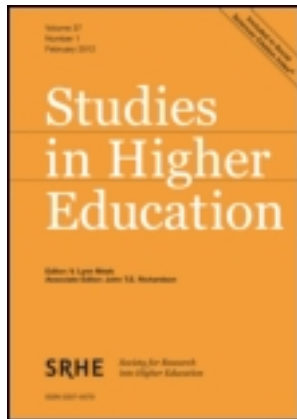


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Back in the USSR: path dependence effects in student representation in Russia

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This paper analyses the current state of student representation in Russia as deeply rooted in the institutional structure of the Soviet higher education system. The study traces the origins of existing institutional arrangements for student representation at the level of university governance and analyses how representation practices have been transformed in post-Soviet Russia. It combines a historical review with a qualitative analysis of the current state of the professional student union (*profsoyuz studentov*), which is one of the most widespread organisational forms of student representation in Russia. The data were collected through a series of 30 in-depth interviews with student activists and university administrators from four state universities in Tomsk, in addition to an analysis of documents regulating student representation.

Keywords: student representation; university governance; organisational change; path dependence; Russia

Introduction

In the last two decades, Russia has experienced tremendous growth in the number of both higher education institutions and students at those institutions. With more than 6000 enrolled students per 100,000 population, the reach of Russia's higher education system is second only to that of the United States (Carnoy, Loyalka, Dobryakova, Dossani, Froumin, Kuhns, Tilak, and Wang 2013). Massification presents a number of challenges for every domain of the higher education system, and student representation is no exception.

On the one hand, recent studies have shown that growing enrolment in Russian higher education has resulted in a more diverse and less motivated student body, decreased student engagement, and a lack of student participation in university governance (Popov 2009; Titaev 2012; Froumin and Dobryakova 2012). Students as a social group have begun to lose their identity; the media often describe them as an 'amorphous mass' incapable of consistent collective action or self-representation. On the other hand, massification has spurred several important institutional transformations in Russia's higher education system, and has become one reason to introduce a new public management approach to university governance. Among other things, the new public management approach implies the involvement of external stakeholders in the policymaking process.

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As a result, Russian students, like students in some other countries, are considered to be an important source for both expertise and legitimisation of governance decisions (Klemenčič 2012). The Russian Federation's new 'Law on Education', which was adopted in 2013, requires all institutions of higher education to include students in the decision-making process by establishing either student councils or professional student unions:

In order to take into account the views of students ... regarding the governance of educational institutions and the introduction of local regulations that can affect students' rights and interests, on the initiative of students ... student councils are created ... and (or) professional student unions operate. (Chapter 6, Article 26)

The law in fact obligates universities to obtain student approval for all regulations and policies that affect students' rights or interests (for example, scholarships, student housing, and educational policies). The government believes that this legislative innovation has created an opportunity for student representation to blossom in Russia, at least at the level of higher education institutions.

Nonetheless, it is not quite clear how the new system will be introduced, especially in light of persistent problems with path dependence in the agency and structure of student representation. The concept of path dependence – defined by Douglass C. North (2005 21) as 'the way by which institutions and beliefs derived in the past influence present choices' – could be useful in grasping the possibilities and limitations facing the further development of student representation under these new institutional conditions. According to North, any organisation accumulates certain institutional rules and beliefs, which it is interested in conserving if those institutions and beliefs are necessary for the organisation's survival (North 2005, 51–52). Thus, it is important to trace the historical development of Russia's student representation system to understand its organisational characteristics and possible future paths.

Our research is focused on analysing the current state of student representation in Russia as deeply rooted in the institutional structure of the Soviet higher education system. What are the origins of the existing institutional arrangements for student representation in university governance? How were student representation practices transformed during higher education's massification phase in the post-Soviet period? What expectations for the further development of student representation are reasonable given both the recent legislative changes and path dependence effects? We examine these questions by studying the development of one the most enduring and widespread forms of student representation in Russian higher education: the professional student union (*profsoyuz studentov*) at the level of higher education institutions. The new Law on Education also mentions another legitimate form for student representation – namely, the student council (a collective body, elected by students to represent their interests at the departmental and institutional levels) – but we do not analyse it in our study for several reasons. First, student councils, which appeared in the 1990s, are much less influential and widespread in Russian higher education than the professional student unions. There are many universities where student councils are not established or in fact do not operate. Second, these councils partly duplicate the activities of professional student unions, so their unique impact on student representation in Russia is minimal so far.

The main argument developed throughout this paper is that the structure and the agency of professional student unions have their origins in the Soviet centralised

model of student representation. Even the term ‘professional’ itself refers not to the status of the unions or their members, but denotes the resemblance with professional (labour) unions, which were a widespread form of collective representation in the Soviet industrial sectors. Despite tremendous changes in Russian higher education in the 1990s, professional student unions still dominate student representation at the institutional level, and thus shape student life in the university. Path dependence effects make it difficult for students to represent their interests, even in new institutional conditions.

This paper is structured as follows. First, we provide a historical overview of the Soviet model of student representation, investigating both the functions and the organisational characteristics of that model. Second, we describe the results of an empirical study that explored professional student unions and their role in student representation. The data were collected through a series of 30 in-depth interviews with student activists and university administrators from four state universities in Tomsk, along with a study of documents regulating student representation. Finally, we discuss possible options for further developing student representation in the Russian higher education system.

Student representation in Russia: a retrospective overview

Despite the fact that Russia established its first higher education institution in the eighteenth century, there is no longstanding tradition of student participation in university governance. Students’ earliest attempts at collective organisation began in the 1830s (usually as informal clubs, or *kruzhok*), but they encountered resistance from both the government and the university police (Milyukov 1994). The latter wanted to establish total control over student behaviour and suppress any tendencies to corporatise. Students were forbidden from taking any collective actions, including gathering outside classes, submitting collective petitions and complaints, holding collective negotiations with university administrators, establishing mutual benefit societies, establishing libraries, or organising concerts and theatrical shows (Ivanov 2004).

The 1884 charter of imperial universities stated that ‘students are considered as standalone visitors to the university and thus, any actions that can be regarded as corporate are forbidden’ (Charter of Imperial Universities 1885, Section 13). At the same time, the manner in which university administrators followed these rules varied by institution. At the University of Moscow and the University of Saint Petersburg the regulations were humanised, whereas at the University of Kazan they were stiffened (Eimontova 1993, 236). Moreover, many students participated in informal and secret clubs, societies and fraternities. Often these student groups were units of broader political movements, and on some occasions they helped students who had been imprisoned by the government.

Continuous repression provoked student riots and a series of national student strikes in 1899. As more and more students became involved in the revolutionary movement, the increasing pressure had potentially dangerous consequences for the government. Thus, in 1901 the Ministry of Education introduced several legislative changes aimed at legalising student organisations and gatherings, and laying the foundation for student representation through senior students (*starosta*) to be elected by the students themselves. These changes seemed to be a concession to student demands; however, the true intention was to bring secret student organisations and other forms of collective activity under the control of university administrations (Ivanov 2004, 30).

Bureaucratic procedures came to tightly regulate all types of corporate actions. For example, all student gatherings and meetings could take place only with the

participation of university staff or professors. Student organisations could be created only with the agreement of the university administration, and were then audited twice a year by a university commission. The senior students' main function was not to represent student interests, but rather to execute administrative orders and monitor classes for outsiders (Ivanov 2004, 34).

Needless to say, students had no enthusiasm for these changes; they preferred not to collaborate with university administration, and did not want to 'step out of the shade'. Thus, political movements and parties of all sorts became an even larger influence in the student community, coming to monopolise public discourse at universities (Tolstoy 1997, 92). Strikes organised by political activists occasionally shut down universities, and political parties began using university lecture halls for their meetings. Up until the Russian Revolution and the fall of the Russian Empire's monarchy in 1917, student representation was characterised by both involvement in wider political debate (including higher education issues) and the absence of legal channels for collective negotiation with university administrations.

The October Revolution and Russian Civil War deeply changed the landscape of the nation's entire higher education system. Initially, the Bolsheviks did not have strong support among students and professors, who often refused to recognise or collaborate with the new government. This was one of the reasons the Bolsheviks initiated the 'proletarianisation' of universities – namely, the cutthroat struggle against 'alien classes' of society in higher education in order to establish a proletarian dictatorship. In 1918, to 'proletarianise' the student body, the new Communist government significantly expanded access to higher education for workers and peasants by eliminating all entrance exams and educational requirements. Ultimately, anyone over the age of 16 could be admitted to the universities.

This policy caused student enrolment to skyrocket. For example, the number of students at Saratov University increased from 1072 in 1917 to 10,242 in 1919 (Avrus 2001, 45). Soon it became obvious, however, that the educational level of many students was so low (most of them had not even finished secondary school) that they could not meet even minimal university requirements. To help working-class students prepare for higher education, a number of university-based institutions – 'labour departments' (*rabochii fakultet* or *rabfak*) – were established. These two-year or, in some cases, four-year institutions admitted only students who were sponsored by the Russian Communist Party, the Young Communist League (*Komsomol*) or certain labour unions. Therefore, most of the *rabfak* students were Communists who received both special support (scholarships and food) from the party and some academic preference. *Rabfaks* played an important role in saturating the student body with young, working-class people; by 1927, almost half of university students were *rabfak* graduates (Avrus 2001, 51).

At the same time, the Bolsheviks attacked the universities' autonomy and initiated repression of professors who were deemed disloyal to the Soviet government. All academic ranks were eliminated (they were reintroduced in 1934), old faculties and chairs were restructured, new forms of university governance strongly influenced by the Communist Party were established. Amidst these changes, the social sciences suffered the most. Many departments (such as history and law) were either shut down or merged into unified 'departments of social sciences' (*fakultet obshchestvennyh nauk*), where teaching was based on the political ideology of Marxism-Leninism.

In their struggle, the Bolsheviks relied heavily on students, especially on those who were members of the *Komsomol* or were *rabfak* graduates. Students were inducted to

university academic councils and various commissions, and they were actively involved in universities' decision-making processes (Avrus 2001, 51). Student organisations, usually headed by *Komsomol* members, interfered with academic planning, curricular content, and teaching methods. Students spent a significant amount of time participating in meetings, demonstrations, and purges of 'public enemies' within the university community. Little time remained for learning.

Large proportions of working-class students were also members of various labour unions (in Russian, *profsoyuz*, or professional unions), and had strong ties to their industrial sectors. Thus, at any particular university there could be many student cells of industrial professional unions (such as the engineering or chemistry unions) in operation. For example, in 1924 there were 135 cells of the industrial professional unions at Moscow State University-1 (Avrus 2001, 52). Usually, these cells represented only the narrow interests of their members: they fought for scholarships, food, and clothing, and also organised entertainment.

The 1920s were an interesting period in the history of student representation in Russia because the corporatist and pluralist models were blended together (in Klemenčič's [2012] terms) during those years. On the one hand, the corporate system of representation was 'imported' to the universities: professional unions and *Komsomol* cells became the only legitimate forms of engaging students in decision-making processes. On the other hand, professional unions, often appealing to Communist ideology, competed with each other for the right to represent student interests.

In the 1930s, the Soviet higher education system went through another major restructuring, which aimed to embed the system into the planned economy. Higher education had previously been seen as one sector of the national economy, merely producing qualified professionals for other sectors. A number of new institutions were established and many universities were separated into several institutions to be put under the control of branch ministries or even large enterprises. The number of higher education institutions significantly increased, rising from 152 in 1929 to 701 in 1931 (Chanbarisov 1988, 193–94). Governance, both at the systemic and institutional levels, became isomorphic to other sectors of the planned economy, and was characterised by pervasive centralisation, sectorial specialisation and the significant role of the party in decision-making. By and large, the structure of higher education that was established in the 1930s remained unchanged until the end of the 1980s (Kuzminov, Semyonov, and Froumin 2013).

These changes seriously affected student representation. First, all student cells of industrial professional unions at the institutional level were integrated into one professional student union (sometimes as part of an institution's professional union). The aforementioned separation and sectorial specialisation of higher education institutions facilitated this integration process. Second, entrance examinations were reintroduced at all higher education institutions and the *rabfak* programme was shut down. The student body became younger and the proportion of Communist students declined significantly (Avrus 2001, 54). Third, a dual model of student representation, composed of both the *Komsomol* and the *professional student unions*, was established. At the same time, due to the increased centralisation of governance, the role of students in university governance became much more limited than it had been in the 1920s.

The dual model of student representation remained dominant until the end of the 1980s. The *Komsomol* was an important channel for bringing Communist propaganda to young people, and acted as a candidate pool for the party. It was the nation's largest youth organisation, consisting of people between the ages of 14 and 28. Primary

Komsomol organisations were created at almost all enterprises and institutions, collective and state farms, military units and educational organisations. It had a governance structure similar to that of the party and was highly centralised, imitating democracy in its decision-making processes. At the universities, the *Komsomol* organisations provided students with an ideological education through meetings, agitation, dissemination of literature and printed media, and special events. At the same time, student representatives of the *Komsomol* participated in collegiate governing bodies, taking responsibility for both student-related issues and the distribution of funds for social and sporting events. The *Komsomol* supported a number of initiatives, including sporting events and clubs, amateur performances, summer vacations, and organising student construction teams (*stroiotryady*).

While the professional student unions were similar to *Komsomol* in their activities in many respects, there were also some crucial differences. The professional student unions were more focused on distributing welfare benefits (including tourist and sanatorium vouchers), food ration tickets, and scholarships. This function was extremely important in the planned economy, ensuring the loyalty of the student body. Given their close ties with industrial professional unions, the professional student unions had their own source of welfare. Membership in the professional student unions was voluntary and almost automatic (in contrast to the *Komsomol*, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s). To become a member, a first-year student simply had to sign an application. Then he or she got access to all the benefits of membership, and in return paid a small fee that was automatically deducted from the student's scholarship. In many cases, institutional-level leaders of the professional student unions were not students; instead, they were university employees who participated in decision-making. The existence of professional student unions at universities made them similar to other types of Soviet organisations and created visibility of representation. These patterns of behaviour were repeated from generation to generation, forging the path for student representation that we can still see traces of nowadays.

While the monopoly on student representation was granted to the *Komsomol* and the professional student unions, their scope of representation was limited by ideological dogma. Students had no voice in many important institutional decisions, such as the hiring of academic staff and the content of curricula. Student representative structures were highly formalised and centralised, as were other parts of social life in the Soviet Union. At the same time many student activists obtained their first organisational and even 'entrepreneurial' experiences as members of the *Komsomol* or the professional student unions. Some of them later became effective bureaucrats in the economy of distribution.

With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, higher education again underwent numerous changes. With respect to the development of student representation, the most important changes were the democratisation of social life, the dissolution of the *Komsomol*, the massification of higher education, the development of the private sector in higher education, the introduction of the Bologna Process, and institutional differentiation in higher education. This period could be characterised as a transition from the corporatist to the pluralist model of student representation. When the *Komsomol* was officially disbanded and the dominant ideology lost its power, new forms of student representation began to emerge. In many universities students organised alternative unions, associations and clubs, though they usually did not last for long (Popov 2009). Some newly established universities experimented with student participation through student surveys (Chirikov 2013), informal student seminars, and new

forms of student government. Still, the professional student unions remained the most numerically significant and sustainable student organisations at the institutional level. During the 1990s they took over many of the *Komsomol*'s functions (such as organising social, entertainment and sports events and supporting student initiatives), becoming even more influential.

Some researchers have argued that the era of professional student unions is over (Popov 2009). They claim that in the context of a massive higher education system, professional student unions are both unable to represent the interests of a diverse student body and challenged by other types of student organisations. In the next section, we explore how the professional student unions have adapted to recent trends in higher education and how their long history affects their current activities.

Professional student unions at work

Despite the transition towards a pluralist model of student representation in Russia, the study of professional student unions is crucial for understanding current trends in representing students' interests. Following Klemenčič (2012), we describe the current state of the professional student unions in terms of structure and agency, and try to understand the role of path dependence. First, we touch upon the organisational parameters of the professional student unions and their place in the system of university governance. Second, we focus on the most typical activities of such unions, and explore the categories used by student activists to justify their participation in the professional student unions.

Data

Our data collection included 30 in-depth interviews with members of student unions, student activists (who organise various events and initiatives outside of professional student unions), and university administrators from four state universities in Tomsk, which is located in Russia's Siberia region. In addition, we analysed documents regulating student representation. Tomsk was chosen as the research location for two primary reasons. First, with almost 100,000 students (constituting 20% of the population), Tomsk is one of the largest student cities in Russia and is sometimes called the 'Siberian Athens' (Rezanova 2010). Second, Tomsk has a unique and diverse combination of universities with a history that can be traced back to the nineteenth century. Our sample included one comprehensive ('classical') university, one polytechnic, and two former sectorial (medical and engineering) higher education institutions. All of the universities that we studied are state institutions. It is important to note that our analysis is limited to the case of Tomsk universities and may not be generalisable at the national level. At the same time, however, due to the high degree of centralisation in Russian higher education, similar characteristics of student representation can be observed in other state universities.

Each interview included a range of questions about the structure of the professional student unions, including questions about the unions' histories, aims and core activities, students' motivation to participate in the unions, and the rights and interests currently represented by unions. We also discussed other organisational forms of student representation that coexist alongside the professional student unions in the universities.

Grounded theory techniques (Corbin and Strauss 1990) were applied to analyse the qualitative data. This means that our study aims to generate hypotheses rather than to

test them (Auerbach and Silverstein 2003), which should be taken into account when reading the results.

The structural isomorphism of the professional student unions

The historical review indicates that centralisation and formalisation are typical characteristics of the professional student unions in Russia. The unions were an important part of the economy of distribution, but at the same time, they represented a limited range of student interests at the university administrative level. We set out to illuminate the current structural characteristics of the professional student unions. How is their prior development imprinted on their structural arrangements? How are the professional student unions embedded in universities' policymaking structures? First, the data show that all of the professional student unions at the four universities studied have strikingly similar organisational structures. Below, we describe a generalised model that outlines the structural characteristics of the professional student unions at all four universities.

At any given university, a large percentage of students formally belong to the professional student union. For example, at the universities we visited, professional student unions contained 60–85% of the students. The large number of members in professional student unions implies various degrees of involvement in student union activities.

In the beginning of the year all freshmen are invited to enrol. Senior members of the union make a short presentation about their organisation to each study group. (In the Russian higher education system, students are generally split into permanent groups of 20–30 people for their entire period of study.) Afterwards, they offer students the chance to sign up for membership in the union. Students who sign the application automatically become members, and agree to pay a monthly fee of RUB30 to RUB60 (US \$1 to US\$2). The fee is quite small, and in many cases it is deducted from the state scholarship that a large proportion of students receive.

In the interviews, students largely said that they do not consider the decision to enrol an important one; it is, instead, a basic part of the freshman routine. The professional student union presents itself as an essential and attractive part of student life, the fee of participation is low, and there are no any other requirements for enrolment, so the majority of freshmen agree with the tagline 'You need *profsoyuz*. *Profsoyuz* needs you'. Formal membership, however, does not mean involvement in the unions' activities.

The members who are more involved tend to be students who are elected as representatives for each study group. These elected students constitute the '*profbureau*', a collective student body that represents students of a particular department. The '*profbureau*' is headed by a '*proforg*', who is also elected by the students, and is the chief student representative of a department. '*Proforgs*', in turn, comprise the unit that represents a university's collective student body, called the '*profcom*', which also includes the leaders of functional commissions (for example, social, sport, and outreach).

The *profcom* is headed by a chairperson, who is elected at the general meeting of the members of the professional student union. Usually, the *profcom* also contains a few administrative positions, which are filled by university employees. For students, being a member of *profcom* denotes the highest degree of involvement in the student unions. The *profcom* members are those who actively participate in professional student unions, do a large part of the everyday work of organising events, and discuss a range of issues brought before the union.

It is worth noting that *proforgs* and commission heads have different functional responsibilities, although they both are members of the *profcom*. The function of *proforgs* is twofold: they both inform ordinary union members about the opportunities and benefits provided by the professional student union, and they communicate students' interests and opinions to the *profcom*. The *proforgs* are also expected to handle a range of administrative work such as recruitment, fee collection and so forth. The commission heads organise various activities (sporting and entertainment events, research activities), and thus try to make the professional student union an important part of student life at the university. It also follows from the interviews that many student activists combine work at the *profbur-eau* and the commissions. For the most part, this combination is the result of the transfer of *Komsomol*-organised activities to the professional student unions in the early 1990s.

Every university's union is a loosely coupled part of the regional and national structure of professional student unions. We will not describe the regional and national levels in detail, in part because the data show that even the unions' leaders do not believe interactions at these higher levels to be important for their institutional-level activities. Despite some efforts to establish an integrated student union at the national level, there is no legitimate leader of all Russian professional student unions. Thus, centralisation is weakening at the supra-institutional level.

But why are the structures of all of the professional student unions similar? What are the sources of this structural isomorphism? Historically, all of the student professional unions were part of, and modelled after, the larger professional union structure. All of the primary organisations at universities, schools or industrial plants had similar structures. In terms of DiMaggio and Powell (1983), this isomorphism was of a coercive nature: the structure resulted from governmental pressures and from explicit orders to develop a certain organisational design for representation. Having a professional union in a legitimised organisational form was the only way to receive government welfare or to participate in a university's decision-making process. Moreover, other forms of representation were forbidden. When these restrictions were eliminated after 1991, the structure did not change much, and it developed similarly at different universities. The main reason for this result is path dependence. The state did not provide universities with new, legitimate forms of student representation and, given the uncertainty of the environment, the costs of developing new forms of student representation at the universities could have been very high and had unpredictable results. Additionally, massification led to more diverse student bodies. Accordingly, students could not develop alternative structures, and so they used the old ones.

Path dependence also manifests itself in language, among other ways. For example, titles related to positions at the collective governing bodies of the professional student unions are no longer used in everyday language. They are borrowed from the 1930s and obviously represent Soviet aesthetics. However, as the student activists described, these titles are commonly used within the university and students believe it is important to preserve them. The data show that position titles are important for students because, in some sense, these titles reflect the essence of the professional student union as an organisation:

As for the position titles ... they are well established. Why change them? I think that if you title them in another way, the organisation will not be a professional student union anymore. Such titles exist in every professional student union. (*Proforg*)

Another important structural aspect of the professional student unions is their place within the universities. Generally, the model of any professional union assumes its

autonomy and independence of organisation. This independence is formally provided by law. All of the chairs that we interviewed also underlined the importance of independence. A declaration of autonomy from the university administration is an important element of the discourse at the professional student unions:

The essential characteristic of a professional student union is that it has always been independent. We are at the university, we have a room here, but that's all. In all other aspects, we are independent, and this independence is protected by law. (The chair of a professional student union)

However, it follows from the interviews that actual relations between the professional student unions and the universities are more complicated and far from complete autonomy. In all four professional student unions that we investigated, the chairs were not students; instead, they were employees and graduates of these universities. This is a common practice among Russian universities; the results of a 2006 survey conducted at 947 Russian universities indicated that at that time, only one-third of all professional student unions were headed by students (Popov 2009, 216). When describing their everyday duties and justifying their non-student status, the chairs themselves provided reasons to be critical of the unions' official declarations of autonomy:

I think that yeah, technically of course a student can be a chair of a professional student union, but that's a lot of work, and it's a lot of grown-up work that deals with financing, administration, and communicating. The chair should understand how the university works; he should be in tune with university administrators. (The chair of a professional student union)

I am a super-busy man. I actually work as if I am a vice-rector, and you can imagine how much work that is! (The chair of a professional student union)

Moreover, in many cases, the chair of a professional student union is the only person who interacts with university administration and participates in decision-making. In some cases, the chair even holds another administrative position, such as being an adviser to a rector. As a result, the professional student unions have become a part of the university structure. The unions are dependent on their universities for resources and legitimacy, and sometimes operate as agents of the administration in exchange for the administration's support. This characteristic feature of the professional student unions can be traced back to their development in the 1920s. In the current situation, this helps universities both to create the impression of student involvement in the governance process (especially important in the context of the new Law on Education), and to avoid the unpredictability of collective student actions.

To summarise, the structure of the modern professional student unions is in many respects inherited from the Soviet era. It is centralised and has numerous characteristics (including relations with university administration, the combination of representation and organisation of various activities) that were developed in a particular historical context. This places some limitations on the way that student interests are represented now.

Panem et circenses: the political agency of the professional student unions

We noted in the previous section that the structures of the professional student unions are quite isomorphic. The same holds true for their agency; in addition to isomorphism,

the professional student unions are characterised by isopraxism. Student union leaders from different universities provide similar narratives regarding the general scope and range of their organisations' activity. Moreover, students justify their participation in professional student unions by reference to a limited number of identical categories. We argue that the agency of professional student unions is rather rigid and can be described by the famous Roman saying '*Panem et Circenses!*' ('Bread and Circuses!').

The primary goals of the professional student unions, both as expressed on their websites and as articulated in our interviews with their leaders are (1) to protect students' rights (with a focus on social security and financial aid); and (2) to make students' lives interesting. Although the chairs of professional student unions describe the former goal as an important but routine responsibility, they perceive the latter goal as an innovation that differentiates the current unions from those of the Soviet era, making the current unions both popular and up to date:

What is unique about the professional student unions is the fact that we respond to generational change, we develop with the interests of new generations of students. Look, our entertainment activities change constantly! (The chair of a professional student union)

All four professional student unions in our study organised a similar range of activities through their various commissions. In addition to protecting students' rights, the typical set of union activities also included entertainment (organising parties, contests and other events), research, volunteering, student career services and sports. There are several explanations for the fact that different student unions in different universities are similar in terms of agency. One is 'the logic of membership' (Schmitter and Streeck 1981/1999; Klemenčič 2012): the underlying interests of student members define a union's range of activities, and variation among the characteristics of the student bodies at different universities is minimal. There could, however, be an alternative explanation. Student narratives showed that there was an informal and unspoken understanding amongst student activists regarding the types of collective activity that were and were not suitable for the unions. This explanation can be described in reference to the notion of 'knowledge at hand' (Schutz 1973), which comes from everyday interactions and remains uncoded.

The data showed that students realised from their experience at the union that some initiatives did not fit within the established framework, and therefore they did not attempt to start them. In some cases, chairs or *proforgs* acted as gatekeepers and did not support new initiatives:

We already have most of what students might need. (The chair of a professional student union)

You can organise your commission, if it is something new and exciting that does not yet exist. Basically, however, people take part in existing commissions that have been around for a long time, for years. And most people find what they want among the existing commissions. (*Proforg*)

The same explanation applies to the way that the professional student unions protect students' rights. As in the case of providing entertainment, all four of the professional student unions focused on the same range of students' rights and interests. These rights and interests included financial aid for students from low-income families, student

housing, and examination deadline extensions for student activists. This set of topics was common to all of the universities under examination; thus, it did not reflect any institutional differences, even though it is quite reasonable to assume that students have unique concerns at each university. Moreover, important issues such as curricular development, academic cheating, and teaching quality were not part of the unions' agendas. The perception of student rights within each professional student union was limited by shared, but unarticulated, rules and understanding.

This observation leads us to argue that the agency of the professional student unions is characterised by performativity, thus contributing to the replication of shared and accepted patterns of student representation within the unions. The concept of performativity, as developed by Michel Callon (2007) in relation to economics, generally suggests that existing knowledge or understanding can be used as guidelines for real action and can contribute to the validity of that knowledge. For example, an economic theory of financial markets could be used by traders in their work, and through their actions the theory could transform and shape those markets, ultimately confirming itself. As for the professional student unions, the notion of performativity means that the unions as collective agents advocate certain views on student rights, and that newly arrived students then perceive these views as valid. Students then begin to act accordingly.

Because the membership of Russia's professional student unions includes a majority of students, the unions play a leading role in student representation. Union-organised activities shape most students' perceptions of student life and student rights. This is particularly obvious with respect to student rights. As one of the professional student unions' primary goals is to protect students' rights, the unions elaborate a working concept of those rights, and then communicate that concept to the students. In the cases that we studied, the professional student unions reduced student rights to those that they protected during the Soviet period.

To understand the basis of the student unions' collective action, we asked student activists why they participated in the work of the professional student unions. Luescher-Mamashela (2013) has outlined various justifications for student representation that can be found in the relevant literature: politically realist, consumerist, communitarian, democratic, and consequentialist. Yet, none of these categories could be applied to describe Russian student activists' motivations. The Russian student activists were more pragmatic, emphasising the useful experience they can obtain at their professional student unions. These experiences could be valuable for their future careers, helping them to develop networks and social capital. The other aspect of Russian student activists' motivation was an interest in obtaining unique resources, such as opportunities to extend study deadlines.

Moreover, some students do not even share the values and beliefs that are declared in the descriptions of the professional student unions' activities. For instance, a leader of the 'healthy lifestyle' commission at one of the unions was responsible for organising an anti-smoking event. Her explanation of why she was planning the event referred to the unique organisational experience that she would receive, rather than to the values of anti-smoking activism.

The logic that students used to justify their participation in the professional student unions showed that students saw their unions primarily as sources of career mobility and resources. This perception also reflects path dependence effects. As mentioned above, resource distribution and promoting mobility were, historically, a core part of the activities performed by the professional student unions and the *Komsomol*. Thus,

the Soviet model of student representation influences the agency and structure of professional student unions.

Conclusion/discussion

The study shows that student representation in Russia is characterised by the significant effects of path dependence. The current organisational framework for intermediating student interests in Russia was developed in the 1930s, and continues to be used today with only minor adjustments. In terms of structure, Russian professional student unions inherited a centralised governance system, embeddedness in the university administration structure, and a coupling of representative and entertainment-related functions in the same structural arrangement. In terms of agency, the unions are focused on the same set of student rights as they were in Soviet times, while developing a more diversified assortment of activities for students. The professional student unions remain the most influential student organisations in a large number of universities, despite the fact that they lost their monopoly (or a portion of the duopoly that they shared with the *Komsomol*) on representing student interests in the 1990s.

What does this 'trap of path dependence' mean for student representation in Russia and its further development? First, the involvement of students in university governance will be quite problematic given the fact that student governance was historically not part of the agenda at professional student unions. The state wants students to be active participants in the decision-making processes at the institutional level, as demonstrated in the Russian Federation's new Law on Education; at the moment, however, there are no well-established organisational frameworks for this goal to be realised. The structural characteristics of professional student unions make student representation fragmented, with little student impact on institutional policymaking. Taking into the account the performativity of the professional student unions, we assume that any of the state's attempts to adjust the student governance system will face multiple barriers.

The second challenge concerns the problem of students' rights. Our study gives reasons to suggest that the students' perception of their rights is influenced by professional student unions. There are only a few instances of collective student action outside professional student unions, and the unions tend to protect only a limited number of rights inherited from the Soviet era. Since professional student unions are successors of labour unions, they focus on rights more or less connected with social benefits, such as financial aid, scholarships, and student housing. Thus, professional student unions impede the formation of alternative conceptions of students' rights, especially those that focus on quality of education or student services.

The third challenge for the development of student representation deals with the relations between the professional student unions and university administrations. The professional student unions are a convenient vehicle for university administrations to obtain students' approval. The existence of unions allows administrators to pretend that student opinions and interests are taken into account while, at the same time, these unions always work 'as it is expected'. For instance, student union leaders, who in some sense are closer to university managers than to student activists, would hardly ever allow any protests against university policy within their organisation.

The fourth challenge concerns the possible competition between the professional student unions and other organisations for student representation. Professional student unions have the symbolic power to speak on behalf of all students because

most students at any given university are members (although the membership is merely formal in many respects). In this way, the professional student unions have a significant advantage over other student organisations, making them sustainable in the long term.

However, we are not trying to argue that the current system of student representation, with the professional student unions at its core, will not change. One of the possible sources for change is student dissatisfaction with various transformations across Russian higher education. For instance, in 2012 various groups of students protested against the mergers of universities in several Russian cities. A recent case involving an increase in student housing fees could also be relevant. In a number of universities, the management introduced a 10- to 15-fold increase in student housing fees after the new Law on Education annulled a provision that capped those fees at 5% of the basic student scholarship. This policy fuelled protests, stimulating students at some universities to develop alternative organisations for student representation. As a result of this student action, the Ministry of Education decided to monitor student-housing fees at state higher education institutions and prevent unreasonable increases.

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