

Russian academics fight back against fraud, plagiarism

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A dissertation council reviewing work on the mediaeval era is not normally national news, but Russia was abuzz this month when historians convened to pass judgement: was the culture minister a fraud?

Vladimir Medinsky's history dissertation focusing on foreign opinions about mediaeval Russia had long irritated local historians.

They insisted it was a botched job with no academic merit and should never have been approved. This year they finally lodged a request to have his degree revoked.

The scandal over the minister's dissertation is just the latest example of Russian intellectuals fighting back against what they see as rampant fraud in academia and the devaluing of serious research under President Vladimir Putin's conservative rule.

"Medinsky's dissertation is scandalous, a real parody," said Ivan Babitsky, an activist with Dissernet, a group of researchers exposing dissertation [fraud](#) who helped two history professors lodge a formal complaint.

The complaint, which said that Medinsky's work "cannot in principle be considered historical research" prompted the education minister to send the dissertation for review.

Among the glaring errors in the work, Medinsky—who states up front

that the merit of a historical fact should be determined by whether it is in Russian national interests—implies that Catholicism is not a part of Christianity and does not appear to know that Denmark is in Scandinavia.

Prior to his 2011 dissertation, the 46-year-old minister, who also holds a PhD in political science, did not publish academic articles on other historical subjects, nor has he published anything since, Babitsky said.

Appointed in 2012, Medinsky has supported a singularly nationalist view of Russian history that chimes with the mood being fostered under Putin.

He clashed with the chief of the Russian State Archive last year to defend a World War II story about the Panfilov 28, a legendary regiment defending Moscow, which the archive exposed as a Soviet propagandist myth invented by reporters.

That battle ended with the archive chief Pyotr Mironenko stepping down from his post. Medinsky has called people who question the Panfilov 28 story "scum".

Medinsky has so far come out on top in the dissertation debacle: the review of the work was first delayed, then put on hold by the government's degree verification committee.

'Mirror of our reality'

Historians in Russia fed up with "politically-motivated attacks" and "incorrect and downright obscurantist publications" established in 2014 the Free History Society to build solidarity among professionals.

Dissernet co-founder Andrei Rostovtsev said researchers from different fields are also coming together to fight dissertation [plagiarism](#), a

phenomenon eroding the social sciences on a massive scale.

Fake dissertations, produced by copy-pasting existing texts and merely switching a few introductory pages, are common, with hundreds of people receiving doctoral degrees from corrupt dissertation councils and then taking posts in their respective fields.

Areas particularly tarnished by fraudulent dissertations are economics, education, medicine and law—and the problem is widespread among officials who look to bolster their credentials with degrees.

"The fake dissertation picture is a mirror of our reality," Rostovtsev said, referring to broader widespread corruption in society that haunts Russia.

A randomly-selected economics dissertation has a five percent chance of being copy-pasted work, according to Dissernet research. Among lawmakers in the Russian Duma, the likelihood is 41 percent.

Fake dissertations are not an exclusively Russian problem, but "what matters is how the system reacts," Rostovtsev said.

"The production of fake academics that are ready to work for hire, this falsehood-producing mechanism, it's something the government institutionally supports," he said. "It's not some black market."

Fighting back against this system can be risky—which is why academics have stayed quiet for so long.

"People are afraid of repression because it's a criminal business," he said.

In April, Rostovtsev found a bullet hole in his kitchen window. "It's on the ninth floor and the perimeter is guarded, so somebody was aiming

from far away," he said. He didn't go to the police, considering it a waste of time.

'Russia is losing brains'

Dissertet has seen tacit support from some officials, including a former education minister who closed many corrupt dissertation councils known for handing out degrees for entirely plagiarised texts - or did not demand any dissertation at all.

How the current minister will behave is not yet clear, Rostovtsev said. One thing that is certain however is that money for academic research will dwindle as the government is struggling to downsize its spending amid an economic crisis.

Cuts pushed employees in the Russian Academy of Sciences to stage week-long protests in September.

"Funding for science is constantly falling," said geneticist Svetlana Borinskaya, who works in the laboratory for genome analysis in the Institute of Genetics but is also involved in popular science projects that aim to fight obscurantism.

"It's hard for scientists to fight politicised pseudo-science, whether together or individually," she said.

"Russia is losing brains," she added, referring to the drain of young qualified scientists. "The process has sped up this year."

"It seems that the government is not interested in fundamental research, and even in applied research, this interest is not entirely clear."

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