

# Academic Integrity in Russia Today

## The Political and Social Implications of Thesis Falsification and Education Reform

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 246  
March 2013

Serghei Golunov  
*University of Tartu*

Ivan Kurilla  
*Volgograd State University/  
George Washington University*

While academic plagiarism was not unheard of (or rare) in the Soviet period, it was not as pervasive as it is in contemporary Russia. Plagiarism became especially problematic in the 2000s, as the rapid spread of the Internet made an overwhelming number of academic and popular texts easily accessible.

The 2012 awakening of public activism in Russia has produced a new situation in which a professional community of scholars is protesting the most blatant cases of academic misconduct, including plagiarism and the falsification of scholarly credentials and journal publications. Public outcry in response to several recent cases has prompted the Ministry of Education and Science to take steps toward punishing some who have faked their dissertations and revoking their degrees. At the same time, the scandals have coincided with a state effort to reform higher education that involves drastic faculty cuts. Nicknamed “Dissergate,” the whole situation has turned highly politicized, as various political forces have become eager to use dissertation scandals to discredit each other.

### **Plagiarism and Academic Integrity in Russian Higher Education**

The same digital forces that abet plagiarism work against it. The Russian online service *AntiPlagiat* has been detecting falsified texts since 2005, but it is imperfect and there are many tricks plagiarists use to escape detection. Until recently, the problem of plagiarism was not given much official attention. However, in September 2012, Russian Prime

Minister Dmitry Medvedev called for devising a system to automatically check papers and dissertations; in February 2013 he admitted that the number of bogus doctorates “overshoots any conceivable limits.”

Still, as of mid-February 2013, one could find only six inconsequential mentions of the word “plagiarism” on the Ministry of Science and Education website. Only a handful of Russian universities (mainly in Moscow and St Petersburg) have effective anti-plagiarism policies that impose harsh penalties on those who copy the works of others. The vast majority of provincial universities (including those that have special status as federal or national research institutions) do not have policies or have only vague declarations condemning plagiarism.

Since 1990, the number of people seeking to obtain a doctoral degree without writing their own thesis has increased dramatically. This is especially so in the social sciences, but it is also true in other fields (including agriculture, medicine, and other technical subjects). For many officials and business people, having a doctorate is a matter of prestige that testifies to one’s high status and capabilities. In many cases, it has been easy for influential people to make arrangements with academic institutions (and dissertation reviewing committees) through various pressures or rewards.

The demand for graduate work ranging from term papers to finished doctoral theses or monographs has given rise to a host of entrepreneurs who render such services openly and practically legally. While many of these service providers economize their efforts by simply copying, pasting, and slightly editing texts from the Internet, some provide texts that are harder to trace, such as theses written during the Soviet period. Others offer to write original texts at a premium cost. Some offer “all inclusive” services, which include writing a dissertation *and* writing and publishing a number of associated articles and monographs, often necessary as part of the degree qualification process. Such a service thereby provides additional safeguards in an approval process that can involve opponents, a dissertation committee, and the Higher Attestation Committee.\*

### **The First Scandals**

For many years, high-standing officials and politicians would rather straightforwardly appropriate texts by other authors. This resulted in substantiated if sporadic accusations of plagiarism.

One of the earliest cases attracting attention was that of Vladimir Putin, who defended his Candidate of Sciences thesis in St. Petersburg in 1997, three years before he was elected president of Russia. Reviewing Putin’s thesis, Clifford Gaddy of the Brookings Institution, a think tank, maintained that Putin drew on text from a 1978 article written by U.S. researchers. Putin and his team ignored the charge, while a few scholars from St. Petersburg unconvincingly tried to publicly defend Putin.

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\* The Higher Attestation Committee (VAK) is the highest Russian degree-awarding agency. The first graduate degree, “Candidate of Science,” is awarded by universities, but the decision must get the approval of VAK, which presents the diploma. The higher degree of “Doctorate” is awarded directly by VAK.

The subject of another plagiarism scandal was the ex-leader of the opposition Union of Right Forces and governor of the Kirov region, Nikita Belykh. In 2011, the Historical Memory Foundation reported that some of his qualifying publications contained large-scale instances of plagiarism.

In another case, at the beginning of 2012, the online journal *Aktualnaya istoriya* published a table of verbatim matches of text in the thesis abstract of Vladimir Medinsky, a former parliamentary deputy, and a previously published work. As Belykh had done, Medinsky unconvincingly argued that only formulaic and commonly used phrases coincided. This scandal did not prevent the government from appointing Medinsky Minister of Culture in May 2012.

### **“Dissergate”**

Russia’s contested political season of 2011-2012 played an important role in raising public activism in many spheres. Meanwhile, a series of plagiarism scandals involving the dissertations of European politicians – leading to the resignation of the German minister of defense, the German minister of education, and the Hungarian prime minister – had their own demonstration effect.

In November 2012, a group of alumni from a prestigious high school (a math and science boarding school founded in Soviet times and affiliated with Moscow State University) protested against the candidacy of Andrei Andriyanov as the school’s new director. Andriyanov was the active leader of a pro-Kremlin youth organization of university students and was in the leadership of the “All-Russian Popular Front” movement, which Putin created on the eve of his 2011 electoral campaign. To begin with, the alumni questioned how Andriyanov acquired his dissertation, seeing that he was a graduate student in the chemistry department of Moscow State University while his candidate degree was from the history department of the Moscow Pedagogical University. In the course of the investigation, conducted primarily online by alumni and bloggers, it was shown that Andriyanov cited several published articles that never actually appeared in print (and probably were never written). Moreover, the investigation uncovered a whole network of people who had defended bogus theses from Moscow Pedagogical University.

In December, 2012, the Ministry of Education and Science created a special commission under assistant minister Igor Fedyukin to investigate the Moscow Pedagogical University cases. The result was the closing of the university’s dissertation council, the firing of head professor Alexander Danilov, the revocation of 11 doctoral and candidate degrees, and the enactment of a set of recommendations to improve all procedures for awarding postgraduate degrees. Andriyanov was fired as the director of the high school (although he received a place as vice-president of another pro-Kremlin youth organization, Rosmolsport, a youth sport organization).

The discovery of mass dissertation fraud encouraged scholars to look into the theses of politicians far more influential than Andriyanov. Revelations became more frequent as online activists began checking suspicious dissertations systematically. The next victim was one of the leaders of United Russia’s Young Guards, Vladimir

Burmatov, who was forced to leave his position as deputy head of the parliamentary committee on education.

Several revelations were made by a Russian scholar working abroad, blogging on LiveJournal under the nickname “doct\_z,” and later revealed as Andrei Zayakin. In January 2013, he started to systematically check the suspicious dissertations of United Russia deputies and detected plagiarism in several of them, including that of the former head of the Federal Education and Science Supervision Agency, Nikolai Bulayev.

Whether directly related to “Dissergate” or not, the head of the Higher Attestation Committee, Felix Shamkhalov, was arrested (on seemingly unrelated grounds) at the start of February 2013 and dismissed.

“Dissergate” is also affecting school history textbooks. Alexander Danilov was the author (or co-author) of a line of textbooks on Russian history put out by the major publisher, *Prosveshchenie*. After Danilov's scandalous dismissal, the textbook that he wrote needs to be replaced. This situation opens the door to a redistribution of the large textbook market, but it also provides a convenient moment to pour more ideology into new textbooks. In mid-February 2013, Putin suggested the creation of a new “unified” history textbook for Russian schools, a suggestion that produced another wave of heated discussions.

### **Scandal Turns to Politics**

Many of the “Dissergate” activists are scholars, primarily interested in putting an end to the catastrophic devaluation of academic degrees and in purifying the academic community from false degree holders. There are others, however, who are primarily seeking to compromise supporters of the Putin regime by discrediting prominent officials and members of United Russia. Zayakin (“doct\_z”), for instance, branched out and used his search methods to reveal foreign property ownership by prominent parliamentary deputies. His disclosure of Miami apartments belonging to Vladimir Pekhtin, one of the leaders of United Russia and head of the parliamentary committee on ethics, led to Pekhtin’s resignation in February 2013 (he failed to include his Miami properties in a mandatory declaration of assets).

Political opponents of United Russia have decided to take advantage of these bloggers’ activities. Also in February, parliamentary deputies from the Just Russia party, Ilya Ponomaryov and Dmitry Gudkov, announced the creation of an “*Antiplagiat* Public Committee against the Falsification of Science.” Their idea is to organize the search for plagiarism and subsequent appeals to authorities. Of course, plagiarists can be detected among deputies from Just Russia itself; at least 40 percent of those with doctoral degrees defended their theses while working in non-academic fields.

The government has many ways to counteract efforts to compromise corrupt officials and high-level Putin supporters. While anyone can get online access to the dissertation database, public access can be stopped or restricted. Supporters of the regime can try to discredit Internet activists or litter the Internet with fake revelations. They can pressure activists by suing them for libel or other trumped-up charges. At the

same time, it could be politically useful for Putin's team to permit the targeting of deputies while defending more powerful and influential officials.

The academic community, in turn, is wary of how the government will react. State television channel *Rossiya* recently aired a commentary on education scandals that insisted that "just 10 percent of those defending dissertations are real scientists." Some activists are afraid that the education scandals will be used to compromise all scholars to justify drastic faculty cuts. Several attempts are being made to organize independent trade unions for professors. The degree of academic unrest is higher than it has been in years.

## Conclusion

Recent developments concerning Russian academic integrity have several implications. First, the situation has deteriorated to the point where the very existence of quality science and scholarship has come under question. There is a threat that those who obtained degrees fraudulently will soon occupy a significant number of leadership positions even in prestigious universities.<sup>†</sup> Russia's academic community and state institutions should take strict measures to stop any further slide into academically corrupt behavior. Second, recent events have demonstrated growing scholarly concern about the fate of Russian science and education. There is a public demand for purification that has already led to initial steps by the state to clear the field. Third, the scandals were quickly politicized by political forces aiming to compromise their foes, as well as by large parts of the university community that see a threat to their positions – not because they have fake dissertations but because they fear that fake dissertations will be used as a pretext for mass job cuts. While the situation remains fluid, responsible politicians and academics should make sure that whatever the outcome, developments will lead to an improvement of Russia's academic standards.

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<sup>†</sup> Vladimir Burmatov, mentioned above, still works as Head of the Department of Political Sciences and Social Communications at the prestigious Plekhanov Russian University of Economics (the current rector of which defended his doctoral thesis in economics while working at a high-level official position not related to education or science).