

NEW 'USE' PASSION

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Late May and June is the period when high school graduates take their Unified State Exam (USE). Naturally, the USE draws more attention in this period: numerous stories about corruption relating to the USE are published in mass media, and this type of exam receives an increasing criticism.

Neither did May and June 2013 become an exception: the very first day of the Russian-language exam (one of the two compulsory exams) was notoriously marked by a big scandal. Exam monitoring and test materials were found to have been posted on the Internet before the USE began. It did happen before, but not in such unprecedentedly large scale as it was in 2013. The Federal Education and Science Supervision Agency made initial attempts to lead general public to believe that the materials was just a fake until it had to admit that the disclosed examination assignments were authentic. The Federal Education and Science Supervision Agency managed to “promptly” detect a few violators (in Tomsk, for instance, first examination results of a girl were cancelled, but since the discontent tidal wave kept growing, the list of violators was growing accordingly¹). The USE situation was heavily covered in both electronic mass media and newspapers: detected were a few regions (Dagestan in particular) in which eleven grade schoolers were moved on a massive scale from urban to rural high schools, because the latter were less meticulous about USE monitoring and accepted far less expensive bribes. The USE received most negative response in Moscow where it was kept under tight monitoring, thereby considerably decreasing chances for Moscow high schoolers to enter prestige Moscow higher schools, at least this is what their parents said. In general, the USE has become a pet aversion for Moscow and St. Petersburg, because it was basically Moscow residents who used to enter higher schools in Moscow before the USE was introduced. The same was true for St. Petersburg and its residents. Now, both cities have been facing a strong inflow of high-grade high school graduates from other regions, whereas Moscow and St. Petersburg residents are reluctant to move to smaller cities, thereby having objectively less chances to enter good higher schools. Furthermore, a tougher monitoring over

the USE in Moscow makes the situation even worse for Moscow high school graduates. According to witnesses, the USE monitoring was more relaxed in St. Petersburg, thereby having become another cause for USE criticism: non-cheating schoolers (and their parents) failed to win, whereas those who had not high integrity standards stood to gain by receiving high grades to be well on the way to prestige higher schools. And it's not just entering that is the case, because a firm belief developed that cheaters would be entitled to study on a state-funded basis (i.e. free of charge), whereas non-cheaters would have to pay for their education.

As a result, the Unified State Exam has rapidly been losing people's confidence. Even more illustrative was a USE survey conducted by Fond “Obschestvennoye Mneniye” (Public Opinion Foundation) (POF)².

Just 20% of the respondents supported the introduction of USE, whereas 51% of those being aware of it were in opposition. Furthermore, these figures are typical of all types of communities – 50% of the population in large cities, and villages disliked the USE, whereas just one fifth of the population said that the introduction was a positive measure.

The same POF conducted in 2001 a public opinion survey concerning the USE, when the USE-introduction experiment was recently launched. The survey results were precisely the opposite: 56% of the respondents had a positive view of the Unified State Exam, whereas 25% didn't like it. Positive attitude towards the USE was based on parents' hope that it would offer more chances to schoolers from rural and remote areas to enter prestige higher schools.

Incredible as it may seem, on the one hand, it did help more rural and upcountry high school graduates enter higher schools in Moscow and St. Petersburg. On the other hand, it made different social groups to harden to the view that most of these graduates are cheaters or bribe givers. It has long been forgotten to date that in 2001 most of high school graduates believed that Moscow higher schools were difficult to enter because they “had all the aces”. Nonetheless, the

¹ However, on the conference call held on June 27, 2013 on the occasion of the completion of the Unified State Exam, Deputy Prime Minister Golodets O. Y. pointed out that not more than 140 exam papers leaked to the Internet before the USE started, and the source was detected and respective measures taken, as strong as cancelling the examination results, with regard to 138 papers.

² Survey's results were published on June 19, 2013, see <http://fom.ru/obshchestvo/10961>

**ANSWERS TO THE QUESTION WHY DO YOU THINK THE INTRODUCTION OF THE UNIFIED STATE EXAM
IN HIGH SCHOOL IS WRONG?**

Data as percentage of the total interviewed	Answers
14	USE results provide no full picture of a level of knowledge, they are largely of random nature
10	USE is focused on getting an inch-deep knowledge, the level of knowledge has declined
10	Too heavy burden is placed on schoolers, they are under stress
6	Traditional exams are better than tests
3	The USE system needs refining, tests contain many flawed, tests contain many flawed, ill-conceived questions
3	Too much forgery, corruption
2	USE can't be used for all high schoolers
2	I dislike the USE, there are many negative comments
1	USE fails to consider the difference between high schools in the level of teaching
1	Not all topics can be sat as tests
1	I adhere to the Soviet educational system
2	Other
2	To be undecided

belief has been growing that top higher schools can't be entered just like that. Today, in fear that their children can't enter a higher school, parents pay to tutors and those who can "help with exams". One may assume, however, that payment to tutors and USE-related bribes have resulted from a negative environment created around the Unified State Exam through annual hysteria around the same.

It should be noted that in 2012 the *Institut Gumanitarnogo Razvitiya Megapolisa (Institute of Metropolitan Humanitarian Development)* (IMHD) conducted a survey of Moscow high schools and obtained a very interesting result: shortly after the SFC (State Final Certification, a USE equivalent for middle school graduates) was introduced for nine-grade schoolers, 68% of families hired tutors to make sure that their children get high grades at this (virtually intermediate) exam. As a result, it turned out to be difficult to tell who gives knowledge to enable schoolers to pass the SFC with high grades, a good school or the family which cares about their children and hires tutors.

Those who believed that the USE introduction was wrong (51% of the respondents who are aware of the Unified State Exam) were asked the question "Why do you think the introduction of the unified state exam in high school is wrong?". Summarized answers of the respondents are presented in *Table 1*¹.

Table 1 is a good illustration of that respondents' vision of the USE has largely been shaped through the picture going the rounds year after year (especially when they sit the Unified exam) in mass media rather than first-hand experience. A random character of USE results, as well focus on teaching to the exam, and inch-

deep level of knowledge were highlighted. The answer "too heavy burden is placed on schoolers, they are under stress" given by 10% of those who dislike the USE sounds odd in particular. It should be recalled that the USE was introduced in particular to relieve stress from high school graduates, because they had to sit high school final exams and higher school entrance exams.

However, this answer may be interpreted the following way: exams at high school were given by "friendly" teachers who wanted their schoolers to pass all exams to their best (it did relieve stress from 17-year old "kids"), while tutors were hired from the higher school to be entered (and these tutors would often provide support during entrance exams).

Another big scandal broke out at the very end of USE-2013, when the Federal Education and Science Supervision Agency announced that grave violations were committed in 3/4 of the high-grade exam papers.

Perhaps, all these scandals resulted from the statement made by Minister of Education and Science Livanov D.V. that the approach to the USE should be changed. He also said that a high schooler portfolio (his/her involvement in social activity, etc.), sports achievements, and the Overall Grade Point Average would be taken into account in order to be admitted to a higher school, which should enhance the high school prestige and on top of that encourage eleven grade high schoolers to study not only the USE subjects, but also other high school disciplines. The Minister and many other speakers referred to the US practice, where not only national test results, but also other characteristics of a candidate are considered for university admission. Referring, however, to the US practice, they ignored the fact that the US high school graduate portfolio contains no test results on

¹ See <http://fom.ru/obshchestvo/10961>.

many subjects since the second grade class, and the said test is to be conducted by independent organizations.

All of the proposed changes give rise to a great concern¹, because the concept of the USE is its independence from high and higher schools – gradually degrading. In this context, it is the Overall Grade Point Average that might become the most controversial element of the new system. Anyway, it remains to be seen what weight it would carry in the total result of a high school graduate.

In the meantime, summing up the USE results on June 27, vice prime minister Golodets O.Y. , pointed out that she was satisfied with the results, notwithstanding that more than 4,000, or about 0.5%² of to-

1 Although the portfolio is definitely useful, its contents should be extensively discussed.

2 It should be noted that those who failed their Russian-language and math exams accounted for more than 2% and 3% respectively of total high school graduates annually since 2009,

tal, high school graduates failed the Russian-language and math exams in 2013. In particular, she noted that many regions had switched to “a more unbiased method of conducting the USE”. Therefore, the vice prime minister made it clear that the Unified State Exam – a symbol of educational reforms – would not be abolished but keep developing. ●

when the USE switched to its regular operation mode. In 2008 – the last year of the USE experiment – more than 11% and 23% of those who sat the Russian-language and math exams received a fair (2) mark (on a traditional 1-5 scale).