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## ANALYSIS

## Russian Higher Education to 2020

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### Abstract

There are few more stunning changes in global affairs than the rapid decline in Russia's standing in education, science and technology. Some of the challenges to the higher education system are common to all nations in an increasingly competitive global environment. In this competition, Russian myths about the quality of the Soviet achievement along with stifling bureaucracy and corruption are undermining the effect of increased funding. Russia also faces demographic and social challenges that make it difficult to reorient the system to meet the demands of 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education. Rather than seeking to raise the level of education for all Russians, the government appears intent on forcing citizens to pay an increasing share of the cost of public services, encouraging exacerbation of already severe economic inequalities.

### Global Challenges

All nations seeking to compete in the globalized knowledge economy face tremendous economic and social pressures. Higher education has become the equivalent of elementary education and literacy a century ago: the basic requirement for success in a modern society.<sup>1</sup> Mass tertiary education creates opportunities, but poses daunting challenges. National education systems cannot afford the cost of university education for all, resulting in fees for higher education and pressures for universities to commercialize anything that might produce revenue, especially technology.

The education systems in the growing number of nations seeking to be players in the global knowledge economy must compete with all the others for human and financial resources. Universities seek to attract the best students and faculty, along with tuition-paying students to help defray rising costs. To cope with the growing demands, universities must also compete for managerial talent able to organize the educational and research systems in effective ways. Competition for financial support results in growing reliance on development (or "advancement") professionals who often have an ambivalent relationship with the university faculty.

The global competition for human and financial resources is closely linked to the competition for status: top faculty and students, along with much state and private funding, gravitate to the institutions perceived to be the best. Identifying "the best" is a mix of self-selection by educators and researchers and a growing (competing) set of international ratings. Ranking systems intended to help students and their families make informed choices when applying to colleges have become important markers of local and national prestige, with vehement arguments about the indicators used to rate universities.<sup>2</sup> A better method of gauging

quality may be the way faculty and students in specific disciplines congregate in research communities. Particularly in the natural sciences and technology, the "creative class" has consistently favored locations where the best research and top talent can be found. The Connecticut Valley in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and Silicon Valley in the 20<sup>th</sup> are examples of dynamic innovation environments based on research, technology and industry where the culture of informal information exchange and competition created unique configurations.

### Common Solutions

Russia shares the common problems, and some of the solutions the government has adopted parallel practices elsewhere. Rapid expansion, the search for new sources of funding, and selecting a limited number of elite ("flagship") universities are common responses. The rapid expansion in student enrollments has not been matched by increases in faculty or infrastructure, a situation now common in many Latin American and European nations. Students in many countries are being asked to pay more for higher education, often resulting in protests. The alternatives to relying on tuition—private philanthropy or commercialization—have serious downsides. Private money may come with strings attached, and even endowments fluctuate over time. Commercialization requires significant investments, and raises a host of issues including intellectual property and the nature of the university's core mission. Like many nations, Russia has sought to identify a group of leading "research" and "federal" universities that receive special status and funding.

1 OECD. (1998) *Redefining Tertiary Education*, Paris: OECD.

2 Gladwell, Malcolm, (2011) "The Order of Things: What college rankings really tell us." *The New Yorker*, February 14.

[http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/02/14/110214fa\\_fact\\_gladwell#ixzz1MquYDPx](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/02/14/110214fa_fact_gladwell#ixzz1MquYDPx); Wildavsky, Ben. (2010) *The Great Brain Race: How Global Universities are Reshaping the World*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press; and Salmi, Jamil. (2009) *The Challenge of Establishing World-Class Universities*, Washington, DC: IBRD/World Bank.

Russia's "research universities" were selected in two competitions, which suggests that the group includes many of the top institutions in Russia, or at least excludes weak universities.<sup>3</sup> The "federal universities" represent a reasonable solution to the problem of maintaining educational opportunities and research communities across an enormous geographic space, but they were not chosen through competitions.<sup>4</sup> Even if these are truly the best universities in their regions, they were not required to present any design for their new role prior to receiving a large infusion of funds, squandering an opportunity to incentivize creative thinking and induce change.<sup>5</sup>

The Russian Ministry of Education and Science increasingly allocates research funding on the basis of competitive grants, a change that is beginning to make peer review and competition important features of the system. Yet this remains unpopular among the older scholars who dominate administration. In one of the strangest decisions regarding the flagship university program, the infusion of funds includes significant sums for equipment, but the money may not be used to support research. Critics note that equipment purchases create opportunities for irregularities in the bidding and payment processes.

### Specific Russian Problems

Russia is like many other countries in its efforts to cope with the financial and quality dilemmas posed by mass tertiary education and the need for lifelong learning in a knowledge economy. At the same time, Russia faces a number of challenges specific to its history and traditions: a demographic situation that will see the number of secondary school graduates cut in half by 2017, threatening funding based on tuition; a sharp drop-off in quality from elite institutions to "average" institutions of higher learning (VUZy); weak partnerships with the private sector; poor quality vocational training, and competition with the Academy of Sciences for research support. Russian universities also suffer from an excessively restrictive administrative environment, high levels of fraud and corruption, and insular epistemic communities.

Russia now enrolls a larger share of its working age population in higher education than all but two other

nations, and annual admissions to VUZy have exceeded the number of secondary school graduates since 2000.<sup>6</sup> The 5% of Russia's population enrolled in higher education is double the average for OECD countries. This allowed the government to mount a campaign touting Russians as "the best-educated people in the world." Unfortunately, international tests of students' ability to use the knowledge they acquire in school and international rankings of universities do not support the claims of excellence. Expanded higher education enrollments became possible because Russia moved well beyond all European countries in the proportion of students paying for their higher education, and nearly half are enrolled in part-time (evening and correspondence) programs.<sup>7</sup> At state universities other than the flagship institutions, about 2/3 of the students are in for-fee divisions. Another 20% of Russian university students attend private institutions, and most pay for their education. Russia's demographic situation makes this model unsustainable. Already 1/3 lower than in 2006, the number of 18-year olds will decline by about 50,000 to 100,000 in each year up to 2018, when the total number in that age cohort will be half the 2006 figure.<sup>8</sup>

The economic impact of reduced enrollments is likely to be even more severe due to the large share of "informal" payments in the system. Students and their families report making significant payments for admission to and successful completion of university study.<sup>9</sup> As universities are forced to compete for students, the pressure to alter these practices will grow. At the most prestigious institutions, there may be less competition. (This may

3 Fediukin, Igor' and Isak Frumin. (2010) "Rossiiskie vuzy-flagmany (Russian Flagship VUZy)," *Pro et Contra*, Vol. 14 No. 3, May-June, pp. 19-31. In addition to the 27 institutions selected in the two competitions, two "pilot" universities were chosen as sites to test the model.

4 There are now 8 Federal Universities, plus Moscow and St. Petersburg, which retain a special status and generous federal funding.

5 Balzer, Harley. (2010) "Obuchenie innovatsiiam v Rossii i v Kitae, (Learning to Innovate in Russia and China)," *Pro et Contra*, Vol. 14 No. 3, May-June, pp. 52-71.

6 Kliachko, Tatiana. (2011) "Ekonomika vysshego obrazovaniia—smena modeli (The Economics of Higher Education—Changing Models)," *Otkrytaia ekonomika*, January 11. <http://opec.ru/134071.html>. Many of those admitted to higher education institutions are graduates of specialized secondary institutions.

7 Kliachko, "Ekonomika vysshego obrazovaniia." About 8% are in evening divisions and more than 40% in the lower-quality correspondence divisions. In this Russia has returned to the situation in the 1960s, compared to the 1970s and 1980s when more than 70% of VUZ students studied full-time.

8 Balzer, Harley. (2003) "Demography and Democracy in Russia: Human Capital Challenges to Democratic Consolidation" *Demokratizatsiya*, Vol. 11 No. 1, pp. 95-109.

9 Indem's Georgi Satarov calculated that payments for educational services total larger amounts than those for medical services. In 2010, Alexander Blankov of the Interior Ministry Department of Economic Security estimated corruption in Russian education to total \$5.5 billion. Some \$1.5 billion was spent on the admission process. (Itar-Tass, May 25, 2010). The same day, Itar-Tass quoted Viktor Panin of the Russian society for the protection of rights of educational services consumers on the prices for specific educational credentials: Secondary school certificates cost \$500; VUZ diplomas \$700-\$1,000; Kandidat degrees are priced at \$20,000 to \$50,000, while Doktor nauk credentials cost \$30,000 to \$70,000. Panin estimates that about 5,000 Doktor nauk credentials are sold annually.

explain the intensity of the competition for “flagship university” status.) The government’s policy has been to allocate significant funds to the flagship universities, which are now less dependent on paying students, and therefore less responsive to societal demands.<sup>10</sup> Other VUZy have become less attractive to students while more dependent on tuition.

Academics everywhere complain about bureaucracy, with the harshest criticism emanating from state institutions. In the U.S., administrators at a growing number of state universities have raised the possibility of “going private” to escape the tutelage of politicians and officials who provide a diminishing share of their funding but insist on strict accountability. In Russia, ministerial controls place almost impossible constraints on when funds are received, how they may be spent, and when they must be used, even if they are received near the end of the budget period. The rules make it difficult to operate research projects, and in some cases foster absurd behavior patterns.<sup>11</sup> While it is not at all unusual to demand strict accountability when public money is involved, the lack of autonomy in use of those funds leads to suboptimal results.

### Demographic Decline

As the impact of decreased enrollments is felt over the decade 2010–2020, the elite institutions are likely to be *relatively* insulated. But even at the best-funded universities, unless there are changes to ministry rules restricting the use of funds, administrators will encounter problems finding money for discretionary spending that is not included in ministry line items. The ministry and local education administrations have plans to support an additional 150 to 200 institutions across Russia that will constitute a “second tier” of post-secondary education, though many regions will find it difficult to provide adequate financing. Nearly 1,000 other VUZy, about half of them private, will compete for tuition payments from a sharply reduced pool of applicants.

In the U.S., when faced with far smaller declines in the pool of high school graduates, colleges and universities have turned to “non-traditional” students to meet their enrollment targets. Given that Russian VUZy already admit more students than the number of secondary school graduates and enroll a significant share of specialized secondary institution (SSUZ) graduates,

finding new candidates will be a daunting challenge. The problem will be exacerbated by competition with employers and the military.

In the coming decade we can expect to see continuing pressure resulting from the demographic situation. As top students and faculty concentrate at the flagship institutions, quality elsewhere will be a growing problem. Funding will be limited as the number of potential matriculants shrinks. This will be a special concern at institutions that cannot pay competitive salaries to their staff, and have closed their eyes to side payments that augment modest salaries.<sup>12</sup> The appeal of academic careers will be less if the reduced pool of students lowers faculty incomes. The alternative, increasing the size of bribes, would curtail access for lower-income students.

### Competing Internationally

Without substantial improvements in both funding and quality, Russia will continue to lose many of the most talented students and scholars. Growing global competition means that the best and the brightest have opportunities in many countries. England and Switzerland reap significant benefits from wealthy Russian students at all levels of education. Some 3 million Russians now live and work outside Russia, and the emigration of the “creative class” has become a serious concern in the scenarios for Russia’s development up to 2020.<sup>13</sup> Embracing the Bologna process will increase the opportunities to go abroad, while failure to embrace the Bologna process would further isolate the Russian academic community. The only solution to this dilemma is to find ways to compete more effectively: providing an environment attractive enough to persuade Russians educated abroad to return and to persuade foreign students to attend Russian universities. Neither the country’s political leadership nor the academic community has yet accepted the changes this competition requires.

Russian defense of national traditions and resistance to foreign competition is not unusual, though it may be extreme. German engineering schools are seeking to prevent the elimination of their engineering *diplom*, arguing that it represents a unique credential in the global marketplace. In India, a program to help alleviate the faculty shortage by allowing foreign universities to set up branches has been stymied by a demand for a \$12

10 Kliachko, “*Ekonomika vysshego obrazovaniia*.” The shift from elected to appointed rectors also makes Russian VUZy less responsive to input from outside the bureaucratic system.

11 One university rector sent nearly every faculty member on a business trip (*komandirovka*) to spend the annual funding by the ministry’s deadline. This has been described as a major stimulus program for Aeroflot and Russian Railways, but its contribution to the institution’s educational mission is questionable.

12 In a recent survey, ¼ of VUZ students admitted to having paid a bribe at least once. Bashkatova, Anastasiia, “*Vysshee korruptsionnoe obrazovanie*, (Higher Corrupted Education),” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, May 24, 2011.

13 Starodubrovskaiia, I. V. and V. L. Glazyshev. (2011). “*Real’nyi federalizm, mestnoe samoupravlenie, mezhibudzhethnaia politika* (Real federalism, local self-government, inter-budget policy),” *Tsenter sotsial’no-konservativnoi politiki*, March 24, at <http://www.cskp.ru/analytics/10902/10902/10902>.

million “deposit” before they are allowed to operate. In the wake of 9/11, stricter U. S. visa requirements curtailed the number of foreign students at American universities. Nevertheless, it is revealing that Russia enrolls about the same number of foreign students as Singapore, a city-state with a population of about 3 million.

While it will require massive changes to make Russia a magnet for the creative class, nothing genetic or cultural prevents Russians from doing well in the global knowledge economy. Some 40,000 individuals of Russian descent work in Silicon Valley; Sergey Brin was a founder of Google. If “*mentalitet*” is the problem, it is the mentality of officials at all levels for whom bureaucratic control and personal enrichment are higher priorities than a vibrant national economy. And it is the mentality of professional communities convinced that their traditions are the best and are threatened by the very competition that might allow them to prove this assertion. This is good news: Russia’s problems can be addressed through incentives, institutions and professional associations.

### Implications

What does this mean for Russian higher education in the coming decade? There will likely be fewer institu-

tions, fewer students at most of the surviving institutions, and a growing disparity between the 40 or so flagship universities and the rest. There may be a “middle range” of 100–200 universities supported by regional governments, though the quality and funding of these institutions will vary depending on the wealth and competence of local governments. The group of flagship universities is likely to expand slightly, as regions lobby to include their best institutions and new schools like Skolkovo receive priority. Significant funding will not guarantee high quality: Asian and Latin American countries spend about the same share of GDP on education, with vastly different results. If the Russian government follows through with proposals to charge fees for secondary education, it will be impossible to sustain the network of universities. Unless incentive structures are changed and the institutional climate improves, especially with regard to corruption, Russian universities will continue to lag in the global competition. And unless the economy is diversified, the best Russian graduates will continue to seek opportunities abroad.

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## ANALYSIS

### Corruption and Informal Payments in Russia’s Education System

By Eduard Klein, Bremen

#### Abstract

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, corruption in Russia has increased significantly. Numerous studies suggest that petty corruption—particularly between ordinary citizens and low-ranking officials—is widespread. The education system is one public sphere where corruption seems to be endemic. Starting as a phenomenon characteristic of higher education, it is increasingly affecting secondary and even primary education. This article focuses on corruption in the educational process and provides a level-by-level overview of current corruption problems in Russia’s education system.

#### Introduction

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia’s education system changed fundamentally. In addition to several positive effects, such as the abolition of ideology and introduction of knowledge-based curricula, the emergence of private education establishments and a general expansion of the higher education system, most

educational institutions faced serious problems. Among these was a significant increase in corruption.

Education corruption is not a new phenomenon in Russia. It already existed in Soviet times: In 1963 Nikita Khrushchev charged that “bribes are given ... for admission to higher educational establishments, and even for the awarding of diplomas.” However, in comparison to



the situation in the Soviet Union, education corruption during the last two decades achieved a new quality and quantity.

One of the main reasons for this development was the lack of state funding for educational institutions—while the Soviet Union had spent 9.6% of its GDP on educational purposes in 1986, Russia's expenditures for education declined to a nadir of 2.9% in 2000. These budget cuts forced institutions and their employees to develop alternative revenue mechanisms, both legal and illegal. When tuition fees were allowed in the early 1990s for the formerly tuition-free education system, the share of students paying for their studies reached more than 50% by 2000. Other legal sources of income included leasing educational buildings and other facilities to private entrepreneurs or private tutoring. But, according to estimates, even with this supplementary revenue the higher education institutions had only about 15–40% of the funds they actually needed. The necessity of filling this gap opened the door to corruption. A poorly defined legal framework, hybrid state and opaque admission procedures facilitated embezzlement, nepotism and other forms of corruption. Bribery and informal payments were widely viewed as a legitimate way to halt the collapse of the education system, providing underpaid educational staff the additional revenues they required to survive. Although the financial situation has improved in recent years, there has not been a corresponding reduction in corruption. On the contrary, it has grown continuously, leading to a situation in which education corruption is considered highly institutionalized.

### Consequences of Education Corruption

Education corruption is understood as the “(systematic) use of public office for private benefit, whose impact is significant on the availability and quality of educational goods and services, and, as a consequence, on access, quality or equity in education.” (Hallak & Poisson 2007). Corruption in this sphere is particularly harmful because it misallocates financial resources and causes serious social problems. If kindergarten, primary and secondary school or university admissions are based on informal criteria, such as bribery or kinship, children from poorer families become disadvantaged. Such an outcome undermines the opportunity for social mobility, the provision of which is a crucial function of education. The result is a vicious circle in which elites reproduce themselves and social and educational deprivation pass from one generation to the next.

In addition to the growing social disparity, corruption becomes increasingly socialized and normalized. Students who have positive experiences with corruption

internalize the belief that informal practices are legitimate and more effective than formal ones. Since students generally do not have to fear any consequences from paying bribes, the likelihood that they will repeat corrupt patterns of behaviour later in life increases. Furthermore, it is likely that corruption affects the quality of education negatively and reduces not only the graduates' skill set but also the significance of diplomas. One of President Dmitry Medvedev's key goals, Russia's modernization, will be difficult to achieve without a well-educated populace.

In May 2010 Viktor Panin, vice president of the “Russian Consumer Rights Protection Society of Educational Services (OZZPOU),” concluded that corruption in the education system has become the norm “from kindergarten to dissertations.” Despite a lack of reliable figures, he estimated the 2010 corruption volume to be \$5.5 billion, calculated from “average expert assessments,” which he does not explain further. But, since corruption is usually a “hidden” transaction, its actual extent is hard to determine. In this respect, Panin's estimates should be regarded with caution. According to him, \$1.5 billion of the sum is spent on university admissions. This number is consistent with the findings of the Department of Economic Security of the Ministry of Interior (DEB MVD). Other sources, like UNESCO, estimate that the amount being spent on corruption for university admissions is \$0.5 billion. Panin guesses that another \$1.5 billion goes for corruption during the teaching process, for example on examinations, grades etc. He does not explain where the rest of the money ends up.

### Corruption and Informal Payments in Pre-School Education

In pre-school education an alarming development took place during the last decade: parents were increasingly compelled to pay bribes to secure kindergarten places for their children. The reason for this development included social uncertainties caused by rapidly changing demographic trends and slow institutional responses to them. There has been a drastic decline in births since the mid-1980s: while in 1987, the birth rate peaked at 2.2 children per woman, the low point came in 1999, when women had an average of only 1.2 children. Subsequently, nearly 50% of the Soviet pre-school establishments closed in the 1990s. With the consolidation of the state beginning in the new millennium, the fertility rate slightly increased to 1.5 births per woman in 2008. Currently the demand for kindergarten places exceeds the supply. Long waiting lists have formed and parents frequently must wait up to three years for a free place. To avoid these problems, several informal mechanisms

have been established, resulting in an increase in corruption. In Moscow, for example, opaque “funds” for parents who want to donate money to elude the waiting list were established. The “donation” per child varies between 30,000 and 60,000 rubles (ca. \$1,000–\$2,000). The “fund managers” distribute the money among the kindergarten staff who administer the waiting lists and ensure that children of paying parents are admitted. The whole procedure can be seen as a highly formalized pattern of corruption including a bribe-giver, a bribe-taker and an intermediary.

The Higher School of Economics (HSE) regularly conducts an “Education Monitoring” project, which samples information on informal payments for educational goods and services. Its data show that in the 2007/08 academic year about 10% of the parents paid bribes (between 5,000 and 9,000 rubles or ca. \$170–\$320) to receive a place at the kindergarten of their choice. The share of parents bribing nursery school teachers to ensure that their children do well is also 10% (in Moscow 8%). Other forms of informal expenditures are even more common: for example, virtually every second family contributed either physically or financially to the renovation or maintenance of kindergartens.

The non-transparent procedures of indirect and direct bribes as well as other informal practices means that most parents have to pay for pre-school education, which is a violation of the constitution.

### Corruption and Informal Payments at Schools

The shortage of places has also reached the first grades. According to the Federal Service for State Statistics, some 12,000 schools were closed during the past four years. Especially in bigger cities, waiting lines emerged at prestigious schools and parents pay “voluntary donations” to receive a place for their kids. Although the prohibition of school entrance examinations was confirmed officially, an increasing number of schools established informal admission tests. Most likely this opened the door for bribery during admissions.

Similar to kindergartens, informal payments and services are common at schools: Parents have to contribute to renovations, maintenance, security issues etc., and are promised good grades for their children in return. The above-mentioned HSE Education Monitoring found that 63% of parents (in Moscow 77%) participate in such services. One explanation for the popularity of these informal practices might be that it is harder to define them as “corruption” as the direct *quid pro quo* is missing.

In contrast, direct bribes for grades and notes at schools are rather uncommon. According to the HSE,

only 7–8% of parents paid bribes (on average 2,000 rubles = ca. \$70, in Moscow twice the sum) in the 2007/08 academic year.

### Corruption during University Admissions

The pre-2009 university admission system was prone to corruption for several reasons: The entrance examinations were non-uniform, allowing standards to vary widely; some universities had oral, some written exams; some used so-called “dean” or “rector” lists, allowing top officials to approve “their” favourites (often the applicants paying the highest sums); and admission committees often were highly corrupt. In short, the system offered plenty of loopholes for bribery, nepotism, and other informal practices. To enter a prestigious university and receive a “budgetary” college place, one frequently had to pay several thousand dollars. The HSE estimated a total corruption sum of \$520 million spent on the 2007 admissions.

In 2009, after a six-year testing phase, the Unified State Exam (EGE—*Yediniy gosudarstvenniy ekzamen*) was implemented to replace inconsistent and opaque procedures and to guarantee harmonized, transparent and fair admissions. The successful completion of the computer-based (and therefore objectively “fair”) exam, similar to the American SAT, entitles the examinee to enter a higher educational institution. The exam became mandatory for all graduates of the 11<sup>th</sup> class.

One of the declared aims of the reform was the reduction of corruption during admissions. However, preliminary assessments indicate that the exam’s capacity to function as an anti-corruption tool is rather weak (in contrast, other goals of the reform, for example the harmonization of curricula, were reached to a certain extent). In spite of the changes made, the volume of corruption during university admissions rose: While in 2009 between 30,000–60,000 rubles (ca. \$1,000–\$2,000) were paid to pass one of the eleven partial examinations of the EGE with a “very good” score, in 2010 an average of 100,000–150,000 rubles (ca. \$3,500–\$5,300) had to be offered. For financially disadvantaged families this sum is hardly affordable. The fair and open access to institutions of higher education promised by the reform did not materialize.

“Tutoring” is another field in which informal payments are widespread. Approximately one third of Russian parents (but only 9% of muscovite parents) engage such help. Previously the tutors’ job was to prepare their pupils for the entrance examinations; nowadays they prepare them for the EGE. At least some of them work in a “grey” sphere of informality and use their contacts to place their students at a certain university or faculty. According to HSE’s “Education Monitoring” project,

in 2007/08 parents paid on average 28,000 rubles (ca. \$1,000) for tutoring.

In 2007 the independent *Levada Centre* conducted an opinion poll asking members of the public what they thought the main criteria for entering a university was. Two thirds of the respondents reported that they believed illegitimate financial means to be the decisive factor. Another 13% thought that personal relations were crucial. Only 17% were convinced that academic qualifications were the principal element. In light of these results, it is not remarkable that most Russians have a sceptical or even negative view of the EGE. The Public Opinion Foundation examined attitudes toward the EGE and found that during the pilot phase in 2005 29% of the population rejected the reform, while in 2010, after its implementation, the share of those with a negative attitude increased to 56%.

### Corruption and Informal Payments in the Higher Education System

Corrupt practices occur not only in conjunction with access to institutes of higher education but also during studies. According to the HSE data, students and their parents spent a total of \$98 million on bribes during studies in 2007. Since then the amount of corruption has increased considerably, but Panin's estimation of about \$1.5 billion still seems questionable. Students, and quite often their parents (in some cases even without the knowledge of their children), bribe teachers to obtain grades, buy their way out of classes (e.g. Physical Education or "Basics of Life Safety" are unpopular compulsory subjects) or to change their field of study. In most cases students or their parents take the initiative, but there are also situations where teachers extort bribes. According to the HSE Monitoring in 2007/08 one out of ten families paid a bribe (the average annual sum being 3,000–4,000 rubles = ca. \$75–\$100).

Gifts to university employees are more popular than direct cash payments: one third of the surveyed families tried to influence the academic success of their children in this way. Since gifts to education personnel, often regarded as a polite form of bribery, are legal up to five times the value of the minimum wage, the threshold for this form of bribery is relatively low.

Another informal practice is accepting payment from students who want to repeat a failed exam: the first exam is deliberately designed to be hard in order to increase the number of failing students who afterwards have to register for the repeat test, which is usually fee-based. Students report that some tests are impossible to pass in their original form. Teachers justify the fee taking with their additional work expenses but *de facto* this practice is a form of extortion. In 2007/08 the yearly average

expenditures for families affected was 6,600 (15,200 in Moscow) rubles (\$160/\$370 respectively).

### Future Prospects

The current Russian education system is in a "corruption crisis" which has reached a critical stage in the view of many experts. The social consequences of education corruption primarily affect children from financially disadvantaged families who face declining possibilities to receive a good education. In its present form the EGE seems not only to be ineffective in reducing education corruption but, on the contrary, creates the impression that it is facilitating new kinds of abuses. This outcome proves that it is not sufficient simply to reform test procedures. A "reform of the reform" is needed as well as a wider approach to the problem, which addresses several spheres of education corruption and not just the admission system.

Part of this approach should be abolishing the practice of selectively applying sanctions: punitive measures must apply not only to a small group of unpleasant teachers but to *all* participating actors, including students, parents and intermediaries. Admittedly, this outcome might be hard to achieve since the judiciary itself is often corrupt. Furthermore, the financial situation of educational institutions must be improved, in particular the low wages that sometimes still do not even cover fundamental living costs. Information campaigns, which sensitize the public to the problematic of corruption, might be helpful, too. They are necessary to develop a general *mens rea*, which seems to be absent in the sphere of education corruption. Initiatives of other countries, namely the Lithuanian "Education Against Corruption" project, might serve as an example. Not only politicians but also educational institutions and civil society must play an active part in the fight against corruption. They all have a vital interest in solving the problem and should intensify their efforts. Institutes of Higher Education, for example, could engage ombudsmen who monitor corrupt activities and might also serve as contact persons for cases of corruption. Independent NGOs and the (local) media could support these actions and report not only about concrete incidents but also about the indications and consequences of corruption in general.

President Medvedev has acknowledged that his modernization program is only feasible on the basis of a corruption-free and intact education system. In 2008 he said: "The Russian education system should play a decisive role in shaping a new generation of professionals. Its previous successes were once recognised around the world. Today, despite some positive developments, the situation in education leaves much to be desired. Let us be frank: we were once in the vanguard and have now



fallen behind. This has become a very serious threat to our competitiveness.”

Only time will tell whether this statement was just a rhetoric manoeuvre or will lead to real changes.

#### *About the Author*

Eduard Klein is currently writing his doctoral thesis on “Academic Corruption in Russia and Ukraine” at the University of Bremen with a grant from the Heinrich Böll Foundation.

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## ANALYSIS

# Higher Education Reforms and Global Geopolitics: Shifting Cores and Peripheries in Russia, the Baltics, and Central Asia

By Iveta Silova, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania

## Abstract

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Russia and the newly independent republics of the Baltics, Central Asia, and the Caucasus engaged in redefining their political, economic, and social relationships vis-à-vis each other and the world. In the Baltics, the main impetus for reforms was “a return to Europe,” which was reflected in the efforts to replace Soviet education policies and practices with European ones. In other parts of the former Soviet Union (for example, some countries of Central Asia), the intent was to hold on to the educational structures and practices introduced by Russian authorities during the Soviet period, while restoring some of the pre-Soviet traditions. And yet in other parts of the former Soviet Union (for example, the Caucasus), the desire was to explore alternatives by pursuing new educational alliances (for example, partnerships between Turkey and Azerbaijan). In most cases, education reforms became a part of the broader reconfiguration of the post-Soviet education space, including the re-definition of power relationships between the newly independent states, Russia, the European Union, and the world.

## Different Visions, Similar Reforms

Despite vastly different visions of post-Soviet transformation trajectories, education reforms assumed striking similarities across the region. As Heyneman (2011) points out, higher education reforms included a move toward standardized testing as a criterion for admissions, a restructuring away from sector ministerial control, a diversification of provision, as well as a decentralization of governance, salary, and tuition structures. Taken together, these reforms constituted a part of the “post-socialist education reform package” that was transferred to the newly independent countries after the Soviet Union collapsed (Silova & Steiner-Khamsi, 2008, p. 1).

In some cases, this “package” was imposed through the structural adjustment policies introduced by the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. In other cases, however, it was voluntarily borrowed out of fear of “falling behind” internationally. Generally, the changes were perceived as necessary to “correct” the inefficiencies of the Soviet higher education system, while modernizing the system to meet the needs of market economies. Given the contextual diversity of the post-Soviet education space and the wide variety of geopolitical visions, why were post-Soviet education reforms so strikingly similar? More importantly, how and to what extent did these higher education reforms affect geopolitical re-

configurations of the newly independent countries vis-à-vis Russia, Europe, and the world?

To examine these questions, I will focus on higher education reforms in two distinctly different cases—the Baltics and Central Asia. In the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, higher education reforms were driven by a clear determination to distance universities from Russia's influence and instead embrace European Union (EU) standards, policies, and practices. In contrast, for some Central Asian republics (for example, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan), the historical relationships with Russia remained intertwined, yet increasingly more complicated in the post-Soviet context. In both cases, the Russian government attempted to maintain its influence through the implementation of different policies, although with various degrees of intensity and success. Increasingly, however, the EU (especially the Bologna process) played an important role in determining the direction of higher education reforms in the Baltics and Central Asia. It is in the context of these multiple, conflicting, and overlapping international influences that we will examine the complex reconfiguration of the post-Soviet higher education space.

### **The Baltics: "Returning to Europe"**

The leitmotif of post-Soviet higher education reforms in the Baltics was a "return to Europe" (Silova, 2002). Neither the vast majority of society nor political elites questioned the desire to break ties with Russia and become a part of Europe. In fact, Europe often appeared as the only alternative for post-Soviet transformations in the Baltics. Not surprisingly, the integration of the three Baltic states into the EU in 2004 clearly signaled a desire to adhere to the shared European values of liberal democracy and free market economics. From this perspective, educational policies in the Baltic states have been naturally pro-Western, either in the European or Transatlantic sense.

Notwithstanding the clearly articulated desire to "return to Europe," Russia used higher education as a foreign policy tool in an attempt to maintain its influence in the region. One such foreign policy strategy was its "compatriot" policy," which included scholarships for Russian-speaking residents of the Baltic states to pursue higher education or teacher training in Russia. In 1999, for example, the Moscow City Council established "Luzhkov scholarships" for Russian-speaking students from Latvia, awarding 40–50 scholarships annually to study in Russian universities (Muiznieks, 2006). Similarly, the Russian Embassy in Riga has supported study visits to Russia for school children and teachers. The 2004 evaluation of Russia's "compatriot" policy in

the Baltic states, which was conducted by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, did not produce flattering results. The report noted that there was a widespread belief that Russia's policy to support "compatriots" was to a certain degree declarative and that "with regard to education, youth are to a large extent oriented to Europe, and not Russia" (quoted in Muiznieks, 2006, p. 129).

In a way, the more Russia sought to preserve its influence over the Baltics, the more the Baltic republics expressed their commitment to westernization (particularly Europeanization), thus ensuring the irreversibility not only of their independence, but also of integration into the West. In higher education, it would be fair to say that Russia has lost its influence in the Baltic states, and it is the EU that now dictates the direction of higher education reforms in the region. While most of the EU measures do not explicitly aim at the regulation of national systems and policies, they impact them more indirectly through European educational cooperation. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the Baltics states have joined other EU accession countries in a wide range of EU-funded educational programs, which were specifically designed to help these countries prepare for accession to the EU (e.g., SOCRATES, LEONARDO da VINCI, TEMPUS, etc). The basic logic and most objectives of the EU educational initiatives—promoting international cooperation, enhancing the quality of education, encouraging social integration, and increasing the employability of graduates—have generally corresponded to national development goals, forming the cornerstone of education policies in the new accession countries.

Undoubtedly, joining the Bologna process brought a "windfall of benefits" to the new members, including the expectation of bringing funding and talent into their stagnating higher education systems (Tomusk, 2011). However, this has not necessarily resulted in leveling the playing field of European higher education, with the newly independent republics of the former Soviet Union assuming equal positions in the European higher education space. Although some countries may seem to have gained a stronger voice in European politics (including higher education policymaking), the majority appear to have remained on the periphery of the emerging European federal structure. For example, student mobility within Europe remains a difficult issue, with top-ranking universities (such as Oxford and Cambridge) reluctant to host students from low-ranking universities, and risking their own reputation. Universities in the peripheral countries, however, remain highly interested in becoming providers on the emerging European markets of higher education. In other words, joining the European education space has not

necessarily moved the Baltics states towards the center of Western Europe; rather, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have remained on the periphery of Europe. As Tomusk (2008) poignantly described,

“Instead of a new brotherhood of European nations coming together for mutual richness of cultures, and languages, and identity formation on that basis, Europe is assuming the path of transforming its higher education into an English-language-operated knowledge shop with its high street in Cambridge and Oxford and night bazaars in Tallinn, Riga, Sofia, and so on, where the periphery is not adding its cultural value to the common European pool but rather, having internalized the imposed view on its own inferiority, imitates the center in the language that often sounds like broken English.” (p. 24)

### Central Asia: Colliding Ideas and Ideologies

While most of the Central/Southeastern European countries were enthusiastic in their efforts to distance themselves from the socialist past and join the European education space, most of the Central Asian Republics insisted on keeping many of the Soviet educational traditions and practices, while creating their own unique models of educational development. In Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan, for example, education reforms have been primarily based on internal references to Soviet educational practices. Frequently, Soviet education is still explicitly described as the “good old” system, offering hope to overcome the current educational crisis. In fact, there is an increasing tendency for romanticizing the Soviet past as a strategy for not undertaking substantive reforms in higher education (Tomusk, 2008).

In this context, Russia continues to serve as a “model” for particular higher education reform trajectories in Central Asia. In particular, Russia remains the first-choice destination for many Central Asian students, although an increasing number of students (especially those with English language abilities) choose to study in Western Europe or North America. Furthermore, Russia has set up branches of its universities in the Central Asian states to respond to the demand for education in the Russian language. For example, Moscow State University opened a branch in Dushanbe in 2009 and the Russian Oil and Gas University opened a branch in Ashgabat in 2008, to mention just a few examples. These universities undoubtedly influence higher education in the region by diversifying the available study options and increasing academic competition. However, they are increasingly competing with newly established local universities (e.g., KIMEP in Kazakhstan) and with the higher education institutions affiliated with other inter-

national agencies and supported by various international governments (e.g., the University of Central Asia supported by the Aga Khan Foundation).

Moreover, Russia’s influence has been increasingly overshadowed by the Bologna process, which has become a major consideration for those Central Asian governments that are interested in joining the European education space (for example, Kazakhstan). More intensive cooperation between the EU and Central Asia began in 2007, when the European Education Initiative was launched as part of the EU-Central Asia Strategy (Jones, 2011). By 2009, the initiative had prioritized higher and vocational education and emphasized links with the Bologna process. Countries in Central Asia, notably Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and to some degree even Tajikistan, are interested in membership in the Bologna Process in order to increase the visibility of, and financial flows to, their higher education systems. Economically, membership in the Bologna process is seen as a powerful marketing tool that could attract fee-paying students, particularly from Asian countries, to former Soviet Union republics in Central Asia. Politically, it is seen as a vehicle that could shift Central Asian countries from the global periphery towards Europe. In particular, President Nursultan Nazarbaev has publicly announced the goal of placing Kazakhstan among the top 50 countries of the world, while the Tajik government proclaimed the challenging task of lifting its education system to the top six most competitive systems worldwide (cited in Tomusk, 2011).

In practice, however, higher education reforms remain painstakingly slow. Central Asian universities continue to face major problems including low salaries, lack of funding, stagnating curricula, and increasing corruption. In turn, this has slowed down implementation of any major reforms. As Brunner and Tillet (2003) summarize, there have been no significant changes in how higher education institutions are managed, or how teaching, learning and research are conducted. Within this context, public universities are at risk of losing relevance, while the newly established private institutions do not always ensure the necessary quality (Brunner and Tillet, 2003). In other words, higher education reforms have been largely unsuccessful. As a result, Central Asia has not only remained on the periphery, but has in fact moved from the Soviet to the global periphery (Tomusk, 2011).

### Shifting Cores and Peripheries

What is common to these distinctly different case-studies of higher education reforms in the Baltic states and Central Asia is the attempt to radically reconfigure the post-Soviet education space. The Baltic states and Cen-

tral Asian republics have attempted to re-position themselves along the imaginary axis of East/West or core/periphery. Indeed, since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, a degree of geopolitical reconfiguration among its former republics has taken place. The three Baltic States—Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania—have undoubtedly moved from East to West through their membership in the European Union and NATO; yet the movement has only brought them to the European periphery. The Central Asian Republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan continue to grapple with increasingly colliding higher education

trajectories, stemming from the multiple influences of Russian, EU, and other international policies. From the Central Asian standpoint, Russia continues to be seen as a more advanced (western) country, which inevitably places Central Asia at the global periphery. It is exactly this shift from the imperial periphery of the Soviet Union to the global periphery that connects Russia, the Baltic states, and Central Asia in the broader context of post-Soviet higher education reforms. It is not necessarily a shift that these nations have been actively seeking, but it is something that they now have to deal with.

#### *About the Author*

Iveta Silova, Dr. phil., is associate professor of comparative and international education at Lehigh University, Pennsylvania, USA. Her research and publications cover a range of issues critical to understanding globalization and post-socialist education transformation processes. Her recent publications include: *Globalization on the Margins: Education and Post-Socialist Transformations in Central Asia* (Information Age Publishing, 2011), *Post-socialism is not Dead: (Re)reading the Global in Comparative Education* (Emerald, 2010), *How NGOs React: Globalization and Education Reform in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Mongolia* (Kumarian Press, 2008; with Gita Steiner-Khamisi) and *From Sites of Occupation to Symbols of Multiculturalism: Re-conceptualizing Minority Education in Post-Soviet Latvia* (Information Age Publishing, 2006). Additionally, she is co-editor (with Noah W. Sobe) of *European Education: Issues and Studies* (a quarterly peer-reviewed journal published by M.E. Sharpe).

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## ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

Editors: Stephen Aris, Matthias Neumann, Robert Orttung, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder, Aglaya Snetkov

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The Institute of History at the University of Basel was founded in 1887. It now consists of ten professors and employs some 80 researchers, teaching assistants and administrative staff. Research and teaching relate to the period from late antiquity to contemporary history. The Institute offers its 800 students a Bachelor's and Master's Degree in general history and various specialized subjects, including a comprehensive Master's Program in Eastern European History (<http://histsem.unibas.ch/bereiche/osteuropaeische-geschichte/>).

#### Resource Security Institute

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Editors: Stephen Aris, Matthias Neumann, Robert Orttung, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder, Aglaya Snetkov

Layout: Cengiz Kibaroglu, Matthias Neumann, Michael Clemens

ISSN 1863-0421 © 2011 by Forschungsstelle Osteuropa, Bremen and Center for Security Studies, Zürich

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