

Reply

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It is hard to say anything about the “present-day condition of philosophy in Russia,” since we would first have to define the “present day,” and then specify what exactly we mean by “philosophy,” and then, finally, have to come to terms as to who qualifies to be called a “Russian philosopher” and who doesn’t. If we forego the search for some “Russian idea” expressed in one set of terms and not another, attempting to limit the number of the authors of philosophical works to the citizens of the Russian Federation, disregarding the fact that a large number of colleagues from Belarus, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan are Russian and write in the Russian language, or apply “parentheses” to the numerous works of the authors from outside the “guild” (specialising in cultural or political studies, theologians, writers, etc.), the question becomes much easier to answer and can be rendered to providing a diagnosis of the corporate structure constituted by Russian philosophers.

What greatly complicates such a diagnosis is the mere existence of a multitude of persons employed as teachers of philosophy. Basic knowledge of philosophy is part of the school “social studies” curriculum, which is studied in the upper secondary school. Philosophy is also taught in technical schools, and is a compulsory subject in higher education (and one has to remember that there are around 3,500 universities and their branches in Russia). Thus, philosophy is most often taught by people lacking a philosophical education—those who had never studied Plato or Descartes, or opened a logic textbook—this applies to the professors and assistant professors of the majority of tertiary education institutions in Russia. Obviously, there are exceptions, but the general level of how philosophy is taught is extremely low. Only a very minor part of those twenty or twenty-five thousand people who formally belong to the corporation is capable of writing a coherent text, and only about a few

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hundred people are capable of conducting serious academic research. Most of them work at departments of philosophy and at the institutes of the Russian Academy of Science. About sixty universities are licensed to teach philosophy, and some forty-five or fifty produce actual philosophers. What qualifies as decent knowledge is translated to the students in some twelve or fifteen universities; others are cases of ignoramuses teaching ignoramuses. What we see is the legacy of the Soviet epoch, when philosophy was incorporated into the dominant ideology—years of negative selection. This does not imply that everything written during the Communist epoch was of poor quality and essentially meaningless. However, the archetypal teachers from “the department of Marxism-Leninism” are still present in a great many universities. They have grown older, but not wiser.

At best, there are about a thousand professional philosophers in Russia today, and they are every bit as good as their European and American colleagues. Unfortunately, their books and articles are, for the most part, only available to readers who understand Russian. There are several philosophical journals that have a good reputation (and many more that do not), and dozens of works by the leading Western authors have been published since the removal of the ideological restrictions. Regular conferences are held with the participation of Western colleagues (although all of them take place in Moscow and St. Petersburg). There are many competent and well-educated people who enter the “guild.” However, few of them stay for long—the salaries of university teachers are extremely low.

It is equally hard to speak of the influence of philosophy on the minds of those outside the corporation. At the very least, the political and economic elite of today’s Russia is completely indifferent to philosophy. There are no “state orders” or “party orders” for any kind of an official ideological philosophy, but there is no control, either—philosophers are poor, but free. The reputation of philosophy among the representatives of the arts and sciences is still in the shadow of the long reign of dogmatic Marxism, and their memories of the lectures on “dialectical materialism” and “scientific communism” are still vivid as particularly humiliating experiences.

Philosophy can hardly be described as flourishing in other more trouble-free countries besides Russia, but that is outside the scope of the question. As for the vector of changes occurring within Russian philosophy, there are some reasons for cautious optimism. The salaries of university professors will grow substantially over the next 3–5 years, and more university graduates will consider academic careers. The majority of philosophy professors are aged around 70 today, and many assistant professors are around 60. The heirs of the “Marxist–Leninist” school will retire, to be replaced by people who actually studied something. Some of them will certainly be strangers to philosophy, but, at the very least, there will be young professionals teaching at university departments of philosophy and writing coherent papers and articles. Whether they will identify themselves as phenomenologists, Wittgensteinians, or heirs of the pre-revolutionary Russian school of thought, is of little importance.