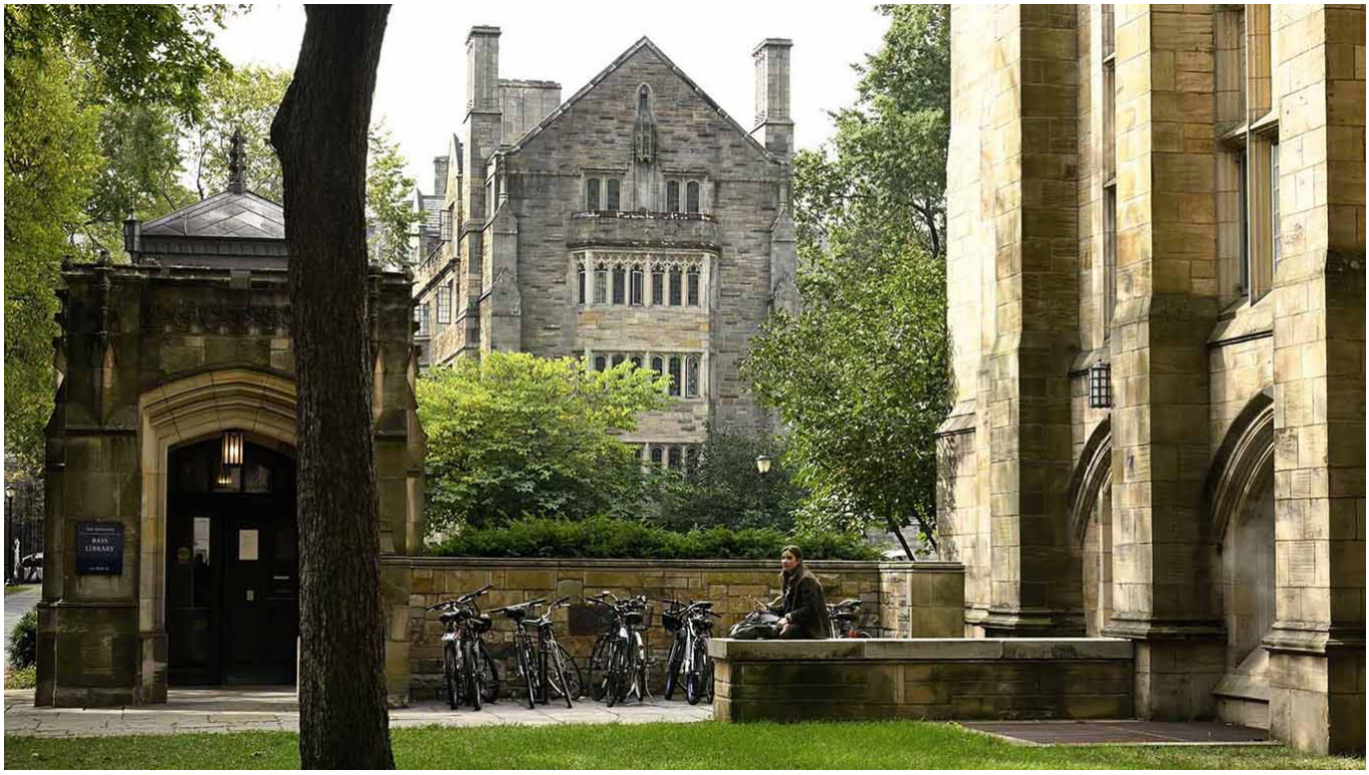
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

What Happens When Your University Is Banned in Russia?

By Charlie Hancock

July 21, 2025



The campus of Yale University. **Jessica Hill / AP / TASS**

When Yale University was banned in Russia as an "undesirable" organization this month, its faculty, administration and students were immediately put at risk of criminal prosecution. One month earlier, Brigham Young University found itself in the same position.

The two colleges are members of a small but growing number of universities whose operations have been banned in Russia since 2021, when the liberal arts school Bard College became the first university hit with the designation.

Russian academics were already threatened with reprisals for criticizing the Kremlin or working with foreign researchers. Now, foreign researchers connected to "undesirable" universities are at legal risk themselves for working in Russia.

Since the "undesirables" law was passed in 2015, dozens of universities, NGOs, think tanks,

foundations and media organizations that have documented or criticized the country's worsening human rights record and war in Ukraine have been hit with the label.

Founding or leading an undesirable organization carries a sentence of six years in prison. Repeated involvement in a banned group's activities, including merely sharing the group's content online, can lead to fines and a sentence of up to four years.

Though enforcement is in many cases not retroactive, experts say the law has a chilling effect by creating the impression that any kind of contact with a person associated with a banned organization is illegal.

"The point of the law is to scare people, and the vagueness is deliberate," Daniel Treisman, a political scientist at UCLA, told The Moscow Times. "It forces Russians to worry about any contacts they may have with Westerners or Western ideas. You link to a study by a scholar from Yale and you may be facing a five-year prison term. It's part of Putin's increasingly elaborate infrastructure of intimidation."

Related article: Russia Blacklists Yale University as 'Undesirable' Organization

In its ruling, the Russian Prosecutor General's Office accused Yale of training opposition leaders, including members of Alexei Navalny's groups, and providing justifications for international sanctions against Russia.

When Brigham Young University, which is owned by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, was proscribed in June, no reason was given.

Bard, too, had found itself in the dark about the reason for its proscription.

But faculty have presented several theories.

One suggestion was that the college was targeted for its association with billionaire philanthropist George Soros' liberal Open Society Foundation — itself "undesirable" since 2015 — and was a founding member of its network of universities focused on supporting neglected student populations. The Kremlin has accused Soros and his organizations of posing a threat to state security.

Related article: Russia's Blacklisting of Bard College Signals End of Key U.S.-Russia Cultural Exchange

After Bard announced a $500 million donation from Soros, pro-Kremlin campaigners staged a press conference in which conservative public figures warned against Soros' alleged influence in Russia's education system. The college thinks that the Kremlin views academic freedom as a threat, regardless of whose money is behind it.

Bard's president, Dr. Leon Botstein, said he believes that the liberal arts education that the partnership provided was seen as a threat.

“From the Russian point of view, the Anglo-American tradition and the freedom it supports is connected with the ability to innovate. But scholarship and learning are not autocratic enterprises — they are inherently committed to freedom and disputation and dissent,” he told The Moscow Times.

Before Bard College was banned, its dual-degree partnership with Smolny College at St. Petersburg State University (SPGU) had been an effort to introduce the tradition of liberal arts education to Russia, with hundreds of American and Russian students taking part in it.

As the Smolny program grew in popularity and SPGU’s leadership became increasingly connected with the Kremlin, Bard considered spinning Smolny out from the main university to preserve its independence.

“And then practically overnight, without warning, we were subject to an FSB investigation. And nobody knew why,” Botstein said. “We appealed to the American authorities under President Joe Biden to solve it and they couldn’t get to first base. The next thing we knew, we were declared undesirable.”

The repercussions came quickly. An American professor at SPGU who helped run the exchange with Bard, Michael Freesewas, was detained on his way to work and deported from Russia over his connections with the college.

Another aluma of the Bard-Smolny program is artist Sasha Skochilenko, who was sentenced to prison for replacing supermarket price tags with facts about the invasion of Ukraine before being freed in a historic Russia-U.S. prisoner swap last summer.

She said the program afforded students a level of intellectual freedom rarely found in Russian universities — which may be a reason it was targeted.

“It wasn’t a formal place, like other places in Russia, because it was pure freedom,” Skochilenko told The Moscow Times. “There was no hierarchy between student and professor. We openly discussed things that are nowadays kind of criminal, like Putin and his politics, and it was wonderful.”

She also credited her liberal arts education with helping her endure the two years she served in prison, where doctors feared for her health.

“The sociology program meant I knew something about people, society, jail and institutions,” she said. “I turned my imprisonment into a tremendous performance and gained status in the community. People in jails deeply appreciate good storytellers and I could help people write touching letters to their loved ones.”

Bard tried to appeal its “undesirable” designation, but received no response. It now operates the Smolny Beyond Borders program from its branch in Berlin as an online degree targeted at Russian-speaking students in the diaspora.

Brigham Young University, whose study abroad program to Russia has been suspended since the Covid-19 pandemic, is reportedly considering trying to get its listing reversed as well.

Bard still has some staff who are Russian citizens and advises them not to travel to the

country. It also still accepts students from Russia, though very few apply.

“We accept or reject students based on their qualifications,” Botstein said. “We don’t actually ask any detailed questions about a student’s nationality or family. … There is a special law that protects information on students.”

Brigham Young and Yale Universities did not respond to The Moscow Times’ questions about the measures they are taking to support their Russian students and faculty.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine restricted academics’ access to Russia, even for universities that haven’t been banned. Dozens of U.S. academics, including two from Yale, have been banned from entering the country.

Accessing state archives for research has also become increasingly complicated since the start of the war.

The Bridge Network, which connects foreign researchers with locals to collect archival material on their behalf, says that archives related to the security services and foreign policy deny the majority of access requests.

They also warn that requests to archives may be directed to the Foreign Ministry or Federal Archival Agency, delaying projects through months of bureaucracy.

Russian academics have also been targeted for working with foreign researchers. In 2023, aerospace scientist Valery Golubkin was convicted of treason and sentenced to 12 years in prison for sharing sensitive research with a partner in Belgium. The apparently secret information is reportedly available in the public domain.

Botstein said he would advise Yale and Brigham Young, as well as any other university targeted by the Kremlin, to look to the long term.

“Russia is an important place, culture and partner for us,” he said. “There’ll be a day after Putin and the loyalty shown by our Russian colleagues and citizens is extremely rewarding and touching. We believe we did real good and we’re prepared to do it again.”

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/07/21/what-happens-when-your-university-is-banned-in-russia-a89903