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A Letter of Concern

by

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Dear Professors,

This letter is regarding the actions of Dr. Mikhail Akulov as a dean and teacher of the General Education Faculty at KBTU.

As it may be already known to you, during the academic 2015/16, in which I had the honor to be employed at KBTU as an Associate Professor of Philosophy, I also had to work under his "leadership" in the same faculty. The scale of the problems encountered in my work relations with him was grave enough to incline me to draw your attention to them also then, as well as soon after I left the university, though at the time professional and other duties prevented me from doing so. But now that I understand that my colleague at KBTU Dr. Beau Branson has quit his work as an Assistant Professor, also unwilling to work with him anymore, I feel it as a moral and professional obligation to expose to you what I consider is problematic in the way Dr. Akulov perform his duties there. In the process of completing the present letter, I also read Dr. Branson's letter. I can generally confirm its substance, though at times I thought that Dr. Akulov's image in it is a shade more positive than I see it.

On my view, Dr. Akulov's performance of his duties as a dean was on the whole ***bellow unsatisfactory***. It is my understanding that this was not because of some objective factors impeding his work, (though perhaps such factors are not to be excluded), but because of subjective ones, and most of all because of his inadequate, indeed unprofessional disposition towards the nature of the academic work. This can be illustrated with numerous examples of events I witnessed during my work with him. If I have to summarize in advance the main elements of his perceived lack of professionalism, these will include the following four main categories: 1) lack of organization to the point of chaos; 2) low level of general and professional ethics; 3) inability to evaluate problematic situations and to come up with respective problem-solving actions; and 4) unprofessional performing of his teaching duties. (I must note here that this fourfold division is very conditional, as its elements often overlap). I shall discuss them here in brief:

1) Poor Organization (chaos) and Poor Communication

As pointed also in Dr. Branson's summary, as head of faculty and department, Dr. Akulov has displayed a ***barely believable lack of organization***. I do not remember an occasion in which we were given timely notifications, for instance, about faculty or departmental meetings. It had been typically on the day before for the day after, without much concern of our availability, which resulted in regular absences of colleagues. The faculty meetings also did not appear to be prepared in advance and would typically have no clear structure or program with points to be addressed. The discussions of issues were chaotically conducted and would typically end without much clarity. Voting on issues was almost never done, and on the few occasions when it was (upon our suggestion) it looked like a parody, with Akulov barely looking, let alone counting the votes. Perhaps the most grotesque example of untimely notification from him was when once last spring he called me to ask me why I am not done with one report yet - I pointed to him that the deadline according to an email was tomorrow at noon, and he replied that it was actually today and that it was not accurately pointed in the email.

Further, our work in the department has been marred by a lack or ***shortage of professional information***. For instance, he failed to notify us for the deadlines for submitting the grades for mid-terms, end-terms, and finals for both the fall and spring semesters last academic year! This resulted in untimely submitted grades and in one occasion in a scandal, in which he blamed the security employees in 'sabotage'. (I witnessed his quarrel with the security people, in which he appeared illogical and trying to force them to bypass their procedures because the grades were late). It is also very indicative of his professional approach that, whereas on three of these occasions he admitted his responsibility, on a fourth one he did not, claiming that he had

notified me when he accidentally met me around 8 pm in the hallway the day before the deadline. This speaks of itself without further explanations. But perhaps the most drastic case of shortage of information was in relation to the concourse interview. Whereas by early May 2016 I had already lost most of my enthusiasm to work with him in the future, I did actually formally submit an application for rehire before the deadline. However, *Dr. Akulov did not notify me for the day, the time, and the place of the interview!* Instead, he called me one afternoon and told me that the interview is 'now' and asked me where I am. As I was not on campus, he asked me how long it would take me to come there. It was at that very moment that I decided that I do not want to deal with this anymore. I told him that I simply cannot come 'now' and he said that he would try to present my case to the committee. I still do not know whether he intentionally did not notify me for the interview sufficiently early, or he simply had not been mindful of the administrative process once again. In either case, this would be something indicative of him on its own, but at that point it did not make a difference to me anymore.

Dr. Akulov was also frequently *inaccessible* and unavailable to discuss recurrent issues of professional importance. It was a common occurrence for me to try to get in touch with him regarding such matters and he to refuse to do so, claiming that he was busy. Often the time for addressing such issues was pressing but he did not seem to understand or appreciate that. For instance, questions regarding funds for visa trips and conference participations were almost always answered very late, with the result of plane tickets prices going up, which ultimately was at the expense of the university and the faculty concerned. This was simply a repeated failure to see things in perspective and to timely and adequately address them, with the worst cases in which he apparently did not even heed to issues we raise.

But even when Dr. Akulov was accessible it was often *difficult to communicate with* him. To my mind, this is due to his lack of concentration and use of illogical statements. His communicative attention span appears to be too short to be efficient in a conversation, especially when more complex issues are discussed, (as Dr. Branson also noted in his summary, discussing his lack of focus). He could barely listen to a sentence before interrupting, turning me away, or simply changing the topic. This is quite an unfortunate vice for any team work environment. And whereas it is not certain whether this is a consequence of a flawed ethics or a psychological (medical) condition of a certain kind, such a deficit in attention is indicative of interpersonal skills that are problematic and inefficient, especially for the position he holds. This was made worse also by a perceived inability (or unwillingness) to understand the content of emails sent to him (if he truly read them all the way), which were often replied to in poor and illogical answers. But not being able to listen when spoken to and to answer logically when written to,

he was also often unable to see the complete picture of specific problematic situations that needed to be addressed. When communicating with someone for the purpose of solving a problem, one needs to be able to make sense to the other side. But that was not Akulov's strength; it was actually his worst failure. I was not only struck by his inability to do produce sensible statements when he speaks or write -- even as I am a specialist in critical thinking, I found it all too often impossible to assert in his communications a meaningfully useful information that would enable me to perform my professional duties in the best way. (I shall discuss the state of his displayed critical thinking in the third section).

Also, during my time in the department he appeared as ***lacking a recurrent concern about how things are going***. It is typical for heads of academic units to ask their colleagues if there is something that needs to be addressed with the aim of maintaining the work efficiently and preventing potential setbacks. In his case, however, that would be rather an exception, which was a key administrative failure that contributed to a poor atmosphere in the work environment, which greatly diminished its efficiency.

2) Lack of General and Professional Ethics

As someone having taught general and professional ethics in universities around the globe for many years, I can say that I have never seen such a poor work ethics as that of Dr. Akulov's.

Its first and foremost feature is his ***inability to contribute to and maintain efficient team work***. That was a direct result of his being generally whimsical in his thoughts and actions. Effective team work is typically based on good emphatic relationships between the members of the team. This generally requires a capacity to communicate one's thoughts with a degree of predictability to secure effective actions. To achieve this, the person administering an academic department needs high quality interpersonal skills, along with the understanding that the general departmental atmosphere is synergetically efficient only if it is maintained along the standards of a modern day professional ethics. Most basically, however, this person needs to understand properly the nature of the academic profession and to advance it with all means available. Unfortunately, Dr. Akulov failed in all of these. As the department manager who is whimsical and unpredictable, with no clear idea of the fundamental goals of the work, simply cannot have the group function properly.

Dr. Akulov has also demonstrated an ***autocratic attitude***, attempting to give orders like a military style commander, as several of Dr. Branson's examples illustrate. This is, of course, highly unprofessional. Working with people is a special art, especially with highly intelligent

people who possess doctorates, habilitations, and experience far larger than his. Whereas promoting unethical attitude is basically promoting abuse. One can interpret this today as a form of harassment that indulges a sadistic sexuality, and in fact a similar attitude has been treated in Western universities as sexual harassment. I had to warn Dr. Akulov very early in my first semester, that if he displays such a lack of professionalism one more time, I was going to quit on the spot. As this was not an isolated case, one could easily assume that others may not have been spared in this regard in the same extent. You may do well, for instance, to inquire into the number of secretaries leaving his office, which at the time appeared quite high, by some estimates - every several or so months since he assumed his position.

Dr. Akulov has also been *presumptuous*, having made certain conclusions in his mind and believing in them as if they were absolutely certain. (Dr. Branson characterized this very fittingly with the psychological terms "projection" and "negative interpretations"). This is indeed very unprofessional, as it has hindered his capacity to evaluate problematic situations properly, but also because in the case of his colleagues it is clearly unethical to treat them as some sort of imaginary transgressors by presumption. In the state law, there is the so called presumption of innocence, which is generally accepted also as a standard of ethics; he would not observe it, though, but would typically project his own prejudices on the other party. In the above mentioned scandal with the security people, Akulov accused them in 'sabotage' rejecting their claim that they follow the procedure, without assuming that they may actually have to follow a procedure. In the same way, I have seen him in verbal fight with lower level administrators, considering them presumably guilty of transgression if they do not agree with him. He has also been presumptuous with his fellow academics in the department -- he somehow assumed that we do not know how to examine properly our students and made an insistent effort to make us adopt his evaluation approach in terms of types of exams and percentage distribution. (As someone who has done research in the area of educational evaluation, I have a note on that - his own syllabus was (and perhaps still is) of a very poor quality, not adhering to basic professional principles, something which I will address bellow).

Dr. Akulov often shows a *lack of respect to both colleagues and students*, which can be seen in his words, as well as in his attitudes to them. I remember a case in which Dr. Branson had sent to him a plagiarizing student; I was in Akulov's office when the student appeared and asked why the paper is considered plagiarized. Akulov started yelling at him right away "It's plagiarized! It's plagiarized!" without actually explaining to him 'why', apparently waiting for the student to agree at some point and leave. Regardless of the fact that the student may have plagiarized, he was entitled to respect, ethical attitude, and explanation -- this is would have been the professional way. This is also indicative of a behavior that can be described as 'defensive',

showing no collegiality to other members of the academic community, as he can burst into angry shouting for most insignificant of reasons. As some of the examples given by Dr. Branson illustrate, Akulov's autocratic approach was essentially disrespectful. It was just all too often that he would sideline conversation and debate for the sake of imposing his position, regardless of how little the latter makes sense.

Akulov has also a penchant for emphasizing his own *self-importance*. He has often said that our rehiring depends largely on him. In the context of his autocratic behavior, however, this can be perceived as a veiled threat. By such threats, he appeared to pursue a cultivation of subservience in his subordinates in order to indulge in exercising his position as he pleases. Yet, threats are criminal acts in the contemporary legislation, regardless of how they are made. By itself, this already speaks of his general and professional ethics. In the meantime, I had never before heard anyone in academia to call himself/herself a "boss". To me, this is indicative of a deeply flawed perception of our professional world. The same might be said about his emphatic statement "My career is skyrocketing!" in reference to being appointed a dean. I would say that this claim, which he seemed to genuinely believe, is a fairly naive and complacent. One's academic career does not simply advance by just holding an administrative position; just as managing an academic unit is not anything like managing a restaurant or a mob.

As Dr. Akulov appeared disorganized, chaotic, and late with his notifications, he also tried to cover his errors by *(ab)using his position*. His above mentioned untimely responses were often neither informative, nor logical, with the vague excuse that he is busy with other important matters. For instance, it was nearly impossible to have a conversation with him on pressing professional matters like conferences and visa trips during my second semester, whereas I could see him all too often having extensive conversations with several students with whom he was commonly hanging. Besides not showing the necessary respect to his colleagues in this way, he also appeared simply unable to understand that the real issues of the job have to be really addressed and handled, and not just ignored or sidelined. Addendum to that are his commonly rumored attempts to fire or not recommend for re-hiring well-respected and efficient members of the faculty.

Dr. Akulov had also made highly *misleading and dishonest statements*, which were in sharp contrast with any relevant factology. At the time of my job interview he said that the yearly salary for the position was over the equivalent of USD 44,000, but this statement did not turn out to be true. In the very best situation, which would have included also summer teaching, the annual payment was not going to exceed USD 37,000 by the existing pay schedule. Another misleading claim of his was that the renewal of the contract was going to be immediately after

its end (June 1, 2016 in my case) with regular monthly salary starting right away, whereas in the spring he told me that 'nobody is paid in the summer' and that I would be paid only if I teach a summer course. To me this means that he straightforwardly lied to lure me to come to KBTU. Frankly speaking, in the ensuing exchange around the contract before the beginning of the academic year, I had lost any faith in him due to his inability to support his words with relevant actions, and I had given it up. It was only a forwarded message by the vice rector Yuri Loktionov, that made me change my mind and come to Almaty. In another occasion, when I asked him to show me the university document that requires academic personnel to be present from 9 to 5, (something that is not practiced in the West), he produced documents in which there was no such a provision. He appeared also quite forgetful that the issue was cleared with the dean of the Business school, when we were still affiliated with it, and he ignored the fact that such policy is not implemented in other departments. On the whole, Akulov was typically so evasive, using ambiguous and illogical statements, that I was never able to obtain a clear picture of the situation under consideration. I even thought that he did not care much whether what he was saying was true or false and what the consequences of this might be for others.

For comparison, Dr. Akulov's perceived work ethics appeared in sharp contrast with that of other heads of academic units, with whom I had experience, including Kuandyk Tleuzhanuly, Darkhan Kouralkhanov, Ewan Simpson, and Louise Wheeler.

3) Inability to Evaluate Problematic Situations and Take an Adequate Problem-solving Action

Dr. Akulov's poor organization, communication, and work ethics have been also compounded by his perceived inability to evaluate problematic situations and respectively act accordingly. Dr. Branson listed examples of this as well, citing his lack of foresight and planning and the resulting "crises."

Particularly, Akulov's failure to maintain meaningful communications appeared also to condition his *inability to see things in perspective* sufficiently well, and thus to generally obstruct his appreciation and understanding of the connections between them. As a consequence, his evaluation of the nature of the problematic situations was inadequate, whereas his problem-solving approach was already handicapped from the start. Thus, when I told him that I would rather renew my visa in a city where there is a good library that I can use, Akulov replied that I am not sent there to do a research. This speaks of an inability or unwillingness to understand something essential to our profession, namely, to work on research projects and publish academic papers, something that we need to take any

opportunity to do and in the most optimal of ways. It also speaks of a flawed thinking that is not on the level necessary for properly performing one's duties as a faculty dean and department chair. His problematic thinking was apparent even at the time of my interview. He asked me a question that did not make sense overall, but was lengthy and brought a lot of issues together (from Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Ancient Greek philosophy) in a way that they could not actually be brought for specialists in the discipline. It appeared on the occasion that he either wanted to look well-versed in the discipline, (even though he was obviously not), or that he wanted to have done what was expected by him -- to ask an academic question -- though without considering it well, he appeared to expect that the applicant would have no choice but to take it as a meaningful question. Making sense is indeed a basic condition for good communication and efficiency in team-work environment, but Dr. Akulov was not able to emulate it not only on the occasion but almost never when we discussed professional matters. His main problem appeared to be his inability to see the big picture of the situation and to appreciate the importance of its elements. In short, a critical thinking failure.

Furthermore, Dr. Akulov appeared **unable to appreciate suggestions** of approaches and policies that have been proven efficient in the work of leading global institutions. As I thus quite unexpectedly found myself in the need to frequently emphasize the importance of a proper problem-solving mindset and work ethics, he told me at an occasion to stop talking about critical thinking and professionalism. This by itself is indicative of the manner in which he handled his duties, but as a specialist in critical thinking, I felt obliged to try to keep him on track as the work in the department was stalling. Likewise, we prepared with Dr. Branson a fairly long list of so-called 'bullet-points' that were focusing on issues that could be resolved or handled better than they currently were. He refused to accept the paper version of the document with our names and signatures, but requested an electronic copy of it, making us suspicious that he wanted himself to take credit for it without acknowledging us. Almost none of our suggestions were implemented, though. He was only rarely taking our advises. But in all fairness, he took some, including the ones for introducing *Turnitin* at the university, which has been widely used in academic institutions for a while, and the one for a flat rate reimbursement for some trips.

Acting without a concept is never too good. But for Dr. Akulov that seemed a trademark. Unable to give sensical argument for his actions, he was often just saying something and acting, or simply not taking action. Thus, regarding my recurrent requests that we receive summaries of our student evaluation reports, Akulov never undertook any action, even though it is well-known that the reports are very useful for our work, as they help us improve our teaching and approach to students related matters. At one point, when I raised the question at a faculty

meeting, one of our colleagues, who was handling the matter at a university level, replied that main were the best (without specifying at what level). On the occasion, Dr. Akulov was barely able to hide his frustration at the fact, saying "We all have good evaluations." This is surely unprofessional, as it ignored the importance of the matter for the sake of one's vanity. It is also unhelpful and shows a lack of understanding of key components of the academic work. This and the previously mentioned acceptance of our document with suggestions only in an electronic form made me think he might be trying to cover up how well we were doing for fear of being overshadowed or somehow sidelined.

4) Unprofessional teaching

I had the opportunity to observe Dr. Akulov, when he was teaching a course *Introduction to Philosophy*. I found a number of aspects of his teaching problematic and, upon the class, did not hesitate to point them to Dr. Branson, who was also present in the classroom. We were both in agreement about Dr. Akulov's lack of expertise on the subject and inadequate approach to teaching it.

The class we observed focused medieval philosophy, including covering the highly complex issue of the so-called *universals*. Dr. Akulov used a classroom technology to aid his presentation by sliding pictures, which was in principle commendable. His presentation, however, consisted of speedy discussion over a large number of issues which could not be so easily grasped without terminologically elaborate explanation. To proceed moving from one issue to another the instructor needs to make sure -- by recurrent feedback -- that students are able to follow him with understanding. Such feedback, however, was not asked for, except on a couple of occasions, in which he simply asked the students whether they understand him in a manner that did not seem to anticipate other answer than a routine 'yes' (and he got it). The issue of the universals, which due to its complexity is most commonly discussed in graduate courses, was covered in the same speedy manner and likewise not convincingly explained. As is well known, in any subject, a proper conveying of complex issues requires a respective terminology, which however was neither introduced nor invoked in this case.

Additionally, as I pointed in my observation report, the presentation seemed more historical than philosophical – resembling a very general exposition in cultural history or history of religion, (the topic was indeed largely in religion). I also suggested an emphasis on terminology, which could have done only good to the specific colloquial approach adopted by Akulov. Another suggestion I made was about more emphasis on the connection with previous material, which in this case was not done, though it could have efficiently facilitated students'

understanding of the material. Finally, I also suggested an emphasis on the communication with students, especially recurrent feedback, which in this case was unsatisfactory, in order to make sure that they follow with understanding.

In my view, on the important teaching issues of terminological usage and recurrent students' feedback, Akulov failed because he does not have the necessary expertise on the subject. (He had indeed repeatedly stated that his doctorate was in history, and not in philosophy). This is why he was unable to establish connection between current and previously introduced material, and was unable to utilize the relevant terminology, which in this subject is indispensable. Not being an expert on the subject, he was simply unable to position what he was telling to the students in the larger picture of the subject that is available to academic philosophers.

Thus, after the class, it remained a puzzle to me and to Dr. Branson, why Dr. Akulov would be allowed to teach a subject in which he does not have academic expertise. I think this is a serious problem, which I urge you to correct right away, if you do not want to do a disservice to the wonderful students you have in KBTU. (American Philosophical Association has advised on its website that philosophy courses should be taught only by qualified philosophers. Dr. Akulov is said to have an American diploma and this, therefore, applies to him specifically).

Besides his insufficient expertise on the subject, Dr. Akulov displayed on the occasion an apparent lack of preparation for the class. He left the classroom during class time for a relatively long period of time (about 10 min), leaving the students on their own, because he had not taken with himself some of his teaching materials! He returned to continue with another PowerPoint presentation relating to a later period in the Western intellectual history, which however, he could not properly condition by way of explanation to the previously shown presentation. This left in me the impression that he had either not worked on the connection between the two presentations or had simply meant to stop at the end of the first one; but now that me and Dr. Branson have come to observe him he decided to fill more of the time with class presentation. In either way, however, his approach falls short of today's professional standards for both teaching preparation and deliverance on the subject of philosophy.

I have also reservations regarding the way Dr. Akulov has structured the syllabus for his philosophy class, which I found to be of a very poor quality on the whole. First of all, the objective of the course was not clearly stated and the structure of the whole syllabus looked chaotic. It is also remarkable that in Dr. Akulov's syllabus the percentage towards the final grade for students' participation was double higher than those for mid-term or end-term exam.

These exams are generally considered major examinations that must thoroughly identify students' actual knowledge and evaluate it as is due. But giving more weight on class participation, especially with large size of the classes at KBTU, and with low actual participation in the classroom, would typically fall short of credibility. It may be true that the academic autonomy entitles Dr. Akulov to his own approach and style of teaching, but it is up to the university to decide whether it will be content with a way of teaching that falls short of modern standards.

Yet, on this particular occasion, Dr. Akulov failed to live up to these standards in one more way. Whereas he had insistently stated that we use strictly English language in the classroom, despite me and Dr. Branson both having a certain level of Russian, Dr. Akulov himself started reading extensive passages from a medieval text in Russian. The language switch was in a way not a big deal, knowing that most KBTU students speak more than two languages, but the lack of consistency between words and actions in Dr. Akulov himself was just one more example of his battered professionalism.

Concluding words

Professionalism these days has nearly the status of religion in the Western academic institutions. Yet, Dr. Akulov has failed to live up to its standards in more than one way, even as he has been hired for the very purpose to convey professionalism himself. Indeed, and regrettably, not all Western-trained professionals are also professionalists in this sense. But this only makes it advisable for the academic institutions hiring foreign faculty to extend their scrutiny of the candidates beyond their diplomas to cover also their other professional qualities, including organizational skills, diligence, critical thinking, and ethics (and especially sense of responsibility).

My general observation is that by global standards Dr. Akulov has utterly failed in the performance of his duties at KBTU. I suggest that you try to corroborate the information regarding his actions by Dr. Branson and myself with testimonies of other people who have had something to do with him in their work. I would think that an anonymous inquiry (questionary) on his performance (without his knowledge and presence at the time of filling it) may be very useful in this regard. But you definitely need a way to make sure how some of your employees may perform, especially if appointed to key administrative positions, because while supposedly supervising the members of their units, they themselves may remain out of control.

It is surely up to you to decide whether you want to keep in your institution a person, who has failed at so many levels and has been driving away proven professionals at everybody's expense. With the kind of unprofessional performance he displays, Akulov most certainly would not have lasted for too long in any Western university. Perhaps the best approach to selecting the most efficient leadership of academic units is to make their heads electable, as in such case they would feel responsible to meet in their work the expectations of their colleagues. But I believe Dr. Akulov stands no chance of being elected (by undisclosed votes) by people who have already worked with him, as they would know that he causes more problems than he solves. It is obvious that he has no Western teaching experience; actually, I was not able to discern in his work style anything characteristic of the Western academia. On the contrary, nothing in his approach shows that he understand the important issues involved in this profession. I would think that his most appealing ability to KBTU is his fluency in Russian, but I cannot really think of anything else. At times, I actually thought that he has not spent even one semester in graduate schools, largely due to his so often perceived inability to make sense when he communicates. For a comparison, of the nearly 4000 students I have had so far on three different continents, I have had only a handful of them displaying the same problem.

In all events, Akulov will need first to improve his teaching, and realistically, he probably need at least 7-8 more years just teaching and research experience to better understand what this profession is all about. It could be only then that he be properly trusted with taking positions of higher responsibility, such as head academic units. (By the way, in most Western universities, for positions of head of department and faculty can be appointed only academicians of the rank of Associate professors and above; this also is frequently sanctioned by law).

You have got great students in KBTU! They deserve something better. And you need to know what kind of employees you are spending your budget on.

Thank you for your time.



Kind regards,
R. Roussev