

Some Observations on the Subject of Dissertation Fraud in Russia

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Russia has become notoriously known for the fraudulent practice of awarding fake PhDs to prominent politicians, businessmen, and all sorts of crooks who wish to use their impressive new degrees to achieve faster career success. Academic titles are widely traded; the business, entirely based on falsified dissertations, has actually become an institution that is well-integrated into the contemporary Russian political system. In early 2013, experts, researchers, and journalists came together to establish the organisation called Dissernet. It is a free association aimed at countering fraud and trickery in the academia, particularly at the stage of defending dissertations and awarding PhD. By mid-2015 Dissernet activists had identified over 3500 falsified dissertations. Statistical data they have collected allows us to draw a number of conclusions regarding the issue at hand, which I will present in this paper.

It is worth mentioning that Western societies already have extensive experience in identifying plagiarism through the work of network communities. VroniPlag, for example, a German project, has already helped identify hundreds of plagiarised dissertations in the past several years. The approach of our Western colleagues is, however, different from that used in Russia. In the West, the term 'plagiarism' (from *plagium* — which literally means 'theft' in Latin) is used in its original meaning, i.e., an intentional and unlawful incorporation of other people's texts or ideas into one's own text or research paper. Yet in Russia, most of the authors under scrutiny by Dissernet have never really done research; they have, most probably, never written a single page of their dissertations and might have never read them or even seen them at all. Such 'dissertations' are usually nothing else but a mere compilation of other people's texts. It is therefore important to distinguish between plagiarism in its original sense and falsification or fraud. Here is a classical example of how such dissertations come about: a dissertation can be written and defended at the sociology department, later to be passed to another PhD-candidate who will defend it at the economics department

of the same university. In essence, the second 'defence' is only different from the first one in terms of whose name stands on the title page. Sometimes the second candidate will change the subject of his or her 'research' too — usually by contextually substituting some terms. For example, one notorious 'scholar' transformed a dissertation about confectionary industry into a dissertation about beef-and-dairy industry by substituting 'dark chocolate' with 'home-grown beef', 'white chocolate' with 'imported beef', and 'nut chocolate' with 'bone-in beef'. In the meantime, all the data, spelling, tables and pictures remained unchanged. Sometimes such authors also 'update' the dating of the statistics they refer to, thus making their 'research' seem to have been conducted recently.

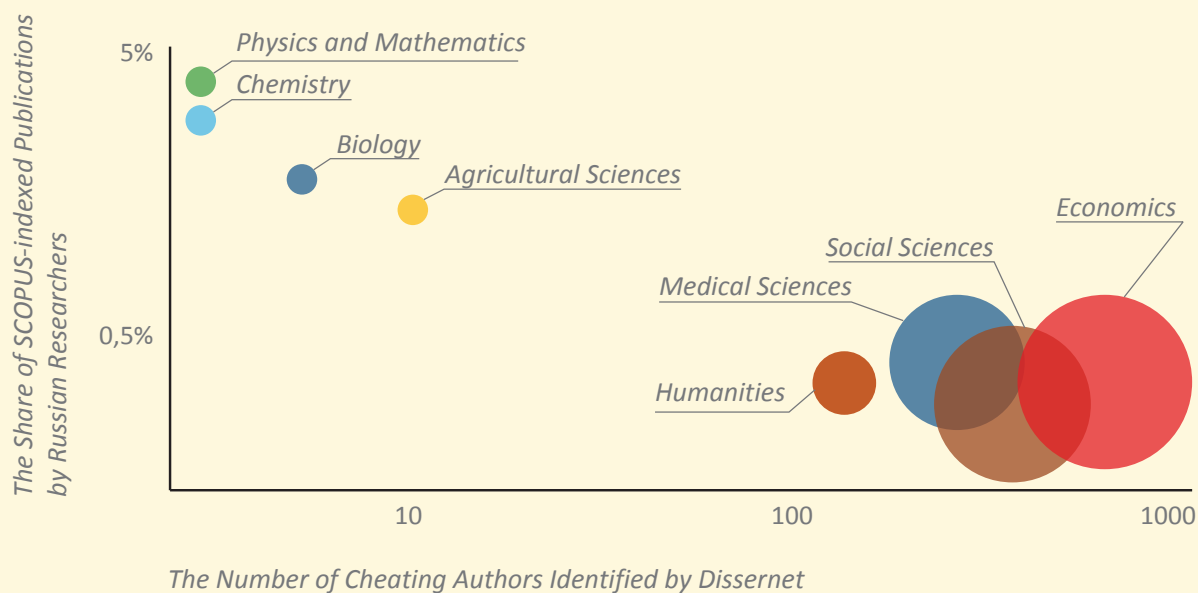
Scallywags prosper in the academic areas where Russia is still lagging behind. According to Dissernet statistics, the amount of fake dissertations varies significantly between different academic fields. Most of the fake dissertations (40%) accrue to economics. Other popular spheres are pedagogics and law, followed by medical sciences, political sciences, engineering, and social sciences. Fake dissertations are rare in the area of natural sciences. Such distribution is symptomatic as it represents Russia's main problem areas: economy, law, education, etc. Moreover, according to SCOPUS data, the amount of fake dissertations per field is inversely related to Russia's international input in these disciplines (see Fig. 1).

The scale of forgery in the academic sphere in Russia shows that it is not just some fringe phenomenon but an integral part of Russia's statehood. Geographically speaking, fake dissertations are mass-produced primarily in Moscow — Russia's political and business capital, and in Saint Petersburg rather than somewhere on the outskirts of the country. Other cities and towns fall behind. The scale of falsifications in the Caucasus region is record large but on the whole, their share in national statistics isn't that high.

The two leaders in terms of the number of fake dissertations and falsified research papers in the past 10-15 years are Moscow State Pedagogical University and The Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration. The former became notorious due to a dissertation committee on historical studies that turned out to be a conveyor unit for 'PhDfying' politicians and history teachers, while the latter 'PhDfied' a lot of public officials. Other leaders include Russian State University for Humanities and Russian State Social University, as well as the country's major institution — Moscow State University. Russian Academy of Sciences ranks 23rd on the list (represented by its Caucasus-based branch). In other words, the market for academic fraud reflects the situation in the country's higher education system on the whole.

Fraud in soft sciences usually means broad-scale plagiarism, while in hard sciences it is often limited to some very narrow subjects, i.e., the scale is much smaller.

Figure 1



One such example is a series of dissertations on Carabidae (ground beetles), all defended at Dagestan State University. The range of topics included: Carabidae of the Kurush Massif, Carabidae of Sarykum Sand Dunes, Carabidae of DzheyraKh and Targim Basins, Carabidae of the steppes and low-mountain areas of Dagestan, Carabidae of the Nukatlin Ridge, etc. Each such dissertation resulted in a new PhD in biology. Certainly, the arthropoda of each and every dune deserve to be studied. Yet such work is nothing more than that of a research assistant who merely collects necessary specimens, therefore such dissertations are rather poor in terms of contents. They normally share the same structure: a long introduction with an extensive literature review, usually copied from someone else's work; a short main part, just some dozen pages long, consisting mainly of several tables with the statistics regarding the number of beetles caught, and a standard conclusion. The lack of any real research behind such dissertations is also evident from the fact that they all have the same bibliography. Unfortunately, biology isn't the only discipline affected by this phenomenon.

The truth is, fake dissertations constitute just the tip of the iceberg of fraud when it comes to science and education in Russia. According to Higher Attestation Commission (VAK) norms, PhD candidates also have

to have dissertation-related publications in academic journals. Logically, if one's dissertation is plagiarised, they simply cannot have original academic articles. Therefore, many of the articles, monographs, and textbooks published in Russia are nothing but a compilation of non-original work. It is no secret that hundreds of journals recognised by VAK make authors pay in exchange for publishing their articles. None of such journals could ever make it into respectable global bibliographic databases. Less than 10% of all Russian journals, for example, are listed in Web of Science and Scopus.

Dissernet has built a unique database of plagiarised dissertations and has developed a semi-automatic algorithm that can check whether the editors of commercial academic journals have something to do with dissertation fraud. It turns out that editors of many low-impact journals actually work for dissertation committees whose name has already been tainted, and even are members of various VAK expert councils, thus covering up fraud. Such a pattern is typical for all disciplines that have been affected by this plague of major academic transgressions.

