

The OD-Group vs the Moscow State University: Sociology Students and the Sociology Faculty

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A paper presented at the Meeting & Symposium: “Defending the University: Academic Freedom in Central and Eastern Europe” (Vilnius, June 20-21, 2008) organised by the Scholars at Risk Network and the European Humanities University

Oral presentation / June 21, 2008

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[Slide 1] My presentation is inspired by the case studies included in the background materials. I should apologise for not referring to any particular legislation acts. Like so many Russians I believe that the formal regulations are sometimes less important than the routine practices which frequently have little in common with the law.

My today's story will be about the conflict between some sociology students from the Moscow State University and the dean of the department of Sociology. For the sake of brevity, the information will be incomplete but I've tried my best not to miss anything important.

The story begins **[Slide 2]** with a bunch of newspaper reports of a scandal at the Moscow State University campus at the end of February 2007.

The newspapers reported some students were caught during a protest action. The guards working for a private security company hired to guard the building of the department of Sociology – which is huge, by the way, because it houses about 1,500 students – the guards brought the students to a local Police Station, where they were held for an hour or two without any charges and quietly released.

The students protested **[Slide 3]** against an overpriced café located within the premises of the Sociology department. The prices were high, indeed. For instance, a cup of tea costed about 3 US Dollars and a salad, about 8.

The prices, however were not the only concern. The students claimed that the café was owned by nobody else **[Slide 4]** but the son of the dean of the Sociology department. One should be rather naive to not figure it out that the final target of the action was **[Slide 5]** the Dean himself.

It took hours to realise that the students who had taken part in the action did not belong to the Department of Sociology and some of them even to the Moscow State University. They were noticed before in diverse protesting actions and, indeed, had a record of conflicts with local police and a scheme of alerting the journalists.

This time, they acted on behalf of or, rather, formed a radical wing of a mysterious organization, **[Slide 6]** the so-called OD-Group. There was a number of Speculations as to what OD Stands for. A reliable source has told me that originally it was “Order of Dumbledore” named after a fictional character of the Harry Potter series. The less radical wing of the OD-Group was formed by former members of a private seminar run by a young Moscow sociologist who is a keen adept of a French

sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. As a result, they were trying to exercise secretly the art of empirical research and read the forbidden books by Bourdieu just like the members of the fictional “Order of Phoenix” studied the practical defence magic spells.

The OD-Group has put together a website where they posted their criticisms on the situation in the Sociology department.

They said that

- The dean had created a dictatorship regime in the Department.
- The quality of teaching was low.
- The sociology at the Moscow State was very backward and, in fact, was replaced by some sort of ideology.

I must say (as a digression) that the dean calls his system of beliefs an “orthodox sociology”. He believes that sociology is a western liberal invention which must be counterbalanced by an approach which is more healthy, better tailored for Russian national spirit, and based on the values of the Russian Orthodox church.

- They said further that the dean endorses nationalistic and anti-Semitic feelings distributing a brochure which builds its argument on the data borrowed from the so-called *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (a notorious historical hoax based on the idea of a worldwide judeo-masonic plot).
- Finally, the dean was accused of covering a highly corrupted entry examination system.

Obviously this was simply a moment when the smouldering conflict surfaced at last in a form of a student protest. The roots, however, lay deeper, and we have to undertake another small digression to unearth them.

The crisis of the February 2007 was preceded by another scandal in October 2006.

In October 2006, the dean was re-elected for another term (and he was already for 15 years in charge) beating two other competitors, who severely criticised the regime within the department. Both of them lost their jobs with the Moscow State University soon afterwards.

A reasonable question arises: How come that such an odd person could be nearly unanimously re-elected for another term?

[Slide 7] Because he is elected by the so-called Academic Council. The academic council unites selected members of the faculty **[Slide 8]**, staff, and some students. Besides of that some administrators are ex officio members.

The root of loyalty of the Academic Council lies in a very plain fact: There is no such thing as tenure. The temporary contracts last from one to three years. After this term every faculty member has to be re-elected by the same Academic Council.

The whole procedure of the re-evaluation is paradoxically both bureaucratic and highly informal. One must collect a pile of papers but there are no clear formal criteria for re-election, so one's contract may be either turned into a virtual tenure or terminated without any trouble. The rest you can easily imagine.

We go back to the main line of the argument. The students decided that they should not stay underground: they complained **[Slide 9]** to the rector of the Moscow State, and sent letters to the leading Russian sociologists **[Slide 10]** and to the world scholarly community **[Slide 11]**.

The rector said that he would not interfere because this would be against the Academic autonomy. However he organised a commission **[Slide 12]** consisting of the faculty from the other departments which was immediately set into operation.

The first thing they did, they closed the overpriced café **[Slide 13]** and started a rigorous investigation of the students complaints.

Meanwhile, the sociological community reacted with letters of support **[Slide 14]**. The sociologists expressed their concerns and asked the rector to take the appropriate measures to investigate the situation.

The dean received his share of encouragement too **[Slide 15]**. However it was far less spectacular than the one received by the students. Some provincial sociologists and loyal students sent their letters to support him, while the orthodox radical organisations accused the students of anti-religious sentiments and unpatriotic behaviour. The dean added to the list the accusations of an attempt at an “orange revolution” and said that the students were paid for what they did (which is, by the way, not true).

Meanwhile, the rector's commission composed a report **[Slide 16]**, saying that some of the students' complaints had a real ground.

The practical outcome however was not impressive. The only thing the rector could do was to limit the number of students who are accepted on the paid basis. In Russia, there are two kinds of students: the ones study free of charge, the others pay for their education. The students compete for the free of charge positions and then those who fail the exam have a second chance applying for the paid positions. The number of paid positions for the next year was cut from 223 to 50.

The quality of education which has gradually becoming the prime concern for the OD-Group campaign was however not easy to catch.

So, the students appealed to the so-called Public Chamber of Russian Federation **[Slide 17]**, which is a consultative institution created in 2005 to analyse draft legislation and monitor the activities of parliament, government, and other governing bodies.

The Public Chamber organised its own commission **[Slide 18]** composed of some leading Russian Sociologists from different Universities. Their task was to evaluate the quality of education at the Moscow State University Department of Sociology.

The commission produced its report **[Slide 19]**.

They charged the dean with plagiarism because they had found huge portions of the text copied without any references to the source into his numerous textbooks. However, when coming to other aspects of the education quality problem, the results were not impressive again **[Slide 20]**.

The question is why? Because they measured the quality of the curriculum against existing standard. And the national body setting the educational standards, the so-called Methodical Commission in Sociology is composed to a large extent of the Sociology faculty of the Moscow State University

[Slide 21] and is controlled, in fact, by the same dean. One must be really insane to create a standard which does not fit him or her in such a situation.

[Slide 22] Then there were the vacations and the Empire stroke back **[Slide 23]**. Some students graduated, some others failed the exams and were expelled, the remaining few continue their education at the Moscow State. End of story for now.

The question is: who are the bad guys threatening the Academic Autonomy and / or Academic Freedom?

The authorities? Represented by a local police station **[Slide 24]**? I'm not sure. All they did, they released the rebellious students.

It is more likely that the bad guys are somewhere here **[Slide 25]**. The scholars themselves fighting and torturing each other.

I assume the whole situation raises a number of questions about the academic culture in Russia and I can not predict all of them but an obvious question which pops up first, at least to my mind, is: How come that a person who is proven to be a plagiarist remains a dean of the (formally) leading department of Sociology in the country?

There is a number of hypotheses explaining different aspects of the situation but I will share only the main one **[Slide 26]**. There is no nationwide community of sociologists who share the same set of basic values. There is no unified reputation market. There are several contributing factors: Lack of nationwide professional association, journals (except for very local ones), peer-review of the manuscripts submitted to them, etc., etc. In such a situation an unchecked autonomy is at risk of turning into an autocracy. It seems that the Russian Academics should first be saved from themselves.

Thank you.

Disclaimer

This disclaimer was not a part of the actual oral presentation. However I should add it to make myself clear. My personal involvement in this story was limited. Besides of my positions of a Research fellow at the Laboratory of Sociology of Science and Education and a *Docent* (~ Assistant Professor) at the Department of Human Sciences of the Higher School of Economics, I'm working as a columnist for an on-line newspaper *Polit.ru*. Our newspaper covered the conflict extensively from the very first day, and my knowledge of the situation is based on interviews, observations, and analysis of published materials (including Web-logs, like *Livejournal.com*, which was an important part of the information campaign).

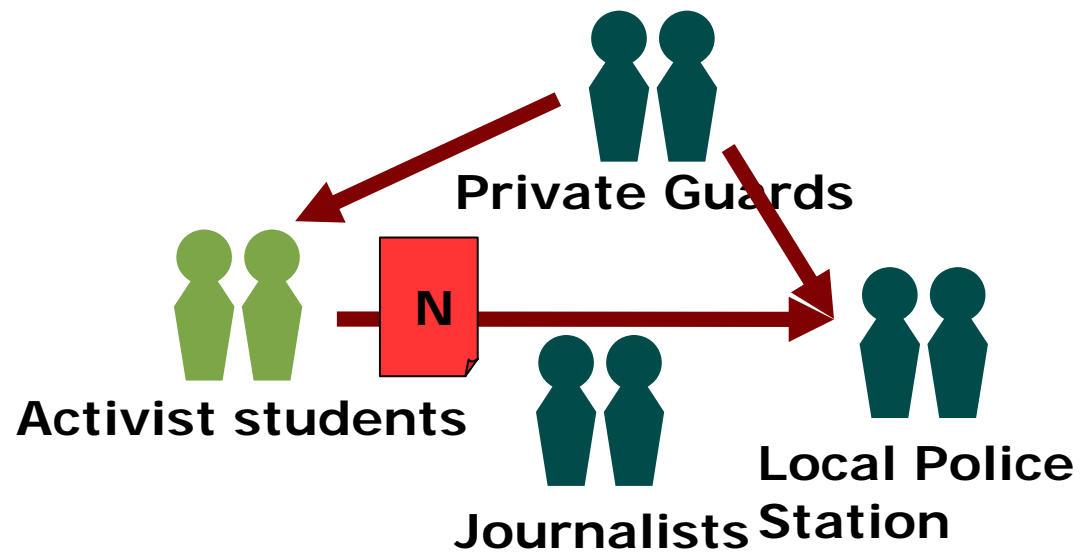
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Activist students



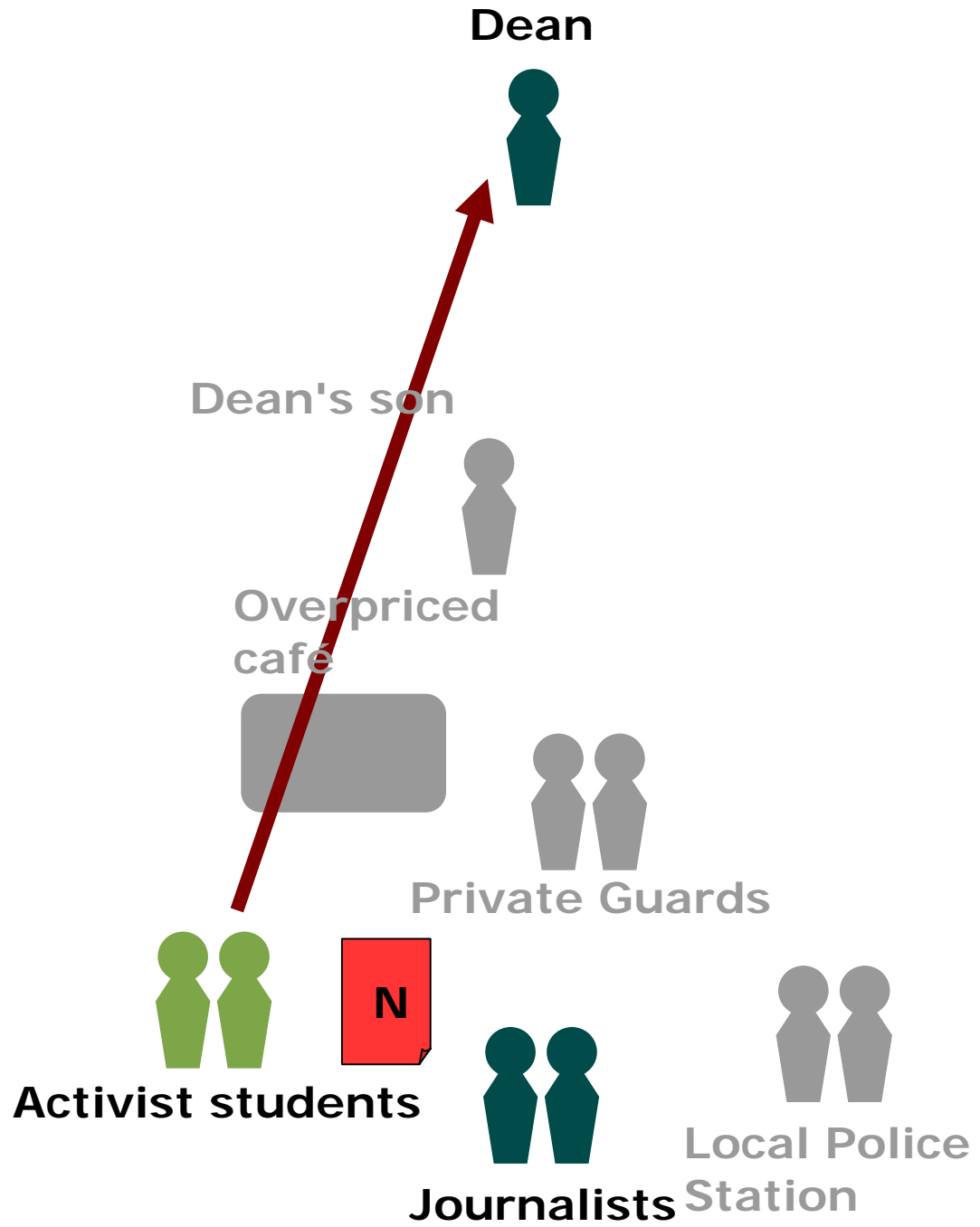
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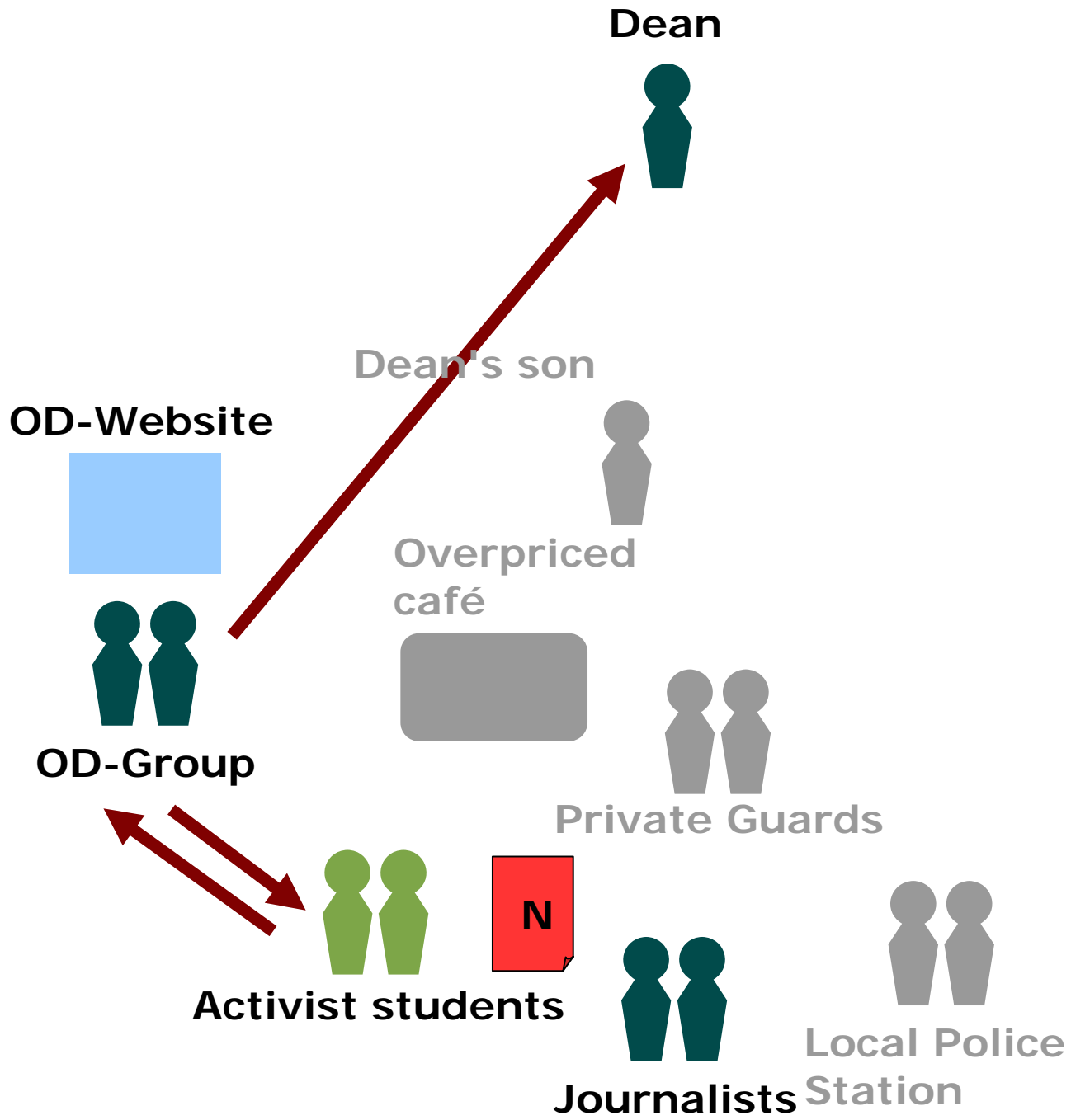


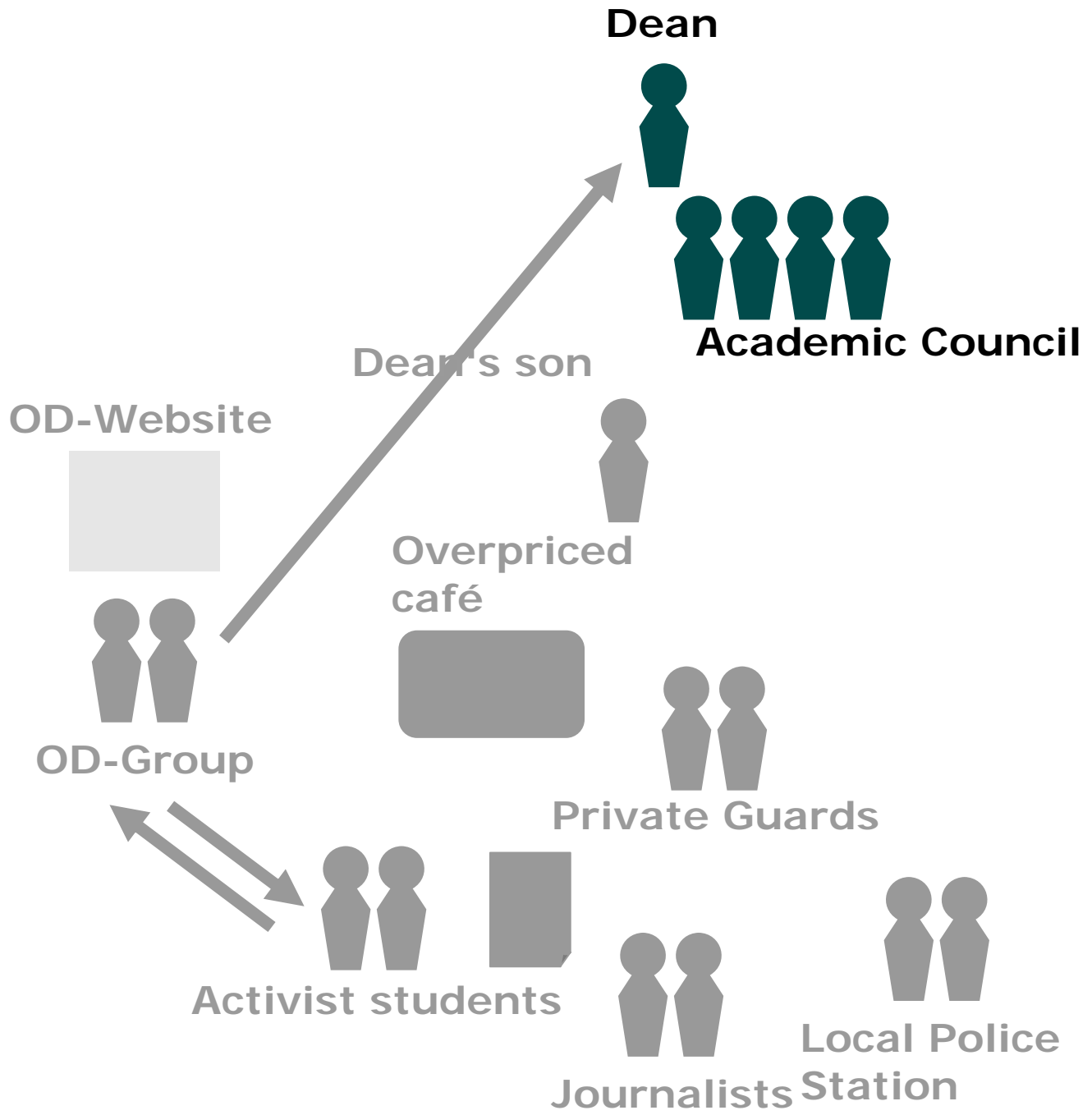
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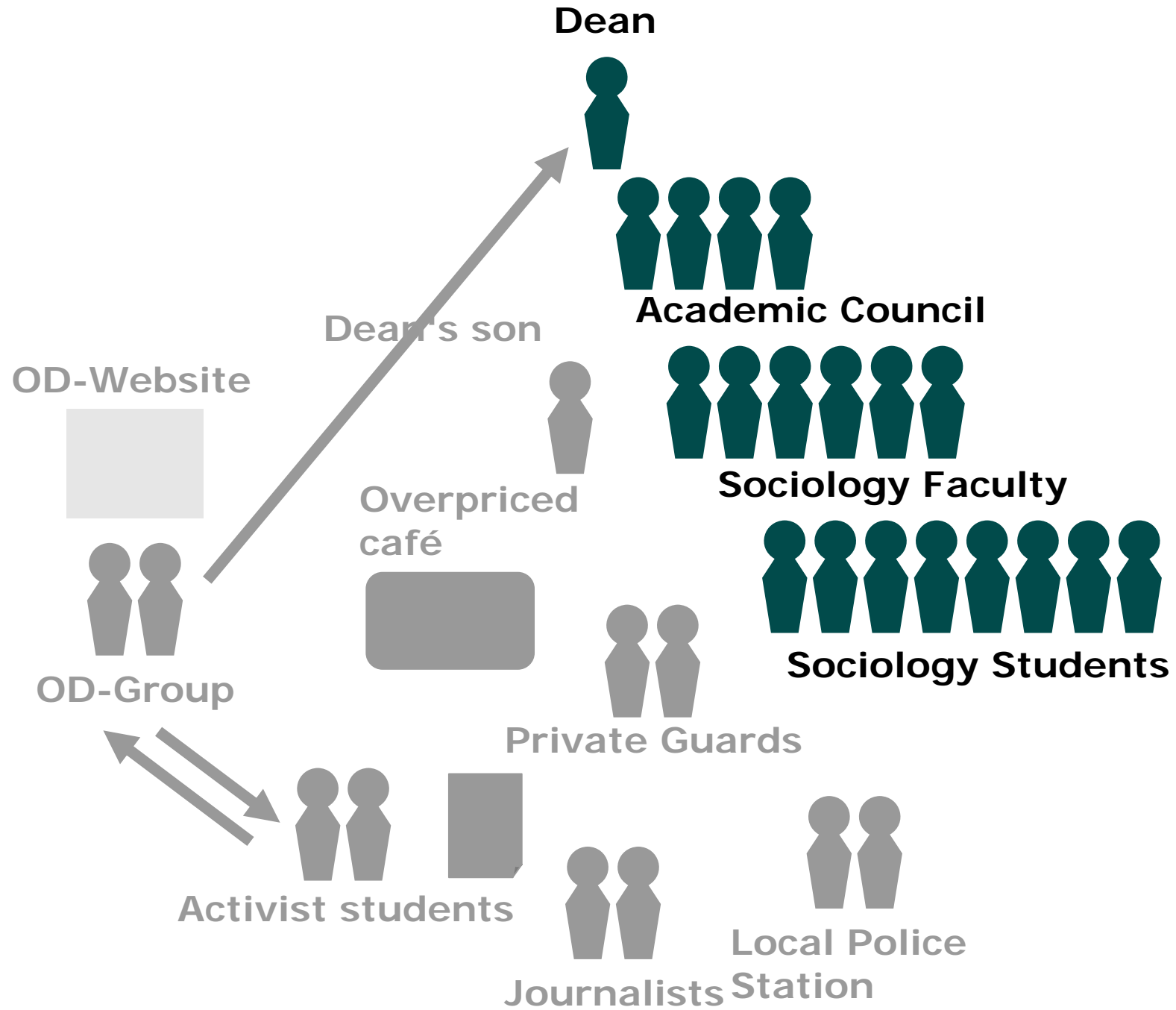
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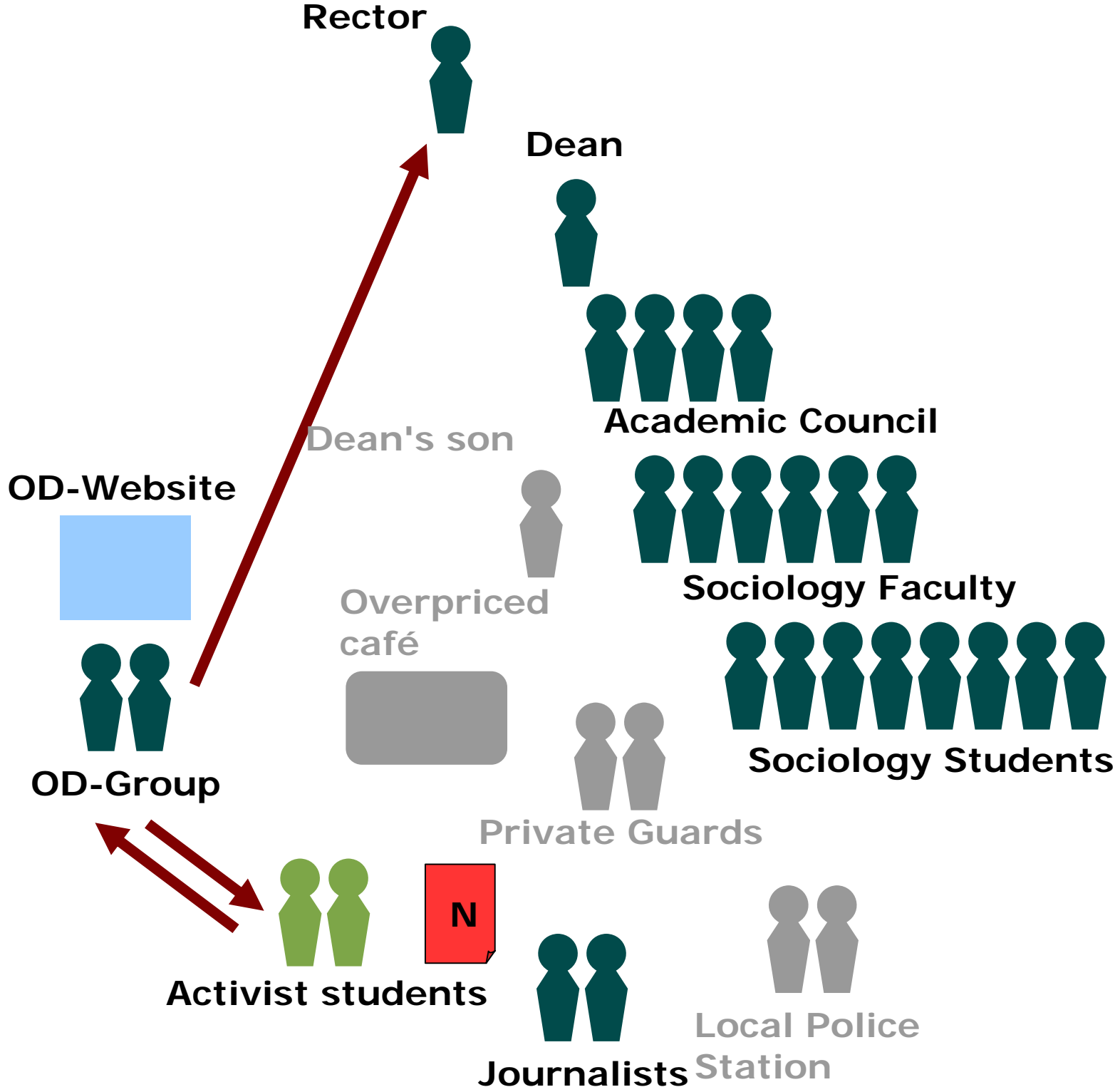


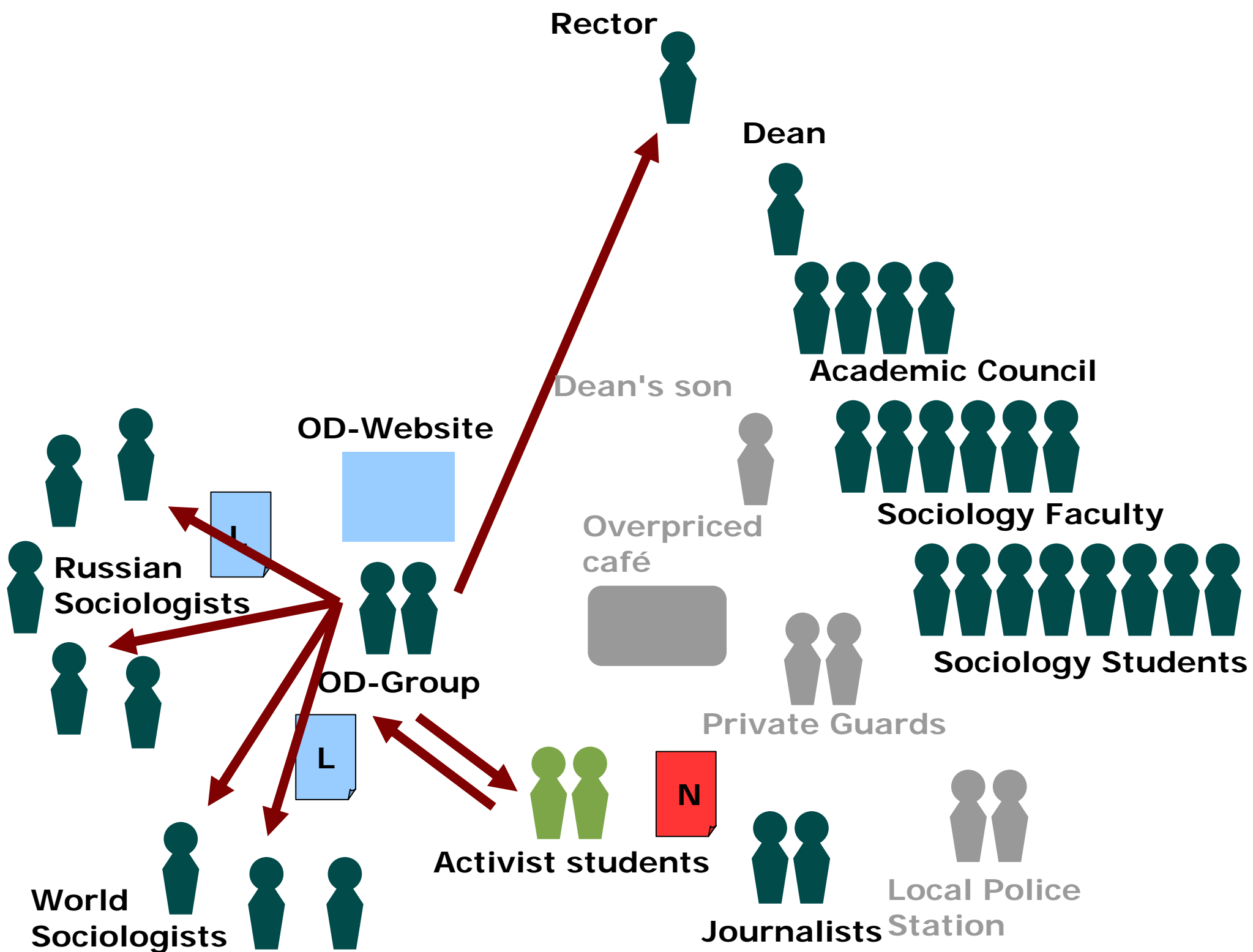


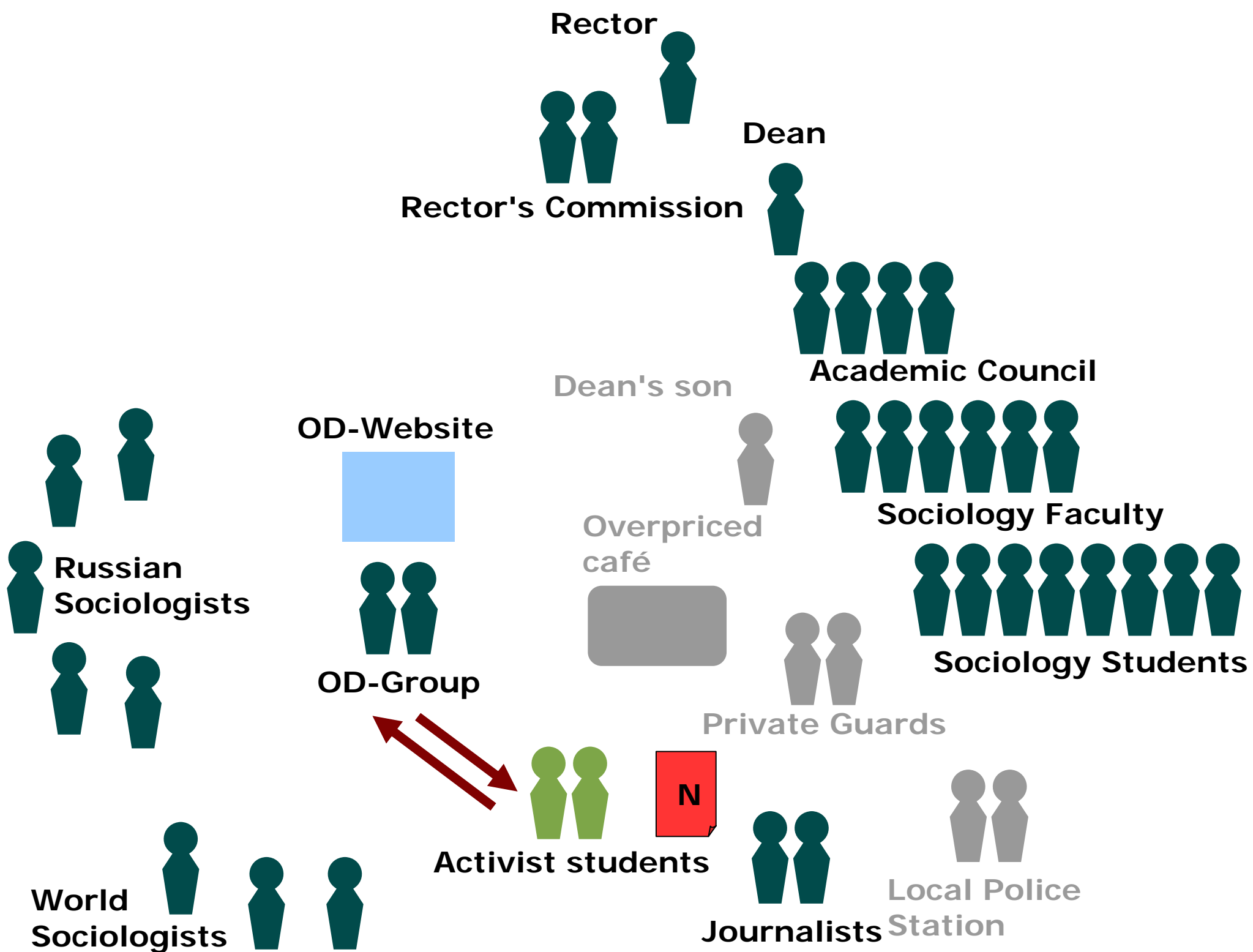


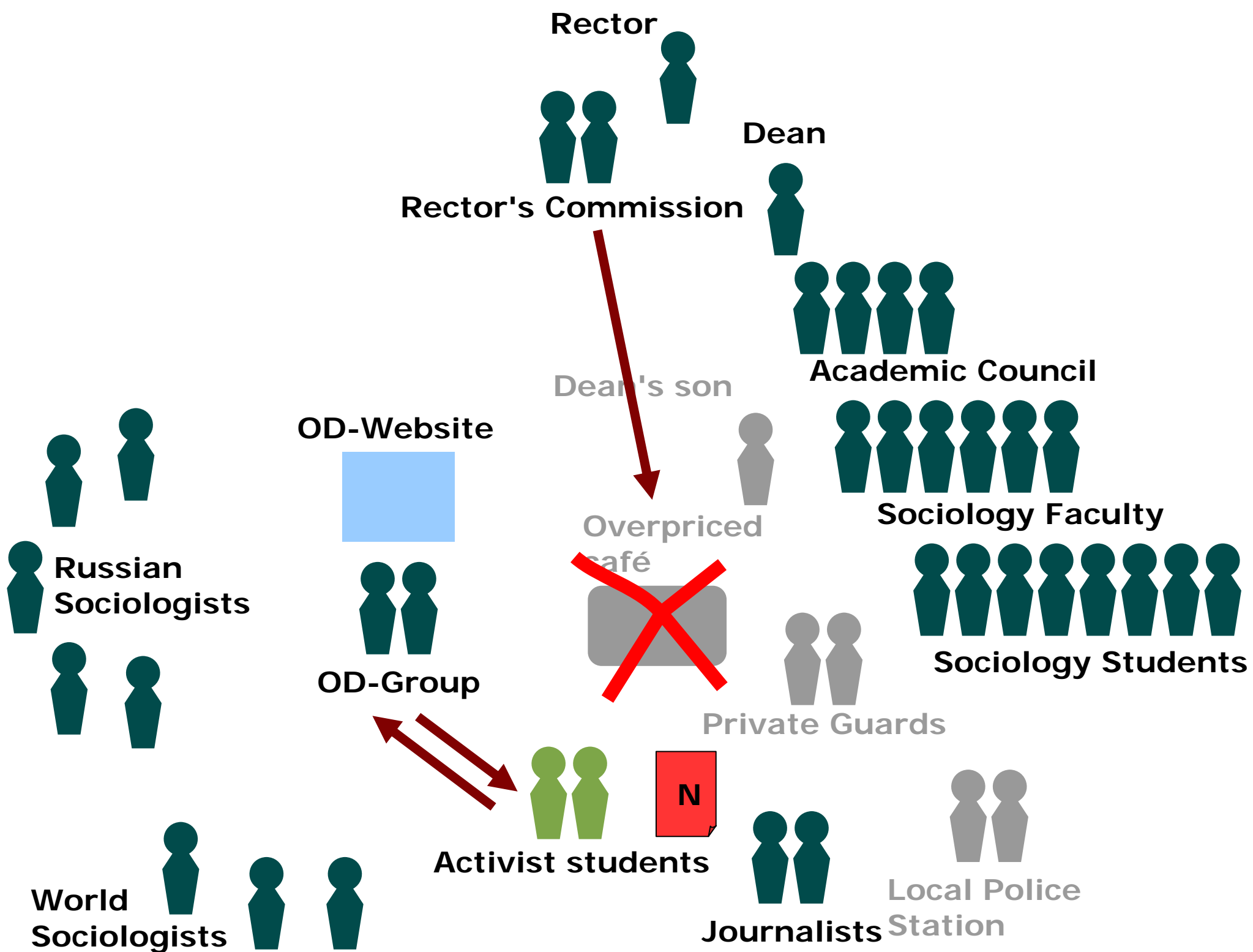


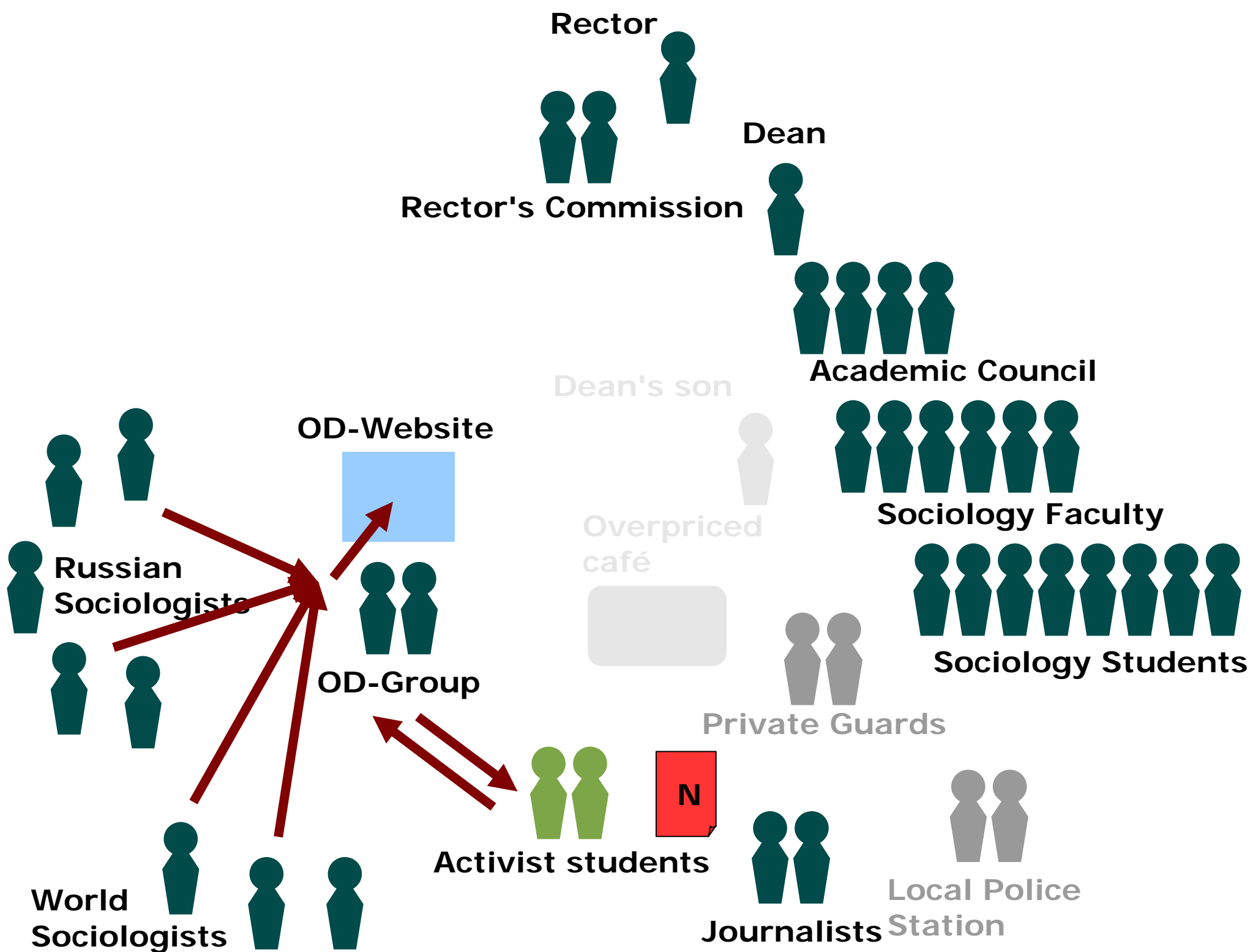


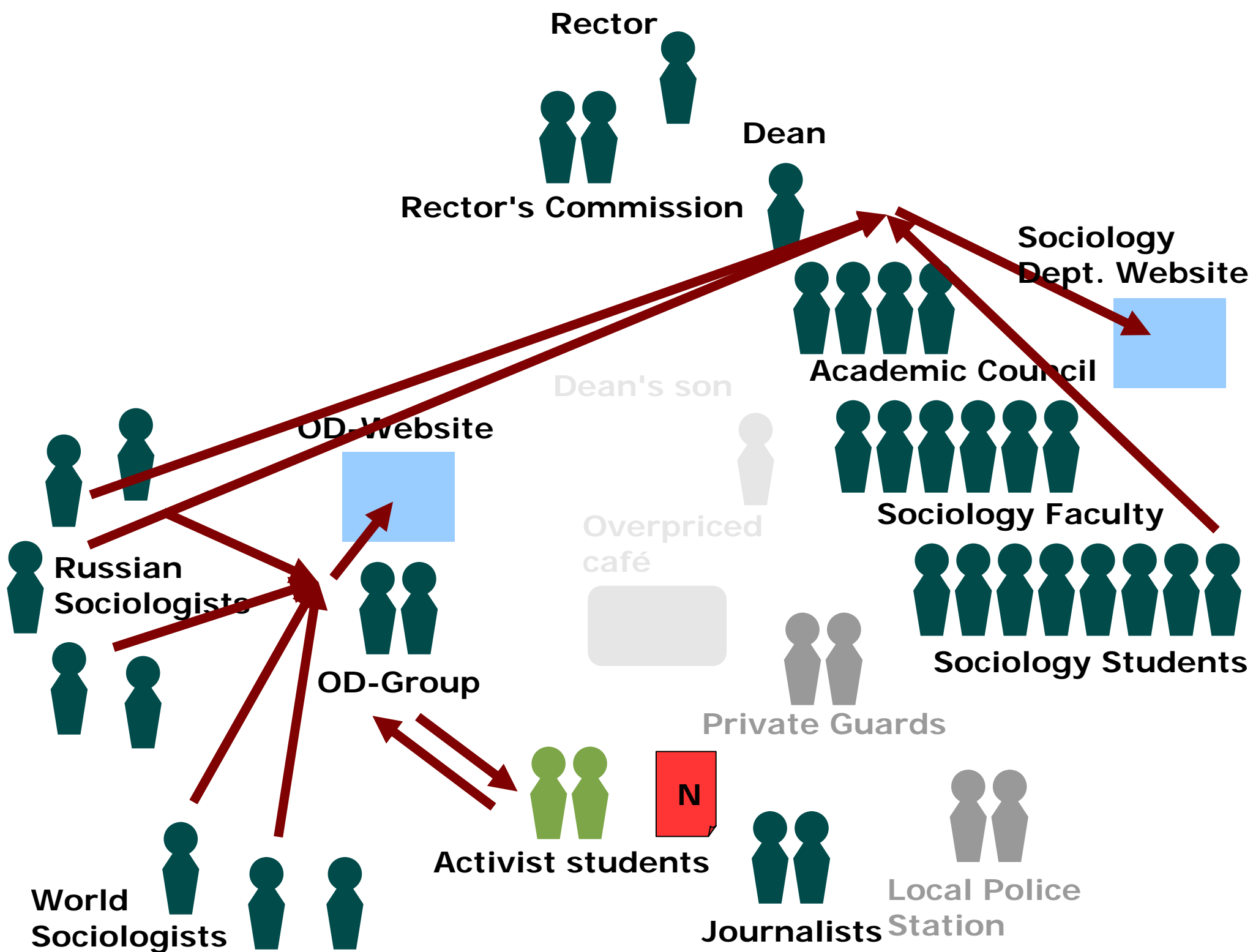


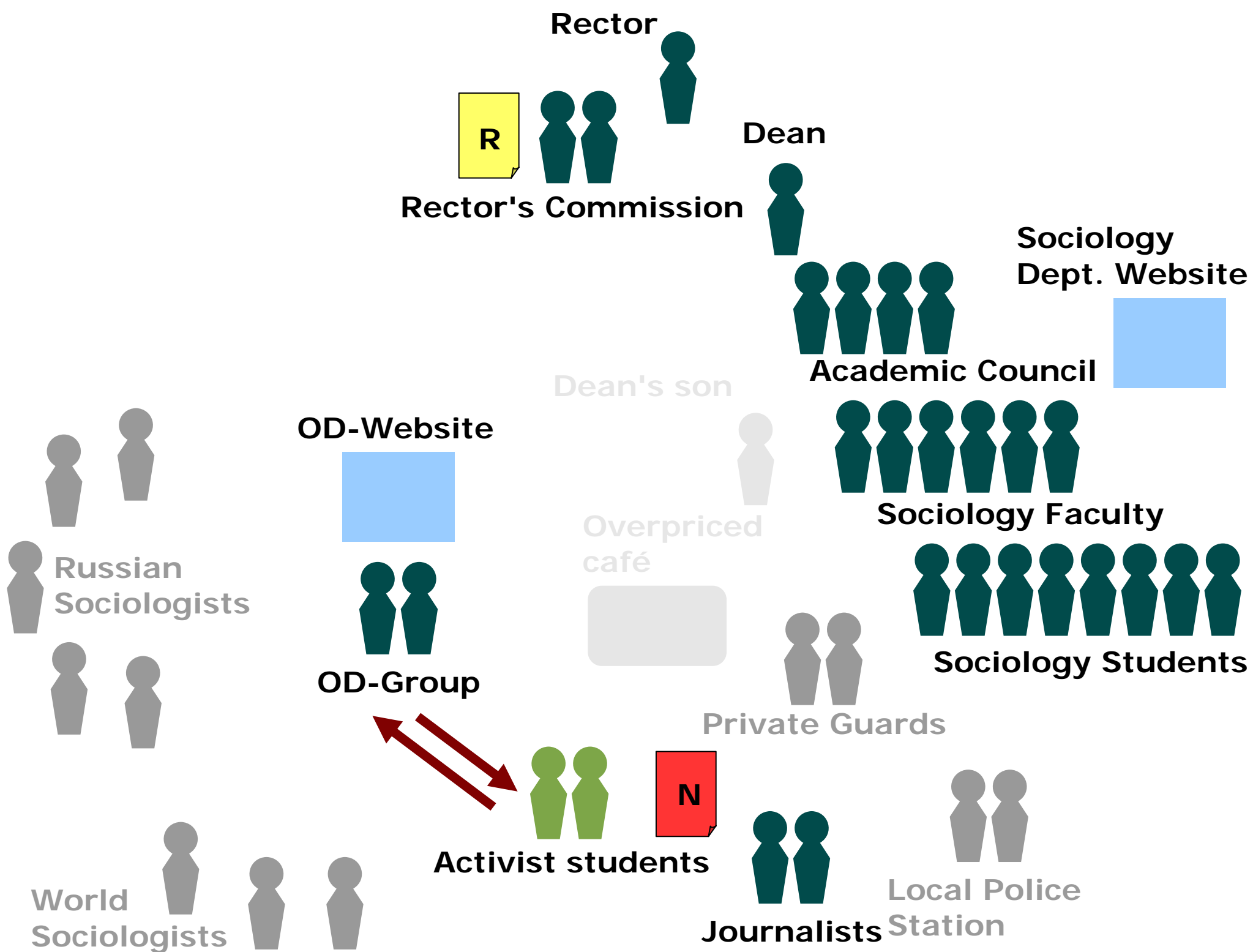












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Education Committee**



Rector

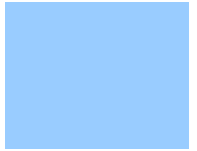


Rector's Commission

Dean



**Sociology
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Academic Council

Dean's son

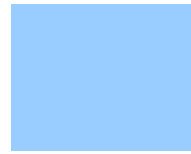


Sociology Faculty

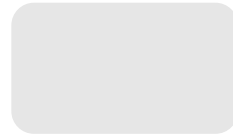


Sociology Students

OD-Website



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Private Guards



OD-Group



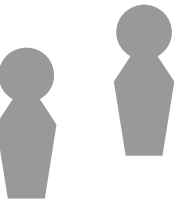
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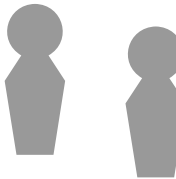
Journalists



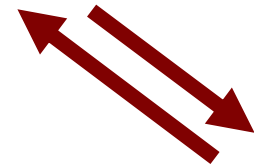
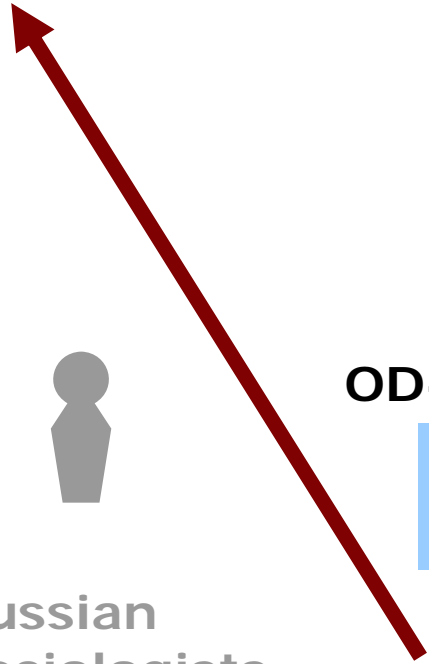
**Local Police
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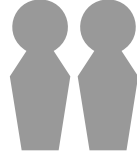


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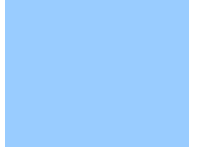
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Academic Council

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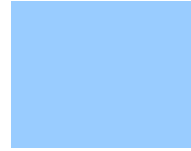


Dean's son

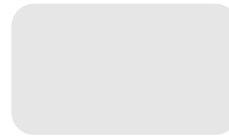


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Activist students



Journalists

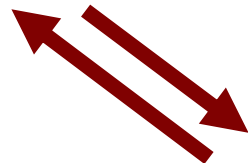


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Rector's Commission



Rector

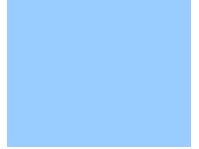


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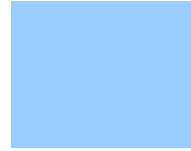


Sociology Faculty

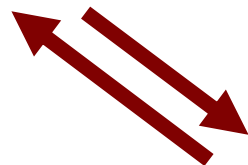


Sociology Students

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Journalists



**Local Police
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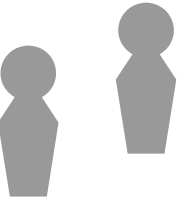
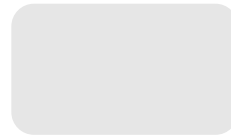
Private Guards



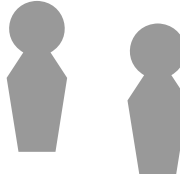
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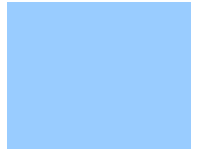
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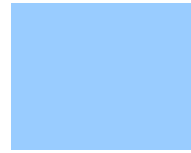
Academic Council

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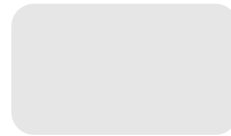


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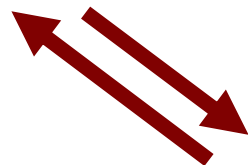


Sociology Students

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Rector's Commission



Rector



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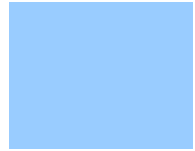


**Methodical Commission
in Sociology**



Academic Council

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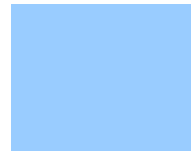


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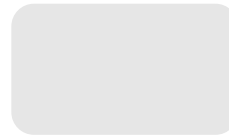


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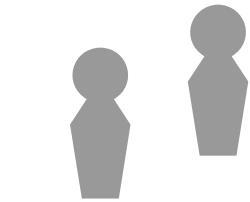
Journalists



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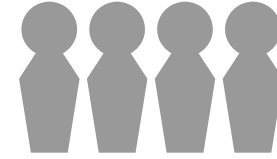
Public Chamber
Commission

Rector



Rector's Commission

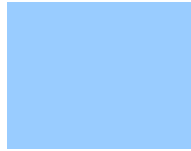
Methodical Commission
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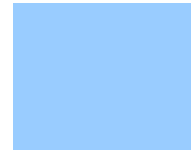
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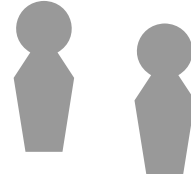
OD-Group



Private Guards



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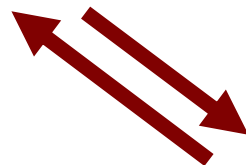


Journalists



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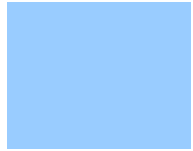
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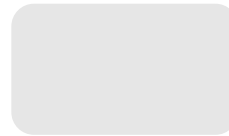
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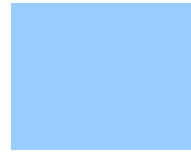
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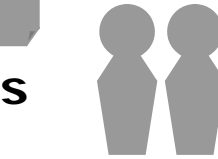
Activist students



Private Guards

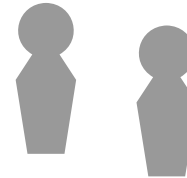
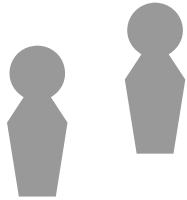


Local Police
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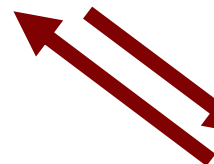


Journalists

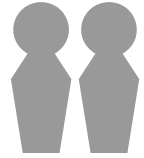
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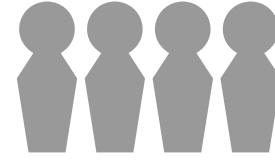
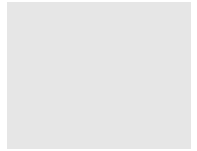
Methodical Commission
in Sociology



Dean

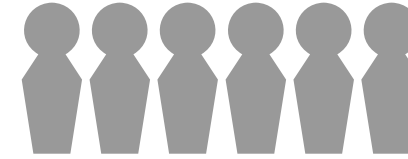


Sociology
Dept. Website



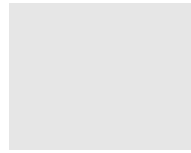
Academic Council

Dean's son

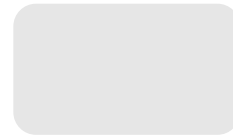


Sociology Faculty

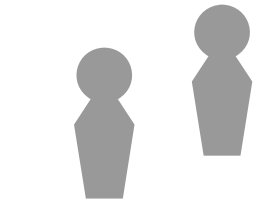
OD-Website



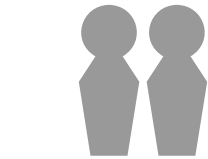
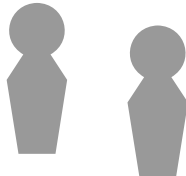
Overpriced
café



Sociology Students



Russian
Sociologists



OD-Group

Private Guards



World
Sociologists



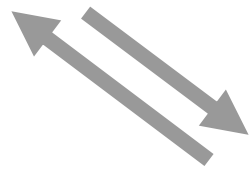
Activist students



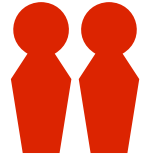
Journalists



Local Police
Station



**Head of the Public Chamber
Education Committee**



**Public Chamber
Commission**

Rector



Rector's Commission

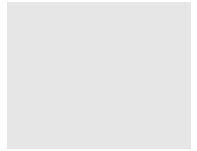
Dean



**Methodical Commission
in Sociology**



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**Academic
Council**

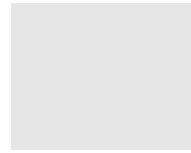


Sociology Faculty



Sociology Students

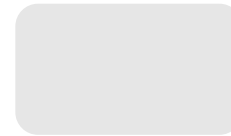
OD-Website



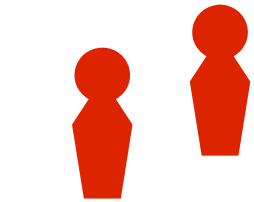
Dean's son



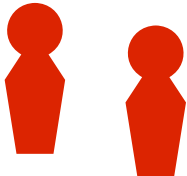
**Overpriced
café**



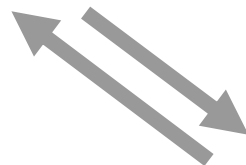
Private Guards



**Russian
Sociologists**



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Activist students



Journalists

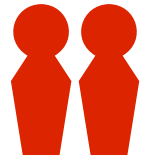


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Station**

**World
Sociologists**



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Rector



Rector's Commission

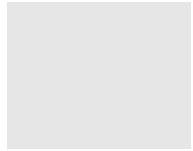
**Methodical Commission
in Sociology**



Dean



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Dept. Website**



**Academic
Council**

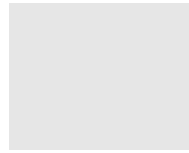


Sociology Faculty



Sociology Students

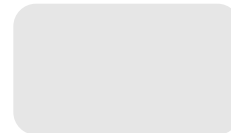
OD-Website



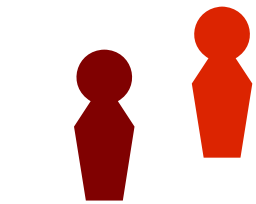
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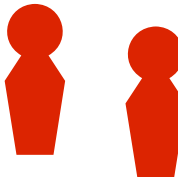
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