

No, Prime Minister: PhD Plagiarism of High Level Public Officials

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Based on a public office definition of corruption, this article uses the case studies of doctoral plagiarism of German Minister of Defence Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, Hungarian President Pál Schmitt, Romanian Prime Minister Victor Ponta, and Russian President Vladimir Putin in order to show that, by shattering citizens' confidence in and respect for political class, political parties, state institutions and rule of law, academic plagiarism of high-ranking politicians intertwines with and enforces the most serious democratic failures in their respective countries: degeneration of political culture in Germany, nationalist authoritarian trends in Hungary, a culture of corruption in Romania, and outright dictatorship in Russia. As such, this specific type of plagiarism goes far beyond academia. It represents a direct, aggressive, and effective threat against democracy itself.

1. Introduction

In early March 2011 it was revealed that the 2008 London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) PhD dissertation of Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, the second son and heir apparent to Libya's then dictator, was plagiarized. The LSE had 'been aware of the plagiarism claims *for some years*'¹ and 'was investigating' these claims.² At the same time, however, it had accepted a £1.5 million donation from the Gaddafi International Charity and Development Foundation run by the new PhD and used the £300,000 it had already received to finance a North Africa research programme. Saif Gaddafi's academic adviser visited Libya in December 2009 on behalf of, and sponsored by, that programme.² Moreover, the prestigious Oxford University Press had signed a contract to publish the dissertation as a book after having it reviewed by 'scholars of the highest international standing' who acknowledged 'its scholarly quality and the author's credibility'. Incidentally, the author had offered to purchase 20,000 copies of the book.³

This example stands out mainly due to the exaggerated amount of money involved in buying the degree. In Germany, a ghost-writer might charge as much as €100,000 for an excellent doctoral dissertation, but an average one in history does not cost

more than €20,000.⁴ In Portugal, the price might be as high as €50,000⁵ while in Russia it can run anywhere between €3000 and €35,000.⁶ Yet, the largest and most accessible market remains the English language one. I contacted the first specialized company I found on Google and they offered to write for me a 200-page doctoral dissertation analysing Venezuela's relations with the US during and after President Chavez's tenure for only US\$2695, which I could pay in three instalments (the price was also available in British Pounds). No more than ten days were needed to complete the high quality text.

PhD plagiarism has become a huge business whose advantages, as Gaddafi's example shows, are not ignored by innovative politicians. At times, they come from the Global South. Like the Libyan strongman, the Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, plagiarized parts of the doctoral dissertation he defended at the Glasgow Caledonian University in the 1990s.⁷ Still, the idea of assessing such cases as a nefarious export of Middle Eastern political corruption to the immaculate Western academia has very little to do with reality. In recent decades, numerous Western politicians have been involved in known cases of PhD plagiarism. Scandals ensued but, counter-intuitively, in certain cases public support for the faulty politician actually increased during the scandal. This article uses four case studies of high level European officials – two Presidents, one Prime Minister, and one Defence Minister – who plagiarized their PhD dissertations, in order to scrutinize this specific type of corruption and to assess its consequences for the host country. Plagiarism and the surprisingly large variation in the public reactions to it are analysed in relation to the general levels of corruption and democracy in these four European countries.

The article is structured as follows. The next section constructs the theoretical framework of the analysis. The following four sections present the case studies. Their findings are analysed in the final section.

2. Plagiarism and Corruption

In Ancient Rome, the *plagiarius* was a kidnapper. Martial used the word to designate 'literary theft'.⁸ Most Romans, however, associated it with individuals who either stole slaves or stole and sold freemen into slavery, a crime repressed by a specific law, *Lex Fabia de plagiariis*. Similarly, ancient French law called *plagiat* (the present French word for plagiarism) the theft of children.⁹ Around 1600, the latter's place was finally taken by 'children of the brain' and plagiarism acquired its present signification.¹⁰ Charles Nodier defined it in 1812 as 'l'action de tirer d'un auteur [...] le fonds d'un ouvrage d'invention, le développement d'une notion nouvelle ou encore mal connue, le tour d'une ou de plusieurs pensées' – in other words, misappropriating the essence, innovative notions, or thoughts of another author's work.¹¹ Plagiarism is a complex concept but, as suggested by the very title of Domenico Giuriati's 1903 *Il plagio. Furti letterari, artistici e musicali*,¹² it has been frequently perceived as a form of theft and was associated with this phenomenon's negative moral, ethical, and legal connotations. Interestingly, certain scholars have adopted a different stance. Nick Groom has claimed that plagiarism, an 'aesthetic activity,' can be used to subvert the 'dominant work ethic'

he associated with creating value through the expenditure of labour and capital in production – a perspective reminiscent of Marx-inspired anti-capitalist activism. Similarly, Marilyn Randall identified plagiarism as a guerrilla tactic for feminist authorship (Ref. 8, p. 35). More relevant for this article, another atypical interpretation of plagiarism has to be mentioned that concerns a cultural dimension. Ranamukalage Chandrasoma, Celia M. Thompson, and Alistair Pennycook have analysed plagiarism as an act of resistance to the dominant forms of rhetoric that contradict non-Western students' epistemological traditions. Alistair Pennycook has further developed this idea, speaking of plagiarism as resistance against the more general imposition of alien rules.¹³ China, with its tradition of collectivism, is frequently used as an example of a culture that devalues the Western concept of authorship while placing a greater value on imitation, which is encouraged and valued in the creation of new intellectual property. This results in a different system of values concerning plagiarism. Accordingly, it was claimed that 'Chinese students neither understand Western concepts nor feel that such plagiarism is an unacceptable practice' (Ref. 13, pp. 219–220). During the mid-2000s, Dilin Liu and Le Ha Phan opposed one of the supporters of this view, Colin Sowden, and rejected 'culturally stereotyped views of plagiarism'. They claimed that, in fact, plagiarism is perceived as immoral in Chinese and Vietnamese cultures. Yet, Dilin Liu and Le Ha Phan's views seem to be contradicted by a growing body of empirical research.¹⁴ A somehow similar situation might concern parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Calixthe Beyala, a Cameroon-born French novelist, was convicted of plagiarism in 1996 and later faced a number of similar accusations. In her defence, she vigorously invoked the African 'oral tradition which falls outside of Western literary practice, thereby placing herself, like an outlaw, outside of, and thus unanswerable to, the law.'¹⁵ This is an important aspect that was instrumental in the selection of this article's case studies. In order to avoid distortions due to Chinese-type major cultural differences, the four case studies are European. Differences of perception clearly exist among Germans, Hungarians, Romanians, and Russians, and they are scrutinized in this article. However, at least at the level of principle, nobody in the four countries rejects the Western negative perception of plagiarism.

The foregoing all concerns plagiarism in general. The current article preoccupies itself with academic plagiarism, which 'is a crime against academy. It deceives readers, hurts plagiarized authors, and gets the plagiarist undeserved benefits.'¹⁶ Academic plagiarism has been variously defined as reflecting the plagiarist's failure to meet academic standards; as an infringement of academic informal practices that undermines trust between teacher and student; as a practice that breaches ethical standards; and as a violation of intellectual property.¹⁷ However, it is obvious that there is a significant difference between an undergraduate student who cheats when submitting a term paper and a Prime Minister that uses a plagiarized PhD to enhance his personal prestige and electoral support. The former commits a 'crime against academy'. The latter discredits academia but also shatters the citizens' confidence in and respect for political class, state institutions, and rule of law. Moreover, it is likely that it was his position and influence that contributed decisively to his dissertation not being appropriately scrutinized by the jury. Consequently, this article is based on the

idea that the specific case of high level politicians who plagiarized their PhD dissertations is best analysed as a case of corruption.

The latter has variously been defined from public-office centred, public-interest centred, and market perspectives.¹⁸ Within the first approach, Joseph S. Nye identified corruption as:

behaviour which deviates from the normal duties of a public role because of private-regarding (family, close private clique), pecuniary or status gains; or violates rules against the exercise of certain types of private-regarding influence.¹⁹

This includes bribery, nepotism, and misappropriation. Critically, it represents a deviation from the Weberian legal-rational type of authority that the state apparatus of a modern democracy is supposed to incarnate. Officials are expected to serve the state and subordinate their personal relationships with citizens to legal mechanisms centred on the office, not the incumbent.²⁰ This is clearly incompatible with any type of private gain. Consequently, the office-based approach is a useful instrument for the study of corruption in executive agencies, which includes the cases of corrupt high-level officials. In a democracy, executive functions are associated with the idea of a collective agent that people can trust to execute collective decisions. Therefore, such functions imply public trust: the government is the trustee and executor of collective purposes. Corruption – and especially corruption of individuals at the top of the executive branch – involves violating that trust. This undermines democracy, leads to inefficient and ineffective government, and creates an atmosphere marked by differential treatment and arbitrary actions.²¹ These effects have been emphasized in the case of more traditional forms of corruption, but they also are present when PhD plagiarism of high-level officials is concerned. The case studies presented in the next four sections will show how serious the consequences of this phenomenon are, especially in the case of weak, unconsolidated democracies.

3. Germany's Minister of Defence: Baron Cut-and-Paste

Being a Doktor in Germany

In Germany, earning a doctoral degree is perceived as reaching a higher social status. The title is displayed on passports and identity cards (something also done only in Austria and the Czech Republic),²² and is engraved on a brass plate on the door at home and in the office. At work, new doctors normally get promoted to higher levels of responsibility (Ref. 10, p. 23), which on average implies a €20,000 increase of annual salary. Consequently, the number of PhD degrees rose from 15,500 in 1986 to 27,000 in 2011,²³ one of the highest in Europe. In 2010, doctoral degrees represented no less than 7% of all university degrees awarded in Germany (Ref. 22, p. 178). One of the negative consequences was the increasing temptation of taking advantage of fast track 'copy-and-paste' methods.

The 'German Kennedy'

In February 2011 it was revealed that the 2007 doctoral dissertation on the stages of development of constitutions in the US and the European Union, defended at the

University of Bayreuth (and published as a book in 2009), by the German Minister of Defence contained plagiarism on 94% of the pages. Almost two-thirds of the lines of the text were plagiarized, using mainly internet sources. Within two weeks, the university withdrew the doctoral degree (Ref. 10, pp. 29–30).

The Minister in question was the 39-year-old Baron Karl-Theodor Maria Nikolaus Johann Jacob Philipp Franz Sylvester Joseph von und zu Guttenberg (soon nicknamed Baron Cut-and-Paste, Zu Copyberg or Zu Googleberg by the German media). Owner of a family castle in Bavaria and married to a stylish TV presenter, Countess Stephanie von Bismarck, he was voted ‘Germany’s most popular politician’ in 2009. The couple were frequently referred to as the ‘German Kennedy’ and his ‘Jackie O’. Described as the ‘shooting star’ of conservatism in Germany, the charismatic baron was a member of the Christian Social Union, the Bavarian sister party of the chancellor’s Christian Democrat CDU, and was viewed by some as the future German leader.^{24,25} Good-looking, with a ‘charming personality’, he succeeded in achieving a rock-star status. His party even played an AC/DC track when he took to the stage. He became particularly well-known during his brief tenure as Minister of Economy and even more so after 2009 as Defence Minister, when he ‘fearlessly’ visited German troops in Afghanistan, wearing a flight suit and desert boots. His pictures were published by all gossip magazines (Ref. 24; Ref. 10, p. 31).

When the plagiarism was revealed, zu Guttenberg first described the allegations as ‘absurd’. He then stated he would only stop using the PhD title during the investigation. Then he admitted having ‘made serious errors’, but not plagiarizing.²⁴ However, after two weeks of daily attacks by media and outraged intellectuals (51,500 German academics signed a letter objecting to his continued role in the government) and the Speaker in Parliament describing his actions as ‘a nail in the coffin for confidence in democracy’, he finally decided to resign.²⁶

Out of the four case studies, this was by far the quickest resignation. Surprisingly, however, it was accompanied by ethically doubtful statements and developments within the German political system and society at large. During the entire crisis, Chancellor Angela Merkel supported zu Guttenberg, stating that she had ‘appointed him as defence minister, not as an academic assistant’.²⁴ After his resignation, she told reporters she was confident that she ‘would have the opportunity to work with Guttenberg again in the future’.²⁷ The Christian Social Union party also was willing to see a return of the former minister to frontline politics.²⁸ Among the citizens, many supporters of the charming baron were angry that ‘such a trivial offense’ led to scandal: ‘Surely everyone had cheated in school?’ (Ref. 10, p. 30). Astonishingly, opinion polls showed that support for zu Guttenberg actually *increased* from 68% to 73% during the crisis, when he was accused of being ‘a liar and an impostor’.²⁹

German Politicians’ Favourite Sport

Ironically, Norbert Lammert, the Parliamentary Speaker who so harshly criticized zu Guttenberg, became himself the object of a PhD plagiarism scandal in 2013.²³ He thus joined a rather numerous group of high level copy-and-paste German politicians who

had their doctoral degrees questioned. Education Minister Annette Schavan, Vice-President of the European Parliament Silvana Koch-Mehrin, European Parliament member Jorgo Chatzimakakis, Member of the Parliament of Baden-Wuerttemberg Matthias Pröfrock, as well as Member of the Parliament of Berlin and chair of the CDU parliamentary group Florian Graf, lost their PhD degrees because of plagiarism. Former Minister of Education and Cultural Affairs of Saxony, Roland Wöller, and the Minister of Education and Cultural Affairs of Lower Saxony, Bernd Althusmann, were in a somewhat similar situation, but they were able to keep their doctoral degrees despite having ‘violated principles of good academic practice’ (Ref. 22, p. 181).³⁰ The Minister of Cooperation and Development, Gerd Müller, has also been accused of PhD plagiarism.³¹ One only can be shocked by such a situation in a country well-known for the quality of its academic system and for its lack of corruption.

Corruption in Germany

In fact, resistance to corruption is associated more with Cold War Western Germany than with the current country. The tradition of Prussian correctness dominant until the early 1980s has been increasingly challenged. Leaving aside corruption in the construction industry, Germany has mainly been affected by high-level corruption that involves a small number of senior figures. Typically, they do not profit personally from corruption acts. In most cases, it concerns the illegal financing of political parties.³² Yet, this phenomenon has been so important and visible that today Germany has landed in the category of ‘somewhat corrupt’ countries.³³ Transparency International still ranks it 12th out of 174 states,³⁴ but 65% of Germans feel that their political parties are corrupt or extremely corrupt; 48% believe the same thing about the Parliament.³⁵ Consequently, the public image of the German political system and its political class has been seriously damaged (Ref. 32, p. 63).

The German education system is better perceived: only 19% of German citizens believe that it is corrupt or extremely corrupt.³⁵ However, the cases of zu Guttenberg and his fellow plagiarists have linked this sector and the already damaged image of German politicians from the perspective of perceived corruption. The plagiarism scandals affected both education and politics in a deeply negative way because they questioned the behaviour in public office, and the moral status, of key representatives of the German democracy. Even more disturbing are the hopes of both his party and the Chancellor that the former Defence Minister might eventually return to politics; and the shocking fact that public support for him actually *increased* during the scandal. This goes far beyond the human weakness of some isolated individuals. Indeed, it seems to be indicative of what a prominent political commentator described as ‘the degeneration of political culture’ in Germany (Ref. 32, p. 63).

4. Hungary’s President: The Plagiarist Olympic Champion

In January 2012, the Hungarian business weekly HVG revealed that the country’s President, Pál Schmitt, had plagiarized the 1992 doctoral dissertation on the modern

Olympic Games that he had defended in 1992 at the University of Physical Education, now part of Semmelweis University in Budapest.³⁶ Out of 215 pages, 16 were carbon copied from the translation of a 1991 German text by Klaus Heinemann while other 180 contained text as well as tables and charts taken from a 1987 book by a Bulgarian author, Nikolay Gueorguiev.³⁷ Only 18 pages were written by Schmitt himself.³⁸

Schmitt won gold medals for fencing at the Olympic Games of 1968 and 1972. During the 1980s he became a communist State Secretary for Sports,³⁹ and since 1983 he has been a member of the International Olympic Committee. Showing 'a chameleon-like ability to adapt to changing circumstances', after the fall of communism he made a swift turn right.⁴⁰ He became the head of the Hungarian Olympic Committee in 1990, was vice president of the International Olympic Committee between 1995 and 1999,³⁹ served as a Member of the European Parliament for the ruling right-wing Fidesz party, and was elected President in the summer of 2010 by the Hungarian Parliament thanks to the support of the Fidesz Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, whose coalition holds a two-thirds majority.³⁷ The presidency is mainly ceremonial, but allows the incumbent to challenge legislative acts. Schmitt did not do so, in spite of the fact that some of the 365 laws fast-tracked by Fidesz in its first 18 months in office were criticized by the European Commission and the Council of Europe.⁴⁰

The news of plagiarism provoked outrage in social media. The President spoke of 'unfounded allegations'³⁷ and claimed that the texts in question were identical because he had worked with Gueorguiev and Heinemann, something the former's daughter and the latter himself strongly denied. A Semmelweis University commission investigated the case and concluded that there was no plagiarism, but the university's Senate decided otherwise and on 29 March withdrew Schmitt's doctoral degree. The President stated on public radio that the decision was illegal.³⁸ He would nevertheless accept it, 'but this has got nothing to do with me being a president'.³⁶ He also declared that he was willing to rewrite the dissertation. In Parliament, opposition Socialists and Greens had initiated an impeachment procedure but this was rejected by Orbán's two-thirds majority.⁴¹ Yet, the growing scandal resulted in 'Hungary's most polarising political drama since riots in the autumn of 2006'.⁴⁰ After days of political turmoil,³⁷ on 2 April 2012 a large demonstration was held in front of the President's official residence in Buda. Socialists, Greens, civil society activists, but also members of the extreme right Jobbik party and of Fidesz demanded Schmitt's resignation.⁴¹ The President claimed once more that 'his conscience was clear'³⁶ but, in order to avoid dividing 'his beloved nation', accepted to resign.³⁷

'Una profonda crisi morale'

Very differently from the German case, the Schmitt plagiarism is singular among Hungary's high-level politicians. Unfortunately, something more is very different between the two countries. Since Viktor Orbán's conservative coalition came to power in 2010, its nationalist policies have initiated a 'U-turn and the systematic destruction of the fundamental institutions of democracy'.⁴² The clearly authoritarian trend was acknowledged by the Prime Minister himself, who in a

July 2014 speech stated overtly that he was constructing an ‘illiberal state’.⁴³ Hungary is still a semi-consolidated democracy,⁴³ but one of the consequences of the present evolution is that, due to the ‘pyramid-like hierarchy’ headed by Orbán, most investigations of corruption cases involving people close to Fidesz are never completed (Ref. 42, pp. 35–36). Political corruption scandals not resulting in retribution have contributed to raising the percentage of citizens feeling that the institutions are corrupt or extremely corrupt to 68% in the case of political parties and to 56% in that of the Parliament. For the education system the figure is identical with that of Germany, 19%,³⁵ but as many as 49% of young people aged 15 to 29 believe that corruption exists in educational institutions.⁴⁴ However, their main concern is closer to politics: like the rest of the population, they are acutely aware of the fact that one of the most corrupt areas of Hungarian public life is party and campaign financing, and this results in ‘a loss of faith in the country’s democratic values and processes’ (Ref. 44, p. 374).

The reaction to the President’s PhD plagiarism is part of this larger context. The Fidesz-controlled parliamentary majority had no ethical problem in openly supporting the plagiarist by voting against the impeachment motion. When asked about Schmitt’s possible resignation, Orbán stated that ‘nobody except him can decide’,³⁶ as if this were a purely private matter. This is illustrative, as an Italian newspaper put it, of Hungary’s ‘profound moral crisis’⁴¹ and of the serious perils threatening its democracy.

5. Romania’s Prime Minister: the Non-Resigning Plagiarist

Undoubtedly, the Romanian Prime Minister, Victor Ponta, provides the most colourful – and outrageous – case study. In June 2012, *Nature* revealed that more than half of his 2003 University of Bucharest dissertation on the functioning of the International Criminal Court (also published as a book in 2004) consisted of duplicated text. At that time, Ponta was Secretary of State in the government of Adrian Năstase, who also was his doctoral supervisor.⁴⁵ Ironically, Năstase was eventually jailed twice for corruption. The university’s ethics commission found plagiarized elements on 115 out of the 297 pages of the dissertation and confirmed charges. The state agency responsible for investigating PhD plagiarism, the Romanian National Council for the Attestation of University Titles (NCAUT), concluded that 85 pages had been entirely copied and pasted. But Prime Minister Ponta *disbanded* NCAUT during its very meeting examining his own case. Instead, he decided that the National Ethics Council (NEC) be in charge of PhD investigations, too.⁴⁶ Incidentally, earlier that month all NEC members had been replaced with protégés of the Prime Minister one day before the Council examined the plagiarism charges against Ponta’s Minister of Education, Ioan Mang, who was, of course, cleared of any wrongdoing with respect to the eight academic papers he had copied and pasted.⁴⁷ Predictably, the NEC also cleared the Prime Minister, whose only minor mistake was found to be the omission of references in footnotes. Ponta claimed that all charges were part of a vicious political campaign launched against him by then Romanian President, Traian Bănescu, and therefore there was no reason for him to resign.⁴⁶ Because the entire

society (but not Ponta's Social Democratic Party, the more or less reformed former Communist Party) was outraged, the Prime Minister stated, at first, that he would stop using the PhD title; and, later, that he would relinquish it. This was not legally possible, but in December 2014 he passed a Government Emergency Ordinance modifying the National Education Law to allow holders of academic degrees to relinquish them without providing any explanation. Yet, the ordinance has not yet been implemented and Ponta still holds a PhD.⁴⁸

The Prime Minister was hardly the only high-ranking Romanian politician in this situation. The Vice-Prime Minister and July 2015 Acting Prime Minister Gabriel Oprea also plagiarized his 2001 doctoral dissertation. When this was revealed in 2015 he was promptly cleared by the NEC. Moreover, as a professor at the Romanian Police Academy, he supervised at least six plagiarized doctoral dissertations.⁴⁹ Ponta's Minister of Economy, Mihai Tudose, inserted in his 2010 PhD dissertation about 50 pages from a dissertation defended one year earlier by a police superintendent. Interestingly, the latter told journalists that he was contacted by Tudose, to whom he simply 'sold the copyright as [he would have done with] any other merchandise'.⁵⁰

Overall, 33% of Romanians perceive their education system as corrupt or highly corrupt (Ref. 35, p. 119), but it is believed that the most serious situation is precisely that of plagiarized doctoral dissertations. The Group for Social Dialogue, one of the most prestigious Romanian civic organizations, even held a highly publicized debate entitled 'Plagiarism as State of the Nation' in September 2015, during which Andrei Pleșu, a university professor and former Minister of Culture, suggested that all holders of legitimate PhD degrees relinquish them until people like Ponta admit their guilt and resign.⁵¹

Of course, the latter scenario is highly unlikely because PhD plagiarism is only one of the forms taken by the pervasive corruption of the Romanian political elite, a social group that Tom Gallagher characterized as 'cynical and amoral to an extent unusual even in the former Soviet satellites'.⁵² A Stratfor report spoke of its 'culture of corruption'.⁵³ Accordingly, Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index ranks Romania 69th out of 174 countries³⁴ while 76% of its citizens believe that political parties are corrupt or extremely corrupt. In the case of the Parliament, the percentage is 68%.³⁵ The lack of a clean political party led to large scale electoral apathy and further encouraged mass emigration to Western Europe. In turn, this allowed Ponta to lead in the opinion polls and to receive the largest number of votes in the first round of the November 2014 presidential election despite his plagiarism. Yet, on his orders, polling stations at embassies and consulates abroad prevented a large part of the four million Romanians abroad from voting. This backfired, as live TV coverage of large queues, protests, and riots at consulates made first round abstentionists back home vote against Ponta in the second round. He lost the presidential election, but stated that there was no reason for him to resign from his position of Prime Minister.⁵⁴ He repeated this statement when he was formally indicted for corruption in September 2015. However, in November 2015, more than 30 teenagers died in a nightclub fire ultimately due to corrupt practices that resulted in the non-respect of anti-fire legislation. This triggered a 20,000-strong protest

demonstration asking for Ponta's resignation and for the departure of corrupt politicians from public life. Finally, the plagiarist stepped down.⁵⁵

Overall, the Romanian Prime Minister's case is relevant for the way high level political corruption, which includes an academic component, compromises trust in politicians and politics, induces electoral apathy and severely distorts democratic processes in a country whose semi-consolidated democracy remains weak and vulnerable.⁵⁶

6. Russia's President: The Plagiarist Tzar

In March 2006, two fellows at the Brookings Institute in Washington, DC, Clifford Gaddy and Igor Danchenko, discovered that more than 16 pages of the 20-page theoretical chapter of Vladimir Putin's 1997 dissertation entitled 'Strategic Planning of the Reproduction of the Mineral Resource Base of a Region under Conditions of the Formation of Market Relations' as well as six diagrams and tables had been taken almost word-for-word from the 1978 classic US management textbook *Strategic Planning and Policy* by William R. King and David I. Cleland that had been translated into Russian during the early 1990s by a KGB-related institute. There were no quotation marks and the source was not mentioned.⁵⁷⁻⁵⁹ The 218-page dissertation earned Putin a Candidate of Science degree, which is the lower stage of Russia's two-level PhD structure (the higher one being that of Doctor of Science),⁶⁰ from the St. Petersburg Mining Institute.⁵⁸

Putin started his doctoral programme after becoming an assistant to the rector of Leningrad State University responsible for international relations, in 1990. Soon, he also became an adviser and then the Chairman of the Committee for International Relations at the St. Petersburg City Hall. From 1994, he concurrently held the position of Deputy Chairman of the St. Petersburg City Government. In 1996, he moved to Moscow to become Deputy Chief of the Presidential Property Management Directorate and in March 1997 he was appointed Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Executive Office and Chief of Main Control Directorate.⁶¹ Despite his busy timetable, he returned to St. Petersburg to defend his dissertation at the Mining Institute. The latter's rector, Vladimir Litvinenko, eventually became Putin's adviser on energy policy and a potential candidate for the position of head of the huge state-owned Gazprom energy company.⁵⁸

There is a strong suspicion that the dissertation was in fact written by a ghost-writer. To quote a senior associate at the American Foreign Policy Council, E. Wayne Merry, 'It's probably an open question whether Putin even read his dissertation until shortly before he had to defend it'.⁵⁸ In any case, it was extremely difficult to obtain a copy of the text, which suggests that the Russian President had tried to prevent a possible plagiarism scandal.

Yet there was no scandal when plagiarism was revealed – and nobody has ever mentioned resignation. Putin himself 'never dignified the reports with any comment'.⁵⁷ State TV stations did not mention them. The independent *Kommersant Vlast* weekly did publish a cover story, but one that gave equal weight to plagiarism

accusations and to pro-Putin statements by Vladimir Litvinenko. Except for some Russian bloggers, ‘everybody knows about [the plagiarism], but nobody wants to bring it up’.⁵⁹ This is no different from what is happening in the case of other prominent Russian dubious doctorate-holders, such as Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky, former Defence Minister Boris Gryzlov, former Minister for Regional Development Vladimir Yakovlev, President of Chechnya Ramzan Kadyrov, and the nationalist party leader and Member of Parliament, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. All faced plagiarism accusations which have never been investigated.⁶² Moreover, no less than 349 of the 612 members of the two chambers of the Russian Parliament hold doctoral degrees – normally in fields different from that of their first degree – despite the fact that only 76 are involved in research and teaching (Ref. 62, pp. 268–271).

Some Western scholars claim that this situation should be perceived in the post-Soviet context that preserves the tradition of communist strongmen with doubtful academic credentials: ‘it was really quite common for an up-and-coming *apparatchik* to get a ghost-written work done to obtain a degree’.⁶³ The problem, however, goes beyond politicians. Seventy-two percent of Russians believe that their education system is corrupt or extremely corrupt.³⁵ Bribes are paid to school and university officials to have children admitted to the institution of their choice, and to professors in order to get good grades.⁶⁴ At the PhD level, ‘ready-made dissertations’ are for sale for prices between €3000 and €35,000 (Ref. 6). A study identified no less than 169 legally registered, tax-paying firms offering doctoral ghost-writing (Ref. 62, p. 267). In fact, this is only one of the many dimensions of the corruption that permeates all aspects of the life of the Russian people ‘from cradle to grave’ (Ref. 64, p. 412) and which is believed to comprise no less than 20% of the country’s GNP.⁶⁵ Not surprisingly, Russia is ranked by Transparency International 136th out of 174 countries in its Corruption Perception Index.³⁴

Still, pervasive corruption including wide scale PhD plagiarism is not the only reason that prevented a scandal erupting in Putin’s case. The Russian plagiarist is also a dictator. He has succeeded in creating a consolidated authoritarian regime characterized by a 6.46 Freedom House Democracy Score (7 represents the worst possible level). Next to the almost complete elimination of citizens’ political rights and civil liberties, the President and his inner circle use their power to direct greater personal wealth to themselves and to loyal oligarchs. They only pursue corruption charges selectively against political rivals.⁶⁶ Accordingly, 83% of the citizens believe that the Putin-controlled Parliament is corrupt or extremely corrupt.³⁵

Consequently, the President’s plagiarism, the surprising lack of an associated scandal, and the absolute absence of the idea of resignation, illuminate two different but closely related aspects. On the one hand, as a dictator, Putin cannot be indicted because he is above the law; and he cannot be criticized overtly because he controls the mass media and the society at large. On the other hand, his act of academic-related corruption is legitimated by the culture of corruption his regime has helped develop. All this is proof of a distortion of ethical values totally incompatible not only with democracy but also with many of the key characteristics of a modern polity, be it democratic or not.

7. Analysis and Conclusion

In purely academic terms, it might be noted that the four case studies are associated with a somehow bizarre second-level plagiarism. All plagiarists seem to have paid ghost-writers to do their work; in turn, the ghost-writers plagiarized printed or internet sources. At least in the case of zu Guttenberg, this was a total surprise for the customer, who certainly questioned the ghost-writer's ethical position.

Less amusingly, the academic corruption of politicians perverts the educational purposes of research and scholarship and has a deeply negative influence on the processes of doctoral education and fundamental research (Ref. 62, p. 263). Negative consequences, however, go beyond these fields. It was found that there is a clear correlation between long-term investment in education and a decrease in corruption. These two elements tend to reinforce each other, thus creating a virtuous circle. One of the main causes is believed to reside in the fact that education builds self-reinforcing social trust, which helps curb corruption. Yet, if the expansion of high-quality public education is perceived as being implemented in corrupt ways, a situation greatly favoured by highly visible academic scandals such as those presented in previous sections, education ceases to be a generator of public trust and its anti-corruption effects dissipate (Ref. 35, pp. 6–7).

This suggests that, notwithstanding its uncontested importance, the academic dimension of the four case studies is dwarfed by the socio-political one. It is clear that this is public office corruption, with prominent members of the executive obtaining private gain by deviating from the normal duties of their public role, as they convert their authority into personal assets. Private gain is represented by enhanced reputation resulting in increased electoral support (Ref. 62, p. 265). The deviation from normal duties was present, first, within the act of plagiarism itself: most likely because of the position and influence of the candidate, the members of the jury did not appropriately scrutinize the dissertations in question. At least in the case of Putin, the rector of the university eventually was rewarded with a political position. Second, political instruments at the disposal of the plagiarists were used abusively to prevent legal retribution. Ponta changed legislation to clear himself of charges, Schmitt used his allies' parliamentary majority to prevent impeachment, and Putin simply took advantage of his dictatorial immunity to legal investigation.

This raises serious ethical questions. One might be tempted to blame the four as individuals, but the numerous similar cases of slightly lower-level politicians suggest that this is not the right approach. In fact, 'choices about moral decisions and actions are not made solely by the individual'.⁶⁷ Research indicates that ethical motivation and action depend on the continual creation of personal moral identity through social conditioning and socialization.⁶⁷ This brings the discussion to the critical point represented by political culture and democratic practices. The survival of the Soviet tradition of communist officials using ghost-writers in order to acquire undeserved academic degrees⁵⁸ as well as a background of generalized corruption turned Putin's plagiarism into something close to an uncanny 'normality'. Răzvan Theodorescu, a member of the Romanian Academy of Sciences and a former Minister of Culture in

the government led by Ponta's corrupt doctoral supervisor, Adrian Năstase, provided an explicit acknowledgement of differences he perceived between Western and Eastern Europe:

If Ponta is guilty [of plagiarism], he should apologize. In other parts of Europe, for something like this you resign. In Europe's borderlands, where we are located, you only apologize. You apologize and go on.⁶⁸

These differences are well-illustrated by the large variation among the four case studies in what Martin Bull and James Newell called 'the degree of scandal', something determined mainly by different expectations in different national publics (Ref. 33, p. 235), which in turn relate to political culture and associated (un)democratic practices. The overall repertoire of the four politicians' unethical acts included the plagiarism itself; rewarding of members of the PhD jury with political positions; trying to make the dissertation unavailable to public scrutiny; lying in public statements; arbitrarily changing laws and modifying the membership of institutions involved in the investigation of academic fraud; using the protection of political allies to prevent impeachment; refusing to resign despite large-scale public protest; and controlling mass media in order to prevent a scandal erupting. Yet, there were huge differences between what zu Guttenberg and Putin were willing and able to choose from this repertoire. As shown in Table 1, there is a clear parallel between the four politicians' attitude toward resignation (taken as the most relevant indicator of their behaviour), the public reaction to their plagiarism, and the levels of corruption and democracy in the four countries. More democracy is associated with a better civil society rating, less corruption, stronger outrage resulting in public protest, and quicker resignation of the plagiarist. Dictatorship and weak civil society mean more corruption, no scandal, and no talk about resignation. Each of the four case studies is representative of a different stage on the continuum between the two extremes.

It is hardly a new finding that 'the development of corrupt practices is more likely where cultural attitudes are not strongly supportive of a country's democratic institutions [...] or of democracy more generally', a situation that in Central and Eastern Europe has resulted in most corrupt countries being at the same time the least democratic ones (Ref. 33, p. 236). Data presented in Table 1 can be used to support the idea that the less democracy–more corruption relationship is one of mutual enforcement. On the one hand, the corruption-related acts of the four plagiarists were more outrageous in countries where less democracy meant that they were less exposed to legal retribution. On the other hand, those corruption-related acts further weakened democracy. Indeed – and perhaps surprisingly – the key element emphasized by the four case studies is how closely academic plagiarism practices of high-ranking politicians intertwine with and re-enforce the most serious democratic failures in their respective countries. In the German consolidated democracy, zu Guttenberg's acts and attitude have been considered indicative of, and contributing to, that country's 'degeneration of political culture' (Ref. 32, p. 63), something that support from his party and the Chancellor as well as the increase in his popularity after plagiarism was revealed seem to confirm. In Hungary, Schmitt could and did

Table 1. Democracy indicators and perception of corruption for Germany, Hungary, Romania, and Russia; public reaction to and behaviour of case study PhD plagiarist officials

Country	Freedom House Regime Classification (2015)	Freedom House Democracy Score (2015) (1 = best, 7 = worst)	Freedom House Civil Society Rating (2015) (1 = best, 7 = worst)	Corruption Perceptions Index Score (2014) (100 = least corrupt; 0 = most corrupt)	Corruption Perceptions Index Country Rank (2014) (out of 174)	Political parties perceived as corrupt/ extremely corrupt (2013)	Parliament/ legislature perceived as corrupt/ extremely corrupt (2013)	Education systems perceived as corrupt/ extremely corrupt (2013)	Position of case study corrupt official	Public reaction to official's PhD plagiarism	Delay before resignation
Germany	Consolidated democracy	–	–	79	12	65%	48%	19%	Min. of Defence	Public outrage; over 50,000 academics signed letter of protest; 5% increase in popularity	2 weeks
Hungary	Semi-consolidated democracy	3.18	2.50	54	47	68%	56%	19%	President	Public outrage; large protest demonstration	3 months
Romania	Semi-consolidated democracy	3.46	2.50	43	69	76%	68%	33%	Prime-Minister	Public outrage	Refused to resign; changed legislation to clear himself of misconduct
Russia	Consolidated authoritarian	6.46	6.00	27	136	77%	83%	72%	President	None	Resignation never mentioned by anyone

Sources: Transparency International;^{34,35} Freedom House⁶⁹

defy public outrage for three months because of the political support provided by his nationalist allies, whose authoritarian trends he had supported through his acts as a President. In Romania, Ponta mocked justice and democracy under the protection of a 'culture of corruption' he helped develop during his entire tenure, and that made them ineffective if not irrelevant. In Russia, Putin did not even face a scandal because of the marriage between dictatorship and rampant corruption he had successfully promoted. This is to say that this specific type of plagiarism goes far beyond academia. It is a socio-political phenomenon that affects the entire polity and society. Because it combines with and significantly enhances other anti-democratic processes, it represents a direct, aggressive, and effective threat to democracy.

Consequences cannot be ignored even in the case of a consolidated democracy such as Germany. They are, however, much more destructive in the post-communist states, where they include the significant lowering of citizens' confidence in, and respect for, the political class, political parties, state institutions, and the rule of law. This results in declining levels of public trust, electoral apathy, and disaffection with politics (Ref. 33, p. 244). Support for democracy is deeply undermined, and citizens might start to consider alternative, undemocratic forms of government. This is particularly dangerous in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe, where democratic consolidation is increasingly challenged by populist and authoritarian temptations, and in the members of the Commonwealth of Independent States, most prominently Russia, where democratization remains a remote and probably unrealistic prospect.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to Amanda Ramlogan and Mélissa E. Bryant for their useful suggestions.

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