

If winter comes, can spring be far behind?

— Percy Bysshe Shelley



ear's beginning is a good time to reflect on the upcoming plans, and we gladly invite the readers to learn more about HSE's involvement in online education and cooperation with universities in Russia's regions.

Traditionally, we also get a chance to learn more about research interests of international postdoctoral fellows working at HSE, and they tell us about research in history and nation-building, as well as about how to measure the influence of peers at schools on each other's academic performance. To inspire you to explore the holiday season in Moscow, our columnist write about the special charm of the city's winter, which we hope you will experience for yourself.

Yulia Grinkevich
Director for Internationalisation

Center of Excellence

*The HSE Look is glad to present the second part of the interview with Rector **Yaroslav Kuzminov**, originally taken by our flagship bulletin **Okna Rosta**. This part focuses on new educational tools as well as old traditions, on cooperation with regional universities and the transformations to be achieved in the upcoming decade.*

Online lectures and online education are among the most discussed topics both within HSE University and in the media. It is fair to say that the academic community has become quite divided on the subject. Proponents of face-to-face lectures often recall the essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' by Walter Benjamin to support their argument. They say that without traditional lectures, which possess a special kind of authenticity, similar

to works of art, the university cannot retain its identity as an educational institution. On the other hand, opponents of face-to-face lectures point out that they are routine, outdated as a format and are not very well attended by students. There are also other concerns being voiced, such as the potential loss of contracts due to reduction of teaching hours, or the quality of infrastructure needed to implement a successful digital classroom.

Are online lectures and online education a manifestation of broad systemic transformations in the education as a whole?

Or are they a more local story, so to speak - in HSE's case, a specific tool meant to facilitate teaching a greater number of students?

What can be said to alleviate the existing concerns of academic staff and students alike?

Online lectures are only the tip of the iceberg in terms of what digitalisation has to offer to the education. The first steps in such digitalisation seem to be the loudest. I firmly believe that it is not just a quirk of HSE University, but an inevitable future for all institutions. And it is not in itself antagonistic to traditional forms of teaching which you talked about.

At HSE we have sufficient resources to keep alive everything that is supported by students and the academic community. If a colleague enjoys giving lectures, if the students eagerly engage in dialogue with them, nobody is going to cancel such courses.

It is good to remember that it's not enough for us as teachers to love giving lectures, we need reciprocity from students. Unfortunately, not every teacher can claim this to be true. Education is not a one-way street, with knowledge flowing in one direction.

Lectures attended by five students out of many give very little in terms of genuine interaction and knowledge acquisition, and are an affront against common sense. We can find a better format for such talks or consultations rather than lectures with physical attendance.

The point of introducing online courses into our education model is similar to any digital tool, and that is to replace what we do not enjoy, i.e. routine repetitions which require similarly routine tests. Usually, unless we are strictly required, we try to minimize or skip such activities.

They are dull and we presume them to be unworthy of our time. Most undergraduate degrees do not even offer lectures for third or fourth year students, instead focusing on seminars and practical problem-solving tasks, and that is true not only for HSE but for other universities as well.

That is why online courses will consist of lectures that explain the basic concepts of the subject and thus should not be skipped. Such a course will help students to be better prepared for the active work during seminars and will help to identify the core of the audience who are most interested in the topic. It might turn out to be only a third of the initial audience, or 10%, or 2 students who will continue communicating

with the lecturer, and it's all right. Professors will be able to engage in teaching more complex and interesting topics rather than give repetitive introductory lectures, and students will get a more personalized education of better quality.

Do you think it is possible that in a relatively near future digital education tools will replace traditional classroom work fully or to a great extent?

In mass education traditional forms will certainly be replaced by digital ones. At Higher School of Economics as well as other research universities they will never completely replace face-to-face learning because our courses are taught by researchers who are very good in their fields.

We do not have any rationale for diminishing the contact of our students with our faculty members. On the contrary, if a university does not have enough staff who can provide good quality of teaching, it makes a lot of sense for them to substitute some of its courses for online versions provided by top universities. It might be the only chance for their students to learn from a researcher in a specific field, maybe even to reach out to this researcher about continuing their graduate or postgraduate studies.

HSE University, Moscow State University, Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology, and other top research institutions - we do not need to overcome this challenge. That is why I don't think that teaching at HSE will change radically.

In addition, though, our students can take courses from Yale, Harvard, Freie Universität Berlin, St Petersburg State University, etc. to enhance what our academic staff offers. Some students want to take the same subject from different universities, so as to compare details and gain a different perspective, we already know there's an interest in this.

During my own studies I used to read different textbooks so as to create a more stereoscopic picture of the problem. Others might just want to have a taste of a different university for a small price of one online course and its certificate.

For the first time HSE Development Programme places a heavy emphasis on our university actively contributing to the advancement of education systems in Russian regions. In the past couple of years HSE has already launched a programme for postdoctoral fellows from Russian universities to boost academic mobility within the country, but what are the new

forms of cooperation that the Development Programme envisages? Would you say that regional universities are looking forward to these new cooperation opportunities?

I would like to recall that newly established HSE would not be what it is without the assistance and support programmes of London School of Economics, Sorbonne, and Erasmus University Rotterdam. We know very well what it means to be a university which learns from others, and now we are making our first steps in becoming similar mentors in return. I think there is nothing wrong with seeking and accepting assistance and guidance from those who have already developed good and innovative practices.

There are many colleagues in the regions who are already cooperating with us or who are looking forward to setting up such initiatives. Of course, there are many of those who are in doubt or think it's a Trojan horse of some kind, but there's nothing to be done about that.

Will there be 'pilot regions' specially selected for implementing such programmes with regional universities?

I am certain there will be, because we have good working relations with several governors, and we also have active goodwill on the part of the Ministry of Education and Science. However, we don't want to launch the programme with such top-down approach. We would like to begin by welcoming teachers who are genuinely interested in this cooperation and mobility opportunities rather than were delegated by their universities. It is going to create a much more organic start of the programme, and any kind of liaising with regional authorities and ministries might wait till 2021.

How HSE in ten years will differ from today? What are the key points, based on what the university commits to under the new Development Programme? How can we make sure that we are moving in the right direction?

We have talked about one of such key changes which is easily measurable, and that is the organic growth of the university (read The HSE Look 3(43), November 2019 for the first part of the interview).

Another key development that can and should be traced is establishing centers of excellence. Their aim is to be academically attractive on a global scale for colleagues from the top universities, and they will have the resources

to invite visiting scholars. I believe we have several research centers which could try to achieve that, such as Faculty of Mathematics, Institute of Education, Institute for Statistical Studies and Economics of Knowledge, and Center for Institutional Studies. Some of them will flourish in this regard, some might not, but HSE is already attracting quite interesting researchers as visiting academics. I think centers of excellence are a symbolic thing which shows whether you are an interesting destination for other academics to simply collaborate and work side by side.

Most of the other measurable results are the ones we are already used to monitoring, such as the percentage of international students, quality of publications and their citations. We can plan how to improve these things, of course, but they are not new.

I think one of the most important changes will concern the contracts with academic staff. HSE has been relying greatly on several tools which help to promote the desirable behavior and standards, such as bonuses for top-tier publications and for getting the 'best teacher' award, as well as the research productivity assessment. I think that over the next ten years the biggest leap will be from using these tools which force people to comply with certain standards to conditions which simply help to put to paper productive behaviors which our academic colleagues already practice. We are planning to switch for longer contracts (three and five years) and award more long-term bonuses for achievements (currently most of them are for one year only).

This will help to bridge the conditions for our academic staff with those in Western universities which we are trying to compete and benchmark with. It is going to be a huge shift, so that we no longer need special tools to push people do better, but the very quality of the academic community will be helping them advance. Such is the nature of great environments: it would be strange to work at Harvard, Chicago, or Lausanne university and stop moving forward, and we want HSE to attain the same quality, to keep getting better. People do not come to work for Apple in order to slack off, and this is the drive we are looking for. We need to keep asking ourselves whether we are moving towards this goal or not, and if specific things bring us closer or farther from it.

And it creates a different image of HSE as a university: with greater freedom and confidence. We need to overcome the era of self-doubt; after all HSE has been created by researchers for researchers, and we still are not feeling entirely great in our university home. So I am really hoping that by the time I am 70 years old, we will finally achieve what I intuitively envisioned when I was 35, and that I will still be a part of this academic community while not being at the helm of HSE.



Studying History and Nation-Building in Borderlands

Alexandr Voronovici, a second year postdoctoral research fellow at the International Centre for the History and Sociology of World War II and Its Consequences, shared his experience of teaching transnational perspective on Soviet history to HSE students.

What are your research interests in general and what are the projects that you are working on right now?

More generally I am interested in nation-building, and more generally 'the national question' and the history of this issue in the borderlands, particularly in the contested territories in Eastern and Central Europe. Currently I am doing two projects. One is more historical - on Soviet and Bolshevik approach to and instrumentalization of the national question on the western border. Another project is more interdisciplinary - on memory politics in separatist republics of Donbas and Transnistria. I am looking at how separatist regimes are trying to use history in their policies and discourses to legitimize themselves externally and internally, and in political struggles.

In Transnistria it has been already going on for thirty years and in Donbas for the last 5 years. I am trying to compare these two cases, and, in my opinion, they have an interesting phenomenon in common. For that I am analyzing speeches, official documents, history textbooks and historical publications to see how they instrumentalize history for political goals; also visual data, monuments - which monuments are being erected, preserved or removed.

How do you work with history textbooks?

We take history textbooks from schools and universities and try to understand what kind of narrative they are building: which periods of history and features of the region they are emphasizing and in which way, what part of the population they are elevating or downgrading or hiding.

It is interesting to trace how textbooks are constructing the historical account as a separate entity in relation to the parent state (i.e. the state from which the region is trying to secede) and what role they ascribe to the separatist state in the larger context. Some of these things are changing over

time in history textbooks because internal and international circumstances change, different people are coming to power, different ideas become popular on international or local scale.

There can be contesting viewpoints among politicians and historians alike even in a supposedly quite small region like Transnistria, for instance, providing the researchers with competing narratives in publications, public speeches or interviews to study.

Is this what you teach this semester?

The course I am teaching is titled "The Soviet Union and the World: Comparative and Transnational Perspectives on Soviet History". With this course I am trying to give a broader international perspective on Soviet history to demonstrate how Soviet Union was - even though we have this general perception that Soviet Union was an internationally quite isolated state - was very much interconnected with the outside world.

And this is what historical studies in the last couple of decades very much contributed to and developed on. The course was designed to give the students a more international view on Soviet history; how Soviet Union and Soviet actors were interacting with the outside world all the time- sometimes through people, sometimes through ideas. Another element of this course was to give international history of communism outside of the Soviet Union as, of course, it is very much interconnected with it.

What are your general impressions of the course and what are some challenges that you have encountered?

There were many historians in my class so they know enough things about the Soviet Union, some even more than me, but the background knowledge across the class really varies and

some do not know very basic things. So it is a very large and diverse classroom, and I have both Russian and international students as well, including some from the former socialist countries. International students are very interested in the region and they know Russian and Soviet history quite well.

They are often quite fluent in English, too. I have also noticed that some of HSE students have a decent level of English in written papers but find it challenging to respond quickly in classroom or engage into discussions. But I think it is a good experience and practice for them.

It was actually good that the group was so diverse. It is an opportunity for HSE students to hear other people not from their region, share different perspectives and get into discussion with them, see how the same text can be approached in a variety of ways. Even simply communicating is good, as this experience of being in an international community is enriching. You start questioning a lot of things which you have taken for granted, especially when you have not travelled a lot before.

And you start to understand what has been taken for granted in your culture and at home - and that it is not necessarily true in other places. In that sense your horizon is widening.

It is wonderful that HSE students have an opportunity here - with a lot of international students coming in, international faculty coming in, and also HSE students have a chance to travel abroad through various programs. It is a unique opportunity for them not just professionally but personally.

What are the opportunities you are gaining from HSE that help you to develop your research?

There are many benefits. First of all, geographical location. Moscow is great for me because central Soviet archives are here. Since I am also studying Ukrainian and Moldovan history – Soviet republican and regional archives are also important, but Moscow holds the archives of the central Soviet bodies.

For instance, many of my colleagues in the West have to travel once a year or every two years for several weeks in archives. And I basically stay here all the time and can use the documents from archives any time I want to when I am not writing articles or teaching.

The other great moment is that my center - the International Center for History and Sociology of WWII and Its Consequences - has some of the leading specialists in Russia and the world on Soviet history. Oleg Khlevnyuk, for example, is one of the leading specialists on Stalin and Stalinism. He

basically knows everything we know about Stalin. Also the director of the center Oleg Budnitsky is a specialist on World War I, Revolution, Interwar period, and World War II. We really have a group of people who are very close to my research and amazing specialists in the field in general and internationally. In addition, we have external international members who are fellows at our center and come from time to time, such as Michael David-Fox or Lynne Viola. They are globally recognized specialists on Soviet history, and they come for conferences or to give a short course at HSE.

In addition to that, almost all major specialists on Soviet and Russian history are passing by Moscow often and give a talk at our Center. In that sense it is an amazing opportunity to communicate with some of the best specialists in the field who are arriving for their research in the archives or some other events and take the time to visit HSE as well.

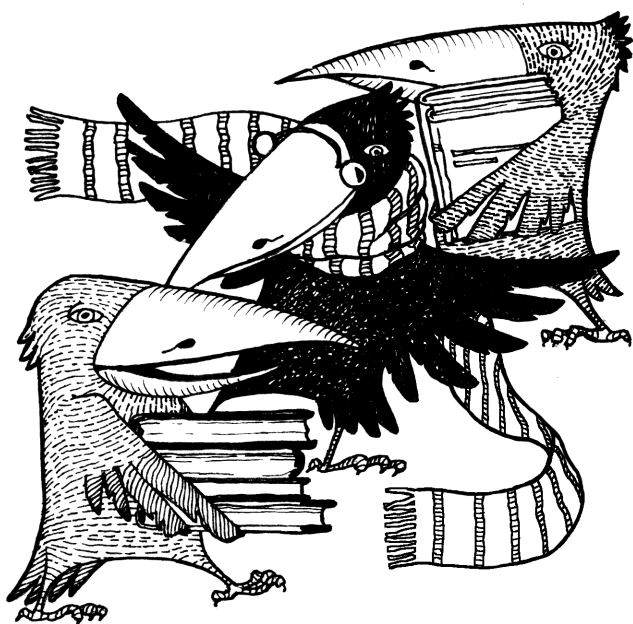
If we look through the HSE mailbox, there are always some great researchers giving a talk, as well as opportunities to find events in Moscow offered by other platforms, universities and institutes. Moscow is a global city, and academically it gives a lot of opportunities, especially for those who study the region.

Another great opportunity here is to meet your international colleagues, other postdocs like me. I made friends with several people from other fields with whom we are discussing various issues, from string theory to economic development. I enjoy the opportunities to meet people from other places both to discuss academic issues and also to make friends.

Is there anything you think you could recommend to new international faculty members who just joined HSE?

I would say first of all one has to ask coordinators what opportunities are available. Sometimes we realize too late there were calls to get funding for a conference or something like that. One should also take bureaucratic procedures into consideration when planning how to use funds or business trips. Sometimes it takes a bit of time to make it happen, and it is normal, we just need to not assume our previous experience from other universities applies precisely.

So I would advise to ask your coordinators or international faculty support center who are here to help us with such things. It is also important to start early discussing the possibilities of collaboration with your colleagues at HSE. Historians especially tend to stick to their own research and sometimes they feel comfortable like that, but it is possible to push things a bit further and explore more opportunities together.



Economics of Education

Bernardo Pincheira is a Research Fellow at the International Research Laboratory for Institutional Analysis of Economic Reforms, Center for Institutional Studies.

Having graduated from the University of Nottingham with a PhD in Economics, Dr. Pincheira shared his interest in Economics of Education and peer effects in the classroom.

What is your academic background and how did you decide on your field of study?

My BA was a mix of business, administration and economics; I wrote my thesis on transport economics that was a hot topic in Chile back then. For postgraduate studies, I wanted to do a program in an English-speaking country and the UK seemed the most appealing place.

At the moment of applying for Master's, I knew I wanted to do a postgraduate in economics, even though I did not yet have a clear idea of which subfield. In the first semester, we had to do a project of data analysis and that was the first time I did something in the field of education. Although I did my PhD in Economics, my research topic was on the application of economics to the field of education. My thesis related to "peer effects" – or how peers affect one's own outcomes.

Before that, I was doing data analysis on Chile, studying how at the school level classmates have or do not have an impact on one's own learning. The overall idea is to use tools from empirical analysis – econometrics in my case – to analyze some features of education and try to see if you can come up with policy recommendations to improve educational systems based on those results. Thus, right now I am basically working at the intersection of two fields, namely Economics and Education, at the Center of Institutional Studies.

Can you tell more about your research on peer effects?

General idea is that having smarter peers is helpful. If we think of mechanisms behind it - there are many possible reasons. One of the arguments could be that if you struggle with the course, your classmates can help you. In the long run you will perform better. Also, you learn more because smarter peers can ask smarter questions in class. Another reason that is being researched currently is competition - when one cares not only about his absolute achievements, but also about ranking. Let's say you are at the top of your class and then someone very smart comes to the school and now she is the top of your class. You want to recover your first place and for that reason you study more.

To measure the effect students receive from peers, I first look for the average peer effect and then try to look at the size of this effect depending on whether one is at the lower part of the distribution of scores, at the middle or at the top. What my research shows is that students in the middle are those who benefit less. Students at the bottom or at the top benefit more as they are more sensitive to which peers surround them. If one is in the middle, he still will benefit from having better peers, but not that much.

At least that is what my research shows.

How does the Center for Institutional Studies help you to develop your research?

Compared to other people working in the laboratory, I come from a more purely quantitative background. Many of my colleagues use sociological and other research methods of social sciences, and that helps me to put a bit of human feelings into my numbers.

When I presented my research at the seminar organized by the Laboratory for Institutional Analysis of Economic Reforms the first question of my supervisor was ‘What is the story behind all these numbers?’ and this is something I still need to work on more. Because in the end behind these numbers I am trying to present are children and how they learn.

The institute has more people working a bit more on education than on economics, and economics is one of the tools that is used to analyze it. I am very happy and actually, this is something that was one of my motivations to come here.

When I present my research to a non-pure economics audience, the main criticism is always that we economists think we know everything and there is no need to study any other disciplines of social sciences.

Here it has been quite helpful since I can interact with people who have similar research interests but come from a different background so they can give me another view, which in the end enhances my research.

Also, the Center for Institutional Studies organize research seminars with speakers every week. After I presented my research project, a researcher from Saint-Petersburg campus contacted me even though he could not attend the seminar.

As he is interested in the same area as I do, maybe we will try to do something together. In my research so far I have used a more traditional approach, in which I look at the whole classroom as my reference - though in reality this is a simplification because if you are surrounded by 30 people, it is unlikely that you will interact in exactly the same way with other 29.

You will have closer friends. The colleague from St. Petersburg is trying to study the same issue of peer effects but with networks. These network groups are identified through asking students questions like “Who are you friends” or “which friends you study with”.

You then can look at a smaller group where peers are more relevant for you.

What are some other projects that you will be working on this year?

I am also starting a research on Russian school pupils who are in the grade when they start preparing for the Unified State Exam before going to university.

The data I am analyzing is from the TREC project (trajectories in education and careers), which is a longitudinal study. The project team followed students from the 9th grade onwards - 9th and 11th grades, and then when they went to university.

They collected students’ grades in schools, for their final exam, and then the unified state exam. As for those students who also worked while being in school, data was collected on how much they worked.

The project also collected information about parents’ background, such as higher education attainment, family income, some measures of social capital such as books available at home.

The project organized by HSE traced 4000 pupils across Russia and every year or every two years they surveyed them.

They collect data not only on their grades but also employment and further education trajectories, for example, some students were not working in the beginning of 11th grade but then started to work. During that year. And then not all students went to university as some joined the labor market right after school.

Another project our Center has just started recently is a study of HSE students in Perm campus. I am trying to use the network approach to study peer effects there. In Perm students were asked “who do you work with”, “who are you friends”, to help identify their networks and social capital.

With so many projects to implement, do you have time to explore Moscow?

I am more of an outdoors person, so I like to explore by bike. I brought my bicycle from UK and am using it to come to work. I like to cycle around Sokolniki Park as it is the closest park to my dormitory, but I have also been to parts further north.

At least twice a week I like to cycle along Moscow River and Luzhniki before going home. Sometimes I also go to Sokolniki Park to play chess at the small chess club there. The rules are clear so no specific knowledge of Russian language is needed.



Discovering HSE and Russia

*In this issue, we present a column by Blair Dunbar,
Editor at HSE Expert Translation Centre*

“How do you like our Moscow winters? Isn’t it cold for you?”

With either an eye roll or a slight smile I respond, “I grew up in Chicago. I can handle it.”

To be more accurate, I grew up in a small suburb located about an hour and half west of the Windy City, a town of about 20,000 people. While Russian winters may be the stuff of legends (what else could’ve defeated Napoleon), my hometown still knows what a real winter is like.

My early childhood is replete with memories of praying for a snow day, shoveling driveways, scraping ice off cars, and digging through plastic containers overflowing with gloves, neck warmers, scarves, and even face masks. While at university in Evanston, another Chicago suburb, we famously received three days off classes after the temperature hit -29 degree Celsius (windchill not included).

That’s why, when I first studied in Moscow as a college junior, and November gave way to December, I was prepared for the snow. I was prepared for the chill. I was even prepared for the slush. I wasn’t prepared for the vibrance.

Where I’m from, there is a tendency to hibernate. Sure, my town hosts the annual Christmas Walk that includes the ceremonial tree lighting, bake sales, and house tours. Sure, you can spot the occasional group of children speeding down Settler’s Hill. You’ll even see a few runners brave the cold along the River Walk. But, as a whole, winter is quiet.

Moscow is a city that is never completely quiet-particularly if you know where to look. And you don’t have to look far, considering a freshly decorated Christmas tree towers above the sprawling Christmas market next to GUM, right in the center of the city.

Not too far away, the massive Gorky Park, which just a few months ago was host to beach volleyball courts, ping-pong tables, bicycle rentals and outdoor dance classes, is magically transformed into a 20,000 square km ice skating rink. In fact, it’s as if half the city transforms into an ice-skating rink – in

2018, there were nearly 1,500 artificial and nature ice-skating rinks throughout the city.

More amazing though, is the number of people who venture outside sans skis, ice skates, or snowboards.

Botanicheskiy Sad, located to the north of the city, is covered in an ever-increasing layer of snow from December till late March. In other words, the pavement literally disappears, and you’re walking on padded down snow. Yet, pick any Sunday and you’ll see groups of families going for long walks, dedicated cyclists making good use of their snow tires, and runners hoping they won’t slip and fall (myself included). For as much as Russians tend to complain about the cold, it’s a bit amazing to me the number who refuse to let chill or sunless days disrupt their weekend plans.

My favorite part, though, are the lights. When I was a child, some of my favorite Christmases were spent with my grandparents in Des Moines, Iowa. My grandma had no fewer than four Christmas trees in her house, and she would rent out an entire bus for the sole purpose of touring the elaborate and extensive Christmas light installations set up by the city. In Moscow, a bus would be superfluous. The lights are everywhere. They line the walls of the city’s largest ice-skating rinks. Snowflakes and stars dangle above my head as I walk the cobbled streets next to Okhotny Ryad. Pay attention, and you can watch the trees change colors as you walk from Chistyye Prudy to HSE. And when those lights are set against a backdrop of freshly fallen snow? Well, it’s just gorgeous – a site that speaks to the romantic in me.

There’s special lifeblood to Moscow winters, one that I love. It’s like the city has dual personalities: summer and winter. Sure, the latter is darker, gloomier, and marked by significantly more grumbling, but it’s also a time when the superficiality and touristy veneer are stripped away. Calm wins the battle over bustle, and I get to reclaim the city that convinced me to uproot my life and move across the Atlantic.