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Testing Russia's Corruption Level

By Boris Kagarlitsky

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This year's Unified State Exam for high school students applying for admission to universities has turned into a national scandal.

More than 300,000 users of the Vkontakte.ru web site were able to view test questions that had been posted by students who took the exams several hours earlier in the Far East. In some regions, teachers and administrators simply handed students the answers on the spot.

In response, the authorities promised that during next year's exams they will ask the police, Federal Security Service and possibly even the army to help enforce the rules. They will, among other things, disable mobile phone communications and shut down social networking sites while the exam is being administered across the country.

Massive cheating on the standardized exam has captured the attention of more Russians than any other political problem in the country at the moment, including the question of which member of the tandem might run in the 2012 presidential race.

Strangely enough, many of the people who post test answers on the Internet and create web sites to help students cheat seek no financial gain. At the same time, they risk serious punishment under the law. For them, it is a political protest against the exam rather than an opportunity to make a few bucks on the side. They believe the exam is patently flawed and a poor measure of a student's ability to excel in university.

Given the technologies available today, any attempt to crack down on exam cheating is doomed to fail. Even the most totalitarian control will only increase demand for more high-tech ways to bypass restrictions. To enforce the ban on taking mobile phones into the test area, each student would have to be searched or else taken to a separate room for strip searches. The only way to enforce test rules is to introduce the same procedures that are used in prisons. The authorities understand this well, and perhaps this is why they want to bring in the police and the FSB.

The discontent over standardized exams are only a small part of a larger conflict over education reforms and cutbacks. As usual, the authorities are not listening to people's complaints. As a result, an isolated problem such as the standardized exams has turned into a large, nationwide political confrontation with the people. In typical fashion, Russia's leaders doggedly focus on symptoms rather than underlying, systemic causes as they muddle their way through each successive scandal and policy failure.

The advocates of education reforms constantly repeat their belief that standardized exams provide a level playing field — an objective benchmark for university admissions that enables talented, but poor, students from the most remote villages to study at the country's top universities.

Despite President Dmitry Medvedev's battle against corruption, the problem has now reached unprecedented proportions. Cheating on state exams has become a national malaise in which whole cities and regions are implicit.

Blatant disregard of the law became the norm in society a long time ago, but this year's widespread cheating on state exams has widened the scope for cheating and breaking the law.

Boris Kagarlitsky is the director of the Institute of Globalization Studies.

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