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Serghei Golunov

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

Corruption and Cheating in Russian Universities

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To the “silent heroes” of the Russian higher education system: to those ordinary university teachers who managed to preserve their integrity despite low salaries, pressures from higher authorities, and other unfavourable circumstances.

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Volgograd, June 2014

Serghei Golunov

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

C.Sc.	Candidate of Sciences (academic degree)
D.Sc.	Doctor of Sciences (academic degree)
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
MES	Ministry of Education and Science, of the Russian Federation
MGIMO	<i>Moskovskii gosudarstvennyi institut mezhdunarodnykh otnoshenii</i> (Moscow State Institute of International Relations)
MSPU	Moscow State Pedagogical University
MSU	Moscow State University
Rosobrnadzor	<i>Federal'naia sluzhba po nadzoru v sfere obrazovaniia i nauki</i> (Federal Service of Supervision in the Sphere of Education and Science), of the Russian Federation
RANEPA	Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration
RAS	Russian Academy of Sciences
SPSU	St Petersburg State University
USE	Unified State Exam
VAK	<i>Vysshaia attestatsionnaia komissiiia</i> (Higher Attestation Commission), of the Russian Federation

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1. The problem

Along with several other countries, Russia is often mentioned when discussing where corruption and other malpractices in education are widespread¹. It is commonplace to argue that higher education is a very corrupted sphere in Russia. According to the results of an opinion poll held in 2011 by the Public Opinion Foundation, universities were ranked third in the list of everyday corruption after drivers' relations with car inspectors and child care². Corruption, traditionally understood as an abuse of power for obtaining private gain³, is not the only kind of malpractice that is pervasive in Russian higher education: indeed, various forms of cheating (such as plagiarism, cribbing, and receiving unauthorised hints during exams, etc.) are probably even more widespread than bribery, clientelism, embezzlement, or shadow paybacks.

It should be specifically stressed that not everything in the Russian higher education system is corrupt: the government takes some measures periodically, some universities pursue more consistent anti-corruption and anti-cheating policies than others, and, not least, there are still many principled teachers and students who avoid resorting to malpractices. Yet, as is argued in this book, the overall pervasiveness of malpractice is so great that it can lead to disastrous consequences, such as the devaluation of diplomas, the prevalence of corruption and dishonest behaviour in the younger generation, degradation of academic integrity, and the underfunding of crucially important education and research activities, etc. The current measures, taken against corruption and cheating by federal agencies and universities, are not suffi-

1 See for example: David Chapman, "Corruption and the Education Sector," *USAID* (2002), http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNACT874.pdf (as of 2 May 2014).

2 "Bytovaia korruptsia v Rossii," *FOM*, 15 June 2011, <http://http://fom.ru/obshchestvo/138> (as of 2 May 2014).

3 Jacques Hallak and Muriel Poisson, (2007) *Corrupt Schools, Corrupt Universities: What Can Be Done?* (Paris: International Institute for Educational Planning, 2007), 29.

cient; thus, the question “what should be done to combat malpractice more efficiently?” lies at the core of the current research.

It is worth mentioning that I had a strong personal motivation for conducting this research. I worked in an average provincial university for more than ten years, and witnessed many instances of malpractice personally and heard even more about them from my colleagues. I never took bribes (though I was offered them sometimes), but unfortunately was not always impeccable in terms of academic integrity: in particular, I sometimes gave undeservedly high marks to some well-connected students, yielding to the pressure of higher authorities, though there were some colleagues who had enough courage not to do it. In the last years of my employment in the Russian higher education system I faced plagiarism more and more often: on average about written work I checked contained large blocks of plagiarised text; thus, my work checking students’ texts became increasingly mechanical and decreasingly meaningful. Even worse, I (and some of my colleagues also) started to be regularly pressurised by higher authorities who required high marks to be given for evidently plagiarised works⁴. It were cases of this kind that finally prompted me to try to obtain revenge not on specific people but on the entire vicious system. Thus, I decided to start policy-oriented research on malpractice in Russian higher education, and this finally resulted in the writing of this book.

1.2. Existing works on the topic

Internationally, corruption in education (including higher education) is considered in a relatively large number of scholarly works. However, the number of works trying to conceptualise the worldwide experience is relatively small. In this respect, publications that resulted from the International Institute for Educational Planning’s research project “Ethics and Corruption in Education” and

4 At least twice when I was forced to give undeservedly high marks I found no better solution than to give good marks to all students irrespectively of their performance so as not to give well-connected students any advantage.

especially the Hallack and Poisson book⁵ should be mentioned. Another notable work is a volume edited by Heyneman⁶. Some other relevant works, such as Eckstein's paper dealing with academic cheating⁷ as well as Heyneman, Anderson, and Nuraliyeva's article focusing on the cost of corruption⁸ also proved to be especially useful in the course of the current research.

Though corruption in Russian higher education is sometimes considered as a too hackneyed subject, the number of fundamental works related to this topic is a very small. Leontieva's D.Sc. thesis⁹ should be mentioned first of all, but it has a somewhat broader focus, as the range of informal practices includes not only corruption and cheating but also legitimate and semi-legitimate practices. There are also a larger number of articles conceptualising one or several key aspects of corruption in Russian higher education: marginalising the status of university teachers and commodifying the demand for diplomas¹⁰, rapidly developing corruption culture¹¹, and legal treatment of bribery in universities¹², etc.

5 Hallak and Poisson, *Corrupt Schools*.

6 Stephen H. Heyneman (ed.) *Buying your way into Heaven: Education and Corruption in International Perspective*, (Rotterdam and Taipei: Sense Publishers, 2009).

7 Max Eckstein, *Combating academic fraud: Towards a culture of integrity* (Paris: International Institute for Educational Planning, 2003).

8 Stephen H. Heyneman, Kathryn Anderson, and Nazym Nuraliyeva, "The Cost of Corruption in Higher Education," *Comparative Education Review* 52:1 (2008): 22.

9 El'vira Leontieva, *Institutsionalizatsia neformal'nyh praktik v sfere vysshego obrazovania* [Doctor of Sociological Sciences' Dissertation] (Khabarovsk: Pacific National University, 2010).

10 Oleg Leibovich and Natalia Shushkova, "Na semi vetrah: institut vysshego obrazovania v postsovetskuyu epohu," *Zhurnal sotsiologii i sotsial'noy antropologii* VII:1 (2004); Piotr Orekhovskiy, "Teoria neiavnogo kontrakta" *Polit.ru*, 11 May 2011, <http://polit.ru/article/2011/05/11/innov/> (as of 2 May 2014); Natalia Shushkova, Oleg Leibovich, " 'Hochesh' sdat' ekzamen na piat'?'..." *Otechestvennye zapiski* 47:2 (2012), <http://magazines.russ.ru/oz/2012/2/sh24.html> (as of 21 February 2014).

11 Vladimir Rimskii, "Sposobstvuet li sistema vysshego obrazovania rasprostraneniu korruptsii v Rossii," *Terra economicus* 8:3 (2010); Shushkova and Leibovich, " 'Hochesh' sdat' ekzamen na piat'?'..."

12 Gennadiy Morozov, "Korruptsiya v obrazovanii: mify i realii normativno-pravovogo haraktera," *Pedagogicheskaya obrazovaniye Rossii* 2 (2010): 149-159.

There are a lot of publicistic and blog entries written by those scholars who focused on individual malpractices: plagiarism¹³, procurement and competition machinations¹⁴, and exam-related machinations¹⁵, etc. Many of these articles have been published in the *Troitskii variant*, which is a newspaper established as an informal initiative of academic activists.

Finally, there is one more kind of academic and publicistic entries that are written by scholars and these deal with those factors and trends that indirectly create a breeding ground for malpractice: massivisation¹⁶, overbureaucratisation¹⁷, and authoritarianism of university management systems¹⁸, etc.

Thus, while there is a relatively large number of scholarly and publicistic works devoted to corruption and cheating in Russian higher education, there is a need for a large policy-oriented study that would conceptualise malpractice, evaluate current achievements of governmental and non-governmental

-
- 13 See for example: Ivan Kotliarov and Iurii Brumshtein, "Studencheskii plagiat: vlianie na intellektual'nuiu i informatsionnuiu bezopasnost' regionov," *Informatsionnaia bezopasnost' regionov* 1 (2012); Mefodii Volikhamov, "MGU i Dissergeit: opasnye svyazi," *Troitskii variant* 178 (2014), <http://trv-science.ru/2014/02/25/mgu-i-dissergejit-opasnye-svyazi/> (as of 10 April 2014); Vladimir Volkhonskii, "Pokolenie plagiata," *Troitskii variant* 124 (2013), <http://trv-science.ru/2013/03/12/pokolenie-plagiata/> (as of 10 April 2014).
- 14 See for example: Aleksei Krushel'nitskii, "Pilite, Shura, pilite," *Troitskii variant* 68 (2010), <http://trv-science.ru/2010/12/07/pilite-shura-pilite/> (as of 10 April 2010); Yevgeniy Onishchenko, "FTsP: konkursy i 'konkursy'," *Troitskii variant* 79 (2011), <http://trv-science.ru/2011/05/24/fcp-konkursy-i-konkursy/> (as of 12 March 2014); Yevgeniy Onishchenko, "Kormlenie kak sistema," *Troitskiy variant* 35 (2009), <http://trv-science.ru/2009/08/18/kormlenie-kak-sistema/> (as of 12 March 2014).
- 15 See for example: Leonid Ashkinazi, Maria Grishkina, and Svetlana Ivanova, "Utechka-test," *Troitskii variant* 131 (2013), <http://trv-science.ru/2013/06/18/utechka-test/> (as of 10 April 2014).
- 16 Girsh Khanin, "Vysshee obrazovanie i sovetskoye obschestvo," *EKO* 8-9 (2008), http://www.econom.nsc.ru/eco/arhiv/ReadStatiy/2008_09/Hanin/index.htm#23/ (as of 5 January 2014).
- 17 See for example: Leonid Bliakher, "O vnutrennei biurokratii v vuzakh i ne tol'ko v vuzakh," *Livejournal*, 12 September 2012, <http://lenya.livejournal.com/240801.html> (as of 13 January 2014); Ivan Kurilla, "Kriterii otsenki: chitaia intervju Yaroslava Kuz'minova," *Troitskiy variant* 121 (2013), <http://trv-science.ru/2013/01/29/kriterii-ocenki-chitaya-intervyu-yaroslava-kuzminova> (as of 13 January 2014).
- 18 See for example: Vladimir Volkhonskii, "Piatiletka rektora Kropachëva," *Troitskii variant* 125 (2013), <http://trv-science.ru/2013/03/26/pyatiletka-rektora-kropacheva/> (as of 10 April 2014).

actors trying to combatting the malpractice, and take into account the relevant international experience. I hope that this book could be considered a modest contribution to the research in this direction.

1.3. The approach

This book is primarily policy oriented. While I make an attempt to conceptualise the set of factors creating a breeding ground for malpractice, the main focus is related to examining the prevalence of malpractice, evaluating the efficiency of measures taken by various kinds of actors to combat it, and on proposing new measures aimed at improving this efficiency. The proposed measures take into account international experience of combatting corruption and fraud in the education sphere.

While analysing trends related to corruption and cheating, I had to rely largely on anecdotal evidence (news and stories told to me by my colleagues), my personal experience, and those online discussions I had with academic activists, e.g. with activists from the anti-plagiarism Dissernet network. Apart from this, I also analysed hundreds of biographies of Russian top officials and politicians as well as the principals of Russian universities, with the focus primarily on evaluating the circumstances in which they defended their doctoral theses¹⁹.

In the course of writing this book I had to refer to accusations that, though being reasoned and not properly responded to, cannot be considered as clearly proven. For instance, an accusation of plagiarism, even if based on the comparison of two coinciding pieces of texts (provided that the text of an accused person was written later), can be considered to be not sufficiently grounded as literally coincided phrases theoretically can be commonly used by many and have no clear primary source, or can be plagiarised from some accused person's even earlier work. Taking also into account that the purpose of my book is not in identifying specific persons or institutions but rather in analysing common trends; I tried to minimise references to not explicitly

19 For greater detail see the section 3.3.

proven accusations in the main text while providing references to this kind of cases in the footnotes.

Moreover, as a Russian citizen, I should be cautious while using the very term “plagiarism” with respect to specific cases. As will be mentioned in the third part, according to the Russian Criminal Code, an accusation of plagiarism is an accusation of a crime that can easily be considered as ungrounded (and thus qualify as libel) by Russian courts even if the considered texts evidently coincide. For this reason, I deliberately use substitute wordings (such as “illegitimate textual borrowings”) in many of these cases when specific accusations of plagiarism are considered.

1.4. Book structure

The current part characterises the scope of the problem, describes the range of existing works on the topic, and outlines the author’s general approach and the approach towards covering some specific sensitive issues.

The second part, after describing the key features of the Russian higher education system, examines the negative trends of its development that created a breeding ground for various malpractices. Among such trends are massivisation, commercialisation, overbureaucratisation, growing authoritarianism of university management combined with reduction in the autonomy of universities’ self-governance, and marginalisation of the position of ordinary university teachers. Apart from this, the role of the external environment in provoking malpractice in the Russian higher education system is also considered.

The third part focuses on corruption and cheating practices. In the beginning I consider some issues related to their conceptualisation, including the problem of delimitation between corruption and cheating. In the subsequent two sections I then examine specific kinds of corruption and cheating practices. After this I consider the consequences that the prevalence of malpractices entails both for the Russian higher education system and also for Russian society.

The fourth part assesses the measures taken to combat these malpractices. First, it examines the worldwide experience of fighting corruption and cheating. Second, it evaluates the relevant efforts taken by official Russian actors: the Ministry of Education and Science, and individual universities, etc. Third, it considers the efforts of non-governmental actors, especially the recently emerged movement for revealing dissertation fraud. Fourth, it focuses on the actual and potential influence of international actors and institutions, such as inter-university partnerships, international agreements, and global university ratings.

In the concluding chapter I summarise and analyse the previous findings and offer some recommendations on what should be done to combat malpractice in the Russian higher education system more effectively.