

## FICTION

# Neoliberal Fictions for the Audit Theater: University Educators and Administrators Navigating Accountability Regimes

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**SUMMARY** *This ethnographic story explores fiction-making in the context of audit cultures and accountability regimes. Based on a critical multi-sited ethnography conducted between 2011 and 2015 in the Russian Federation, this composite narrative draws on eighty interviews, casual conversations, and observations at several universities. It documents how educators at higher education institutions responded to audit reviews by constructing paper façades of reports and curriculum documents that obscured what they were doing or how their departments were run. When an inspection took place, the reviewers focused on paperwork to infer the quality of educational services. The fictions and paper façades created to convince the state that institutions were functioning well also sheltered the illicit practices and corruption that operated at various levels of the institutional hierarchy. In this audit theater, faculty participated in producing fakery, dupery, and swagger that protected them from immediate punishment, but they ended up feeling cheated by their own production. As educators navigated new reporting requirements, they also made sense of the state's own fakery, hypocrisy, and duplicity. New relationships among educators, institutions, and the state created by accountability regimes produced a politics of disposability to sustain state fictions of success. [audit culture, neoliberalism, accountability regimes, teacher education, Russian Federation]*

### “The Government Inspector is Coming”

“The Government Inspector is coming ...”

Thus begins Gogol's play *The Government Inspector* ([1836] 1985). A small town is engrossed in fear that a young man who everyone believes to be a Government Inspector might find out about the dirty dealings in which different representatives of state bureaucracy are engaged. Only after the young man collects a hefty sum of money and leaves the town do officials learn they were duped.

Thus also began the meeting chaired by the assistant dean for academic affairs on 29 March 2014 at Dobrolyubov State Pedagogical University—the only

higher education institution that prepared teachers in the large Siberian city. It was a monthly meeting for student leaders at the foreign language department. About twenty-five or thirty young people were dispersed throughout a large, freshly painted classroom. Two faculty members responsible for overseeing students' academic progress and overall professionalism were present as well. The assistant dean stood at the front, facing everyone in the room. Right next to her stood another administrator.

"Bad news and good news. The Government Inspector is coming."

She paused and looked around the room for effect. Everyone was quiet.

"That is why we need to get our house in order. You have to tell all the students that if they have any debts, they have to take care of them before May 6th. If they don't take care of these things, we will expel them in the afternoon of May 6th."

*Debts*, in this case, had nothing to do with finances. In Russian higher education, *debts* and *tails* are words used to describe incompletes—end-of-semester exams that students have not passed or courses for which students did not receive grades because they did not submit all the required work.

She continued, "Students should go and make arrangements with faculty about how they could take care of their incompletes. Get in touch with the faculty and arrange to take the exams so that everything from previous semesters is passed and taken care of. If any problems with the faculty arise, talk to the department head. Students will be met halfway. Student leaders, make sure that all the record books are in order—that everything is entered, everything is signed. If anyone asks to see those, we have to have them ready."

A twenty-minute meeting was mostly devoted to instructions: what should be done, what paperwork needed to be in order, what to do if one might be out of town when the inspection team arrives; all of it said with an air of ironic seriousness.

I sat in the back of the room with my notebook in front of me, trying to follow what was happening and occasionally getting distracted by the first signs of spring outside the window that ran the entire length of a classroom wall. In Dobrolyubov, where I was born, you never know if the first thaw is the beginning of spring or just a rude reminder that winter will not end till May. Just like the first signs of spring could be elusive and deceptive, so were some of the messages I heard. It was my third research visit to this university, but the first time I became aware of a fiction: the fiction of a student body progressing through their studies at this department.

During the weeks after this meeting, students' attempts (or lack thereof) to take care of their academic debts became the butt of professors' jokes. In the department office shared by the twenty people who taught English and linguistics courses, faculty discussed unruly students who did not do enough but continued to advance. Junior and senior professors gathered around a communal table standing in the corner of the room, sipped tea or coffee, had lunch together, and shared stories of what they had to deal with. There was the proverbial student who had incompletes "roll over" for eight semesters; he managed to reach his fifth year without having passed classes in his first and second year of studies. His case was extreme but revealed what was happening in the department: students were moving through their programs regardless of their progress. Now with the inspection coming, all students were pressured to take

care of several exams quickly, so that paperwork reviewed by the inspectors would be in order.

One day Valentina, Zinaida, and I left the department office to grab lunch at the university cafeteria. We were standing in the hallway as Valentina locked the office door. A student approached her. "Valentina Andreyevna, please, give me a grade."

Headed towards the stairs, Valentina spoke over her shoulder, "Come tomorrow."

"But I will get expelled," moaned the student.

Valentina shrugged her shoulders, "What can I do?"

As the three of us were going down the stairs, the student remained standing by the office door. I looked back at the girl, her face fixated on Valentina. I looked at Valentina, her eyes fixated on the next door ahead of us. As we passed through that door and it closed behind us, Zinaida erupted in an angry whisper, "Look at them! They woke up all of a sudden! It is the middle of the spring semester, and they are only now thinking about passing their winter exams! Would anything like this happen in America?"

I was often asked this question because of my affiliation with a US university. I started mumbling a response, but Zinaida interrupted.

"Everyone just thinks that the rules are not for them, that they will always find a crack to crawl through, that there will always be an exception for them. You tell them, 'You have to attend classes, you have to do your work, and you have to submit your assignments. You have to take exams and pass them during the exam session.' And they think it does not apply to them, that they can just show up, beg, and get a grade!" The rumors of the inspectors' visit revealed the conflicts festering in the department: faculty wanted students to follow the rules, and students constantly got away with breaking them.

When we returned to the department office, the conversation about students continued. Natalya—one of the youngest faculty members in the department—was shuffling papers at her desk. Valentina told her about the incident with the student. They chuckled. Natalya started telling those who were sitting around the table before they went back to teach, "I used to supervise first-year students. I wanted to create a student handbook that would include information on what to expect if they have not passed their exams by a certain date. You know, 'If you don't pass your winter exams by March, you will get expelled.' Something like this. I went to the dean's office to find out what the rules and the deadlines are. And they just would not tell me anything definite. First, it is one thing, then another. And then I figured, what's the point? The dean's office constantly changes those dates. Students have already caught on to it. They understand that no matter what they do, no one will expel them."

Anna joined in, "And if you try to do anything, *you* end up looking like a fool."

Rules like this existed before and were often strictly enforced. But the policy of optimization, introduced in Russia in the early 2010s, increased student-to-teacher ratios and changed budget formulas from need-based to per-student funding formulas. As a result, expelling students would lead to the loss of funding for the department. To keep the department afloat financially, all students were kept enrolled regardless of their performance. This practice allowed

students, often with administrators' support, to constantly break rules that faculty were trying to create or enforce.

Several days later, the conversations around the table returned to students' "debts" again. This time Zinaida complained that the dean's office started putting pressure on her that several students had not passed winter exams for her class yet.

Darya slowly explained, "The dean's office does not like it when students don't have grades for elective courses."

"But is it my fault? It does not require that much effort to pass my classes! If they want to take that class away from me and give it to someone else, I don't care." Zinaida tossed papers on her desk. She tried to stick to her principles, but the administration forced her to give in to students' whims and just let them pass without submitting any work.

Valentina, sipping on her tea, giggled. "Oh, don't worry, Zinaida. If need be, the dean's office will enter the grades without our help. Someone told me this morning that the dean's secretary was looking for me to sign some documents. I went to sign them, looked, and bam! My signature is already there. I know I did not sign them!"

Others in the office chimed in, "And your signature is hard to forge! How did they do it?"

No one had an answer.

### Constructing a Paper Façade

What seemed to be the point of the inspection? No one knew for sure.

Russia has had a long history of inspections: from the tsar era so cleverly captured by Gogol's tale, through Soviet rule, and to the post-Soviet transition. There were a lot of continuities across these practices, but the neoliberal turn brought its ruptures. In 2001 the Russian Government issued *the Concept of Educational Modernization*. It claimed that, in the nineties, the state left education, and education became irrelevant; in the new millennium, the state was ready to return. Many perceived this as a promise of greater investment; they did not realize that the state returned not as an investor but as an auditor. This new role manifested itself in the increased levels of paperwork. *Bumazhki*—a derogatory Russian term for papers or documents—were constantly brought up in conversations. Reports were everywhere: reports on teaching, scholarly productivity, service, individual professional development, extracurricular activities for students, participation in communities outside of the university, and so much more. An old Soviet saying was often evoked to describe this new state of being, "*Bez bumazhki, ty-kakashka*" (without a piece of paper, you are just a turd). Constant production of reports created a sense of being under perpetual surveillance, waiting to be called into the office and being reprimanded for your activities or fired for their insufficient number. Together with a couple of faculty, we joked that there must be a dark room somewhere on campus where men in black, wearing dark glasses, sit in front of computers, watch reports coming in, and decide who deserves to live and die.

That's what this inspection became. All that was repeated, circulated, and fretted over were papers. Instructions for the inspectors' arrival focused on

preparing curriculum plans, syllabi, students' records, professors' research plans, publication records, and ledgers of monthly workloads.

During the department faculty meeting held at the end of March, the department head gave faculty instructions on preparing all the course paperwork for the upcoming inspection. She told them to create three folders: one for the course description, one for the weekly plans, and one for the assessment materials. Her instructions caused confusion. Some faculty designed Moodle modules for their courses and felt that those should be sufficient to demonstrate what they were doing in their courses. No, that would not do because there was a strict format to follow. Others were startled that they had to submit weekly plans. Many of the faculty taught more than five or six different courses; some had to teach the same courses to students from several different cohorts. Designing detailed weekly plans for all of those was a gigantic undertaking that needed to be done fast.

A sixty-year-old faculty member who missed the meeting but was told about the task the next day joked, "They trained us well for this in the Soviet times. They tell us to write reports. We sit down and write them all in one evening. Somehow, we'll figure this out." Her comment pointed to a fiction often performed in this department, in other universities, and even in schools across Russia: syllabi and curriculum plans were created to satisfy the state's desire for control and measurable performance. In everyday life, instructors did not rely on these documents. Instead, they taught from textbooks, sources they collected over time, or new finds. Faculty members described the process of writing syllabi and curriculum plans as *ochkovtiratelstvo* (dupery), a Russian slang word for a lie created to present something in a more favorable light.

One week faculty were told to make three separate folders; the following week, they were told to put all texts into one file. Then it turned out that they had to make tables. During the first meeting, the faculty were told it was enough to create one syllabus per course. Then it was important to create separate syllabi for the same course taught to different majors. First, faculty had to submit the plans for all the courses taught or currently offered to students. Then it turned out that the same had to be done for all courses that appeared in the curriculum plan, even those that had never been taught or had no students enrolled. Instructions changed weekly, even daily.

The department printers and copiers ran out of paper. Then they ran out of ink. When supplies were replenished, everyone received instructions that only documents pertinent to the inspection would be printed.

In early April, a decree with a list of tasks and deadlines, accompanied by the university president's signature and the university stamp, appeared on the side of the wardrobe that served as the announcement board in the department office. Faculty stopped by that decree, complained about it, asked questions about the still unclear parts, and then walked off to teach. I once joined them out of curiosity.

"When should we submit it?"

"The decree says 10 April."

"If we get it done for them by the 29th, they will have to pat us on the back."

Anna passed us, staring at that paper on the way to her desk. "I just wrote some crap. What is this? Fakery. Why bother then?"

Darya pleaded with her, "Can I make changes if anything comes up?"

"You can do whatever you want. I never look at these papers anyway," responded Anna settling down at her side of the table and getting a cup of tea.

Darya rolled her eyes. Even though she was on the curriculum council, she was younger than Anna and less established in the department. She was the link between the faculty and the administration but did not have the power to enforce any rules or standards. Darya tried to say that other faculty might find the course description or the syllabus useful if they teach this course later, but Anna responded that no one looked at those papers anyway. It was hard to disagree with her. When Valentina—a young faculty member who graduated from this university only a couple of years prior—was asked to teach a new course, instructions on which topics to cover and when came from the department head rather than any syllabi or curriculum guides.

But there was more. During the second faculty meeting at the end of April, faculty were told that everyone had to teach strictly based on the schedules: no absences, no rearrangements, and no changes. These instructions revealed what few ever discussed openly. Classes often appeared to be in a state of disarray: some people changed the times when classes were taught for the sake of convenience without making changes in the official schedule; sometimes entire groups of students did not show up; sometimes, faculty missed classes. Anticipation of the inspection instilled fear: when inspectors were supposed to be on campus, everyone had to be on their best behavior. Yet another fiction produced to appease the state.

### **Fictions of Reform**

Eventually, someone in the department heard from someone else at the university that inspectors would check the implementation of standards, based on new educational laws issued after Russia joined the Bologna Process. Somewhat late in the game, it turned out that all the paperwork that faculty members were creating was supposed to reflect the Bologna Process, the standardization of higher education taking place in Europe. Theoretically, that meant that students were supposed to have individual study plans and take elective courses; courses had to reflect competence-based approaches and incorporate learning outcomes. However, none of this was clear before, during, or after the inspection. With the massive undertaking of constructing paper façades of curriculum plans, syllabi, and assessment documents, faculty members were left largely in the dark about the fictions that administrators created to show that they implemented reforms based on Bologna principles.

Once, as we all sat around the department lunch table waiting and talking, Liliya started laughing. Because of the inspection, she learned that preservice teachers had sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics in their curriculum plans.

"I have been teaching these courses to linguistics majors but had no idea that preservice teachers were taking them, too."

"Do they?" someone at the table turned to her.

"It is an elective course for them." She giggled coquettishly, covering her mouth with a piece of paper.

They all laughed. An elective course was a misnomer. Even though the introduction of the Bologna Process stipulated students' ability to create individual study plans and to choose classes that matched their interests, this practice was not introduced in most Russian universities. In the context where schedules were designed by staff in the dean's office with paper and pencil and then displayed on the walls of department halls, this was not just a matter of refusing to adhere to central mandates. It was impossible to introduce individual study plans or offer elective courses because there was no technological infrastructure to support this practice. Students didn't choose any of their courses, and, as the joke went, their classes were "elected" based on "the dean's office choice." Only because of this inspection, the faculty learned that new elective courses—with syllabi, weekly plans, and assessments—had to be designed. They had to be put together as if they were a part of the official curriculum: ghost classes that were never taught and never had any students enrolled in them.

Incongruences between the Bologna Process principles and practices in the department surfaced in other contexts. Two weeks before the inspection, I saw Valentina tinkering on the computer. "What are you up to?" I asked.

"Trying to figure out what knowledge, skills, and abilities students develop in my course."

I paused and looked at her in slight disbelief. The new standards, for which all the programs were being revised were supposed to be competence-based. There was much debate about the differences between competencies and Russian "traditional" focus on knowledge, skills, and abilities. The two approaches were seen as incompatible, and the traditional focus was supposed to be discarded. Valentina received instructions to put the knowledge, skills, and abilities back into her syllabus because university administrators decided that competencies were too vague. Technically, this went against Bologna tenets, but since it was unclear what they meant or how they would work at a Russian university, the fiction of reform had to be constructed with whatever made sense.

### **The Moment of (Non-)Encounter**

On Wednesday, 12 May, Darya, as a member of the curriculum council at the department, shared with others, "They say that the inspection team from the Russian Quality Assurance Committee has already arrived in town. They will be here for a month. There are twenty people, and five of them are going to be at our university. They will be checking all the universities in town."

"Why are they starting with us?"

There was no response. In the fall of 2012, the Ministry of Education conducted its first monitoring of effectiveness. Afterward, it closed almost half of Russia's pedagogical universities on the premise that they had failed to demonstrate effectiveness. Since then, there had been much fearful talk about the university's possible closure. Natalya had shared with me that there were rumors that only one teacher education university out of five currently operating in Siberia would be left. "There was talk of creating one base center for teacher preparation where all these people would have to go for training," she had explained to me. Suspicions about connections between the inspection and the closures of pedagogical universities ruminated for a while.

"What are they going to do? Walk around?"

"No, they will just be sitting in one room. And we will be running in and bringing papers to them. Didn't you just see the department head running with a box of papers?"

Anna opened her eyes wide, "Are they going to read that crap?"

Darya raised her voice, "Yes! Can you imagine that? That's why I had to fix so much in what you wrote!" She gave a polite smile, barely hiding her anger.

Valentina jumped in, "But what will happen if they don't like it?"

Darya sat back in her chair, "Maybe they will finally close us? Then we'll go and get normal jobs, with real salaries."

Natalya said with a faint smile, "I have an idea. If they shut down this place, let's just open our own university. Look, we all know how to teach. After all of this, we all know how to design curriculum plans! We have a ton of syllabi now."

Most of them started laughing. "Oh, we have enough syllabi to last us a lifetime!"

Valentina persisted, "No, but seriously. Will they close us?"

Anna, the oldest in this group and one of the senior faculty at the department, waved her hand dismissively, "They'll just cross out a few things here and there, tell us what changes they want to see. That's it. I can't imagine that they would close us down for this. Oh, the administration will just serve a nice meal for the inspectors. They will all have a nice time. And then they will leave. And everything will be fine. We will go on living as usual."

Anxiety about the inspection seeped into classroom teaching as well. On Thursday, I observed a lecture on pedagogy in the same classroom where I first heard the announcement about the inspection. An elderly professor was telling students about alternative pedagogical approaches: the Waldorf school and Amonashvili's humanistic pedagogy. After she finished showing a video about those approaches, she turned to the room full of first-year students, "We have an inspection here. They are going to evaluate us based on some formal criteria. But is it right to draw conclusions about education based on some papers?"

After the lecture, I slowly walked along the long hallway dotted with closed doors to the department office. It seemed as if even students were speaking in hushed voices. All faculty were ordered to be on campus between noon and three p.m., in case there were any problems with the documents. Faculty who did not have classes on that day grumbled about having to come in, rearranging their tutoring sessions, or other commitments they had at another job. And when they arrived, there were only ten desks and fifteen chairs for twenty people.

When I walked into the office, I saw Darya sitting at the table drinking coffee, looking slightly disheveled. "We spent the night here," she said slowly.

As she was preparing to tell me more, other faculty members started coming in. Everyone had a long break at the same time, and most people came back to the office to eat their lunch and catch up on gossip. On this particular day, the lunch table felt more crowded than ever before.

"They looked at the papers from the Physical Education department. They barely had anything. The inspectors told them they would just close them down. They would close the entire department unless all the papers are in order by

the next day. So, the university administration called us all in at nine p.m. to go through the paperwork with a fine comb and fix any errors we could find. My husband and I were at a friend's house, having dinner. And I got this call that I had to come in. My husband just called me crazy. I did not leave campus until five in the morning. Went to my parents' home, got two hours of sleep, woke up at seven, and came back here."

"What else is happening?"

"Nothing much. They called for our papers, and the department head ran to turn them in. We were printing the last pages as she was getting ready to go."

As faculty members sat down around the table to have their lunch, Darya shared more. "You know, last night when we were all called in, there were some department heads—really old professors, famous ones—who had to come in and sit with us and go through all these papers. And they said that, throughout all of their careers, they had never seen anything like this. Such a theater of the absurd! I have this feeling that we are all participants in a theater of the absurd! I can accept being reprimanded if my students don't know my subject. I can understand that. But to reprimand me for a missing piece of paper or some grading rubric? And they want to shut down the entire program for that? Such a theater of the absurd."

Everyone sat in the department office, waiting. Some people were trying to catch up on work, take care of other paperwork, or check students' homework. From time to time, we heard the sound of high heels clacking on the concrete floors of the hallway, stopped what we were doing to see if it was the department head, and then went back to our tasks.

No one saw the inspectors: not the day before, not the day when they collected the documents from all the departments, not during the final day of their visit when they stated the inspection verdict. Over tea, coffee, and chatter, the day slipped away. Around two thirty, most people started packing up to leave. No one got called in. No one was told what was happening.

On Friday, there was a meeting of the administration where the results were to be announced. After the meeting, we heard from the department head that everything seemed to be all right.

I later asked Darya, "Why did you call it the theater of the absurd?" She looked defiantly at me, "Because I always have one question: what do they expect from me? I sincerely believe that I should provide quality education, and my students should have quality knowledge. And that's why when it comes down to papers, I don't understand why a course description is not enough. If the syllabus has a typo, not eight but five for the semester when the course is offered, I don't understand what the problem is about. But when they only look at papers and papers become the cornerstone of everything, and not specific students and their knowledge, then that drives me ..." I assumed she was going to say "drives me insane," but then she stopped and said directly what was maddening to her: "I work for an educational establishment, I teach. I would hope that my value as a teacher is not in my ability to write syllabi or create curriculum plans quickly but to provide quality instruction to my students in the courses I teach. What I see happening is a shift in values. This formalization is creating a shift in values where papers are more important than what we actually do."

## **The Aftermath**

Two or three weeks after the inspectors' visit, Darya and I were sitting at the table chatting about classes.

Liliya ran in, "There is a criminal case against the university!"

"What?"

"The inspection! They announced it on the news. My dad told me in the morning. I thought he misunderstood something. But I came to class, and students kept asking me, 'Are they going to close the university down?'"

"Which news channel showed it?"

Darya was incredulous, "How come? There did not seem to be any reprimands for us. There were some errors; some of them were quite serious. But we were given a month to fix them."

"They said something about degrees and programs; there was some kind of a mismatch. Maybe they will close the university down?"

Valentina ran in. Liliya turned to her, "Have you heard that there is a criminal case against the university?"

"Yes. All the students are talking about it."

She was scrolling through her phone, trying to find more information. Finally, still looking at her phone, she said, "It is true. It says it right here."

Liliya sighed, "What I don't understand is why we have to learn about it this way. Why didn't anyone tell us about it?"

The department head rushed into the office. "No one is closing the university! There are two court cases against it, but no one is closing it. And they are not criminal cases. They are administrative cases." She tried to sound reassuring. Faculty wanted to know more, but she threw a glance at me—an outsider—and told them that they could talk about it later.

Eventually, we learned that several people had been fired from the university, and a number of departments were under a threat of being merged or eliminated. The quality assurance agency that carried out the inspection displayed on its website what errors were discovered: "violations of license requirements; violations of admitting students; violations in providing paid services; violations in issuing diplomas; violations in students' thesis requirements; violations in educational standards requirements." Only the latter had relevance for the work in which faculty members invested so much time. Still, with no explanation of what those violations might have been and which departments were involved, there was little anyone could learn from this experience.

There was no news after that. Everyone went on working, teaching, and complaining as they always did. Only the "theater of the absurd" began to appear more often in department chats. Conversations about finding another job also became more frequent among junior faculty. For the time being, the fictions created for the inspection appeared to have worked.

But some faculty seemed betrayed by the inspectors' visit. They were hoping that some problems that had been festering in the department would be addressed through this inspection. Once, as we were chatting about the curriculum plan, Anna complained to me, "I used to teach the theory of translation during the fourth year. By that time, students would have had all other practical and theoretical courses. Now I have to teach this class during their

second year. I tell them *connotation* and *denotation*, and they just stare at me. I have to go back to the basics. Then there is no time left for any theory. We have complained about this curriculum plan so many times. We asked the assistant dean to change it. But she would not listen to us. So, these inspectors came. What were they checking? The courses need to be rearranged in the curriculum plan. But they just flipped through the papers and did not even look. Why am I telling you all this? It all should be directed up there. But can one ever get across to them? This is just the cry of the soul." As she was talking, she pointed to the ceiling, a common gesture to refer to the educational hierarchy with the Ministry of Education at the top.

But there were also bigger issues, unspeakable truths that lay hidden beneath the rubble of everyday life. Weeks before the arrival of the inspectors, the department head told Liliya that she would not be allowed to attend an international conference. "If you don't let me go, I will talk to the inspectors when they come for the review," Liliya threatened in response. The department head asked why. "They want to know how we are doing. Well, I would be happy to tell them." The threat had little effect because the struggles over permissions and even her ability to stay on in the department continued for several more weeks. Her comment, however, pointed to a hope that some faculty had for the inspection: that inspectors would look into the administrators' illicit practices and put a stop to the *bespredel* (lawlessness) that was happening around them.

I learned through the department grapevine that, several years prior, Anna went to the police with evidence that the dean used her position to engage in money laundering. At that time, nothing came out of it because the dean settled the case with the police. Most suspected that a large bribe was involved, but no one could prove it. Dirty dealings at the department continued. The dean organized annual professional development courses for school teachers that the department faculty taught. Even though over a hundred people paid a significant amount of money for the courses, only some faculty received a pittance for specific masterclasses or workshops. Everyone suspected the money was siphoned off elsewhere. Students' financial aid distributed by the dean's office was several times lower at this department than at other departments. The discrepancy was odd because amounts were determined centrally and should not have varied between different departments. Many wondered how such differences were possible, but no one could ever bring this up for a public discussion. Most faculty stopped receiving bonuses that the previous department head had given to everyone who showed evidence that they had done extra work. At about the same time, the new department head bragged about buying an expensive fur coat, then a new apartment. The faculty pretended that they did not have the slightest idea where the money for these extravagant purchases was coming from.

Administrative positions were distributed among the dean's "own" people—very loyal but not particularly fit for the job. The head of the Asian languages department knew no Asian languages and never even attempted to study them; her lack of effort and interest became the butt of students' and faculty members' jokes. The head of the Germanic department knew no foreign languages at all; her training was in Slavic philology. One of the assistant deans had no advanced degree. The assistant dean for academic affairs did not know

how to develop curriculum plans. Granted, before 2010 those were developed by the Ministry and sent to universities for implementation. Even though there were plenty of opportunities for her to learn how to address this change, she did not seem particularly interested in pursuing them.

There were other issues, too. With a salary of three million Russian rubles a year (about one hundred thousand US dollars), the university president was listed as one of the top-paid presidents in the country. The statistic was surprising, given the low status of the institution as a teacher education university tucked away in a remote corner of Siberia. In contrast, junior faculty received around one hundred thousand rubles (about three thousand US dollars) and senior faculty about two hundred and forty thousand (about seven and a half thousand US dollars) a year. When faculty asked for salary increases, they were told the university had no money. Yet everyone was aware that the university won a large government grant for its strategic development plan. People wondered where the money went.

When external reviewers came in, there was a glimmer of hope: if only they dug deep enough, if only they conducted a full financial audit, if only they came in to talk to faculty members and students, there would be hope of change. An inspectorate team from the Soviet Ministry of Education in the 1950s or 1960s, judging by archival documents and personal stories of veteran educators, would have come around asking people questions about their work environment and teaching experiences. Or, faculty members could write letters to the Ministry asking them to address problems. There was no guarantee they would have been heeded, but there was always a chance. That chance was no longer present during this inspection.

### **“A Fish Rots from the Head Down”**

The inspection and its audit theater evoked many historical comparisons. Everyone knew that the Soviet Union was infamous for fiction-making at every level of state hierarchy, but neo-liberalization introduced in Russia in the early 2000s superseded even the Soviet level of pretense. Konstantin Mikhailovich—a former assistant to the Minister of Education—compared the Soviet times with the neoliberal present. “Swagger was always there,” he told me. “Potemkin villages were put up. It did happen. But at the same time, the state invested in education. Education was supported. It was of high quality. And now? They introduce reforms into the law on preschool, and it turns out that parents will now have to pay for it. They reform nonformal education, and it turns out that there will be no free nonformal education left. This is what is disgusting—when, under nice words, they hide hideous actions; when under demagoguery and declaration, there are horrible lies.”

One of the state’s lies that became visible during the inspection was related to salaries. Faculty often repeated a Soviet-era joke: “The state pretends to pay us, and we pretend to work.” In 2012, newspapers announced that the salaries of those who worked in higher education would be significantly increased to improve their financial situation and their status in society. After much fanfare, salaries were increased by less than one percent. Most people did not even notice the change when it finally happened. In the summer of 2013, there was

another official announcement that higher education employees would receive salary increases. September of 2013 was filled with hopeful anticipation while faculty members waited for their salaries to be deposited into their bank accounts. In October, that hopefulness disappeared. Eventually, it became clear that salary increases occurred for most people only on paper. The low base pay and bonus supplements that faculty used to receive were now combined into base pay. That created a fiction that salaries were increased: on paper, base pay increased almost two-fold. But in reality, it was the same money that most faculty were already receiving, some of the lowest salaries in the social sector of the economy.

Natalya explained to me how she made sense of what was happening, "This Kafkaesque surrealism is on levels of the society and the state. We pretend that we do what they want from us, and they pretend that we have what they want. I usually use this phrase—a *fakery mechanism*—when higher levels of leadership give lower levels tasks that are impossible to complete. So, those who occupy lower levels face a dilemma, they either refuse to complete the task and get fired, or they can fake that they have done this task, and then that goes up each level. The university president receives a task that they need to come up with a report, he realizes that these data have never been collected, he lowers the task down to the next level. 'Get these data.' They scratch their heads, get some numbers from somewhere, insert them, and give the president a report. Because in reality, no one needed that report in the first place."

I saw this "Kafkaesque surrealism" late one Friday afternoon. I stepped into the department office and saw the department head sitting at her desk, deep in thought. Most faculty tried to leave work early at the end of the week, so she was all alone. The inspection made me acutely aware of how strategically that desk was positioned in the department office: in the corner from which all the other desks were clearly visible. Sitting at her desk motionless, she held a piece of paper with one hand and a pen with the other. When she heard me, she looked up from the paper. "See, I got another report to write. They keep asking us how much money we earned from external grants. What am I supposed to tell them? The only agency that funded educational research was the World Bank. We worked on their projects, and the university administrators kept all the money. But at least there was something we could report. The World Bank does not do any more projects. The government does not fund educational research. What am I supposed to put down?"

I shrugged my shoulders. I was genuinely lost for words.

She went on, "What contributions has our department made to the developments in nanotechnology, space exploration, environmental protection, and fight against terrorism? What am I going to put down? We teach foreign languages here. If I just put zeroes, they will start cutting faculty lines because we are not contributing to state priorities. What am I supposed to say?"

Worries about job losses became prophetic. After the inspection, discussions of optimization became more frequent. While in Russian, *optimization* sounds like a promise of improvement, the reality of these reforms was that professors were fired or laid off to increase the faculty-student ratio from one-to-seven to one-to-twelve. Faculty of retirement age or those who spoke up against corruption were asked to leave "to optimize" the ratios. When I returned to Dobrolyubov in the

fall of 2015, I met Darya in an off-campus café on a rainy afternoon. She shared how optimization affected everyone in the department. "We used to have a peaceful life. This work brings no income. There is nothing to lose. We can barely find enough people, and all of a sudden, they talk about downsizing. And it was as if the Grim Reaper visited the older generation. Those of retirement age. Our golden foundation. We have natural selection as is. Those who stay live for this job. We don't have anyone random working here. We are all very different, but this is what we live for. This job is a lifestyle. And they took our mentors and humiliated them. It was so unethical. They told them to write letters that they wanted to quit voluntarily. People lost retirement. It was such a shock." She paused, and then added, "It was painful. Very painful."

On my way back to the department, trying not to step into puddles, I crossed the yard in front of the gray brick university building. Built in the late sixties, it always looked gloomy and unwelcoming to me. Past the security checkpoint stood a newsstand lined with the freshly printed issues of a glossy university magazine. The front-page story was titled "DSPU has a lot to celebrate." Underneath the picture of the smiling university president ran the text, "Optimization was a priority activity during the last academic year. We eliminated, merged, and restructured many departments. More than one hundred professors and one hundred and three support personnel positions disappeared from the schedule. We carried out difficult work, but you have to remember that this requirement is an element of state policies." As I flipped through the rest of the magazine, I saw a fiction of success: students' happy smiles, thoughtful looks on administrators' faces as they participated in seminars on reform, and portraits of governors and ministers accompanied by their perspectives on improving the quality of university education. The loss of over two hundred positions in a university that employed a little more than a thousand faculty members was quite an accomplishment to celebrate.

After all the storms died down, life in the department went back to normal: off-and-on report writing, classes, and chats over tea around the department's communal table. The binders and boxes of papers prepared for the inspection collected dust in a large pile by the department head's desk. Some desks were no longer shared by two faculty members because of the downsizing. Any time we talked about fakery and dupery, Anna would take a sip of tea and slowly say, "What can I say? A fish rots from the head down."

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