

Dubrovsky (*right*) with Vladimir Kostushev, professor, Higher School of Economics, St. Petersburg, serving as expert witnesses at the criminal trial against the street art group Voina, known for its provocative and politically charged performance art. All photographs in this article by Vladimir Telegin



BY MASHA UDENSIVA-BRENNER

WITHOUT A COUNTRY: THE CHANGING FACE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

DMITRY DUBROVSKY IN PROFILE

It's an unseasonably warm day in mid-November, one week after the United States elected Donald Trump to the presidency, and I'm with Dmitry Dubrovsky, associate research scholar at the Harriman Institute and an Institute of International Education Scholar Rescue Fund fellow, on a small playground near Columbia University. Dubrovsky, dressed in a light-blue seersucker jacket and dark blue jeans, is trying to stop his



Dubrovsky pondering the case, with Voina's founding member Oleg Vorotnikov behind bars in the background

three-year-old from injuring himself with a giant stick, and telling me, in rapid-fire Russian, about the implications of the recent election for the international human rights landscape. Dubrovsky, a historian by training, taught human rights at St. Petersburg State University's Smolny College for ten years until, in March 2015, he was dismissed and his position permanently eliminated. He believes his dismissal was related to his criticism of the university and the Russian government. (The university's official stance was that Dubrovsky failed to sign a contract in a timely manner. University officials later decided to eliminate his old position altogether.)

Dubrovsky, who came to the Harriman Institute in the fall of 2015, has been teaching and researching the trajectory of change in the rhetoric and practice of human rights from the USSR to the Russian Federation. Human rights discourse in academia, he says, has become much more isolated, xenophobic, and conservative since the later years of the USSR, and the Russian government has coopted and appropriated human rights rhetoric in order to promote its own geopolitical interests. The most prominent example of this, he says, is the 2014 annexation of Crimea, which the Kremlin justified as retaliation against purported fascist tendencies of the new leadership in Kyiv.

As recently as three years ago, Russia seemed alone in its quest for national isolationism and a return to traditional values. But since Dubrovsky's arrival in the United States, the geopolitical landscape has changed tremendously—the United Kingdom has voted to leave the European Union, right-wing governments have come to power in both Poland and Hungary, and nationalist movements are gaining prominence in France, Germany, and Austria (where a right-wing leader was defeated by a narrow margin in December 2016). After the election of Donald Trump, who has embraced international despots throughout his campaign and has been nominating controversial right-leaning candidates to his cabinet, tides in the U.S. have shifted, too.

With his term at the Harriman Institute ending in June, Dubrovsky wonders where he'll go next. "After this election," he says, looking into the distance, "it feels like there is no place left."

Born in Leningrad in 1970, Dubrovsky came of age in the final years of the Soviet Union. Aside from a few isolated experiences he had no involvement in the human rights sphere until his early thirties. As a teenager he was an avid guitar player, an archeology enthusiast, and a leader of the Komsomol (the Communist Party's youth organization).

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When he was sixteen, he traveled to Tajikistan to work on an archeological dig. There he watched as the archeologists—“refined members of the intelligentsia,” he says—demeaned the Tajik workers. Having grown up in ethnically homogeneous Leningrad, Dubrovsky had no understanding of the concept of racism—he did not even know the word—but was struck by the vast injustices that befell the workers. “Watching these quiet, diffident men, I could not for the life of me understand how anyone could tolerate this disgrace.”

The following year, while working on another dig in central Siberia’s Tuva Republic, Dubrovsky noticed a local ethnic Russian police officer grab a ram from an ethnic Tuvan shepherd and drive away—blatant robbery. Dubrovsky asked the shepherd why he didn’t do something, and the man simply shrugged. “What can I do? Go complain to the police about the policeman?”

Having observed these wrongs, Dubrovsky began to develop a sense of rebellion toward the Soviet order. One warm spring Saturday in 1988, he sat in Leningrad’s Kazan Square playing guitar with a friend, in hopes of earning extra cash, when a group of police officers warned pedestrians to disperse. “This is an unsanctioned rally,” an officer announced. The Democratic Soyuz, an opposition group Dubrovsky knew nothing about, was scheduled to demonstrate. But the demonstrators did not have any posters or signs, so they blended into the crowd. Not knowing their targets, the police began detaining everyone. Dubrovsky could not believe the unfairness. He shouted, “Hello, Soviet democracy!” and was about to run, when an officer grabbed him (his friend escaped with the guitars) and dragged him to an old white police bus. Dubrovsky squirmed, and an officer whacked his head against the bus; he lost consciousness and later awoke inside, on the floor, his eyes level with rows of police boots. (Soon the bus filled with other detainees, including an old woman with her groceries who had been curious about the commotion.) Because he had shouted an “anti-Soviet” slogan, the police deemed him part of the demonstration

and sent in a KGB officer to question him. Somehow the officer knew a lot about his background. “You come from a good family,” the officer said. “Why are you destroying your life?” A few hours later the officers realized Dubrovsky had no connection to the movement and released him.

These incidents alerted the teenage Dubrovsky to the failings of the Soviet system, but they did not propel him to pursue a career in human rights. After serving in Karelia as a radio operator for the Soviet army, he studied central Asian archeology, a “bohemian” profession far removed from the political sphere. By then, the Soviet Union had collapsed, and he was married with a daughter and interested in establishing a peaceful life for his family.

But soon funding for archeological projects, which had been plentiful during Soviet times, diminished, eventually forcing him to leave the field. Dubrovsky enrolled in the European University at St. Petersburg (EUSP), where he completed a master’s degree in 1996 and fulfilled his course requirements for a Ph.D. in ethnography in 1999. He was planning to finish and defend his dissertation, when EUSP unexpectedly invited him to direct a new program on ethnic studies and tolerance. The program attempted to popularize tolerance in the Russian mass media by gaining a comprehensive understanding of propaganda, particularly on the Russian-language Internet, then using the information to create “hate filters” that would make it possible for users to avoid Internet pages with this content. It also administered professional training about ethnic tolerance to state employees and law enforcement officers working with multiethnic societies. It was the first effort of its kind in Russia, and Dubrovsky drafted the mission statement.

For years Dubrovsky and his colleagues had trouble getting professionals to take their tolerance training seriously. The police force declined to participate altogether, and the city government, which had initially approved of the program’s goals, was beginning to adopt the opinion that ethnic minorities themselves were to blame for the negative attitudes toward them—if only they would integrate into Russian culture, they would not evoke so much hatred. In 2004, funding for the project ran out. But soon came another career opportunity: the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences (Smolny College) of St. Petersburg State University (SPbU) invited Dubrovsky to establish a new program on human rights. The invitation surprised him. Not only had he never taught the subject, but also he had never studied it; at the time, human rights courses were rarely offered outside of law school. “And



From top to bottom: Dubrovsky with supporters of the street art group Voina; Dubrovsky during Voina's trial

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here I was," says Dubrovsky, "being asked to teach it to nonlawyers in a liberal arts setting."

Two months before he started, Dubrovsky heard the news about Nikolai Girenko, a prominent ethnologist and human rights activist who had pioneered the ethnic tolerance and antiracism movement in the Soviet Union. Frequently called as an expert witness, Girenko had testified against many ultranationalists, including three skinheads prosecuted for the murder of an Azerbaijani

street vendor; an ultranationalist newspaper accused of anti-Semitism; and Schultz-88, a radical nationalist-socialist group implicated in a series of hate crimes against non-Slavic-looking pedestrians in St. Petersburg. Then, an ultranationalist group called Russian Republic designated him an "enemy of the Russian People" and posted a death threat on its website. Three days later, on June 19, 2004, Girenko was shot dead through the wooden front door of his St. Petersburg apartment. Subsequently, several neo-Nazi youths, who had been convicted of other hate crimes, were sentenced for his murder.

"It was a very scary moment for our nation," says Dubrovsky. In hopes of continuing Girenko's efforts, Dubrovsky started appearing as an expert witness in various trials and commenting in the media about hate crimes and racism in Russia. Suddenly he was entrenched in the political sphere he had always wanted to avoid.

Smolny College was founded in 1994 by a group of liberal SPbU scholars in collaboration with Bard College (graduates of Smolny's bachelor's program also receive a bachelor's degree from Bard); Smolny was the first liberal arts department in Russia. It operated as an independent platform within the philological institute at SPbU, and, thanks to Bard, which sought grants on its behalf, was well funded by organizations like the Open Society Institute and the MacArthur Foundation. It attracted young, successful, liberal-minded faculty, who initiated programs that would have been unpopular with both Russian society and the Russian government. "When I started there, it was very independent," recalls Dubrovsky.

At the time, Smolny's dean was Nikolay Koposov, a historian who, as one of the college's original founders, encouraged his faculty to participate in public intellectual debate. Dubrovsky embraced this attitude, but his public comments espousing tolerance provoked criticism from some conservative and nationalist groups. Once after condemning a racist incident in the St. Petersburg metro—a metro worker, spotting pickpockets, made an announcement asking passengers to "beware of gypsies"—Dubrovsky was harangued by fascist organizations on social media. They published his photograph, his passport information, and his address, and urged vengeance for the metro worker, who had been docked a month's salary. But, Dubrovsky was not physically harmed. On another occasion, he was assaulted in front of the entrance to his apartment building.



Dubrovsky responding to questions from the media

In 2008, the atmosphere at Smolny started to change. The university appointed a new rector, and, according to Dubrovsky, all its departments faced intensified scrutiny from the administration. The following year SPbU enacted a new regulation that required faculty to show their work to university administrators before submitting it for publication or conference presentations abroad. Dubrovsky criticized the new rule in a comment to the reporter Ellen Barry, who quoted him in the *New York Times*; he says that he was quickly warned by the administration that, due to a new clause in his contract, he could not criticize the university in the press as a university employee (the matter was reported by Al Jazeera in May 2015). Five years later his contract was up for renewal. Dubrovsky had an uneasy feeling.

In March 2015, after a long bureaucratic process, he found himself without a job. St. Petersburg's Human Rights Council, to which Dubrovsky belonged, quickly wrote a letter on his behalf. And more than 15,000 students signed a petition to reinstate him and two other faculty members who had also been let go under controversial circumstances. But Dubrovsky was not reinstated. Instead, the university eliminated his position altogether.

Seeing no professional future in Russian academia, Dubrovsky pursued opportunities abroad. When he first moved to the United States nearly two years ago, Dubrovsky felt that, despite all its problems, he was living in a country that respected human dignity and the rights of its citizens. Since the Cold War, he had always perceived the U.S. as a stabilizing influence in international politics and a counterbalance to Russia and other autocratic regimes that disregard international human rights norms. With President-elect Trump at the helm, he fears for the fate of international institutions and foresees a new world order that will drastically alter the human rights climate. "The danger is that human rights will stop being a part of the global order," he says. "The U.S. is a key player, and if it starts promoting the same rhetoric that Trump and his consultants have used, they will speak the same language as the Russians."

Since the election, Dubrovsky has decided to reshape his research. He is now studying global academia in the face of the changing human rights landscape. "The post-Nuremberg world is facing a crisis," he says. "And it will be a crash test for Western democracy and institutions." ■