

**Aleksandr Pavlovich Gorbunov**  
(*Professor, Vice-Chancellor of GOU VPO<sup>1</sup>*  
*“Pyatigorsk State Linguistic University”*)

**THE CONTEMPORARY UNIVERSITY AS A CENTRE FOR  
PEACEBUILDING AND A PLATFORM FOR INTERETHNIC AND  
INTERRELIGIOUS POLYLOG**

The theme chosen for this seminar is a highly topical one, for the usual tendency when seeking to define the roles and functions of the university in today's world is to consider it merely as an educational institution, a research facility or, at best, more recently, as an entrepreneurial, innovation-generating structure.

Russia's experience, and specifically the experience of higher educational establishments in the North Caucasus, show, however, that universities can and must also perform a **peacebuilding function, channelling the efforts of multiple state and social institutions** into organising productive, intercultural, interethnic and interfaith co-operation.

Modern-day society is a society based on wide-ranging dialogue and co-operation, in a multicultural, multifaith environment. And given that it is conducted by a large number of actors in a multicultural space, being a dialogue “of each with all”, and “of each with each other”, a more accurate term for this process would be **interethnic and interfaith polylog**.

To a large extent, it is universities that are setting the tone of this dialogue and co-operation.

This is only natural: it is already clear that we need to produce a whole generation of competent managers, ones who will be capable of dealing with intercultural and interfaith issues, and universities, as human resource training centres, are in the front line of this endeavour.

---

<sup>1</sup> State Educational Institution of Higher Professional Education.

Universities are also places which, in today's world, are subject to a whole range of spiritual influences. And because they are highly educated and trained, students and graduates of higher educational establishments are themselves a major influence among young people.

Hence the major importance of intercultural spiritual and moral education at university.

There is, too, a general need for highly educated specialists in intercultural and interfaith dialogue in the education system as a whole, including higher education. For example, it is no secret that one of the main problems when it comes to teaching the basics of Orthodox culture or the basics of Islamic culture, or any other religious culture today, is one of personnel. For who teaches these and other religiously and philosophically oriented subjects, and how they are taught, in faith-based and secular institutions alike, is crucial to our **spiritual security**. Just as the question of the kind of specialists who will be acting as **mediators** between faith-based organisations and the state is of crucial importance for **civil peace**.

Ultimately, therefore, everyone needs to understand that **university education is instrumental in ensuring spiritual security and civil peace**.

The role of universities as **a centre for creating a culture of interethnic and interfaith co-operation** is expanding, not least because in recent years the necessary legal, organisational and methodological framework has been put in place, paving the way for the development of a system of spiritual, including theological, education in Russia. Theology is now taught at over 40 higher educational establishments in Russia, 23 of them state universities.

At a time when culture-forming faiths are having a growing influence on the process of civil society building, we believe that the constitutionally enshrined principles of a secular state and freedom of conscience afford an opportunity to lay the foundations for meeting society's need for theologians and other specialists in the spiritual field. For such a need does exist.

At Pyatigorsk Linguistic State University, the **introduction of a new academic subject – “state-faith relations” – within the framework of multifaith, theological training** has been prompted by the need for highly trained civil servants to liaise with faith-based organisations, in order to implement the basic constitutional principles related to freedom of conscience.

Without the help of the universities, such staff will not exist.

The subject itself, which was developed by the PLSU and is aimed at training experts and consultants in state-faith relations, is **unique in its own way**. It was developed and introduced in response to the fact that the fundamentally new social culture, including the religious landscape, that emerged in Russia and elsewhere at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century **requires constant consideration to be given to religion** in state building, lawmaking, the management of various aspects of social life and in all central and local government activities.

The main task today is the **future development of state-society and state-faith dialogue in the education sector**, which, to a large extent, is being addressed by state universities working in close partnership with various non-state institutions, including faith-based educational institutions.

**Universities in Russia are in high demand in this area.** At state level, considerable attention is being given to training specialists with an in-depth knowledge of the history, culture and religions of ethnic groups, and to theological training. Within society, there is a new awareness of the need to eliminate ignorance of other countries and religions, but to do this, we need a “critical mass” of well-trained specialists: teachers, consultants, experts in the history, culture and religions of countries and peoples, with a firm grasp of the intricacies of their customs and traditions, and the main, culture-forming faiths.

It is now clear, moreover, that **providing this training is a direct responsibility of the state**. Such specialists are much in demand today, including and indeed especially in central and local government, social, faith-based, international and interfaith organisations; in legislative, executive and judicial institutions; in the non-profit sector and other civil society organisations.

At PLSU, however, we believe that none of this should be done in isolation from the ordinary, day-to-day work which, in our case, is directed at implementing the **concept of the university as a model for a multicultural civil society and a professional community**. At PLSU, such a model has already been developed and is being put into practice. All of the university's activities must be geared to this end. That includes the festivals of friendship and the activities of the "language and culture centres", of which there are now 12, including the Centre for Russian Language and Culture. Many of these have links with ethnic communities in southern Russia, including: the Centre for North Caucasian Languages and Cultures, the Centre for Greek Language and Culture, the Centre for Armenian Language and Culture, the Centre for German Language and Culture, the Centre for Arabic Language, the Study of Islam and Islamic Culture, the Hebrew Language and Culture Centre, etc. All of this represents a real opportunity to learn intercultural and interfaith dialogue skills.

Targeted efforts in this area are very important because it is during their formative years in the multi-ethnic, multicultural and multifaith environment of university that young people can learn the **correct behaviour model** that will then guide them throughout their lives. As we see it, therefore, university is not only a means of educating future members of the workforce, but also a way of **teaching youngsters to live in peace and harmony**, through the activities of the university as a working model of a multicultural civil society and professional community.

PLSU is making major efforts in this regard, with undergraduates, postgraduates and trainees from 41 regions of Russia and 26 countries, including members of virtually all the ethnic peoples of the Caucasus.

Since 1996, PLSU has been conducting an integrated research, educational and humanitarian programme entitled "Peace in the North Caucasus through languages, education and culture". There have already been 5 international conferences under this programme and the 6<sup>th</sup> is due to be held in October 2010, this time in a wider format: **"Peace through languages, education and culture: Russia, the Caucasus and the global community"**.

As part of the university's efforts to pursue a wider theory- and practice-based interethnic, intercultural and interfaith programme, in addition to the existing research facilities, 2008 saw the setting up of the **Regional Research Institute to explore interfaith relations, ethnopolitics and ethnoculture in southern Russia**. The institute's governing board is headed by the Vice-Chancellor, and the director is the head of academic policy and innovation, **Y.Y. Grankin**. Its activities include research, expert evaluation, training research and teaching staff, publishing "Theodicy", a scientific journal and organising youth and other conferences, round table discussions and Olympiads focusing on the basics of spiritual national culture.

Today, with the ongoing integration of the Russian education system into the European and global system, the role of Russian universities as centres for peacebuilding has taken on new importance, being crucial to the ability of Russia's higher education sector to compete in the new global environment.

**Universities are becoming centres not only of science, education and innovation, but also focal points for the peacebuilding initiatives of civil society, and ongoing interaction and co-operation between the state and civil society, including its religious component.**