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Accusations of Plagiarism Become a Political Weapon

By Natalya Krainova

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"In recent years, hundreds of Russian lawmakers, senators, officials and businesspeople have defended their dissertations," Duma Deputy Ilya Ponomaryov, seen above speaking at a rally, said in a blog post announcing the creation of a group called the Public Anti-Plagiarism Committee.

Members of the political opposition often accuse state officials of grandiose misdeeds, such as falsifying election results, stealing millions from state coffers, or even ordering the killings of their adversaries.

Lately, they have begun accusing pro-Kremlin officials of a far less sinister offense, one more often leveled at schoolchildren and college students than at government bigwigs: plagiarism.

It may sound insignificant, but the discovery of dissertation violations has already led to the resignation of one lawmaker from his leadership post on a State Duma committee, and opposition leaders have accused other top politicians of similar wrongdoing.

"In recent years, hundreds of Russian lawmakers, senators, officials and businesspeople have defended their dissertations," Duma Deputy Ilya Ponomaryov said in a blog post announcing the creation of a group called the Public Anti-Plagiarism Committee.

"All of them should be subjected to a thorough and impartial investigation," he said, adding that people outside academia could have received degrees for the sake of a position, money or status.

The calls come amid a rash of accusations that officials and university professors committed plagiarism in their dissertations, which have become fashionable among politicians.

In early December, bloggers said they had found signs of plagiarism in the dissertation of Duma Deputy Vladimir Burmatov of United Russia, and Ponomaryov asked prosecutors to examine their findings.

A few days later, Burmatov left his position as first deputy head of the Duma's Education Committee but remained in the Duma, saying he wanted to avoid being accused of influencing officials investigating his dissertation.

The opposition's anti-plagiarism committee published its first findings last month: a list of 14 officials whom it suspects of copying other authors' material in their academic work.

The list included President Vladimir Putin, who has long faced allegations that he improperly copied material for his graduate degree in economics, Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky and Liberal Democratic Party leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky, along with six Duma deputies and other officials.

The idea of felling top officials for plagiarism may seem improbable, but the offense has brought down government ministers abroad. Last month, German Education Minister Annette Schavan resigned after she was stripped of her doctorate because of plagiarism, and in 2011 German Defense Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg left his post under similar circumstances.

According to Andrei Zakharov, an associate professor at the Higher School of Economics, certain advanced academic degrees in law, economics and political science have become significantly more popular in Russia over the last 15 years, with the number having increased more than fivefold.

"A candidate-of-science degree (and even more so, doctor of science) has become an accessory, just like a watch, a fashion model for a secretary, a business-class car and foreign real estate," Zakharov wrote in a Vedomosti op-ed last month.

Such a degree also helps one advance up the career ladder in government, he wrote.

But the plagiarism scandal has not been limited to government circles. In November, alumni of a school affiliated with the prestigious Moscow State University complained to the State Commission for Academic Degrees and Titles that the dissertation of the school's director contained links to non-existent publications.

The head of the university's dissertation council was fired over the allegations, and the

school's director, Andrei Andriyanov, resigned early last month.

In late January, the Education and Science Ministry discovered that numerous dissertations at Moscow State Pedagogical University, where Andriyanov defended his research work, had also been plagiarized. As a result of the check, Education and Science Minister Dmitry Livanov stripped 11 people of their advanced degrees.

Ponomaryov argues that plagiarism breeds corruption and discredits Russian science, which has struggled for years due to a lack of funding and a persistent brain drain of Russian researchers to the West.

Irina Abankina, head of the Institute for Development of Education at the Higher School of Economics, said the number of falsified dissertations skyrocketed in the 1990s when science was "liberalized" after 70 years of Soviet power when it was "dominated by dogmatism ... with quotes by Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin."

Information technologies also contributed to the growth of substandard dissertations, she said in a telephone interview.

Many officials defended their dissertations in the humanities, mostly in law and economics, and their papers represented a "compilation" of extracts from works by other authors, Abankina said. Their dissertations tended to be analytical and informational rather than scientific, she said.

Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev has ordered the government to respond to the recent scandal by developing an electronic system for checking theses and dissertations for plagiarism by the end of this month.

Medvedev addressed the issue in September, before the scandals broke, saying the government's efforts had to be aimed at moving Russian universities into the world's top ratings by 2020 as ordered by Putin in an inaugural decree in May.

"When you can copy from cover to cover, you lose the interest in knowledge and in the academic program," Medvedev said in a video blog.

"All this leads to a reduction in the number of scientific publications and, of course, has a very harmful influence on international indexes of science citation [of Russian researchers] and on the ratings of Russian universities," he said.

Last week, Moscow State University announced that it would tighten rules for dissertations by ordering their authors to post them on a website where experts can discuss them as well as get reviewed by foreign scientists, university spokeswoman Svetlana Reshetnikova said.

Some contend that Medvedev also has political motives in targeting plagiarism.

Oleg Smolin, first deputy head of the Duma's Education Committee and a Communist, said Medvedev's anti-plagiarism campaign was part of the government's highly publicized anti-corruption efforts.

Smolin suggested that a state commission would be tasked with "punishing minor and mid-

level plagiarists and not touching senior ones," according to an interview with Club Regionov, a mouthpiece for regional governors.

Yevgeny Minchenko, head of the influential Minchenko Consulting Group, said the campaign gave Medvedev the opportunity to put pressure on officials.

Medvedev and his allies, who favor more liberal-leaning policy ideas, have been locked in a power struggle with Kremlin hardliners for years.

Another motive for Medvedev is his desire to support his Internet-savvy image by maintaining a "dialogue" with bloggers and to show that authorities are "keeping up to date and can talk to their critics," according to Olga Mefodyeva, a senior analyst at the Center for Political Technologies.

But Deputy Ponomaryov cast doubt on the possibility that the government would truly pursue plagiarists.

"It is absolutely clear that not a single state structure will carry out such a check, first of all because it requires a large workforce and major resources, and secondly because no one 'inside the system' is actually interested in purging it," he said.

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