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Country of Research: Russia

Title of Research Proposal: Teaching Literature in the New Russian School: Modernization Initiative

Topic of Research: Russian Education

Relevance and Contribution to Field:

The research is an attempt to investigate the most recent developments in Russian education and to ascertain the success or failure of modernization initiative in the field of literature teaching. Russian literature as a whole has been undergoing a momentous change which includes a shift from Socialist realist to post-modernist models of writing, the reevaluation of the literary canon, and the rehabilitation of previously banned authors and works. The way, in which educators deal with this shift in approach to and perception of literature, is a telling indication of changing social agendas and cultural strategies. Debates about teaching of literature in schools provide a glimpse into the changing ideological milieu where high culture, public opinion and social aspirations combine in the creation of a new cultural canon. The transformation of Russia's young generation through the changes in its educational system is the proclaimed goal of the modernization reform, and the final outcome of the reform process will have a substantial impact on Russian society as a whole. The topic of research is of high relevance to the general study of the changes that Russia has experienced since the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

Approach and research methodology; list of research sites

Since my research concerns the modernization initiative in contemporary Russian education, and, more specifically, its application to the teaching of literature in a general high school, I followed several lines of inquiry in my work: legislation, textbook writing and publishing, new testing procedures, and actual lessons. Accordingly, during my grant period, I visited a number of high schools in Moscow and St. Petersburg, interviewed school principals and teachers (both in public and private schools), observed literature lessons in these schools, and participated in one round of competition for the best teacher of the year in literature. I have collected textbooks approved or recommended by the Ministry of Education for use in literature courses in high schools as well as supplementary materials, such as teachers' manuals, course plans and recommendations for writing compositions. I conducted interviews with officials responsible for evaluating new textbooks, textbook writers, with those who put together reading materials for schools, and with people who write the new Unified State Exam (USE) for high school graduates. I

obtained copies of the USE and have analyzed its various versions. In addition, I have been collecting articles in Russian educational periodicals concerning the controversy surrounding the USE, new standards in literature and new proposals for the evaluation of textbooks. I have also visited the cities of Voronezh, St. Petersburg, and Obninsk in order to see whether the situation in the regions is different from the way the reform is being implemented in the capital.

Research findings and preliminary conclusions

The material collected during the grant period is substantial; therefore, any conclusions I offer here are rather preliminary and should be viewed as such. Broadly speaking, the modernization initiative is an attempt to bring Russian education in line with its Western counterparts, without forgoing the longstanding achievements of the Imperial and Soviet educational systems. The push for internationalization, which includes standardized graduation tests, computerization, reapportioning of course loads in favor of professionally oriented curriculum, is the aspect of the modernization program that is clearly indebted to the westernizing impulse of the reform and is readily observable in today's Russian schools. Internationalization aims to ease the process of accreditation for the graduates of the Russian educational system in Western educational institutions, and legislative proposals, coming from the Presidential office, the Ministry of Education, and the Duma, have been consistent with the proclaimed goals of the reform in this area. Yet it is these aspects of the modernization that have been particularly controversial in their implementation. Standardized graduation tests, designed to combat pervasive corruption in the university admissions process by making the tests results anonymous and generally accepted, have met great resistance from the faculty and administrations of the most prominent schools. The major reason for this reluctance appears to be the fear by the major universities of losing the control over the admissions process which would deny the faculty opportunities to earn additional remuneration for tutoring and, as often is the case, to ease the process of admission for those high school graduates who can bribe their way into the universities. Reshuffling of the school curriculum to accommodate the need for professionally "desirable" school subjects has angered many dedicated teachers in the humanities. In order to make school curriculum consistent with university entrance requirements and with the USE, the government introduced a "content minimum" based upon established standards for each course, and accelerated courses in the last two years of study in some disciplines. This set of measures has been vociferously debated over in the press and among educational practitioners, primarily because the new standards appear too vague in their stated objectives and too skewed toward the hard sciences at the expense of the humanities.

Enhancing quality of education and its effectiveness is one of the objectives of the modernization program, yet, in my opinion, this goal appears to be still unreachable in today's Russian school. The learner-based instruction designed to shape schoolchildren into critically thinking, self-aware, and democratically inclined

citizens, envisioned by the reformers in the late 1980s and promoted by the crafters of the modernization initiative, is not yet in evidence in most schools I visited. There are many dedicated teachers of literature who are passionate about their work, and some of them are truly original in their teaching approaches. Yet most of the classes I observed differed only slightly (basically in the literary canon that was being studied) from the way business was conducted in the Soviet era—memorization of lecture and textbook material followed by the student's presentation of the same. What is truly surprising and encouraging is that, despite the miserable salaries that teachers get and the astounding teaching loads they have to assume to make ends meet, there are still some genuinely innovative educators who subscribe fully to the goals of the "humanized school" and who bring their vision into the classroom. They have to do this work despite the dearth of textbooks in the humanities which support the "humanized" approach. In 2005 the system of evaluation and approval for high school textbooks underwent a considerable reorganization, signaling a move back toward centralization of the process and greater governmental control over textbook publishing. Two major publishing houses, Prosveshchenie and Drofa, are now responsible for the publication of the majority of the textbooks approved or recommended for use in high schools. The Federal Expert Council, which relied in its textbook evaluation on peer review and the combined efforts of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAN) and the Russian Education Academy (RAO), is now disbanded, its work being done by RAN, the body which includes or is associated with some of the very authors who submit their books for evaluation. The textbooks themselves appear to be slightly revised versions of the books published before the modernization initiative, which themselves were revised versions of the volumes published before perestroika.

The majority of the people involved in the implementation of the modernization program agree that the most successful part of the reform so far has been the introduction of the USE. The exam offers an opportunity for many students outside the two capitals to have a fair chance of entering major universities and is an instrument which, if properly crafted, can help revive school curriculum and, in the humanities, require reliance on those competencies which are needed in today's world.

Future research agendas

I have already started working on an article dedicated to the implementation of the education reform for *Slavic and East European Journal*. I plan to write an article about the 1920s literary debates next (something that I also worked on while in Russia). Modernization of Russian education is the topic of a monograph that I hope to start working on after the completion of the two articles.

Policy recommendations

The monopolization of textbook publishing by a handful of publishing houses and the centralization of the textbook evaluation process, consistent, in my view, with the general tightening of controls in Putin's Russia, are the two interrelated developments that need further attention. The introduction of the USE appears to be the only real positive outcome of the reform so far, but its success depends completely on the conformity of the exam with the educational standards that are still being established and on changing the attitudes of the major institutions of higher learning. The state of the educational reform in Russia is very much in flux and should be studied further.