

Russia's plagiarism problem: Even Putin has done it!



By **Valerie Strauss** March 18, 2014

Russia has a really big plagiarism problem. So many businessmen, academics and high-ranking government officials — President Vladimir Putin included — have been found to have plagiarized their college and doctoral theses that Russia's education minister just denounced the revelations, saying they were hurting Russia's reputation.

"People not versed in this topic will get the idea that all academics are cheats and liars," Education and Science Minister Dmitry Livanov just told the Kommersant newspaper, according to [a Russian news agency](#). "It's a severe reputational problem for Russian science."

Lest you think he is trying to cover up the problem rather than confront: He did mention in the interview that the plagiarism problem is real. But that would be hard to deny, given that the Russian State Library last year admitted that about 10 percent of doctoral theses on history since 2000 looked like they were plagiarized — and that could easily be a lowball percentage.

The plagiarism racket has long been a fixture in Russian higher education circles, according to Time World, which said in [this 2013 article](#) that "that many politicians and businessmen pad their résumés with fake diplomas, either plagiarizing their dissertations or paying someone to do it for roughly the cost of a midsize sedan."

A grass-roots group called Dissernet — whose members stay anonymous for fear of retribution — has in the past several years uncovered dozens of examples of plagiarism among high-ranking officials, including the powerful Investigative Committee head Alexander Bastrykin and dozens of governors and federal lawmakers, according to [RIA Novosti](#). Most of those who have been accused of plagiarism have denied it.

Recent revelations have ensnared Pavel Astakhov, a well-known children’s rights ombudsman who was found by the Russian state Library of having taking “incorrect borrowings” for about 31 percent of his dissertation on resolving legal conflicts, while another third was taken from work he had previously written, according to RIA Novosti.

The most prominent Russian to have been accused of plagiarism is the most prominent Russian — Vladimir Putin.

Putin’s official biography says that he graduated from the law department of Leningrad State University in 1975 and in 1976 defended his doctoral thesis on economics at the St. Petersburg State Mining Institute.

Washington Post reporter David Hoffman in 2000 asked the institute for a copy of the 218-page thesis but was refused. He wrote in this story:

The Mining Institute recently refused to show Putin’s thesis to a reporter. When a copy of a summary was found by the reporter in the institute’s library, officials snatched it away, saying it was private.

In 2005, two researchers at the Brookings Institution in Washington got a copy of the thesis, titled “Strategic Planning of the Reproduction of the Mineral Resource Base of a Region under Conditions of the Formation of Market Relations,” and presented their findings in 2006. Researchers Clifford Gaddy and Igor Danchenko found that the thesis had been heavily “borrowed” from a 1978 textbook, “Strategic Planning and Public Policy,” written by University of Pittsburgh Professors David I. Cleland and William R. King.

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In remarks at Brookings, Gaddy said that the thesis did include the King/Cleland textbook in the bibliography, but:

[T]here are no quotations marks anywhere used in this. There are no page citations anywhere, no footnotes at all. There is no mention in the text, whatsoever, of the names of these two gentlemen, Professors King and Cleland. From the beginning of the chapter, these ideas are presented as the dissertation writer’s own, leading the reader to believe that when rhetorical questions are asked and answers are posed, that these are all directly from the writer of this dissertation. This goes on page after page after page for nearly 20 pages. I calculate that there are more than 16 pages worth of text taken verbatim from King and Cleland. Also, there are at least six diagrams and tables lifted directly or slightly modified from King and Cleland, with no attribution whatever.

This is plagiarism at any level of U.S. higher education, undergraduate and graduate. It would be plagiarism if it had been used in a term paper, not to mention a thesis or dissertation.

They also said that they only checked King and Cleland's book and that there may be other examples of plagiarism in the paper, which, they noted, was the paper was not really a doctoral thesis but more like a thesis for a master's degree. Gaddy said that the Russian government says that "Putin holds the degree of *kandidat ekonomicheskikh nauk* and that this is the equivalent of a Ph.D. degree in economics." But, he said further:

This is misleading. First, Mr. Putin's dissertation was really not about economics at all ... Second the Russian *kandidat* degree is generally not the same as a Ph.D., at least not in most social sciences. Given the material covered in the dissertation, Putin's degree might perhaps be closer to an MBA. Note, however, that he never attended any classes for this degree.

Olga Khvostunova of the Institute of Modern Russia, a nonpartisan think tank in Washington, wrote about the plagiarism scandal in Russia in this piece, detailing some of the history of the uncovering of the plagiarism scandals in Russia. She wrote about Putin's plagiarism:

"The scandal over Putin's dissertation led nowhere. But because the head of state's deed had no repercussions whatsoever, a new trend emerged in the country: plagiarism in the writing and defense of dissertation works began on an unprecedented scale."

Valerie Strauss covers education and runs The Answer Sheet blog. 🐦 Follow @valeriestrauss

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