

Dissernet Activists Track Russian Officials With Black-Market Degrees

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Andrei Zayakin, founder of the anti-plagiarism advocacy group Dissernet.

What do more than 40 lawmakers, a strident children's rights advocate, a Ukrainian separatist, a federal minister, a chief investigator and the head of the state circus watchdog have in common?

They are all accused by activists of having plagiarized their dissertations.

After the downfall of the Soviet Union, the Russian bureaucracy moved en masse to obtain academic degrees, motivated by what experts believe to have been a cocktail of hubris and insecurity.

But hundreds among them have since become the targets of grassroots advocacy group Dissernet, on its war path to hunt down and expose degree holders that purchased their dissertations on Russia's thriving black market for academic research.

Very few of Dissernet's victims have confessed to charges of plagiarism, or have been stripped of their degrees over the exposOs — a situation Andrei Zayakin, the group's founder, ascribed to the tendency of bureaucrats to cover each others' backs.

But the campaign remains ongoing, and has expanded its scope to cover full-time scholars — many of whom, especially in administrative positions, likewise appear not to have written the works they take credit for, Zayakin said.

"These people are morally wrong, and we have found a way to prove it," the theoretical physicist who spearheaded this pervasive anti-plagiarism campaign told The Moscow Times in an exclusive interview.

Influence Through Whistleblowing

Since its inception in 2012, Dissernet examined about 1,500 dissertations in the humanities, social sciences and medicine — finding that most were suspect.

In practice, the work is essentially textology: The group compares suspect works with possible sources of plagiarism, using both specialized computer programs and manual, page-by-page comparisons.

The list of people against whom Dissernet has blown the whistle includes about 45 of the 120 State Duma members who hold academic degrees, as well as a handful of federal ministers, including Transportation Minister Maxim Sokolov, Investigative Committee chief Alexander Bastrykin, children's ombudsman and ex-lawyer Pavel Astakhov, and St. Petersburg Governor Georgy Poltavchenko.

More obscure figures have also been targeted, including the head of the Rosgostsirk, which oversees the state-run circuses, and a low-level official in the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic in Ukraine.

Most have denied allegations of wrongdoing in public statements — but not one sued.

Dissernet members have not reported any threats or harassment, though they have not been spared accusations of attempts to influence the authorities.

"Well, of course we want to influence the authorities," Zayakin said. "But that does not undermine the validity of our research one iota."

Not a Crime

So far, any influence by the anti-plagiarism crusaders has not come easy: Only half a dozen Dissernet targets have been stripped of their degrees in connection with the organization's revelations, and no top-tier officials are on the list. Only one — Alexei Komissarov, head of the Moscow City government's science department — has admitted academic malpractice.

This comes in stark contrast to global practice: Plagiarism allegations have destroyed careers of numerous officials worldwide, a famous recent case being that of German Defense Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg in 2011.

"There is a conspiracy of silence among the [Russian] bureaucrats; they cover for each other," Zayakin said.

The Moscow Times contacted five Dissernet targets for this article. The only reply received was from Transportation Minister Sokolov's press service.

The minister's press service cited a defense typical for many of Dissernet's targets, saying only that Sokolov's dissertation was accepted by the dissertation council of the college it was defended. The statement never explicitly confirmed or denied plagiarism allegations.

Academic plagiarism is not a criminal offense in Russia. Moreover, the statute of limitations for plagiarism was, until recently, capped at three years by the Education and Science Ministry. The limit was recently expanded to 10 years, but only applies to dissertations defended after 2011 — which means earlier works are safe, plagiarism or no.

The Education Ministry did not return a request for comment sent on Tuesday morning.

"They see us as an enemy, though are ready to occasionally sacrifice one of their own," Zayakin said about the ministry, though admitting it had "a few thinking men in the ranks."

'Hands Off Gauss'

By his own admission, Zayakin, a magna cum laude graduate of Moscow State University with a degree in physics, was "apolitical" for a long time.

But the lanky 33-year-old, who spent the past several years holding postgrad positions around Europe, said he never had any illusions about the government of Vladimir Putin — and at some point, he couldn't take anymore.

For Zayakin, the tipping point was the failure of a scholarly article to convince the courts that Moscow's 2009 legislative elections had been marred. Specifically, the article had alleged electoral fraud on the basis of a statistical pattern first described in the 18th century by Carl Friedrich Gauss, the so-called "Prince of Mathematicians."

"I could put up with a lot, but when they insulted Gauss, it really got me going," Zayakin said.

He began his career as an activist by scouring foreign real estate databases for luxurious property owned by Russian officials — which resulted in numerous resonant exposOs.

Zayakin zeroed in on plagiarists after the Duma passed an infamous law in 2012 banning U.S. adoptions of Russian children, which he believes was immoral.

"I thought: you pretend to be moral? Well, let's show that you are not because you stole your dissertations," he said.

Since then, Dissernet swelled from a one-man show to a group comprising a dozen experts and assistants, operating with an annual budget of about 2.5 million rubles (\$70,000) — raised through crowd-sourcing — which publishes an average of two exposOs a day.

"One mactation in the morning, one in the evening," quipped the well-spoken Zayakin, who

is fond of biblical metaphors.

The group has plowed through most of Russia's high-ranking officials — though many studies are still pending publication — and has shifted its focus to the academic community, where plagiarism appears to be just as widespread, Zayakin said.

The ultimate goal is a purge of several hundred ministry-approved dissertation councils across Russia, dozens of which are "[plagiarized] dissertation factories," he said.

Demand Begets Supply

Type "commissioning a dissertation" on the Russian search engine Yandex, and you will find dozens of companies offering such services, with prices starting at a modest 90,000 rubles (\$2,500).

The practice of buying dissertations became ubiquitous in the 1990s, when Russia's academia was severely underfunded, but still retained clout, said Nikolai Petrov, a Russian political scientist with the prestigious Higher School of Economics.

In Soviet times, a degree did wonders for the holder's social status — and now thousands of officials could afford it, while scholars were ready to monetize their ability to issue said degree, Petrov told The Moscow Times on Tuesday.

A degree is also a form of "golden parachute" for officials — those who lose the bureaucratic game and are kicked out of state service can land a teaching job if they have academic credentials, Zayakin said.

And it is as handy before the firing, adding to an official's informal clout — which is crucial for surviving in the corridors of power because there are few formal criteria for evaluating a state servant's performance in Russia, Petrov said.

"In the absence of clear KPIs [key performance indicators], everybody's looking for eagle feathers to add to their headgear," quipped a history scholar at the Russian Academy of Sciences familiar with "dissertation factories."

"It is a market. Demand begets supply," said the scholar, who spoke on condition of anonymity to avoid trouble for speaking about corruption in the academic community.

Dissernet's activity has driven prices up and crippled the low end of the academic plagiarism market, the scholar said.

But those who desire a degree will still be able to buy one, simply commissioning an original, non-traceable study instead of a "half-assed compilation," he said.

"That's really an improvement — if a study's good, the authorship really doesn't matter that much," the anonymous scholar said.

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