

Fox guarding the chicken coop

by Voy Le Vitzki

Commentary on 'Time of deceit' by Marek Wroński¹

Dr Agnieszka Szpak², an award winning scholar from the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Thorn, after having committed an act of academic misconduct and been penalised for her offence, carried on as if nothing had happened as a member of the University Disciplinary Committee for Academic Teachers³ and today she still is on the Nicolaus Copernicus University's Disciplinary Committee for Doctoral Students. This scandal brings to mind the words of Prof. Michio Kaku from the City University of New York: 'It's like having the fox guard the chicken coop. Don't be surprised if all you have left are chicken bones.'⁴

Dr Szpak, the proverbial fox, was 'guarding' academic integrity in her role as a member of the University Disciplinary Committee for Academic Teachers for almost a year after she had

¹ This commentary refers to the issues described by Marek Wroński in his article titled 'Time of deceit (or how to lose reputation)' (<http://www.bmartin.cc/dissent/documents/Wronski/Wronski1506.pdf>) under the sub-title 'Righteousness is withering away'.

² Dr Agnieszka Szpak is an Assistant Professor at the Nicolas Copernicus University in Thorn, Poland, Faculty of Political Science and International Studies, Department of International and European Law (<http://www.wpism.umk.pl/wydzial/struktura/katedra-prawa-miedzynarodowego-i-europejskiego/agnieszka-szpak.html>). She specialises in international humanitarian law. She teaches the following subjects: public international law, international humanitarian law, human rights protection, diplomatic law and international organisations. She participated in many courses on public international law and international humanitarian law such as: summer course on public international law at the Hague Academy in 2004; IX Polish School of International Humanitarian Law of Armed Conflicts organised by the Polish Red Cross (2005); V Summer Course on International Humanitarian Law San Remo-Geneva organised by the International Institute of Humanitarian Law (2005), European system of human rights protection organised by Europa-Universitaet Viadrina Frankfurt at Oder (2006) and 18th Course on International Protection of Human Rights – Protection of National Minorities organized by Poznań Human Rights Centre, Institute of Legal Studies of Polish Academy of Sciences, Adam Mickiewicz University, Faculty of Law and Administration in cooperation with University of Strasburg and Stiftung Convivenza – Internationales Zentrum für Minderheiten (2009). Dr Szpak is the author of about 50 publications (including 3 books). Her doctoral thesis on the Status of the Guantanamo Bay detainees received an award from the Polish Red Cross.

³ See footnote 1.

⁴ Prof. Michio Kaku referred to the appointment of often anti-science Senator Ted Cruz as Head of the Senate Subcommittee on Space, Science, and Competitiveness (http://www.salon.com/2015/01/15/it's_like_having_the_fox_guard_the_chicken_coop_scientist_slams_having_ted_cruz_oversee_nasa/).

been convicted and penalised for violating academic ethics standards herself. She was only terminated from her position when Prof. Marek Wroński, who described her case in his article 'Time of deceit (or how to lose reputation)', protested against this outrage to the authorities of the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Thorn (NCU).

Prof. Marek Kalinowski has been Chair of the University Disciplinary Committee since 2008. His second term finishes in 2016. In June 2014, as Chair of the Arbitration Panel of the University Disciplinary Committee for Academic Teachers, he issued a penalty of reprimand to Dr Szpak for borrowing, without referencing, from a paper by Prof. Lindsay Moir from the University of Hull in the United Kingdom. Yet, despite being actively involved in Dr Szpak's misconduct case, Prof. Kalinowski either did not notice or did not consider it inappropriate for the convicted offender to remain on the University Disciplinary Committee! This scandalous arrangement was terminated only thanks to Prof. Wroński's intervention.

However, even after Prof. Wroński's protest, the NCU authorities' blase attitude towards guarding academic integrity by Dr Szpak has not changed! She still is a member of yet *another* disciplinary committee at the Nicolaus Copernicus University, namely the University Disciplinary Committee for Doctoral Students, chaired by Dr Anna Bajek. Dr Szpak started her term on this Disciplinary Committee in 2013, the same year that she committed an act of academic misconduct for which she was convicted in June 2014! The term lasts four years. The University Resolution No. 127 of 23 November 2012, announcing the Disciplinary Committee members, including Dr Szpak, was signed by the Vice-Chancellor of the Nicolaus Copernicus University, Prof. Andrzej Tretyn.

So here we have, with the full approval of the Vice-Chancellor, the fox is still guarding the chicken coop, in fact the coop with new hatchlings!

The decision to retain Dr Szpak on the University Disciplinary Committee for Doctoral Students is a clear signal for the NCU's fledgling scholars that the Vice-Chancellor does not consider misconduct committed by their teachers a problem at all. In my opinion, this situation is very damaging to the development of future generations of academic teachers. It reflects badly on the integrity of Vice-Chancellor Prof. Tretyn who is one of those deciding the future of science in Poland. Of the two evils, I think it is more damaging when the teacher-offender looks after the ethics in research conducted by doctoral students who are still

new to academic misconduct, than when she is involved in a similar capacity in relation to experienced scholars.

The appalling reality is that blatant academic dishonesty has frequently and for a long time plagued the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Thorn⁵. Such an unprecedented scale and frequency of institutional fraud indicates that to guard this university against degradation is a lost cause!

Nevertheless, I will be following up on the issue of Dr Szpak's academic misconduct with the authorities of the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Thorn. Let's bear in mind that Dr Szpak is an experienced, award-winning, internationally educated lawyer (at the Hague Academy among other distinguished institutions) with in-depth expertise which specifically includes international humanitarian law and human rights protection. What an irony!

Voy Le Vitzki
vlevitzki@gmail.com
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⁵ For instance, see the article 'Accusations against a Dean' (<http://www.bmartin.cc/dissent/documents/Wronski/Wronski1307.pdf>), where Marek Wroński describes the case of alleged plagiarism in a major monograph by Dr Tomasz Justyński, Head of the Institute of Civil and Family Law who, despite the accusations, was elected in 2012 to a position of Dean of the Faculty of Law and Administration at the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Thorn. Coincidentally, Dr Justyński, similarly to Dr Szpak, has never admitted to have committed the acts of plagiarism.