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Corruption in Russian Higher Education as Reflected in the Media

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This paper considers corruption in higher education in Russia as reflected in the national media, including such aspects as corruption in admissions to higher education institutions and corruption in administering the newly introduced standardized test. The major focus is on the opinions of the leading figures of the education reform as related to corruption in education. The national media presents points of view of both supporters of the reform and those in opposition to the reform. Despite all the opposition that the standardized test faces among the leading educators and legislators, including The Chairman of The Council of Federation and numerous other Members of the Russian parliament and rectors of higher education institutions, the government continues implementation of the reform. Even though, as follows from the media reports and comments, the standardized test will not solve the problem of corruption in education, its full scale country-wide implementation at this point appears to be a question of time.

Key words: corruption, higher education, media, reform, national test, Russia

Introduction

The three major issues in higher education are access, quality, and equity. These issues are universal and at stake in every nation. Corruption affects all three of these issues. It has a negative impact on the quality of higher education and other services; it increases inequality in access to higher education, and causes inequities. Every nation solves problems of access, quality, and equity differently. Thus, although corruption in higher education is part of the news in every country, the ways in which the national media reflects on corruption in higher education differ.

The level of tolerance of corruption in higher education in Russia is relatively high, as corruption is considered a part of everyday life. Petrov and Temple note that “In Russia, our interviewees also despised bribery, but at the same time expressed the view that, perhaps, in the present situation, corrupt practices in higher education were inevitable.”¹ Based on the 1999 survey, Spiridonov concludes that in Russia the corrupt bureaucrat or a corruptioneer was regarded as an “absolutely normal element of real life.”² The level of transparency is high as well, with corruption in education often being highlighted in the mass media, including both official and independent sources.³ Publications are based on interviews with the leading educators and public officials, simple generalizations, and particular legal cases. Corruption in education is discussed openly in the society in all of the former Soviet republics, including Azerbaijan,⁴ Armenia,⁵ Belarus,⁶ Kyrgyzstan,⁷ Moldova,⁸ the Russian Federation,⁹ and Ukraine.¹⁰

This paper considers corruption in higher education in Russia as reflected in the national media, including such aspects as corruption in admissions to higher education institutions, in the educational process, and in administering the newly introduced standardized test. The major focus is on the opinions of the leading figures of the education reform expressed in relation to

corruption in education and perspectives of the national test. It is still unclear whether the initiative with the test will be successful.

The problem of corruption

There are over one thousand higher education institutions in the Russian Federation, of which some are funded by the federal government, others by the regional authorities and local municipalities, and some are private for profit colleges. In addition, there are numerous public community colleges and vocational schools. Public higher education institutions accommodate around 80 percent of all the nation's students while other 20 percent attend private colleges. Half of all the students in public colleges and universities are funded by the government. The admissions to governmentally funded places are corrupt. Course grades can also be bought from faculty members.

There is a variety of forms of corruption that may be found in higher education in Russia. Forms of corruption include bribery, embezzlement, extortion, fraud, nepotism, cronyism, favoritism, kickbacks, transgressing rules and regulations, bypass of criteria in selection and promotion, cheating, plagiarism, research misconduct, discrimination, and abuse of university property. A bribe can be in the form of cash, merchandise, service, or a monetary donation.

There were over eight thousand economic crimes in education reported in Russia for the period of 2000 to 2005. Only in 2005 there were more than three thousand crimes committed, including 849 cases of bribery and 361 cases of embezzlement, gross waste, and misallocation of the resources that come from the central budget.¹¹ Most of these crimes were committed by the heads of colleges and schools, members of the admissions committees, students, and high school graduates.

According to the Chief of the Department of Economic Security of the Ministry of the Interior, Sergey Lavrov, in 2005 the sum of the material damage caused by the criminal activities was equal to more than 430 million rubles. Sixty-seven criminal cases concerning heads of educational institutions and officials of selection committees, including six members of the selection committees, nine officials of the territorial educational organizations, five rectors and deans, seven professors and senior lecturers, forty directors and assistants to directors of educational institutions have been investigated. Criminal charges were brought against the members of the admissions committees in Omsk, Volgograd, and Lipetsk oblasts. Criminal investigations were launched against educational officials and administrators in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, Kazan', Tver', Ufa, and other cities. The charges included embezzlement, extortions, and bribery. Lavrov concludes that bribery can be found in all the different areas of the educational industry.¹² He also reports that forged educational documents turned into a big business with international connections, pointing to a price of up to \$20 thousand for some forgeries. Criminal groups involved in production and distribution of diplomas and other educational documents and certificates were exposed all over the Russian Federation, including Sakhalin, Hakassia, Kaluzhskaya oblast'¹³, Kaliningradskaya oblast', Moskovskaya oblast', Tul'skaya oblast', and Krasnodarskiy kraj.¹⁴

The scale and scope of corruption in the Russian education industry is impressive, indeed. It might be no different from many other countries, and is likely less than in Central Asia, but the rate of growth of the criminal activities in education is alarming. From Kaliningrad in the West to Sakhalin in the Far East and from Moscow to Krasnodarskiy kraj in the South, corruption in education is exposed and investigated. At the same time the number of accused corruptioners is

incredibly small. Accusation of seven professors and instructors for the country where the system of higher education employs many thousands of faculty members is literally nothing.

The majority of investigated cases appear to be related to the educational officials, including rectors of colleges and directors of schools, who embezzle from the state budget. This means that those involved in corrupt activities other than embezzling from the state funds are virtually invulnerable. The message is well taken by educators and by the public. If educational corruption is widespread and at the same time only a few corrupt educators are prosecuted, then participating in bribery and extortions appears to be a relatively safe business for the faculty members, students, and their parents. Also, this information strengthens the public's perceptions that everything can be bought and sold and that there is no reason to try to appeal to the law. An increase in such perceptions further facilitates an increase in corrupt activities.

Until recently, corruption in education was encountered predominantly in higher education. Admissions to higher education institutions, based on the entry examinations and decisions of the admissions committees, were considered to be notoriously corrupt. Now teachers and administrators in secondary education are gaining some access to the benefits of corruption as well, thanks first of all to the nationwide introduction of standardized tests. Admissions to better elementary, secondary, and high schools can also cost money to the prospective pupils' parents.¹⁵ The process of corruption has now rotten admissions and enrollments from higher education down to kindergartens.

Russian media openly discusses the relatively new process of school delineation on good schools and bad schools. Along with the private schools, some of the public schools are considered to be elite, well staffed, and well funded, while others cannot provide high quality instruction and lack funding. Wealthy parents try to secure places in elite schools, agreeing to

contribute to the school's funds. This increases inequalities in access to a quality instruction in secondary and high schools and limits disadvantaged students' abilities to enter publicly funded colleges. The press exaggerates the problem, suggesting that the times when children were attending the nearest school are gone and that now one has to pay bribes and make donations in order to place one's child in a good school. Monetary pledges, gifts, and bribes are commonplace.

Reform as a response to corruption

In the USSR,¹⁶ all the colleges and universities were fully funded by the state. At the same time in Russia, a country consisting of eighty-nine regions, a population of one hundred and fifty million, and eleven time zones, there was no universal national standardized examination for high school graduates. In order to enter any higher education institution, the high school graduates must be present at the college of their choice to pass competitive entry examinations. Some households are unable to cover travel expenses for their children to a university of their choice to take entry examinations. Some candidates with high academic potential do not accept the risk of competing for places in top schools. If not accepted, they will not be able to compete even in lower tier colleges, since the time for entry examinations will be over.

The reform is based on the educational policy project with a standardized, computer-graded examination, which will be used for entrance to universities. The General State Examination (EGE)¹⁷ is analogous to the US national educational tests (such as the SAT and ACT), and the French Baccalaureate, and is referred to as the national test. Initially, the project was conducted in 2001 in sixteen representative regions. All high school graduates in the sixteen

regions took the national test in one of the 1938 places, where the national test was conducted, in number of subjects, defined in each region.¹⁸

Supporters of the new examination system argue that the reform will create equal opportunities in access to higher education, prevent corruption, and make higher education a demand-driven industry. Intervention is based on the assumption that since low-income households cannot pay tuition, cannot afford to pay for their children to travel far from home to take entry examinations, and that entry examinations are corrupted, implementation of the national examinations will increase access to higher education for children from lower-income households.

Opinions on corruption and the national test

The Rector of Moscow State University (MGU), Victor Sadovnichy, is very popular with the media when it comes to higher education. Leader of the flagship Russian higher education institution comments on the issues of corruption as well as numerous other problems in education not less often than does the Minister of Science and Education.

Sadovnichy offers the following comment on the questions about corruption in education and corruption in Moscow State University in particular: “Education is a part of the society’s life. No one should say that there is an oasis, an island in our life. Of course corruption touched education as well.”¹⁹ He affirms that corruption has multiple faces and points to the fact that people often tend to call corruption any payment made to a higher education institution. For instance, someone is preparing for the entry examinations and his parents hire him tutors. Private tutoring is not illegal. It is allowed under the law. As a result, parents spent a significant amount of money, preparing their child for the entry examinations. Then they say that they paid for

entering the college. These are Russian language peculiarities. Next time one would think that they actually paid a bribe in order to secure an entrance.

Sadovnichy also mentions the practice of collecting money from pupils' and students' parents in schools and colleges for the institutional needs, including repair, security, and such. He considers such practices as a negative phenomenon. Indeed, collecting money from students is not allowed under the law. However, each school creates a so-called parents' committee that collects the money and manages it.

The Rector of Moscow State University deserves credit for not avoiding tough questions and offering straight and precise answers. He refers to the Criminal Code and comments on the problem of corruption as follows: "Bribe is based on a mutual agreement. The risk is taken by the one who pays and the one who accepts the bribe. That is why every year in the Events Hall of MGU I ask in front of three thousand students and their parents that if you know of such cases, please inform me confidentially, and I will help to prepare your child for the entry examinations for free. I lead the admissions for about twenty years and yet I did not face a single case when someone came to me and said that he faced a request to pay a bribe. There were no such cases. Moreover, if there were such gossips, I was creating a special commission to check on this. And never such gossips were proven or confirmed. So you can judge for yourself. Of course, I know number of cases, I was informed by the students, when a faculty member makes a hint in a certain form 'If you will buy me a cell-phone or a computer, it would be easier for you to pass the test.' I always investigated such cases, and when they were proven, I fired these instructors. But there were no single straight-forward direct bribe proven in MGU for all these years."²⁰

Sadovnichy's views on corruption changed and conformed more to those voiced by the government. In 2001, he offered the following comment on the news about the arrest of two

corrupt professors in one of Russia's regions: "Until the country will start to think whom, what, and how it teaches, to organize demonstrative prosecutions for bribers in universities is immoral and not clever. It is a blasphemy to require high moral principality from a professor who lives on \$50²¹." ²² Sadovnichy sees causes of corruption among college teachers not in terms of their moral standards, but in the manner in which they are treated by the government. He also suggests that "...education in universities should be free. Of course, commercial education also should have a right to exist, but it should exist separately from public education."²³ Now Sadovnichy points to the fact that he manages to pay additional money to the base salary to the MGU's entire faculty. These additional payments come from the non-budgetary activities of the University and triple professors' salaries. In addition, most of the faculty are involved in the research, funded by external grants, teaching abroad, etc. This brings their salaries way higher than what one can see as their base salary.

As the EGE becomes a more and more powerful tool in replacing entry examinations in colleges and a major criterion in making admissions decisions, public opinion turns more toward this soon-to-become-national standardized test. So far, opposition to the introduction of the test, as well as critiques of its design, implementation, and administration has been much stronger than its support. In 2004 an open letter titled "No to the destructive experiments in education" was sent to the Russian President Vladimir Putin. The letter was signed by over four hundred educators and scientists, of which thirty were members of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAN). The letter said in particular: "The EGE will not reduce 'corruption tax' but distribute it from entry examinations to schools. Corruption in the result of introducing the EGE will multiply and have a negative influence on the youth." The authors thought that "No reliable estimates of the school education results can be obtained with the one-time testing."²⁴ They

suggested creation of a commission independent from the Ministry of Science and Education that would conduct an evaluation of the results of the modernization projects in education.

The EGE is criticized not only from the positions of its rational, preparedness, and objectivity. More and more often the test is being condemned for its high level of corruption. The Dean of the School of Economics at Moscow State University, Victor Kolesov, contemplates that “A mythical billion in bribes, offensively ascribed to the heads of the top hundred higher education institutions, will be materialized and distributed among thousands. Corruption in this way will be ‘democratized’ for sure.”²⁵

In addition, providers of the testing services that design, develop, and administer the test nationwide are apparently vulnerable to corruption as well. One of the most recent news reports on corruption in the EGE is about the investigation of the testing services. The management of the federal department responsible for the EGE is suspected in embezzlement and waste of over 33 million rubles.²⁶ Another scandal that is unfolding in early June of 2007, right at the beginning of the admissions season in higher education institutions, is a possible massive cheating on the EGE’s Russian language test. Allegedly, someone managed to receive the test forms ten hours prior to the beginning of the test, answered them, and posted the correct answers on the web with open access for all. High school graduates, their parents, and teachers in some districts, including Moscow, now demand to annul the results as not credible.²⁷

The Head of Rosobrnadzor, Victor Bolotov, contests the demand to annul the results of the EGE’s Russian language test saying that technically it would be difficult for any substantial number of students to cheat on the test since it was posted on the web less than ten hours prior to the test. He believes that the case is not significant enough. However, the case points to the fact

that there is a leakage within the very core of the system and that there is no guarantee that such incidences will not happen in the future, possibly even on a larger scale.

The Russian public starts understanding the importance of the EGE. Public's involvement in the process of testing and control is growing. The emerging civil society institutes want to take part in overseeing the process of the EGE and the education reform overall. These non-governmental organizations also have reasons to believe that the process of testing is corrupt and they represent public concerns. According to the assessment of the President of the All-Russian Education Fund, Sergey Komkov, the major problem of the EGE is in strengthening of corruption in education. He asserts that "With the introduction of the EGE corruption not only moved to a new level, but changed qualitatively. Earlier, higher education tutors were considered as corruptioners, because they were taking money for the preparation of applicants for the entry examinations. Now, even more money goes to the fraudsters who 'arrange' necessary results for the EGE. At the same time they add nothing to the high school students' knowledge."²⁸

The Director of the Federal Testing Center, Vladimir Hlebnikov, also admits the fact of corruptness of the EGE. He tends to consider corruption in the EGE as a result of the Russian mentality and blames the public for not being honest and trying to get around the rules and laws. Hlebnikov complains: "We could not win over corruption in 600 higher education institutions and now we want to eradicate corruption in 15 thousand testing centers."²⁹ He thinks that unlike their Western counterparts, Russian pupils rely on cheating and outside help during the examinations while their parents are ready to use different means, including family members, friends and acquaintances, and money, in order for their children to receive necessary high grades. Hlebnikov points to the fact that in Kazakhstan and Belarus proper order in the testing centers is guaranteed by the special law enforcement agencies and secret services. He also admits

the fact that in Russia, with its huge territory and fifteen thousand testing centers, it would be impossible to have everything under control. He concludes that a massive leakage of information about the standardized tests is just a question of time. The recent scandal with the EGE's Russian language test being posted on the web prior to the test proves that Hlebnikov's statement turned out to be a prophetic one.

The amassing critiques of the EGE and its vulnerability to corruption lead to another issue, namely, whether the test should be the only criterion for making admissions decisions in colleges. A Member of the Science, Culture, Education, and Healthcare Committee of the Soviet of Federation³⁰ Zinaida Dragunkina suggests that the EGE should not be designated as the only form of testing the knowledge obtained in school and especially in college. She supports the other forms of testing and criteria used in admissions decisions as well, including additional tests and examinations in the subject matter of the chosen major, competitions, Olympiads, and interviews.³¹ Dragunkina also points out that colleges often are faced with applicants with high EGE scores who are not able to pass the entry examinations. This mismatch appears to be suspicious. She gives an example of Moscow Mining University, where only two out of ten applicants with high EGE scores were able to pass entry examinations in mathematics. Apparently, the EGE results were not accounted for in the university.

Estimates of academic corruption

Numerous accusations of corruption as related to higher education, admissions and academic process, and, more recently, the standardized test, necessitate presenting some estimates about the scale and scope of corruption in the nation's education industry. Publishing corruption estimates drives the media sources' rankings up. The Higher School of Economics in

Moscow conducted research on corruption in education and came out with the following astounding estimates: During the 2002-2003 academic year Russians spent 26.5 billion rubles on informal payments for their children's education. Of this money, 21.4 billion rubles were spent on bribes in admissions and in grading in colleges.³²

Estimates of corruption in education are a mixture of rationality, sarcasm, and a wild fantasy. Moreover, all of these characteristics may be found in the same article. Lebedev's article titled "Corruption tax in HEIs: how to fight it?" is a good example of such a mixture. While the title indicates a quite rational economics-like understanding of corruption, the article itself presents some estimates of corruption given in very sarcastic language: "The Minister of Education and former rector of RUDN³³ Vladimir Filippov was the first to provide the specific numbers. During the few years of his job as the Minister his former colleagues from the Council of Rectors turned into the worst enemies of the Minister-reformer. They refused to accept the EGE, which the 'Filippov', Bolotov', and Co' Partnership advertised as a licensed remedy from corruption. The rectors should have been exposed. But the minister remembered that he only had one landing pad on reserve in case of resignation, the same RUDN. That is why everything happened as in the anecdote: 'Patient, do you have AIDS? Yes, but very little...' Filippov modestly said that 'there are hundreds of thousands of dollars in education.' Therefore, we need to introduce the EGE soon in order to free the applicants from the unpleasant necessity to pay bribes.

The Minister was responded to by the Rector of Moscow State University, Victor Sadovnichy: 'The turnout of shadow funds in education is equal to 5 billion rubles,' - credibly commented the owner of Vorob'evykh Mountains.³⁴ Interestingly, Filippov did not argue: the sum was, apparently, taken from a ceiling (out of nowhere, author), and a ceiling in Moscow State

University is high. The third was Georgy Satarov. Based on the results of the research conducted by 'INDEM'³⁵ he has compared the scale of corruption in education to the corruption market on the roads (traffic police corruption, author). With that we lived: officials quoted Filippov, the rectors (with the indispensable clause 'it is not about us') quoted Sadovnichy, and the rest quoted Satarov. Everyone knew everything about himself/herself. At the same time, taking a look into someone else's pocket is not nice, and what for?"³⁶

Difficulties in presenting realistic assessments or estimates for the total volume of corruption in the education industry are faced by all who comment on the issue and, at the same time, they try to be more or less reasonable and credible. Credible information in the sphere of corruption is traditionally lacking. Komkov says that "There is no one fixed price-list. But I suppose that an 'A' on the EGE, i.e. 90 to 96 points, can cost as high as \$3 thousand. If an applicant has to take three or four entry examinations, the cost of entering a higher education institution will be on average \$10-12 thousand. As you know, the well-known Order #14 of the Rosobrazovanie³⁷ made the EGE required in all regions that take part in the 'experiment'. It means that we are talking about millions of applicants. So, there is huge money in it, and there are numerous ways of bilking the population."³⁸ Here one can see clearly an attempt to rationalize the process of estimating the total potential volume of corruption.

Estimates are presented not only about the volume of corruption and the possible size of bribes, but the level of corruption in the EGE as well. Komkov says that, as in previous years, in 2006 there were several regions with suspiciously high EGE results. He lists Mordoviya, Kaluzhskaja oblast', and Bashkortostan and points to the fact that, in these regions, EGE results were 5 to 6 and sometimes 8 times higher than on average in Russia. Komkov points out that "Even in Moscow, where the level of instruction is sufficiently high, and where the EGE is taken

by high school students voluntarily, which means that the students are well-prepared for the test, the results are only 2-2.5 times higher than the average.”³⁹ Komkov claims that he personally traveled all over Mordoviya and Bashkortostan and that he did not find any credible reason why the results would be so high. He suggests that high test scores might have been arranged by the regions’ administrations. However, he misses the fact that these two regions were among the first sixteen where the EGE had been conducted since 2001.

The Head of the Federal Testing Center, Hlebnikov, also points out that in some of the districts of Bashkortostan up to 85 percent of all high school graduates received ‘A’s in mathematics. He says that according to the reports, the highest test scores in the country were received in the village of Kil’mez’ in Kirovskaja oblast’, and he expresses his doubt concerning the objectivity of the results.⁴⁰ At the same time, in some other regions the results of the EGE were disastrous. In Dagestan, in 2006, 27 percent of all the high school graduates failed the Russian language test. The same problem can be found in Yakutiya. Supporters of the EGE use these facts to underline the objectivity of the EGE as the national test.⁴¹

Both those who are in opposition to the test and those who are in support of the test use the media to advance their agenda. Group interests and political agendas in education often go beyond the simple discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of introducing the EGE. Lebedev points out that the scrupulous calculations of the total amount of bribes in education is nothing but the legitimization of the educational modernization projects as a cost-saving strategy. In order to support this argument, he refers to the findings presented by the Higher School of Economics. Kuz’minov estimates that every ruble spent on the EGE saves two rubles spent on the entry examinations and 16 rubles spent by families, including payments for tutoring services, transportation to and from the higher education institution, and bribes.⁴²

Civil society is mentioned by the interviewers as a form of influence on the EGE through the governmental structures. Komkov states that, based on his complaint, the Office of the Attorney General is in process of preparing the formal letter to the Supreme Court that would contest Order #14 of the Ministry of Science and Education as contradictory to the legislation and the Constitution. He notes that if the Order is annulled, then higher education institutions will be able to decide on their own if they want to consider the results of the EGE in admissions. In Komkov's view, "In this case part of all the applicants, who had already bought the results of the EGE, will lose their money. I assume that a certain part of all the higher education institutions will refuse to acknowledge the results of the EGE and will conduct the traditional entry examinations."⁴³

Appeals to the public and reliance on emerging civil society institutions are not rare. Sadovnichy calls on the public to take part in the fight against corruption and emphasizes the necessity to fight corruption together in order to be successful.⁴⁴ The Head of Rosobrnadzor,⁴⁵ Victor Bolotov, claims that his department investigates regions with suspiciously high EGE scores as well as the regions and particular testing centers about which there are complaints from the public. He says that they maintain an on-line interactive dialog where many high school graduates complain about the violations that take place in testing centers. As a result, some of the officials responsible for these violations were dismissed. Bolotov concludes that "We will not be able to solve this problem without the participation of civil society. That is why I often call on your participation in the supervisory boards in the testing centers. The rule is posted on our website that every educational institution must include you in such an overseeing board, unless your children study in this school. And write us about the disadvantages and problems that you see in the way the EGE is designed and conducted."⁴⁶

In distinction of some hints on the necessity of the broader public participation and civil society's involvement in general, the Ministry of the Interior has its traditional approach to the problem of corruption. There was a decision made after the meeting in mid-2006 to form an inter-ministerial working group focused on protection of the rights of participants of educational process as well as prophylactics of criminal activities in the education industry. This group was intended to include representatives from the Ministry of Science and Education, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Justice, and The High Commissioner in human rights in the Russian Federation.⁴⁷

The discussion and suggestions

High cost of education and a growing demand for higher education from the population, along with the low salaries of the faculty and staff create a necessary ground for corruption. An increase in public perceptions of corruption in higher education, oftentimes supported by the media, facilitates a further increase in corruption as well as in the total amount of graft accumulated by the faculty and staff. Newly designed rules and mechanisms of admissions policies and administering entry examinations appear to be nothing but an attempt of self-deception.

Educational leaders point to certain operational, managerial, and technical innovations as to good working tools utilized to fight corruption. The Rector of MGU claims novelty of introducing a lottery-type process of determining the content of entry examinations. This is now done 15-20 minutes prior to the beginning of the test.⁴⁸ He suggests that it helped to reduce perceptions that the topics for the essays are known well before the beginning of the examinations and that they are for sale. He also highlights yet another invention. Namely, all the

Russian language tests are conducted in one day and then the papers are collected, moved to the separate library building, and graded all in one day. Rector Sadovnichy claims that this “know how” of moving all the coded papers in a separate building guarantees objectivity in grading and suggests that the same technique will be used next year for the mathematics tests as well.

The EGE as an instrument of fighting corruption may be nothing but another technicality. Sadovnichy’s offerings and suggestions are also technicalities that are called to legitimize continuation of the entry examinations as an alternative to the EGE and preserve the right of making admissions decisions based on the results of the entry examinations. Instead, promoters of the EGE prize the gluing technology used to seal the envelopes in which tests are delivered to the testing centers. One of the leaders of the Federal testing center confirms that the envelopes are made of a special chemical material and once opened, cannot be sealed again. In his view this will prevent any fraud and attempts to learn the content of the tests prior to their beginning.

The Head of the All-Russian Education Fund, Komkov, has the opposite view on that same technicality. He blames not only the EGE, but the companies that benefit from organizing the test: “The most outrageous cases are being reported in the regions where the EGE is administered based on the system, offered by the company KROK-Incorporated. This year the system is used in 21 regions. All the KIMs (control and measurement materials) with the correct answers arrive to these regions in advance. All of them are named: they specify not only full name of the test-taker, but even the place where he will be seated. As I found out, these materials are sent not to the local education departments, but to the postal addresses of individuals! Can you imagine how it looks in reality?! What can prevent these individuals from distributing already filled out test forms to the ‘right’ guys? Nothing! 90-100 points are guaranteed to those

who paid. Needless to say, the waiting line is created by those who want to pay a bribe in exchange for the necessary grade.”⁴⁹

In order to sort out the most important determinants from the rest, one should consider first of all economics and demographics in the country and in the education industry. While the economy is now booming after a decade-long crisis and stagnation, the number of school students declines, as does population overall. The Minister of Science and Education, Andrey Fursenko, points out that the number of school students in Russia will decline one-third in the next year or two down to around thirteen million. He says that this number has already declined by five million during the past few years.⁵⁰ This process was recognized for quite sometime. Sadovnichy asserted in 2001 that because of the birth rate decrease, there will be no students in the country soon: “I have data that, for instance, six thousand entered University of Mordovia⁵¹ this year, and 7200 were born in the republic.”⁵²

Stable decrease in population will inevitably lead to a drastic decline in the enrollment numbers in higher education institutions. So far this process is being slowed down by the numerous specialists who study for the second degree, including some former engineers who now need a degree in economics, because they serve in the customs services, or former historians who need a degree in accounting, because they work in small private firms. However, in the long run, the lack of students will only be partially compensated by the inflow of students from the other former Soviet republics and from the developing nations. The projections point to the fact that soon the number of places in Russian higher education institutions, licensed and accredited by the government in accordance with all the requirements, will be higher than the number of those who would be willing to receive higher education, including distance learning, correspondence programs, and re-training.

Lebedev criticizes comments about the selection of most talented and gifted children and concludes that the process is “nothing but a selection of wealthy parents. If one is to look on the modernization projects offered by the Higher School of Economics from this point of view, one would understand that they will only make corruption in education worse.”⁵³ In his view, the rapid decline of the number of children in the country that has already led to the decline in the number of high school graduates makes entry examinations unnecessary. Indeed, the number of places in higher education institutions will soon be higher than the number of those who would like to obtain higher education.

The real competition is not for places in colleges, but for the state-funded places in colleges. The number of the state-funded places in higher education institutions declines in absolute terms. Minister Fursenko says that the number of the state-funded places in the Russian higher education institutions will be reduced. He pointed toward the fact that while the law guarantees the state funding for 170 students per every 10000 population, in fact the state funds more.⁵⁴

The Director of the Department of the State Policy in Education, Isaak Kalina, assures that the federal higher education institutions will be able to enroll in the state-funded places 529 thousand students in 2007, of which 372 thousand will be full-time students in the day-time programs. The number of the state-funded places will be reduced only in humanities, economics and management, and pedagogical sciences and education, because there is no sufficient demand for these qualifications in the labor market. At the same time, the number of the state-funded places in vocational schools will increase one percent.⁵⁵

Komkov establishes the question of why is it necessary to consider the EGE as a prerequisite for entering higher education. He criticizes supporters of the EGE for their

adherence to it as an ideal measurement tool for the academic progress and success achieved by the high school students. They think that the EGE is good because it presents a real picture of the knowledge of the high school graduates. Komkov says that “May be this is right. But why then the EGE is at the same time plays a role of an entry examination in the higher education institution!?! This should not be the case!”⁵⁶ In this case, however, all the growing importance of the EGE will vanish. If the standardized test will not serve the role of the single most important criterion in the selection process and admissions decisions, especially to the state-funded places, then it will only be left with its function of control over the high school outcomes. This function will denigrate the EGE to the yet another useless threshold in academic life that can easily be ignored.

One of the fundamental processes that take place in the Russian education is de-facto privatization of the supply of educational services. Tuition in the leading universities in Russia increases steadily. The cost of one year of studies in the most popular majors, including economics, finance, management, international business, and public relations grew approximately 25 percentage points in just one year, from 2006 to 2007. Cost of economics education in Moscow State University increased from \$8000 to \$9000 per annum, in Moscow State Institute of International Relations, from \$8000 to \$12000 per annum, and in the Financial Academy, from \$5000 to \$8000 per annum. The Higher School of Economics and Russian University of People’s Friendship will charge \$10000 and \$8000, respectively.⁵⁷ These prices are not as high as in the US and Western Europe, but still unaffordable for the majority of Russians. Educational loans may be a solution and some of the private banks start issuing educational loans.

Growing commercialization and de-facto privatization of the provision of educational services, especially in higher education, leads to the need for educational loans. Educational

loans may help to ease the tension between the growing cost of education and relatively small incomes of poor families and households in economically disadvantaged regions. The government is planning introduction of educational loans for college students that would cover their studies for up to six years. Some commercial banks are entering this new area of financial services as well. Very soon Russian students will be able to receive educational credits of up to 140 thousand rubles.⁵⁸ Credits are available for both covering tuition and cost of living. Governmental credits may be supplemented by the educational loans from the private banks-lenders, especially in cases when students study in the most prestigious and expensive universities, located in Moscow and other large cities with the high cost of living.

In addition to the growing proportion of the for-tuition places in colleges and growing informal payments in elementary, secondary, and high schools, the EGE promises to be a big business as well. Officials and private companies involved in the emerging testing industry already started fighting for the governmental contracts and discrediting their competitors. Komkov criticizes testing company KROK and says that “the EGE is not the first scandal in which this company is involved. I will recall just the most significant ones: errors in calculations of the votes conducted based on the system GAS-“Vybory”; fraud in the process of computerization of Russian schools; and scandal around the competition for the contract to conduct population census in 2002. Fraudulent deals of KROK with the EGE will be exposed by the Attorney General. For now I will tell you that EGE will fail due to the faults of this company. This will unavoidably lead to political scandals and resignations, including first of all, the current Minister of Education and Science Fursenko.”⁵⁹

The system of higher education in the Russian Federation is being reformed in accordance with the Bologna Declaration. This planned conformity, however, is only true for the

academic standards, and to a lesser extent for the content of educational programs and academic process. The future system of educational financing and management in Russia may be similar to the US higher education. Accordingly, the major steps forward are introduction of the standardized test and both governmental and private educational loans. The critics of the educational reform based on the principles of the Bologna Declaration predict possible collapse of the initiative.⁶⁰ They ignore the fact that the education system, along with the other sectors of the economy, is transferring to the market-type basis. This process appears to be irreversible. Similar processes occur in all the educational systems of the former Soviet republics. Some of them are relatively slow with introducing the national standardized tests, as Ukraine, while others are already ahead of Russia, such as Kazakhstan.

Lastly, partial withdrawal of the state from education funding necessitates new forms of control. The government is now actively seeking such forms of control and negotiates less autonomy for the Russian Academy of Sciences and the leading universities in exchange for some guaranteed federal funding.⁶¹ The government seeks its right to appoint the leader of the Russian Academy of Sciences and offers status of national university along with the guaranteed federal funding to Moscow State University in exchange for the right to appoint its rector.

Conclusions

There are three major trends overlapping in the Russian educational reform. These trends or processes exist on different levels. On the fundamental level, there is an ongoing process of commoditization of education, transition of the education system to the market basis. On the functional level, there is a process of transition from the system where education was funded by the government through the redistribution of budget funds to the system where higher education

institutions are funded by the immediate consumers of educational services, i.e. students and their parents. The way access to higher education is regulated also changes. Transition from the HEI's run entry examinations to the selection process based on the results of the standardized national tests takes place. Finally, on the operational level, supporters of the EGE argue for its necessity and objectivity, and call for its improvements, while those in opposition to the EGE offer a variety of technical measures to fight corruption in admissions.

The national media pays equal attention to all of the trends listed above. It presents points of view of both supporters of the reform and those in opposition to the reform. The process of introduction of the EGE occurs while the education industry experiences growth in for-tuition programs and the country experiences a demographic crisis. The education reform is not limited to the introduction of the standardized test. It is much broader than that. The media highlights problems of higher education, including corruption, in the context of socio-economic transformations.

The rhetoric of educators and public officials in regard to the EGE develops based on its own logic. Initially, the media highlighted the project of standardized test along with the project of introducing educational vouchers. Later, the idea with the vouchers failed, and they were immediately taken off the media's menu. Instead, the major focus was on the idea of the EGE confronting corruption in education. Later, it became obvious that the EGE itself is not free of corruption. This facilitated a discussion about possible improvements and modernization of the EGE. Finally, an obvious trend of reduction of the state-funded places in higher education gave way to the discussion of the necessity of educational loans.

Despite all the opposition that the EGE faces among the leading educators and legislators, including The Chairman of The Council of Federation, Mironov, and numerous other Members

of the Russian parliament and rectors of higher education institutions, the government continues implementation of the reform. Even though, as follows from the media reports and comments, the EGE will not solve the problem of corruption in education, its full scale country-wide implementation at this point appears to be a question of time.

Notes

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