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# Malpractices in the Russian Higher Education System: Implications for EU-Russian Education and Science Cooperation

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# MALPRACTICES IN THE RUSSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM: IMPLICATIONS FOR EU-RUSSIAN EDUCATION AND SCIENCE COOPERATION

## ABSTRACT

A number of malpractices, including corruption, cheating and abuse of power by superiors flourish in the Russian higher education system. As authorities turn a blind eye to at least some of such problems, this leads to a devaluation of Russian diplomas and degrees and a normalization of misconduct in academic environment. This (as well as similar practices in some EU member states' universities) could reveal itself in EU-Russian cooperation in various ways: the use of credentials obtained in improper ways by some participants, distribution of positions within joint projects not by merit but by connections, appropriation and embezzlement of project funds etc.

Unfortunately, the EU and EU-based actors currently have no efficient levers to promote anti-corruption reforms and academic integrity in the Russian higher education system. These levers could potentially appear if the Bologna process quality assurance criteria are revised and if educational anti-corruption monitoring projects are supported in terms of funding and distribution of their results. If malpractices in Russian higher education are fought efficiently, it can provide more opportunities for EU high-rated universities to offer their programs on the Russian market jointly with their Russian partners.

## INTRODUCTION

The Russian higher education system is heavily infected by various malpractices, the scope of which is wider than either corruption or academic misconduct. Such malpractices include not only bribery, clientelism, shadow paybacks in procurement, or embezzlement, but also plagiarism, exam cheating, abuse of power by university management, forcing students and professors to support pro-government politicians, and other unpleasant practices. In the vast majority of Russian universities mechanisms for maintaining academic integrity (such as university self-government, ethics codes, professional unions, student trust lines, internal and external audit) are weak, imitative, or non-existent. No wonder that public opinion polls regularly place higher education among the most corrupted social spheres: for instance, according to a 2011 poll of the Public Opinion Foundation, universities were ranked third on the everyday corruption market after drivers' relations with car inspection and child care<sup>1</sup>.

The paper tries to assess the pervasiveness of malpractices in Russian higher education system, the influence of these malpractices on the EU-Russian

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1 FOM (2011), 'Bytovaya korruptsiya v Rossii', 15 June, <http://goo.gl/VmkTd>.

interaction in the field of higher education and, finally, the incentives that the EU has to induce Russia to combat such malpractices better. The paper's structure follows this agenda.

## **RANGE AND REASONS OF MALPRACTICES IN THE RUSSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM**

### ***Range and reasons***

Like most other Post-Soviet countries, Russia is often mentioned as a country where corruption and other educational malpractices are widespread<sup>2</sup>. These malpractices are caused by various reasons.

The economic crisis of the 1990s led to a sharp decrease in salaries and the social status of university lecturers, whose income was typically (especially outside Moscow and St. Petersburg) reduced to the level obtained by the non-qualified work force (for instance, shop assistants). Additionally, since 1998 the academic workload in universities increased dramatically, reaching 800–1000 academic hours per year. The economic recovery of the 2000s didn't lead to a substantial increase in university teachers' incomes because infrastructure development rather than increasing teaching staff's salaries became the key priority of state education funding. Meanwhile, there is a huge gap between the salaries of ordinary university teachers and university top managers who typically earn not several hundreds<sup>3</sup>, but from several thousands up to tens of thousands of Euros a month<sup>4</sup>. Though this problem became a focus of public attention in 2011–2012 and the government has taken some steps to diminish the gap in salaries, the information about the earnings of university management is still not transparent.

In these conditions many lecturers have to search for additional sources of income. Some find supplementary jobs in other education institutions, some concentrate on private tuition, others write dissertations for bogus scholars or even term papers for students<sup>5</sup>. A number of university teachers receive shadow income, passively accepting or actively extorting bribes. According to an online

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2 See for example: Chapman, D. (2002), *Corruption and the Education Sector*, <http://goo.gl/C0S5u>.

3 In a provincial university of the European part of Russia a Docent (equivalent to Associate Professor) typically earns 250–300 Euro after taxation.

4 In 2009 the difference between the income of the Nizhny Novgorod State University rector and the typical incomes of the same university's docents was approximately 100 times. See: Golunov, S. (2011), 'Printsy i nishchiye ili rossii'skiy vuz kak bananovaya respublika v miniatiure', *Troitskiy variant*, 26 April, no. 77, <http://goo.gl/gSDT2>.

5 Three years before, a job offer of this kind in Volgograd advertised a salary that was three times higher than that time's Associate Professor's salary of the author.

survey conducted in 2011, bribery practices sometimes occur in 68% of Russian universities and flourishing in 25% universities<sup>6</sup>.

Clientelism, which was widespread already in the Soviet era, went on flourishing during the post-Soviet period. Using their connections with the teaching staff and the university administration, well-connected students get unfair marks while bitter-enders among the teaching staff are pressurized by superiors. Members of the teaching staff could be 'persuasively asked' not just to informally pass a failed student, but to give immediately and unconditionally good marks which would allow a student to succeed in passing the examination session, to have a right for receiving a stipend or even to receive a diploma with honours. Clientelism and nepotism sometimes also matter for appointing a person to attractive positions in a university. It is especially typical for private institutions, many of which willingly give attractive jobs to relatives of a president or a rector<sup>7</sup>.

The introduction of the Unified State Examination (USE), formally providing equality of entrants' opportunities, which is assured by separating universities from taking entrance exams, did not reduce the scale of machinations, although it did change their typical schemes. The corruption relationships moved from the university level (where there were the so called 'rectors' lists'<sup>8</sup>) to schools and the local educational administration departments, as well as to the regions where the process of going through tests is especially corrupt<sup>9</sup>.

The current system of university funding greatly depends on the number of students who enter and somewhat on the statistics of students' performance. That is why university administrations informally pressurize scrupulous teachers, trying to prevent not only the dismissing of students (especially fee-paying ones), but also giving 'too' high of a number of bad marks to poorly performing students. Similarly, dissertation councils, which have an insufficient number of theses defended or give negative evaluations of dissertations, are at risk of being closed<sup>10</sup>; that is why the members of such councils often turn a blind eye to dissertations of poor quality.

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6 See: *Carrier.ru* (2011), 'Vzyatki v vuzah', <http://goo.gl/7gsQ9>.

7 In the course of my research conducted at the beginning of 2013, I identified about 60 private and only several state higher education institutions, the governing bodies of which include two or more relatives. This data is incomplete as many private institutions do not publish any information about their governing bodies at their sites.

8 Rectors' lists were informal lists of those university entrants, who according to the rector's informal order had to be given necessary marks to be qualified for entering a university.

9 It is widely believed that the process of doing a USE is especially corrupted in some regions of the North Caucasus, especially in the republic of Dagestan. According to some reports, 'USE-tourism' is getting frequent: school-leavers from different regions come to Dagestan especially to take the exams. See, for example: *Bolshoy gorod* (2012), 'Razgovory v gorode', 13 July, <http://goo.gl/LR4MT>.

10 See for example: Ziganshina, N. (2011), 'Dissertatsii v pisalis' v vertikal', *Gazeta.ru*, 5 December, <http://goo.gl/A9wdh>.

Expanding access to the Internet made the problem of student plagiarism highly important. More and more students choose to download or copy and paste texts from the Internet instead of writing papers themselves. Actually for a considerable part (if not a majority<sup>11</sup>) of students the process of studying turns into a mechanical copying and pasting of texts from the Internet together with using technological aids during exams. The situation with plagiarism among the teaching staff is not cardinally better. Some of them, being overloaded with their work, deliver to students lectures consisting mainly just of text portions borrowed from the Internet<sup>12</sup>. Plagiarism in academic works is also widespread; ironically it can be illustrated by examining a selection of articles (slightly more than 20) on corruption in the Russian higher education system<sup>13</sup>, out of which at least four, according to my assessments, contain possible cases of large-scale plagiarism themselves. The prevalence of plagiarism is supported by the availability of firms working quite legally and offering their services in writing any papers from essays up to dissertations and monographs. While for a small fee such firms are ready to produce works based on text plagiarized from the Internet and library books, for a larger fee some also can provide a client with original research, carried out by highly-qualified professionals.

Regretfully, the vast majority of Russian higher education institutions have no clear anti-plagiarism policies: plagiarizing students can usually resubmit their term or graduate papers without any sanctions if plagiarism is found, while caught academics are usually not punished at all. Only a handful of institutions (such as Higher School of Economics, MGIMO, Moscow and St. Petersburg State Universities) have documented anti-plagiarism policies, though it is not widely known if these policies are actively implemented in practice.

As it was already mentioned, the Russian higher education system is highly authoritarian and hypercentralized. Elections of university principals are typically just formal as rectors have a wide range of opportunities to manipulate the composition of voters, appointing and changing persons at those administrative positions that give the right to vote. In its turn, the Ministry of Education and

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11 According to a survey conducted by the Higher School of Economics, approximately 50% of students admitted to plagiarizing in the process of preparing written assignments. See: Ivoilova, I. (2009), 'Polovina studencheskih referatov i kursovyh skachivaetsya iz Interneta', *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 20 January, <http://goo.gl/8sxMG>. In late 2008 the author checked for plagiarism the essays of more than 100 students of "Area Studies" and "International Relations" programmes and found plagiarism in 2/3 of the cases.

12 In such cases the lectures can sometimes consist of students' course works and essays uploaded to web-sites for other students who don't want to "waste" time on writing essays themselves.

13 These articles on corruption in higher education were identified by keywords via Elibrary.ru (that is the largest online database of Russian academic articles) search engine.

Science has vast power both to impose on universities their candidates for rectors' positions (e.g. through dismissing a previous rector and appointing an acting one who controls the following pseudo-elections) and to disqualify any of alternative candidates on non-transparent grounds. Such a system creates a fertile ground both for abuse of power by the university leadership and for the development of shadow clientelist relations between rectors and their patrons at the upper levels.

Commercialization of the institutions of higher education has opened a wide range of opportunities for unscrupulous university top managers who can use their power, which is weakly limited by institutional self-governance, for private purposes. They can get income from privileging some suppliers of goods and services for their educational institutions in exchange for kickbacks<sup>14</sup>. Another informally mentioned practice (the existence of which, however, is difficult to document) is collecting "tributes" from successful collectives who have received funding for their projects: administrators who actually don't work in these projects receive payments as if they worked, go to conferences abroad instead of the real project participants, are mentioned as co-authors of monographs and articles without actually making any serious contributions to them. University top managers buy luxury cars at the expense of the universities<sup>15</sup>, use those cars as their personal property and from time to time go abroad for touristic purposes under the pretext of concluding agreements on cooperation with foreign universities.

Of course, Russian higher education system does not exist in a vacuum, as it is not isolated from society with its pressing political and economic realities. Even the top elements of the Russian science and higher education system are vulnerable to pressures from above. For instance, in 1998, the Higher Attestation Commission had to assign a Doctor of Philosophical Sciences' degree to the leader of the influential parliamentary faction of the Liberal Democratic Party, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (whose thesis was defended in Moscow State University), despite its initial reluctance to do so, because Mr Zhirinovskiy, contrary to existing rules, had no Candidate of Sciences' degree by that time<sup>16</sup>, while the thesis itself, according to a 'Just Russia' parliamentary faction deputy Ilya Ponomarev, did not correspond to any qualification requirements both by its length (allegedly just 88 pages) and by

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14 In 2012 a rector of Northern State Medical University was sentenced to jail for such a practice. See: Orefyev, V. (2012), 'Prigovor po delu Pavla Sidorova: srok, shtraf i lisheniye nagrad', *Bizes-klass*, 15 June, <http://goo.gl/bWSBZ>.

15 In 2012 there was a high-profile case of scandals with attempts by some universities to buy luxury cars for their management personnel. The price of these cars exceeded 160 thousand dollars. See: *RIA Novosti* (2012), 'Minobrnauki prokomentirovalo zayavki vuzov na zakupki dorogih inomarok', 1 September, <http://goo.gl/IM16k>.

16 Vernidub, A. (2004), 'Dissertatsii Zyuganova i Berezovskogo ischezli, Putina – "mozhno dazhe kserokopirovat"', *Kompromat.ru*, 7 June, <http://goo.gl/aKfni>.

its bibliography (that predominantly contains references to Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's own works)<sup>17</sup>. Another glaring example of the same type was a scandalous story with the press secretary of the Investigative Committee at the Public Prosecutor's Office, Vladimir Markin, whose higher education diploma, obtained under dubious circumstances<sup>18</sup>, was cancelled by the Federal Service of Supervision in the Sphere of Education and Science (Rosobrnadzor) after a check conducted in November 2011. However, already in January 2012 Rosobrnadzor reversed its decision and again recognized this diploma as legitimate<sup>19</sup>.

As for the university leadership, it is very risky not to be loyal to their patrons at the governmental level. It is not wise for university principals to upset relations with provincial authorities or representatives of various agencies (fire, sanitary etc. inspections, law enforcement etc.), who wish to defend dissertations, protect their children from bad marks, or mobilize students to support pro-governmental parties and politicians during elections. A 'too principled' university head can be potentially replaced by a more loyal one or can provoke fault-finding inspections, paralyzing the university's work<sup>20</sup>. It seems that only a few heads of prominent higher education institutions can successfully resist such pressures due to their connections to the top political circles.

No wonder that some of those in university leadership often have to serve as intermediaries, retranslating pressure by powerful external actors on those ordinary members of the university teaching staff and researchers who do not want to give an undeserved good mark to a well-connected student. Such members of the teaching staff, venturing to refuse informal requests from their chiefs, risk being left without bonuses in the future, not to be allowed to go on business trips and, finally, of finding themselves among the first candidates for being fired because of current severe job cuts in the Russian higher education system<sup>21</sup>. Thus, for both

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17 Blog of Ilya Ponomaryov, <http://goo.gl/BBzr4>. It should be noted that Vladimir Zhirinovskiy vigorously denies all accusations, arguing that the dissertation that Ilya Ponomaryov has is fake. See: *Spravedlivo-online.ru* (2013), ' "Poyedinok": Ponomaryov vs Zhirinovskiy (21.02.2013)' <http://goo.gl/uYggK>. The problem is that the text of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's dissertation is not available for public access in Russian libraries.

18 According to State Duma deputy Aleksandr Khinshtein, the inspection revealed that Vladimir Markin was initially enrolled to the fourth year and even managed to pass 17 exams within one day of his study. See: Khinshtein, A. (2011), 'Nezachyot generala Markina', *Moskovskiy komsomolets*, 28 September, <http://goo.gl/SbLQC>.

19 *Stringer* (2012), 'Diplom Markina priznan legitimnym', 11 January, <http://goo.gl/7Ot7Z>.

20 For example, in the beginning of 2008, after receiving the EU's grant for monitoring Russian elections, the European University in St Petersburg was closed for several weeks as the fire inspection found violations of fire safety requirements. See: Pushkarskaya, A. (2008), 'Yevropeiskiy universitet vozobnovil rabotu', *Kommersant-online*, 25 March, <http://goo.gl/B96tf>.

21 This process is caused by a dramatic decrease in the number of students in Russia because of the demographic crisis.



university management and ordinary university teaching staff it is profitable to provide the mentioned shadow services for influential officials in order to secure desirable connections and other benefits.

In these circumstances obtaining second higher education or postgraduate degrees by influential officials<sup>22</sup> is considered as something common. Such a fashion among officials can be explained by prestigious consumption considerations and in some cases also by bonuses that are paid by many public institutions for having an additional graduate or postgraduate degree.

It is typically believed that dissertations, monographs and articles are written for unscrupulous officials or business people by their subordinates, individual scholars or by staff of numerous specialized firms, which take greater amounts for writing original texts and smaller amounts for rewriting Soviet or foreign works. While some shadow writers avoid plagiarising texts that can be easily found on the Internet<sup>23</sup>, others resort to this practice routinely. Plagiarism scandals, involving high-ranking holders of post-doctoral degrees, including Russian president Vladimir Putin himself<sup>24</sup>, governors<sup>25</sup>, ministers<sup>26</sup>, members of parliament, and even top officials of the Ministry of Education and Science,<sup>27</sup> occur periodically, but usually such high-standing persons are not punished.

In the longer term, taking into account the significant official and shadow income that the post of a university principal promises, there is a serious threat that these kind of positions would be attractive targets for officials with fraudulently obtained degrees who would wish to get such a position either as a step in a political carrier<sup>28</sup> or in return for leaving voluntary some important high office. According to the result of a study of 541 biographies of rectors of Russian state and municipal universities, conducted by the author at the beginning of 2013, at least 10% of rectors defended their theses under dubious circumstances, most typically already working for a long time in high-standing full-time positions not related

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22 Many officials obtain both in random order: many prefer first to defend a thesis and afterwards to obtain a second or a third higher education.

23 Many of such firms guarantee their customers that a thesis will not contain plagiarism.

24 *Washington Times* (2006), 'Researchers peg Putin as a plagiarist over thesis', 24 March, <http://goo.gl/9FIEP>.

25 *Fond Istoricheskaya pamyat'* (2011), 'Novosti fonda', 25 May, <http://goo.gl/sWME5>.

26 *Aktualnaya istoriya*, 'O plagiata v doktorskoy dissertatsii V.R. Medinskogo', <http://goo.gl/t13rP>.

27 For instance, a former head of the Federal Education and Science Supervision Agency and a Member of Parliament Nikolai Bulayev was accused of large-scale plagiarism in his thesis in the beginning of 2013. See: <http://goo.gl/2bkih>.

28 Many rectors are members of the Russian dominant progovernment political party "United Russia", holding prominent position in this party at the provincial level.

to science<sup>29</sup>. Some of these rectors head very prestigious universities that have obtained special status from the Russian government.

Apart from top university officials, even ordinary university teaching positions, still publicly considered prestigious despite low salaries, sometimes are given through good connections to young relatives or friends of influential officials who can ask members of university leadership for this favour. For example, the author knows from a trustworthy source a story when a young person got a low-paid job of English language university teacher in a prestigious university in the city of Volgograd just because a representative of the provincial government asked the rector 'to help'.

Informal relations between university leadership and their political patrons often take on the form of what is sometimes characterized as political corruption<sup>30</sup>. Striving to strengthen their positions and to be less dependent on external actors, many rectors are often seeking to enhance their political influence, becoming powerful regional politicians as members or supporters of the ruling pro-governmental party, United Russia. Periodically university administrations pressurize faculty members and students, inducing them to vote for pro-governmental candidates, to come to their presentations, to participate in pro-governmental rallies<sup>31</sup>.

As for the influence of the economic environment on the Russian higher education system, it should be noted that the labour market demand is not sufficient to encourage universities to be more scrupulous about their reputations. As the bulk of graduates is typically employed by the services sector or become civil servants, they typically do not need to have high professional qualification, just an acceptable level of literacy, communication skills, diligence, reliability and loyalty to superiors are required. Yet, a university degree is traditionally the necessary formal condition of being employed. According to Petr Orekhovskiy, Russian business is dominated not by 'classic' companies who seek corporate profit maximization and personnel efficiency and are financially highly transparent, but 'gangs' that are indifferent to the quality of education (as well as to moral values) of the staff they employ, because loyalty valued more than high qualifications<sup>32</sup>.

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29 See: Golunov, S. (2013), 'Kvasifeodalizm vysshego obrazovaniya' *Troitskiy variant*, 26 February, no. 123, <http://goo.gl/2R6rE>.

30 Hallak, J. and Poisson, M. (2007), *Corrupt schools, corrupt universities: What can be done?*, Paris: IIEP, p. 29.

31 See for example: *Demagogy.ru* (2012), 'V transportnyh vuzah agitiruyut za Putina', 21 February, <http://goo.gl/l8d7O>; *Gazeta.ru* (2011), 'Studenty MFTI zhaluiutsya na davleniye: yesli «Yedinaya Rossiya» naberyot malo golosov, ne dostroyat obschezhitie', 24 November, <http://goo.gl/KqYdq>.

32 Orekhovskiy, P. (2011), 'Teoriya neyavnogo kontrakta', *Polit.ru*, 11 May, <http://goo.gl/s6CLv>.

## **Consequences**

Pervasiveness of malpractices has a wide range of consequences (largely negative ones) for the Russian higher education system. On the one hand, it should be mentioned that in the 2000s corruption has become an incentive for infrastructure modernization in higher education institutions, since after the introduction of the USE (that redistributed the relevant corruption incomes from enrollees of universities to schools and local education departments) kickbacks from construction and repair works, equipment and services procurement become an probably one of the most important sources of shadow income for corrupted university managers<sup>33</sup>.

On the other hand, malpractices in the education process lead to a devaluation of Russian higher education, since there is no guarantee that a diploma or a degree is obtained without resorting to plagiarism or connections. Pervasiveness of malpractices make these efforts vain, corrupting the younger generation and contributing to acceptance and adoption of patterns of unscrupulous behaviour by youngsters, "teaching them that cheating and bribing is an acceptable way to advance their careers, that personal effort and merit do not count; and that success comes rather from favouritism, manipulation and bribery"<sup>34</sup>. According to some researchers, Russian students are even more tolerant of corruption than those young people who don't study at universities<sup>35</sup>. Those who embezzle universities' money for private purposes directly or indirectly contribute to the low and diminishing salaries of ordinary academics. Finally, corruption in higher education also nourishes corruption in other spheres by various ways. For instance, it is widely believed that students can easily bribe doctors in order to get sick certificates and to be qualified for extending examination periods and I myself know many cases when students got such certificates allowing them to avoid expulsion under rather dubious circumstances.

## **Positive Trends and Countermeasures**

Of course, persistence of the above-mentioned malpractices doesn't mean that everything in the Russian higher education system is corrupted everywhere. First,

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33 The most recent case of a university principal's arrest was related to a procurement kickback: on 9 March 2013 a rector of the State University of Management Victor Kozbanenko was arrested on bribery charges. More specifically, he was accused of accepting a 175 000 euro (in equivalent) kickback from a cleaning company who wanted to secure a 1.45 million euro contract with the university. See: Chashkin, A. (2013), 'Uborka s "otkatom"', *Kommersant*, 11 March, p. 4.

34 Hallak and Poisson, op. cit., p. 56.

35 Rimsky, V. (2010), 'Sposobstvuyet li sistema vysshego obrazovaniya rasprostraneniyu korruptsii v Rossii', *Terra economicus*, vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 91–102; Titayev, K. (2005), 'Pochyom ekzamen dlya naroda? Etyud o korruptsii v vysshem obrazovanii', *Ekonomicheskaya sotsiologiya*, vol. 6, no. 2, p. 80.

for many officials, academics, and students it is a matter of principle not to offer or take bribes or cheat even if the conditions or their colleagues' examples induce them to do so. Second, a few leading universities (primarily in Moscow and St. Petersburg) are more consistent in fighting corruption and cheating than the vast majority of others: specifically, they have really working ethical codes and anti-plagiarism policies. Third, in some fields of study and research the situation looks much healthier than in others: for instance, it is much more difficult to graduate successfully from departments of physics or mathematics or to defend a doctoral thesis in these fields largely due to corruption or cheating, as these fields are too incomprehensible for non-professionals. On the contrary, such corruption and fraudulent practices are much more typical in the social sciences.

Finally, it should be noted that in the 2000s governmental control over higher education has been tightened significantly. This tightening, however, has been fragmentary, focusing primarily on preventing the misuse of funds and on ensuring that services offered by state higher education institutions fit a number of standard criteria (numbers of teachers with academic degrees, conformance of curricula and syllabi to formal requirements, availability of numerous activity reports etc.) and is much weaker concerning such issues as plagiarism, the abuse of power by superiors, procurement kickbacks, incentives for over-marking, the unfair distribution of salaries and other incomes between top university management and ordinary teachers, protecting students from extortions and teachers from illicit pressure, the implementation of public control and informational openness, the enforcement of ethical codes, and receiving feedback about vulnerabilities of the system. Because of the tightened bureaucratic control, an increasingly larger share of working time is spent on writing reports and less time on doing teaching and research, the deteriorating quality of which doesn't affect much an academic's status if formal requirements are observed. While bureaucratic staff, which has to deal with numerous checks and inspections, is growing in many universities, the number of teaching personnel is now cut because the number of students is diminishing in Russia.

## **THE IMPACT OF MALPRACTICES ON EU-RUSSIAN COOPERATION IN THE FIELD OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

It is very difficult to estimate the pervasiveness of such malpractices as the available information is overwhelmingly based on anecdotal evidence. However, such information, taken together with speculations, at least indicates the real and typical vulnerabilities that can be exploited by perpetrators of malpractices. Here are some of the typical malpractices related to EU-Russian cooperation.

1) *The use of credentials abroad that are obtained by improper ways.* As Heyneman, Anderson, and Nuraliyeva argue, this can bury the Bologna Process achievements. Indeed, recognition of the equivalence of diplomas obtained in corrupted universities by dishonest means and diplomas of highly-reputable universities “would constitute the educational equivalent in the European Union of unilateral disarmament”<sup>36</sup>.

It is not quite impossible that those graduates from Russian universities who obtained their diplomas by systematic resorting to cheating or connections, as well as persons, who defended fake theses, could achieve recognition of their credentials in the EU. Though some large prominent Russian state universities are trusted more than others, they overwhelmingly have no effective anti-corruption and anti-cheating policies allowing to prevent the production fake specialists. If such a person succeeds in obtaining a position in the EU, there is a high probability that she will resort to fraud at first convenience. A pseudo-academic, who defended a thesis in a fraudulent way, can use her/his degree for obtaining EU funding or to obtain an EU visa as a scholar. Vice versa, it is not impossible that a person, who obtained a degree in the EU by some fraudulent ways (e.g. just purchased it from a bogus university), could find a job in Russia, participate in Russian academic events or grant programmes.

2) *Academic tourism.* While to some limited extent it is a normal secondary motivation for an academic, it is dangerous when such a motivation becomes predominant and especially if it is actualised at the expense of other academics, students, and low-income universities.

Using their power, some university principals and their deputies travel to the EU supposedly to conclude cooperation agreements, but actually to have a good time. The author knows a case when a rector of a Russian state university travelled for this purpose to Canary Islands and after his return asked his subordinates to invent justification for this agreement (that, not surprisingly, didn't work at all later).

Various student or staff exchange and training programmes and academic events can be also used by administrators or academics with good connections. A head of a UK university department told the author several years ago that he and his colleagues were much surprised when their partners from a large Siberian university brought to the UK more than 30 people who all were “members of a football team” for participation in a friendly football match in the framework of a bilateral cooperation program.

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36 Heyneman, S., Anderson, K., and Nuraliyeva, N. (2008), ‘The Cost of Corruption in Higher Education’, in *Comparative Education Review*, vol. 52, no. 1, p. 22.

When joint programs are funded from EU sources, but the list of participants is formed by separate decisions of participating universities, there is a risk that some of such participants can be selected not by merit, but by their administrative position (rectors, heads of departments etc.) or by connections. The author was told about cases when even those leading researchers who initiated EU-Russian cooperation projects were replaced by those in favour with university's principals.

There are even some signs of business promoting academic tourism from Russia to the EU and other regions of the world. In 2011, among other similar announcements, I received junk mail from a company advertising conferences held three times a month during the entire year in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Bulgaria. The organizers did their best to attract as many post-Soviet researchers as possible: conference topics (such as "Days of Science", "Contemporary Academic Achievements" etc.) were made broad and vague. The main target group for such announcements is probably those who have power or connections to get funding from their universities for participation in these conferences.

3) *Appropriation and embezzlement of grant funds.* In many cases it is not very difficult in Russia to obtain a blank receipt or a 'second invoice' (stating different amount in comparison with the real one) from a supplier. Thus, there are many opportunities either to appropriate some part of funding or to spend it for unauthorized purposes. While ordinary low-paid scholars can consider such practices as an 'almost justified' way to get modest additional income by small-scale tricks of this kind, those who control the distribution of funding for large-scale institutional projects potentially have much more opportunities for personal enrichment.

These and other malpractices can have serious negative consequences for EU-Russian cooperation in the field of education and science. First, a significant share of money allocated for such projects can be spent in vain. Second, funding can be allocated to unworthy people who could force to the background their worthier competitors in inappropriate ways. It should be born in mind that not only Russian, but also EU academics can participate in these and other kinds of malpractices.

It looks tempting to solve such problems by unilateral restrictions. However, such measures could complicate cooperation for those law-abiding researchers for whose careers EU-Russian cooperation has crucial importance. It could be more sensible to stimulate a partner to promote academic integrity in its higher education system. However, does the EU have real leverages to induce Russia for such reforms?

## **IN WHAT WAYS CAN THE EU PROMOTE INTEGRITY IN THE RUSSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM?**

There are standard 'good practices' applied in different regions of the world in combating educational malpractices. A set of measures typically employed to combat higher education malpractices includes decentralisation of control over a higher education system (it is, however, recognised that if not supported by other listed measures, it can even trigger corruption<sup>37</sup>); the development of democratic governance, increasing information transparency, conducting independent external financial audits, the introduction of modern control technologies (e.g. the automation of data management); simplification and clarification of control and reporting requirements, efficient enforcement of existing anti-corruption rules and ethical codes, capacity building of staff and public self-government bodies concerning this enforcement, use of feedback and risk analysis while planning anti-corruption policies etc.<sup>38</sup> However, no internal reform of a higher education system guarantees crucial success insofar as this system exists in an aggressively corrupted environment. In order to defend universities from corruption pressure from powerful outside actors, either the external environment should be reformed as well, or, at least, universities should be granted large autonomy and audibility in information space to enable them to resist pressure.

In cases when national governments do not have much political will to fight corruption, the ability of international organizations and international cooperation programs to serve as a catalyst of anti-corruption reforms in higher education is estimated by analysts as somewhat ambiguous. While the importance of grants and projects of such organizations as UNESCO, the World Bank, and Transparency International is acknowledged, some researchers argue that in many cases international organizations and programs are inclined to turn a blind eye to corruption or feel satisfied with cosmetic measures against corruption in order to not be at loggerheads with the recipient countries' governments and not to provoke governmental discontent towards such institutions' activities<sup>39</sup>.

Nevertheless, it seems that EU-based actors have a range of possibilities to induce Russia to conduct anti-corruption reforms in the field of science and higher education in the following ways.

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37 See for example: Poisson, M. (2010), 'Corruption and Education', *Education policy booklet series*, no. 11, <http://goo.gl/05m3o>.

38 Ibid.

39 Sahlberg, P. (2009), 'The Role of International Organisations in Fighting Educational Corruption', in Heyneman, S. H. (ed.), *Buying your way into Heaven: Education and Corruption in International Perspective*, Rotterdam and Taipei: Sense Publishers, pp. 150–151.

1) *Reforming and specifying the Bologna process quality assurance criteria.* The Bologna process is a basis both for multilateral higher education cooperation and for EU-Russian bilateral cooperation. Quality assurance is one of the key priorities of the Bologna process<sup>40</sup> and it is the most relevant priority on which the struggle against corruption potentially can be based. Among other things, it promotes such useful mechanisms as external evaluations of universities' achievements<sup>41</sup>. The problem is that the struggle against corruption or supporting academic integrity are not in themselves important priorities of the Bologna process. This can be illustrated by the fact that the word 'corruption' is mentioned on conceptually insignificant occasions (in virtually all cases without any further analysing or conceptualizing the issue) only 12 times and the phrase "academic integrity" is mentioned in the same manner just eight times in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) site's searchable content<sup>42</sup>. No wonder that the non-EU participants of the Bologna process are not much induced to adopt the above-mentioned set of anti-corruption measures based on ensuring self-governance, transparency, the independence of control, defending rights or ordinary academics and students etc.

Thus, while some researchers believe that the EHEA provides mechanisms, which to some extent allow to pressurize corrupted higher education systems and universities by the threat of marginalization<sup>43</sup>, the author of this paper considers these mechanisms rather vague and generally not efficient. Hence, specific anti-corruption criteria should be introduced to the Bologna process. For their implementation the carrot-and-stick policy can be used: universities matching these criteria can be considered privileged and trusted partners while those that don't match can be marginalized.

2) *Specifying criteria of the leading international university ratings.* At least two of the most influential global university ratings – QS World University Rankings and Times Higher Education World University Rankings – are composed by EU-based (more precisely, UK-based) institutions. As in the case of Bologna process, criteria of such ratings do not clearly take into account corruption and academic integrity issues; thus it is quite possible for universities, allowing a considerable part of students and researchers to obtain their degrees by fraudulent means, to

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40 The Bologna Declaration of 19 June 1999, <http://goo.gl/JD4Ve>.

41 European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (2005), 'Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area', <http://goo.gl/aHYKE>.

42 The search was made using Google on 13.03.2013. In the vast majority of cases the issues were briefly mentioned either in country reports (most often Georgian and Romanian), or in overviews of conference presentations.

43 Bergan, S. (2009), 'The European Education Area as an Instrument of Transparency?', in Heyneman, S. H. (ed.), op. cit., pp. 131–132.



achieve high positions. Meanwhile, to achieve high positions for top universities in global rankings is a matter of prestige for Russian authorities: in particular, Russian president Vladimir Putin in 2012 has set a task according to that five Russian universities should be in the top one hundred of global university rankings by 2020<sup>44</sup>. Thus, making the ranking criteria more sensitive to corruption and academic integrity issues, which are typical for higher education outside the EU, would be great contribution of ranking agencies in promoting academic integrity not only in Russia but also in many of other countries worldwide.

3) *Joint EU-Russian diploma programmes*. While the level of public dissatisfaction and distrust of the Russian higher education system is high<sup>45</sup>, there is a significant potential for EU universities to expand their share in the Russian market by offering their diplomas in cooperation with Russian partners. If prestigious EU universities are interested in organising such programmes, they should take efficient measures to prevent the devaluation of their diplomas. On the other hand, the very opportunity to cooperate with a high-rated university from the EU and thus to attract more fee-paying students could influence some Russian universities to reform their governance, preventing corruption and ensuring academic integrity.

4) *Introducing EU grants stimulating academic integrity in universities outside the EU*. Such grants would likely be too small for large Russian state universities to induce them to conduct major reforms or to induce university principals to cede some part of their immense power over university collectives. However, such grants could be very attractive for some small private universities that could become “isles of integrity” and “growing points” in Russian the higher education system.

5) *Supporting anti-corruption monitoring by scholars and NGOs both in the EU and Russia*. The problem is that Russian initiatives can face strong resistance from powerful actors (e.g. universities headed by politically influential rectors) whose interests are damaged. NGOs obtaining foreign funding for conducting vaguely defined political activities<sup>46</sup> should be registered as ‘foreign agents’ and could easily be labelled as accomplices of foreign conspirators who would like to destabilize Russia by discrediting and undermining the ruling regime.

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44 *Newsland.com* (2012), ‘Putin raspriadilsya nachat reformy v obrazovanii’, 7 May, <http://goo.gl/2gOZf>.

45 See footnote 1.

46 In this context Russian legislation means under political activity either political actions aiming to change actual national policy or influence public opinion for this purpose. See: Federal Law “On Non-Commercial Organisations”, Article 2.6, available at: <http://goo.gl/RVY3P>.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Various malpractices that are widespread in Russian higher education lead to a devaluation of degrees awarded even by the largest and most respectable universities, undermining the culture of integrity among both teachers and students, and diminishing already rather modest amounts of money available for educational purposes. Mechanisms allowing to resist cheating, clientelism, financial fraud or other malpractices are non-existent, weak, or just imitational for a number of reasons: non-democratic and non-transparent university governance, marginalization and pauperization of a bulk of university teachers in the post-Soviet period, the weak importance of reputation for the labour market and other spheres of social relations, aggressive pressure on the higher education system by external highly corrupted environment etc.

Pervasiveness of malpractices in the Russian higher education system poses a serious problem for EU-Russian cooperation in the fields of education and science. Many students and academics participating in this cooperation are highly influenced by this poisoned atmosphere in which values of academic integrity are weakly supported while some malpractices (such as cheating, clientelism, and plagiarism) tend to be normalized. It is not impossible that key positions in some jointly funded projects can be occupied by people who achieved their positions by dishonest means and threw into the background those who deserved to participate in such initiatives. Joint projects can be used by those who are authorized to manage funds, to embezzle money, or to appropriate it.

Unfortunately, the mechanisms that the EU could use for inducing Russia to conduct reforms supporting academic integrity and targeting corruption are currently rather weak and vague. Neither the Bologna process nor ratings or partnership initiatives at various levels contain clear and significant incentives to do so. In such circumstances the most powerful incentive among those available is the reputation that Russian universities, programmes, diplomas have in the EU. It should be, however, noted that such reputation is often too subjective: e.g. diplomas of large and well-known Russian universities are generally trusted to a greater extent than diplomas of small universities, though the vast majority of large universities does not have any better anti-corruption and anti-fraud policies than small ones.

Still, there are some ways in which the EU as a whole and EU-based actors could induce Russia to conduct such reforms. Here are some relevant recommendations.

1) There is a need for a set of indicators allowing to assess the efficiency of Russian achievements in fighting corruption, cheating and also in maintaining and protecting the atmosphere of academic integrity. For this purpose the results of

the project "Ethics and Corruption in Education"<sup>47</sup>, conducted by the International Institute of Education Planning and of other relevant projects could be used. In particular, these indicators should allow to estimate the level of democracy of university governance, existence and real implementation of policies ensuring academic integrity and information transparency, defence of students' and ordinary teachers' rights.

2) Since in the foreseeable future the Bologna process will likely remain the only mechanism of multilateral and bilateral cooperation that could potentially stimulate Russia to do something at the systemic level, the priority of struggling corruption and maintaining academic integrity, based on a clear set of criteria and roadmap, should be integrated into the Quality Assurance pillar. Otherwise it would be hardly possible to ensure the quality of education in highly-corrupted participant countries, which brings the idea of recognizing the equivalence of degrees and diplomas under very serious doubt.

3) EU-based and other university ranking agencies should be recommended to include the relevant indicators (see point 1) to their set of evaluation criteria. Otherwise they seriously risk ranking universities systematically awarding degrees to plagiarists and to those who qualify mainly because of their connections too high, allowing them to get undeservingly good marks. It should be born in mind that the consideration of prestige can prove to be a serious impetus for the Russian government for triggering reforms at least in leading universities.

4) Projects aiming to monitor malpractices in Russian and other higher education systems conducted by researchers and NGO activists should be supported by EU grant-making programmes. As a result of such projects, EU-based universities could find more efficient and trustworthy partners than before: in particular, they will be more able to choose reliable partners for mutually profitable joint education programmes.

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47 See: <http://goo.gl/vSh1a>.

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