Restrictions on Academic Freedom

An Analytical Matrix and Review of the Voices of the People Case

A companion analysis to
The Price of a Relationship

DEMOS — Centre for Democracy, Creativity and Social Inclusion
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About this text:
This text revises Annex A of DEMOS's Response to the European Commission, submitted to the European Ombudsman on 20 November 2024. The original remains in the case archive as submitted [VP-022].

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The statements of the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression provide the basis for a definition of censorship. Censorship involves the suppression of speech, public communication or information in ways that hamper the free flow of ideas and information. In the academic realm, it includes actions that prevent or restrict efforts to publish, distribute and disseminate knowledge generated through scientific research, literary or artistic works.[1]

Censorship can be carried out in a direct or indirect mode. It can also vary in scale and intensity, and involve complete or partial restrictions. The two variables combined provide an analytical matrix that allows for a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the constraints imposed on the Voices of the People initiative. The matrix is offered as a tool: it can be applied to any case in which research is kept from its public.

Types of Restrictions on Academic Freedom

Mode	Scale & Intensity	
	Complete	***Partial***
Direct	**Overt**	**Limited**
Indirect	**Oblique**	**By-product**

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Overt restrictions involve total and explicit prohibitions on the free flow of ideas and information. These can affect a specific oeuvre or a distinct set of viewpoints.

Oblique restrictions entail backdoor ways of curbing or suppressing freedom of expression. Outlets or authors are nominally free to share ideas, but added injunctions or constraints curtail tangible exercise of the right of freedom of expression.

Limited restrictions allow for partial freedoms of expression but restrain wider or fuller manifestations of this. Outlets or authors are allowed to publish. Yet they are barred from

[1] See the reports of the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, notably the report on academic freedom, UN doc. A/75/261 (2020); and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Freedom of expression and opinion," ohchr.org/en/topic/freedom-expression-and-opinion.

using distribution channels – often standard ones – that can enhance access to the knowledge produced.

By-product restrictions are a hidden, informal, de facto form of suppression of knowledge and ideas. They are more diffuse and subtle, but no less consequential. By-product restrictions do not rely on explicit injunctions or official constraints. Rather, they arise from conditions shaped by previous or existing acts of censorship.

By-product censorship generally affects outlets or authors that have suffered overt, oblique and/or limited forms of suppression, and are deprived of means to exercise their rights of freedom of expression, in a timely and effective manner. *Self-censorship* is a subset of by-product restrictions. Here too, direct forms of censorship – or the threat of this – cause fear, exhaustion, reputational loss and material depletion that lead to inhibition.[2]

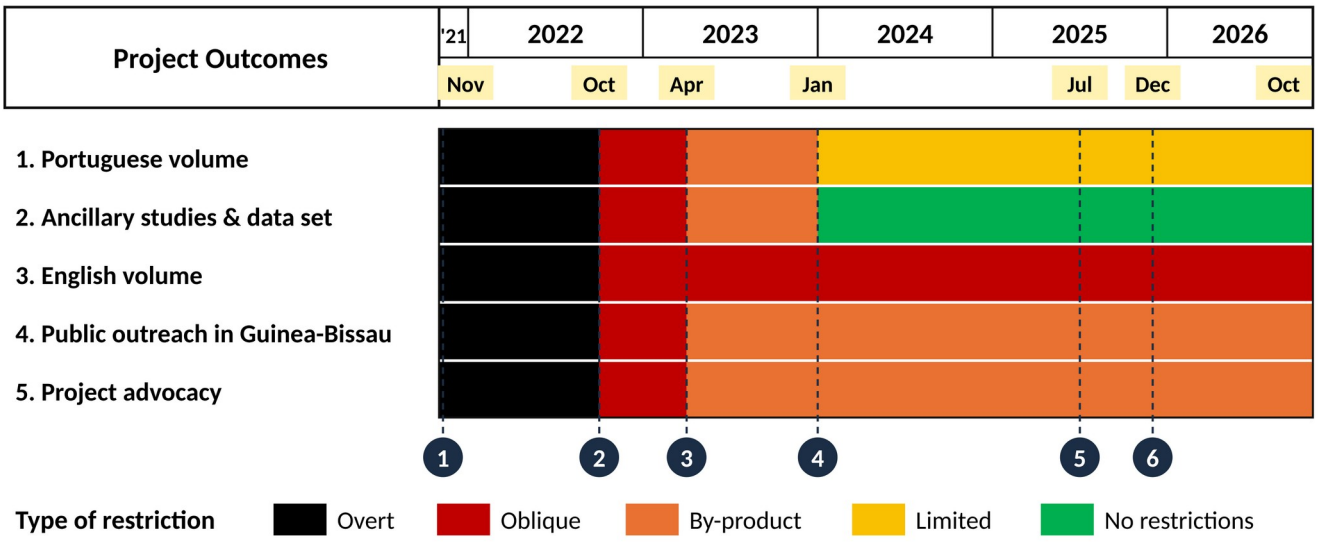
The timeline below illustrates how these developments took place, under different circumstances. The chart covers five outcomes related to the Voices of the People initiative adversely affected by the 2021 decision to embargo the study, namely: (1) the Portuguese volume publication, (2) the publication of ancillary studies and data set produced as part of the research, (3) the English volume publication with a reputable academic press, (4) project outreach activities in Guinea-Bissau to present, promote and distribute the book, and (5) project advocacy in other countries. The first four outcomes were agreed contractually with the Commission. The fifth represents an anticipated result.

[2] The logic of events under by-product censorship is akin to that of the aftermath of a devastating storm, which causes distress and property damage. The aftermath will prevent survivors from picking up and continuing with their lives as if nothing happened. If they are unable to get any support to recover their losses, storm after-effects are apt to endure much longer. DEMOS was still picking itself up amid storm debris when it prepared the first version of this text for the European Ombudsman, in November 2024.

Types of Restrictions Imposed on the Voices of the People Initiative

By Main Project Outcomes

An ongoing timeline, November 2021 – October 2026



Milestones

1. **Nov 2021.** The Commission bars publication: "do not print." No explanation is given.
2. **Oct 2022.** The Commission says "go ahead", without clear terms; it agrees to examine a copyright transfer.
3. **Apr 2023.** The Commission refuses conciliation after blocking, in effect, publication of the English volume.
4. **Jan 2024.** Portuguese edition printed; research studies online; no funds to take the books to Guinea-Bissau.
5. **Jul 2025.** The European Ombudsman closes its inquiry with no remedy.
6. **Dec 2025.** The Commission undertakes to teach the free-of-charge condition to its staff.

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As the timeline shows, DEMOS encountered four periods in the struggle to lift all restrictions on the Voices of the People study.

First Period: Late November 2021 – October 2022. DEMOS was barred explicitly from publishing any results of the study in late November 2021. The Commission's ***overt restrictions*** persisted for *11 months*. No rationale was given for this drastic decision, nor was DEMOS accorded the opportunity to discuss or amend the study. Instead of reasons, in December 2021, the EU Delegation proposed Addendum 3. It would have struck the English edition out of the contract and placed the printing, online publication and public presentation of the study under EU approval. DEMOS declined it.[3] Had DEMOS signed, the ban would have become a term of the contract.

Commission authorities in Brussels have used different euphemisms to describe this period, saying the publication was "put on hold" or "delayed." Retroactive justifications, however, cannot alter the EC's blanket prohibition on publicizing any or all parts of the study. An actual "delay" would have involved a deadline. Yet the embargo had no end date.

[3] Proposed Addendum 3, transmitted by the EU Delegation on 15 December 2021, and DEMOS's reply of 17 January 2022 [VP-006-007].

Second Period: Late October 2022 – April 2023. In early October 2022, DEMOS started an online petition drive and sent the EC another letter protesting its breach of contract and embargo of the study. Authorities in Brussels responded a few weeks later and advised DEMOS to "go ahead" with the publications. The Commission's decision was not spontaneous. But the situation appeared to be on the mend. Assurances given by Hans Christian Stausboll (DG INTPA), on November 25, 2022, added to this impression.

The assurances, however, were not matched by action. The months that followed led to a growing state of uncertainty. The EC remained evasive on the instruments needed to publish the study. Its officers took nearly three months to declare it was too complicated to transfer the study's copyright to DEMOS. Without knowing the copyright status, DEMOS could not go to print.

Thereafter, DEMOS proposed a licensing agreement. The EC, then, announced that DEMOS's publishers could not sell any copies of the book. This was a backhanded way of telling DEMOS that it could not take the English volume to a "reputable academic publisher," as agreed in the contract. No publisher of scholarly texts would consent to bear the costs of production and distribution of a book it could not sell. This constraint limited DEMOS's ability to distribute the Portuguese book as well. The EC did not provide funds to pay for printing costs in English. The Commission subsequently rebuffed DEMOS's attempts to resolve issues through formal mediation and blocked further negotiations (see The Price of a Relationship, Point 3.2).

Hence, the second period displayed a pattern of ***oblique restrictions***. DEMOS was nominally free to publish but experienced hurdles – created by the Commission – that made it essentially impossible to do so.

Third Period: May to December 2023. During these eight months, DEMOS faced ongoing constraints. It was, in essence, blocked from publishing the English volume with an academic press. The Commission's backdoor constraints amounted to an ***oblique restriction*** of an agreed project outcome.

Other aspects of the project suffered a more subtle form of constraint: ***by-product censorship***. The Commission's opposition to dialogue and formal mediation compelled DEMOS to seek legal counsel in Belgium. This took time and effort. The lawyers advised that DEMOS had a solid case. But the cost of taking the EC to court in Brussels was simply prohibitive for a modest NGO.

It was difficult to regain momentum. Given the circumstances, DEMOS was forced to update and relaunch its public relations campaign and online petition, to press for the English language publication and wider distribution of the Portuguese volume. It prepared an account of the struggle to publish Voices of the People, explaining the two-year delay of the Portuguese volume and the ongoing restrictions on the English edition. Publishing the ancillary reports proved to be cumbersome as well, since the support staff DEMOS had

on hand to upload the studies in December 2021 and January 2022, as originally planned, was no longer available.

The struggle to overcome the Commission's overt and oblique forms of restriction exacted a significant toll. It deprived DEMOS and its associates of time, energy and other resources needed to exercise full rights to freedom of expression. This was the after-effect or by-product of censorship: a mostly hidden, informal, de facto barrier to the free flow of ideas and a distinct form of restriction itself.

Fourth Period: January 2024 to the Present. This period reflects a mixed batch of achievements and ongoing restrictions. In January 2024, DEMOS published the ancillary studies on the DEMOS website, printed the Portuguese volume and uploaded a digital copy of the book to the DEMOS and Voices of the People websites. Though the volume is publicly available, access to it remains restricted. DEMOS cannot distribute it the way most scholars manage their books, through publishers and retailers. As such, it remains in a state of ***limited censorship***. Because of this, only five print copies have reached Guinea-Bissau — sent, at DEMOS's expense, to the contributors to the volume who live there. More than 300 copies remain in Paraguay, where the book was printed, under a printing contract signed in 2021.

DEMOS lost all the investments made to distribute and disseminate the Voices of the People study in Guinea-Bissau, as a result of the November 2021 embargo. This situation undercut all the public outreach activities set in the contract signed with the Commission, which have lingered in a condition of ***by-product censorship***. Finally, efforts to extend the initiative to other countries have been hampered as well, in part by the ***oblique restrictions*** on the English volume. A scientific project is harder to export when its main volume remains unpublished in English.

In July 2025, the European Ombudsman closed its inquiry with no remedy.[4] In December 2025, the Commission told the Ombudsman that it would teach the free-of-charge condition to its staff.[5] The ***oblique restriction*** imposed on the English volume is thus set to become standing practice — available to any official who finds an EU-subsidized study inconvenient.

Over nearly five years, various forms of restriction imposed on the Voices of the People initiative have harmed DEMOS, its associates and citizens of Guinea-Bissau. They have also raised dismay among scholars worldwide. Many signed the petition in defence of academic freedom, and the African Studies Association wrote to the President of the European Commission in November 2024.

[4] European Ombudsman, Decision in case OI/4/2024/MIK, 8 July 2025 [VP-027].

[5] European Commission, reply to the European Ombudsman on the suggestion for improvement, C(2025) 8523 final, 5 December 2025 [VP-028].

Using the matrix

The matrix asks four questions of any restriction. Is it direct or indirect? Is it complete or partial? Which outcome of the work does it affect? And does it outlast the formal ban? Applied to the Voices of the People case, the answers show a censorship that changed form but never ended.

Overt censorship is easy to see, and to condemn. The veiled forms — oblique, limited, by-product — present themselves as something else: a delay, a procedure, a condition of contract, a hidden consequence. They are no less damaging. They are simply harder to name. This case gives them a name. Applied elsewhere, the matrix can help scholars, publishers and civil society organisations do the same.

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