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1. October 2008

Online at <http://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/11138/>

MPRA Paper No. 11138, posted 16. October 2008 01:56 UTC

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**Corruption in Russia's Doctoral Education\***

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Doctorates have long attracted attention of those aspiring to scholarship and research, but also those seeking verbal distinctions and a documented knowledge. Doctoral degrees are considered as signs of a high level expertise and authority in a given field. The growing number of dissertation defenses does not necessarily translate into a higher quality of dissertations or qualifications of newly produced doctorates. Such a trend may in part be a result of the growing corruption in higher education, including doctoral education. This paper addresses the issue of “dissertations for sale” in the Russian Federation. It describes corruption in conferring doctoral degrees in its most explicit forms and focuses on possible solutions for this problem. It searches to answer the questions: Why people buy doctorates? Whether this practice is harmful? Is corruption in doctoral education really a bad thing? Is it possible to stop such a practice and how? Answering these questions helps develop a conceptual approach to the problem of doctorates for sale, on the basis of which it will be possible to build future theoretical and empirical work.

Key words: corruption, dissertation, doctoral degrees, higher education, Russia

JEL Codes: I23, I28, P36, P37

## **Introduction**

Russian doctorates, especially those in mathematics and sciences, have long been considered some of the most prestigious in the world. This high level of reputation was retained by their quality and low level of corruption that existed in the system of doctoral education. The situation has changed drastically over the last two decades, and according to some evidence continues to deteriorate. Not only is international recognition of Russian doctorates now problematic, but recognition of doctoral degrees domestically, i.e. within the centralized national system, also becomes an issue. The cost of corruption in doctoral education reaches far beyond credential evaluation and recognition of the degrees. It makes the national economy less effective and efficient and undermines trust and social cohesion in the nation.

Corruption in higher education has long been neglected as an area of research, and hence, there is little surprise that corruption in doctorates was not addressed by scholars. One reason for this might be that the relative scarcity of prosecuted cases has made corruption in conferring doctorates seen like a minority problem in the nation's higher education, not significant enough from the researchers' standpoint to be paid much attention. However, the growing "dissertations for sale" business urges to address this issue.

This study addresses issues related to the quality of Russian doctorates and the different forms of abuse that may be found in the system of conferring doctoral degrees. It does not pursue the goal of comparing doctoral programs in different nations or discussing the quality of doctoral programs. Nor does it discuss the content of doctoral programs and issues of research misconduct. Instead, this paper describes corruption in conferring doctoral degrees in its most explicit forms and focuses on possible solutions. It searches to answer few questions: Why do people buy doctorates? Is corruption in doctoral education really a bad thing? Is it possible to

stop such a practice and how? Answering these questions will help develop a conceptual approach to the problem of doctorates for sale, on the basis of which it will be possible to build future theoretical and empirical work.

### **The system of doctoral education**

It is worth saying few words about the system of graduate education in the Russian Federation. The existing system of doctoral degrees is inherited from the Soviet system, which, in turn, is a direct descendant of the German educational system. Until recently, priority of technical sciences and rigid hierarchical structures of academic institutions remained intact. However, with the beginning of market reforms, social sciences began to occupy a larger share of doctoral education sector. Still, the institutional rigidity, along with the old mechanisms of operation, does not allow for major changes. Old educational cadres, including members of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAN), are so far quite successful in preventing any major shifts that would threaten their stability, “immortal” status, and the monopoly on truth in the last instance, and they are unlikely to give up their positions voluntarily. The Highest Attestation Commission of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation (VAK) regulates the system of doctoral education and controls quality of doctoral dissertations. Doctoral programs are hosted by universities and research institutes, and dissertations are defended in Specialized Academic Boards.

Russian higher education continues to maintain the two-tier system of doctoral degrees, similar to that in most other European countries. The first level doctoral degree is Candidate Sciences [Kandidat Nauk], and the higher doctoral degree is Doctor Sciences [Doktor Nauk]. The Candidate Sciences degree is somewhat similar to European PhDs, but differs drastically

from North American PhDs, in part because of the lack of formal coursework required in doctoral programs. The Doctor Sciences degree in Russia is similar to German habilitation and British Doctor Sciences. Holders of Candidate Sciences normally serve as associate professors while Doctor Sciences retain positions of full professors, provided, of course, that they teach in higher education institutions (HEIs). Similar two tier systems of doctorates and academic positions exist in France, Italy, Spain, and other European nations. The discussion about which one is better, Candidate Sciences degree or PhD, arises every time the Bologna process is mentioned. Such discussions, however, miss the key point, i.e. the quality of doctoral programs and the skills of those who hold doctoral degrees.

In Russia, in 2005, there were thirty five thousand dissertations defended, including thirty thousand for the degree of Candidate Sciences and five thousand for the degree of Doctor Sciences. For the period of 1993 to 2005, the number of the Candidate Sciences dissertations approved by VAK, including the fields of military sciences, medical sciences, agriculture, humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and engineering, grew from 15679 to 30116. The number of Candidate Sciences dissertations in social sciences and humanities increased for this period from 4362 to 15981, i.e. almost quadrupled.<sup>1</sup> The Head of the Department of Information Technology at the Russian State Library (RGB), Alexandr Visly, said that in 2005 alone the library received thirty one thousand dissertations.<sup>2</sup> This is an all time record. In 2002, there were only twenty seven thousand dissertations received by the library. For comparison, in the US in 2004, there were forty thousand PhD conferred by accredited doctoral programs.<sup>3</sup> The high numbers of doctoral defenses in the Russian Federation look somewhat suspicious if one is to take into consideration continuously declining state funding of science and education and a lack of interest from the industry.

There is a strong belief among scholars that such a phenomenal increase in the number of defended dissertations, especially in social sciences, can be attributed, at least in part, to the so-called phenomenon of dissertations for sale. The Head of the company “Nezavisimye analiticheskie sistemy” [Independent Analytical Systems], Pavel Lobanov, says that the number of dissertations for sale will likely increase. The company specializes on consulting for doctoral students. According to Lobanov, “Competition continues to grow. There are more players coming to the market. Everyone think that this is easy money.”<sup>4</sup> Despite the growing problem, Russian scholars avoid writing on issues of education corruption, and prefer to focus on curriculum, finance, and administration.<sup>5</sup>

There are three issues to be considered along the lines of doctorates for sale problem. They include the dissertation, the holder of a doctorate, and the diploma itself. According to the standards set for dissertations, a dissertation represents a piece of original research that makes a substantial contribution to the existing body of knowledge in a particular field. This is characteristic of a Candidate Sciences degree. A dissertation submitted for a Doctor Sciences degree is intended to be at a level high enough to resolve a significant theoretical problem in the field and have a practical application. A Doctor Sciences dissertation is expected to be not just a substantial contribution, but to fill an existing gap in the body of special knowledge. A holder of a doctorate is a person who, presumably, wrote a dissertation and defended it before the Special Academic Board. The diploma of Candidate of Sciences or Doctor of Sciences is issued by the state agency VAK and identifies the holder of the degree, the field, the discipline, and the University where the dissertation was defended. Corruption in doctoral education emerges within these three parts of the doctoral education. First, not all dissertations represent a significant contribution to the field. Some are plagiarized and hence do not represent original research.

Second, not all of the dissertations are prepared by candidates. Some are written by professionals for sale. This makes some degree holders people without scholarly merit. Finally, diplomas for doctoral degrees may be forged.

### **The problem of corruption in doctoral education**

The word corrupt comes from Latin *corruptus* and means rotten; depraved, wicked; influenced by bribery.<sup>6</sup> The definition of corruption in education includes the abuse of authority for material gain and is broadly defined as the abuse or misuse of public office or public trust for personal or private gain.<sup>7</sup> The terms abuse and misuse, public office and public trust, personal and private gain, are often used interchangeably. Heyneman (2004) adds to this definition by arguing the following: “But because education is an important public good, its professional standards include more than just material goods; hence the definition of education corruption includes the abuse of authority for personal as well as material gain.”<sup>8</sup>

Petrov and Temple (2004) apply a narrow definition of corruption that regards corruption as such only if it implies illegality.<sup>9</sup> Osipian (2007) defines corruption in higher education as a system of informal relations established to regulate unsanctioned access to material and nonmaterial assets through abuse of the office of public or corporate trust.<sup>10</sup> This definition points to the systemic character of education corruption, extends the realm of corruption in education to both public and private HEIs, and allows for research of corruption and its impact on access, quality, and equity in education. Education corruption in Russia is widespread and attempts to fight it appear to be unsuccessful.<sup>11</sup> Corruption in higher education is by no means an exclusively Russian phenomenon, but can be found in other former Soviet republics.<sup>12</sup>

Corruption in doctoral education is somewhat distinct from corruption in higher education in general, and differs significantly from corruption in state bureaucracies as it is commonly perceived. First, the doctorate is the highest level of formal education that can be achieved. Obtaining doctoral education represents a transfer of an individual's activities from training to the creation of new knowledge. Holders of doctorates are considered as most qualified specialists, authorities, experts in their respective fields. Their knowledge and writing is often overly narrow, specific, and of higher quality than is currently demanded in the societal production. Second, high moral and ethical standards are expected from holders of doctoral degrees. Doctors, most of whom teach in academia and conduct research, uphold the spirit of intellectual integrity. Third, doctors educate students in HEIs, including training of new doctorates. They also observe standards of academic integrity, set standards of academic conduct, and prevent student misconduct. Thus, doctors are expected not only to follow the rules of academic integrity, but they are also expected to develop and maintain the culture of high academic and ethical standards among their students.

The media in the Russian Federation reports that there is a growing concern within the academic community that dissertations are bought by people who do not belong with the academy. According to some estimates, twenty to thirty percent of all the defended dissertations are those written for money by specialists for clients.<sup>13</sup> High demand for scholarly degrees in the social sciences and humanities, including economics, jurisprudence, finance, political sciences, history, and sociology, lead to the emergence of the business of preparing dissertations for money. By now this is a well-developed business. In 2006, the Head of the Highest Attestation Commission, Academician of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Mikhail Kirpichnikov, called for criminal responsibility for those participating in this business. Specifically, he wanted to

prosecute people who write dissertations for others. The phenomenon of dissertations for sale is not uniquely Russian, but can be found in other former Soviet republics, from Ukraine to Uzbekistan.<sup>14</sup>

Existence of the black market for dissertations is not a secret. News reports about dissertation fraud are accompanied by on-line advertisements of different dissertation writing services and dissertations for sale. The new impulse to discuss the credibility of degrees and dissertations was generated after Russian media picked up the information of the Western media, including The Times and The Sunday Times, about possible plagiarism in the dissertation of the Russian President, Vladimir Putin.<sup>15</sup> The issue was inflated by Russian and foreign media, paid unprecedented attention and discussed for several months.<sup>16</sup> Putin defended his Candidate of Sciences in Economics dissertation titled “The Strategic Planning of Regional Resources under the Formation of Market Relations” at the Saint Petersburg Mining Institute in 1997.

With the continuing decline in state funding, universities increase their revenues by charging tuition. In contrast to HEIs, most research institutes, once generously funded by the state, generate little income. In this sense, universities are in an advantageous position in respect to Research institutes. Nevertheless, research institutes preserve the right to host doctoral programs, hold dissertation defenses, and produce doctorates. The doctorates for sale scheme helps research institutes to survive financially. This scheme, be it in universities or research institutes, often implies bribery and other explicit forms of corruption, including kickbacks, gifts, gratuities, collusion, and fraud. The scholars entrusted by society and authorized by the state to award doctoral degrees defraud the state and abuse public trust by awarding doctorates without merit, producing dissertations for sale, or simply not participating and controlling the set process of doctoral education. This intentional deception of the society equates to fraud.

The fashion of holding doctoral degrees among bureaucrats, public officials, politicians, and businessmen leads to a continuous increase in the demand for the doctorates for sale, when hired scholars write dissertations and help with all the required documents and procedures before and after the defense. While the dissertations might be good, the degree-holders are but forgeries. Doctoral degrees have become popular among Russian politicians, including high rank bureaucrats and members of the Duma [Russian Parliament]. According to media reports, many state bureaucrats and the parliamentarians lost sleep over their academic laurels.<sup>17</sup> Of 450 members of the Russian Parliament, 228 hold doctoral degrees, including 143 Candidate Sciences degrees and 85 Doctor Sciences degrees.<sup>18</sup> The Russian Parliament is also distinguished by the number of billionaires among its members and is referred to as the richest parliament in the world.<sup>19</sup> In the Russian Federation, the media links the problem of dissertations for sale with public officials who hold doctoral degrees.<sup>20</sup> The President of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, is often targeted by the media in an attempt to discredit his doctoral degree in economics and other titles and decorations.<sup>21</sup> An attempt to distinguish oneself from the masses drives the demand for doctoral degrees and other verbal and documented distinctions. In Russia, it is now in fashion to buy decorations, including state and public orders and other distinctions.<sup>22</sup> Since state awards are not easily accessible, public organizations are established to offer public decorations for sale.<sup>23</sup>

While the presence of corruption in awarding doctorates is obvious, the size of bribes paid and costs of different accompanying services remain unclear. Some estimates, however, may be found in the media. Price of the papers necessary for publication before the defense is \$150. Full bibliography for the dissertation will cost around \$300. The cost of experimental or analytical part varies from \$300 to \$1000, depending on the level of complexity. The prices are presented as of 2006.<sup>24</sup> Some reports say that the prices are higher than those perceived by the

public and that doctorates, especially Doctor Sciences degrees, can not be bought for few thousand dollars. Doctor Sciences can go as high as \$50,000, depending on the discipline and the university where it is conferred. *Spiegel* reports that “depending on the quality and the field, the price of one of these quickie degrees can run anywhere from €3,000-35,000 (\$4,452-51,937).”<sup>25</sup> Paying for doctoral dissertations may be a part of a new post-Soviet culture, when everything is for sale. Starting from the massive privatization of state enterprises, the country has now reached the point when doctoral degrees are also for sale.

The culture of plagiarism, cheating, and forgeries is widespread in Russia. Masters theses and term papers can be bought on-line or custom-prepared for the clients, and so can doctoral dissertations. Academic corruption is not an exception. The Ministry of Economic Development confirms that half of all the goods in Russia are forgeries or counterfeited products. The Assistant to the Head of the Ministry, Yuri Liubimov, who leads the department against piracy, says that in order to understand the attraction of Russians to forgeries and counterfeiting, one has to know about the importance of kitsch and showing off in the society: “It is like French term *faire montrer*. It is better to look like, than to be. It is very oriental.”<sup>26</sup>

The state control over the centralized system of doctoral education gives up under the pressure of market forces. The outdated system can no longer resist the market demand for fake doctorates. In earlier days, VAK was effective in processing documents for doctoral degrees and controlling the quality of dissertations for the entire USSR, while now it can not serve even the Russian Federation. In the Soviet times, VAK had 220 specialists plus staff members and was in fact a state committee. The building it occupied had twelve thousand square meters of office space. In 2007, there are only 44 specialists left in VAK, but the number of dissertations that goes through VAK is now higher than it was in the Soviet times, in 1980s. VAK now has to

process around thirty thousand Candidate Sciences dissertations and four thousand Doctor Sciences dissertations each year. In addition to dissertations, VAK also considers around twelve thousand applications for academic ranks of Associate Professor [Dotsent] and Professor. The office space has been reduced almost tenfold, down to less than one and a half thousand square meters. Chief Academic Secretary of VAK, Feliks Shamhalov, complains about the lack of funding, personnel, and premises, and states that “Members of Expert Boards, highly respected people, and, as the norm, old people, have to write conclusions, fitting themselves somewhere in a hallway. Sorry for a dark comparison, but even on a cemetery one receives more space...”<sup>27</sup> Shamhalov states that changes are coming to the system of attestation, including tighter quality control and better staffed commissions.<sup>28</sup> VAK can hardly cope with the growing flow of dissertations. This overload serves poorly the need for quality control.

According to the results obtained by the Institute of Psychology of RAN, 84 percent of scholars consider the practice of awarding doctorates to people very distant from research and scholarship as negative, 7 percent are indifferent, 8 percent have special opinions in this regard and 1 percent find it difficult to answer. Some respondents think that if a person funds a research that goes into his/her dissertation, then this practice is acceptable, because at least there is some funding for research, no matter who does it. The sense of passion for research and scholarship remain strong in Russian academic community, but it does not prevent the practice of dissertations for sale. The survey shows that scholars emphasize administrative methods in curbing such a practice, including more power and resources to VAK, tighter control over the Special Academic Boards, higher level of legal responsibility and such. At the same time, there are voices that demand focusing on the quality of the dissertation itself, on expertise over authorship, and a restriction for candidates based on the number of years spent in research and

teaching. Forensic expertise is also mentioned by the respondents. Overall, 78 percent of the respondents think that the academic community should stop the practice of awarding doctorates without merit, 6 percent think that there is no such need, and 16 percent do not have a particular view on this problem.<sup>29</sup>

Kirpichnikov said that from now on dissertations and their abbreviated versions or autoreferates will be checked for plagiarism with the help of the newly introduced on-line system “Antiplagiat.VAK.” He was discussing corruption in the system of conferring doctoral degrees at the round-table discussion titled “Antiplagiat.VAK – innovations against pseudo-dissertations.” Kirpichnikov says that around three percent of all the dissertations fail the defense. This amounts to one thousand dissertations a year. By failures, he apparently means that the dissertations did not pass the VAK and did not receive its approval.

VAK is intended to use “Antiplagiat.VAK” program to fight plagiarism in dissertations. The Chairman of the Board of Directors of the private company “Anti-Plagiat,” Igor Karpachev, confirms that the system “Antiplagiat.VAK” can use over eight million on-line sources to find possible plagiarism and that thanks to the system “prestige of scholarship in Russia will increase.”<sup>30</sup> The name of the program can be translated as Anti-plagiarism for the Higher Attestation Commission. The internet service AntiPlagiat.Ru, maintained by the company, is said to be used successfully by several Russian HEIs. This internet service was launched in 2006 and is the first service of such kind, launched in Russia. College instructors use the service to check for plagiarism in the students’ term papers.

Only one percent of all the dismissed dissertations are dismissed by VAK for plagiarism. This constitutes ten dissertations a year. In light of this, it becomes unclear why so much weight is given to the system that supposed to spot plagiarism in the dissertations. On the one hand,

VAK may become more successful in sorting out plagiarized texts from the original ones. On the other hand, it is possible that VAK is intended to implement the system because of the favorable relations with the private company that offers the service. The older dissertations will not be checked through the system because there is not enough funding available to do that.

Plagiarizing a dissertation and ordering one from the experts are not the only ways to acquire a doctorate. There is no need to go through the hurdles of writing and defending a dissertation or buying one from the experts in the field. There are fake doctoral diplomas on sale with the option of placing the information in all the necessary databases and files. Finally, there are doctoral diplomas from non-existent HEIs. These two forms of abuse of doctoral degrees in Russia are similar to US forgeries and diploma mills, when one can buy a “genuine” Stanford PhD for \$200, or order a full set of educational certificates from a notorious diploma mill.

### **Discussion**

The “doctorates for sale” phenomenon is by no means a new development in education. Historically, doctoral degrees incurred a substantial cost, including informal payments and gifts. In many medieval universities, laxity in standards in doctoral education was extraordinary even by the standards of the time. Professors were paid by their students and, hence, were interested primarily in students’ money, less so in maintaining prestige of a university, especially since universities themselves were not well-shaped and well-structured. Compayre asserts: “The result of this dependence on pupils was, as one can imagine, a tendency on the part of professors to display indulgence and to lower the requirements for passing the examinations, so as neither to discourage the students nor to expose themselves to the loss of patronage. In 1412, a rector of Montpellier called the doctors of the Faculty of Law to order for their deplorable laxity in

conferring degrees. Poorer universities acquired a sorry reputation for excessive laxity; the graduates of the University of Orange, for instance, were nicknamed ‘Orange-flower doctors!’ *Docteurs a la fleur d’orange!*”<sup>31</sup>

The genesis of doctorates for sale from Perestroika to present day Russia may be separated into few stages. Initially, experts in leading universities that hosted Special Academic Boards for doctoral dissertation defenses were offering help in finishing and polishing dissertation to candidates in exchange for an informal payment. This was characteristic of late 1980s and early 1990s, when many came to Moscow to defend their dissertations. Due to the heavy bureaucratization and high centralization of the system, it was perceived that the regulations are strictly observed in academic centers in Moscow, while being more loosely interpreted on the periphery. However, the opposite might well be true. Universities in Moscow were in the forefront of turning dissertation preparation and defenses into a well-developed business. The practice of helping in finishing dissertation was considered as something within the limits of accepted practices, since many candidates were qualified in their respected areas of specialization, but lacked time and skills necessary to formulate their major scholarly statements and findings, and put them into proper form and format. Also, the line between personal contribution to the field of knowledge and assistance in writing dissertations was not clearly demarcated. If formatting dissertation in Word for a fee was considered normal, then preparing mathematical or experimental part of the dissertation by an expert and not the candidate could be considered acceptable as well. The dissertation conveyer started gaining pace.

The second stage moved the dissertation business much further, when experts started offering to write a dissertation for a candidate from scratch. More advanced version of this service is so-called “dissertations for key,” when the candidate himself or herself is not expected

to make any effort in obtaining the doctorate. In fact, in some instances it came to anecdotal cases when a candidate was not able to recall the exact formulation of the dissertation's title even during the defense. This is especially explicit indication of corruption, since in the Soviet system a lot of attention was paid to wording of the dissertation's title and titles were going through the formal approval and re-approval. Dissertations for key were new, original, custom made works of a good quality. The full package included whole range of services, from selection of the dissertation topic to the approval of defended dissertation in VAK.

Slowly, it became understood that not every dissertation has to represent an original research and that lower quality dissertations may be prepared for the clients and defended successfully. The third stage employs the concept under which experts offer to write dissertation for a client and then plagiarize certain parts of it in order to save time, reduce the cost of production, and produce a cheaper product, thus increasing the total demand on such kind of services. The third stage was a significant modification of the concept of dissertation for key. At the second stage, the forgery was at the level of the candidate, i.e. the receiver of the doctoral degree was not holding it on merit. At the third stage, not only the degree was not deserved, but even the dissertation itself was below a set standard. Such a development implied a well-organized mechanism of conferring degrees to the candidates without merit for defending dissertations that are below the doctoral level dissertations, i.e. the experts who were writing dissertations were likely to be connected with members of the Special Academic Boards. In some instances, members of the Board could also write dissertations for clients. This would be normal under current circumstances, by analogy with academic advisors who write theses for their own students in exchange for cash and other benefits.

Some candidates will prefer to plagiarize, while others will prefer to pay to professionals. Plagiarizing works of others for one's own dissertation may be risky. When experts plagiarize, they have an informal agreement with the members of the Board. When candidates themselves plagiarize, they can be failed by the Board. In reality, different variations and combinations of candidate's own work and services of experts for an informal fee are possible. Apparently, it is also possible to write and defend a dissertation without paying bribes and gratuities. The opinions expressed in the media and internet blogs point to the existence of practices of extortion, when even good dissertations presented by scholars are not allowed to pass until a bribe is paid. On the other hand, there are accounts that researchers defend their dissertations without any expense. These, of course, are all anecdotal accounts that can not be held as hard evidence, and yet they point to the possibility of different scenarios in the dissertation business.

Despite the phenomenon of doctorates for sale has deep roots in history of the university and is widespread along both centralized and decentralized systems of doctoral education, it is not addressed by the scholars; there are no articles, working papers, conference presentations, or any other accounts or scholarly records on corruption in conferring doctorates and "doctorates for sale," except for discussion of diploma mills that sell "real PhDs" among other educational certificates. Corruption in higher education has long been neglected as an area of research, and hence there is little surprise that corruption in doctorates was not addressed by scholars. One reason for this might be that the relative scarcity of prosecuted cases of corruption in conferring doctorates has made it at first appearance not a large problem in the nation's higher education, not significant enough from the researchers' standpoint to be paid much attention.

Another explanation for this is that all of the scholars attended higher education institutions and most of them hold doctoral degrees and teach in colleges and universities. Many

teach in doctoral programs, advise doctoral students, sit on Special Academic Boards or PhD committees, and some apparently prepare doctoral dissertations for clients and let them through the system. The sense of belonging and close affiliation may prevent from involving in research of academic corruption in doctorates. It has been noticed that the university values loyalty above all and does not reward criticism.

In distinction from the media, scholars are overly cautious about the language of investigations and usage of such explicit legal terms as corruption, bribery, fraud, and prefer to replace them with such terms as misconduct and breach of academic integrity. Finally, definition of education corruption itself is still vague and undeveloped. This creates uncertainty in the subject matter of the prospective research, approaches to be applied, and methodologies to be employed. The limits of the object of the research, i.e. the locus, also remain unclear for those who would want to venture to study corruption in conferring doctorates.

It may be unclear whether the issue of doctorates for sale is significant enough, or at least its immediate impact on the economy is significant. Simply put: How big is this problem in the Russian Federation? By estimates, over ten thousand dissertations are bought and sold annually. Let us assume an average price of \$10,000 per dissertation. The total for this informal industry amounts to one hundred million dollars. This sum seems not so big for the country with the annual GDP of over one trillion dollars. In fact, it only constitutes 0.01 percent of the GDP. Ten thousand dollars for a doctoral degree is an acceptable price for the country with the annual per capita GDP of six thousand dollars as measured in nominal USD. The total volume of bribes paid in higher education in the Russian Federation in 2005 was estimated at the level of over one billion dollars.<sup>32</sup> The total sum of bribes paid by ordinary citizens to street level bureaucrats, including in education, healthcare, and traffic police, is estimated at over three billion USD. The

total amount of money paid in bribes and kickbacks by businessmen to bureaucrats is ten times higher, mounting thirty billion USD. By 2008, if accounting for the rapid economic growth, rising cost of tuition, and the trend of steady increase in corrupt payments in education, the total shadow market in higher education may be equal to around two billion dollars, as measured in the nominal USD dollars, and much higher if adjusted for purchasing power parity. The “dissertations for sale” segment of the market constitutes only five percent of the entire shadow sector in higher education.

If the problem of doctorates for sale is so insignificant, can it be ignored? It would be irrational for the society to ignore this problem, because it extends far beyond its immediate boundaries. The monetary estimates of the problem and the market segment itself are but a tip of the iceberg. The real price of doctorates for sale, i.e. the real cost to the society is much higher. First, there are far reaching negative consequences for the education industry and the society. Second, “doctorates for sale” is an organic part of the larger problem of corruption in higher education. Accordingly, efforts focused on the reduction of corruption in doctoral education become a natural part of the fight with corruption in the education sector. Third, there is no legible substitute for doctorates in modern educational systems.

The next issue to be considered is the level of harm that undeserved doctorates do or can potentially inflict to the society or specific segment of the national economy and governmental structure. The question to be addressed may be formulated as follows: Are holders of fake doctorates really harmful to the society, especially if they do not realize their PhDs in the societal production? By analogy, how harmful is someone who claims that he/she has an MD, if he/she does not practice medicine? The harm to the society may be accounted in few ways. First, politicians and bureaucrats occupy positions they did not deserve. By doing this, they effectively

prevent capable individuals to occupy these positions, do better job, and better serve the society. Second, a widespread nepotism in higher education leads to the fact that many teaching positions in HEIs are occupied by relatives of the administration. They acquire doctorates in corrupt ways in order to retain their bread-winning positions in academia. As a result, the quality of teaching is deteriorating, while more promising doctorates are kept away from teaching and research. Third, those who bought their doctorates are eager to collect illicit benefits and spread the culture of corruption in organizations they work, be it a university, a private firm, or a governmental institution. Finally, doctoral degrees have a signaling function. Once doctoral degrees are available for purchase, the signaling function is distorted. Some ambitious pretenders receive Candidate of Sciences degrees without even having completed a college degree. Once Candidate of Sciences degrees are available for sale, Doctor Sciences degrees' availability is just a question of time.

Are all the doctorates of equal value or does the value of doctorates for sale varies depending on the field? It appears that the value of doctorates for sale is field-specific and depends heavily on consumer preferences. The data shows that bureaucrats and politicians do not want to hold doctorates in mathematics, physics or other sciences.<sup>33</sup> There might be few reasons for that. First, it may be more prestigious to hold a doctorate in social sciences than in sciences. Second, because (they think) they know at least something about economics, politics, sociology, or philosophy, and thus can prove that they indeed deserved this doctorate. Third, physics, chemistry, and other science fields are either irrelevant or less relevant to bureaucrats' occupations.

Bureaucrats and politicians do not want simply a doctorate. They prefer a relevant doctorate, i.e. a doctoral degree in a field closely related to their position. Such doctorates are, of

course, in economics, jurisprudence, sociology, history, and political sciences. Hence, the tradition of conferring honorary doctorates to individuals of high social stance and public merit is unlikely to become a solution for the problem of doctorates for sale. State bureaucrats, elected officials, and prominent businessmen will not be satisfied with honorary degrees from particular HEIs, because they are not centrally recognized and not field-specific. Moreover, honorary doctorates do not convey any message to the public. An honorary doctorate is not a good replacement of an academic degree, since it is not accredited, certified, field related or field specific.

Part of the problem is that there are no doctorates in public administration in the Russian system of doctoral degrees. The newly established academic discipline of public administration offers masters degrees only. Organizing doctoral programs in public administration would partially relieve the tension. Bureaucrats involved in public administration on a daily basis, may consider it as a good substitute for doctorates in economics or history. Relevance of the field to bureaucracy will help to avoid asymmetry in the signaling function of doctoral degrees. The value of doctorates for sale may be university-specific as well. The price may vary depending on the status of the awarding institution. Special Academic Boards based in higher ranked universities and research institutes may count on higher illicit rewards.

As the number of doctorates for sale grows in proportion to the total number of doctoral degrees conferred, the value of an average doctoral degree declines. As the value of doctorates deteriorates, the situation becomes paradoxical. Politicians and bureaucrats hold doctorates, many of which are not earned. More and more people become aware of this fact. Eventually, just about everyone will know that their doctorates are not earned and, hence, are not credible. The question that arises is: What is the rationale for politicians and bureaucrats to acquire doctorates

if they are not deserved and will eventually be completely discredited? Apparently, there are certain reasons for which this process will continue for quite sometime. Similarly, there was a rationale for French nouveau riches to acquire noble status.<sup>34</sup> French bourgeoisie accumulated material wealth first and then many of its representatives bought nobility for the reason of prestige, upgrade of social status, and belonging to the higher classes. The benefits from purchasing noble titles from the Crown were minimal. The monetary cost was much higher. At the same time, it was not harmful to the society, since by that time the nobility itself lost most of its meaning.

Nobility eventually lost any meaning and became senseless. Doctorates may share the fate of noble titles and eventually vanish as well, if there would be no accompanying distinctions, i.e. other characteristics to distinct a genuine doctorate from a fake one. Such characteristics come from the very nature of a doctorate and include an academic position that anticipates teaching, and an R&D position that involves laboratory work. If one is employed in either one of these sectors, one is more likely to be a holder of a genuine doctorate, but not necessarily. The rent seeking behavior in modern Russia may be found everywhere. Rent is prioritized and placed above everything else. As soon as the academia becomes a profitable enterprise, there are no longer safeguards from fake doctorates. The conditionality for such a situation includes the following: 1) teaching brings benefits; 2) poor teaching quality is accepted; 3) ghost teaching is possible and accepted. In this case, university position is no longer a proof of quality for doctorates. The same is true for R&D. In fact, there is no one perfect indicator or test, no one perfect predictor of high quality doctorates.

Occupation is not a predictor of quality of a doctorate and scholarly achievements are not a perfect predictor either, since scholarly works can be written by someone else or co-authored.

One has to differentiate between quality of dissertation and quality of the holder of a doctorate. The distinction is that high quality dissertation can be written by someone else. There may be instances when an individual bought his/her doctorate, sits on the Special Academic Board, and raises income by letting other bogus candidates and dissertations to pass the defense. At this point, the system of dissertations for sale becomes self-sustainable. Fake doctorates produce fake doctorates and the process of producing fake doctorates become self-perpetuating.

One of the major issues is not the fact that there are doctoral degrees for sale, but the issue of the level of centralization of the system. Corruption in education exists in both centralized and decentralized systems. Doctoral degrees can be bought in the US as well, including through the services of diploma mills.<sup>35</sup> In fact, even some members of accreditation boards are accused of holding doctorates purchased from diploma mills, as are some of the employees in the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) and other governmental agencies. In the centralized systems, corruption in doctoral education is not limited to transition and developing economies only, but may be found in developed countries as well. There is corruption in conferring doctorates in the centralized system of German education, recently reported by the media.<sup>36</sup> The principal distinction, however,<sup>37</sup> is that in the centralized system the quality of doctorates is guaranteed by a centralized agency.

In the centralized systems, the function of quality control is normally monopolized by the state. In decentralized systems, every college is on its own. Nevertheless, there are still several levels of centralization and coordination in decentralized systems. These levels manifest the presence of group and institutional responsibility over the quality of produced doctorates. The first level consists of professors in the same department. One professor can jeopardize the quality of a doctoral degree and negatively impact work of others. Peer pressure can work both ways; it

can either encourage or discourage the practice of dissertations for sale in any given department. There is a problem of ignorance and silent approval of corrupt activities around doctorates, when professors tend not to interfere and are not interested in someone else's business.

The second level is the university level. Production of few fake PhDs negatively impacts the entire institution, including its reputation, ranking, and academic stance. Hence, in decentralized systems, centralization is present within departments and universities, but not the industry overall. Quazi-state organs or state substitutes exist above the university level. In the US, these are accreditation organizations, including regional college accreditation boards. All of them are non-governmental and many of them are regionally based. Some are formed based on region and specialization, such as those accrediting law schools and medical schools, i.e. professional schools that are also tied to the state licensing. Universities join accreditation pools voluntarily and fund accreditation agencies.

Abuse of trust has a potential to reach a higher scale in centralized systems, where the state guarantees the quality of a doctorate. In centralized systems, the public entrusts the state agencies with the function of quality control. The state, however, is often unable to perform this function and exercise its authority effectively. In decentralized systems, abuse can be considered as decreasing on a sliding scale, depending on the prestige of each university. There is a gradation from the most prestigious doctoral programs at the top to diploma mills with worthless doctorates at the very bottom.

The policy of checking dissertations for plagiarism in Russia, newly adopted by VAK, if proves effective, will drive prices for dissertations up and eventually require more creativity on the side of perpetrators. Under the classical understanding of economic theory, an increase in price of the product causes a decrease in the demand on this product. There are exceptions,

including inferior goods and Giffen goods. Dissertations and doctoral degrees are neither inferior goods, nor are they Giffen goods. Doctoral degrees produced for sale are more of luxury goods accessible for those with monetary means and power. Hence, the price-demand causality may not be the case with the doctoral dissertations. Successful mechanisms for plagiarism detection will necessitate an increase in quality of dissertations, and, hence, the prices will increase. Once the quality of dissertations will increase, the prestige of obtaining a doctorate will increase as well. Prestige of doctoral degrees will be partially restored. As a result, the demand for doctoral degrees from the side of the clients may increase and not decrease. In accordance with the postulates of economics, the demand is understood not as the total number of clients, but the total sum of money they are able and willing to pay for dissertations.

On the personal level, the client buys a doctorate for the title and prestige attached to it. This transaction is positive since it is beneficial for the client. However, the opponents can challenge the client for holding a fake doctorate. This may imply criminal responsibility as well as damage of political reputation, and hence negatively impact the client. In highly corrupt societies, information of corruption is used selectively as compromising materials against corrupt individuals. This, nevertheless, does not prevent them from being involved in corruption. Hence, the risk factor alone will not help to stop corruption. So called black publicity campaigns, when political opponents accuse each other in holding fake academic credentials, are commonplace in modern Russia and other former Soviet republics. In such cases, the major appeal is made to the public that supposed to condemn the use of fake degrees. Interestingly, in business such allegations do not work. Apparently, the world of business applies its own standards of ethics and trust and is not concerned about the problem of business partners using fake doctorates.

Doctoral degrees facilitate career growth, especially in state agencies. For instance, in police and military services, Candidate Sciences corresponds to the rank of Major and Doctor Sciences to Colonel. Prestige is not the only factor in the doctorates for sale problem. Monetary considerations are not less important. The growing demand on doctoral degrees creates higher level of supply of adequate illicit services. High transaction costs drive the price of the “dissertations for sale” up. Illegality of the whole business is one of the factors that cause an increase in transaction costs and explains the need for informal arrangements.

The country now observes the process of creation of parallel structures that mimic certain functions of the state. For instance, state decorations are now supplemented and even contested by state affiliated public decorations, state titles by public titles, doctorates by honorary doctorates, and even the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAN) is now being supplemented by other Academies that exist independently and parallel to RAN. These parallel or mimicking structures are intended to ease and broaden the access of the public to the range of verbal and documented distinctions, which were earlier inaccessible for the most. In fact, they are designed to make a dream come true and follow the Russian tradition: “If you can’t, but really want it, you can get it.” In the conferral of doctoral degrees, VAK is now being paralleled by Highest Public Attestation Commission (VOAK). Creation of parallel structures only increases the price for state authorized degrees, regalia, and distinctions. Eventually, in most of the instances prestige is still being retained by the “Soviet” trade mark. The emergence of parallel structures, independent from the state, manifests a typical market type behavior and facilitates competition on the market of doctorates, decorations, and memberships, previously monopolized by the market. The state no longer holds the monopoly over conferring the publicly acknowledged distinctions.

In the USSR, there were only four Academies: Academy of Sciences of the USSR (now RAN), Academy of pedagogical Sciences, Academy of Medical Sciences, and Academy of Agricultural Sciences. Now, there are around two hundred academies in Russia, all of which, except these four, are public, but not state affiliated. According to the results of the survey of the community of scholars, conducted by the Institute of Psychology of RAN in 2005, 65 percent of them do not welcome the emergence of a large number of new academies, 29 percent are neutral, and only 6 percent see this as a positive change. Apparently, the elimination of the state monopoly in the world of academia is not welcomed by the scholarly community. One of the major reasons for non-state affiliated new academies to exist is to grant distinctions of Academic to people who do not have chances in the state Academy. Opinions about new academies differ based on the discipline: representatives of social sciences and humanities oppose new academies stronger than do representatives of natural sciences. Among social sciences and humanities, 78 percent are negative, 19 percent are neutral, and only 3 percent are positive. Among natural and technical sciences, 56 percent are negative, 37 percent are neutral, and 7 percent are positive.<sup>37</sup>

One of such academies has been closed recently with a big scandal. The Attorney General's office informed about the liquidation of the Academy of Problems of Security, Defense, and Public Order. Members of the academy included Russian Prime Minister, 137 members of the State Duma and its leaders, 58 heads of the federal regions, ministers and other high ranked public officials.<sup>38</sup> The scandal started after the media's sarcastic comments on the Academy and the merits of its members.<sup>39</sup>

All the issues of corruption in conferring doctorates come down to the labor market. As long as there is no developed labor market, corruption is to flourish in all the forms, ways, and fashions. R&D and teaching are the two major areas of societal production where doctorates are

needed. At the extreme, all irrelevant to these two major divisions may be considered as phony doctorates, even though some of them may be earned, not bought. The intent to enlarge VAK and tighten control over doctorates no longer reflects the existing reality in the education sector. At best, it will facilitate an extension of the existing system of control over controllers. Such systems in state bureaucracies have proven ineffective and corrupt, especially in the long run.

The system of doctorates in the Russian Federation is planned to be reformed to conform to the principles laid down by Bologna Declaration. This designed conformity, however, is only true for the academic standards, and to a lesser extent for the content of doctoral programs. The system of funding will likely transform into a structure similar to the US model of financing doctoral education that relies heavily on personal funding and educational loans. There is little need for the public to fund doctoral education through the central budget, if the governmentally funded places are allocated not on the basis of academic merit and scholastic abilities, but on the basis of informal relations, kinship, and bribes. The combination of personal funding, university scholarships, and educational loans, appears to be more appropriate as a new system of funding for doctoral education.

The implementation of Lisbon Convention that anticipates mutual recognition of the degrees and educational credentials by the signing parties is threatened by widespread corruption as well. Heyneman, Anderson, and Nuraliyeva (2008) assert that “Whether experienced or perceived, universities or university systems with reputations for corruption will likely end the Bologna process. Were this process to actually take effect it would constitute the educational equivalent in the EU of unilateral disarmament.”<sup>40</sup> Countries with the high level of credibility and low level of corruption are unlikely to recognize educational credentials from the countries

where degrees are bought and sold. This may lead to the collapse of the initiative of creating a common educational space within the larger Europe.

Doctorates are often needed to put suffice of a Dr. before one's name. It gives feeling of self-respect and personal accomplishment. Verbal distinctions come, change, and disappear in time. Noble titles in France, inherited in generations and then simply sold by the Crown to the merchants, are now near extinction. Nobility in France was abolished while Britain still award titles of Sir to some distinguished contributors to the societal wellbeing. The clear division between doctorates and honorary doctorates is a solution to the problem of academic credentials versus public merits. But, as was pointed out earlier, bureaucrats, politicians, and businessmen, are unlikely to be satisfied with honorary doctorates.

Naturally, universities may request from the government to establish the state control over doctoral degrees and other academic degrees as well. Feasibility of this motion, however, is doubtful. In the Russian Federation, VAK has failed due to the lack of funding. To be more specific, VAK itself did not fail, but the government has failed to assure continuing and effective functioning of VAK, including through sufficient funding and staffing. Accreditation is still being an important institute in higher education. The questions to be addressed regarding accreditation and attestation of qualifications in the next decade or so are as follows: Does it have to be state accreditation, administered by the state agencies? Does it have to be obligatory or volunteering for public and private HEIs? Does it have to be centralized, or can it be decentralized, and to what extent? Doctorates are needed to pursue scholarship in academia and research. Knowledge is the best criterion to define a genuine doctorate and professorship along with research achievements is a best usage of doctorates.

In the times when USSR was alive, “Soviet” meant quality. “Soviet” was a unified brand, a certain trade mark, recognized in many countries. Soviet trade partners and enterprises were considered as reliable partners and contractors, because responsibilities and legal obligations were all met by the state. There were hundreds of thousands of foreign students receiving education in the Soviet system of higher education, most of which came from developing nations. Soviet diploma was valued around the world. Same was true for the quality of Soviet doctorates – they were state certified. This is no longer the case, at least in reality. Deterioration of quality of doctoral degrees appears to be an irreversible process. Irreversibility of the process means that the system can not return to the initial condition, unless there is an extra effort made to turn the system back to its initial condition. It is unclear, what would be the source of such an effort and whether it would be internal, i.e. generated within the system itself, or external, applied from the outside of the system. It is also unclear if this would be at all possible. Certainly, it is virtually impossible under the current conditions of underfunding and current trends of decentralization.

There is a strong sense in the academic community that if the centralized control is to be removed through the abolition of VAK, there will be chaos, at least temporarily. The public’s perceptions lean toward reinforcing the old system in a hope to regain the positions of credibility and trust. Tougher administrative requirements are imposed in order to make the old system function better. These requirements, however, are overcome easily by those who have more access to administrative resources, i.e. bureaucrats and businessmen. For instance, limiting the total number of defenses per year allowed in a given Special Academic Board may cut, first of all, most able candidates. New system need to be implemented. The propagation of the slogan “The VAK is dead! Long live VAK!” is highly unlikely. In the future, universities may organize

improvised pools and fund their own accreditation agencies, including regional and professional ones. These agencies may also include the state VAK, or independent VAK(s) only, but participation in such accreditation pools will be voluntary. Accordingly, non-governmental VAKs will only serve participating institutions. Universities and research institutions will participate in order to ensure the quality of doctorates they produce.

Presently, Special Academic Boards are eager to accept for defense high quality original dissertations written by genuine candidates, because it improves the average quality of dissertations and candidates defended in the Board. A larger number of high quality dissertations allows to accept a larger number of low quality dissertations. The same is true for the quality of candidates. If the total number of defenses per year is limited, there is a tradeoff between the average quality of dissertations and illicit income from the dissertations for sale. Timing is also important. Candidates have to wait until the time they will be scheduled for the defense. Naturally, some candidates, especially those who are actually clients of the Board, would be willing to move to the front of the line.

### **Conclusion**

A doctoral degree, guaranteed by the state, gives prestige to its holder. Traditionally, holders of doctoral degrees were employed by universities and research institutes. This is no longer the case. A new privileged class, including politicians, state bureaucrats, and businessmen, seeks verbal and documented distinctions. In order to satisfy the demand for doctoral degrees, dissertations are for sale. The “dissertations for sale” business in Russia is growing. Russian society pays a much higher price for the existence of fraudulent doctorates and dissertations for sale than do those buying doctoral degrees. Fake doctorates directly and indirectly reduce

effectiveness and efficiency of the societal production and are detrimental not only to the education sector, but the society overall.

The rent-seeking behavior in the Russian society is perceived as a norm. Public officials, bureaucrats, and public servants attempt to transform their access to material and non-material assets into personal benefits. Educators act in a similar manner. Rectors of state HEIs rent out public property, including academic and non-academic facilities and land, to businesses in which they often have a share. University professors sell doctorates by abusing their monopolized function of conferring doctoral degrees. The specifics of the doctoral education in the Russian Federation are such that doctoral students take only few formal courses. This is common in European countries. Professors do not have to teach doctoral courses, nor do they advise their doctoral students, even though they suppose to. In many instances, university professors, including members of the Specialized Academic Boards, simply let a dissertation through. The division of functions emerges in order to maximize the total income obtained from illicit payments. The Board members let the dissertation through, while others write the dissertation and prepare the documents before and after the defense.

This paper addresses the problem of doctorates for sale in the following manner. First, it offers a brief description of the doctoral education in Russian. A special emphasis is the analysis is made on the high level of centralization of the system, including the changing role of VAK. Second, it presents a description of corruption in doctoral education with the major focus on the “dissertations for sale” business. The illicit nature of the business implies high transaction costs. The discussion section offers some insights to the magnitude of the problem, and its impact on the society. The genesis of the dissertations for sale business is supplemented by the idea of

creation of parallel structures and personal incentives that drive the demand on dissertations and fake doctorates up.

The bottom line in the dissertations for sale issue and the broader issue of doctoral credentials comes down to two questions: 1) whether PhD holders are used in societal production, i.e. R&D and teaching; 2) whether dissertations are used in production, i.e. results of the dissertations are applied in production, as do products of R&D. At this point, it appears that the whole sector of scientific research and scholarship is spinning around the production of dissertations for their own sake. A doctoral degree performs a signaling function: it flags a high quality specialist able to perform certain functions in societal production. The whole issue is not the quality of bought and sold dissertations, since they do not really go into production, but the quality of degree holders. They do not deserve academic merits and their educational credentials do not represent real knowledge.

Decentralization and restructuring of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAN) diminishes the role of the state. University autonomy may be needed to replace weakening state control. Meritocracy and high social prestige of doctorates slowly disappears. This indicates the process of erosion of values, common for the society overall. Forgeries will eventually be annihilated by their overwhelming number. Doctoral degree will become absurdist. The situation develops in an unregulated, unorganized way. A well-planned campaign focused on discrediting Soviet doctorates is unlikely. Nevertheless, the process of debasement of the old system creates a ground for the new, one tier system of doctorates, based on PhDs. In the new system, a doctoral degree will serve as an indicator of the holder's ability to perform independent scholarly research and teaching. Reputation of each degree and degree holder will be based on his/her academic merits and reputation of the granting university.

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