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A Small Victory Over Academic Plagiarism

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The biggest event last week in the lives of Russian academics was the publication of the findings of an Education and Science Ministry commission regarding its investigation into the activities of a dissertation council at Moscow State Pedagogical University.

That commission was formed in November because of the public outcry by scholars, journalists and Web-based writers over flagrant violations found in the dissertations of a group of prominent public officials, including State Duma deputies.

But the commission's findings are a victory not so much because civil society prevailed over government. It proved that contrary to popular opinion, a government agency can carry out its assigned task effectively and professionally. It turns out that it is possible to appoint a commission without any political bias, establish facts that do not require prolonged effort to ascertain and make sensible recommendations based on those findings.

Of course, the task was made easier by the fact that the violations discovered initially by scholars and journalists — and later documented by the commission — were sizable

and truly egregious. The plagiarism discovered by the commission was a potpourri of random passages stolen from other sources and scrapped together into a dissertation paper. These were cases of academic plagiarism and outright falsification.

Other documents the doctoral students were required to submit were also discovered to be fraudulent, including reviews by opponents and leading organizations and references to nonexistent publications in scholarly journals. It is a complete mystery as to how all this activity could have gone unnoticed, especially by the Higher Accreditation Commission, a government body. It is equally unclear what the academic advisers who oversaw these fraudulent dissertations could have been teaching their other students, but for now, there has been no talk of firing them. And finally, it is difficult to believe that everyone involved in falsifying dissertations and their supporting documentation could have done that work for free. Their activity should be subject to criminal investigation.

In a bizarre twist, the head of the Higher Accreditation Commission was arrested Tuesday on charges of embezzling 350 million rubles ($11 million) in connection with several Moscow construction projects.

The fine example set by the ministry commission, led by deputy education minister Igor Fedyukin, is important. In recent years, dozens, if not hundreds, of government officials, Duma deputies and businesspeople have defended their dissertations. Theoretically, a person can hold down a full-time job in an important government post or business and also carry out independent scholarly research on his own time, but in practice this is impossible to accomplish. As a result, all of those dozens of individuals who faked their doctorates knew they could be exposed by an objective investigation, so they strove to prevent one.

But the problem is not only identifying and exposing the "fraud factories" like the one that operated at Moscow State Pedagogical University. The real problem for the academic community is figuring out how to create at least one dissertation council whose work can be trusted implicitly. The work of the Education and Science Ministry's commission is definitely a step in the right direction, but it is only the first in a journey of a thousand kilometers.

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