

# On Changing the Policy of Regulation in Today's School Literary Education

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**Abstract.** A survey of first-year philology students was conducted in autumn 2008 at Moscow Humanitarian Pedagogical Institute (MHPI) with the purpose of exploring these students' reading interests and getting an idea of how they had read the books they were required to read in school—in full, in short summaries, or in excerpts. The same survey was conducted in 2013 among first-year philology students in the Institute of Humanities at Moscow City Pedagogical University, of which the MHPI became part in 2012. We discovered that high school students did not read all of the required dramatic and epic books in full and showed little interest towards books about painful periods in Russian history (collectivization, repressions, famine, etc.) or stories

with complicated plots. The list of particularly important books has changed insignificantly, consisting almost entirely of required school reading and foreign books, their number having been reduced by one-third over the last five years. The scope of reading interests also proved to involve mainly foreign literature and to have shrunken over the last five years. The required reading list and the number of books actually read by high school graduates do not coincide: even philology-oriented school students read many books in excerpts or simplified versions. Literature as a school subject does not create enough motivation to read the books that are referred to as national literary classics. We find it necessary to revise the conventional attitudes toward state prescriptions for teaching literature, to abandon rigid required reading lists, and to switch to a competency-based model of literary education outlined in the Federal State Literature Standards. Such a transition will require reconsideration of the existing approaches to testing the reading and speaking competencies of school graduates through the Unified State Examination.

**Keywords:** school students, scope of reading, required reading, reading interests, the Unified State Examination, Federal State Literature Standards, competencies.

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Mechanisms of government regulation of literature education at school depend on a number of factors, including general political changes, the evolving principles of state regulation in various fields

and activities, and the relatively random set of conditions underlying the work of education authorities. We believe that institutional changes should be based primarily on an analysis of practices and an assessment of education productivity in the context of the existing regulations in state education management. Based on such an assessment, we can make conclusions about the power of specific regulations, their scope, and the areas for their modification or improvement. It is hardly justifiable to make any political decisions without such an analysis.

**The list of  
required  
reading books**

Regulations in literature education that exist today in Russia's general education schools differ considerably from comparable regulations abroad; moreover, they have not changed since the early 1930s. Educational programs in the 1920s used many different approaches to the organization of the learning process: labor- and project-based methods of learning that associated literary works with analysis of practical situations; development of curricula on the problem- and subject-based principle of promoting research in various "spheres of poetry: love life, social reality, and philosophical pursuit"; history and literature high school syllabi; an "integrated method of literature learning" using literary works as illustrations of general social science topics, etc. [Bogdanova, Leonov, Chyortov, 2008].

All of these approaches allowed for a great deal of flexibility in choosing both literary works and learning methods. In a situation where the top-priority national goal was to eliminate mass illiteracy, this flexibility looked quite acceptable because no educational institution had had any complex education objectives before them. Any schoolbooks or teaching methods could be used to teach reading and writing; there was no need for any special teacher preparation standards. As this goal was being realized, the need was growing for unified "school canons" that would prescribe a balanced list of required reading books including classic Russian works of literature as well as books by famous foreign authors and recent revolutionary writers. The importance of such an issue was consistent with overall social and economic changes—notably, the transition from the New Economic Policy to industrialization. The logic of setting universal standards during the industrial era had an impact on the education system, too.

A relatively stable literature program was developed as early as 1933 and included literary works by Russian and foreign classic authors, Soviet writers, and excerpts from articles by public figures, politicians, and critics. Later on, the program was revised many times, nevertheless preserving a canonic list of required reading books established at the national level. The list became part of the model curricula approved by the main governmental agency of the USSR and then by relevant agencies of the Soviet republics. The final lists looked

almost entirely the same as the federal one, if only slightly expanding it at the expense of oeuvres by republican writers to inculcate the ethnocultural specificities of the literature of different peoples of the Soviet Union. The list served as the reference point for schoolbooks, institutions for advanced teacher training, university teacher preparation programs, and methodological and auditing procedures.

Little by little, this led to a gap between the list of required reading books and the contemporary literary process that grew wider with each year (we refer to the “official” process taking place in isolation from the literary life evolving in diasporas or uncensored communities). Thus, the only 10<sup>th</sup> grade literature textbook used all over the USSR [Kovalyov, 1976] ended with works by Aleksey Tolstoy, who had died in 1945, and Alexander Fadeyev—the novels *Razgrom* (The Rout), 1927 and *Molodaya Gvardiya* (The Young Rout), 1946–1951—who had died in 1956. This same textbook was used in schools up until the early 1990s. During the late Soviet era, contemporary literary works were only studied in extracurricular reading classes, and even then, not in the historical and literary context, but as part of compulsory topical units (Leniniana, “contemporary hero,” military literature, and alike). Even in these cases, the reading lists were compiled by coordinators. The reading interests of students were also never taken into account, except in a small number of elective courses offered by some educational institutions.

The situation has little changed even today. Although schools were granted legal autonomy to develop their own curricula in 1992, the Russian Federation continues following the so-called Minimal Education Content Requirements, which comprise part of the federal component of the State Education Standard (hereinafter, “the learning standards”) and determine the lists of required reading books. For example, the existing standard requires study of over 140 literary works in middle school (grades 5–9) and over 160<sup>1</sup> in high school (grades 10–11), exclusively from supplementary reading books selected by teachers<sup>2</sup>. Unsurprisingly, the public has viewed literature as a subject needed first of all to make children read through the established list of books. There is an inherent implication that mastering this “universal” list of compulsory works guarantees the achievement

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<sup>1</sup> To be fair, these works are different both in genre and volume, from novels to poems.

<sup>2</sup> Federalny komponent gosudarstvennogo standarta obshchego obrazovaniya. Chast I. Nachalnoe obshchee obrazovanie. Osnovnoe obshchee obrazovanie [Federal Component of the State Standard of General Education. Part I. Primary School Education. Middle School Education], Moscow, 2004; Federalny komponent gosudarstvennogo standarta obshchego obrazovaniya. Chast II. Srednee (polnoe) obshchee obrazovanie [Federal Component of the State Standard of General Education. Part II. High School Education], Moscow, 2004.

of educational outcomes required to develop a good personality in terms of moral qualities and belief systems. Meanwhile, the doubtful efficiency of this approach is obvious even at the language level, in the expression “to do a book.”

The requirement that students must read all of the books on a specified list also underlies the system of education quality assessment. The latter evaluates how well students understand the idea and the subject of literary works, the narrative construction of epic or dramatic oeuvres, and the emotional content of lyrical texts, as well as specific features of writing. The professional community and the public as a whole have a deep-rooted idea that acquaintance with “classic” works in itself develops personality and cultural identity. The more texts that “contain the universal Russian cultural code” with which students get acquainted, the fuller their initiation into the national culture. Meanwhile, given that the overall number of obligatory literary works has considerably grown since the early 1930s, the State Final Examination tests for 11<sup>th</sup>-graders establish a shortened version of the list, which serves as the basis for the examinations’ tasks. The list is determined by a regulatory document called “The Codifier of Content Elements and Requirements to the Attainment Level of Graduates from General Education Institutions for the Unified State Examination in Literature”<sup>3</sup> (hereinafter, “the USE Codifier”). The Codifier includes around half the number of literary works prescribed by the high school standard.

A number of questions arise: how much of the state-prescribed list of literary works do students actually read in their literary education? To what extent do modern students actually need to read the books (as opposed to scanning through their short versions and textbook overviews) in order to succeed on exams? How much does the scope of leisure-time reading interests of students overlap with the list of required reading books? How important are these obligatory texts for high school graduates, and to what extent do they form students’ values and preferences?

### **The survey procedure**

In its pursuit to find answers to these questions, the Chair of Russian and Foreign Literature and Methodology of Moscow Pedagogical Institute of Humanities (MPIH) conducted a survey of first-year students in the Faculty of Philology in autumn 2008. The survey was designed to explore the scope of reading interests and to find out how the list of required books had been covered by high school graduates who had chosen to become philologists. In fact, the study objectives had an applied, intra-institute focus: it was important to understand who the people were who had chosen literature and language teach-

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<sup>3</sup> Available at: [http://ege.edu.ru/common/upload/docs/li\\_kodif\\_2013.pdf](http://ege.edu.ru/common/upload/docs/li_kodif_2013.pdf)

ing as their profession and what place school reading books took in their scope of reading interests with the goal of modifying the lists of required and recommended reading books and, perhaps, even the syllabi, depending on the data obtained.

The same survey was conducted five years later, in 2013, among first-year philology students of the Institute of Humanities under Moscow City Teacher Training University that took over the MPIH in 2012. The list of works and authors included in the questionnaire was mainly based on the USE Codifier, which actually served as the list of required books, as most literature and language teachers were drawing on it; in addition, the questionnaire took into account the major high-school literature programs.

In the first part of the survey, respondents were asked to indicate which of the literary works in the predetermined list they had read in full, which ones in excerpts (specific chapters or fragments), which ones in summarized versions, and which ones they had not touched at all.

Of course, the survey results do not provide any grounds to judge on the overall situation in the secondary school reading program, because the sample was unrepresentative of all school students in Moscow, let alone in the whole country. The sample included students of philology in a capital teacher training university, 27 in 2008 as well as in 2013 (the enrolment is normally rather low for this field of study). Some of the questions remained unanswered, whether due to carelessness or impossibility/reluctance to answer them. Moreover, the sincerity of the respondents could not be proved, and relevant corrections to the final results were never made.

The results obtained are of interest primarily because the respondents were assumed to be the most motivated readers, as they had just made their decision to commit themselves to literature. Quite surely, their counterparts who had opted for other fields of study were, for the most part, less active readers. Moreover, it would have been logical to suggest that reading was one of the top priorities in respondents' lives and that the scope of their reading interests was much broader than the framework determined by school syllabi and by the USE Codifier for Literature Studies.

The survey revealed, however, that *high school students don't read many obligatory epic and dramatic literary works in full*. This was a survey among philology-oriented first-year students; what can we expect, then, of school students who are not planning to study literature?

Almost all respondents of both years, 2008 and 2013, reported to have read *Gore ot Uma* [Woe from Wit] by Alexander Griboyedov, *Yevgeniy Onegin* [Eugene Onegin] by Alexander Pushkin, and *Geroy nashego vremeni* [A Hero of Our Time] by Mikhail Lermontov in full.

**Literature of the  
19th century**

Two other “canonic” books, *Kapitanskaya dochka* [The Captain’s Daughter] by Pushkin and *Myortvye dushi* [Dead Souls] by Nikolai Gogol, were not so popular: everyone had at least read retellings or excerpts from them, but few had read them in full, with the number of “full readers” decreasing slightly over five years. This result is consistent with the students’ repeated complaints that these two books (even *The Captain’s Daughter!*) “are rather difficult to read”.

Literary works of the mid- and late 19th century include texts that the great majority of students read in full as well as those that students prefer reading in short or retold versions. The ones consistently read in full include *Groza* [The Storm] by Alexander Ostrovsky, *Ottsy i deti* [Fathers and Sons] by Ivan Turgenev, *Oblomov* by Ivan Goncharov, *Prestuplenie i nakazanie* [Crime and Punishment] by Fyodor Dostoevsky, and *Vishnyovy sad* [The Cherry Orchard] by Anton Chekhov. As for *Voyna i mir* [War and Peace] by Leo Tolstoy, only one respondent admitted having never read it even in retold form, both in 2008 and in 2013. About half of the 2008 respondents and 75% of the 2013 respondents had read the full novel. It follows, thus, that 25% of candidates applying to the faculty of philology of a capital teacher training university are still unable to read through the novel to the end, and this cannot be ignored. (As high school teachers have a look at the survey results, they say unanimously that the number of school students who read the work in full is many times lower among teenagers who are not aspiring for an education in literature and language.) Similar reading rates were demonstrated by other major works of the same epoch: only two-thirds of the respondents had managed to read over *Komu na Rusi zhit khorosho* [Who Is Happy in Russia?] by Nikolay Nekrasov and *Levsha* [The Lefthander] by Nikolay Leskov (with the number slightly decreasing over five years); less than half the 2013 respondents had read through *Ocharovanny strannik* [The Enchanted Wanderer] by Leskov and *Istoriya odnogo goroda* by Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin [The History of a Town] (with one-third of the respondents having never read a word from the book).

Many experts today raise the issue of the school literature program being overloaded with large or difficult-to-read literary works which take modern students much more time to study in-depth, as they have to look up many words and realia that were familiar for students 20 or 30 years ago. We can see the list of required reading books being reduced in a natural way, with teachers of literature and language reducing the lists little by little in their learning programs or offering fragments of large works for study, on one hand, and by children themselves pretending to fulfill the requirements of demanding teachers, on the other part. Thus, without interference of the regulatory authorities, *the “school canon,” the so-called minimum minimumorum of classic Russian works of the 18th century that can still hardly be avoided by developers of any model or learning literature programs, simply due to their reading and teaching experience, their*



*idea of the critical and the optional in the literature canon for the purpose of its study and support of the cultural tradition, develops.* This can hardly be avoided, provided that no extraneous forces interfere with their own ideas of what is valuable and viable.

The literature of the first half of the 20th century (mainly studied in the 11th grade, when both teachers and students are increasingly concerned about preparation for the USE, most often in other subjects) also has its leaders and outsiders. Over five years, *Gospodin iz San-Frantsisko* [The Gentleman from San Francisco] by Ivan Bunin, *Starukha Izergil* [Old Izergil] and *Na dne* [The Lower Depths] by Maxim Gorky became literary works that were read by virtually all applicants to the Faculty of Philology. *Chisty ponedelnik* [Clean Monday] by Bunin and *Granatovy braslet* [The Garnet Bracelet] by Alexander Kuprin were also ranked rather high. Slightly lower but still notably high rates were shown by *Dvenadtsat* [Twelve] by Alexander Blok and *Sobachye serdtse* [Heart of a Dog] by Mikhail Bulgakov. Bulgakov's pen issued the book that holds the absolute record of popularity among school students: *Master i Margarita* [The Master and Margarita] was reported to have been read by 100 percent of the respondents in 2013. (It could be that the novel grew in popularity after being adapted into the film directed by Vladimir Bortko at the end of 2005 and after the release in April 2011 of the eponymous film directed by Yuri Kara in 1994). However popular Bulgakov is, his *Belaya gvardiya* [The White Guard] was only read by about 50 percent of the respondents and *Dni Turbinykh* [The Day of the Turbines] by 25 percent, which proves that even highly-motivated highschool readers rarely go beyond the school program in their reading interests, and cult authors are no exception. Apart from the works listed above, none of the books of this period cleared the hurdle of 50 percent of "full readers."

Mikhail Sholokhov's *Tikhii Don* [And Quiet Flows the Don], the "War and Peace" of the 20th century (and of the final year of school), stands apart from other literary works of that epoch. It repeated the success of its great predecessor when 75 percent of the 2013 respondents reported to have read it in full, as compared to just over half of the respondents in 2008. Thus, only two large books of the first half of the 20th century had been read in full by over 50 percent of the first-year philology students surveyed, while *The Master and Margarita* proved to be the only novel of the century read by everyone.

The list of required books of the second half of the 20th century does not include any large works at all, although it cannot be said that the period was not rich in outstanding literary works. All in all, the selection of literary works of the late 20th century is the biggest failure of the school program: the survey revealed that no more than 25 percent of first-year philology students had read the most popular works

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by Vasily Shukshin, Boris Vasilyev, Varlam Shalamov, Viktor Astafyev, Valentin Rasputin, and others. The rankings of literary works devoted to World War II were a little bit higher but still rather unimpressive: *Sudba cheloveka* [The Fate of a Man] by Sholokhov and *Vasily Tyorkin* by Alexander Tvardovsky had been more or less covered, given that both works are usually studied in middle school. Less than half of the respondents had read through Vasilyev's *A zori zdes tikhie...* [The Dawns Here Are Quiet], a number that has reduced over five years. Perhaps, books from the second half of the 20th century are unpopular among school students because the regulatory document "Specification of Test Materials for the Unified State Exam in Literature"<sup>4</sup> states that literary works from the second half of the 20th century can comprise approximately 0 to 15 percent of the USE tasks. In practice, the proportion is more likely to be nearer to zero, which makes teachers whose students are preparing for the USE in literature focus on studying and reviewing works from the 18th century and the first half of the 20th century. Moreover, works from the second half of the 20th century are most often "done" either in middle school (grades 5–8) or in the spring semester of the final year, when it is much more reasonable to spend time in the classroom reviewing what has been learned rather than taking up new materials.

School students express little *interest in books about painful periods in Russian history* (collectivization, repressions, famines) and avoid *literary works that are complex in structure*. Thus, Yevgeny Zamyatin's *My [We]* and Andrei Platonov's *Kotlovan* [The Foundation Pit] had not been read by two-thirds of the 2008 respondents and by half the 2013 respondents. *Doctor Zhivago* by Boris Pasternak, which is at the same level as Sholokhov's and Bulgakov's key works in the cultural hierarchy, is read many times less often even by philology-oriented high-school students (it was reported to have been read by just under half the 2008 respondents and by 25 percent of the 2013 respondents<sup>5</sup>). An exception is literary works by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the study of which received national support<sup>6</sup>: about two-thirds of the 2008 respondents said they had read *Matryonin dvor* [Matryona's Place] and *Odin den Ivana Denisovicha* [One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich], the proportion growing to over 75 percent in 2013. The fact that *Kolymskiye rasskazy* [The Kolyma Tales] by Shalamov was never mentioned by anyone is not indicative of the author's unpopularity among young people; instead, it demonstrates that teach-

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<sup>4</sup> Available at: [http://ege.edu.ru/common/upload/docs/lit\\_2013.pdf](http://ege.edu.ru/common/upload/docs/lit_2013.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> A quite successful eleven-episode eponymous spin-off series was aired on TV in 2006.

<sup>6</sup> *Arhipelag GULAG* [The Gulag Archipelago] adapted by the writer's widow Natalya Solzhenitsyna for school students is recommended to include in the syllabus.



ers find it easier to work in the final year with works of who continue the classic literary traditions rather than those who enter sophisticated, sometimes even conflicting relationships with them.

The poetry of the second half of the 20th century is almost unknown to contemporary school students who are interested in humanities. The respondents were asked to indicate in the list of poets: whose poems they had read many of; whose individual poems they knew by heart; whose individual poems they had at least come across; whom they had heard of but had never read anything written by them; whose names they were hearing for the first time.

## Poetry

It is easy to name the poets ranked the highest by reputation and popularity ratings. Most respondents mentioned Alexander Pushkin, Sergei Yesenin, and Mikhail Lermontov as poets whose poems they had read many of, with Anna Akhmatova and Vladimir Mayakovsky following a bit behind them; all of these poets have become more popular among school students aspiring to become philologists. As for the poetry of the second half of the 20th century, first-year university students only happened to be well-acquainted with singers-songwriters Vladimir Vysotsky and Bulat Okudzhava, who were named by about half the respondents. There is a growing interest in Joseph Brodsky, while Nikolay Rubtsov and Yuri Kuznetsov were unread by or even unknown to the best part of the students, although most textbooks and syllabi devote quite a lot of attention to these two poets. Overall, there is an obvious growth of awareness among humanities students in that they know increasingly more names; however, they tend to read less poetry—just as a modern poet has observed:

we used to know poems by heart,  
sometimes forgetting the authors,  
or even never knowing their names;  
today, we know the authors,  
versificators, poets,  
forgetting though their rhymes,  
sometimes never reading them at all...

Kushner, oh yeah, right, indeed<sup>7</sup>.

As for knowing individual poems by heart, one-third of philology students were able to recite Pushkin, Akhmatova, Mayakovsky, and Blok in 2008, as compared to only 25 percent of students in 2013. Poems by Fyodor Tyutchev, Afanasy Fet, Vasily Zhukovsky, and Nikolay

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<sup>7</sup> Grinberg B. *Ranshe znali stikhi...* [We used to know poems...]. Available at: [http://eknigi.info/index/grinberg\\_boris/0-112](http://eknigi.info/index/grinberg_boris/0-112)

Nekrasov have been abandoned dramatically, and only Yesenin and Vysotsky have “grown” a trifle, perhaps because many of their poems had originally been known as popular songs or became such later (however, this trend does not hold with Okudzhava, or Andrey Voznesensky, or Yevgeny Yevtushenko, who also wrote a number of songs). Most of the respondents had never heard of such poets (included, by the way, in the USE Codifier or literature syllabi) as Yuri Kuznetsov, Nikolay Tryapkin, Vladimir Soloukhin, Oleg Chukhontsev; over one-third of students did not know the names of Yuri Levitansky, Boris Slutsky, David Samoylov; many had never read any poem by Velimir Khlebnikov, Igor Severyanin, Nikolay Zabolotsky, Nikolay Rubtsov, or Andrei Tarkovsky.

Contemporary poets were almost never mentioned as first-year students’ favorite authors. The record here is set by Yesenin and Akhmatova, named by almost half the 2013 respondents, as well as Mayakovsky, who caught the fancy of one-third of students. Nearly all of the favorite poets are studied as part of the school program (with the exception of isolated mentions of Larisa Vasilyeva and Eduard Asadov, who can rather be classified as “popular poets”). Meanwhile, the 2013 list of favorite poets left out Zhukovsky, Nekrasov, Konstantin Balmont, Andrei Bely, Severyanin, and Vasilyeva (almost all of their poems date back to the 19th century—the early 20th century) and instead included Blok, Brodsky, Osip Mandelstam, Fet, Nikolay Gumilyov, Yulia Drunina, Robert Rozhdestvensky, and Yevtushenko (half of them are poets of the second half of the 20th century, and Fet is the only poet of the 19th century). *Thus, students’ reading interests are obviously shifting in favor of more contemporary poetry.*

The data obtained in the survey almost entirely correspond to the results of research on online poetic communities. The Internet rating of poet popularity looks as follows: 1. Sergei Yesenin; 2. Vladimir Vysotsky; 3. Joseph Brodsky; 4. Vladimir Mayakovsky; 5. Marina Tsvetayeva; 6. Anna Akhmatova; 7. Alexander Pushkin; 8. Poetry of the Silver Age (as a period—*M. P.*); 9. Eduard Asadov; 10. Alexander Blok; 11. Mikhail Lermontov; 12. Robert Rozhdestvensky; 13. Boris Pasternak [Borusyak 2014]. Both lists are topped by Yesenin, whose poetry is studied by school students long before their final year.

### **Leisure reading**

The personal preferences of students and the scope of their leisure reading interests were investigated using a series of interrelated questions included in the questionnaire: “Name the five most important literary texts (in order of decreasing importance);” “What is your favorite literary genre?”; “What books have you read over the last six months (beyond the school program)?” The survey was conducted in September–October, so the last question shed light on what the candidates had been reading during the last months of their final year at school and while preparing for entry examinations, and at the same

time what books they had been reading during summer vacation and during their first month at university.

The list of the most important books has little changed over five years and consists almost solely of works from the school program, while the rest is mostly foreign literature, the range of the books named having reduced by one-third in five years. The leader of the 2008 list, Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, was named as the most important by only one-third of students in 2013, giving way to *The Master and Margarita*. Bulgakov's novel improved its position in the ranking, being put on the list of favorite books by two-thirds of yesterday's school students. It had shared positions 2–3 with *Eugene Onegin* in 2008, but the latter sunk to positions 3–4 on the list (from one-third to 25 percent of the respondents) to share them with *A Hero of Our Time*, which also somewhat lost its popularity. Gorky's *The Lower Depths* had been named by 25 percent of the respondents in 2008 but dropped out of the list of favorite works in 2013. The rest of the books specified as favorite ones hardly accounted for 20 percent of votes (the most popular among them include *War and Peace*, *Oblomov*, *Fathers and Sons*, *Woe from Wit*, and *The Garnet Bracelet*). Neither in 2008 nor in 2013 was there any literary work outside the school program that was named by two or more respondents (perhaps, with the exception of *We* by Zamyatin, which is only studied in some schools).

The scope of leisure reading interests consists to a large extent of foreign literary works and has been reduced dramatically in five years. Russian classic oeuvres that are not part of the school program are almost always excluded, although one would expect that school students should keep reading Dostoyevsky and Bulgakov, whose novels were on the list of the most important books. The second part of *Dead Souls*, Turgenev's *Nakanune* [On the Eve], Dostoyevsky's *Idiot* [The Idiot], Bulgakov's *Teatralny roman* [Theatrical Novel] and *The White Guard* were each read by only one student from the 2008 sample. Three respondents said they had not read anything beyond the school program as they had been busy preparing for entry examinations. Nobody mentioned any of these books among their leisure reading preferences in 2013. In compensation, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and Bulgakov's *Dyavoliada* [Diaboliad] were each mentioned once.

Many of the books specified used to be classified as teen fiction as recently as one or two generations ago. (The category included *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Alexandre Dumas, *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again* by J. R. R. Tolkien, *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, *Dva kapitana* [The Two Captains] by Veniamin Kaverin, etc.) There is an increasing interest in "recreational" reading, especially thrillers/mystery and romance novels. On the whole, would-be philologists prefer reading mass-market fiction and avoid literary works that touch upon acute sociopolitical or philosophical issues: "difficult reading" is not for them. The relatively low popularity of fantasy

and science fiction is apparently explained by the gender distribution of the respondents: both the 2008 and 2013 samples included only two boys; the rest of the sample body was made up of girls. Neither are philology students interested in modern non-format, non-genre, “complex” fiction—which is in line within the common trend. Works of poetry beyond the school program are almost absent on the list of the books read.

Of those students who answered the question of what had kept them from reading while studying at school, more than 50 percent cited a lack of time. The second most popular answer was “it was boring” (which is paradoxical if we remember the field of study chosen by the respondents). The reasons for the lack of time obviously lie not only in high course loads but also in the decline of reading as a vital priority for students.

As we can see, the school list of required books is too far from what students actually read. Even philology-oriented school students read many of the obligatory works in excerpts or in retold versions, while the scope of their leisure reading interests does not include the authors whose canonic texts make up part of the school literary education. The school subject “literature studies” does not build enough motivation for students to read what is referred to as Russian classic literature.

The standard of general education implies the contraposition of the “classic” and the “modern,” which is particularly revealed in the fact that literary works of the last 50–70 years are suggested for study in the form of overviews during the last months of the final year, while knowledge of them is hardly ever tested on the USE. The focus is placed on the works written in the beginning of the 20th and sometimes even 19th centuries, which makes school students believe everything “genuine” was created long ago in the past and that the whole history of Russian culture is a story of its gradual degradation: Victor Pelevin instead of Pushkin, Tatyana Tolstaya as a questionable successor to Leo Tolstoy. This attitude is proved by a heavily negative response to the introduction of the Model Final Year Syllabus edited by Boris Lanin, which includes books by Pelevin, Lyudmila Ulitskaya, and Asar Eppel, in the reading list<sup>8</sup>. Meanwhile, judging by the literary works the respondents reported to have read beyond the school program, the scope of students’ leisure reading interests is slowly but persistently being filled with foreign literature, both “non-format” and mass-market.

It is due to the priorities of standardization, classics, and canonicity that the general education system is poorly suitable for the exploration and interpretation of “difficult,” problem-oriented Russian and foreign literature of the last decades. One of the ways to introduce

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, [Troitsky, 2013].

such literary works into the scope of school student reading consists of creating a reading support environment that would attract young readers as well as their parents, teachers, school librarians, scientists, writers, and anyone else concerned, who could guide students around the world of books that are complex but important. To create such an environment, we will have to:

- build a system of measures to support independent reading, both leisure and reflective, aimed at the development of cultural competencies;
- enhance the teaching and educational potential of libraries and museums by providing conditions required for efficient interaction between schools and cultural institutions (Master of Arts in Teaching programs for employees); develop technologies to engage students in reading through networking cooperation between institutions of various departmental subordinations;
- identify and develop a dialogic language common for children and adults, which would be used in dedicated reading forums, seminars, roundtables, and meetings to discuss tricky issues touched upon in “difficult” literature, thus refreshing the educative potential of belles-lettres and preparing the public for step-by-step changes to the very approaches to school literary education.

The gradual transition to the new Federal State education standards focusing on overall education outcomes instead of the list of teaching units reflects the fact that the need for these changes is being realized. To some extent, we can be confident in the provisions of a recent law titled “On Education in the Russian Federation,” which provides additional opportunities for networking cooperation between educational institutions and arts and cultural organizations, as well as other social agencies.

Special attention should be paid to the development of model syllabi. Such federal non-regulatory documents will suggest an approximate list of literary texts. We should probably abandon the idea of a universal list and focus on learning profiles, individual syllabi, development of choice and profound reading opportunities instead. We should also take into account the experience of foreign countries—participants of international comparative studies on education quality—which proves that readers’ literacy depends in particular on the range of options offered. In this regard, the experience of International Baccalaureate (IB) schools in Russia is of great use: there is a predetermined list of several hundred literary works from which every student selects a dozen for in-depth analysis, presentations, essays, and final papers.

Analysis of the results of the survey among first-year philology students demonstrates the long-overdue need to change the object of state regulation in literary education. The change, as we see

it, should consist of a transition from the ever-growing, strictly regulated list of required books to additional establishment of genres and types of literary works to be studied, as well as reading and speaking competencies to be developed in the course of study and assessed by the USE in literature. As a result, the list of obligatory literary works would be reduced to a reasonable minimum; what is even more important, students and teachers would be more interested in choosing the content of education. The use of modern teaching technology would also contribute to the improvement of education quality. In order to preserve cultural continuity and the “national literary canon” that determines the “national cultural code,” this canon does not have to be prescribed as a regulatory national education standard; culture is a living organism as long as it maintains everything living and archives everything obsolete.

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In the era of education reforms, it is essential to understand the situation at each given point of time and evaluate whether or not today's education mechanisms correspond to the objectives we set. In order to adjust or update these mechanisms, we need to have unbiased information at hand. Otherwise, education will spin its wheels and the reforms will be stalled. This means that reflection and in-depth study of the current state of affairs are crucial and that the reforms must take into account the results of such an analysis.

In their article "On Changing the Object of Regulation in School Literary Education", M. Pavlovets and I. Remorenko discuss the situation with school literary education today. Not only is the topic sophisticated, but it is also "untouchable," despite its importance. It is considered inappropriate to talk about the weak points of literature studies in a country with a powerful literary tradition and once-strong literary education. Raising the question of whether literary education should be reformed is virtually a crime in the professional community.

Meanwhile, not only do the authors demonstrate the inefficiency of contemporary literary education at school (an unfortunate and well-known fact), but they also disclose the reasons for such inefficiency. The questionnaire that served as the basis for their conclusions may seem unconvincing in terms of its sample size, but the selection of respondents proves that the conclusions are profound. The sample consists of recent school graduates, first-year students in the faculties of philology at Moscow Pedagogical Institute of Humanities and Moscow City Teacher Training University. In other words, the respondents are future teachers of literature, and their reading horizons and preferences are very symptomatic. Moreover, the study compares results of studies conducted in 2008 and 2013, which makes it possible to assess the efficiency of school literary education dynamically. The conclusions made in the article are both revealing and unbiased.

The authors discovered that future teachers of literature had no interest in the form or content of "complex" literary works, which raises concerns about the contemporary state of literary education at school. Teaching students to understand works with profound content is the keystone of Russian literary education; thus, the fact that future philologists are incapable of thoughtful reading indicates the extreme stagnation of such education. Failure to understand and reluctance to read complex literary works prove that school does not prepare children to perceive the art of modernism and postmodernism, or, in fact, any modern art. All of this stems from the bloated school literature syllabus, which prevents teachers from talking about the art of language thoughtfully and in-depth. Another factor is the continuous "ageing" of the syllabus; authors of the 20th century, es-

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Policy of  
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and I. Remorenko**

pecially its second half, are almost always neglected by teachers and students because the relevant texts are hardly ever present in the USE tasks. “Ageing” of the program is also responsible for the ever-widening gap between students’ reading interests and the content of literary education.

The results obtained demonstrate clearly that today’s mechanisms of school literary education need extensive reforms. That is the authors’ overall conclusion.

It is essential that the article by Pavlovets and Remorenko was published at this precise point of time. Although modifications to literature teaching practices at school comply with the latest-generation Federal State Education Standard, there is stubborn opposition on the part of professional lobbyists in reality. The Association of Teachers of Literature and Russian, an all-Russian non-governmental organization, passed a document titled “The Conception of Philological Education” (in the first reading) in early November 2014, proposing the conservation of the existing policies of school literary education. The authors of the Conception oppose any amendments to the principles of syllabus development. Meanwhile, it is dogmatic conservation of the existing poor state of affairs that is killing the best traditions of Russian literary education. Today, our education is again at a crossroads: either we continue to reproduce the problems described in the article, or we listen to the experts and to the part of the teaching community which is searching for and suggesting ways to upgrade literary education.

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