

We Must Accept the Truth: Western Academics Are Russian Intelligence Targets

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The case of Dr. Vyachelsav Morozov, the professor of political science at Tartu University who was arrested by Estonian police and is now being prosecuted on charges of engaging in espionage for Russia, has brought to the fore concerns about Russian spies targeting academics and related professionals in Western countries.

Like Morozov, I am an academic who has visited many countries in the post-Soviet region over more than twenty years. His arrest has stirred up distressing thoughts for me and other colleagues. It has also solidified my impression that members of our profession are at significant risk from the intelligence services of Russia and other hostile authoritarian regimes.

However, the concerns raised by this incident go far beyond this specific case. I know Dr. Morozov only very minimally, by correspondence, and will not comment on his possible guilt or innocence. He should and will have his day in court. Estonia is a credible rule-of-law state, and I trust that the case will be handled fairly.

Morozov was arrested against the backdrop of extreme pressure on Estonia from Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), which perceives the small EU and NATO member state as a nearby enemy and seeks its destabilization. There have been spectacular cases of Russian [infiltration](#) of Estonian institutions. At the same time, Estonia has also scored [notable successes](#) in [unmasking](#) Russian spies. Unlike most Western countries, which often prefer to handle such espionage cases discreetly, Estonia also makes a point of publicizing them to increase public awareness of Russia's malign intentions.

But sadly, I do not believe this kind of case is in any way exceptional or specific to Estonia. Rather, after Morozov's arrest, I realized that despite being involved in post-Soviet research for some 20 years as a student and then professor, no university or government office has ever given me guidance about how to detect or respond to hostile intelligence interest in me, whether it be from Russia or any other state.

Yet, over my career, I have had several disturbing experiences in the post-Soviet region, not only in Russia, when I had reason to believe I was under surveillance. I received suspicious phone calls, was photographed by strangers, and asked probing questions that seemed designed to elicit my attitude toward the Russian government. My friends and colleagues have been questioned by the FSB about me and my work, and I have faced some overt accusations by Russian officials and local press outlets that I was a spy.

Many other Western researchers who visit the region to collect material for academic books and articles can attest both to such experiences and to their lack of preparation for them. We rarely discuss what happens because doing so is upsetting and frightening.

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This points to two related Western blind spots. First, while the Russian state fails to provide its citizens with functioning social services or a high standard of living, it has highly effective intelligence services that take a broad view of who and what are useful. They are not only focused on stealing advanced technology and military secrets, but also burrowing into different professional networks to form connections that may be useful in some less spectacular ways. For example, they can access reliable information about specific occupational networks and the major figures in them.

Second, western academics are neither as politically irrelevant nor as safe as we like to think. The view that graduate students and professors are buffered from politics and secure in their ivory towers is deeply ingrained in many people. In some societies in the Global North, it contains some truth. My dissertation reader, Professor Ivan Szelenyi, convincingly argued in his book "The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power" that after World War II university professors in wealthy industrialized democracies became a unique social category. They were paid a comfortable salary and allowed to conduct scientific inquiry without political constraints, while also being expected to refrain from overt political activism.

But Russia does not see things that way. During my field research as a U.S. doctoral student in Russia, I was surprised when Russian interlocutors assumed I must be tied into official structures in the United States. Their perception of me as politically exposed, if not employed, jarred with my belief that I was harmless and neither represented nor worked for my government.

In a sense, we both had a point. No, I wasn't working for the CIA. But it is true that Western universities are connected to powerful political institutions in ways that we do not always consider. My Russian contacts were completely correct to view their own country's universities as overtly politically influenced and controlled, as has now become even more apparent with nearly all university rectors in the Russian Federation signing a statement of support for the invasion of Ukraine.

Indeed, Western academics, particularly social scientists and historians who study sensitive world regions, but also others such as scientists in fields with defense applications, mix with government officials in a variety of relatively uncontrolled contexts. Contexts in which those officials perceive us as useful sources of information and even policy ideas, but also as politically innocuous, not to say irrelevant.

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Given the role of academics as information brokers between civil society and the state, it is highly naïve to expect Russia to leave us alone simply because we perceive ourselves as outside, if not above, the grubby world of politics.

In fact, we are people who can learn official things in unofficial ways, or bring our knowledge to official attention. We can influence public and elite opinion. Those who study Russia and other post-Soviet countries are in contact with emigre communities the Kremlin wishes to surveil.

All Western academics need to acknowledge the interest we present to Russian and other hostile intelligence services. While I am less knowledgeable about other professions, I believe the same point broadly applies to people like international journalists, who have a similar role in brokering information and shaping opinions.

All of us are subject to the same techniques that allow Russian spies to recruit other Western citizens: appeals to greed or ideological predispositions or – in some cases – blackmail or threats. Those with family members still in Russia are at particular risk.

This raises the twin questions of who in our own countries is watching out for Western academics, and what we can do to protect ourselves. There is reason to think Estonia's police and counter-intelligence services are more vigilant and effective than counterparts in many other Western countries in this respect, or at least more concerned about Russian interest in their country's institutions. I would like to think that they are aware of the strong connections between intelligence services and academic institutions, which have served as recruiting grounds for both Western spy services and — as in the notorious case of the Cambridge spy ring — their Soviet adversaries.

But while it is difficult to form definitive conclusions about the world of intelligence from the outside, I suspect most Western intelligence services are not very focused on potential Russian spies in academia. Possibly this is because academics are far down their list of concerns, and not seen as important or dangerous.

So, what can members of our profession do to protect ourselves? While keeping mindful that our independence from political leaders and freedom to speak and write openly are what legitimate us as scholars, we need to become harder targets against Russia and other hostile actors.

However, exactly what that approach might entail still needs to be worked out. McCarthyite witch hunts, intrusive surveillance, and university entanglement with police, defense, or counterintelligence bodies are clearly the wrong answers. But sharing information among colleagues, and developing best practices within universities and professional associations to ensure that doctoral students and junior scholars are given the appropriate training would be a start.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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