

## Deputy PM under attack: plagiarism is back

*Another senior governing party politician is embroiled in a plagiarism scandal, and the details of the affair look very similar to the imbroglia that ultimately brought down former President Pál Schmitt. The newspaper that first aired the evidence is again the weekly HVG, and the government's reaction is the same: it completely rejects and ridicules the charges. Like last time, the first accusations were followed by an initial attempt on the part of the university to make the whole issue go away, and then an investigation establishing that plagiarism had indeed occurred. This is where the similarities will probably end, however: if Semjén gets to retain his academic titles, which appears likely at this point, he most likely won't have to resign.*

Regular consumers of Hungarian news probably felt an intense tinge of déjà vu in recent weeks concerning the scandal surrounding Deputy Prime Minister Zsolt Semjén's theses. Both the details and the evolution of the story bear a striking resemblance to the plagiarism scandal that ended in the resignation of President Pál Schmitt, after long weeks of tortured reactions by politicians and academic institutions involved.

### **Helpful hands**

First, HVG published the story detailing how large parts of Semjén's 1991 doctoral theology dissertation had been plagiarised from a variety of foreign and Hungarian sources. Predictably, the government reacted by dismissing the charges as ludicrous, without any response to the substance. Politicians in Zsolt Semjén's Fidesz-satellite party KDNP went as far as to speak of anti-Christian persecution. A day after its first accusation, HVG added that large portions of said doctoral dissertation were included in a sociology thesis submitted by Semjén to ELTE a year later, without a proper attribution of the source. When the government published another – allegedly updated and final – version of the latter study, HVG countered that this version was in large parts identical to later works published by Semjén's thesis adviser, Attila Károly Molnár, a conservative political philosopher whose sympathies for the current governing party are well-known.

Several factors make the confusing story even more bewildering. Apparently, of Semjén's two ELTE graders one sought to fail him while the other, Molnár, wanted to give him a grade of excellent (which is hardly surprising if he authored large parts of Semjén's work himself, as appears likely at this point). To resolve the dispute, a third grader was called upon, who ultimately allowed Semjén to pass. Molnár left most questions with regard to the affair unanswered, and only issued a statement that he had never plagiarised, which most critics tend to believe. Still, either he or Semjén did.

### **Another politicised academic affair**

Pázmány Péter Catholic University, which awarded Semjén his doctorate, issued a statement that it would not deal with this issue, thus making it clear that unlike Schmitt's title, Semjén's doctorate was secure. This probably won't do much harm to Pázmány's academic

reputation. ELTE, however, as the country's leading institution in the social sciences, is in a more difficult position in terms of the sociology degree it awarded Semjén.

The intensity of the political heat was already apparent in the very palpable reluctance of ELTE's social science division to deal with the problem of Semjén's thesis. Unlike Semmelweis University – which stripped Schmitt of his doctorate –, whose leadership certainly harbours no sympathies for the left, ELTE's social sciences division boasts what is probably among the most left-leaning faculties in the country. Still, in the precarious times that higher education is experiencing right now, going after a senior governmental figure who is one of the PM's favourites to boot, seems daring, and it is no wonder that Dean Katalin Tausz would have preferred to stay above the fray.

### ***Obvious plagiarism***

Ultimately, however, Tausz gave in and set up an ad hoc committee to investigate the issue. The committee concluded that Semjén's thesis had indeed been plagiarised. At a press conference Tausz explained that the guidelines concerning plagiarism had not been clear at the time, nor do they provide clear instruction what needs to be done if plagiarism is made out long after a thesis has been accepted. ELTE, consequently, would not conduct an official investigation and Semjén's ELTE degree, too, is safe. Tausz' comment that the ethical dimensions of such transgressions are not subject to statutes of limitation may have been a sop to those who had hoped for a lot more, either for reasons of political antipathy or a commitment to academic purity.

It was also an inconsequential comment, as Semjén's own reaction showed. The deputy PM diverged slightly from the usual script and did not deny that mistakes may have been made, but he placed the blame for whatever may have been amiss on the academic staff at the time for failing to alert him to problems. For the government, the issue is closed. While it made the same, ultimately futile, claim during the Schmitt case, in this instance it seems considerably more likely that the academic institutions themselves will let the matter rest, which would render the denial strategy more tenable.

### ***Another “yes man” in the crosshairs***

Though it may be coincidental, another interesting parallel between the two cases pertains to the persons affected: both involve officially highly-ranked but nevertheless ceremonial figures who owed their respective positions almost exclusively to Orbán's grace. Semjén is similar to Schmitt in that even in governing party circles he is considered an intellectual and political lightweight whom the prime minister cultivates for personal reasons, mostly because he needs reliable yes men in these positions, those with less benign interpretations argue.

Correspondingly, losing Semjén would be an embarrassment, of course, but it would not be a substantial blow to any governmental activity. Semjén holds no real power, he is not known for expertise in any particular policy area or for pushing any specific agenda. As far as what the government does, Semjén's resignation would be nigh irrelevant, though it would

clearly be a setback for Orbán, who is committed to his deputy. Hence it is to be expected that Fidesz and especially KDNP will continue to stand by the embattled deputy PM.

And though to many who believe in academic standards it is clear that Semjén's plagiarism was neither a petty transgression nor committed in ignorance, the obvious conclusion that his resignation would be a moral and political imperative may well turn out to be a fantasy that confuses Hungary with a country where accountability matters. Both the opposition and the press appear far less sanguine about bringing Semjén down than they were about removing Schmitt, which suggests that the plagiarism issue may be exhausted. For the time being, it seems that rather than setting a new standard, the Schmitt case might have worn out whatever limited capacity the public has for outrage. If that is indeed the case, then Fidesz' stubborn attrition strategy in the Schmitt affair is earning the ruling party delayed dividends.