



The end of the Schmitt presidency

In light of last week's events, President Pál Schmitt's resignation on Monday came as a surprise. The pressure on Schmitt and Fidesz had been substantial, of course, but both appeared determined to sit the plagiarism scandal out. Whatever hopes Fidesz had for a Schmitt presidency, the current occupant of the Sándor Palace was no longer likely to realise them. With SOTE's decision to strip him of his doctoral title, Schmitt had been permanently damaged and the era we termed the quiet presidency was over. Tortuous as it might have been, Fidesz may use Schmitt's belated resignation to try to claim the moral high ground. The question now is what this means for future plagiarism scandals and whether the new president will also bring a new strategic approach to the office.

In one of the first columns of "Hungarian Politics In-Depth" we analysed the ascension of Pál Schmitt to the presidency (2010/33). We claimed that though he was not likely to make a big mark, his election still signalled the completion of another key piece in the puzzle that is the National System of Co-operation. As president, Schmitt was supposed to be (occasionally) seen but not heard, quietly signing bills that his predecessors – and especially the person immediately preceding him, László Sólyom – would have sent either to the Constitutional Court for review or straight back to Parliament for reconsideration.

For well over a year this worked exceptionally well, with Schmitt realising his most important ambition as president: to serve as a facilitator of the government's legislative work. He signed bills as soon as they arrived on his desk, helping Fidesz adhere to its aggressive timetable.

Wither the quiet presidency

Recently, however, it became mighty noisy around the president whose primary quality was supposed to be quiet obedience. Since a tenacious reader of the Hungarian weekly HVG spent months pouring over Schmitt's dissertation and showed it to be plagiarised in significant parts, the former president became embroiled in a scandal that climaxed twice last week. First when the committee that investigated the plagiarism charge published its report that ended up absolving Schmitt. It argued somewhat paradoxically that even though large portions of the thesis had indeed been copied and translated, the dissertation committee at the time was to blame for failing to alert Schmitt.

While the press and large portions of the chattering classes – including many rightists – jeered at the sheer implausibility of the verdict, Fidesz and Schmitt let out a collective sigh of relief. Their nightmare appeared to be over, and a number of statements were released to drive home the governing party's impression that the matter was settled. Most everyone thought so, including the growing number of frustrated Schmitt-critics.



Semmelweis University refused to be dragged down

What ultimately and surprisingly doomed Schmitt, however, was a higher education reform. Not the one instituted by this government – that would have been supreme irony indeed – but a previous one in the late 1990s, which had fused the college of physical education with Hungary’s renowned medical school, the Semmelweis University (SOTE). Formally, the plagiarism committee did not decide about revoking the doctoral title, it merely made a recommendation. Since it had explicitly exonerated Schmitt despite carefully documenting his guilt, the expectation was that SOTE would follow suit.

The university gave the government another option to resolve this issue by passing the hot potato to Minister of National Resources Miklós Réthelyi. The sign on Réthelyi’s desk read “This is from whence the buck returns”, however, and the minister sent the whole package back to SOTE without even opening the report. Only two days after the plagiarism report was released came the stunning news: SOTE’s Senate revoked Schmitt’s doctoral degree in a lopsided 33-4 vote. Newspapers rumoured that the pro-Schmitt holdouts were primarily physical education scholars, among them some of the members of the review committee that had absolved him. It seems likely that had his alma mater remained a separate school, it would not have visited such a harsh judgment on its most famous alumni. SOTE allegedly has little love for its PE division anyway, and only felt embarrassed about the affair: the Senate’s vote was most probably an assertion of academic integrity, but it certainly was not a political statement (even among Schmitt’s most desperate advocates there was hardly any claim that SOTE is an opposition cell).

Roller-coaster

Just as it had seemed obvious on Tuesday that Schmitt would be staying, his departure appeared pre-ordained following the loss of his title. Yet for a few days at least Schmitt defied expectations by in an interview Friday night, in which he claimed that he was unfairly attacked, that the plagiarism committee had been right and SOTE was wrong. Consequently, he wanted to stay on and write a PhD thesis. After some ambiguity, Fidesz supported him, arguing that the constitution mandates that the president may not be the subject of criticism. This new approach was quickly parroted by the remaining Schmitt loyalists in the media - even reliable Fidesz outlets such as *Magyar Nemzet* and *Heti Válasz* had called on Schmitt to resign, though they blamed the left’s successful character assassination rather than the president’s own actions.

More importantly than the imbroglio surrounding Schmitt’s academic transgressions, his failure to resign was the second issue in a mere few weeks on which significant portions of the right turned against Fidesz. The right-wing forums on the internet were rife with bitterness and disenchantment, and the tortured explanations advanced by the few government politicians who dared to comment in any detail, not to mention Schmitt’s own odd interview Friday night, only poured oil on the fire. It was clear that Schmitt had forfeited the respect not only of large segments of the left, but was also considered hopeless on parts of the generally cohesive right as well.

Ultimately an unusual step

Whatever desperate hopes Schmitt and Fidesz harboured, it appears that over the weekend the realisation that Schmitt's presidency was untenable had sunk in, with the consequence that the perseverance slogans of last week gave way to a dramatic resignation address, in which Schmitt exclusively blamed the unfair attacks of his detractors, insisting on his innocence. Still, however long it took, resignation is an unusual step in Hungary. As we noted a few weeks ago (Week 2012/5), scandals have plagued Hungarian politics almost continuously over the past two decades, rarely resulting in resignations or penalties. Fidesz might now be tempted to exploit the fact that Schmitt has succumbed to pressure in two ways.

For one, it will likely emphasise that Schmitt was unfairly hounded out of office by a left-wing conspiracy, i.e. it will likely advance some "stab-in-the-back" legend. More importantly, somewhat inconsistently and disingenuously it can claim that as promised, Fidesz has put an end to the era when Hungary was the country where ill-deeds never resulted in adverse consequences for the offenders. Various socialist politicians stayed in office despite scandals that should have resulted in their resignations. Unlike them, Schmitt ultimately chose the dignity of his office over his personal ambitions. Large parts of the right-wing press are already open to such a narrative, since they have been advancing this theme themselves.

A precedent for future plagiarism cases?

Two questions remain. The first is whether Schmitt's successor will be a different type of person, i.e. whether Fidesz will choose a president who will have more of an independent character. The odds are that the "quiet presidency" that silently endorses everything Fidesz passes in Parliament will continue under a new name. The other interesting question is what the precedent of Schmitt's resignation implies for future plagiarism scandals. As many right-wing commentators gleefully pointed out in warning of the ramifications of a potential presidential resignation, Schmitt's practice and worse were common fare in the 1990s (probably before and since as well, we might add). There are in all probability a vast number of plagiarised and commissioned dissertations, not to mention astonishingly bad theses that only passed because of nepotism. Though in most cases only the first category can be both proven and damaging enough to hurt someone's career, there should be enough of those to significantly hurt the political establishment across the aisle.

Had Schmitt stayed in office – as other plagiarisers no doubt prayed he would – that probably would have settled the issue for good. If such a high profile target cannot be brought down by verified charges of plagiarism, then less conspicuous politicians may be safe. Schmitt staying on would have given plagiarism hunters a pause. The current situation is more ambiguous and in light of the immense energy it takes to unmask a plagiarised thesis, the message may well be that it's not worth the effort. But still, bringing down a high profile target may render the investment worthwhile, and Schmitt's departure holds out such a possibility.