

When 'E' Is Not an 'E'

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Another corruption scandal has hit Russia.

The Unified State Exam has been turned into a complete farce. As in previous years, teachers openly gave answers to students before and during the exam, and bearded university students took the test in place of school kids.

But this year, a new scheme was developed. Students in the Far East used their mobile phones to photograph test questions and post them on Vkontakte.ru, offering the information to other students for a modest fee.

All developed countries have some form of standardized exams for students trying to enter a university. But the kind of cheating schemes that are par for the course in Russia are unheard of in other countries. For example, the Vkontakte.ru scam would never have found enough willing accomplices to succeed in Europe or the United States.

Corruption has perverted every institution and law in Russia, except perhaps the law of gravity.

Take, for example, the proposal to create a professional army. How many times have we heard that the idea of a mass-mobilization army is outdated and promotes corruption, that if there were only a professional army and soldiers earned a salary for their services they would no longer be treated as slaves.

But what happened?

The military set up special divisions made up of professional soldiers, while the rest of the armed forces remained conscript.

This split system spawned a new form of corruption. Officers forced conscripts to stand out in frigid temperatures in only their underwear until they signed contracts to become professional soldiers. Then, the officers pocketed the contract pay themselves. This brazen corruption scheme was exceptional even by Russian standards.

Another example: online state tenders. It used to be common practice to exclude “outsiders” from the bidding by disqualifying them on any pretext. Then the authorities standardized the process so that all documents had to be submitted in electronic form through an official web site. It would seem that the system was corruption-proof, right?

What happened?

Devious officials and bidders discovered that when listing a tender on the government web site, if, for example, they replaced a Russian “e” with an identical English “e” in the name of the product or service sought, any Russian-language search for that item by potential bidders would come up blank. Only the bidder in cahoots with the authorities would be given the secret information — the combination of letters that could locate the tender on the Internet. As a result, he could offer an exorbitantly high “bid” and was guaranteed to win.

These are all symptoms of Russia’s acute necrosis.

Officials are always inventing ways to drive unsuspecting victims into this or that bureaucratic trap. But even more disturbing is the way each new measure for reducing corruption — measures that work well in normal countries — only produces the opposite results in a system as warped as Russia’s.

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