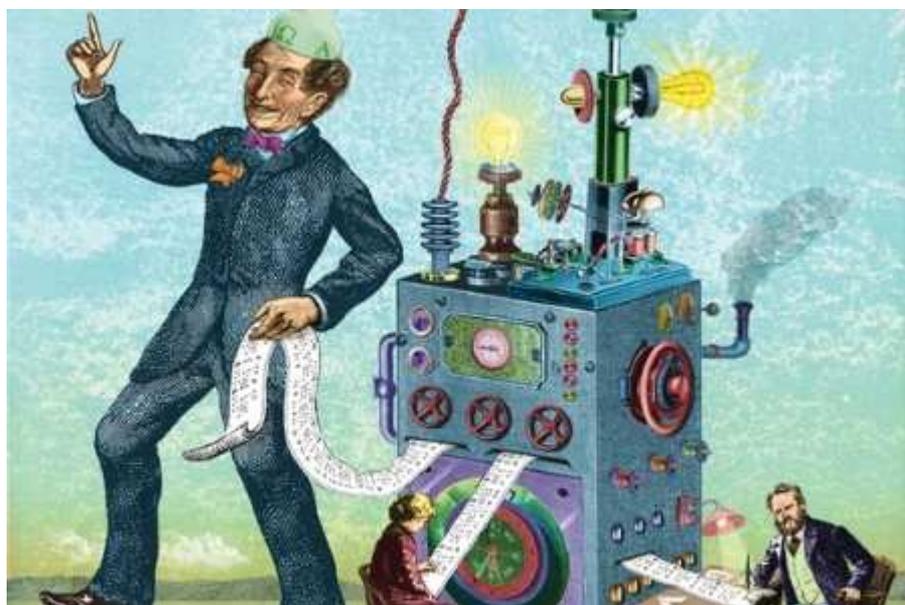


AT THE HEART OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION DEBATE

A plague of plagiarism at the heart of politics

16 May 2013 | By [Paul Jump \(URL=/paul-jump/1074.bio\)](#)

Germany and Eastern Europe rocked by string of high-profile cases within their governments. Paul Jump reports



Source: [Femke De Jong \(URL=#\)](#)

We've fostered an environment in which major ethical problems have emerged with very few people willing to say or do something about them

When Annette Schavan, Germany's minister for education and research, resigned earlier this year amid allegations of plagiarism, weary sighs could be heard along the length of the Danube.

Schavan was merely the latest in a seemingly endless string of politicians from Central and Eastern Europe to have been accused in recent years of obtaining their doctorates on the strength of plagiarised theses.

Schavan resigned in February, four days after Heinrich Heine University of Düsseldorf revoked her 1980 doctorate, awarded for a dissertation titled "Person and Conscience: Studies on the Conditions, Need and Requirements of Today's Consciences".

Bruno Bleckmann, dean of Düsseldorf's Faculty of Arts and chair of the investigating committee, said that Schavan had "systematically and deliberately claimed as her own intellectual achievements which she had in fact not produced herself".

Schavan's defenders have suggested that her apparently rather lax approach to citation was common practice at the time and have accused Düsseldorf of overreacting. But Bleckmann said it had been made clear to students even in the 1980s that "unmarked literal takeovers of foreign texts" would be regarded as plagiarism and be subject to disciplinary action.

Schavan, for her part, continues to insist that she had no intent to deceive and has begun legal action against the university. It was the requirement to avoid a conflict of interest while doing so that ostensibly prompted her resignation from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research - a resignation that Chancellor Angela Merkel, herself the holder of a PhD in quantum chemistry, accepted "with a heavy heart".

Düsseldorf had launched its investigation at Schavan's request after the plagiarism allegations against her were posted on a website called Schavanplag in May 2012.

Such sites have proliferated in Germany in recent years since the high-profile resignation of defence minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg in March 2011.

The aristocratic zu Guttenberg, once tipped as a future chancellor, had been accused of plagiarism the previous month on a website called GuttenPlag Wiki. He initially dismissed the allegations as "abstruse" but an investigation by the University of Bayreuth, which awarded the degree in 2006 on the basis of a thesis on the development of the US and European Union constitutions, upheld them. Bayreuth revoked the doctorate.

The minister admitted he had made "serious errors" but claimed he had not deliberately cheated and blamed his busy schedule for the mistakes. His initial refusal to resign was supported by Merkel, but her remark that she had "hired a politician, not a scientific assistant" provoked a petition condemning her "mockery" of academic values, which was signed by tens of thousands of doctoral candidates and PhD holders.

After nearly two weeks of being ridiculed as "Baron zu Googleberg", the "minister for cut-and-paste", he stepped down.

Soon after zu Guttenberg's downfall, another website, VroniPlag, began levelling plagiarism allegations against other high-profile German politicians. Prominent among the seven whose doctorates have so far been rescinded is former rising star Silvana Koch-Mehrin. She resigned as vice-president of the European Parliament and a board member of the Free Democratic Party - the junior members of Merkel's ruling coalition - in May 2011 amid allegations that she had plagiarised her 2001 thesis, "Historical Monetary Union between Industry and Politics: the Latin Monetary Union, 1865-1927".

The University of Heidelberg announced in June 2011 that it would revoke her PhD after its own inquiry found more than 120 plagiarised passages from more than 30 sources in her thesis - two-thirds of which were not mentioned in its bibliography.

According to Debora Weber-Wulff, professor of media and computing at the University of Applied Sciences in Berlin, Koch-Mehrin is among several politicians found guilty of plagiarism who have failed in subsequent attempts to sue their alma maters: precedents, she says, that do not bode well for Schavan.

But those taking legal action "get to keep their doctor title until the last court of appeal's verdict is final", she notes. "That seems to be why they are doing it."

Weber-Wulff is one of around a dozen volunteers who work regularly for VroniPlag. Although she has been warning about student plagiarism in Germany for a decade, she has been "shocked to the core" by recent events.

"How could the advisers accept theses like these?" she asks. "There are even many cases in which the [works of] advisers themselves were plagiarised and they did not even notice."

She believes that a culture of "cutting corners" has become the norm in German research and "seems to have fostered an environment in which major ethical problems have emerged with very few people willing to say or do something about them. It has shaken my belief in the basic honesty that used to be so firmly connected to German research."

Weber-Wulff argues that VroniPlag is not politically motivated: 16 academics are among the 45 people whose work it has scrutinised (12 politicians have received the treatment).

So why have so many German politicians been caught out? One reason might be the sheer number with doctorates: common estimates put the figure at around a fifth of the country's total.

According to François Paquet-Durand, junior group leader at the University of Tübingen's Centre for Ophthalmology, this is because in Germany and in neighbouring countries that were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, holding a doctorate has conferred huge prestige and respectability since the late 19th century. Its use as a form of address is still widespread.

Despite the number of cases, he is reassured by the fact that those caught cheating typically lose their jobs owing to "overwhelming public pressure" - which he attributes to Germans' ongoing attachment to the strict moral principles of the philosopher Immanuel Kant.

However, it transpires that this is not always the case elsewhere on the banks of the Danube. According to Peter Somogyi, professor of neurobiology at the University of Oxford, the zu Guttenberg case had an impact in Hungary: it taught the country's politicians - many of whom have doctorates - that they could use plagiarism accusations as a means to attack their opponents.

Early last year, the Hungarian weekly economics magazine *Heti Világgazdaság* (*World Economy Weekly*, known as *HVG*), which is associated with the country's socialist opposition, printed allegations that Pál Schmitt, at that time Hungary's president, had committed extensive plagiarism in his 1992 thesis, "An Analysis of the Programme of the Modern Olympics".

Budapest's Semmelweis University confirmed the allegations in March 2012 and sent its report to Miklós Réthelyi, minister of national resources and former rector of the institution, who had theoretical jurisdiction in the case. However, Réthelyi denied that jurisdiction and returned the report unopened.

According to a Semmelweis statement, the university's senate then "considered it its duty to definitively settle" the question of whether to withdraw Schmitt's doctorate, and voted overwhelmingly to do so.



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A week later, at the beginning of April, Schmitt bowed to intense pressure and resigned his largely ceremonial position, berating his political opponents for kicking up an international storm. However, he maintained his innocence and sought a judicial review - still extant - challenging Semmelweis' authority to revoke his degree on the grounds that it was awarded by a different university with which Semmelweis had subsequently merged.

The political storm also claimed the scalp of Tivadar Tulassay, Semmelweis' rector, who stood down the day before Schmitt (around three months earlier than his term was due to end).

Just weeks after Schmitt's resignation, a regional newspaper published allegations that former socialist prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsány had failed to submit the required dissertation while training as a teacher at what is now the University of Pécs in the 1980s.

Neither the university nor Gyurcsány was able to locate the dissertation.

According to Somogyi, the government "blew up" the allegations as part of a campaign to discredit the former leader.

Then in November 2012, *HVG* printed allegations that Zsolt Semjén, deputy prime minister and leader of the Christian Democratic People's Party, the junior party in government, had plagiarised his 1992 sociology doctoral thesis, "An Attempted Interpretation of the New Age". Budapest's Eötvös Loránd University, where the thesis was submitted, found significant overlap between his thesis and one of his supervisor's unpublished papers. The institution did not withdraw his doctorate, which was based on one written at a different institution, Pázmány Péter Catholic University, from which Semjén also holds a doctorate. Pázmány Péter declined to investigate the charges and the prime minister's office called the charges a "campaign of slander".

In Somogyi's view, Eötvös Loránd is "scared" to rescind Semjén's doctorate. He says that funding both there and at Semmelweis - which he rates as Hungary's best two universities - has gradually been reduced "with all kinds of excuses" since the plagiarism verdicts, while other institutions, such as Pázmány Péter, have been "pumped with money".

Somogyi also blames Semmelweis' funding fears for its refusal to act on another set of allegations: he has urged it to withdraw the honorary doctorate of Constantin Copotiu, the former rector and now senate president of Romania's University of Medicine and Pharmacy, of Târgu Mureş. Copotiu, along with two other senior figures at the institution, was implicated in a plagiarism scandal highlighted last year in the journal *Nature*.

Marius Echim, at that time vice-president of Romania's National Ethics Council, told *Nature* that its unpublished report "identified clear plagiarism in all three cases and recommended that two of the three professors involved be dismissed from the university". However, on the day the report was delivered to the government, 8 June, it dissolved the committee. A replacement with an entirely new membership re-examined the case and largely cleared the senior trio of misconduct, shifting the blame on to juniors.

Before it was reconstituted, the ethics committee had been poised to vote on allegations against a senior politician, Ioan Mang, the education minister and computer scientist at the University of Oradea, who had been accused of plagiarism in several of his academic papers. Mang had already resigned from the government in May 2012, just days after being appointed to the new government led by Victor Ponta. Ponta claimed that the accusations were politically motivated.

The saga took a sensational turn in June when Ponta himself was accused of having plagiarised his PhD thesis on the International Criminal Court, which he successfully submitted to the University of Bucharest in 2003.

Ponta has strongly denied the claims, arguing that he listed all the sources that he "consulted and drew inspiration from" in his bibliography, so "the only reproach that can be brought is the fact that I did not mention the author in a footnote on the [same] page".

On 29 June, the National Council for Attestation of Titles, Diplomas and University Certificates found that large chunks of Ponta's thesis had been plagiarised. However, immediately prior to the announcement, Liviu Pop, Mang's successor at the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sport, annulled the council's mandate.

The newly constituted National Ethics Council then investigated the claims and in July declared that Ponta's thesis was in accordance with the academic regulations of the time. Interestingly, the Romanian authors whose work he is alleged to have plagiarised have also repudiated the plagiarism allegations.

But that was not the end of the matter. Just one day after the council's verdict, an investigation by Bucharest took a different view and backed the original plagiarism verdict. The association of Romanian academics abroad, Ad Astra, called on Ponta to resign and more than 3,000 academics petitioned the education ministry to revoke his PhD. It has refused to do so, however.

Cristian Dogaru, research fellow in the University of Bern's Division of International and Environmental Health, adds that Ponta was even "cynical enough to joke about" the plagiarism allegations after overwhelmingly winning last December's general election: according to the Romanian press, he observed that "it looks like us plagiarists are voted for more".

Dogaru says that the election result reflected the plagiarism scandal's lack of impact on ordinary Romanians: "The common reaction was: 'He may have plagiarised: so what? Everybody does that. We've got bigger problems.'"

He adds that Romanian politicians continue to believe that their status - particularly in other EU countries - is enhanced by academic trappings. Hence, in addition to acquiring doctorates, they often hold academic positions - with universities apparently only too willing to acquire the influence this buys them in the country's highly centralised educational system. However, Dogaru believes that common knowledge of the ease with which academic qualifications can now be obtained has eroded their prestige domestically.

Lucian Ancu, postdoctoral researcher at the University of Bern's Albert Einstein Center for Fundamental Physics, agrees, noting that many Romanian universities are culturally tolerant of PhD theses that "pick up parts from other sources and glue them together". The lack of limits on the number of doctoral students an academic can supervise also means that some "barely read" the theses they oversee.

"Several reports in the Romanian media have shown that there was a market in theses...and that sometimes even employers of the universities were [involved]," he says. "As far as I know, there has never been a decision to suspend a title or to end a contract of any professor that supervised such a thesis."

Dogaru says that Ponta, like many other European politicians accused of plagiarism, was already a government minister while studying for his doctorate (in his case supervised by Adrian Năstase, Romania's prime minister at the time). He doubts that active politicians have time to "do such menial tasks as writing a doctoral thesis".

According to Razvan Orasanu, director of research at the Romanian Academic Society thinktank and a senior adviser in the previous government, acquiring a doctorate is a common perk of political office. "As senior adviser on economic affairs to the prime minister, I was offered the 'opportunity' of a PhD in economics, which I promptly declined," he says. "The person in front of me was shocked that I turned down such 'generosity'."

This attitude is symptomatic of a lack of collective ethical principle in Romania's government, Dogaru claims: something he attributes, at least in part, to the country's Communist years: "The plagiarism cases involving public figures are only the tip of the iceberg: they reflect much larger negative traits that plague Romanian society, such as corruption, nepotism and thievery."

Orasanu, who helped to expose the plagiarism allegations against Mang, is exasperated by the political feeding frenzy that plagiarism allegations provoke - long before any independent expert committee (if one is even involved) passes judgement.

"What deeply irks me," he complains, "is that nobody is interested in the education system, which still needs to function long after [everyone forgets] who Ponta and Mang are."

"Supporters of Ponta are busy saying that he respected the rules [in place in] 2003; those who want to knock him down say that he is a copy-and-paste prime minister. But the [bigger] issue is plain: do we still want a PhD thesis to mean something?"



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'A degree is a degree! Whether fake or genuine...it makes no difference'

The legitimacy of the educational qualifications held by Pakistan's politicians has also come under scrutiny in recent weeks.

In the run-up to this month's historic elections - the first transition from one democratically elected civilian government to another in Pakistan's history - the newly strengthened and supposedly independent Election Commission of Pakistan has scrutinised candidates to determine whether they are fit to serve in national and provincial assemblies.

Anyone caught with a fake degree has been deemed in violation of an article in the constitution stating that MPs must be of "good character". Eleven lawmakers who served in the previous government have been disqualified from running again on these grounds.

Fake degrees among politicians flourished under the previous president, Pervez Musharraf, after he introduced a requirement for MPs to hold degrees or religious qualifications.

The law, introduced shortly before the 2002 elections, was officially billed as a way to raise standards of governance, but was widely seen as an attempt by Musharraf to purge the ranks of members of the major parties who opposed his military rule.

However, most candidates produced “degrees” in time for the elections and by 2008, even the few who had been barred six years earlier had produced the required certificates. There was little scrutiny of their validity.

Two months after the 2008 elections, the law was scrapped on the grounds that it ostensibly barred most of the population from holding office: in Pakistan, less than 1 per cent of the population has a degree and literacy hovers around the 50 per cent mark.

“Requiring a specific level of education for being in the contest for political office is undemocratic,” argues Rasul Bakhsh Rais, professor of political science at the Lahore University of Management Sciences. “Musharraf enacted this law with a political motive to keep certain known politicians out of the assemblies.”

In 2010, the Supreme Court began investigating whether existing lawmakers who had run for office while the degree law was in effect had abided by it. This was widely seen as an attempt to clear the ranks of the ruling Pakistan People’s Party.

Chief justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, who is known to loathe the PPP and President Asif Ali Zardari, oversaw the investigation. At the time, Mr Chaudhry was also pushing to have the deeply unpopular president tried for corruption and his actions were applauded by wide sections of the population.

But analysts warned that the Supreme Court’s activism paved the way for unelected bodies to take over the country - a familiar threat in a nation ruled by the military for half of its history.

Stoking public outrage during the investigations, Nawab Aslam Raisani, at that time chief minister of Balochistan Province, publicly declared: “A degree is a degree! Whether fake or genuine, it’s a degree. It makes no difference.”

When a provincial lawmaker from the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz party was asked to provide evidence of his academic qualifications, he produced certificates that showed him receiving a master’s degree in 2002, a bachelor’s in 2006 and matriculating from school in 2007.

Salmaan Taseer, at that time governor of Punjab (he was assassinated in 2011), commented on Twitter that he should be “disqualified for stupidity, not fraud”.

According to media reports, of the 13,490 candidates who contested the 2008 elections, about 2,000 have fake degrees.

In the latest round of scrutiny, former education minister Sheikh Waqas Akram had his degree and A-level certificates declared fake by the Higher Education Commission, a branch of the Ministry of Education that he headed from 2005 until this year.

Questions have also been raised about President Zardari’s qualifications. According to his official biography, he studied business and economics at Pedinton School in London, graduating in 1976. There is no record of an institution by that name.

“The legislators with fake degrees have always offered the same excuse,” explains Rais. “Political necessity forced them to violate the law because they would not leave the political arena uncontested.

“But when such a large number of cheaters occupy seats in our federal and provincial assemblies, people within and outside the country rightly question the standard of our society and the quality of our democratic leadership.”

Annabel Symington

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