This paper argues that a powerful rhetoric about plagiarism has emerged in contemporary Romania. While this rhetoric articulates a positive criticism of the academic system, it also has important negative effects. Because sites such as Integru.org create certain representations of plagiarism, these condemnations strengthen the idea that Western professors are the only impartial authority to challenge unethical behaviors. Such condemnations also deploy the rhetoric of neutral, technical evaluations and hide the political character of their effects.

While my analysis starts from a specific case study, this paper is part of a larger project that investigates the production of guilty subjects in contemporary Romania. Guilt is a strong mechanism for regulating behavior and produces subjectivities attached to hegemonic ideologies. Althusser (2001) showed the importance of guilt for transforming individuals into bad subjects—or “interpellating” them into acting according to a certain ideology. Butler (1997) suggested strategies of responding productively to subordination and showed how could one become a “bad subject.” In a more historical manner, scholars working in Eastern European studies such as Katherine Verdery (1996) and Maria Bucur (2009) have initiated an analysis of “corruption” and “the politics of victimization,” especially by noting the contrast between a neo-liberal narrative about the West and the local realities of Romanian society. Their arguments articulated various strategies that challenge a simplistic production of strong dichotomies.

By deploying the insights of post-structuralist scholars, I suggest an alternative path to the rhetoric of plagiarism. I argue that condemnations of corruption have to be aware of their specific political and contextual effects. I draw on a student protest in Cluj-Napoca against the awarding of the Doctor Honoris Causa to a former EU official, Gunther Verheugen, to underscore the value of interventions that destabilize a narrow view of corruption. By targeting an European official, this protest challenges the terms of this prevalent rhetoric. Guilt should not have only effects that consolidate a feeling of subordination, but it could become an incentive for novel political actions that contest the alleged inferiority of Eastern European subjects.