

Russian Academia Rattled as American Professor Sacked After TV Witch Hunt

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Kendrick White

Anxiety gripped Russia's academic community after news broke that a central Russian university had fired an American professor following a state-run media broadcast decrying his work as "harmful" to the country.

Nizhny Novgorod's Lobachevsky State University (LSU) blamed "restructuring" for its decision to push Kendrick White, 51, out of his position as vice rector for innovation, according to the official dismissal order published on the university's website Tuesday. White's profile was swiftly removed from the university website.

The firing came on the heels of an incendiary program that aired over the weekend on state-run television channel Russia, during which fervently anti-Western host Dmitry Kiselyov denounced White's work as "bringing us [Russia] harm."

During his weekly news hour, which focused largely on unwanted foreign influences, Kiselyov featured a segment where a reporter in Nizhny Novgorod interviewed White and toured the university. At one point in the segment, the reporter mused, "how [has] it happened that a citizen of the United States, an entrepreneur from Washington, could hold such a position [at a Russian university]?"

In an apparent bid to provide proof of the professor's harmful intent, the reporter noted that the university's corridors contained portraits of two American — not Russian — scientists. "Democracy from America is merely an attempt to subjugate everyone else," the program's narrator concluded.

The university claimed the dismissal order was issued on June 26, two days shy of Kiselyov's broadcast. However, it only announced the firing on June 30, two days after the damning segment aired.

Though many questions surrounding White's dismissal remain unanswered, White's story appears to have triggered a sense of paranoia in Russian educational circles. Several leading academic institutions that employ foreign professors and lecturers that The Moscow Times contacted for this story went above and beyond the standard refusal to comment, going so far as to ask not to be mentioned in any context.

A Sign of the Times

White, who had reportedly been working in Nizhny Novgorod since 1992, dedicated his career to championing entrepreneurial innovation in the region. Toward this end, he founded a center to train and support promising young entrepreneurs, his since-deleted profile page on the university's website said.

In his role as vice rector at the university, White arranged for students to visit the United States to demonstrate their research projects, Igor Yefimov, a professor of biomedical engineering at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., said in comments carried Tuesday by Kommersant.

"I only evaluated those [of the projects] that were related to health care — and they were works of genius, they needed to be advanced in the world market," Yefimov was quoted as saying.

Lobachevsky State University President Yevgeny Chuprunov declined to comment in detail on White's dismissal, simply saying: "These are the times that we're living in," Kommersant reported.

Recently, foreign involvement in Russia's education system has provoked the ire of official Moscow, and the Kremlin has addressed the need to curb educational and research exchange programs.

President Vladimir Putin recently accused foreign organizations of sifting through Russian schools, intent on spiriting away the country's most talented and promising students.

"A network of [foreign] organizations has 'rummaged' through the schools in the Russian

Federation for many years under the guise of supporting talented young people. In reality, they simply hoover everything up like a vacuum," Putin was quoted by state-run news agency RIA Novosti as saying during a meeting last week of the Council for Science and Education.

As relations between Moscow and the West plunged to post-Cold War lows over the crisis in Ukraine, Russia canceled the popular Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) program last year. FLEX, established in 1992, saw more than 8,000 Russian high schoolers travel to study in the United States.

The academic consequences of the diplomatic fallout didn't end there.

Prominent Russian science and education foundation Dynasty, which helped finance the research projects of many young scientists, ended up on Russia's list of "foreign agents" in May, accused of being funded from abroad. In accordance with a 2012 law, Russian NGOs that receive funding from abroad and engage in loosely defined "political activities" can be relegated to a register of "foreign agents," a term that conjures up images of Cold War-era espionage.

Notably, Dynasty's founder — Dmitry Zimin — is a Russian national who keeps his personal bank accounts abroad. These, he has said, are the foreign funds that landed the organization on the controversial list.

Dmitry Peskov, head of the Agency for Strategic Initiatives' (ASI) Young Professionals program — not to be confused with the Kremlin spokesman of the same name — echoed the sentiment that White's firing is a sign of the times. ASI is a government-sponsored organization meant to provide support for Russian and foreign investors.

"This particular situation is part of the legacy of a bigger conflict," he told The Moscow Times on Wednesday. "But it doesn't seem to be a trend across the government as a whole. A lot of state actions continue to aim at internationalization and promoting Russian interests abroad."

A Political or Administrative Issue?

When asked by The Moscow Times about White's firing Wednesday, Vladimir Burmatov, deputy head of the State Duma committee for education, said: "Politics have nothing to do with it."

"It was simply a managerial decision made by the university's president about his vice rector. He [White] he was a vice rector, not a professor or lecturer. It's an administrative position," Burmatov, a member of the ruling United Russia party, added.

"Docent White is still an employee of the university," Nikita Avrallyov, LSU's vice rector for public relations, was cited by the TASS news agency as saying Wednesday. "We announced only that he was relieved of his vice rector duties," Avrallyov explained. He did not go into specifics about what capacity White could be working in at the university in light of the dismissal order, and White himself appears to have negated Avrallyov's theory.

Having returned to his home state of Florida, White reportedly published a post Tuesday

on Facebook alerting his friends that he was on the lookout for a new job. "Does anyone know a good headhunter?" his post said, Kommersant reported. By Wednesday, no public posts were available on his Facebook page.

Numerous requests for comment from White went unanswered.

Politics Threaten Science

Peskov of ASI's Young Professionals program voiced concern that situations such as White's firing threaten to harm Russia's international image in general, and the prowess of its academic and science communities in particular. The latter would be particularly disheartening in light of the boundless efforts involved in promoting Russian universities and science abroad, Peskov said.

"I hope things will change at some point. The trend of mixing politics and education is a dangerous one," Peskov said.

Isak Frumin, head of the Higher School of Economics' (HSE) Institute of Education, agreed with Peskov that scenarios such as White's dismissal threaten to do more harm than good.

"It's disgusting. This story put us all in a very unsavory situation," Frumin told The Moscow Times on Wednesday.

He speculated that White's firing, coupled with Kiselyov's concern with the prospect of an American holding a high-level academic post, could threaten many leading Russian institutions.

"Why do we have to justify ourselves now? Why does the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology have to explain why they have an American serving as the head of their International Council? Why do we [HSE] have to explain the same thing?" Frumin said, noting that the international council at HSE is likewise run by a U.S. citizen.

According to Frumin, political speculations such as that featured in Kiselyov's segment on White endanger Russian education and science by fostering an atmosphere of paranoia and anger.

"Foreign scientists are motivated to come work here in Russia because of our great culture and our kindhearted people," Frumin said. "Unfortunately, television programs like Kiselyov's are capable of destroying these views."

Frumin told The Moscow Times that some of the HSE's foreign partners had called to voice concern with what appear to be dark clouds accruing over Russian academia. "But we [HSE] don't fear those TV firebrands," he said.

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