

CORRUPTION, HIGHER ED, AND RUSSIANS (OH MY!)

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Cheating is a national sport and a source of pride, because in a country that is so thoroughly and wantonly corrupt, rigging the game to your advantage is the only skill that matters. ~[Diana Bruk](#), Russian-born writer and Viral Content Editor for Hearst Magazines writing about Russia

One of the continual concerns in higher education is plagiarism and the impact it has across the academy. While plagiarism should be a concern we continue to manage and educate about, here I suggest a deeper, more looming, and problematic one: corruption in higher education. Corruption can be defined as dishonest conduct and can be demonstrated by an exchange of money for some form of power. More to the core of corruption, I turn to Arvind K. Jain, author of “[Power, Politics, and Corruption](#),” who explains that the political system where corruption takes place is an institutional “failure” (3).

To deepen this discussion, I touch on the reports of corruption (and plagiarism) by prominent Russian political figures over the last several years. I also provide some insight into the framework that has allowed the (alleged) corruption to occur. Finally, I point out how corruption is not only a Russian concern, but also an international one by suggesting that the conditions that have allowed it to flourish in Russia are becoming more prevalent here in the United States and other parts of the world.

For nearly 25 years, reports of various levels of plagiarism have been coming out of Russia. Even Vladimir Putin hasn’t avoided questions about his dissertation. His 1996 dissertation in economics came under suspicion when a 2006 report by the Brookings Institution found “16 pages [were] copied with minor changes” and lacked reference to the “American economics textbook published in 1978” from which it was taken ([Shuster](#)). However, one does not accuse Putin of wrongdoing and most references to this suggest these are allegations, and Putin himself refuses to address the issue at all (see also [Khvostunova](#)).

Just because Putin refuses to address it, does not mean it's not a problem. Simon Shuster, a Moscow-based reporter for *Time*, points out that the level of plagiarism in Russian dissertations is quite high. In a random sample of 25 dissertations, "All but one were at least 50% plagiarized, with some as much as 90% copied from other sources," according to Igor Fedyukin, the Deputy Minister of Education and Science (via Shuster). Speaking from experience, Mikhail Kirpichnikov, who was once in charge of the Russian Higher Attestation Commission, suggests dissertation quality decreased in the 1990s as the quantity of dissertations increased (Khvostunova). Likewise, the number of purchased advanced-level work increased as well, but I will touch on that momentarily (Khvostunova). Perhaps the most famous (and comical) plagiarism case involved Igor Igoshin, a United Russia lawmaker. In his dissertation, he reprocessed the dissertation of Natalia Orlova. Orlova wrote about chocolate. Igoshin mostly replaced the word "chocolate" with "beef" and if more detail about the kind of chocolate was provided, he would adjust accordingly, such as domestic beef in place of white chocolate (see a page in translation for yourself [here](#) or the complete highlighted dissertation [here](#)). While much of the plagiarized dissertation is concerning, Igoshin remains a member of the ruling government.

Another prominent example is Sergei Naryshkin, a former chief of staff for Putin, who "was suspected of paying a ghostwriter to produce a thesis [. . .] then bribing academic officials to secure its certification" ([Neyfakh](#)). (the multi-colored picture above shows his dissertation—each color represents a plagiarized source, also one can see Naryshkin's dissertation [here](#).) In Russia, once a dissertation is composed, it must go through a board for certification. The process is similar to a committee in the US, but it is clear that these boards can easily be persuaded with bribes. Beyond these three examples, Lean Neyfakh, a *Slate* staff writer, points out that "more than 1,000 high-achieving, well-heeled Russians [. . .] have recently been caught plagiarizing large parts of their dissertations."

While certainly some of the plagiarized dissertations were compiled by the ones submitting them, others like Naryshkin's were ghostwritten. In other words, someone wrote them for money. As many Rhetoric and Composition instructors know, there are dozens of online companies willing to "write" papers for paying students. Many of them come with guarantees of original writing and plagiarism-proof prose. And sadly some students undoubtedly take that route. The thinking is that if there is a market for a service that service will be provided. If you have the right amount of money, you could even have an original dissertation written for you on any topic you want in thirty days. Focusing on Eastern European countries, Aleksandar Manasiev and Semir Mujkić, in their article "[Trade in Academic Work Thrives in Macedonia and Bosnia](#)," sought out these ghostwriters of dissertations. They found, not surprisingly, plenty to choose from. For a handful of euros per page, one can acquire "professors" to write original material (Manasiev and Mujkić). They further explain, "A cross-border investigation has revealed a highly organized and efficient system for churning out dodgy dissertations by taking advantage of legal loopholes, lack of enforcement by the state and institutions, complicity by some academics, and rising demand from students who are unwilling—or unable—to do the work themselves" (Manasiev and Mujkić). At this point, we recognize this is a systemic problem.

So, what was the Russian governmental response to this clear corruption and deception by members of its own body? In 2013, after calls for an investigation, the

Education Ministry issued a response “stating that dissertations that were defended more than three years ago could not be subjected to such an investigation” (Khvostunova). The previous understanding was ten years. The clear impression left is that if officials like Putin can do it and measures put in place to manage it are being eased, then everybody can do it. This nefarious system is thus condoned because it continues to exist and is not challenged by any true authority.

One of the concerns about the implication of corruption is the understanding of it. To help illustrate, if 90% of all dissertations plagiarize, is that corruption or just the way things are done? To help understand, I return to Jain, he explains that those in power do not define moral behavior, but operate in “established norms” (4). As we have seen, corrupt behavior in Russia regarding plagiarized dissertations might be considered a norm that is now being pushed back against by those involved with organizations like [Dissernet](#). Dissernet.org serves as a partial response to this substantial and systemic plagiarism. Several Russian scholars began investigating dissertations, started a website (dissernet.org), and began publishing the results of their findings. As of this writing, thousands of people have had their work examined and found to be plagiarists through the volunteer work of Dissernet. The (understandably) elusive founders of Dissernet took action because they sought to protect the integrity of Russian academics. In effect, they are making reasonable attempts to counter the corruption and restore integrity to higher education in Russia in a very public forum. Instead of accusing officials directly, Dissernet developed software that scans dissertations and highlights verbatim language, then each one is checked by an actual person. Assuming the text is considered plagiarized, these highlighted results with some brief objective commentary are provided on their public website.

A next logical question becomes that if a system is corrupt, can quality, ethical education take place? As Jacques Hallak and Muriel Poisson assert, “teachers who indulge in unethical practices are arguably unfit for teaching universal values (civic education, moral values, honesty, integrity, etc.)” (3). In other words, they argue that an environment should be free of corruption and unethical behavior if it is going to teach ethical practices otherwise it is unable to teach such practices. The complexity of this particular point needs to be elaborated upon briefly. One may argue that no system is without corruption, so the possibility of teaching ethical behavior is an illusion: an illusion of integrity. This paradox, then, becomes a rallying point to attack an educational system, which then sets up a rationale for that system to become (more) corrupt.

Still, there are several reasons why education corruption has become more common in Russia (and provides potential in other places). First, educators are not being paid a reasonable wage or just compensation. Referencing D. Chapman, Paul Temple and Georgy Petrov, authors of “Corruption in Higher Education: Some Findings from the States of the Former Soviet Union,” explain salaries “have dropped dramatically” and those wages are only a fraction of those available in industry (90). Lower salaries have forced some to justify taking bribes so they can continue working in education. In related fashion, once educators retire they will likely have even less income because the salary they earned will be a percentage of what it once was, which was cut as the political and economic landscape changed. Second, as teachers are attacked by accusations of being too politically dogmatic or other unsubstantiated charges and politicians accuse them of indoctrinating students, their

social status decreases. Thus, instead as being seen as innovators and educators, they are seen as corruptors (an odd twist to say the least) and dissenters or even unpatriotic.

The third reason is an increased pressure on colleges and universities. This pressure may be economic or scholarship based. Obviously, the economic pressure comes from decreasing funding from the state in relation to inflation and costs. The scholarship-based area could be seen in quality of students produced or employment after graduation or graduation rates. If a school is not fulfilling certain criteria, often funding is slashed even further, which only exacerbates the problem. Another area of concern is the impression that the quality of education is poor. If society feels this is the case, support for education will decrease and potentially dramatic changes will occur that create more problems that weaken the entire system. This does not mean to suggest that adjustments to any given educational system are not needed, but adjustments suggest course corrections or reasonable and rational improvements, not rebuilding at the foundation. Finally, if society feels that the entire “system” is corrupt, then, as noted in the epigraph, the challenge, for students and teachers, becomes how skillfully one can work the corrupt system to maximize personal benefit, maintain social-economic status, or just put food on the table.

There are deeper causes that lead to corruption though. To help explain, Jain writes, “When a segment of the society feels its interests have not been served by the political system, it will try to circumvent the accepted political processes and explore weak points within the system that will serve its interests” (7). It is possible this is why Russian politicians decided to fudge their dissertations—they felt they needed to find a way to garner or maintain power. To some degree, we see this occurring in the U.S. political system with the most recent presidential election. Nevertheless, any one of these reasons or factors may create a corruption-ripe atmosphere in higher education. Jain continues, “When political markets are imperfect, voters may opt for the second-best solution of a corrupt politician who serves their interest rather than an honest politician who represents others as well. Politicians, of course, may exploit voters’ ignorance as well as their uncertainties” (7). One might equate how it was common to hear in our last major election how one was voting *against* one instead of voting *for* the other. As wisdom, and potentially as warning, those in powerful positions, such as President of the United States, may make a society more corrupt by utilizing the ignorance of those that put them in office. And those that aid them may be self-serving instead of creating an environment supportive and willing to find equitable solutions to difficult problems.

Presently in the US, there is a general distaste for fake, copied, or plagiarized material. However with the reality of factual information being challenged and what appears to be an increase in cognitive dissonance, a new level of disinterestedness in education may take hold. When, and if, this occurs the meaning of an advanced degree and what it means to be an academic will have limited importance. If the continued proliferation of alternative facts continues, the American academy may find itself with a similar level of plagiarized dissertations—and people in positions of power telling us they aren’t plagiarized or simply ignoring the fact that they are. To put it simply, with the increase of ghostwriting entities, there is an increase in substandard and plagiarized material.

The heart and genesis of this piece was Russian plagiarism in dissertations, but a more important recognition became much of the body. While the international academic

community may not be as mired as Russia, yet, we need to recognize the potential of how corrupt our educational system could become and recognize how precarious a position the U.S. system is resting. The factors that led to Russia's corrupt system are becoming reality in the United States: poor teacher pay, attacks by political figures, cutbacks to education, and so on. These circumstances serve as beacons of alarm; we should not ignore them.

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¹ Items are also hyperlinked in body text upon first usage.