

## Political Alienation in Anti-Democratic Education

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In this paper, I intend to examine the problem of political alienation in authoritarian educational models via a case study of contemporary Russian education.

### THE RELEVANCE OF STUDYING POLITICAL ALIENATION IN RUSSIAN EDUCATION

A preliminary review of relevant studies indicates that the issue of alienation is widespread in historical-philosophical, social, and political studies.<sup>1</sup> The issue of alienation in Hannah Arendt appears to be a narrower and more specialized one. There is much less research on this topic. Jonathan Roessler follows the logic of Arendt's research and consistently unfolds her concept of the alienation of the world. This concept is part of the body of research on the issue of alienation, yet simultaneously serves as a meaning-forming concept for understanding Hannah Arendt's account of interaction between individuals and society, and for grasping the essence of politics: "The difference between Marx's and Arendt's approach on alienation lies again in Arendt's particular understanding of the world."<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, the topic of political alienation in education receives very little attention, despite the fact that the modern world in many countries is faced with anti-democratic manifestations of the political system.

In the history of thought, there are numerous interpretations of alienation—a concept that evolved with changing understandings of the relationship between individuals and society. Rahel Jaeggi's book *Alienation* highlights the diversity of approaches. I will not delve into it in detail, as it is not the focus of this paper. Instead, I propose relying on Jaeggi's definition and understanding of alienation, as it most comprehensively reflects the anthropological aspect, emphasizing the personal perspective of the alienation problem. The author writes, "alienation is the inability to establish a relation to other human beings, to things, to social institutions and thereby also—to oneself."<sup>3</sup> Thus, an alienated person finds themselves lost: losing connection with the present, society, and, at times, with themselves. They also become isolated, as the state of being lost

is an existential challenge, leading the individual to confront themselves, alone, with the sense of loss.

The case of modern Russia is an example of the tight alignment between the political and the educational, as the more anti-democratic a country becomes, the more it embeds those views into its educational agenda. The process of alienation affects the development of critical thinking and the ability to evaluate the current situation. At the same time, the war in Ukraine magnifies the whole set of Russian educational issues. As a theoretical framework, I propose to apply Arendt's notion of political to education, drawing upon the case of contemporary Russia.

Modern education in Russia turned out to be dependent on the political agenda, constrained by unified content standards and an approach to assessing historical and social reality. Teachers are obliged to deliver patriotic education programs, in which the invasion of Ukraine is interpreted in a very specific manner.

The teaching staff is naturally filtered: only those who, for various reasons, are willing to conform to the rules of the proposed game remain employed. At the same time, it is evident that, personally, people can condemn what is happening, but are forced to conform to the ideological format. In fact, we see a process of political alienation, whereby the teacher, following the rules, ignores, alienates their political opinion, and reduces it to something insignificant. Expressing a concrete opinion shaped by, yet not representing, the state agenda is also intolerable. This is one side of political alienation: when a person has learned to form an opinion and is capable of political articulation, but does not do so due to external circumstances.

As for children, the problem is amplified by the fact that, given such methods of education (ideological filtering and prohibition of alternative agendas), silence becomes a natural form of social practice for them. This represents a form of political alienation that ignores the need to develop a critical attitude toward power and the social order, which for Arendt, is a natural and necessary part of the anthropological (the articulation of the political in society). Generations of children, educated in the routine of alienating the political, constitute a society, or, more correctly, a mass of society, utterly inert

with regard to the political situation in the country and the world, in ignorance of the power structures and censorship of their leaders. This is expressed in a low percentage of voters at elections and weak protest moods. Because in such a society, the idea of politics as a special kind of activity, a dirty business, that does not concern ordinary people is indoctrinated. However, the fact that there are no specific institutions of higher education that prepare presidents should indicate that people with relevant experience become politicians. Therefore, politics is a matter of the people first and foremost. The case of Russia is a vivid illustration of the nature and consequences of political alienation.

I define the issues to be investigated as follows:

- To clarify how Hannah Arendt's notion of alienation fits into the field of education;
- To trace how war transformations in Russian education are shaping political alienation;
- To formulate who is responsible (and to what extent) for alienation in the educational process.

I will reveal the existential aspect of alienation through the articulation of the concept of isolation and justify the paradox associated with the fact that isolation has a dual nature and is not always a condition for the implementation of the atomization policy of anti-democratic forces.

#### WORLD ALIENATION IN HANNAH ARENDT

Following Jaeggi, I tend to consider the problem of alienation in the history of thought in a non-homogeneous way. She writes in *Alienation* that after Hegel, two lines of thought developed: one, the concept of alienation as an economic and social phenomenon; the other, that of Kierkegaard, Heidegger and, I would add here, Arendt, as inauthenticity, based on "the distinction between existence (Existenz) and being present-at-hand or, as Sartre puts it, between essence and existence."<sup>4</sup>

It is precisely the second line of understanding of alienation that is closer to my research. It can be summarized in its most complete form by using a brief digest of Heidegger's concept: "alienation means both making oneself into a thing and adapting oneself to others in what one does."<sup>5</sup> It is

the anthropological and ethical aspects of the problem of alienation that are fundamentally important for my study, rather than the economic and social background. Therefore, I will not talk about all historical and philosophical concepts of alienation and their distinctions, but I will focus on those that turn out to be the most relevant for describing the process of political alienation in education in the case of present-day Russia.

As a theoretical framework for examining the second approach to understanding alienation, I use Hannah Arendt and her idea of world alienation, which is most fully articulated in *The Human Condition*. However, she does not formulate the definition in a conclusive form, but rather outlines the scope and ways of applying the concept.

According to Arendt, the loss of a common world, namely the space of political communication, leads to the transformation of communities into mass societies and of individuals into uniform singularities that, being alone, constitute a mass. The masses are flexible and malleable material for the incorporation of any ideology, as Arendt notes: "...with the emergence of mass society, the realm of the social has finally, after several centuries of development, reached the point where it embraces and controls all members of a given community equally and with equal strength."<sup>6</sup>

She formulates the alienation of the world as the atrophy of the space of visibility and the withering away of common sense. What, then, does this mean? World alienation occurs when two existential conditions are violated: the loss of stability in the world of mundane things, which leads to disorientation and loneliness; the loss of reality, which leads to distrust in the senses and a lack of understanding regarding the meaning behind phenomena. All this deprives the individual of his ability to reveal himself to the world. In a situation of such disorientation, it is easy to manipulate a person, to indoctrinate them with various ideas. Especially when we are talking about children, who are most vulnerable to these processes due to their immaturity and dependence on adults.

Hannah Arendt's anthropological ideas are equally relevant for understanding political and educational contexts. Quite often in contemporary society these spheres are interdependent. Schools and universities educate future politicians, who can then influence subsequent generations by controlling the

formation, selection, and transmission of ideas.

The Good of the educational process, both historically and currently, consists of democratic values, among which is the development of the individual and their capacity for self-disclosure. For Arendt, this development is possible only through the creation of a society, a common communication space. In the context of the authoritarian model of education, democratic values do not disappear, but remain in the background, becoming an ornament, an illusion devoid of genuine content. The educational process undergoes a stage of sterilization (purification from the possibility of expressing a political opinion that differs from the officially accepted one), after which values and ideas ideologically important for the power and maintenance of the regime are infused into it. The humanities academic sphere suffers first and foremost, as it is particularly sensitive to the presence of alternative points of view.

These processes are evident in contemporary Russia, where school and university education are undergoing radical rather than gradual changes (for example, the imposition of ideological courses such as, “The Foundations of Russian Statehood,” and “Conversations on the Important Things,” and the rewriting of history textbooks). According to Arendt, society ceases to exist when the space for political will disappears for any freely expressed opinion.

This is exactly what we are witnessing in Russia: Russian society today has ceased to exist; it has divided into communities on the principle of “for” and “against.” Those who oppose the regime have emigrated or are forced to hide their opinions. This is precisely how Arendt illustrates the deprivation of community and identity. In such an environment, people willingly and uncomplainingly accept any ideological doctrine. Education in this situation is no longer supposed to be about the development of the free individual. The individual is transformed from a full participant in the educational process into an object of manipulation.

#### POLITICAL ALIENATION AS WORLD ALIENATION

In this section, I aim to explore why Arendt considers world alienation to be essentially political alienation and how this is dangerous for society, and how education in authoritarian systems uses this as an instrument of social management.

It is well known that Arendt, following Plato, considers action and speech to be truly political in human society. She writes about this in her work *The Human Condition*.<sup>7</sup>

Speech and action are what make each person unique. “Speech and action reveal this unique distinctness. Through them, men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct; they are modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but *qua* men.” Thus, the ability to speak, which is an expression of oneself in the political space of communication according to Arendt, is a necessary and inalienable human quality: “In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice.”<sup>8</sup>

Accordingly, by depriving individuals of the opportunity to express themselves in society through independent speech, we are faced with the disintegration of society, with people turning into atoms, which form a mass. Where identities are absent, there is no possibility of speaking and being heard. By muting an important anthropological component – the ability to speak politically – a person turns from a “who” into a “what,” into an object that can be easily influenced ideologically. At the level of education, a similar limitation on the possibility of political participation is the absence of any possibility of choice or its decorative nature: the choice of discipline, the head of the group, or the menu in the canteen. After all, political participation also implies a smaller scale of action.

The lack of basic choice at the worldview level creates a sense of helplessness in influencing political processes. We can even point to the absence of the very need to express the political in this case. Authoritarian education turns people into convenient and unified singularities.

The subject of the educational process alienates its political ability, which is immanent to social being; in an authoritarian environment, it simply has no opportunity to develop. Alienation invariably leads to the subject’s frustration and the emergence of a sense of loneliness. After all, the possibility to associate in groups requires active speech. In an environment with low enthusiasm for the

political, it is easy to be left alone with the feeling that the opinion of one means nothing, that it is impossible to influence any social processes in society. This situation invariably leads generations of people to be skeptical about issues of elected government in general and participation in political elections in particular.

Arendt distinguishes isolated being as solitude and loneliness. “Thinking, existentially speaking, is a solitary but not a lonely business; solitude is that human situation in which I keep myself company. Loneliness comes about when I am alone without being able to split up into the two-in-one, without being able to keep myself company, when, as Jaspers used to say, ‘I am in default of myself’ (*ich bleibe mir aus*), or, to put it differently, when I am one and without company.”<sup>9</sup> The first state is similar to the romantic type of solitude, when I keep myself company; it is the state of a philosopher. The second type paints a negative scenario, where there is no possibility to keep myself company, which leads to an inability to reflect, to a lack of thinking. This type of loneliness is destructive to the individual.

The indoctrination process in antidemocratic education is precisely aimed at shaping loneliness.

Is it possible to overcome alienation and loneliness and how? This is something to think about in the next section.

#### CRITICAL THINKING AND THE PREVENTION OF ALIENATION

Anti-democratic power structures breed loneliness, but nonetheless, there are ways to transform loneliness into solitude, creating an opportunity to resist ideology and the formation of closed-mindedness. Societal transformation and changing the situation are possible through education, as it is potentially the most effective platform for shaping the future. I am convinced that in the context of suppressing any free thought in Russia and atomizing those who dissent from the state order, those who manage to find themselves not lonely but solitary within this atomization are the main force of resistance.

If one of the important missions of democratic education is the discovery of the self, the mission of authoritarian education is rather the inability to reflect, which is key to the functioning of the state regime. Therefore, the development of critical thinking can be seen as the prevention of alienation in education.

Shortly after the outbreak of war, Bard College was recognized in Russia as an undesirable organization. At least this fact shows how strong a channel of influence the Russian government considers education to be, and how much it fears the development of critical thinking and the formation of freely formulated opinions in the educational environment. All of this, according to the government, casts doubt on the stability of the existing authorities.

In this case, for example, the idea of the university inherently involves a free union of intellectuals. As for Arendt herself, freedom is the possibility of creating something new. At the same time, it is evident that the novelty/freedom factor for contemporary Russian education is severely limited. The humanities sphere suffers the most, as it is based on the principles of critical thinking as much as possible. Instead of freedom, education is being standardized, and uniform programs of ideological courses are being developed in order to cultivate a “developed sense of citizenship and patriotism.”

Here I want to recall the classics of personality-centeredness. In the romantic ideas of Hölderlin, *Bildung* necessarily presupposes a connection with tradition and history, but it also necessarily implies the creation of something new. *Bildungstrieb* as a creative impulse and a natural driver of human being, “is bent on forming the unformed, to perfect the primordial-natural so that man, who is born for art, will naturally take to what is raw, uneducated, childlike rather than to a formed material where there has already been pre-formed [what] one wishes to form.”<sup>10</sup>

In many respects, the current educational course in Russia is based on the first part, appealing to the historical greatness of the country and neglecting a diverse evaluation of the current situation. There is only one “correct” evaluation, which is precisely contrary to the principle of democratic education and the formation of a critically formed opinion proper, the teaching of the individual in the long run. Arendt describes this process as forming a mass society, where people become instruments. There is a process of depersonalization of the individual and their inclusion in mass society.

The anthropological approach cannot but raise ethical questions for the researcher—for example, the question of responsibility for what is happening.

## RESPONSIBILITY

Addressing responsibility is perhaps the most difficult part because it is proposed to think not only about who is to blame but also about what to do.

The subjects of the educational process, as we know, are parents-children-teachers-state. The questions of who is responsible for political exclusion and to what extent are simple and complex at the same time! In the case of normative documents (course curriculum and the like, as it is organized in Russia), we understand responsibility as part of the sphere of law enforcement, an external factor. Here the state and the teacher, as the executor, are responsible for implementing the goals and objectives of the educational program. On the other hand, education, as a complex process, assumes education in the family.

If we understand responsibility as an internal process, as a response to the moral component of the person, then the responsibility lies with all participants in the process. And it is the result of critical thinking that presupposes the personification of participants. It is easy to shed responsibility by personifying oneself with the activity and decisions of the state. However, it is necessary to understand that this is also a process of objectification, the destruction of the person and society. Behind every action and decision, there is always a person, someone writing a mandatory course program and thinking up strategies for educating young people for several generations.

In fact, power shoots itself in the foot when there is deliberate political alienation in education. Wanting to preserve the existing order of things and control over ideas, does not take into account that the renewal of power will come from a generation of children educated without the ability to freely form political and public opinion. Which, sooner or later, will lead to the self-destruction of the system. Bismarck declared: "The soul of a child is like wax. Therefore, he who directs the school directs the country's future."<sup>11</sup>

Speaking of responsibility in education, it is impossible not to mention a term that became popular at the beginning of the twentieth century, and which is undoubtedly relevant in a conversation about the educational situation in authoritarian countries. Which was, in fact, detached from the term education in connection with the division of education into authoritarian and democratic. "The most remarkable thing about the concept of indoctrination is that it did

not emerge as an issue in the United States until this century. Before the 1920s, indoctrination, Raywid tells us, was synonymous with education. The distinction between these terms originated when John Dewey distinguished between *authoritarian* and *democratic* education.<sup>12</sup>

This refers to indoctrination as a process of deliberate retransmission of any ideas, as a rule, that please the state or institutions of power in order to form a certain public consciousness. Many works have been written on the study and substantiation of this term.<sup>13</sup> I will not dwell in detail on this term, as it is only indirectly related to the topic. However, the main thing to consider when talking about responsibility in indoctrination is:

1. The process of indoctrination can and often does act as a factor of political alienation; students become desirous of distancing themselves from ideas, processes, and institutions of power. As an example, the mechanical reproduction of the ideas of Marxism-Leninism in education without their ideological acceptance. To this day, many Russians who were educated under Soviet rule are able to reproduce memorized ideological quotations. In doing so, it is obvious that we cannot speak of their adherence to a now non-existent state.
2. The mechanical reproduction of ideas disables the ability to think critically. As a result, the state achieves the goal of indoctrination - the mass reproduction of ideas in the public consciousness. However, it often does this in a violent way, since there is no alternative point of view, which is simply unacceptable.

According to research sources, indoctrination can look different in form and methods: for example, there are methods of leading to the desired result. In this form, it may feel as if the student has come to the relevant conclusions on their own. This is a more humane way with respect to the student and their thinking. However, it is not always possible to do this, and it depends on the context and content of the material being indoctrinated. For example, historical “facts” (what is presented in a textbook) are presented in a ready-made way because of the specifics of the subject matter itself. After all, at the school level, it is generally not common to question the facts.

When we talk about indoctrination, the state is primarily responsible for

the result. The goal-means balance must be exactly right in order to determine the outcome of the educational process for decades to come. The responsibility of the educator is to be honest with themselves and the learners. This means the need to share ideas and to believe that this is the way things should be done. Otherwise, everything becomes a violent and artificial process for the sake of the process, not the result.

Parents also have a responsibility when they enroll their child in, for example, a kindergarten at a church, a school that teaches a certain foreign language, and the like. However, there are cases where the choice is either very difficult to make or seems completely impossible. Such is the case with the so-called, “Conversations about Important Things” in contemporary Russia, a course that appeared quite soon after February 24, 2022, after Russia’s war with Ukraine began, a course designed to “remove” all questions from the younger generation regarding the goals and reasons for the “special military operation,” as well as to form a sense of duty and patriotism. In the case of authoritarian-like countries, into which, to my deepest regret, Russia has turned, an alternative version of interpreting the events of the war is impossible, just as it is impossible to avoid attending the new subjects. Otherwise, it inevitably raises questions. Because any form of protest, even silence or non-participation, is perceived as a threat to the existing power structure.

An indoctrinated society suppresses any attempt to be different. Therefore, any form of indoctrination acts as a marker and is detrimental to the democratic principles of education. It violates the principle of critical engagement with the world, the principle of choice in the broad sense of the word, the formation of the free-thinking individual—all of which is the key to the manifestation of the political in society. And this, as we remember thanks to Arendt, is the essentially human.

## CONCLUSION

The case of contemporary Russian education illustrates how political alienation stems from and leads to world alienation, according to Hannah Arendt’s concepts. When the space for free political speech and opinion is suppressed, both society and individuals become atomized and manipulated. This prevents the actualization of each person’s unique identity and capacity

for spontaneous action.

However, the tendency toward loneliness in such a system can potentially be transformed into solitude—a state where critical reflection and self-determination become possible. The key is to emphasize creative freedom and uniqueness within educational practices, rather than enforcing ideological conformity. Teachers and parents share this responsibility.

Ultimately, the courage to take responsibility for one's words and actions represents the first step toward resisting indoctrination and making possible an open, pluralistic public sphere. Each person who develops critical thinking skills contributes to overcoming political alienation. Even in the face of authoritarian constraints, education remains above all a process of human formation through which democratic values can proliferate.

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