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## The “Greatness and Misery” of Higher Education in Russia

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## Summary

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**D**ue to its Soviet legacy, Russia has gained a reputation for having a well-trained population and efficient educational system. The facts on the ground are obviously more ambiguous, however. The veritable “boom” of higher education and the good results of some well-known universities hide the more general fall of average performances and the devaluation of diplomas. Efforts to reform the system are meeting both structural constraints and corruption practices within the educational community. This makes a genuine assessment of Russian degrees difficult to achieve. In addition, the “privatization” of large sections of the education system has rendered the problem of inequality of access even more acute.

# Introduction

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**D**uring the Soviet era, the population's level of education was the source of great scientific and technological achievements. For the Soviets, the teaching and research structure—financed entirely through the state's budget—was for a long time the most tangible “progress” of the socialist regime.

After the collapse of the USSR, the dramatic economic crisis and crumbling of state funding forced the education system to implement strategies for survival. Reforms intended to modernize the education system and end its centralization were implemented at the beginning of the post-Soviet era, injecting new autonomy to public institutions and leading to the creation of private ones. Thus the education market was formed, in a very short period of time, and has since grown considerably.

In spite of repeated calls from the teaching community to “save” the Russian education system, threatened by insufficient public funding and deregulation, the overall level of education in Russia continues to be perceived—through inertia both from within Russia and from the outside world—as relatively high. Heir to the Soviet legacy, the country enjoys the reputation of having a well-trained population and an efficient education system, which is often mentioned as being Russia's main asset in terms of power.

The Russian political elite emphasizes the link between this supposed asset and the country's economic growth in the context of increased global competition. In August 2001 President Vladimir Putin stated that education had become “the most prized and most precious commodity; the sustainable development of nations has long been dependent on the overall education level of its population, more so than on its resources.”<sup>1</sup> Education is among the four national projects launched in September 2005 and was on the G8 agenda of St. Petersburg in July 2006.

Behind the rhetoric and general impression of quality, however, lies a far more nuanced reality. The veritable “boom” of higher education and the good performance of certain institutions barely hide the overall decline in the average level of education, the fundamental inequality of access, and the devaluing of diplomas.

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Translated from French by Jessica Allevione.

<sup>1</sup> <[www.kremlin.ru/appears/2001/08/29/0000\\_30101.shtml](http://www.kremlin.ru/appears/2001/08/29/0000_30101.shtml)>.

# Quantity or Quality?

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## ***The growing demand for Higher Education***

In purely quantitative terms, Russia figures among the most educated countries in the world.<sup>2</sup> In regard to higher education: in the period 1995-1996, 762 Russian higher education institutions (*Vysshee uchebnoe zavedenie*—VUZ) taught 2.791 million students, compared to 1,068 VUZ (655 public and 413 private) teaching 7.064 million students in the period 2005-2006.<sup>3</sup> This spectacular progress comes hand in hand with declining demographics, which is beginning to be mirrored by a decline in the number of secondary schools and preschools. Russia has more students today than at any time in its history, including during the Soviet era. In 2004-2005, the number of students at public VUZs totaled 419 out of every 10,000 inhabitants—a large share, especially when considering that the ratio of “budgeted” places (the quota of places entirely financed by the state) in VUZs, meanwhile, was 170 persons out of 10,000. This number has been constantly rising since 1996, after having fallen in the period 1990-1995.

Education in Russia is now more than ever considered as a priority, justifying of personal investment. Some surveys show that education services represent the greatest expenditure per household, greater even than that invested in savings or spent on health.<sup>4</sup> It is considered to be a promising market, as there is a genuine “infatuation” for university diplomas, sought after by 85% of parents for their children.

Such infatuation is also occurring for postgraduate school (*aspirantura*), PhD theses and academic titles. In 2003, the number of

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<sup>2</sup> For example, if we set it against OECD countries, Russia ranks third in the percentage of persons having a university or post-doctorate degree among the working population (22.3%, or 160 people out of 1000 inhabitants, according to the 2002 national census). By comparison, this rate is in the United States 27.9%, in the Netherlands 22.1%, in Japan 16.1%, in Germany 13.8%, in France 13%. Statistical records *Obrazovanie v Rossiyskoy Federatsii* [Education in the Russian Federation], Moscow, GU-VSE, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Unless stated otherwise, the source of data for this paper is *Rossiyskiy Statisticheskiy Ezhegodnik* [The Statistical Yearbook of Russia], the Federal State Statistics Service (GKS)-Roskomstat, Moscow, 2005, p.227-259 (Chapter on education) and on the GKS website <www.gks.ru>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ekonomika obrazovaniya v zerkale statistiki: novye dannye* [The Economics of Education through the statistical looking glass: new data], Moscow, Higher School of Economics, 2005, p. 17, <<http://isek.hse.ru>>.

people enrolled in PhDs was two and a half times higher than it was in 1995 (140,741 compared to 62,317).<sup>5</sup> In 2005, a record 31,000 theses were filed in the Russian state library (compared to 27,000 theses in 2004).<sup>6</sup> In Russia, it has long been implicitly necessary to have a thesis in order to rise to important managerial or political positions. Politicians, high-ranking civil servants and businessmen are all fond of scientific titles. The daily *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* has, for example, recently revealed the number of “VIP candidates” to be full members (academicians) or corresponding members of the Russian Academy of Science.<sup>7</sup> Among the deputies in the Duma (450 members), 143 are Candidates of Sciences (*kandidat nauk*), 71 are Doctors of Sciences (*doctor nauk*), and 14 hold two titles in different fields.<sup>8</sup>

## ***What Quality of Diplomas?***

Whether through habit or pride, a large number of Russians continue to perceive their education system as one of the best in the world. Thus, after a recent visit to Oxford University, the governor of the Sverdlovsk region, E. Rossel, stated that he had not seen anything “out of the ordinary” there and that Russian secondary and higher education was superior to that of Oxford.<sup>9</sup> Surveys, however, show a different picture, while international studies performed on this topic are outright alarming.<sup>10</sup>

At the secondary level, PISA studies (Program for International Student Assessment) conducted by the OECD in 2000 and 2003 have

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in I. Dezhina, “Russian Scientists: Where Are They? Where Are They Going? Human Resources and Research Policy in Russia”, *Russie.Nei. Visions*, no. 4, June 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in D. Simakin, “Doktora nevidimogo fronta” [The Doctors from the Invisible Front], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta-NG*, 24 March 2006.

<sup>7</sup> *NG*, 14 April 2006. This publication caused a scandal in the academic community, which, in a motion to reject it, finally voted massively against these “VIP candidates,” often strangers to the world of research or science. (*NG*, 26 May 2006).

<sup>8</sup> In Russia, two types of thesis exist: the Candidates of Sciences (*kandidat nauk*) thesis (corresponding to 8 years of higher education) and the Doctors of Sciences (*doctor nauk*) thesis, much harder to obtain. The first degree is awarded after three years of studies at an *aspirantura* (Russian doctoral school) and a successful oral examination. The conferred title opens the door to all teaching and research posts. Although the law does not determine the length of the thesis, it generally does not exceed 200 pages, including bibliography and annexes. The theses essentially correspond to a French DEA-plus or an English PhD-minus. And yet bilateral agreements regard them as equivalent (like the convention signed between France and Russia in May 2003).

<sup>9</sup> *NG*, 15 May 2005.

<sup>10</sup> According to a FOM (Public Opinion Foundation) survey dated 9 March 2006, a large part of those interviewed are convinced that Russian higher education is inferior to that of the Soviet era (50%) and to the world level (37%). All the while, 23% believe it to be on par with the world level, and 10% see it as superior, <bd.fom.ru/report/cat/societas/culture/obrazovanie/high\_education/d052224>.

ranked Russia at the bottom of the list, among 15 year-old-pupils.<sup>11</sup> In 2000, young Russians ranked 27<sup>th</sup> out of 32 countries in reading ability (text comprehension, critical analysis, formulation of conclusions and opinions), 26<sup>th</sup> in natural science and 21<sup>st</sup> in mathematics. In 2003, they ranked 32<sup>nd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> respectively out of 41 countries. These studies underline the difficulty young Russians have in applying their knowledge outside the classroom and in dealing with incomplete or contradictory information, as well as lacking the ability to think critically.

This situation is far from the image that Russians generally have of their education system. The results of this study have sent shockwaves through the pedagogical community, which now advocates an approach based on the development of skills—understood as the capacity to react efficiently to unknown situations (*kompentnostniy podkhod*)—rather than on the mere accumulation of knowledge (*priobretenie znaniy*).<sup>12</sup>

As for higher education, the Academic Ranking of World Universities (known as Shanghai Ranking) published in August 2006 by the *Institute of Higher Education* lists only two Russian universities in the top 500: Moscow State University (MGU), ranked 72<sup>nd</sup> (21<sup>st</sup> in the ranking of best European universities), and St. Petersburg State University ranked 344<sup>th</sup>.<sup>13</sup> To better situate this, the ranking lists 21 French universities, 20 Chinese, 4 Brazilian, 2 Polish, 2 Indian and countless American ones, the latter occupying the top places.

This ranking reflects the isolation of the Russian education system that is also confirmed by the small number of foreign students studying there. In 2003, Russia hosted 54,000 foreign students (for the sake of comparison, in the same year the United States hosted 558,000; Germany 240,619; the United Kingdom 255,233; and France 221,567)<sup>14</sup>, many of whom came for language classes. Its share of the world market of education services thus does not exceed 0.5%.<sup>15</sup> External factors help explain this state of affairs: the relative difficulty of the Russian language, the country's political and economic reputation, difficult living conditions, etc. The situation is also due, however, to the various degrees' lack of competitiveness on the international stage, which are not yet fully integrated to those of the rest of Europe and the world, despite Russia's recent adherence (in 2003) to the Bologna process.

The best indicator with which to evaluate the quality of education of young graduates remains the ability they have in finding a job that

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<sup>11</sup> <<http://pisa.oecd.org>>.

<sup>12</sup> See for example, A. Kasprzhak, K. Mitrofanov, K. Polivanova et al., *Soderzhanie ponyatiya "kachestvo" obrazovaniya v otechestvennoy i zarubezhnoy obrazovatelnoy praktike po rezul'tatam testov PISA-2000*, [Understanding the notion of "quality" in both Russian and foreign education practices, based on the analysis of the PISA-2000 study results], Orenburg, 2005, 128 p. O. Lebedev, « Kompetentnostniy podkhod v obrazovanii » [Educational Approach in Terms of Competence], *Shkolnye tekhnologii*, no. 5, 2004, p.3-12.

<sup>13</sup> <[ed.sjtu.edu.cn/ranking.htm](http://ed.sjtu.edu.cn/ranking.htm)>.

<sup>14</sup> *Education at a Glance*, OECD Indicators 2004, OECD, Paris, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in the Franco-Russian electronic bulletin ROST, 29 December 2005, <[www.rost.fr](http://www.rost.fr)>.

corresponds to their curriculum, and in satisfying the needs of employers. Yet studies conducted by the ReitOR agency (specialized in the ranking of Russian educational resources) in one of seven federal districts (Volga), underline the general dissatisfaction of employers with respect to the young graduates they recruit.<sup>16</sup> Beyond over-evaluating their abilities and having high expectations in terms of remuneration<sup>17</sup>, employers note that recruits also lack practical and theoretical knowledge. Over half of employers think that the 2004-2005 graduates will need additional training before becoming “operational”.<sup>18</sup> Only 13% to 20% of companies are willing to hire recent graduates, according to several heads of employment agencies.<sup>19</sup>

Students themselves seem to be aware of their diploma’s shortcomings. The same Volga region study show that 59% of them wish to further their education after their first university degree (five years)—of which 52% state that they would be willing to pay for this themselves—and 26% would change careers entirely.<sup>20</sup> The determining factor in choosing between two young graduates (putting their possible experience aside) is now more than ever contingent on their second higher education degree.

During the various meetings between representatives of the business community, Ministerial heads and heads of higher education institutions (*Rectors* in Russian),<sup>21</sup> business representatives have frequently voiced concern over the archaism of higher education’s content and methods, the purpose of which is merely to accumulate knowledge, to the detriment of self-forming methods and the development of critical thinking. Instead of this they advocate the use of methods than project management and case-studies. Such proposals usually meet entrenched resistance from a large part of the academic community (notably by the rectors united under the powerful Union of Russian Rectors) who hold dear the “fundamental character”<sup>22</sup> of Russian higher education.

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<sup>16</sup> The ReitOR agency (*Reitingovanie Obrazovatelnyh Resursov*) was created in March 2005 with the collaboration of the “Volnoe delo” Foundation, funded by O. Deripaska, owner of *BasEl* and *RusAl*. These studies were conducted between May and December 2005 on 3,160 young graduates from 52 VUZs, and 800 employers in different sectors of the economy (mechanical engineering, energy, telecommunication and information technologies, management, gas and oil),

<[www.reitor.ru/img/uploaded/files/4\\_Dostoinstva\\_i\\_nedostatki\\_molodih\\_spetsialistov.doc](http://www.reitor.ru/img/uploaded/files/4_Dostoinstva_i_nedostatki_molodih_spetsialistov.doc)>.

<sup>17</sup> In Moscow, the average salary for young graduates is between 250 and 650 euros. In the regions it is between 60 and 200 euros, <[www.reitor.ru](http://www.reitor.ru)>.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, E. Gerasimova, “Illyuziya kachestva” [The Illusion of Quality], *NG*, 10 June 2005. O. Gerasimova, “Degradaciya vuzovskogo statusa” [The Deterioration of University Degrees], *NG*, 3 February 2006.

<sup>19</sup> “Molodezh—eto roskosh” [Young Graduates—A Luxury for Companies], *Vedomosti*, 12 April 2006.

<sup>20</sup> <[www.reitor.ru/img/uploaded/files/3\\_Obrazovatelnie\\_strategii\\_vipusnikov\\_vuzov.doc](http://www.reitor.ru/img/uploaded/files/3_Obrazovatelnie_strategii_vipusnikov_vuzov.doc)>.

<sup>21</sup> For example, *Business pedsovet*, organized by the *Delovaya Rossiya* association in August 2004,

<[www.deloros.ru/netcat\\_files/11\\_194.doc](http://www.deloros.ru/netcat_files/11_194.doc)>, or Putin’s meeting with business leaders, 1 July 2004.

<sup>22</sup> This expression, which is frequently used, has by now been largely tarnished: more often than not it refers to traditional teaching with a broad theoretical base (as opposed to practical teaching).

Another problem, according to the employers, is that the graduates' profiles do not match demand. The labor market is saturated with lawyers and economists,<sup>23</sup> for example, while there is a real shortage of qualified mid-level executives, both in the industrial and managerial sectors (unlike, for example, India which has waged on the training of engineers).

Witness to their strong interest in the graduates' education, certain industrial groups have been trying to setup partnerships with VUZs, or create their own, "corporate universities" (*korporativnye universitety*)<sup>24</sup> which have been developing since 2000. One of the first companies to finance such an initiative was *Severstal*, whose owner A. Mordashov explored this practice in his MBA. Others have followed suit, including, *Sukhoy* (aeronautics), *Bilain* (telecommunications), and *RusAl* (aluminum), all to ensure appropriate training for their personnel.

Another illustration of cooperation between companies and VUZs was the signature, in April 2006, of an agreement between *RussNeft* and MGU to create a school specialized in technological innovation with a faculty's status. According to this agreement, MGU is to provide the training staff, while *RussNeft* is able to participate in the elaboration of degree courses that can meet its own needs. Similarly, the agreement between O. Deripaska, owner of *RusAl*, and the Plekhanov Russian Academy of Economics is perceived by the rector community as revolutionary. This agreement will be the first to test the newly-created status of "non-commercial autonomous organization" (ANO) developed by the government, which would give the company a *droit de regard* over this program. Many *rectors* are worried by this project, for they see it as the beginning of a "concealed privatization".

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<sup>23</sup> These jobs were among those most sought after in the early 1990s, and many VUZs, even of technical profile, created paying programs to train economists, managers, etc.

<sup>24</sup> This term does not correspond to a precise legal concept, but rather to various forms of training: the last years of a specialized program, VUZ, training center, or continuing education courses, bound by the same goal, namely, to form the personnel for one or several companies' concrete needs, by transmitting the culture of these particular companies.

# The Roots of “Misery”

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Generally speaking, the political elite is conscious of the relative deterioration of the Russian higher education system: on several occasions Vladimir Putin and Andrei Fursenko (Minister of Education) have recognized this publicly. There is no consensus on the reasons for this deterioration in the education system between the Union of Rectors, the business sector, experts, and the Ministry of Education. As far as the rectors are concerned, the decline is due to the lack of public funding, which has resulted in unattractive wages and a shortage of necessary equipment. They also claim that the “wild deregulation” of the nineties fostered many private dubious-quality VUZs. According to them, these “ultra-liberal” tendencies and the government’s fondness for applying foreign models onto the Russian education system are responsible for the eroding the grounds and traditions of the country’s education system.<sup>25</sup> Civil servants at the Ministry of Education and business circles, for their part, point to the rectors’ conservatism and reluctance to reform, arguing in favor of financial autonomy unfettered by outside control.

## *Funding*

Public funding allocated to education has diminished threefold between 1992 and 1998. During this period, educational establishments could no longer fulfill their functioning expenses and wage obligations. However, there has been a gradual increase in public funding since 1999: by 2004 it had increased by a third, compared to mid-1990s levels. And while the share of public spending devoted to education is comparable to the OECD average (12.7%), as percentage of GDP the share is much lower, between 3.5-3.8% in the past three years (of which 0.5% goes to higher education), which compares to an OECD average of 6.2%.<sup>26</sup> This sum falls far short of the Russian government’s own professed goal of a 10% share of GDP. Spending per student totals 23,000-25,000 rubles (or 700-800 euros) annually. During his January 2006 visit to the Timiryazev Agricultural

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<sup>25</sup> See, for example, V. Sadovnichiy (ed.), *Obrazovanie, kotoroe my mozhem poteryat* [The Education We Risk Losing], Moscow, 2003, 368 p.

<sup>26</sup> *Ekonomika obrazovaniya v zerkale statistiki*, op. cit., p. 7-8.

Academy, Minister Fursenko assessed that this sum was not sufficient, and that it should instead be closer to 75,000 rubles (2,174 euros). By comparison, in 2003, annual expenditures per student in France was 8,370 euros for higher education.<sup>27</sup>

The 1992 Education Law authorized educational establishments to be recognized as legal entities and, as such, to have their own resources. Numerous schools and VUZs thus began renting out their premises, working their land, opening driving schools, looking for sponsors as well as charging for their services and creating programs most desired by parents.

Officially, the volume of paid services in the education field between 2000 and 2005 increased from 41 billion rubles (1.17 billion euros) to 147.5 billion rubles (4.2 billion euros).<sup>28</sup> Today, about 56% of students pay for their schooling.<sup>29</sup> Surveys show that the idea of paying for high education has begun to make its way into the Russian mindset, and Russians now accept that they will have to take on its cost. However, in the present system, everything has a price: absences, catch-up sessions, exams, etc. Parents are often unaware of the final sum they will have to pay for their children's education. Moreover, paying students often enjoy a favored treatment compared to those whose place is financed through the government's budget.

## ***The Teaching Staff***

Public funding does not allow wages in the education sector to be attractive. The average salary for a secondary school teacher is 9,300 rubles (270 euros) a month in Moscow and 3,900 (113 euros) in the regions; at the university-level they are 7,500 and 5,000 rubles respectively (217 and 145 euros).<sup>30</sup> By comparison, in 2004 the average salary in this sector was 62% of Russian salaries in general and in all sectors, and 53% of those in industry.<sup>31</sup> In addition, the wages of young professors are effectively below the subsistence level. As in the field of research, professors must seek additional revenue, for instance through private lessons (*repetitorstvo*), etc. This side income can match—or even surpass—the original salary, which renders the official tie to the VUZ as more or less fictitious.

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<sup>27</sup> C. Lambert, *L'Enseignement supérieur en France et dans les pays de l'OCDE: état des lieux* [Higher Education in France and in the OECD Countries: The State of Affairs], February 2006, <<http://txtnet.com/educter/pics/Intervention%20Lambert.pdf>>.

<sup>28</sup> <[www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b05\\_01/lssWWW.exe/Stg/d120/03-50.htm](http://www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b05_01/lssWWW.exe/Stg/d120/03-50.htm)>.

<sup>29</sup> NG, 10 June 2005.

<sup>30</sup> NG, 31 August 2005.

<sup>31</sup> *Monitoring ekonomiki obrazovaniya* [Monitoring the Economy of Education], no. 6 (14), Moscow, GU-VSE 2005, <[www.isek.hse.ru](http://www.isek.hse.ru)>.

In such a state of affairs, it is not surprising to notice that young graduates tend to stray away from the teaching profession and, more generally speaking, that the profession tends to age and become increasingly geared toward women, especially in the secondary (where 85.3% of the teaching staff are women).

There is, in addition, a strong link missing between teaching and research in higher education. The percentage of teacher pursuing their own research is small. According to Y. Kuzminov, Rector of the Higher School of Economics, four-fifths of VUZ programs are led by professors not currently engaged in research.<sup>32</sup> Of the 3,797 research institutions in Russia, VUZs represent only a small fraction (393).

## ***Education's Stray***

Also noticeable is a change in society's attitude regarding higher education. In December 2005, Minister Fursenko lamented its overall deterioration, which, he said, was due to the fact that students were more interested in the paper that the diploma represented than the knowledge needed to acquire it.<sup>33</sup>

Even discounting the students that are simply trying to avoid military service<sup>34</sup> (this number varies from 5 to 10% of the student population depending on the surveys) and those that pursue careers unrelated to the diploma obtained, higher education has fallen victim of its own popularity. Sociologists have noted that higher education has also increasingly become a "socializing" institution, since such diplomas are seen as a societal "label of quality". Students, moreover, do not necessarily use their diplomas toward their career. The fact is that Russian youths see the five years at VUZs as simply a means to get a diploma, while the actual task of learning the ropes of a profession come only after, during their first professional experience.

Such an approach has more than one explanation. A Russian youth is nowadays confronted with contradictory influences. On the one hand, societal pressure and the tendencies rules of the labor market contribute to

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<sup>32</sup> Y. Kuzminov, *Challenges and Opportunities of Educational Reform, the Case of Russia*, Moscow, 2004, <[www.hse.ru/eng/IMHE\\_report\\_eng.pdf](http://www.hse.ru/eng/IMHE_report_eng.pdf)>.

<sup>33</sup> 6 December 2005, <[www.rambler.ru/db/news/msg.html?mid=6975208&s=260003051](http://www.rambler.ru/db/news/msg.html?mid=6975208&s=260003051)>. The Minister has voiced this concern on several occasions; see also his interview with Putin, 4 March 2005 in Novo-Ogarevo, <[www.kremlin.ru/text/appears/2005/03/84857.shtml](http://www.kremlin.ru/text/appears/2005/03/84857.shtml)>.

<sup>34</sup> The law on military duty and military service of 28 March 1998 provides deferment for students and doctoral candidates (article 24), and exempts Candidates in Science and Doctors of Science entirely from military service (article 23) (<[www.mil.ru/articles/article3718.shtml](http://www.mil.ru/articles/article3718.shtml)>). In the spring of 2006, the Ministry of Defense put forth a proposal to repeal some of these deferments. This proposal triggered a wave of protests.

an increase in the prestige of a higher education which, combined with the decaying image of other educational institutions (such as professional schools), tends to favor higher education over technical education. On the other hand, this tendency reflects a need to adapt to the hypothetical switch to a knowledge-based economy.<sup>35</sup> In addition, the Russian labor market helps perpetuate this behavior, since it does not seem to grasp the concept of an “over-qualified” candidate, and a university diploma is usually required by employers for just about any post as proof of serious commitment.

The increase in the number of VUZs and the fact that they remain open to students who have failed their entry exam for the “budgeted” places furthers this trend toward the “generalization” of higher education (*massovizatsiya*). Added to this is the fact that Russians finish secondary school at around 16-17 years old, and parents consider the five-year university programs as a period of maturing, constituting an essential form of “intellectual capital” before a long-term career is finally chosen. Only after this period does “real” education begin, in which most parents and students are willing to invest.

Such a particular attitude toward higher education also leads to widespread cheating. In many ways, this phenomenon is nearly institutionalized. Many websites now offer dissertations (*referats*) or exam questions (ahead of the exam, as Russian tradition has it) either directly online or within a brief lapse of time, in all subjects. Increasingly popular are gadgetry such as invisible-ink pens or downloadable mobile phone software.<sup>36</sup> The market for “turnkey diplomas” is thriving. It is also possible to have a proxy candidate take an exam in place of a student. A master’s thesis is rarely the product of genuine research but more often than not a clever composition using “cut and paste” (a popular expression claims that “while students pretend to write papers, teachers pretend to mark them”).

Such a system naturally leads to the outright purchase of fake diplomas, the selling of which in the Moscow subway shocks foreign visitors. A recent survey shows that 76% of Russians (91% of Muscovites) think it very easy to buy a diploma, and 23% admit to knowing someone who has purchased a diploma, while 61% think that a fake diploma opens just as many doors as a real one.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> M. Arapov, “Vysshee obrazovanie v Rossii: bum ili krizis?” [Higher Education in Russia: Boom or Crisis?], *Energie*, 2004, no. 11, p. 74-79.

<sup>36</sup> Examples of such websites are: <[www.referatoria.ru](http://www.referatoria.ru)>, <[www.Referatik.ru](http://www.Referatik.ru)>, <[www.Studentam.ru](http://www.Studentam.ru)>, <<http://skomo.firmsite.ru/>>, <[www.ronl.ru/](http://www.ronl.ru/)>, <[shpargalki.info/](http://shpargalki.info/)>, <<http://cityref.ru/>>, <[www.coolsoch.ru/](http://www.coolsoch.ru/)>, <<http://100shops.ru/>>, <<http://shpora-100.com/>> etc.

<sup>37</sup> FOM survey, 12 January 2006, <[http://bd.fom.ru/report/cat/societas/culture/obrazovanie/high\\_education/d0600114](http://bd.fom.ru/report/cat/societas/culture/obrazovanie/high_education/d0600114)>.

## ***Education or Corruption?***

Corruption's disastrous consequences are now being acknowledged at the highest political levels. On the one hand, this corruption is manifest in bribes paid by universities to civil servants in order to secure some funding (*otkaty*)—an amount thought to represent 50% of the total amount of subsidies.<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, families can purchase “special treatment” from a VUZ or a professor.

Some experts think that, in certain universities, this black market's “turnover” is comparable to that of the major oil companies.<sup>39</sup> Between 2002 and 2003, this number was estimated to be around 26.4 billion rubles (754 million euros), half of which went toward the admission process, and half toward actual teaching.<sup>40</sup>

According to a Higher School of Economics study, one out of five families (one out of four in Moscow) is willing to spend extra cash to secure a place in a better school for their child, and 18% (24% in Moscow) are willing to do so for a prestigious VUZ.<sup>41</sup> Demand for this type of service is high, and it is met by an abundant supply of advertising, before the eyes of all.

Corruption has not spared the field of academic research, either. Some doctoral candidates outsource all or part of their theses. Others, VIP customers, purchase their thesis “ready made”, that is, with everything necessary for its completion included: from the choice of university affiliation to the actual topic, all the way to the pre-acquired, benevolent jury panel.<sup>42</sup> For a price, doctoral students can also publish articles (compulsory before the final, oral, examination) in not-always-rigorous scientific journals.<sup>43</sup> The High Commission in charge of certifying theses in the Ministry of Education and Science is particularly worried about this phenomenon, as a third of theses are not written by the people presenting them. Attempts to check this behavior meet fierce resistance from entrenched practices, however. To illustrate this point, the decision to appoint rectors rather than elect them (which has been the post-Soviet practice) in order to exert greater control over the VUZ has been stubbornly opposed by the body of *rectors*, the justification being that this would symbolize a return to the Soviet system. In any event, such appointments would probably not translate into less

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<sup>38</sup> Appraisal by the leader of the movement “Against Corruption” Leonid Troshin, “Otkaty dushat sistemu obrazovaniya” [Bribes Are Suffocating the Education System], *Interfax*, 24 March 2006.

<sup>39</sup> N. Savitskaya, A. Trofimov, “Vremya krassnoi professury” [The Epoch of Red Professors], *NG*, 23 November 2005.

<sup>40</sup> E. Galitskii, M. Levin, “Korrupsiya v rossijskoi sisteme obrazovaniya” [Corruption in Russian Education System], *Narodnoe Obrazovanie*, No 10, 2004, p. 46-47.

<sup>41</sup> N. Savitskaya, “Pomogu postupit v VUZ” [I Will Help You Get into a VUZ], *NG*, 24 June 2005.

<sup>42</sup> *NG*, 24 March 2006.

<sup>43</sup> <<http://tzrus.narod.ru/>>, <[www.jurnal.nm.ru/](http://www.jurnal.nm.ru/)>.

corruption, since the education business fosters the development of a system of allowance, both symbolic and financial.

## Preserving the Areas of Excellence

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In the backdrop of the general fall in the higher education's level of quality, elitism is also increasingly pronounced and precocious. At the secondary school level, adjacent to ordinary public schools, private *gimnazii* and *litsei* have sprung up: these rely on a rigorous selection process for entry (which can involve, even for six-year-olds, intense preparation with either a parent or a tutor). Secure in their funding, these schools can afford to recruit the best teachers and offer the best training. VUZs, in order to attract the best students, sign agreements with these schools; university professors compose the teaching body for the last few years of such schooling. These students thus have an obvious advantage at the university's entry exam. The result is that almost hermetic "corridors" have developed within the system, going from kindergarten to university, defined by the hierarchy of wealth.<sup>44</sup>

Doubting the worthiness of diplomas has led employers to be more specific of their needs: heads of employment agencies explain that employers are seeking to recruit candidates who hold degrees from specific VUZs.

Within today's elite VUZs, most already had a reputation for excellence during Soviet times. Benefiting from this pre-acquired reputation, these find themselves in a virtuous circle, which remains inaccessible to the uninitiated: their name attracts youths from wealthy backgrounds, which in turn brings in more funding. These VUZs have built partnerships with foreign high schools and universities, and sometimes develop common programs of unique quality.

A number of ranking systems create social pressure to attend such and such a university, even though these rankings are often contradictory due to the various criteria they use. Yet the disparity of their assessments of VUZs (see annex) shows rather the difficulty of measuring real performances. To cite a few notable examples: St. Petersburg State University, which is ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> by the Ministry, is only 15<sup>th</sup> in *Kommersant's* study; the Financial Academy, usually well ranked, is given the 28<sup>th</sup> place by the Potanin Foundation; the Moscow Institute of Steel and Alloys, which does not rank high in any study, has been chosen as an innovative VUZ in the framework of the national project.

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<sup>44</sup> A. Vinokur (ed), *Les transformations du système éducatif de la Fédération de Russie* [The Transformations of the Russian Education System], Paris, UNESCO, 2001, 222 p.

A couple dozen universities nevertheless constitute the heart of the education system, the vast majority being in Moscow: Lomonosov Moscow State University (MGU), Moscow State University of International Relations (MGIMO), Moscow State Technical University Bauman (MSTU), Plekhanov Russian Academy of Economics, Financial Academy, Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology—State University (MIPT), Higher School of Economics, Russian State University of Humanities, Moscow Law Academy, Linguistics State University, and others. Outside of Moscow, St. Petersburg State University and Kazan State University are also well-known, among others.

These universities are renowned both for their academic excellence and for the social prospects they open. A study led in 2005 by ReirOR on the first university degree of 505 key figures belonging to the highest spheres of Russian political elite (the government, presidential administration, plenipotentiary representatives in the regions, Security Council members, regional governors) revealed that 40% of them received their diploma from Moscow universities. The North-European regions were in second place (17%), and before St. Petersburg (16%), the Far-East region (16%), the CIS (6%) and the South (4%). The top three universities represented in this elite are MGU (37 people), the SPGU (16), and MGIMO (15). They are followed by the Plekhanov Russian Academy of Economics, the Moscow Academy of Finance and Moscow Academy of Law.

The Russian State supports leading universities headed by influential rectors close to political circles. The MGU is funded via a separate budgetary line. The *rectors* of the SPGU, L. Verbitskaya, is overtly proud of the increase in public funding going to his institution since 2000. Two thirds of the *alma mater* funding for President Putin and his two daughters comes from the state's budget. According to their *rectors*, these two universities represent the pride and heritage of the nation and must thereby necessarily be funded through the state budget.<sup>45</sup> The most prestigious VUZs are also those that are most reluctant to replace entry exams by the Unified State Exam (EGE), the rule now most frequently adopted in the regions.

The national project on education launched by Putin in September 2005 further strengthens the tendency toward elitism: it was then decided to help finance the best-performing universities through the distribution of credits instead of spreading such help evenly among all universities. In May 2006, the Ministry published the list of the 17 universities receiving such funding in the framework of the national project for the implementation of innovative programs (budgeted at 10 billion rubles, or 285 million euros). The largest amount of money (950 million rubles for each) were granted to no other than the MGU and the SPGU.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> NG, 7 April 2006.

<sup>46</sup> "Vot gde nado uchitsya" [Here's Where to Study], *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, 2 May 2006.

## The Outlook

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The state of higher education in Russia is therefore starkly contrasted: behind the relatively good performance of certain prestigious VUZs, the average level in diploma quality has decreased. The present situation is the result of educational institutions having to adapt and survive during fifteen under-funded years. Yet overall, it must be granted that the system at least had the merit of being resilient and not crumbling under such pressure; it was also able to preserve its leaders, and even regain a certain stability over time. It is the fear of breaking such stability that explains the reticence with which certain rectors and teachers face the reforms promoted by the government.

Current government policy is nevertheless extremely clear in this regard: the state is only to support the best. It does not appear as though there will be any spreading of the funding to save the outsiders or to close the gap between the leaders and the others. The national project explicitly emphasizes supporting “points of growth”. It also advocates the creation of two national universities, as well as a business school able to compete internationally. Successful reform of the GIFO (the state’s individual financing system) would also ensure that money would go to the top universities. Those VUZs surviving would therefore have proven to be the most sound or innovating.

This policy, at first glance, not only goes against the wishes of the teaching community, but also against the demands of the population at large for higher education. However, demographic trends seem to favor this process of “natural selection”. By 2015, the number of children in Russia will have diminished by 38% for 5-14 year-olds, and by 47% for teenagers aged between 15 and 19 years old, compared to 2000 level.<sup>47</sup> There will thus be an over-capacity in schools and VUZs (there will be almost as many places in VUZs as there are high school graduates). This demographic gap will necessarily result in a quantitative readjusting of the system as a whole: the closing or regrouping of certain institutions, the massive retirement of aged teachers, funding per student increased while preserving the overall budget, etc. This readjusting would create favorable conditions in which the education system could evolve qualitatively. The situation therefore gives Russia a unique opportunity to do what it is so keen on doing: diversifying its

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<sup>47</sup> Quoted in a World Bank report, *Modernizatsiya rossiyskogo obrazovaniya: dostizheniya i uroki*, [The Modernization of Education in Russia: Realizations and Lessons], May 2005, p. 10.

economy and positioning itself on the international market as something other than a mere supplier of raw materials.

A genuine breakthrough in qualitative terms is possible only on condition that two major reforms are undertaken:

The first is *dealing with corruption progressively*. Such practices can obviously not be eradicated overnight: corruption is an integral part of the system's balance and it is, therefore, quite difficult to address. No doubt progress can only be achieved by separating the issues: registration fees, entry exams, cracking down on the most flagrant violations, etc. Ukraine, a neighboring country haunted by a similar state of affairs, opted for the complete elimination of entry exams in order to fight corruption. In Russia, this would meet opposition—at least for the time being—from the rectors.

The second is the *reevaluation of the teaching profession*. It is not about giving timely gifts, as the national Education project does by giving bonuses to the 10,000 best secondary school teachers, but rather by offering high enough salaries that teachers can live decently and take steps to attract the young. The rebuilding of a sound bond between teaching and research would also allow teachers to keep their knowledge up-to-date.

These would be the first two steps toward a more evolved system of higher education, which could again become one of Russia's assets, strengthen the innovative landscape nationally, as well as provide Russia with a soft power instrument on the international scene.

**ANNEX:****Comparison of Some Russian Public VUZs Ranking**

VUZ Name	Ministry of Education and Science, 2003, 2005	The 17 innovating VUZ, chosen for the national project, May 2006	Potantin Foundation, 2005-2006	ReitOR, June 2005	Kommer-sant, 2006
Lomonosov Moscow State University – MGU	1	+	3	1	2
St. Petersburg State University	2	+	4	-	15
Moscow State Technical University Bauman (MSTU)	1	+	-	2	1
Higher School of Economics	3	+	15	-	6
Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO)	2	-	8	5	23
Plekhanov Russian Academy of Economics	5	-	32	3	7
Financial Academy	2	-	28		3
State University of Management	4	-	-	6	4
People's Friendship University of Russia (P. Lumumba)	4	-	7	10	66
Sechenov Moscow Medical Academy	1	+	-	-	-
St. Petersburg State Polytechnic University	6	-	5	-	17
Far Eastern State University (Vladivostok)	12	+	25	-	-
Kuban State University of Agriculture	-	+	-	-	-
Moscow State Institute of Steel and Alloys	26	+	-	18	16
Moscow Institute of Electronic Technology	8	+	-	-	77
Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology – State University (MIPT)	3	+	12	8	11
Moscow Engineering Physics Institute (MEPI)	4	-	2	9	18
Moscow Institute of Energy	7	-	-	-	8
St. Petersburg State Institute of Mines (Plekhanov)	5	+	-	-	26
Lobachevsky State University of Nizhni Novgorod (UNN)	7	+	11	-	-
Dobrolyubov Linguistic State University of Nizhniy Novgorod	11	-	1	-	83-86
Perm State University	15	+	23	-	35
Korolev's Samara State Aerospace University	67	+	-	-	-
Taganrog University of Radioengineering	19	+	60	-	73-75
Tomsk State University	6	+	37	-	59
Tomsk State University of Control Systems and Radioelectronics	103	+	-	-	-
Ural State Technical University	20	-	46	-	5

Ivanov Energy University	72	-	-	-	9
Moscow Aviation Institute	16	-	-	7	10
Kazan State University	9	-	51	-	12
Novosibirsk State University	22	-	6	-	36-37
Ural State University – Yekaterinburg	26	-	9	-	49

**Sources:** <[www.mon.gov.ru/proekt/shkola/2474/](http://www.mon.gov.ru/proekt/shkola/2474/)>,  
<[www.korochka.ru/universities/rating/detail.php?ID=1064](http://www.korochka.ru/universities/rating/detail.php?ID=1064)>, <[www.reitor.ru](http://www.reitor.ru)>,  
<<http://fund.potanin.ru/>>.

The quoted rankings used different criteria:

The **Ministry of Education** (2005) takes into account extremely varied parameters, of which several are quantitative (number of students, total square meters of classroom per student, number of professors having academic titles, the number of foreign students, scientific research, publications, library, student housing, etc.). The rankings are separate for each type of VUZ (universities, technical VUZs, etc.), which explains why there are several VUZs in the no.1 spot. The Minister Fursenko has called for other, more qualitative parameters to be included. The next ranking of the Ministry will be based on the list of 17 VUZs selected in May 2006 in the framework of the national project for innovation.

The **Potanin Foundation** (2005-2006) attempts to assess the individual and professional potential for both students and young professors at corresponding VUZs;

The **ReitOR** agency (June 2005) combines the results of surveys carried out among the pedagogical community, employers and the media (using parameters such as graduates' salary levels, and the speed with which they move up in their professional carrier);

The **Kommersant** newspaper (2006) uses the number of graduates that the largest Russian companies hired in 2005, or sought to hire.