

CENSORSHIP, DENUNCIATIONS, AND SILENCE MODE IN RUSSIAN ACADEMIA: INFORMAL INTIMIDATION AND DIRECT PRESSURE ON SCHOLARS

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The article identifies the mechanisms reinforcing a culture of politically motivated silencing in academic institutions, explores the strategies and actors employed in maintaining silence, and presents their implications for the anthropology of bureaucracy in a context where censorship, denunciations, and punishment prevail. The article is based on unstructured in-depth interviews with Russian academics affected by their antiwar stance and on cases of ideological pressure on academics in various Russian-language spaces as seen in the media (e.g., a lecture, a statement on a media platform, a social media post, or a scholarly publication), as well as on the analysis of documents related to persecution (complaints/denunciations, ethics commissions' findings, dismissal orders). The research demonstrates, on the one hand, how, in the first 22 months after February 24, 2022, the Russian academic community has reverted to self-censorship and "silent mode," and, on the other, how university officials punish noncompliance, whether due to external pressures or through internal preventive purges, so as to avoid potential confrontations with the country's security services.

Keywords: Academic Freedom; Ethnography of Documents; Delegation/Dispersal of Responsibility; Anonymous Denunciations; Amoral Conduct; Dismissal; (Self-)Censorship

INTRODUCTION: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Over the last decade, Russian universities have been subjected to an excessive and redundant oversight by federal agencies and an increased state regulation of the system of higher education as a whole (see Amendments to the Federal Law No. 273, December 29, 2012; Artemenko 2021:40–41), while academics have been rapidly losing autonomy in expressing individual opinions and in collective decision-making, ranging from the election of a provost to the protection of labor

rights and political freedoms (Abramov 2011; Abramov, Gruzdev, and Terentev 2016; Dubrovskiy 2017, 2020, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c; Zharkov 2023). Our data showed how mutual suspicion, mistrust, and confrontation between administrations of institutions of higher education (hereafter, universities) and opposition-minded employees who disagreed with the war and the political system more generally have intensified since February 2022. However, the focus of this research is not on moral judgments (regarding the war) or on post-Soviet transformations of research fields, academic networks, and institutional hierarchies (Gapova 2011; "Forum" 2013; Sokolov and Titaev 2013). Instead, we reveal the post-February 2022 collapse of university autonomy and academic independence of the professional corporation of scholars, regardless of their external or internal sources of legitimacy and funding,¹ under direct pressure from university administrations (cf. Abramov 2011; Abramov et al. 2016; Gribovskiy and Sorokin 2019; Stevens, Jussim, and Honeycutt 2020; Gerashchenko 2024) and/or other, third-party actors (cf. Balaš 2024). In other words, with the help of participant observation, interviewing, and the ethnography of documents, we demonstrate the modes of resistance and silence detected among the producers of scientific knowledge, as well as the bureaucratic mechanisms of politically motivated pressure: censorship (Kuksa and Fedosova 2024), denunciations,² and preventive purges.

To conceptualize the post-February patterns of interaction between university administrations and academics in the context of war, increased law enforcement control, and the radical breakdown and reconstruction of the authoritarian legal order, we used the theoretical framework of the anthropology of bureaucracy and the ethnography of documents. We find this framework productive for reflecting on the significance of both unspoken pressure and official documents involved in persecution, as well as on the discretionary powers of academic officials in assessing and making decisions regarding the words and actions of dissenting academics (Lipsky [1980] 2010; Douglas 1986; Hoag 2010, 2011; Stevens et al. 2020). We also focused on the gaps between the legally (un)enforced rules and the actual (non-Weberian) bureau-

¹ Our data indicated that, to varying degrees, the silence mode has set in all across Russian academia, regardless of the sources of funding and status in academic hierarchy. For typologies of post-Soviet universities, see Gapova (2011) for a typology of scientific knowledge producers based on their sources of legitimacy and funding, the pro-Western and nationally oriented academics, and Sokolov and Titaev (2013) for a typology of scientific knowledge producers (in the discipline of sociology specifically) on the basis of mastery and status in scholarly exchange with metropolitan and global academic communities, isolated disciplinary communities in publicly funded universities, and second-rate provincial enclaves in private universities.

² In Russian, the words *donos* and *donoschik*, essential for our text, carry specific negative connotations distinguishing them from the neutral synonyms such as *zhaloba* (complaint) and *zaiavitel'* (complainant, applicant). English equivalents like "complaint," "denunciation," or "whistleblower" do not convey such meaning, so all the quotations from the interviews underwent some semantic transformation in English. Following Sheila Fitzpatrick, we use "denunciation" as the closest interpretation. The same concerns such specifically Russian expressions as *vospitatel'naia/profilakticheskaia beseda*; they cannot be literally translated, so they are enclosed in quotation marks when translated ("educational conversation," "preventive conversation").

cratic routine (the gap between policy and the actual work of public officials)—on what Colin Hoag calls “the policy-practice problematic” (2011:81). We found it particularly meaningful to explore the conflicts between bureaucrats and academics using the ethnography of documents, for it is ironic that both of these social groups strive for neutrality and objectivity in the production of knowledge (Hoag 2011), which is ultimately ensured by properly executed official documentation and paperwork (“the demon of writing” [Kafka 2012; Hull 2003, 2012a]). At the same time, in Matthew Hull’s words, “documents can also be effective precisely because they are not used to produce the kind of factual certainty emphasized by [Max] Weber and [Michel] Foucault” (2012a:259).

Therefore, in order to reveal both the role of documents in the persecution of university academics and the reasons for the anticipatory, ambiguous, or enabling behavior of university officials, we found particularly suitable for our field data Hull’s concepts of “collective agency” and “careers” of documents (Harper 1998; Hull 2003, 2012a; Riles 2006; Cody 2009; Kafka 2012), the “limits of administrative discretion of street-level bureaucrats” (Lipsky 1969, [1980] 2010; Hoag 2011), Hannah Arendt’s (1969) “rule by Nobody,” and Sheila Fitzpatrick’s bipolar (binary) approach to Stalinist denunciations and persecutions (Fitzpatrick 1996, 1997, [1999] 2008; Fitzpatrick and Gellately 1996). At the same time, David Graeber’s (2012, [2015] 2016) concepts of the “dead zones of the imagination,” James Scott’s (1985, 1990) “weapons of the weak,” and Alexei Yurchak’s ([2006] 2014) spaces of “outsideness” (*vnenakhodimost’*) were important for us to illustrate the perspective of the sabotaging, or “voiceless,” producers of scientific knowledge. Applying these conceptualizations allowed us to theorize the performance of university officials and the reactions of dissenting academic staff after February 24, 2022, and to answer the question of why and how formal and implicit mechanisms of academic persecution work to recreate academic self-censorship and reinforce the “silence mode,” on the one hand, and to spread out the responsibility of university bureaucrats, thereby creating the “rule by Nobody” that reconstructs authoritarianism³ (Arendt 1969), on the other. We were also interested in the role anonymous and official documents (public complaints or anonymous allegations, ethics commissions’ findings, dismissal orders, and other genres) play in the formal and covert pressure on academics and in the accelerated spread of silencing.

Our academic contribution consists in demonstrating how an ordinary person’s “dead zones of the imagination” and “interpretative labor” (Graeber 2012, [2015] 2016), the “structural violence,” and lack of awareness of the old and new rules (including the legally significant aspects of document management [Abramov 2011:44; Kuksa 2022]) work toward making the academics engaged in research and teaching

³ “In a fully developed bureaucracy there is nobody left with whom one can argue, to whom one can present grievances, on whom the pressures of power can be exerted. Bureaucracy is the form of government in which everybody is deprived of political freedom, of the power to act; for the rule by Nobody is not no-rule, and where all are equally powerless we have a tyranny without a tyrant. The crucial feature in the student rebellions around the world is that they are directed everywhere against the ruling bureaucracy” (Arendt 1969:81).

lose their subjectivity and public voice (e.g., by means of informal intimidation or through anonymous denouncement by certain “esteemed” colleagues or “vigilant” students).

At the same time, in most cases the nonautonomous and dependent on a number of federal ministries bureaucratic apparatus of the modern university prefers to delegate self-imposed restrictive decisions (self-censorship and resignation) to the academic in question through intimidation and informal conversations.⁴ We also found a mismatch between the unspoken reason for termination of an employee’s labor or civil contract and the official justification for it—a gap between the actual cause being related to dissent and the formal evidence for dismissal. Lastly, higher university officials disperse personal responsibility (cf. Arendt’s “rule by Nobody” [1969] and Hull’s “collective agency” [2003, 2012a]) between multiple in-house and external coparticipants and distance themselves from the formal dismissal of a dissenting employee through a variety of bureaucratic paperwork and subterfuge, which we describe in this article.

Thus, no matter what legitimate legislative and local legal grounds exist for censorship and repression and whether actual offences were committed and proof thereof found, in autocracies administrations of all ranks more often contribute to the growing curtailment of academic freedoms and of academic intellectuals’ agency by means both tacit and formal, because the genre diversity of bureaucratic red tape and tricks enables them to safeguard, improvise, and adapt. In doing so, public complaints and anonymous allegations, collegial decisions of ethics and labor commissions do not only fulfill the bureaucratic tasks of disciplining, controlling (Harper 1998; Hull 2012a, 2012b), restoring justice (Kuksa 2011; Bogdanova 2021), and in some cases settling of accounts during purges (Fitzpatrick 1996; Kafka 2012),⁵ but also support censorship (Chatterjee and Maira 2014; Candea 2019; Stevens et al. 2020) and silencing across academia.

DATA AND METHODS OF RESEARCH

With those goals and objectives in mind, for 22 months (from March 2022 through December 2023) we collected and researched reports of (self-)censorship, public complaints, anonymous denunciations, and persecutions from inside and outside of the Russian academia, as reported in interviews, in the media, and on social media, by the affected and the complainants.

Some of the stories of (self-)censorship and persecution of Russian scholars were obtained from the publicly available sources in the media and online, others through

⁴ The forced (mutual) examination for antiwar opinions in the post-February Russian academia is only partially comparable, in our view, to the 1930s “hysterical” “collective self-examination” among the Communist Party members in the USSR (Fitzpatrick [1999] 2008:232).

⁵ Fitzpatrick (1996:854) described a case in which a young communist mathematician at Moscow State University denounced the physicist Pyotr Kapitsa for his visit to Cambridge in the early 1930s, his anti-Soviet views, and arrogant attitude toward his (lower-class) colleagues, but a high-ranking official dismissed the complaint as a “product of professional feuding and rivalry.”

interviews and participant observation. For 22 months, we kept a joint observation log, including and commenting daily on each other's field observations: public remarks on social media and in the media of those academics who stayed and those who relocated, pdfs of official documents and representations of cases by officials and other relevant actors, as well as our own descriptions of relevant facts observed in the course of regular participation in academic events and conferences. We also tracked some spontaneous grassroots initiatives by activists and human rights advocates in support of opposition-minded citizens and academics who have suffered from "serial" or ad hoc complainants and harassment for their antiwar stance.

Over the course of 2023, we collected 20 unstructured in-depth interviews with affected academics—research, teaching, and administrative staff of Russian higher education institutions, both public and private, in the Central, Northwestern, Far Eastern, and Southern Federal Districts. Of 20 interviewees, 10 were women and 10 men. Three interviewees were in their 20s, three in their 30s, eight in their 40s, five in their 50s, and one in their 60s. The vast majority of our interviewees were professors of social sciences and humanities and worked at public universities in the Central Federal District. Names of the interviewed academic staff (see the list of respondents in the appendix), names of the academics who became public victims and their personal blogs, and blog titles and names of "serial" denunciators have been concealed to protect their identity.

Since methodologically we concentrated on the ethnography of documents, we collected texts of complaints and studied media quotes by "serial" denunciators and denunciators who are in various positions of power, which have been posted publicly since February 2022. We had access to correspondence between university administrations and complainants and other censors that was provided to us by our respondents and/or posted on social media by the affected academics. We analyzed legislation of the Russian Federation (both current and out-of-date), universities' internal legal acts, and administrative edicts, such as ethics commissions' findings or dismissal orders, which we cite in the text as the authors' field materials (AFM).

TOPOGRAPHY OF ACTORS WHO RAMP UP SURVEILLANCE, CENSORSHIP, AND THE "SILENT MODE" AT UNIVERSITIES

In this section, we describe the actors of increasing censorship and control, who perform silencing of university academics by means of intimidation, surveillance, compromising evidence, and denunciations. Using quotes from our respondents who had been surveilled, we demonstrate the features of militarization and weaponization of higher education (Chirikov 2023; Dubrovskiy and Podol'skaya 2023; Dubrovskiy 2024c) and map the roles of actors who contribute to the limiting of the autonomy of scholars and create covert mechanisms of silencing.

One of the new functions of academic administrations in the autocratic periods of history is the normalization and routinization of the political/ideological oversight of staff's loyalty (cf. Abramov 2011; Abramov et al. 2016; Gribovskiy and So-

rokin 2019; Stevens et al. 2020; Balaš 2024; Gerashchenko 2024). We recorded a series of reputational scandals and economic prosecutions of rectors of several public and private universities, which were, in our opinion, intended to serve as a warning to other heads of academic and research institutions against sabotaging the government's agenda. As a result of such risks, recruitment of senior university management underwent rapid changes, and additional actors, including professionals in that industry, have been actively involved in supervision and censorship.

For this purpose, positions of vice rector for security and vice rector for student affairs were established and/or granted additional support in the university administration, since vice rectors most often acted as overseers of student and faculty dissent (Gerashchenko 2023). Other agents of censorship that we discovered were university presidents, administrative staff, heads of departments, university psychologists, part-time instructors, experts, as well as students and, in rare cases, their parents.

In one case, it was the secretary for the head of an institute who complained about a staff member's antiwar stance:

I feel very strongly against him. Something must be done about [his position]: a war is going on, lads are getting killed, and he discredits our institute. . . . He is legally savvy. Maybe he has someone counseling him. He was told: "You could get sacked; you won't get a job in any institute. What's more important to you, science or this?" This, he says. Neither the director of the institute nor anyone knows what to do with him. The Federal Security Service suggested that someone report him to the police. I decided to do it. They collectively helped me draw up the document.⁶

In a number of cases, students initiated the complaint. Professors almost never knew who exactly had leveled the charges. In contrast to Western academia, where denunciations of undesirable academics are almost always public (Stevens et al. 2020), anonymous reporting is more common in Russian academic field (as opposed to public complaints of "serial" denunciators of the members of the cultural elites). A natural consequence of the opacity of the situation was attempts to identify, in one way or another, the denunciator, and the victim was not always sure of having found the right person. Recounting the "investigation" is an important feature of a victim's narrative: "One of the students—we don't exactly know who she is. We had our suspicions; we have more or less figured it out based on the information provided by other students and matched it with the student's character. And so it seems to us that one of the students wrote an anonymous complaint" (Informant 5).

Some respondents believed that students' reports were a direct response to pressure from the university administration, especially in cases of collective complaints or appeals submitted through a "virtual reception" online portal:

⁶ "‘Putin kaput.’ Uchenogo presleduiut za nadpis’ na avtomobile," *Sibir’.Realii*, April 19, 2023, <https://www.sibreal.org/a/putin-kaput-uchenogo-presleduyut-za-nadpis-na-avtomobile/32357193.html>.

This girl was at the top of the hierarchy. She chaired the student council. I mean, students come in all shapes and sizes. She wanted to see how I'd react. She posted on social media. It was a deliberate tactic: She started out from the top and then looked among her underlings for someone to finish me off. And so I am leaving in the end. It's a whole system: Students are pressured by student councils, and student councils confer with their superiors. (Informant 1)

But most victims explained a complaint by the denunciator's personal characteristics: their personal traumas and environmental influences, such as their upbringing, social background, and ethnocultural peculiarities.

One of our interviewees described the activities of a part-time "female security officer from the department" as follows: "Her task is to keep things quiet. We are concerned with scholarship, education. And with having things be quiet" (Informant 2). The day-to-day administrative supervision of a member of staff significantly intensified after a complaint against them disrupted the "silent mode." The part-time security officer "signaled" a violation, leading to the administration's formal and informal communication with the alleged violator or other available coercive measures: "[After the complaint] his work, very indicatively, began to be monitored. At one point he launched a YouTube channel where he spoke out and said negative things about the [country's] supreme authorities. On these grounds he was spoken to and asked to resign" (Informant 5). Even an administration not prone to excessive displays of loyalty to the authorities recognized the need to enforce the silence mode and to prevent employees from speaking out in such a way that could give rise to complaints: "No one here supports [the invasion]. I don't know anyone who is supportive. We have [NAME, a top management employee] is a businessman, he doesn't need all this. But he needs to keep quiet" (Informant 2).

Another respondent expressed suspicions that employees of the university's mental health services were snitching: "The head of the university is now [NAME], after all, someone has to go to [NAME2, a higher person from the ministry]. And so [NAME] does. And our psychologists go to [NAME] every Monday for planning meetings" (Informant 7). Six months later, suspicions of possible systemic informing by psychologists caused a media panic and a wave of interpretations of amendments to the bill on psychological care. The amendments introduced for debate (in autumn 2022) envisaged psychological services monitoring protests and psychologists cooperating with the authorities. The media and the psychology profession had a negative reaction to the amendments: "In this age of denunciations, I think some psychologists will also join the process. Because of this, some people would be afraid to go to specialists if they felt that their safety and privacy were not guaranteed. In the period of an acute crisis, people will simply stop going to psychologists—and rightly so."⁷

Identifying university psychologists not as "helping professionals" but as potentially dangerous coworkers, on the one hand, reflected a heightened level of mis-

⁷ "Chem groziat popravki v zakonoproekt o psikhologicheskoi pomoshchi," *Activatica*, October 14, 2022, <https://activatica.org/content/5a769410-1e21-4b2a-96b9-aea9203118d8/chto-ne-tak-s-zakonoproektom-o-psihologicheskoy-pomoshi>.

trust in which the space of private communication, including in the psychotherapeutic setting, began to be perceived as potentially controllable. On the other hand, other professional actors (e.g., experts, denunciators) were actually being paid to forcibly verify employees' antiwar opinions, which distinguishes the current situation from the total mutual surveillance in the 1930s as described by Fitzpatrick, especially that among the Communist Party members engaging in "hysterical collective examination" ([1999] 2008:232).

Thus, the research and teaching staff were apprehensive and suspicious of all those who, by virtue of their beliefs or official duties, were affiliated with university administration, colleagues responsible for security (a vice rector for security, a part-time colleague in the security department, etc.), and law enforcement agencies. That this situation is far from being unique is confirmed by ethnographer and folklorist Nikola Balaš, who studied the level of authoritarian pressure and control by repressive authorities on the humanities scholars in socialist Czechoslovakia (Balaš 2024), such as when ethnographer Vladimír Karbusický was forbidden to travel abroad, to share information about his expeditions to (German) colleagues, and to publish the folk songs of mining workers so as not to disclose state secrets. Equally, in the post-February Russian academia impenetrable barriers (as described by Erving Goffman [1961]) went up between security officials and university employees, individuality was blurred, and state secrecy expanded and reinforced. Decisions were made for the censored intellectuals, helping to suppress the diversity of corporate, academic, and ultimately personal goals. But at the same time, systems of favors and rewards were introduced for select students with leadership functions and loyal staff, guilt was imputed (Fitzpatrick [1999] 2008), and antiwar sentiments and other independent thinking threatened with punishment, as will be discussed in the next section.

CENSORSHIP AND DENUNCIATIONS, PATIENT CONVERSATIONS AND INTIMIDATION, SILENCING AND ANONYMITY

In this section, we answer the question of exactly how senior and rank-and-file university administrators responded to the government's pro-war agenda and the legislative criminalization of the (common before February 2022) antiwar views (Kuksa and Fedosova 2024). We show how rapidly censorship and bans on public statements by academics were introduced and how the functions of university administrations expanded. We also record the significance of university bureaucracies' discretion (the limits of discretion) (Lipsky [1980] 2010; Hoag 2011) in choosing their methods and the ritualized nature of some of their decisions, comparable, we argue, not to the "hysterical collective examination" among the Communist Party members in the 1930s as described by Fitzpatrick ([1999] 2008:232), but rather to the late Soviet imitative behaviors depicted by Yurchak ([2006] 2014).

The data that we collected show that, since February 2022, university administrations have placed a tacit ban on antiwar opinions and censored statements by the research, teaching, and administrative staff made at work and outside of work. Talk-

ing to media platforms deemed by the Russian state as foreign agents and undesirable organizations came under special administrative scrutiny: “Our administration closely monitors who speaks and where, especially on suspect platforms” (Informant 14). Surveillance is done routinely, but it also intensifies following serial and ad hoc complaints, with censor demands applied to anyone who, university administration believes, is likely to engage in such an activity: “There has been a complaint about [NAME] speaking in the wrong place. The administration didn’t take it seriously and issued a boilerplate response [*otpiska*]. We are all now asked not to speak on untrustworthy platforms” (Informant 14). According to our data, a number of media outlets (included by the Russian Ministry of Justice in the register of foreign agents) to which academic experts were typically invited have now become “untrustworthy,” “suspicious,” “dangerous,” and “toxic” (“contagious”) even for those academics who do not speak against the war publicly, primarily because they are under specific regular monitoring by “serial” denunciators.

Anna Korobkova, who calls herself (in correspondence with the victims and in interviews with journalists) a “hereditary informer,”⁸ has been, in her own words, monitoring statements by academics on the YouTube channels of Dozhd’, Deutsche Welle, Radio Liberty, and Current Time⁹ and petitioning law enforcement authorities to put an end to “talking to the media-foreign agents” (Arkhipova 2023). Judging by our interviewees’ responses, this monitoring and the complaints of an external “serial” informers directly influenced the rectorate’s demands to ban speaking (even on topics unrelated to the war) on “contagious” media platforms:

The university administration—you saw from their boilerplate reply [*otpiska*—is not in the mood for excessive displays of loyalty. But after my appearance on [independent TV channel] Dozhd’ (also reported by AK), the rector called and asked me to be selective in choosing venues for my appearances. And Radio Liberty was right after Dozhd’, just before the rector’s call, but he didn’t know about it at the time. But generally, I really can’t speak to the media labeled as foreign agents now. . . She [AK] really silences [*zamalchivaet*] people. (Informant 9)

A received complaint served as a basis for prophylactic conversations (*profilakticheskie besedy*) initiated by the university leadership, who sometimes, as in the two examples above, felt it necessary to retain a highly qualified employee despite the denunciation. As we understand from the responses of administrations provided by our respondents, administrators wrote lengthy justifications to protect academics from “serial” denunciators, thus showing their bureaucratic discretion and siding with the dissenting staff member. However, in our interviews we also found examples where, after patient conversations, administration, represented by the rector, vice

⁸ Amaliia Zatari, “‘Ia khochu byt’ khodiachei prokuraturoi’: Kto skryvaetsia za lichnost’iu seriinnoi donoschitsy ‘Anny Korobkovo’?” BBC News, Russian Service, December 26, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/cx2n4ydn2jo>.

⁹ Nataliia Zotova, “Naiti vnutrennego vraga. Pochemu rossiiane pishut donosy?” BBC News, Russian Service, September 5, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/cd14gy23w49o>.

rector, or president, urged employees to keep quiet and threatened them with dismissal in case of disobedience:

One denunciation against me was made by a lady on the internet—she wrote to the rector. The rector passed it on to our security service officer and asked her to put the brakes on it. The old bat then wrote to the president. He called me up and said: “Knock it off!” The second case—I was also written up. The vice rector called me out into the hallway and wrote on a piece of paper: “You’re being wire-tapped, you’re followed.” Then the president summoned me after a conversation with the security service officer and said: “There’s an inquiry about you from the regional administration. You’ll be fired. You’ve got to keep quiet, but you do not.” (Informant 2)

In a number of cases university officials managed to force research and teaching staff to self-censor and remain silent: “My colleague and I were threatened with dismissal for our manifested liberal views. And the department chair covered for us and negotiated for us the possibility of continuing to work on the condition of feigned loyalty, that is, not speaking at questionable venues” (Informant 13).¹⁰ In some cases, working relationships were maintained, but the employees opted to work on “nontoxic” research topics and not to speak at or publish in the “undesirable” or “suspect” media outlets: “I decided for myself, first of all, that I don’t speak on TV Dozhd’. But they keep calling every day.”¹¹ According to our observation log, sometimes a scholar chose to make (un)censored statements, the only form of covert resistance available to them (cf. Scott 1985, 1990), but did so for a small group of colleagues, without livestreaming or a subsequent publication on YouTube, on little-known platforms, completely anonymously, or by giving their name but not their institutional affiliation (e.g., by swapping their university affiliation for the “independent researcher” status [see also Rudenkin 2023]).

Despite the scaling up of censorship and the new precariousness resulting from threat of dismissal due to antiwar views, at first the academics who remained in Russia had their separate spaces for personalized communication and tactical agency,¹² since at first administrations experienced obvious difficulties with exercising comprehensive control without the law enforcers and actors named in the previous section. During our research, we also found situations in which the system seemed to be powerless, as in the fragment cited below, and allowed participants to merely simulate support for the pro-government course. This is how the interviewee interpreted the rector’s chosen strategy of “waiting it out” (*peresidet*) (along with a decision to support dissenting staff):

¹⁰ See “post-Soviet aphasia” (Oushakine 2009) versus “asphyxia” (Zdravomyslova 2023).

¹¹ This quote is from a conversation with a female academic in her 60s as part of participant observation (AFM).

¹² The tactical agency of academics resembles the tactics of outsideness (*vnenakhodimost*) and nonresistance by female patients (e.g., home birth) versus the targeted and addressed resistance of the legally savvy female patients (e.g., termination of contract and change of doctor, complaints or lawsuits) (Kuksa 2022).

The university of [NAME] administration—you saw from their boilerplate reply—is not in the mood for excessive displays of loyalty. . . . That said, the rector of [NAME] signed the proverbial “rectors’ open letter.” But on the whole, the position of the rectorate is “to quietly wait it out” without letting the university be ruined. Even [NAME] had his contract renewed in June, which he wasn’t at all sure about, since he is openly opposed to the war. (Informant 9)

We believe that during the first months of the war, reactions of university staff and officials resembled those of late Soviet citizens in response to the authoritative discourse of the Soviet state, which Yurchak excellently deconstructed by introducing the concept of spaces and the freedom of outsideness (*vnenakhodimost’*; not to be confused with apoliticism, apathy, or internal migration). He explains the reproduction of the system by carving out the spaces of outsideness while simultaneously imitating official rituals and texts (Yurchak [2006] 2014).

Meanwhile, the “monitored” research and teaching staff were rather quickly (in the first few months after the start of the war) banned from making any alternative and independent statements not only during lectures and within the university walls, but also in public (speaking to the media platforms or at conferences) and in academic publications. Since autumn 2022, an interdepartmental working group under the Russian Ministry of Science and Higher Education has been updating the “White List” of authoritative Russian and international academic periodicals that are supposed to be used to assess Russian scholars’ publishing activity.¹³

The post-February erosion of academic freedoms in Russia was followed by a legislative criminalization of the (common before February 2022) antimilitarist stance of Russian citizens (Kuksa and Fedosova 2024), which greatly aggravated the position of university administrations and required them to improvise and use bureaucratic tricks to organize censorship and persecution (Dubrovskiy and Podol’skaya 2023; Dubrovskiy 2024c),¹⁴ as will be described in the following sections.

TACITLY FORCING DISSENTING EMPLOYEES TO “VOLUNTARILY” RESIGN

In this section, we show the mechanisms used to force dissenting employees who refuse to keep silent into resigning “voluntarily” by means of, for example, moralizing, accusing them in front of the team, threatening with punishment, and hindering their academic and teaching activities.

¹³ By decision of the working group, 480 international journals were excluded from the list on July 7, 2024.

¹⁴ Since March 2022, censorship has been supported by the updated articles of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation and the Administrative Offences Code of the Russian Federation concerning fakes and defamation and by the possibility to complain to the authorities about antimilitarism (see Kuksa and Fedosova 2024 for more details). At the same time, the legislation has not abolished the autonomy of educational institutions and academic rights and freedoms of university employees.

In case of an employee's refusal to self-censor and keep silent, university administrations, relying on collegial decisions of ethics commissions and/or bureaucratic justifications of the human resources departments, used informal ways of exerting pressure that were available to them, to force the employee leave "by choice" or, in extreme cases, to be terminated. "Educational" conversations, informal "reprimands," "preventive" talks were frequently mentioned in the interviews and contained descriptions of verbal pressure, moralizing, intimidation, and being forced to resign "voluntary": "I had a discussion with the dean. He said that I had done wrong, that I had let the whole faculty down. And that I should write a letter of voluntarily resignation. That the matter had reached the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the university administration would be reprimanded [*vyvolochka* by the ministry]" (Informant 4).

The following quotes suggest that the new university leadership appointed by the president of Russia, the head of the Russian government, or the Ministry of Science and Higher Education on the eve of the February 2022 conflict with Ukraine and newly appointed state officials used their power to exert excessive (and uncharacteristic for academia before February 2022) control over the appearance and political views of employees (especially those of liberal persuasion), as well as to reduce the cultural distance by using repeated "hints," direct threats, verbal abuse, and in some cases even bullying and abusive behavior. In the example below, the rector is suspicious of the color scheme of clothing used by the employee for its intended purpose and without any hidden protest agenda: "I walk into the rector's office wearing blue jeans and a jacket (I have a sand-colored corduroy one). The rector says to me: 'What's with the Ukrainian look?' I say: 'It's not like the jacket is yellow.' He says in a boorish way, 'It's like you should have figured out what I just told you'" (Informant 12).¹⁵

Respondents also reported verbal insults and discrimination specifically on ideological and political grounds:

For example, I bring a project . . . , and the first vice rector says to me: "You should not be allowed to go near there at all, because you will [an obscene word for steal], like all your liberal friends." He's not saying this one-on-one; he's saying it in the presence of two other people. . . . The remarks that "you're one of those, of libtards [*liberota*]"—that's what it all sounded like. (Informant 12)

In this case, the victim faced stigmatization as a dissident, an "outsider," which causes harassment by his new superiors and compels him to resign.

¹⁵ The rector's rude language resulted, in our view, from hypersemiotization (Arkhipova and Kirzuk 2019; Arkhipova 2021)—a situation where random external signs suddenly begin to arouse suspicion and are read as particular symbols. Similar examples of hypersemiotization, wherein unfounded suspicions of pro-Ukrainian sympathies were aroused by the colors of one's manicure, hair, or accessories, have been found in the media, but they differ from the conscious use of pro-Ukrainian symbols and the protest of "semiotic partisans" (Arkhipova 2021; see also Scott 1985, 1990). We encountered such examples mainly in secondary schools in Russia (e.g., "V KhMAO razobralis' v skandale iz-za 'zhelto-sinikh' kosichek shkol'nitsy," BFM.ru, May 16, 2023, <https://www.bfm.ru/news/525473>).

The university administration could force an employee to resign by hindering their research and administrative activities, for example, by closing down projects, but also indirectly, just by creating unrealistic conditions preventing their progress:

I was just given a stupid task—to raise 20 million [rubles] in funding to set up a laboratory in a fortnight. At first they said to just bring in the money, then they shortened the time frame to two weeks. And I said, no, I'm not taking part in this circus. I said that's it, game over, I'm out of this monkey business. Because I knew what was coming next. Next, I would get played at the Academic Council, maybe get some kind of a censure. It is clear that this censure can be challenged, but I will not challenge it. This is where some kind of heavy artillery in the form of inspections and so on would probably come into play. But in principle, it was just that, as I call it, referring back to the book *Treasure Island*, they presented me with a "black spot." And I accepted it. (Informant 12)

In the above quote, the respondent consciously refused to continue their contract with the university. As a seasoned and qualified staff member who understands the capabilities of the university administration, the employee adequately, from their point of view, assessed the situation of being forced to self-terminate (receiving a "black spot"), weighed their resources and possibilities of retaliatory actions, and, as a result, opted for voluntary resignation and a career as a self-employed scientist and an experienced specialist.

In addition to the abuse of power and interference with project work, verbal ("unofficial") coercion to resign was most often accompanied by bureaucratic pressure and formal procedures compelling one to quit "by choice": "First they demanded a letter of explanation, then they reprimanded me and made a note in my personal file, as well as threatened me with the prosecutor's office. They forced me to resign 'on my own accord'" (Informant 7). According to data from other studies, informal forms of pressure, including oral coercion of an employee to resign or nonrenewal of a fixed-term contract, occurred regularly and could not be accurately quantified.¹⁶

It should be noted that censorship and public denunciations also occur in Western academia, but, in contrast to our examples, as a rule, they happen in a public or legal setting and without the risk of criminal and administrative reprisals against their victims (Stevens et al. 2020). As a result, a scholar may be deprived of grant support or at most a position, but public dismissals only ever happened during the

¹⁶ According to OVD-Info, by September 21, 2023, there were 552 known cases of extrajudicial pressure for antiwar stance, mainly in the form of harassment at work (156) and threats (133), but also event cancellation, vandalism, expulsion of students (63), assaults, expulsion from organization (16), and censorship (11). Of the 552 cases of extrajudicial harassment at work, 24 concerned schoolteachers, 37 university lecturers, and 2 cases academic staff. OVD-Info, "Persecution of the Anti-War Movement Report: September 2023," September 27, 2023, <https://data.ovd.info/persecution-anti-war-movement-report-september-2023>. Updated information and data are contained in a 2024 report, "Libo gosudarstvennoe mnenie, libo nikakogo": Kak presleduiut prepodavatelei, kotorym vmenili antivoennuiu pozitsiiu," OVD-Info, September 1, 2024, <https://reports.ovd.info/teachers>.

McCarthy period and under the threat of communism.¹⁷ At the same time, freedom of speech, including that exercised through public denunciation as a means of expressing constitutionally protected opinion, is preserved in the US (Stevens et al. 2020).

Thus, the precipitous loss by some Russian universities of the remnants of autonomy (when diversity of opinions and actions was eliminated before the interviewees' eyes, choice limited, and a homogeneous space with a virtually impermeable border ["fence"], with supervisors and supervisees was formed) was accompanied by a shift in functionality and the expansion of powers of individual bureaucrats toward finding a scapegoat and justifying their dismissal, and recruiting labor and ethics commissions (as will be shown in the next section) to meet the needs of repressions (Dubrovskiy 2024b, 2024c).

DISMISSING DISSENTING EMPLOYEES AND FORMAL GROUNDS FOR TERMINATION

In this section, we demonstrate procedures for dismissing staff members who take a public stand, as well as outline the formal justifications for termination that are chosen in situations of external political pressure and surveillance by law enforcement. Unlike the dismissals of communist-affiliated faculty members from private universities in the McCarthy era (Schrecker 1986; Stevens et al. 2020), that happened after hearings by government commissions where some "freedom of speech" of the accused was preserved, the dismissals in today's Russia are characterized by surreptitiousness of some of the processes and the variety of bureaucratic and informal tricks/moves involved in the decision-making by university officials of all levels. The data in this section shows the gap between the strictures of the postwar agenda and the legally adopted and updated rules that in fact reinforced the importance of uncertainty (Hoag 2010; Best 2012) and ritualized imitations (Yurchak [2006] 2014). At the same time, any individuals working in academia, regardless of their status, function, and values, could be subject to informal pressure, denunciations, censorship, bureaucratic persecution, and eventual termination.

Early termination of the employment contract at the initiative of university administration would require additional efforts: Before proceeding, administration would have to collect documents justifying the legitimacy of the dismissal. In some cases that we documented, the HR department collected documents intended to confirm the facts of "dereliction of duty." A dismissed university lecturer described the administration's process of collecting the required paperwork as follows:

¹⁷ According to Stevens et al. (2020:16), only in rare periods of US history have there been preventive purges and persecutions of "witches/heretics" among academics comparable to autocratic regimes: "Although academic censorship may be on the rise, in historical and international terms, this still pales in comparison to what has often occurred under religious, monarchic, or authoritarian regimes. Current censoriousness, at least in the US, is also less severe than it was during the height of McCarthyism and the Second Red Scare (roughly 1947–1960), when hundreds of faculty lost their jobs. . . . Although that era may have seemed like government censorship, in fact, it was the universities themselves that did most of the firing. Put differently, administrators and many faculty enthusiastically embraced purging communists from their ranks."

They filed 110 reports against me for all sorts of made-up reasons, from my alleged absence from the workplace to missing departmental meetings, which suddenly were held weekly. One of the reports they drew up against me was about my failure to attend an anti-terrorist security briefing. On the basis of these documents, they demanded explanatory statements from me, and I gave them: where I was and what I was doing. I have already written over 30 of those.¹⁸

In other cases, to the best of the respondents' knowledge, the requirement to collect formal grounds supporting the "legality" of their termination was not met. An employee terminated supposedly "on the basis of item 5 part 1 article 81 of the Labor Code of the Russian Federation (repeated noncompliance of the worker without a valid reason after a disciplinary warning)" (AFM) commented on the "real" reasons for her dismissal, "I have no disciplinary sanctions, by the way, only commendations and promotions, but what does it matter when it comes to dissent" (NP blog, May 12, 2022).¹⁹

Most of the harassment and pressure on employees ended with termination of their employment and/or civil contracts, but in some cases the employee held more than one position in the educational institution, which complicated the situation by doubling all the necessary administrative procedures:

I have another job at this university. For some reason they do not dare to sack me from this position, but just slap me with reprimands, reports (104 of those already), do not pay my salary, try to remove my name from the report concerning my own project, and suspend me from working with an intern who came to work with me personally. (DG blog, December 8, 2022)

The reason for dismissal of a staff member with research and teaching responsibilities could be their living abroad and working remotely, as happened in the case of a lecturer at Saint Petersburg Medical University who lived in Germany and taught part-time virtually and part-time in person:

I don't know the results of the inspection. I was never called there, whereas all my colleagues were taken to [the authorities], and I know what they were asked about. The inspectors were interested in how I am able to work remotely. My colleagues explained that this is normal for academic work—this is how conferences and lectures are held all over the world. . . . In addition, they verified all the instances when I had crossed borders and made sure that when I was conducting seminars and taking notes for patients' visits, I was indeed in Russia. That is, as I understand it, the inspection found nothing wrong, and nevertheless, afterwards, I was asked to resign "on my own free will."²⁰

¹⁸ "Mnogie prosto molchat," Glasnaia, Telegram, December 15, 2022, https://t.me/glasnaya_media/1449.

¹⁹ To preserve anonymity, we provide only the initials of blogs' authors.

²⁰ "Ia by ochen' khotel prochitat' ee donos. Luchshii prepodavatel' pervogo meda uvolen po donosu odnokursnitsy," Sever.Realii, October 7, 2023, <https://www.severreal.org/a/luchshiy-prepodavatel-pervogo-meda-uvolen-po-donosu-odnokursnitsy/32626297.html>.

The inspection followed a complaint by a colleague to the university's administration and, when nothing happened, to a State Duma deputy the complainant knew personally.

In addition to violation of workplace discipline, administration could cite the "immorality" of the employee's appearance and behavior as reasons for dismissal. Among the first such cases was the termination of a contract with an employee who had sent a letter to colleagues via corporate email expressing an antiwar stance and criticizing the current government. The professor was dismissed after a meeting of the academic council, the minutes of which contained the following language: "unethical political statements against the government" and "such political views are unworthy of the position of a professor and are a disgrace to the university" (*U fashistov malo kraski* 2023). Ethics commissions often deplored the use of foul language by university staff—this became a formal reason for dismissal. For example, a teacher at a children's art school said that after a raid by law enforcement, the school administration asked him to write a resignation letter voluntarily. When he refused to do so, the school assembled a special commission "to conduct an official inquiry due to an immoral act"—the installation of an abstract sculpture with obscene language in his office (the sculpture had been in the office for several years)—allegedly on a complaint by a student's mother.²¹

The standards defining the "moral image" are specified in the Labor Code of the Russian Federation. They can be further specified by schools' own regulations, as was done in the charter (code of ethics) of one university:

We observe the rules of decorum by avoiding provocative behavior. . . . We do not use profanity (unless it is the subject of our research), obscene and intentionally offensive words, expressions and images in statements made in public places, published in the media and social media . . . particularly when we are identified as employees of the University, whether or not our affiliation is stated. (AFM)

Administration of an educational institution can make changes to these documents, so as to align them with current legislation. That would lead, for example, to the university rector's order to change internal regulations, which listed articles of the Code of Administrative Offences of the Russian Federation and the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, including those about "spreading falsehoods about the war" and the repeated "defamation of the army."²²

With such rules at their disposal, administrators, academic councils, and specially assembled ethics commissions applied them as legal grounds for dismissals. According to the institutions' internal regulations, the decisions of the ethics commissions had legal status and legal significance. These decisions were made by uni-

²¹ "V Nizhnevartovske sud ne stal vosstanavlivat' pedagoga shkoly iskusstv, uvolennogo posle vizita FSB," OVD-Info, February 16, 2023, <https://ovd.info/express-news/2023/02/16/v-nizhnevartovske-sud-ne-stal-vosstanavlivat-pedagoga-shkoly-iskusstv>.

²² "Rektor tekhnologicheskogo universiteta v Ioshkar-Ole zapretit studentam 'diskreditirovat' armiiu i 'propagandirovat' LGBT," Mediazona, July 19, 2023, <https://zona.media/news/2023/06/19/yoshka>. More examples are recorded in AFM.

versity staff who sat on the ethics commissions in addition to their mandated and paid duties in their primary job. Through collegial decisions of the ethics commissions, responsibility for dismissals was delegated from the top downward and dispersed among the multiple decision-makers. The nontransparency of investigations into a university employee's "immoral conduct" and the collective decision-making of the ethics commissions resulted in the affected faculty members unmasking anonymous complainants and signatories,²³ investigating flaws in collegial decision-making, and publishing various scathing conspiracy theory pieces online.

For example, an ethics commission convened in response to an employee's remarks posted on social media recommended that "Professor [NAME] should refrain from using profanity in public communication, including on social media. The expressions [NAME] used on social media are considered unacceptable from an ethical point of view" (AFM). The dismissal order relied on the findings of this commission to explain the termination of employment by the employee "having committed an immoral act incompatible with the continuation of this work" (II blog, December 29, 2022). Similar language was found in another dismissal order of a university employee exhibiting an antiwar position: "knowingly and repeatedly committed an immoral act and may repeat it, which will have a detrimental effect on those being educated" (SCh blog, December 9, 2022). Other cases of dismissals for "immoral behavior" based on the decision of ethics commissions are described by Dmitry Dubrovskiy and Verena Podol'skaya (2023). The cases of dismissal that we found signal an expansion of administrative pressure on dissenting employees and the rise of new actors, such as codes of ethics (see Skibo 2021) and ethics commissions that assume some of the collective responsibility for the persecutions and terminations of contracts.

RESISTANCE AND SUPPORT FOR AFFECTED SCHOLARS IN PROFESSIONAL SPACES, AMONG FRIENDS, AND ONLINE

In this section, we demonstrate the protest tactics that emerged among the opposition-minded and affected academics and their friends, colleagues, and officials who support them.

Respondents noted that for an intellectual suffering from persecution and denunciation, solidarity became a source of psychological, professional, and friendly support:

On the same days, there were reposts and questions, in the online group Overheard in [NAME of the educational institution], from friends and colleagues from the university who saw the YouTube link [to my lecture]. By the time I got to the video, it had about 1,500 views and a number of comments. I posted my comment, and it got a lot of likes and words of encouragement. And I felt relieved. (Informant 6)

Most often, victims of denunciations spoke of students showing solidarity through personal communication and correspondence: "My students write to me from Russia; they are supportive" (Informant 7).

²³ Zatar, "'Ya khochu byt' khodiachei prokuraturoi.'"

Our respondents also pointed out that they found no open public support on campus from their immediate colleagues either before or after the dismissal. Support, if there was any, was expressed privately: “I did not exactly advertise [my dismissal]. I can’t say that some kind of internal opposition had formed at the university—no, not at all. That is, no one tried not to cover this topic [of my denunciation and dismissal]. The support was, well, just human support” (Informant 12). Personal correspondence or communication with one or two close colleagues or friends was reported as the main form of solidarity on the part of one’s colleagues: “[After being fired], I never saw my colleagues again. One wrote privately to say that I had done the right thing. And another hinted gently that I was a right-winger, a radical, but these are her husband’s views” (Informant 4).

According to our interview data, occasionally senior colleagues of a dismissed employee not only supported them psychologically but also assisted them within the limits of their bureaucratic powers, which echoes research by Michael Lipsky, which emphasized discretion of the street-level official in the decision-making process ([1980] 2010). In the following example, thanks to such assistance, a lecturer dismissed after a complaint was able to keep their position in graduate school and avoid the incident being recorded in their personnel file:

I was not fired from graduate school because the exams had been over. My academic advisor took a stand and said that technically there was no reason to expel me. But they took away my spot in line for the [dissertation] defense. The HR department did not make a record of it in my personal file. She said to me: “What would be the basis for flagging it? A [snitch’s] personal opinion? I wasn’t there, I didn’t hear [the remark that prompted the denunciation]. Formally, there is no reason to flag it.” (Informant 7)

Another example of such assistance is the hiring of a colleague dismissed because of their antiwar stance.²⁴

Social media became a space for expressing individual solidarity with a dismissed employee, where their post about the dismissal was often met with words of support from commenting colleagues and like-minded people, such as:²⁵ “Hang in there. Acting in line with your conscience is much more important”; “The lawlessness of petty officials. . .”; “I am proud to live in the same city as you. You are the honor and conscience that they are trying to put shackles on. And you kicked [your opponent] very elegantly” (NP blog, May 12, 2023).

²⁴ “Chlen Nauchno-metodicheskogo soveta GLEDIS S. V. Drugoveiko-Dolzanskaja pristupila k rabote v IRIa imeni V. V. Vinogradova RAN v dolzhnosti starshogo nauchnogo sotrudnika,” *Gil’diia lingvistov-ekspertov*, November 1, 2023, <https://rusexpert.ru/news/chl-ch-mtdichkg-vt-gldi-v-dgvjk-dlzhkya-piyat-bt-v-ititt-kg-yazyk->.

²⁵ The tenor of the comments depends on the platform. For example, on Facebook (which is owned by Meta, a company that has been deemed a terrorist organization and banned in Russia) the vast majority of comments are supportive, with commenters standing in solidarity with the victim. On VKontakte, a Russian-owned platform, the range of opinions offered by users is broader and includes not only statements in favor of the dismissed person, but also disputes about the case and sometimes harassment of the victim.

Someone else's social media post could provide an opportunity to tell their own story of leaving university and to draw an analogy between the two of them:

I took everything I read last night very much to heart, because in a way, [NAME's] story is mine, too. Only definitely at a different, much higher level of responsibility and consequences. The story of [NAME] is, among other things, an occasion for me to say more than I did then, in early March. On March 4, I wrote a letter of resignation from the university, explaining that I was against the war with Ukraine, that I could not and did not want to conceal my civic position, and that in this context I could not continue drawing a salary from the state. (LKh blog, October 11, 2022)

For colleagues expressing solidarity on social media, it was often important to separate the sacrifice and their former workplace and to emphasize the moral high ground of the victim of denunciation:

In Mikhail Romm's [film] *Ordinary Fascism*, there is chapter XI, "But There Was Another Germany." It is about the fact that those who did not succumb to fascism were few, but they existed, and their personal courage was important for the future. So, it should be noted: we have another Russia, another Vyshka [Higher School of Economics], and other professors. They are also few, but they are there, and all the more valuable given how few they are. (DS blog, December 20, 2022)

We recorded a peculiar reaction to dismissals on social media, partly indicating support for the affected employee and condemnation of censorship (Kuksa and Fedosova 2024), expressed in the form of individual calls to boycott universities whose administrations suppress the freedom of civic and academic speech and expressions of antiwar sentiments. In the following quote, the suggestion to boycott of a renowned university came from an opposition-minded head of a private educational institution operating in Russia. The call to action became the moral fulcrum of the speaker, allowing him to reassert his own intention to continue shaping education as an alternative to pro-government education:

And so the [university NAME] is, therefore, no more. There exists something bearing that name. A community college-level outfit [*sharashka*] with the corporate culture of an average neighborhood school. None of its initiatives or, say, research affiliated with that university can be seen as worth anything in a half decent society. . . . For our part—we will do no more projects with [university NAME]. No matter how laughable and small, let it be our contribution to restoring the balance between the good and evil in this world. (Sch blog, December 9, 2022)

Such individual ancillary practices are close to what James Scott called "infrapolitics," wherein lower-level university workers oppose the will of their superiors through everyday inconspicuous forms of resistance dubbed the "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1985; Nikulin 2003; Pavlova and Morozov 2023). University administration used formal justifications for pressure and termination of employment (formal warnings, a flag on the employee's record), while colleagues in positions of power

looked in the bureaucratic toolbox at their disposal for alternative formal ways to help the victim (e.g., that they had no outstanding academic holds in graduate school or that there were no witnesses to the situation that had prompted the denunciation).

LIFE AFTER DISMISSAL AND SEVERANCE OF SOCIAL TIES

Our ethnographic research found that some postwar universities that had made servile pro-government pronouncements and took corresponding actions and produced mostly domestic and patriotic academic content (except for individual centers and scholars) protected their staff from the external “serial” snitches, offered evasive explanatory statements, and maintained a relative autonomy in their decision-making regarding opposition-minded staff. At the same time, politically oppositional universities supporting liberal academic content, especially after February 2022, were under a particularly close scrutiny by law enforcement agencies and were compelled to endorse the current censorship and bans, lose qualified and mobile personnel who quit, and demonstrate (imitate [Yurchak (2006) 2014]) outward loyalty to the pro-government course. Concurrently, there was a gradual displacement of senior managers at universities and research institutes in favor of more loyal personnel of predominantly (pre)retirement age, including those with a bureaucratic experience.

This is also why, according to our data, over the last 22 months, some dissenting intellectuals from the university/liberal milieu (with an antimilitarist position, explicit or implicit) have quit on their own initiative, relying on opportunities for horizontal academic mobility and relocation. At first, some (exceptional) academics had the opportunity to keep their university positions on certain conditions, even with the possibility of relocation outside the Russian Federation. The most precarious situation (from the bureaucratic and judicial points of view) was that of employees who were not protected by an employment contract but were hired as short-term contract staff.

A significant number of cases found in the media and in our interviews testify to nonlegal coercion on the part of administrations, when vulnerable academic and teaching staff had their contracts terminated involuntarily, forcibly, as a result of informal influence: direct intimidation, threats, or hints at the consequences that could ensue, for example, from denunciations by “vigilant” (unnamed by the administration) colleagues or students. Academics would then become victims of “structural violence” or the “dead zones of the imagination,” to use a term applied by the anarchist anthropologist David Graeber (2012, [2015] 2016) to situations of absurd and uncritical acceptance of the bureaucratic red tape and categorizing it as the proper, unproblematic, and system-established order.

The prohibitions and restrictions on the activities of the dismissed victim of denunciation did not stop after the termination of their employment contract. In one of the interviews, the respondent said that even after dismissal the management forbade any communication with students and monitored the instructor’s personal correspondence:

I was allowed to say goodbye to the students. I offered them another meeting in a month and a half. The dean called and put a stop to it, saying she would level criminal charges. But we proceeded with the meeting anyway. I asked not to alert the student [who had filed a complaint with the dean]. We created a separate chat room. It was really terrifying. (Informant 4)

Very rarely did the fired academics dare to challenge the legality of their dismissal and go to court, although there were such cases (DG blog, December 8, 2022). More often than not, they preferred to accept this course of events, but to compensate for the defeat in the informal space of public reputations:

[NAME1] urged me to go through the same [court], but I chose to save my energy. As always, I picked a compromise. That is, on the one hand, I did write a letter of resignation by choice. But after that I repeatedly said that I was forced to do it. . . . [NAME2] defamed me for a long time and wrote to me that I had slandered the university when I gave interviews about having been forced to resign. (Informant 16)

Changing the country of residence and finding another job after the dismissal allowed one to stop self-censoring. For example, one of our respondents permitted publication of their report, which could have been potentially dangerous for them while still working for a Russian university: "You can post a recording of my speech. I received a postdoc offer, so I am no longer afraid of sanctions from the university."²⁶

Thus, according to our data, only a few academic intellectuals who openly exhibited a negative attitude to Russia's military actions in Ukraine brought their conflict situations with university administrations (who demanded their dismissal) into the open by using legal forms of confrontation. Academics then had to beg for the texts of denunciations or offenses (which constituted the formal grounds for ethics investigations), as well as deal with university ethics committee meetings and the language of petitions signed by senior colleagues and colleagues in positions of authority. However, any extrajudicial, pretrial, and judicial confrontations most often resulted in involuntary dismissals and/or fruitless attempts to restore labor rights through the courts.

Besides, after the events of February 2022, regardless of their physical location, degree of privilege, or precariousness of their academic position, university employees with an openly antiwar stance were in real danger of a much more significant loss of civil and teaching rights (than a voluntary resignation or forced dismissal). Some prominent academics were assigned the status of a foreign agent by the government, banning them from teaching and requiring them to include this label on any of their publications or public statements to avoid fines. Others were subjected to administrative fines and even criminal prosecution for disseminating "fake news" about the war or "defamation" of the military (Kuksa and Fedosova 2024) and even for high treason.

²⁶ From a conversation with a male academic in his 30s as a result of participant observation (AFM).

CONCLUSION

The article demonstrates, on the one hand, how the Russian academic community is reverting to self-censorship and “silent mode” and, on the other, how university officials punish noncompliance, whether due to external pressure or internal preventive purges so as to avoid potential confrontations with the country’s security services. To this end, we analyzed the bureaucratic document flow (in the context of a breakdown of law and order), the limits of discretion of senior- and lower-level university officials, and “thick” interpretations by employees under pressure resulting from their official, academic, media, and other status and positionality. We presented a range of actors who reinforce the surveillance and precariousness of academics both inside and outside of academia, such as senior management, part-time coworkers, colleagues, students, university ethics commissions and human resources departments, psychologists, witnesses, experts, “serial” and grassroots denouncers, deputies at various levels acting as public (legally authorized) complainants. In order to understand the vulnerable position of the dismissed university staff, the study examined the practices of protest and support for affected academics in professional, friendship, and social media spaces.

According to our qualitative ethnographic research, during the first 22 months since February 2022, Russian academia was characterized by academic censorship and the “mode of silence”; selection of priority objects for surveillance (“contagious” media platforms and “toxic” research topics) and establishment of a permanent roster of surveillance officials; university administration’s choice of using moralizing or preventive talks and/or direct threats of dismissal and reprisals, which led scholars to self-censorship and silence; informal coercion (presenting dissenters with a “black spot”) and voluntary resignation of dissenting scholars; the use of formal justifications to prove the “legitimacy” of contract termination (a reprimand, explanatory letter, flag on an employee’s record, disciplinary action, charges of “immoral behavior”) against outspoken dissenters; harassment, online censure and boycotts, and conflicts after termination.

Our ethnographic study uncovered a plurality of spaces and multiactor participation in surveillance and censorship within academia, a variety of major types of complainants such as authorized, specialized (“serial”), and ad hoc (rank-and-file) denouncers, as well as the variability of bureaucratic documents and tricks used to distance the institutions from dismissals of the dissenting employees. Among the bureaucratic tricks and variations in the use of anonymous and official documents we examined are the dispersal of personal responsibility of university administrators by, firstly, delegating decisions, authorizations, evidence collection, and complaints to other staff and external collaborators (human resources, psychologists, students, experts, complainants) or, secondly, by striving for collegiality in the decision-making about dismissals through the involvement of ethics and labor commissions (cf. Arendt’s “rule by Nobody” [1969] and Hull’s “collective agency” [2003, 2012a]). The unspoken pressure to self-censor or to quit and the gaps between the factual and formal evidence and reasons for dismissal testify, among other things, to the avoidance of moral dilemmas by the bureaucracy of the modern university (Graham 2002; Hoag 2011).

Up until February 2022, scholars' leaning toward one or another ideological position was a moral choice, whereas since then the scale of criminalization and the frequency of repressions have reached such a level that university administrations found themselves coerced and implicated by the state as conspirators engaged in preventive conversations, intimidation, and informal pressure that contributed to self-censorship and silencing of the vast majority of campus intellectuals fearful of legal consequences of their dissent, from the automatic termination of employment contract to administrative and criminal charges. The impossibility of free academic speech under these circumstances led to scholars' choosing and requesting "non-toxic" topics for their research, contributed to a "discursive paralysis" and "traumatic asphyxia," as Elena Zdravomyslova (2023) aptly noted in relation to public sociology, although her medicalized metaphors just as perfectly reflect the current problems of other humanities and social sciences in Russian academia. However, the post-February academia was unable to defend itself and counter the power exercised through the repressive institutions of the state. With the help of bureaucratic tricks and dispersal of personal responsibility among various officials, universities were forced to submit to new official goals, to maintain the constant surveillance of their activities and a "silent mode" fostered by specialized members of the staff, to control its communications with the outside world, and to restrict research topics and international contacts.

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APPENDIX

List of Interviewees

	Gender, age	Location	Profession and current employment status	Interview date
Informant 1	female, 40s	Northwestern region	lecturer in journalism; denounced, "voluntarily" resigned after encountering hate on social media	Jan. 10, 2023; recorded by Fedosova
Informant 2	female, 50s	Far Eastern region	lecturer in engineering; denounced several times, still working	Jan. 17, 2023; recorded by Fedosova
Informant 3	female, 40s	Southern region	lecturer in law; denounced, still working	Jan. 15, 2023; recorded by Fedosova
Informant 4	female, 20s	Central region	teaches Russian as a second language; "voluntarily" resigned	Jan. 25, 2023; recorded by Fedosova.
Informant 5	male, 40s	Central region	lecturer in political science; denounced, dismissed	Feb. 13, 2023; recorded by Fedosova
Informant 6	female, 20s	Central region	lecturer in history; denounced, employment contract was not renewed	Jan. 9, 2023; recorded by Fedosova
Informant 7	female, 30s	Central region	lecturer in journalism; denounced, dismissed, not expelled from postgraduate studies	Feb. 7, 2023; recorded by Fedosova
Informant 8	female, 50s	Far Eastern region	lecturer in cultural studies; "voluntarily" resigned	Feb. 7, 2023; recorded by Fedosova
Informant 9	female, 50s	Central region	professor, lecturer in the humanities; denounced, still working	July 19, 2023; recorded by Kuksa
Informant 10	male, 20s	Central region	mathematics teacher; denounced several times, still working	June 9, 2023; recorded by Fedosova
Informant 11	male, 30s	Central region	history teacher; denounced, still working	April 26, 2023; recorded by Fedosova
Informant 12	male, 40s	Central region	faculty dean; "voluntarily" resigned after administrative stalking	Oct. 11, 2023; recorded by Fedosova
Informant 13	male, 30s	Central region	lecturer in sociology; "voluntarily" resigned after receiving another job offer	Oct. 10, 2023; recorded by Fedosova
Informant 14	male, 40s	Central region	anthropologist; working with the administration's consent on the condition of respecting the "silent mode"	Sept. 29, 2023; recorded by Fedosova

	Gender, age	Location	Profession and current employment status	Interview date
Informant 15	female, 40s	Far Eastern region	lecturer in philosophy; "voluntarily" resigned after the end of academic year	March 13, 2023; recorded by Fedosova
Informant 16	male, 50s	Central region	associate professor, research fellow, lecturer in cultural studies; "voluntarily" resigned after administrative pressure	Oct. 20, 2023; recorded by Fedosova and Kuksa
Informant 17	male, 50s	Northwestern region	associate professor, lecturer in public history; "voluntarily" resigned after February 2022	Oct. 20, 2023; recorded by Fedosova and Kuksa
Informant 18	male, 40s	Central region	head of the department of philology; working with the administration's consent on the condition of respecting the "silent mode"	Sept. 27, 2023; recorded by Fedosova.
Informant 19	female, 40s	Northwestern region	associate professor; fired after a conflict with administration	Sept. 26, 2023; recorded by Fedosova
Informant 20	male, 60s	Central region	head of the department of local government, working with the administration's consent on the condition of respecting the "silent mode"	Sept. 28, 2023; recorded by Fedosova

ЦЕНЗУРА, ДОНОСЫ, РЕЖИМ МОЛЧАНИЯ В РОССИЙСКОЙ АКАДЕМИИ: НЕФОРМАЛЬНОЕ ЗАПУГИВАНИЕ И ПРЯМОЕ ДАВЛЕНИЕ НА УЧЕНЫХ

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В статье обозначены механизмы, которые укрепляют культуру политически мотивированного молчания в академических институтах, исследованы стратегии и акторы, которые используются для поддержания этого молчания, приведено их значение для антропологии бюрократии в условиях, когда преобладают цензура, доноительство и наказание. Работа основана на неструктурированных глубинных интервью с пострадавшими по причине своей антивоенной позиции российскими академиками

и на (найденных в СМИ) кейсах, свидетельствующих об идеологическом давлении на ученых в разных русскоязычных пространствах (идет ли речь о лекции, выступлении на той или иной медиаплатформе, публикации поста в социальной сети или научной статьи в журнале), а также на анализе задействованных в преследовании документов (жалоб/доносов, заключений этических комиссий, приказов об увольнении). В исследовании продемонстрировано, каким образом за первые 22 месяца после событий 24 февраля 2022 года российское академическое сообщество, с одной стороны, возвращается к самоцензуре и режиму молчания, и как должностные лица университетов, с другой стороны, наказывают ученых за несоблюдение идеологических требований (из-за внешнего давления или внутренней превентивной чистки).

Ключевые слова: академические свободы; этнография документов; делегирование ответственности; анонимные доносы; аморальное поведение; увольнение; (само)цензура