



President Schmitt embroiled in plagiarism scandal

Recent allegations that President Pál Schmitt has plagiarised most if not all of his dissertation threaten to harm beyond repair a presidency that has been beset by difficulties to begin with. Plagiarism scandals are very unusual in Hungary, and unheard of in politics. Yet political scandals are frequent occurrences and result in resignations less often than in more established democracies. The foremost issue therefore is whether this scandal will be enough to force the resignation of Hungary's highest official. Apart from the question of the fate of President Schmitt, however, the question is also whether the affair will have an effect on how plagiarism is handled more generally.

Plagiarism scandals have been rare in Hungary, even in academic circles, not to mention politics, where academic qualifications were the occasional subject of amusement, but rarely matter in terms of substance. One such occasion of amusement was when during his first term as prime minister, Viktor Orbán reserved the sports ministry for his old friend and party mate Tamás Deutsch – currently an MEP -, but refused to appoint him before Deutsch completed his state examination in law, which he had deferred for years.

Once in a while academic qualifications or a lack thereof were the subjects of political debates – most recently the nomination of the successor of Minister for National Development Tamás Fellegi, Mrs. Lászlóné Németh, drew some fire because she lacks a higher education degree - but this was in itself rare, and the actual verification of theses is unheard of.

Schmitt under cloud of suspicion

Recent charges by the economic weekly HVG, which alleges that large parts of the thesis submitted by President of the Republic Pál Schmitt were plagiarised, therefore mark a new dimension in terms of the types of scandals. What makes this issue especially interesting therefore is the question of what Hungarian politics will make of its first ever plagiarism scandal. The high profile target makes the question exceedingly pertinent, too, of course.

Still, what needs to be determined first is whether Schmitt has really done what HVG alleges, and whether - in so far as the allegations or a significant part of them prove true - his transgressions amount to sufficient amount of plagiarism to make it necessary to strip him of his doctoral title. It is worth mentioning that his doctorate is not equivalent to a PhD degree, it can be rather positioned somewhere between a Masters degree and a PhD in the Hungarian academic system of the 1990s. While obviously his position does not feature a requirement that the incumbent hold a doctorate, the removal of said degree based on verified charges of academic fraud would make Schmitt's position tenuous.

Plagiarism charges - an overview

Specifically, HVG's research claims that roughly 180 pages of Schmitt's 215 page dissertation are the verbatim translations of the academic research done by Bulgarian scholar Nikolay

Georgiev. After a brief silence, Schmitt's office denied that any sort of plagiarism had taken place. Prime Minister Orbán's spokesman, Péter Szijjártó, refused to even address the issue, arguing that the story was an invention. In a subsequent interview Schmitt went further to address the situation, arguing that he did use significant portions of a research project jointly developed with the since deceased Bulgarian scholar.

Yet during the interview he also opened himself up for a further line of attack, by arguing that in the remaining parts of the paper – which he claimed were academically the most relevant anyway – were entirely his own work. Later the press claimed, however, that another 17 pages have been taken from another source, this time the study of a German scholar, Klaus Heinemann, who disavowed any knowledge of Schmitt and denied ever having worked with him.

The review of the charges and a decision concerning their veracity has to be left up to an academic committee, though even the establishment of this committee was the subject of some controversy. Initially, the university responsible for the degree flat out rejected the notion that an investigation would be necessary. It took a while for this decision to be reversed, but then the problem was identifying scholars to the committee that undertakes the review, since it appeared that most of those asked were loath to be involved in the politically charged affair.

A history of scandals without consequences

Though Schmitt would clearly be in a dire situation were the committee to decide that his work was ultimately substantially plagiarised, with the consequence that he must be stripped of his doctorate, it is not entirely clear that this would result in the same political consequences as similar scandals had in Germany. Recently two German politicians, notably Defence Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, resigned some or all of their offices over allegations of plagiarism.

Though plagiarism scandals have been unknown in Hungary, there is a long history of scandals without consequences. The two most famous ones before the current affair involved Viktor Orbán's predecessors in office, Péter Medgyessy and Ferenc Gyurcsány, who both headed MSZP-SZDSZ coalition governments at the time. Medgyessy was elected in 2002 but soon after the election it emerged that during the communist era he had worked in the counterespionage section of Hungary's secret police apparatus.

In a country in which communism remains a touchy subject, this revelation was clearly very damaging, especially because Medgyessy had failed to disclose this connection in a timely manner. While even some critics were inclined to give credence to his defence that in light of his activities in counterespionage his work was entirely different from those of communist informants traditionally understood, they charged that his failure to disseminate this information was in itself a cause for resignation, since he violated the trust that the occupant of the most powerful office in the country needs to enjoy.

Nevertheless, Medgyessy was intensely popular at this time for his somewhat surprising determination to carry out almost completely MSZP's vast electoral promises. In fact, it



appears that Medgyessy's commitment to implementing the so-called Hundred Days Programme, which involved monumental expenditures and bears much of the responsibility for the spike in Hungary's national debt, was also driven by his desire to reinforce his political position. Whether that was indeed Medgyessy's desire or not, it worked, as his approval ratings made clear that the revelations about his past had not hurt him much in the eyes of the public.

The Őszöd speech

A greater scandal still was the revelation following MSZP's successful re-election campaign in 2006, that Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány's government had lied about the state of the economy to secure victory. In his infamous speech at the government resort in Balatonőszöd, Gyurcsány exhorted his parliamentary faction to help him break with the profligate ways that had characterised the MSZP-government before the elections and brought the public coffers to a state of near financial collapse. His confidential remarks were recorded and leaked to the press a few months later. But in spite of the revelations, the accompanying massive protests and widespread pressure to resign, Gyurcsány stayed in office, with the backing of the coalition parties' parliamentary factions but with little public support.

Each of the situations described above – and the numerous other cases they are meant to illustrate – may be worthy of debate and individual assessment. On the whole, however, the fact is that even massive scandals are unlikely to lead to resignations in Hungary. Generally speaking, politicians feel less accountable than in more established democracies, and parties are more likely to close ranks behind embattled high profile officials rather than pressuring them to actually step down.

There are of course levels of pressure that even intra-party solidarity cannot withstand, but whether the Schmitt case – if it results in the conclusion that the president has indeed plagiarised his dissertation – will actually yield such a result is unclear.

Reverberations

Yet the consequences of the Schmitt affair could reach beyond Schmitt's person and even far beyond politics. Doctoral degrees are important status symbols in Hungarian social life and their desirability extends far beyond their utility for an academic career, which is in principle the purpose they are meant to serve. As a result, many people write doctoral theses and obtain the commensurate degree even though they have no practical need for it in terms of a science career.

Precisely on account of lacking scientific ambition, and also because of limited resources in terms of time, some doctoral candidates do not take their research obligations all too seriously. Coupled with a widespread ignorance of or disregard for rules concerning plagiarism, this has the problematic effect of leading to a fairly high number of presumed cases of dissertations that probably would not survive closer scientific scrutiny. If the Schmitt case were to result in a finding of plagiarism and investigative journalists or self-appointed

academic purifiers were to decide to look systematically into other dissertations, then that could have vast implications for political and academic life in Hungary.