

## Submission for Miles J. Herszenhorn (The Harvard Crimson) for the ACP Reporter of the Year

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## Harvard Misinformation Expert Joan Donovan Forced to Leave by Kennedy School Dean, Sources Say

*Harvard Kennedy School Dean Douglas W. Elmendorf is forcing out online misinformation expert Joan M. Donovan from her role at the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy and ending her research project, according to three HKS staff members with knowledge of the situation.*

BY MILES J. HERSZENHORN

February 2, 2023

**UPDATED: February 2, 2023, at 9:48 p.m.**

**H**arvard Kennedy School Dean Douglas W. Elmendorf is forcing out online misinformation expert Joan M. Donovan from her role at the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy and ending her research project, according to three HKS staff members with knowledge of the situation.

Donovan was told she has until summer 2024 to end the Technology and Social Change project and depart from her role at HKS, according to the staff members. Donovan, who is not a tenure-track professor, has led the project since its inception in 2019 and serves as the Shorenstein Center's research director. Donovan has also taught at HKS as an adjunct lecturer in public policy.

In addition, Donovan was told her prominence at the school led Elmendorf to end her time at the Shorenstein Center, two HKS staff members said.

HKS spokesperson James F. Smith confirmed in an emailed statement that the project is ending.

“The Technology and Social Change project is winding down — through an extended transition — because it does not have intellectual and academic leadership by a full HKS faculty member, as required of all long-term research and outreach projects at HKS,” Smith wrote.

As part of the School's decision to end the Technology and Social Change project, Donovan is not allowed to raise new funding, according to the three HKS staff members. The project is also facing a hiring freeze and spending constraints on existing funding, the staff members said.

Donovan declined to comment on her status at HKS and the termination of her project.

Donovan received her Ph.D. in sociology and science studies from the University of California San Diego in 2015, before joining the Data and Society Research Institute in 2016, where she served as research lead on a team studying media manipulation.

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In 2019, Donovan joined the Shorenstein Center to serve as the director and lead researcher of the Technology and Social Change project.

At Harvard, Donovan was a leading force in bringing the study of misinformation and disinformation to prominence in academia. Donovan has testified in front of House and Senate subcommittees on the spread of misinformation online.

Tensions between Elmendorf and Donovan rose in fall 2021, according to three HKS staff members, around when Donovan started to work on HKS' Facebook archive project, fbarchive.org. The archive will provide researchers and journalists with access to photos of documents obtained by Frances B. Haugen, the 2021 Facebook whistleblower who disclosed internal Facebook research on its technologies' negative effects.

A year later, at the start of the fall 2022 semester, Donovan was informed that the Technology and Social Change project would ultimately end in summer 2024.

In mid-September 2022, HKS professor Latanya A. Sweeney joined Donovan as co-principal investigator for the Technology and Social Change project, the first time Donovan was not its sole head.

Donovan taught the HKS course Democracy, Politics and Institutions 622: "Media Manipulation and Disinformation Campaigns" and **co-authored a widely-read study in July 2022** that found a plurality of participants in the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol were motivated by their support for Trump. In September 2022, Donovan published a book titled "Meme Wars: The Untold Story of the Online Battles Upending Democracy in America" about the online spread of right-wing media political conspiracy theories.

Smith, an HKS spokesperson, wrote in the statement that the school is continuing to promote scholarship in the field of misinformation and disinformation.

"Harvard Kennedy School is committed to the teaching and study of misinformation and disinformation, and several faculty members are leading significant projects that address these topics," he wrote.

In a Thursday morning email obtained by The Crimson, Shorenstein Center Director Nancy R. Gibbs wrote to center affiliates that the decision to shut down the Technology and Social Change project was "solely driven" by HKS policy of only allowing full professors to lead research projects.

"While there can be limited exceptions, those can't continue indefinitely without a faculty member as the principal project leader and academic head," Gibbs wrote in the email.

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Donovan declined to comment on the contents of the letter.

The Technology and Social Change project — which lists a team of more than 25 people on its website including staff, fellows, contributing researchers, and research assistants — has been led by Donovan since 2019.

Gibbs sent the email hours after The Crimson first reported that HKS would end the Technology and Social Change project by summer 2024.

Gibbs wrote that other initiatives led by faculty members related to the study of misinformation and disinformation would continue at the Shorenstein Center, including the Facebook archive project and the Misinformation Review, an online academic journal.

In recent weeks, Elmendorf has been the subject of controversy.

He faced backlash in January over his **rejection of a fellowship** for former Human Rights Watch head Kenneth Roth. Elmendorf, who allegedly blocked Roth over anti-Israel criticism, **reversed his decision** after more than 1,000 Harvard affiliates **signed an open letter** calling for his resignation.

—Staff writer Miles J. Herszenhorn can be reached at [miles.herszenhorn@thecrimson.com](mailto:miles.herszenhorn@thecrimson.com). Follow him on Twitter [@MHerszenhorn](https://twitter.com/MHerszenhorn).

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# Harvard Kennedy School Student Rodrigo Ventocilla Ventosilla Remembered as a ‘Fighter’ for Trans Rights

*Rodrigo Ventocilla Ventosilla, a Harvard Kennedy School student who died in police custody in Indonesia last month, was remembered as a “fighter” by those who knew him.*

BY MILES J. HERSZENHORN

September 19, 2022



Rodrigo Ventocilla Ventosilla, left, and his spouse, Sebastian Marallano. By [Courtesy of the Ventosilla and Marallano Families](#)

When Rodrigo Ventocilla Ventosilla was not studying at the Harvard Kennedy School's library, he loved to feed friends and classmates from HKS at study group dinners with traditional homemade meals from his native Peru.

The last study group dinner of the spring semester was hosted by a classmate from China who prepared a hotpot meal, but over an hour after the original meeting time, Ventocilla was missing.

He eventually arrived at the hotpot dinner, late, but with a dish of his own in hand: Peruvian arroz con pollo, a traditional chicken and rice dish.

"He arrived late because he was still preparing [it]," said Ana Rocío Castillo Romero, Ventocilla's friend who was a member of the study group. "He wanted to share the arroz con pollo."

"So we make space in the table, we put the arroz con pollo right next to the hotpot," Castillo said. "It was delicious."

Rodrigo Ventocilla was born in Lima, Peru on July 7, 1990. He graduated with a bachelor's degree in economics from the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru. Ventocilla, a transgender man, was a trans rights activist in Peru, where he also worked for the country's Ministry of Education and Ministry of Economy and Finance.

Ventocilla **died on Aug. 11 while in police custody** at a hospital in Denpasar, Indonesia, where he was traveling on a honeymoon with his spouse, Sebastián Marallano. His family says he was **beaten and discriminated against by police in Bali**. Indonesian authorities have **denied all allegations of wrongdoing**.

## 'A Fighter'

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Ana Ventosilla, Ventocilla's mother, said her son spent the first 40 days of his life in an incubator because she went into labor when she was only six months pregnant.

Ventocilla has been "a fighter" since he was very young, Ventosilla said.



Rodrigo Ventocilla Ventosilla, left, poses for a photograph with his mother Ana Ventosilla. By [Courtesy of the Ventosilla Family](#)

“We went every day and prayed to the Virgin so that she could save [him] because [he] had been born prematurely,” Ventosilla said in an interview last month. “And the doctor told me that [he] was a fighter for [his] life because [he] got ahead.”

Later in life, Ventocilla became a fighter for LGBTQ+ people in Peru.

Ventocilla had been an LGBTQ+ activist since his college years, when he would ask his mother for permission to drive their old car to attend demonstrations in support of LGBTQ+ rights, Ventosilla said.

“I was scared and told [him]: ‘You are going to go, but please be careful,’” Ventosilla said. “I even accompanied [him] at times, and [he] always had support, love, and acceptance.”

In June 2015, after graduating college, Ventocilla co-founded a trans rights advocacy organization, Diversidades Trans Masculinas.

Morgan K. Benson, a 2022 Kennedy School graduate, said a large part of Ventocilla’s activism consisted of helping trans people find inclusive spaces.



able to have that.”

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## ‘We Loved Each Other’

Ventocilla met Sebastián Marallano around the time he was launching Diversidades Trans Masculinas. While they knew of each other from the activism world and shared mutual friends, their “definitive” meeting occurred at a party in Lima’s Barranco district, Marallano said in an interview this month.

“By then, I had a crush on Rodrigo,” Marallano said. “I liked him.”

After Marallano spotted Ventocilla at the party, a friend told them to approach Ventocilla and to confess their feelings for him.

Marallano followed the advice.

“At first, he didn’t believe me,” Marallano said. “He asked me if I was kidding and I told him no, that I was serious — that I wanted to get to know him.”

During a rally for Ventocilla in Boston on Sept. 4, Vic Hogg, an HKS student in the class of 2023, said they remembered how he would openly talk about his love for Marallano.

One such time occurred during a meeting of the “queer heartbreak club,” a group formed by Hogg and some friends who were going through breakups at the time.

“We had spent all this time talking about how depressed we were and blah, blah, blah,” Hogg said with a laugh. “Then Rodrigo came over and just started talking about how fucking in love he was with Sebastián and how he was so excited for everything that’s going to come and so excited for the celebration they were going to be able to have.”

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Rodrigo Ventocilla with his spouse, Sebastián Marallano. By [Courtesy of Sebastián Marallano](#)

Marallano traveled to Chile, where they married on May 25.

“One of the reasons we wanted to get married — besides the fact that we loved each other — is because we wanted to have the possibility that I could go to Cambridge,” Marallano said.

But Marallano, who lived in Peru while Ventocilla spent his first academic year at HKS, said they never got the chance to visit Ventocilla in Cambridge because they were unable to get a visa.

### ‘Rodri was Brave’

Colleagues from Peru and friends from the Harvard Kennedy School remembered Ventocilla as an advocate for LGBTQ+ rights and a dedicated student who spent many hours focusing on his work.

Rocio Béjar, who was Ventocilla’s boss when he worked in the Peruvian Ministry of Economy and Finance, said he was “passionate” and “a really good worker.”

Béjar said getting a master’s at Harvard was Ventocilla’s “dream,” but that his goal was always to return to Peru.

his country,” Béjar said.

Ventocilla brought his studious nature to Harvard, where he would study at the Kennedy School library all the time, according to Benson, who graduated from HKS in 2022.

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“I wish we had more memories together because so much of the year he was in the library,” Benson said. “He studied there and he was just doing it all the time.”

Benson said that one of his favorite memories with Ventocilla was traveling to Palestine during spring break, which inspired Ventocilla to think about ways he could “be in solidarity with Palestine” in his future organizing work.

“It was a really intense trip, but the one day we had that was more relaxed, we went to the Dead Sea,” said Benson, who was roommates with Ventocilla during the trip. “We swam and I got my foot all cut up, which he was so sweet about.”



Rodrigo Ventocilla, pictured in a polaroid photograph outside of the Harvard Kennedy School. By [Courtesy of Morgan Benson](#)



On their trip with Palestine Trek, Rodrigo Ventocilla Ventosilla and Morgan Benson visited the Dead Sea. By [Courtesy of Morgan Benson](#)

During his first year at HKS, Ventocilla ran for vice president of diversity, equity and anti-racism in the Kennedy School’s student government. In a message announcing his campaign, Ventocilla wrote that “diversity, equity, and inclusion work, especially LGBT advocacy,” was one of his passions since college.

“Through my experience as a public sector worker and LGBT activist in Peru, I know that issues of racism, sexism, colonialism don’t belong at the margin, they should be the centre of what we learn and do at HKS, and afterwards,” Ventocilla wrote at the time.

Ana Rocío Castillo Romero, Ventocilla’s classmate at HKS and a former colleague from Peru, wrote in a text message that Ventocilla “always fought for his beliefs, who he was, and his right[s].”

“Rodri was brave,” Castillo wrote. “Although he didn’t make it, that didn’t stop him from his fight and ideals.”

—Staff writer Miles J. Herszenhorn can be reached at [miles.herszenhorn@thecrimson.com](mailto:miles.herszenhorn@thecrimson.com). Follow him on Twitter [@MHerszenhorn](#).



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# 'We Want to Clear Rodrigo's Name': Mother of Harvard Student who Died in Bali Says He was Beaten by Police



Rodrigo Ventocilla Ventosilla, left, poses for a photograph with his mother Ana Ventosilla. By  
*Courtesy of the Ventosilla Family*

By *Miles J. Herszenhorn*, Crimson Staff Writer  
September 1, 2022

It was past midnight in Lima, Peru, but when Ana Ventosilla learned her son had been arrested at an airport in Indonesia, she called him immediately.

On a WhatsApp video call, her son, Rodrigo Ventocilla Ventosilla, said authorities in Bali, where he was traveling on a honeymoon, were demanding up to \$100,000 for his release after he was arrested on drug charges.

“Mom, I’m going to negotiate. I’m going to tell them that I [will] give them \$13,000,” her son told her, Ventosilla recounted in an interview Monday.

But it did not work. Hours later, the amount had risen to \$200,000, Ventosilla said her son told her.

“It was an extortion,” she said.

Three days later, Rodrigo Ventocilla’s honeymoon trip to Bali, one of Southeast Asia’s most popular and idyllic tourist destinations, ended in tragedy when he **died at age 32 at a hospital in Denpasar** while still in police custody. A transgender man who co-founded a trans rights advocacy group in Peru, Ventocilla was about to enter his final year as a master’s student at the Harvard Kennedy School.

The cause of Ventocilla’s death has become the source of international controversy. Police in Bali say he died after consuming unseized drugs in custody. He was arrested five days earlier when authorities found a grinder and other items containing marijuana in his possession at the I Gusti Ngurah Rai International Airport, according to the Bali Police.

But his family has called into question officials’ explanation, alleging the arrest was motivated by racism and transphobia. Ana Ventosilla said in an interview with The Crimson on Monday that her son was beaten by police and received inadequate medical attention while he was hospitalized.



By [Courtesy of the Ventosilla Family](#)

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Ana Ventosilla said her son and his spouse, Sebastián Marallano, were subjected to “physical and psychological violence” at the hands of Indonesian authorities. The family, which is now pursuing legal action in Peru, has “evidence of torture,” she said.

Her allegations are the most severe claims of police misconduct Ventocilla’s family has levied to date, going further than an initial press release family members put out earlier this month.

“For us, it is very painful,” she said. “There is evidence of torture, and we want to clear Rodrigo’s name.”

Ana Ventosilla said her son was beaten by Indonesian authorities after he was detained at airport customs.

Ventosilla’s account of the events that transpired after her son’s arrest are based in large part on what Marallano recounted after returning home to Peru, according to a spokesperson for the family, Luzmo Henríquez.

The family is calling on the Peruvian government to authorize an immediate autopsy once the body arrives in Peru on Friday.

The Bali Police deny the allegations of violence. Stefanus Satake Bayu Setianto, a spokesperson for the Bali Police, wrote in a statement Wednesday that “no violence” was carried out against Ventocilla and Marallano by police on the island.

Indonesia is home to some of the strictest drug laws in Southeast Asia. Possession of marijuana can result in a 12-year prison sentence and hefty fines.

The country has also passed several laws in recent years **curtailing LGBTQ+ rights**.

Ventocilla's family has also sharply criticized the Peruvian consular services in Indonesia, charging that officials failed to provide Ventocilla and Marallano sufficient support after they were detained.

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Ana Ventosilla said family members “blew up the phone of the Peruvian consulate in Indonesia” following Ventocilla's arrest. But officials at the embassy did not provide “timely attention,” hindering the family's request for help, Ventosilla said.

The Peruvian Foreign Affairs Ministry did not respond to a request for comment on Wednesday. The government initially defended its actions in a press release last week, but changed its tone after it came under fire from the families of Ventocilla and Marallano.

In a press release on Friday, the ministry asked Indonesia to **produce an “official report”** about the circumstances that led to Ventocilla's death — a sharp reversal from an initial statement it put out two days prior that **defended its consular services** and backed up the Bali Police's explanation of the arrest.

“The first communication was really aggravating and humiliating for us,” Ana Ventosilla said in the interview Monday. “It hurt our souls.”

Ventosilla took aim at Julio Eduardo Tenorio Pereyra, head of consular services for the Peruvian Embassy in Indonesia, saying he refused to fly to Bali from



Tenorio told family members they needed to submit paperwork before he could travel to Bali, where Ventocilla and Marallano were being treated in local hospitals, Ventosilla said.

On Aug. 11, Tenorio agreed to take the next commercial flight to Bali, according to Ventosilla. Two hours later, she received word her son was dead.

After Ventocilla's family informed Tenorio of the news, he delayed his trip to Bali, according to Ventosilla. He told them he would not travel to the island until after a death certificate was issued, she said.

"That's what he writes to me," Ventosilla said. "Not even the slightest, 'I'm very sorry, ma'am.'"

—Staff Miles J. Herszenhorn can be reached at [miles.herszenhorn@thecrimson.com](mailto:miles.herszenhorn@thecrimson.com). Follow him on Twitter [@MHerszenhorn](https://twitter.com/MHerszenhorn).

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Harvard Corporation Senior Fellow Penny S. Pritzker '81 speaks at the Smith Campus Center on Thursday.

## How Harvard's Presidential Search Committee Landed On Claudine Gay

*The search committee, led by Harvard Corporation Senior Fellow Penny S. Pritzker '81, considered more than 600 nominations over the span of just five months, making it the shortest Harvard presidential search in almost 70 years.*

BY **CARA J. CHANG** AND **MILES J. HERSZENHORN**

December 16, 2022

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Snow had covered the ground in Harvard Yard for months when the search committees that selected University Presidents **Lawrence S. Bacow**, **Drew G. Faust**, **Lawrence H. Summers**, and **Neil L. Rudenstine** finished their work.

On Thursday, Cambridge's first winter flurry was only a few days old. But the 15-member group that searched for Harvard's 30th leader had already whittled its shortlist down to one name: Claudine Gay.

The search committee, led by Harvard Corporation Senior Fellow **Penny S. Pritzker '81**, considered more than 600 nominations over the span of just five months, making it the shortest Harvard presidential search in almost 70 years. Gay became the group's final pick about two to three weeks ago, according to Shirley M. Tilghman, a search committee member who sits on the Harvard Corporation, the University's highest governing board.

Gay, the dean of Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences, will take over as University president on July 1, 2023, when she will become the first person of color and the second woman to serve in American higher education's most prestigious job.

The committee — made up of 15 members of the University's two governing boards — met formally about 20 times “in addition to many, many informal engagements,” Pritzker said in public remarks Thursday. The group consisted of all 12 Harvard Corporation fellows and three members of the Board of Overseers, the University's second-highest governing body.

The Board of Overseers formally approved the selection of Gay on Thursday, Pritzker said in an interview following Harvard's public announcement. The Corporation also voted to approve Gay on Thursday, Pritzker said, though every member of the board **except Bacow** sat on the search committee.



Harvard Corporation Senior Fellow Penny S. Pritzker '81, who led the presidential search committee, embraces president-elect Claudine Gay. By [J. Sellers Hill](#)

The search committee started with a list of 600 nominations that narrowed to approximately 50 “credible” candidates, said Tilghman, a former president of Princeton University who [joined the Corporation](#) in 2015.

“Then it was very difficult to go from a list of about 50 down to a number where the committee could actually meet the individuals and get a sense of their viability as a candidate,” Tilghman said in an interview Thursday evening.

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The list then shortened to around 12, according to Tilghman. The committee interviewed contenders over “at least” the past two to three months, she said, including candidates who had no connection to Harvard.

Search committee members declined to identify other candidates they considered Thursday. Harvard spokesperson Jason A. Newton declined to comment on the committee's process.

The Corporation met with the Board of Overseers on Dec. 5 in Loeb House, but search committee members did not present Gay's name to the lower governing board until Thursday, when Pritzker invited its members to weigh in on the final selection, according to Tilghman.

Gay then met with the Overseers herself, Tilghman said. Under **Harvard's charter**, the lower governing board must approve the selection of the University president, but the vote has long been considered a formality.

The **15-member search committee** was stocked with legal, academic, and corporate talent, including two billionaires, two former Obama administration officials, and two former university presidents.

The group held more than 200 informal conversations throughout its process, according to **Diana L. Nelson '84**, a search committee member who sits on the Harvard Corporation.

Searchers focused on two key questions in their conversations with Harvard affiliates and industry experts, according to Tilghman: what qualities the 30th president should possess and what challenges Bacow's successor will face.

The committee valued candidates' scholarly reputation, according to Tilghman, who said the University “needed someone who had the ability to command the respect of the faculty.”

“We also felt, given the complexity of Harvard — and it truly is a complex institution — that it had to be someone with considerable, I would say, administrative ability,” she said. “It is just too complicated a job for someone who has never had to deal with something as complicated as the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, so that eliminated some of the candidates who may have been extraordinary scholars, but really did not have the kind of depth of experience.”

Gay will be the third consecutive president plucked from **within Harvard's ranks**, but Tilghman insisted Thursday that the group seriously considered

individuals from outside the University, too: “We did not ever — either at the beginning, the middle, or even toward the end — ever assume that it was going to be a Harvard insider,” she said.

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On Thursday, when the search committee announced Gay was its final pick, the Board of Overseers reacted with “overwhelming excitement and joy,” Tilghman said.

“Throughout the whole meeting, it was a sense that this was a group who felt they had made a really important, momentous decision — and they had made the right decision,” Tilghman said. “It was thrilling to be a part of it.”

—Staff writer J. Sellers Hill contributed to reporting.

—Staff writer Cara J. Chang can be reached at [cara.chang@thecrimson.com](mailto:cara.chang@thecrimson.com). Follow her on Twitter [@CaraChang20](https://twitter.com/CaraChang20).

—Staff writer Miles J. Herszenhorn can be reached at [miles.herszenhorn@thecrimson.com](mailto:miles.herszenhorn@thecrimson.com). Follow him on Twitter [@MHerszenhorn](https://twitter.com/MHerszenhorn).

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# MILES J. HERSZENHORN

MHERSZENHORN@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU • MOBILE: +1 (917) 599 2845

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## WORK EXPERIENCE

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USA TODAY • INCOMING INTERN • JUNE 2023 – AUGUST 2023

- Incoming summer intern on USA Today's "Politics" team covering political breaking news, U.S. foreign policy, and the 2024 presidential campaign
- Reporting to Candy Woodall, politics editor for breaking news & planning and Caren Bohan, managing editor for politics & Washington

POLITICO EUROPE • INTERN • JULY 2020 – SEPTEMBER 2020

- Worked as a researcher to Florian Eder, editor of Brussels Playbook and executive editor for Germany
- Published articles about the 2020 Belarus elections and the poisoning of Alexei Navalny
- Wrote the Coronavirus Daily Update newsletter
- Youngest person to have a top front page story for POLITICO Europe

## EDUCATION

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HARVARD COLLEGE • SOPHOMORE • SEPTEMBER 2021 – MAY 2025

ACADEMICS • CUMULATIVE GPA: 3.76

- Joint major in History & Literature and Slavic Languages and Literatures
- Studied Russian politics, French feminist theory, and Ukrainian history

EXTRACURRICULARS

- THE HARVARD CRIMSON • JANUARY 2022 – PRESENT
  - Senior reporter covering Harvard's president, provost, & central administration
  - Part of the *Summer Crimson* news team of four reporters who remained on campus in summer 2022 to cover breaking news and other newsworthy developments
  - Former junior reporter covering the Harvard Kennedy School & Institute of Politics
- HARVARD POLITICAL REVIEW
  - Staff Writer for the Harvard Political Review primarily covering European politics

ECOLE INTERNATIONALE LE VERSEAU • JANUARY 2016 – JUNE 2021

- Consistently top of class, including in the native 'French language and literature' course
- Founded the school's first bilingual French/English newspaper

НОВАЯ ГУМАНИТАРНАЯ ШКОЛА (NEW HUMANITARIAN SCHOOL) • SEPTEMBER 2011 – JUNE 2015

- Russian private primary and secondary school

## SKILLS, PASSIONS & AWARDS

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- Fluent in French, Russian, Spanish and English. Elementary knowledge of German
- Experienced interviewer & public speaker in all four languages