higher School of Economics, Moscow. Her main research interests lie in the sociology and political economy of education, with a focus on the governance of higher education systems.

Sergey Malinovsky is a Researcher and the Deputy Director at the Institute of Education, Higher School of Economics, Moscow. His main research areas are the political economy of higher education, educational pathways and access to educational opportunities.

ORCID

Ekaterina Shibanova  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4662-8410>

Sergey Malinovsky  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9885-4391>

References

- Allmendinger, J., and S. Leibfried. 2003. "Education and the Welfare State: the Four Worlds of Competence Production." *Journal of European Social Policy* 13 (1): 63–81.

- Andres, L., and H. Pechar. 2013. "Participation Patterns in Higher Education: A Comparative Welfare and Production Régime Perspective." *European Journal of Education* 48 (2): 247–261.
- Becker, U., and A. Vasileva. 2017. "Russia's Political Economy Re-Conceptualized: A Changing Hybrid of Liberalism, Statism and Patrimonialism." *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 8 (1): 83–96.
- Beller, E., and M. Hout. 2006. "Welfare States and Social Mobility: How Educational and Social Policy may Affect Cross-National Differences in the Association Between Occupational Origins and Destinations." *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 24 (4): 353–365.
- Beloshitzkaya, V. 2020. "Democracy and Redistribution: The Role of Regime Revisited." *East European Politics and Societies* 34 (03): 571–590.
- Bessudnov, A., D. Kurakin, and V. Malik. 2017. "Как возник и что скрывает миф о всеобщем высшем образовании. [The Myth About Universal Higher Education: Russia in the International Context]." *Вопросы образования [Educational Studies Moscow]* 3: 83–109. doi:10.17323/1814-9545-2017-3-83-109.
- Bloch, M., T. S. Popkewitz, K. Holmlund, and I. Moqvist, eds. 2016. *Governing Children, Families and Education: Restructuring the Welfare State*. New York: Springer.
- Blossfeld, P. N. 2016. "Inequality of Educational Opportunity and Welfare Regimes." *World Studies in Education* 17 (2): 53–85.
- Cerami, A. 2009. "Welfare State Developments in the Russian Federation: Oil-led Social Policy and 'The Russian Miracle'." *Social Policy & Administration* 43 (2): 105–120.
- Checinski, M. 1973. "Soviet Jews and Higher Education." *East European Jewish Affairs* 3 (2): 3–16.
- Dobson, R. B. 1977. "Mobility and Stratification in the Soviet Union." *Annual Review of Sociology* 3 (1): 297–329.
- Dudyrev, F., O. Romanova, and P. Travkin. 2019. "Employment of Vocational Graduates: Still a Slough or Already a Ford?" *Educational Studies Moscow* 1: 109–136.
- Esping-Andersen, G. 1990. *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Esping-Andersen, G. 1996. *Welfare States in Transition: National Adaptations in Global Economies*. London: Sage.
- FOM. 2020. The Public Opinion Foundation Database (Weekly All-Russian telephone surveys; accessed September 1, 2020). <https://fom.ru/Nauka-i-obrazovanie/14436>.
- Froumin, I., Y. Kouzminov, and D. Semyonov. 2014. "Institutional Diversity in Russian Higher Education: Revolutions and Evolution." *European Journal of Higher Education* 4 (3): 209–234.
- Gerber, T. P. 2007. "Russia: Stratification in Postsecondary Education Since the Second World War." In *Stratification in Higher Education: A Comparative Study*, edited by Y. Shavit, R. Arum, and A. Gamoran, 294–321. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Gerber, T. P., and M. Hout. 1995. "Educational Stratification in Russia During the Soviet Period." *American Journal of Sociology* 101 (3): 611–660.
- Gimpelson, V. 2019. "The Labor Market in Russia, 2000–2017." *IZA World of Labor* 466: 1–13. URL: <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/206605/1/iza-wol-466.pdf>.
- Hega, G. M., and K. G. Hokenmaier. 2002. "The Welfare State and Education: a Comparison of Social and Educational Policy in Advanced Industrial Societies." *German Policy Studies* 2 (1): 143–173.
- Huisman, J., A. Smolentseva, and I. Froumin. 2018. *25 Years of Transformations of Higher Education Systems in Post-Soviet Countries: Reform and Continuity*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Iarskaia-Smirnova, E., and P. Romanov. 2009. "Multiplicity and Discontinuity in the Soviet Welfare History (1940–1980)." In *Social Care Under State Socialism (1945–1989)*, edited by S. Hering, 213–225. Opladen and Farmington Hills: Verlag Barbara Budrich.
- Iversen, T., and J. D. Stephens. 2008. "Partisan Politics, the Welfare State, and Three Worlds of Human Capital Formation." *Comparative Political Studies* 41 (4–5): 600–637.
- Josephson, P. R. 1997. *New Atlantis Revisited: Akademgorodok, the Siberian City of Science*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Khavenson, T. E., and T. A. Chirkina. 2018. "Образовательные переходы в России: социально-экономическое положение семьи и успеваемость [Educational Trajectories in Russia: Socio-

- Economic Status and Educational Outcomes].” In *Факты образования [Facts on Education]*, Vol. 5 (20), edited by V. Bolotov and I. Froumin, 1–25. Moscow: Higher School of Economics.
- Konstantinovskiy, D. L. 2018. “Измерение неравенства в образовании. [Measurment of Inequality in Education.]” In *Россия реформирующаяся. [Russia Reforming.]*, edited by M. K. Gorshkov, 171–191. Moscow: Новый Хронограф [New Chronograph].
- Malinovskiy, S., and E. Shibanova. 2019. Higher Education in Russia: Highly Available, Less Accessible. International Briefs for Higher Education Leaders Issue 8. Washington: Center for Internationalization and Global Engagement (CIGE). URL: <https://publications.hse.ru/view/292651251>.
- Matthews, M. 2012. *Education in the Soviet Union: Policies and Institutions Since Stalin*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- McCowan, T. 2012. “Is There a Universal Right to Higher Education?” *British Journal of Educational Studies* 60 (2): 111–128.
- Novokmet, F., T. Piketty, and G. Zucman. 2018. “From Soviets to Oligarchs: Inequality and Property in Russia 1905–2016.” *The Journal of Economic Inequality* 16 (2): 189–223.
- Pechar, H., and L. Andres. 2011. “Higher-education Policies and Welfare Regimes: International Comparative Perspectives.” *Higher Education Policy* 24 (1): 25–52.
- Platonova, D., and D. Semyonov. 2018. “Russia: The Institutional Landscape of Russian Higher Education.” In *25 Years of Transformations of Higher Education Systems in Post-Soviet Countries*, edited by J. Huisman, I. Froumin, and A. Smolentseva, 337–362. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Popova, D., M. Matytsin, and E. Sinnot. 2018. “Distributional Impact of Taxes and Social Transfers in Russia Over the Downturn.” *Journal of European Social Policy* 28 (5): 535–548.
- Radaev, V. V. 1991. “Властная стратификация в системе советского типа [Power Stratification in a Society of the Soviet Type].” *Рубеж - альманах социальных исследований [Frontier – the Journal of Social Studies]* 1: 117–147.
- Rimlinger, G. V. 1971. *Welfare Policy and Industrialization in Europe, America, and Russia*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Roshchin, S., and V. Rudakov. 2016. “Влияние «качества» вуза на заработную плату выпускников. [The Effect of University Quality on Graduates’ Wages].” *Voprosy Ekonomiki* 8: 74–95.
- Shpakovskaya, L. I. 2009. “Советская образовательная политика: социальная инженерия и классовая борьба [Soviet Educational Policy: Social Engineering and Class Struggle].” *Журнал исследований социальной политики [Social Policy Journal]* 7 (1): 39–36.
- Smolentseva, A. 2020. “Marketisation of Higher Education and Dual-Track Tuition fee System in Post-Soviet Countries.” *International Journal of Educational Development* 78: 102265. doi:10.1016/j.ijedudev.2020.102265.
- Triventi, M. 2014. “Higher Education Regimes: an Empirical Classification of Higher Education Systems and its Relationship with Student Accessibility.” *Quality & Quantity* 48 (3): 1685–1703.
- Tromly, B. 2013. *Making the Soviet Intelligentsia: Universities and Intellectual Life Under Stalin and Khrushchev*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Vail, P., and A. Genis. 2020. 60-е. “Мир советского человека. [60-s. The World of a Soviet Person.]”. Moscow: Новое литературное обозрение [New literature review].
- van Oorschot, W., and D. Gugushvili. 2019. “Retrenched, but Still Desired? Perceptions Regarding the Social Legitimacy of the Welfare State in Russia Compared with EU Countries.” *Europe-Asia Studies* 71 (3): 345–364.
- Vasileva, A. 2014. “Continuity and Change in Russian Capitalism.” In *The BRICs and Emerging Economies in Comparative Perspective: Political Economy, Liberalisation and Institutional Change*, edited by U. Becker, 100–122. Abingdon: Routledge.
- West, A., and R. Nikolai. 2013. “Welfare Regimes and Education Regimes: Equality of Opportunity and Expenditure in the EU (and US).” *Journal of Social Policy* 42 (3): 469–493.
- Wilensky, H. L. 2002. *Rich Democracies: Political Economy, Public Policy, and Performance*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Willemse, N., and P. de Beer. 2012. "Three Worlds of Educational Welfare States? A Comparative Study of Higher Education Systems Across Welfare States." *Journal of European Social Policy* 22 (2): 105–117.
- Yastrebov, G. 2016. "Intergenerational Social Mobility in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia." *Higher School of Economics Research Paper* No. WP BRP 69.
- Zajda, J. 1980. "Education and Social Stratification in the Soviet Union." *Comparative Education* 16 (1): 3–11.