

Dismissed U.S. Academic Returns to Russia to Forgive and Forget

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Kendrick White

Kendrick White, a U.S. entrepreneur who made the headlines last week when he was dismissed from his post as vice rector of a Russian university after a state-run television channel denounced his work as "bringing harm" to the country, is back in Russia and ready to forgive, forget and start over.

"People are asking ... what am I going to do, do I hate Russia, do I want to leave," White, who was employed at Nizhny Novgorod's Lobachevsky State University (UNN), told The Moscow Times in a phone interview this week.

"No, I don't hate Russia. I love Russia. My wife is Russian and my kids were born here. I will be very happy to stay and continue the work I'm doing," he said.

Far from sounding upset at losing his post after being portrayed as a sinister U.S. agent by the

Rossia television channel, White, 51, expressed optimism about the situation, saying it was a good pretext to start voicing issues concerning the place of Russian science in the international arena and the role foreign specialists play in promoting it.

White has dedicated his career to championing entrepreneurial innovation in the Nizhny Novgorod region, and founded a technology commercialization center within UNN to support promising young entrepreneurs studying at the university.

Though the unpleasant incident caught him off guard, White said it shouldn't stop him from doing work that, according to him, is not only not harmful to Russia, but actually helps the country prevent its most brilliant minds from leaving for good.

Spoiled Vacation

News of White's dismissal from his post made waves in Russia and beyond last week. A widely cited quote from the rector of the university, Yevgeny Chuprunov, given to Kommersant newspaper to explain the dismissal — "These are the times that we're living in" — was perceived as a reference to growing tensions between Russia and the U.S. and contributed to overall anxiety with the country's academic community.

White's Facebook page was instantly swamped with messages of support and compassion, to which he didn't respond, prompting speculation that he was so baffled by the whole situation that he had decided to lie low.

Kommersant reported last week that White had left Russia for Florida immediately after his dismissal was announced.

But the reason for his silence was in fact far more prosaic, White said.

"I was on holiday with my family; we'd been on an island called Longboat Key in the bay of Sarasota [Florida] for a month [by then]," he said.

He said he hadn't checked his e-mails for some time as he was trying to relax and enjoy the family holiday. "And then all of a sudden I get into a nice hotel with Wi-Fi, open my email and — oh my God," he recalled.

"I had a lot of messages [from the university] asking me to get in touch as soon as possible. So my first step was to call our first vice rector. He asked me to come back to Nizhny Novgorod — they wanted to explain to me what had happened," White said.

Media Storm

Among the messages and e-mails White was bombarded with that day was a link to the notorious television program. When he watched it, he said he was shocked to see it was not the story the reporter had told him she planned to produce.

"At the end of May we'd finished two weeks of business plan competitions, roundtables between students and academicians and businesses — a really productive, great series of events, after which the rector organized a number of interviews for me with the media," White said.

"I thought this lady [from TV channel Russia-1] was one of those interviews authorized by the rector. But it was not authorized. They came in here unannounced and used the situation when I had a series of meetings with media that day," he explained.

The Russia-1 reporter, according to White, was very friendly and told him she planned to make a report about "our success stories and the work that we're doing."

Among other things, White explained to her that his work was aimed at creating the infrastructure for young scientists to be able to move forward with their projects.

"Students leave Russia because they don't have hope that they can set up their own businesses here. And what we're trying to do is reverse that brain drain," he told The Moscow Times.

One section of the broadcast showed a brief interview with White and a tour around the university. At one point, 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 foreign entrepreneur's nefarious intent, the reporter noted that the university's corridors were adorned with portraits of two American scientists. "Democracy from America is merely an attempt to subjugate everyone else," the program's narrator concluded.

White said that there were in fact portraits of scientists from all over the world hanging in the university's corridors — including Russians.

Repeat Attack

In a twist to the story, after White returned to Nizhny Novgorod earlier this week, Russia contacted the man whose dismissal they appeared to have facilitated and asked for another interview — as they said, to give him an opportunity to explain his side of the story.

"We had to agree, we couldn't refuse them," said White.

But it turned out to be exactly the same trap as the first time. "Again, they were friendly and nice, but the story that was actually aired was not so nice," he said.

The program was broadcast on Tuesday on the Russia-24 channel. Like the previous one, it focused on the portraits of U.S. scientists on the walls and suggested it was unclear which country — Russia or the U.S. — actually benefits from White's work.

White said as unpleasant as the television attacks on him were, they have not dented his enthusiasm for continuing to work in Russia.

"I'm not offended by this, I'm not bothered. What I'm amazed by is the courage of the university team that met with me on Monday. They all felt terrible about the whole thing," he said.

"I'm an economist. When I finished my undergraduate thesis in 1984, I wrote about the fact that when the Soviet Union went bankrupt under the pressure of the commodity economy, it

would take 40 years to create a normal market economy. So none of this stuff surprises me," he said.

White attributes his removal from the post of vice rector to restructuring that has been discussed for months at the university. He said he hopes to continue to work there, although there has been no formal job offer yet and his status at the university remains unclear.

"I've been told that I'll very likely be appointed director of the technology commercialization center and will continue to do all the work that I'm doing," he said, explaining the uncertainty by the fact that the person responsible for making the final decision — Chuprunov, the rector — is away on vacation.

For that same reason, the former vice rector declined to comment on whether his dismissal had anything to do with the television program or whether it was purely a coincidence.

"Let's wait and discuss that with the rector when he returns from his vacation," he said.

White said he had "found a home at Lobachevsky, which is a great university and a great team. They have explained everything to me and they treated me very well throughout this very awkward situation. For that I'm very happy and I hope that the situation will work out," he added.

The Go-Between

White believes that integrating Russian science into the international arena is crucial for a country that needs to embrace modernization.

"I've spent my entire career here trying to help Russia become integrated into the global economy. It was very important to me to make sure that Russia would partner with the U.S., with Europe and so on. And it's a very difficult process, because Russia has to go through a lot of changes to become such a partner," he told The Moscow Times.

One of the changes that needs to be made, according to White, is to stop seeing foreigners as a threat.

"I am something scary to the authorities in Moscow? I can only laugh. I can't be that much of a threat. I'm hired by the university to implement the programs initiated by the Ministry of Science and Education, and my track record, my investment record, my position toward Russia is well known," he said.

White graduated from Stetson University in 1985 and got an MBA degree in finance in 1990 from Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management.

He went to Nizhny Novgorod in 1992 to work as a counselor for the city administration in the development of entrepreneurship programs, and later became a "business angel" investor and started work at UNN.

White said the attention surrounding his situation was a good starting point for "a very serious debate in society about the role of Russian science in the wider world. This is a very important debate, because Russian science has contributed innumerable advances to the

human species," he said.

White emphasized that Russia "will slide back a hundred years from a scientific standpoint" if it doesn't collaborate with other countries.

He is, however, doggedly optimistic on the future of the country.

In 20 years, he said, "the generation in leadership now will be in retirement, and the generation that is building their self-made businesses today is going to be the elite."

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