

Plagiarism Frenzy in Serbia: In Deep Mud

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Eurocrisis in the
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By [Natalija Miletic](#)

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A spate of plagiarism scandals has been shaking Serbia's political and university life, with issues being raised about political parties' and public officials' malpractices in obtaining PhD degrees, and about the integrity of Serbian higher education in general.

Since early June of this year three prominent politicians – the [Minister of Interior](#), the [Mayor of Belgrade](#), and the [President of New Belgrade](#) – the capital's municipality representing the main business district in the country and probably in the region – have been denounced for having allegedly plagiarised their “fast-track” PhD dissertations. But the affair does not stop here, as it includes another “high-ranking personality” – the Rector and owner of *Megatrend*, Serbia's biggest private university, who has been accused of boasting a PhD degree from the London School of Economics, which he has never obtained. It all started when three UK-based Serbian scholars



presented to the public their analysis of the PhD dissertation submitted by the Serbian Minister's of Interior, Mr Nebojsa Stefanovic, obtained in just two years, while he was serving as President of Parliament. In the [article](#), published on the portal *Pescanik* (Hourglass), the scholars argue that, in addition to the lack of quality and the failure to meet the minimum standards of a research thesis, the minister's PhD abounds in plagiarism. What followed was a series of cyber-attacks, which brought the website down, an occurrence that further fuelled the debate about this case. Minister Stefanovic conspicuously avoided addressing the charges throughout the week after, producing only one [written statement](#), where he claimed he “honestly obtained the PhD”. But this did not prevent his superior, Prime Minister Vucic, to angrily state that the charges of plagiarism are “the most stupid thing he has ever heard”. However, higher education institutions, from the Ministry of Education to various “autonomous” university bodies, remained silent on the issue, despite early calls of a few distinguished professors to take the scandal seriously, as well as a subsequent [petition](#) signed by almost two thousand Serbian scientists from both the country and its diaspora in support of the article.

The minister's mentor, and at the same time Rector and owner of *Megatrend*, Mr Mica Jovanovic, dismissed the plagiarism charges by saying that “it just isn't common or appropriate for a [petty student to question the authority of a Professor](#) such as himself”. This prompted two other UK-based Serbian scholars to check the veracity of his CV. They [found](#) that the Rector (whom they lampooned as “Rector Münchhausen”), [did not obtain a PhD from LSE](#), as he was boasting in public appearances and his CV. After the LSE and the University of London confirmed that Mr Jovanovic has [never gained a such degree at their institutions](#), nor did he ever register for a PhD programme in the past, he was forced to resign and to leave the university's formal management to someone else.



Megatrend University building in Belgrad

The practice of awarding dubious degrees appears to be widespread, and the extent to which it plagues the Serbian university system was further illustrated when a third case broke out. This time, the “hero” is a former athlete named Mr Aleksandar Sapic, whose PhD was [found](#) to allegedly contain many plagiarised parts from a variety of sources ranging from domestic articles, translated books, as well as internet sites (including Wikipedia). Mr Sapic, once the

best water polo players in the world, now an opposition party member and the mayor of the most prosperous Belgrade municipality – New Belgrade – [confirmed](#) he might have not appropriately referred to “one piece of someone else’s work”, however claiming that his PhD “was obtained honestly”.

The culmination of this *crescendo* of affairs occurred when a Germany-based scholar, [Mr Rasa Karapandza](#), [argued](#) that Belgrade Mayor Mr Sinica Mali’s PhD thesis contains an astonishing amount of apparently plagiarised parts. Unlike other officials, Mali’s dissertation was defended at a public university – the Faculty of Organisational Sciences of the University of Belgrade. Mr Karapandza, who enriched his analysis with a page-by-page interactive graphic display of the amount of non-original text in the mayor’s thesis, found that, besides domestic sources, Mr Mali plainly translated a whole chapter of a PhD thesis written by a Groningen-based Eritrean scholar, Mr Habljarama. [The Mayor’s response](#) was that “the only authoritative” instance to judge the PhD is his mentor and the commission which awarded him the degree, a claim criticised by many as “hypocritical”.

There have been quite a few common denominators regarding the reactions that followed each of these accusations: the accused were all quick to dismiss the allegations; the universities, state and private, have failed so far to assemble independent bodies to address the allegations through a transparent procedure; attempts of silencing the media have been observed (from hacker attacks to threats and intimidations of journalists); both majority and opposition parties have failed to initiate internal procedures on these questions and to dismiss the alleged plagiarists from public posts if a commission were officially to strip them of their PhD degree. Although formal procedures have been initiated at the universities involved universities (albeit without official commissions yet) – it remains to be seen how investigations will be conducted and how impartial their internal assessments will be.

Arguably, a major issue halting further progress with regard to the plagiarism affair is university autonomy, which is now being used as a pretext for not allowing external examiners (both horizontally – from other universities, and vertically – from the Ministry of Education and regulatory bodies) to take part in evaluation procedures. There is no political will to deal with the “rascals in our ranks” either. There is no strong media scene either, nor a civil society sector and independent intellectuals whose engagement may be powerful enough to exercise the necessary pressure forcing a transparent and veritable account of the matter.

Plagiarised PhDs are of course not a Serbian or East European specialty. The reader will probably recall the cases of two German ministers– [Karl Theodor Zu-Guttenberg](#) and [Annet Schavan](#), of the ex-President of Hungary [Pall Schmitt](#), and, most recently, of [US Senator John Walsh](#). But what could be a domestic specialty is the lack of appropriate institutional response, as well as a responsible reaction from the political elite. It took two days for Army College to [confirm](#) that the plagiarism allegations against Walsh appeared to be well-founded, and a ten-day period for a commission to [formally decide](#) on the next steps. In Serbia, two months after the breakout of the affair, which has in the meantime expanded to include three high-profile politicians, not a single commission has been established and no one knows how much it will take for a first decision to be taken. Let alone what the consequences will look like.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog, nor of the London School of Economics

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