

Anna Eroshenko
Fadie Arabo
Komronbek (Komi) Ergashev
Marcus Hsieh
Anonymous Author

Access Under Pressure: Higher Education and State Control in Contemporary Russia

Mobility, Exit, and the Restructuring of Opportunity: What happens to students after they enter the system?

Access to higher education is often described only as a question of admission: who can enter a university and under which conditions. However, entering a university is only the first step. Students' opportunities are shaped by what happens after they start their studies. In contemporary Russia, these opportunities are strongly influenced by three processes: internal academic mobility, international isolation and academic exit. Together, they show that access to higher education is not a single moment, but a longer and unstable trajectory.

The discussion of academic freedom is linked, first and foremost, to the specific institutional role of the academy. As noted by Michael Ilg, who understands the academy through the “republic of dissent” concept (Ilg 2025), academic freedom is implemented in a logic different from freedom of expression — since the former is linked to the research as a “system of checks and balances” (Ibid: 346), or as the need to develop principles of expertise and to prevent a majority monopoly within it. It is on this function that the university's distinctive role is based, where “the scholarly profession was a form of public trust” (Ibid: 349). However, this opens up the social role not only of expertise (in maintaining a standard of quality), but of knowledge as well — namely, the openness of this expertise to the future, or its capacity to transform and renew itself. This unpredictability implies that the field of knowledge requires not only rules but also conditions for institutional development. Consequently, what is required is not only regulation of compliance with standards, but the proper functioning of academia as the institution responsible for the temporal dynamics of knowledge standards. In this vein, the measure of academia's proper functioning is its independence from other social institutions, their practices and interests. Ilg illustrates this principle in relation to the university's role when it hosts independent disciplines:

Once an institution does commit to hosting a biology department, under the terms of academic freedom, the university surrenders content authority over biology to biologists. Neither the

government nor university officials get to dictate the terms of what constitutes biology, or what may or may not be taught, researched, or published within the field (Ibid: 360).

From this perspective, the situation in Russia since the start of the full-scale war has been characterised not only by instances of repression against academics (on the basis of their public stances or participation in expert assessments; see below), but also by restrictions on the right to higher education — as the latter is subject to censorship and restrictions, and consequently suffers a decline in quality. The precursors to these restrictions on higher education in Russia can be traced back to the early 2010s, in the form of increased state control over universities as part of programmes to improve their efficiency (Forrat 2020). The state thus becomes the direct commissioner of an academic project, initially intended to secure a place in international university and research publication rankings (which are, however, controlled by the state and bureaucratic efficiency criteria), and, following the outbreak of full-scale war, to develop ideological and patriotic narratives, as well as a basis for “redirecting” scientific cooperation towards the BRICS countries. From the perspective of academia as a “republic of dissent”, both these “orders” represent a violation of the institutional history of post-Soviet academia. And whilst, prior to February 2022, this history did not conflict with the state’s objective of enhancing the international recognition of Russian academia, following the full-scale war, the focus on international openness — as well as freedom from ideological demands, as a crucial part of the professional identity of post-Soviet scholars (or as a symbol of the rejection of Soviet isolationism). For example, the “Open Letter from Russian Academics and Science Journalists Against the War with Ukraine” was signed by around 8,500 people (Otkrytoie pis'mo 2022). In particular, the open letter justifies the scientific community’s anti-war stance by referring to aspects of professional identity such as international scientific cooperation:

By unleashing this war, Russia has condemned itself to international isolation and the status of a pariah state. This means that we, as scientists, will now be unable to carry out our work properly: after all, conducting scientific research is unthinkable without full cooperation with colleagues from other countries (Ibid).

In this context, the allocation of university places to the children of war veterans, against the backdrop of the transformation of the Russian economy under the influence of the war and the state’s desire in its frameworks to significantly reduce the number of those receiving higher education¹, correlates with the dismissal of those academics who had close ties with Western academia and criticised the outbreak of full-scale war on both ethical and professional grounds. This article will show how the pressure on institutional freedom of Russian universities results in decrease of quality in higher education under the

¹ Lukianova, I. "Vam luchshe v kolledzh". Pochemy vsio bolshe schkol'nikov nie mogut popast' v 10 klass ["You better enter college". Why even more school people can't enter 10th grade]. Novaya Gazeta. 17.06.2026. URL: <https://novyagazeta.ru/articles/2026/06/17/vam-luchshe-v-kolledzh> (date of access: 20.06.2026).

circumstances of the full-scale war, as this education has been steadily using its international integration and institutional independence.

Theoretical framework: three trajectories after admission

This framework is based on previous research on academic mobility and academic freedom, but it also suggests a specific way to look at access after admission in the Russian case (Zaytseva, 2023; Chankseliani & Belkina, 2024; Mierau et al., 2024). It combines insights from studies of internal mobility, international cooperation and academic exodus in order to describe how students' opportunities change once they are already inside the higher education system.

We propose a theoretical framework that views access to higher education as a set of trajectories after admission, rather than as a single entry point. In this framework, the central question is not only “who is allowed to enter the university?”, but also “what paths are open to students once they are inside the system?”. We focus on three main tendencies: internal academic mobility, international isolation and academic exit.

The first tendency is internal academic mobility. In general, moving between different regions and universities inside Russia can expand opportunities. It gives students from small or disadvantaged regions access to better infrastructure, stronger academic communities and diverse programmes in large cities (Zaytseva, 2023). This article on internal mobility shows that standardised admission procedures made this type of mobility more common for some people (Zaytseva, 2023). However, because mobility does require a lot of financial resources, social capital and information, it is not equally available to everyone. For the majority of students, especially from poorer regions, moving remains too expensive or risky. Internal mobility reveals how access is still stratified: some students can use mobility to improve their position, while others cannot.

The second tendency is worldwide isolation (in a form of the termination of existing international academic collaborations). Before 2022, international mobility was presented through exchange programmes, joint degrees and collaborations. It was an important way for Russian students and scholars to join global academic networks. After the full-scale invasion, many of these channels have been blocked (Mierau et al., 2024). Institutional partnerships have been suspended, and Russian universities have lost access to a huge part of their international projects. Even for students who weren't planning to emigrate, this means almost no opportunities for studying abroad, presenting their work internationally or learning from foreign colleagues. In this sense, international isolation creates a form of epistemic isolation: it limits access to various perspectives, methods and debates (Mierau et al., 2024; Chankseliani & Belkina, 2024).

The third tendency is academic exodus. Academic exit occurs when scholars and students leave the Russian academic system and continue their studies or careers abroad. The academic exodus described in recent research shows that exit is often a reaction to political pressure, censorship and the absence of academic freedom (Chankseliani & Belkina, 2024; Mierau et al., 2024). When experienced staff leave, universities lose more than a worker: research groups, supervision capacity and parts of their curricula. For students who remain, this can mean very limited course options, narrow research agendas and weaker mentorship. Academic exit therefore transforms the structure of opportunities inside the system and deepens the already existing inequalities between the institutions.

These three tendencies interact with each other. Internal mobility can reduce some inequalities within regions, but it cannot compensate for the loss of international connections or the departure of important academic staff (Zaytseva, 2023; Mierau et al., 2024). Worldwide isolation reduces the value of internal mobility, because moving inside Russia does not open access to any global academic spaces (Mierau et al., 2024). Academic exodus increases the odd distribution of existing resources between institutions, as some universities lose more staff and programmes than others (Chankseliani & Belkina, 2024). Taken together, these processes show that access to higher education in contemporary Russia is unstable. It depends not only on individual quality, but also on institutional regulations, political decisions and world conflicts.

In this theoretical perspective, access is a dynamic and highly fragile process. It can expand when reforms support mobility and open borders, but it can also be cut quickly under conditions of war, repressions and again, isolation (Mierau et al., 2024; Zaytseva, 2023). For today's students, admission to a university doesn't guarantee stable or at least equal participation in academic life. Their paths are shaped by the possibilities and limits of internal mobility, by the walls of worldwide isolation and by the ongoing academic exodus that changes the whole environment in which they study (Chankseliani & Belkina, 2024; Mierau et al., 2024).

Sources and context

This analysis is based on several types of materials. One central source is the *Science at Risk* monitoring report, which describes political pressure on universities, restrictions on academic freedom and the militarisation of higher education after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Mierau et al., 2024). It also documents how many academic exchange programmes and international cooperation agreements have been terminated or suspended. These changes reduce contacts between Russian and foreign universities and limit students' participation in international academic life.

Another important set of data concerns academic migration from Russia since 2022. These data show that a significant number of scholars have left the country and moved to institutions in Germany, Israel, Kazakhstan, China and other states (Mierau et al., 2024). Researchers describe this process as an academic exodus (Chankseliani & Belkina, 2024). It affects individual careers, but it also changes the human resources and knowledge available inside Russian universities. When experienced academics leave, some research projects stop, and certain courses or programmes cannot continue.

In addition, we rely on sociological research on internal academic mobility of students in Russia. Studies of academic mobility, such as those by Zaytseva, define mobility as movement between institutions or regions for the purpose of study (Zaytseva, 2023). They show that internal mobility is not a new phenomenon, but that institutional reforms have changed its patterns. For example, the introduction of standardised admission procedures increased the probability that young people from provincial towns could move to universities in larger cities (Zaytseva, 2023). At the same time, these studies emphasise that mobility depends not only on formal rules, but also on structural conditions: regional inequalities, differences in infrastructure and students' financial resources. This means that internal mobility remains unequal and selective.

Finally, we use research on the academic exodus after the invasion of Ukraine, such as the work by Chankseliani and Belkina (2024). These authors argue that the war has triggered a large-scale departure of academics from Russia and that this process has both immediate and long-term consequences. They describe how ongoing research projects are interrupted and how an “intellectual void” emerges in many institutions (Chankseliani & Belkina, 2024). Combined with the findings from the *Science at Risk* report on censorship and repression, this work helps to understand exit as a reaction to shrinking academic freedom, rather than as an independent choice (Mierau et al., 2024).

Governance, Corporatism, and State Control: How is higher education governed, and who actually holds power?

To understand how access to higher education in contemporary Russia has changed, it is necessary to deal with governance. The interconnection between higher education and governance could be described through three connected ideas: the centralisation of governance, the transformation of autonomy into a conditional and revocable privilege, and the proliferation of state priorities into university management through corporatist logics (Science at Risk 2025; Kinzelbach et al. 2024; Yatluk 2025; Gataulina 2025). Together, these processes help explain how higher education in Russia has become a politically regulated rather than an institutionally independent sphere.

The first of these processes is centralisation. Centralisation does not simply mean that the Ministry of Education has become more active. More theoretically, it has ensured that authority within higher education has moved upwards toward agents deeply entrenched in the state. Regarding the “republic of dissent” and institutional autonomy of universities optics, the crucial step in this direction was made in 2012, when the law “On Higher and Postgraduate Professional Education”, presuming a lot of freedom in choosing methods of teaching (see, for instance: (Dubrovsky 2020)), was replaced with the new law “On education in Russian Federation”, which implied much more regulations. One clear indicator of this shift is the restructuring of some universities under the logic of large projects (such as the “5-100” Program) which made it possible to move from the election of rectors to their appointment by state authorities (Science at Risk, 2025), (Forrat 2020). This change matters because it alters the principle of accountability within the university itself. A rector elected internally is, at least theoretically, answerable to the academic body that elected them; a rector appointed by the state is more murky. They are answerable to the shadowy workings of the political structures that guarantee their position. As Science at Risk notes, this shift formed part of a broader transformation in which centralised decision-making increasingly gave the state greater control over the university (Science at Risk, 2025).

After the protests of 2011-2012, universities became increasingly “strictly unitary,” (Science at Risk, 2025) with a stricter observation of affiliates and a growing intolerance of internal political pluralism. The significance of this goes beyond mere administration. It suggests that the university is no longer capable of independent judgement. Rather, it becomes an institution whose internal life must remain politically safe. By the time of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this tendency had hardened further (Yatluk 2025). What began in 2022 as public loyalty pledges by rectors evolved, in the report’s language, into an “extensive control system” (Science at Risk, 2025) in which universities are rendered not just a directly government-managed executors of projects on “academic effectivity”, but as instruments of state ideology. Centralisation, then, is not an abstract background condition. It is the precondition for all the transformations discussed in this paper, because it establishes that real decision-making power no longer lies principally with academic communities themselves.

Yet the Russian case is not best described as one in which university autonomy has utterly disappeared. The more apt formulation is that autonomy has become conditional. Universities still possess some room to express a particular idea or two, but only those that exist within politically acceptable limits (Kinzelbach et al., 2024). Their autonomy is therefore now a revocable privilege dependent on compliance. This distinction matters because it captures the hybrid nature of the resultant system. Institutions are not openly told at every instance what to teach or who to hire. Really, they, in fact, operate within an

environment of shark-infested water in which deviation can trigger a battering, and uncertainty itself encourages self-discipline.

The conditions behind the mysterious conditional autonomy are both legal and informal. Without a doubt, the most important legal instruments are the categories of “foreign agents” and “undesirable organisations,” both of which are used to manipulate academia far beyond mere explicit political activism. Science at Risk shows that these categories now affect not only protestors, but also scholars, publishers, academic associations, and educational organisations more broadly (Science at Risk, 2025). In April 2025, parliament passed a law prohibiting people and organisations labelled as foreign agents from engaging in educational activities. The same legal environment has had direct consequences for publishing and the circulation of information. Publishing houses and bookstores were required to organise clearance sales of books by foreign agents before September 2025, after which their sale could, in fact, become an administrative offence (Science at Risk, 2025). Certainly, the further proliferation of such material would have been terribly catastrophic for the Russian government. Such measures show that the question is no longer simply whether universities are autonomous in law, but whether the agents within them can participate in intellectual life without catching themselves in the line of fire.

The category of “undesirable organisations” is even more fascinating because of how expansively and arbitrarily it can be applied. Activities as ordinary as taking an exam abroad may be construed as participation in an undesirable organisation, while citing a publication from Yale University Press may also attract persecution once Yale itself has been designated undesirable (which it has) (Science at Risk, 2025). The addition of ASEES, a major scholarly association in Slavic, East European, and Eurasian studies, to the undesirable organisations list in June 2025 is especially telling (Science at Risk, 2025). It transformed conference participation and association membership into a legal risk. This is why the current system is best understood not simply as a censored one, but as a system of structured uncertainty. The problem is not only that certain acts are forbidden; it is that the boundary of the forbidden remains vague enough to engender a sort of anticipatory obedience. In this respect, the legal environment begins to resemble the logic of Kafka: the power of the system lies in the fact that one is never entirely outside the possibility of arbitrary accusation. What is more, the use of this designation severely isolates Russian academics from the rest of the world, lest they associate with so-called enemies of the state and land themselves in trouble.

This isolation becomes even clearer when one considers the collapse of academic exchange. Academic exchange fell from 185,000 in 2022 to below 60,000 in 2025 (Science at Risk, 2025). That decline is significant not only as an indicator of international isolation, but as evidence that universities no longer possess the freedom to maintain an ordinary state of affairs. Partnerships have been terminated and students pursuing qualifications abroad

may expose themselves to state persecution. The result is a narrowing of institutional horizons. Universities become more domestically governed and more dependent on the political limits imposed by the state.

The third concept needed to make sense of this transformation is corporatism. Here the point is not simply that the state intervenes in universities from outside, but that state priorities are progressively embedded into university governance itself. Karp says higher education has become framed in managerial and developmental terms (Karp, 2023). On one level, this appears technocratic rather than political. Universities are described as instruments for increasing competitiveness and national capacity. Such managerial logics can coexist easily with authoritarian control. In fact, they can help facilitate it. Once universities are organised around externally defined priorities, they become more governable from above. The language of efficiency does not displace politics; it provides a form through which politics can be integrated into the university structure. In the Russian case, that means that developmental steering increasingly overlaps with ideological steering. Universities are expected to serve state directives. The corporatist element of governance therefore lies in the fact that the university ceases to be a site of inquiry and comes instead to be an instrument for the implementation of state projects.

Centralisation of the Russian higher education system has shifted authority away from academic communities and towards the state's intermediaries. Conditional autonomy has transformed self-government into a revocable privilege. Corporatist logics have embedded state priorities inside the routines of university management. The other sections of this paper are best read as consequences of this deeper transformation in how Russian universities are governed.

Admissions, Quotas, and Inequality of Entry: Who gets into university, and on what basis?

Since the onset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a sweeping cadre of reforms have reshaped its higher education system. While the oft-vilified Unified State Exam (USE) remains the spiritual and de-facto core of admission, a ballooning glut of bureaucratic "Special Military Operation" (SMO) pathways have funneled thousands of former military participants and their relatives into top universities, regardless of exam performance.

To paint a clearer picture of Russia's wartime reforms at the university level, it is imperative to understand the state of admissions prior to the invasion of Ukraine. Before 2022, admissions criteria were solely dominated by the USE; Universities ranked applicants by their standardized testing scores, stratified by specialized demographics or regional quotas. Analysis by (Prakhov and Sergienko 2017) indicates that 87% of admitted students

had been evaluated solely via their USE results, with a minimal minority entering through alternative means.

Since 2022, the Kremlin has advanced a series of policies introducing special admission benefits tied directly to personal participation in the Ukrainian invasion. Most policies have benefitted the children of SMO participants, with thousands of such admissions offers being made. In 2023, such policies became more heavy-handed, with significant funding allocation for SMO participants and their children as a novel quota, giving them the right to enter without exams. In 2023, the government formalized this pathway, codifying it as a bespoke quota set at a minimum of 10% of the total budgeted seats for each university department. Under this system, dubbed the “Heroes of Russia” program, recipients of Orders of Courage and the children of combat casualties could be admitted without taking entrance exams at all. For those who had already enrolled, tuition was slashed at public institutions (Participants of... 2023). The primary beneficiary of such novel groups include SMO veterans themselves, their direct children, and certain mercenaries/law enforcement groups operating within Russia. In early 2026, the scope of these educational benefits was also broadened to encompass more extended family members. As of recently, the government introduced and passed a legislative amendment granting widows of combatants the same right to state-funded bachelor’s program through an SMO quota, given that they have not remarried (Akinshina, 2026). Approximately 600 widows have signalled interest in this pilot program, marking yet another encroachment of SMO quotas on the admissions criterion of Russian higher education.

An investigation into twenty top Russian universities (Uzhvak, Nikolaeva, Savina 2025) found that nearly 3,000 SMO participants and their children had enrolled under the SMO quota, a significant and quickly growing academic population. Investigative journalists found that ~83% of such students would not have been admitted under normal competition, as they either skipped the USE entirely or scored significantly below the cut-off required for average applicants. At St. Petersburg State University, an elite Russian institution, 103 SMO entrants were admitted with scores that would not otherwise have been considered. Across the broader Russian higher education system, this surging influx has grown rapidly. For the 2025-2026 school year, the total volume of these separate quotas has grown to ~53,000 seats (Surinskaya, Mayer, Akinshina 2026). According to the Ministry of Education and Science, this number grew by over 18,000 in just 2025, a 160% increase compared to 2024. While data remains sparse, it appears that the majority of these students have gravitated toward high-demand employable sectors in technology and engineering. Compared to the pre-war USE gauntlet, where exam scores served as the primary gatekeeper, the SMO quotas create a parallel track that, in addition to censorship and ideologically motivated repression against academics, exerts further pressure on the independent development of academia.

Throughout this era, universities have worked to obfuscate SMO beneficiaries. One such attempt has been by replacing names on public admissions lists with a series of codes, limiting external scrutiny and making it more difficult to assess exactly who is being admitted. Officials continue to insist that SMO quotas do not impact other social quotas, such as those for certain ethnic groups, orphans, or disabled applicants, but it is without a doubt that SMO quotas must absorb seats from some qualified group. Symbolically, the rise of SMO quotas at elite Russian universities inextricably embeds war participation as a normalized route to educational privilege. While this shift remains contained to the higher education system of Russia, it signals a broader politicization and militarization of Russian institutions and a departure from the meritocratic evaluations of years past.

Militarisation and Ideological Reprogramming: How is the Decline in the Quality of Education Interrelated with the Limitation of Academic Mobility?

Quota systems affect the academic and student community by normalising war, thereby incorporating those directly involved in it. The increase in the number of students admitted under quotas for participants in the so-called “Special Military Operation” (SMO) and their relatives could increase the number of ideologically motivated denunciations of students and lecturers for anti-war statements and positions in future. These denunciations could lead not only to dismissal, but also to criminal prosecution. For example, Mikhail Belousov, a history lecturer at Saint Petersburg State University, was dismissed in June 2023 for his alleged “inappropriate irony” regarding a student who had been killed in the war. Pro-war activists are believed to have played a significant role in this dismissal. In November 2023, following a denunciation by her students, Irina Sedelnikova, a lecturer at the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (Nizhny Novgorod), received a three-year suspended sentence for “knowingly disseminating false information” about the “special military operation” during a seminar session. (Dubrovsky & Podolskaya, 2023). As the number of students entering universities under quotas for war veterans increases, it is also likely that lecturers and students will practise self-censorship to a greater extent. The situation is made worse by the fact that former troops frequently suffer from severe PTSD symptoms, which Russia is widely reported to have totally failed to heal systematically (Volyanova 2025). This will inevitably diminish the quality of intellectual discourse, creating an atmosphere of fear and mistrust.

The situation with the quota system regarding both students’ access to higher education and the quality of this education, is further exacerbated by the constant pressure on students to take part in military operations (Russian Colleges... 2026). The authorities’ intention to

recruit students into contract military service is confirmed, among other things, by the publication of special guidance materials. On the basis of these, universities are advised to carry out “information and awareness-raising work” among students. The arguments proposed for such propaganda are based on false information claiming that students who voluntarily sign a contract will not be required to renew it after a year, and that such students will certainly serve as drone operators far from the most dangerous sections of the front line. In addition, the campaign is supported by militarised events and initiatives organised by universities – for example, the “Unmanned Systems Festival”, which took place at the Higher School of Economics (the former allegedly “most liberal” university in the country) (Drones first... 2026).

Thus, the recruitment drive is based, on the one hand, on offering students substantial financial incentives, and on the other, on their fear of losing their deferment from military conscription should they be expelled from university or fail to gain entry to the next level of education upon completing their current course. It should be noted that in the Russian Federation, all citizens aged 18 to 30 with a male gender marker who are not in the reserve are subject to conscription (№53-FZ). Students are effectively being offered the chance to exchange their current status as university students for a “guaranteed safe format” of military service (Mazaeva, Vasilyeva, Sonne 2026). According to “Groza.Media”, over 200 universities and colleges in Russia have been observed engaging in such propaganda (Sebastian, Krebs 2026). Students also report pressure, coercion and threats of expulsion being used by university administrations to force them to sign a contract with the Ministry of Defence. According to “*Idite lesom*” (an organization defending the rights of those who are forced to participate in military actions), by April 2026 there were already more than 51 known cases of such pressure being exerted on students (Pressure on students... 2026).

Thus, the value of education as preparation for a future profession, as well as the competitive environment that encourages students to improve their knowledge and qualifications, is eroded and undermined by such “alternative merits” in the form of military service. Students who have agreed to sign a contract have no real grounds to believe that the promises made to them will be fulfilled – that is, it is highly likely that these people will not return to their studies in the near future after signing a contract for military service (it should be noted that from September 2022, all contracts remain in force until the end of the so-called “special military operation”).

This situation demonstrates how public authority of higher education is being transformed from the universally appreciated skills and competences, which are proved and developed by international mobility, to a secondary appendage of a patriotic loyalty, which certain content is determined by the official rhetoric around the war and isolationism. It correlates with the tendency described for the period preceding the full-scale war in: higher

education develops under a serious influence of chauvinist political rhetoric, and then – of that of isolationism (Chiriov, Feduykin 2021). This involves deriving it from the international academic community, including its core themes and accepted working principles.

The growing trend towards isolationism in higher education is a consequence of severe restrictions on academic and public freedoms under the influence of war. This isolationism negatively impacts the conditions in which students study and conduct research, the quality of their education and the dissertations they produce in accordance with new ideological requirements. The most obvious consequence is that students of the social sciences and humanities cannot propose a critique of the war, an examination of related political, social, economic and cultural processes, or a pacifist stance as the subject of their dissertations. Instead, in contemporary social, cultural and political studies, students are invited to participate in projects based on disinformation and war propaganda, such as the study of 'traditional values' as the foundation of a “multipolar world”. Following the outbreak of full-scale war, special conferences (International Conference, 2024) and journals (Journal “Patria”, n.d.) dedicated to this subject emerged, as did “patriotic education” lessons in primary and secondary schools (Talanova 2022). Consequently, the training of students in the social sciences and humanities is increasingly geared towards shaping future “personnel” for these fields.

For certain disciplines, such as Ukrainian Studies, this conceptual isolationism within the Russian academic community makes further development entirely impossible (Dubrovsky, 2024). Gender Studies, Feminist Studies, and Queer Studies are in a similar position (Bronnikova 2025), (Zaborskaya 2026), as it is practically impossible to develop these fields under Russian legislation banning “LGBT propaganda” (№479-FZ) and the Supreme Court's decision to recognise the so-called “international LGBT movement” as extremist. The absence of certain disciplines, such as gender studies, from Russian university curricula makes it difficult for Russian students to gain admission to some foreign MA programmes that require specific subject-related credits on degree certificates. Such a transformation of higher education directly affects the mobility of Russian students, hindering their ability to meet international standards in their fields of study.

The decline in the quality of education is further exacerbated by the designation of foreign research centres and research funding bodies as “undesirable organisations”, and of Russian academics who are part of the international academic community as “foreign agents”. Literature published with the support of these “undesirable organisations” or authored by these “foreign agents” cannot be used in teaching, and access to it is restricted. Similarly, books addressing the rights of LGBTQ+ people are banned from possession and distribution as they are deemed “contrary to Russian legislation” (Orlova, 2023). There have

been reports of university administrations threatening students for referencing such literature in their dissertations. Restrictions on engagement with leading contemporary research during the learning process also diminish the quality of education received by students.

Direct restrictions on academic contacts have a similar effect. Russian universities have been advised to strictly regulate international travel by their staff (Tubridy, 2026). Furthermore, participating in internships and conferences organised by foreign organisations designated as “undesirable” in the Russian Federation has become risky for students, as it may result in administrative or criminal liability. Notably, this affects the academic mobility programmes for students that were the most popular prior to the start of full-scale war (Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst e.V. – DAAD) and the leading centres and programmes in the fields of Slavic Studies (ASEEES, Bard College, Central European University, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Osteuropakunde e. V., Princeton University). Consequently, students are forced to refuse applying for their programmes, whilst the organisations themselves are compelled to restrict their cooperation with Russian students (DAAD suspends... 2026). Following the designation of the British Council, which administers the IELTS international exam, as an “undesirable organisation” in June 2025, Russian students could face prosecution for “financing an undesirable organisation” for taking this exam. The requirement for English proficiency certificates, and the popularity of the IELTS test, is also limiting the international mobility of Russian students.

Against this background, close attention is warranted to such enhancement of isolationist tendencies as the introduction of mandatory post-graduation service schemes (or “work-back” requirements) for certain fields. As of 1 March, a law adopted on 17 November (Federal Law No. 424-FZ) will come into force, establishing such obligations (framed as “mentorship”) for medical university students. After graduation, students must work for up to three years in a state medical institution, with the precise duration for different specialisations being regulated by the Ministry of Health (Baraniuk 2025). Consequently, students who wish to pursue international mobility lose the ability to do so. The state presents the measure as a means of preventing the outflow of specialists from a critically important sector, and proposals have been made to introduce an analogous regime for the teaching profession (Asatryan 2025). Notably, in contemporary Russia, an inclination to leave the country may be associated with an anti-war stance and a refusal to work for a government engaged in warfare. It should also be noted that the medical profession in Russia is subject to military registration, meaning individuals with medical training, including women, may be mobilised under the wartime. This makes medical education (and potentially teacher training) dependent on the state: students on these courses become detached from international academic mobility practices, while the state exerts decisive influence over their training and subsequent employment.

This negative trend is set to continue with Russia's withdrawal from the Bologna Process planned in Autumn 2026. Russia's membership was suspended in 2022 following the outbreak of full-scale war. However, the Russian authorities are framing their withdrawal from the Bologna Process in isolationist terms. For example, Valery Falkov, the Russian Federation's Minister of Science and Higher Education, explained the withdrawal from the Bologna Process by stating that Russia "has its own unique education system in store, which will serve the interests of the national economy" (Borisova 2026).

Studying these war-related mechanisms that constrain university education makes it possible to trace a complex transformation of higher education in Russia as a social institution. The increasing difficulty of pursuing an academic track for students oriented toward international values and standards is likely to have a long-term negative effect on the condition of scholarship and research in Russia.

Concluding Remarks. Repression, Exclusion, and Epistemic Access: Who is pushed out of the system, and why?

As it is demonstrated in the conducted research, access to higher education in Russia since 2022 is no longer defined solely by admission, but by the ability to safely participate in academic life without political dissent. The Russian state has increasingly expelled students for anti-war protests, social media posts, or political expression, demonstrating that continued enrollment is conditional on ideological compliance (Groza & OVD-Info, 2025).

Faculty members have been dismissed or pressured to resign for criticizing the war or state policies, showing that academic employment is contingent on political loyalty rather than scholarly merit. This creates a system of anticipatory self-censorship, where students and professors avoid certain topics out of fear of punishment, even without direct repression. Entire academic disciplines, such as Ukrainian studies or gender studies, have been eliminated or suppressed, restricting students' access to certain forms of knowledge and limiting intellectual diversity (Dubrovsky 2024).

This represents epistemic exclusion, the state controls not just who enters universities, but what knowledge can be produced and accessed. Universities increasingly function as ideological institutions that reproduce state-approved narratives, rather than independent sites of inquiry. Repression produces a selection effect: dissenting individuals are expelled,

dismissed, or leave voluntarily, resulting in a more politically compliant academic population.

This transforms access into a conditional privilege, individuals can only remain in higher education if they demonstrate political neutrality or loyalty. Overall, the Russian state has redefined access from a merit-based system to one structured by political conformity, repression, and ideological control, fundamentally reshaping the purpose of higher education.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Sources

Akinshina, T. (2026) In 2025, 1.6 times more participants in the special operation entered universities. [V 2025 godu v vuzy postupilo v 1,6 raza bolshe uchastnikov spetsoperatsii]. *Vedomosti*. 25.03.2026. URL: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/society/articles/2026/03/25/1185271-v-2025-godu-v-vuzi-postupilo-bolshe-uchastnikov-spetsoperatsii> (date of access: 10.04.2026). (In Russian).

Asatryan, A. (2025). The Ministry of Education called the idea of introducing work-offs for pedagogical university graduates “not bad” [V Minprosveschenii nazvali “neplochoi” ideiiu vvedeniia otrabotki dlia vypusnikov pedvuzov]. *Forbes*. 09.10.2025. URL: <https://www.forbes.ru/society/547521-v-minprosvesenia-nazvali-neplohoj-ideu-vvedeniia-otrabotki-dla-vypusnikov-pedvuzov> (date of access: 10.04.2026). (In Russian).

Baraniuk, U. (2025). “Welcome to serfdom”. Russian doctors predict a healthcare collapse due to the law requiring “work-back” after medical education. [“Dobro pozhalovat v krepostnoie pravo”. Rossiskiie mediki predriekli kollaps zdavookhraneniia iz-za zakona ob “otrabotke” posle medvuzov]. *Current time*. 18.11.2025. URL: <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/rossiyskie-mediki-zdravookhranenie-otrabotka-posle-medvuzov/33594113.html> (date of access: 10.04.2026). (In Russian).

Borisova, M. What Russian students aren’t told about the Bologna system [Chto rossiiskim studentam ne govoriat o Bolonskoi sisteme]. *Deutsche Welle auf Russisch*. 13.02.2026. URL: <https://www.dw.com/ru/vhodimvyhodim-cto-na-samom-dele-proishodit-s-bolonskoj-sistemoj-v-rf/a-75936767> (date of access: 10.04.2026). (In Russian).

DAAD suspends work in Russia. *German Academic Exchange Service*. 13.02.2026. URL: https://www.daad.de/en/press-releases/2026/nach-einstufung-als-unerwuenschte-organisation_daad-stellt-arbeit-in-russland-ein/ (date of access: 11.04.2026).

Journal “Patria”: About. URL: <https://patria.hse.ru/about> (date of access: 11.04.2026). (In Russian).

International academic conference “The new world order: Shaping the multipolar world and the role of Russia”: Programm [Mezhdunarodnaya nauchnaya konferentsiya “Novyi mirovoi poriadok: formirovaniye mnogopoliarnogo mira i rol Rossii”: Programma]. 24.04.2024. URL: https://igh.ru/ckeditor_assets/attachments/768/%D0%9F%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%BC%D0%B0_24_%D0%B0%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%BB%D1%8F.pdf (date of access: 11.04.2026). (In Russian).

Drones first: HSE hosted the Unmanned Systems Festival [Pervym delom drony. V NIU VShE proshel festival bespilotnykh sistem]. *NRU HSE: News*. 25.02.2026. URL: <https://www.hse.ru/news/life/1132192558.html> (date of access: 10.04.2026). (In Russian).

Mazaeva, M., Vasilyeva, N. Sonne, P. (2026). To Fill Drone Force Ranks, Russia Targets a New Demographic: Students Recruitment sessions have taken place at hundreds of universities and colleges across the country. *New York Times*. 13.04.2026. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/04/13/world/europe/russia-ukraine-war-recruitment-students.html> (date of access: 11.04.2026).

Orlova, K. (2023). The Higher School of Economics will remove books by "foreign agents" and "LGBT literature" from its library [Vyshaia shkola ekonomiki uberet iz svoei biblioteki knigi “inoagentov” i “LGBT-literaturu”]. *Novaya Gazeta. Europe*. 27.03.2023. URL: <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2023/03/27/vyshshaia-shkola-ekonomiki-uberet-iz-svoei-biblioteki-knigi-inoagentov-i-lgbt-literaturu> (date of access: 10.04.2026). (In Russian).

Otkrytoie pis'mo rossiiskikh uchenykh i nauchnykh zhurnalistov protiv voyny s Ukrainoi [An open letter from Russian scientists and science journalists against the war with Ukraine]. *T-Invariant*. 24.02.2026. URL: <https://t-invariant.org/2022/02/we-are-against-war/> (date of access: 20.06.2026). (In Russian).

Participants in the special operation will be able to enroll in universities under a separate quota [Uchastniki spetsoperatsii smogut postupat v vuzy v ramkakh otdelnoi kvoty]. *Vedomosti*. 19.06.2023. URL: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/society/news/2023/06/19/981242-uchastniki-spetsoperatsii-postupat-vuzy> (date of access: 08.04.2026). (In Russian).

Pressure on students to sign contracts has already been recorded at 51 universities across Russia [V 51 vuze po vsiei Rossii uzhe zafiksirovano davleniie na studentov, kotorych pyraiutsia zastavit podpisivat kontrakt]. *Idite Lesom*. 13.04.2026. URL: https://t.me/iditelesom_help/7342 (date of access: 10.04.2026). (In Russian).

Russian colleges are offering struggling students ‘one-year’ army contracts. Lawyers warn it’s a trap. *Meduza*. 30.01.2026. URL: <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2026/01/30/russian-colleges-are-offering-struggling-students-one-year-army-contracts-lawyers-warn-it-s-a-trap> (date of access: 11.04.2026).

Science at Risk (2025). Academic Freedom in Russia: State Repression and its Influence on Academic Practice. Monitoring Report 2025.

Sebastian, C., Krebs, K. (2026). “Colossal” pressure: How Russia is targeting university students for military recruitment. *CNN World*. 16.04.2026. URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/2026/04/14/europe/russia-students-military-recruitment-campaign-intl-cmd> (date of access: 11.04.2026).

Surinskaya, Y., Mayer, A., Akinshina, T. (2026). The Cabinet of Ministers approved benefits for widows of special operation participants when applying to universities. [Kabmin odobril lgoty dlia vdov uchastnikov spetzoperatzii pro postiplenii v vuzy]. *Vedomosti*. 31.03.2026. URL: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/society/articles/2026/03/31/1186686-kabmin-odobril-lgoti-dlya-vdov-uchastnikov-spetsoperatsii> (date of access: 11.04.2026). (In Russian).

Tubridy, M. (2026). Russian Universities Advised to Pre-Authorize Academic Trips to ‘Unfriendly’ Countries, Report Says. *Moscow Times*. 02.02.2026. URL: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2026/02/02/russian-universities-advised-to-pre-authorize-academic-trips-to-unfriendly-countries-report-says-a91834> (date of access: 12.04.2026).

Vonyanova, S. (2025). “These are dangerous people”: How Russia is failing to treat soldiers with PTSD. *BBC News Russian*. 06.08.2025. URL: <https://bbcrussian.substack.com/p/these-are-dangerous-people> (date of access: 12.04.2026).

Literature

Arnold, R. Moscow Conducts Fascistization of Russian Higher Education (Part One). *Eurasia Digest*, 1(31). 14.10.2025. URL: <https://jamestown.org/moscow-conducts-fascistization-of-russian-higher-education-part-one/> (date of access: 14.04.2026).

Bronnikova, S. (2025). Forbidden Knowledge: Who and How is Blocking Transgender and Queer Research in Russian Science? [Zapretnoe znanie: kto i kak v rossiiskoi nauke blokiruet transgendernye i kvir-issledovaniia]. *7x7 Horizontal Russia*. 29.07.2025. URL: <https://semnasem.org/articles/2025/07/29/zapretnoe-znanie>

Chankseliani, M., and Belkina, E. (2024). Academic Exodus from Russia: Unravelling the Crisis. *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education*, 16(3), 97–105.

Chiriov, I., Feduykin, I. (2021). The Role of Universities in Putin’s Russia. Reinforcing the State, 220–238. In: Douglass, J. (Ed.). *Neo-nationalism and Universities: Populists, Autocrats, and the Future of Higher Education*. Johns Hopkins Univ. Press.

Dubrovsky, D. (2020). Akademicheskaya svoboda v Rossii — kak ieie ponimat’? [Academic freedom in Russia — how to interpret it?]. *Gaudeamus: Academic Freedom*. 07.08.2020. URL: <https://gaudeamus.blog/ru/akademicheskaya-svoboda-v-rossii-kak-ee-ponimat/> (date of access: 10.07.2026). (In Russian).

Dubrovsky, D. (2024). Ukraine and Ukrainians in Russian Higher Education and Science. In A. Shekhovtsov (Ed.), *Russia against Ukraine: Russian Political Mythology and the War on Ukrainian Identity*. *Centre for Democratic Integrity*. URL: <https://democratic-integrity.eu/russia-against-ukraine/> (date of access: 14.04.2026).

Dubrovsky, D., Podolskaya, V. (2023) Rossiia: Naruscheniia akademicheskoi svobody v 2023 godu. Sotzialno-politicheskii kontekst presledovaniia uchenykh i prepodavatelei [Russia: Violations of academic freedom in 2023. The socio-political context and the persecution of academics and lecturers]. URL: <https://cisrus.org/ru/academic-freedom-violation-2023-rus/> (date of access: 11.04.2026). (In Russian).

Forrat, N. (2020). Forrat, N. Dekanov — vybiraiut, direktorov — naznachaiut [Deans are elected, directors are appointed]. *Gaudeamus: Academic Freedom*. 29.05.2020. URL: <https://gaudeamus.blog/ru/dekanov-vybirayut-direktorov-naznachayut-2/> (date of access: 20.06.2026) (In Russian).

“Groza” and OVD-Info (2025). Universities and the System: A Study on Russian Authorities’ Pressure on Students and Academia. Special Report [Universitaty i sistema. Issledovaniie “Grozy” o davlenii rossiiskikh vlastei na studentov i akademicheskuiu sredu]. *Groza.Media*. 28.05.2025. URL: <https://www.groza.media/posts/universitety-i-sistema-ovd-groza> (date of access: 10.04.2026). (In Russian).

Gataulina, I. (2025). Captured to Serve: Universities, Knowledge Economies, and Authoritarian Governance in Russia: “Managing Global Competition: University Status.” *Palgrave Macmillan Cham*.

Ilg, M. (2025). The Republic of Dissent: A Constitutional Theory of Academic Freedom. *McGill Law Journal*, 70(2), 339–390.

Karp, A. (2023). Educational Autonomy and State Influence in Russian Universities: Shifting Power and Institutional Identity. *Higher Education Review*, 47(2), 112–138.

Kinzelbach, K., Spannagel, J., & Saliba, I. (2024). *Free Universities? Political Control and Academic Freedom in Authoritarian States*. Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) & V-Dem Institute.

Prakhov, I., & Sergienko, D. (2017). *Sources of Inequalities in Access to Higher Education: Evidence from Russia*. Higher School of Economics Research Paper.

Talanova, D. (2022). Kids with guns. Russia’s schoolchildren are being spoon-fed with “patriotism”: they march around wearing military uniform, hate Ukraine and NATO, and are literally taken on school trips to prisons. A research by Novaya Gazeta. Europe. *Novaya Gazeta. Europe*. 05.09.2022. URL: <https://novyagazeta.eu/articles/2022/09/05/kids-with-guns> (date of access: 14.04.2026).

Uzhvak, P, Nikolaeva, R., Savina, S. (2025). In 2025, Nearly 3,000 Russian Troops Who Had Fought in Ukraine, and Their Children, Were Admitted to Top Russian Universities Through Quotas. That’s One and a Half Times More Than Last Year / ed. by K. Bonch-Osmolovskaya. *Important Stories*. 05.08.2025. URL: <https://storage.googleapis.com/istories/en/stories/2025/08/05/uni-2025/index.html> (date of access: 11.04.2026).

Yatluk, L., Khukalenko, I. (2025). Fingers crossed behind the back: tactics of hidden resistance in Russian wartime academia. *Higher Education* 90, 1405–1426. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-024-01383-y>

Zaborskaya, K. (2026). “No Women”. How Academic Feminism Is Being Stifled in Russia“ [Nikakich zhenchin”. Kak v Rossii duschat akademicheskii feminism]. *Glasnaya*. 31.01.2026. URL: <https://glasnaya.media/2026/01/31/nikakih-zhenshhin/> (date of access: 11.04.2026).

Zaytseva, A. A. (2023). Vnutrirossiisaya akademicheskaiia mobilnost studencheskoi molodezhi: osobennosti institutziionalnoi regulatzii i samoregulatzii [Intra-Russian academic

mobility of student youth: Features of institutional regulation and self-regulation].
Nomothetika: Philosophy. Sociology. Law, 48(4), 683–692. (In Russian).