

Romanian panel calls prime minister a plagiarist

But committee is dissolved during the course of its meeting.

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02 July 2012

A Romanian academic committee has said that the country's prime minister, Victor Ponta, plagiarized parts of his PhD thesis, an allegation that was reported last month by *Nature*¹. But the committee officially ceased to exist before the end of its meeting on Friday 29 June in Bucharest.

At the meeting, 13 members of Romania's National Council for the Attestation of University Titles (CNATDCU) unanimously concluded that Ponta had copied and pasted large parts — about 85 out of 307 pages (excluding appendices) — of his 2003 thesis on the International Criminal Court², though that judgment did not consider more subtle plagiarism such as passages where some words have been replaced by synonyms. However, acting education minister Liviu Pop interrupted the meeting to tell its members that their mandate had been withdrawn. He declared that by ministerial order the council's by-laws had been rendered null and void, after it had failed to deliver a report of its activities and performance that he says he had requested on 21 June. CNATDCU members reject this reasoning.

"It is plainly obvious that the government's sole motivation was to put pressure on us and, ultimately, stop our work," says Marius Andruh, a chemist at the University of Bucharest, who presided over the council. "We did receive — but actually no sooner than 25 June — a fax requesting a sweeping report of our activities. Needless to say, there was no way of producing this in three days."

Romania's academic community is outraged by the move, which many fear will further damage the reputation of the country's science and higher-education system. Over the weekend, more than 800 scientists and scholars signed a [petition](#) in which the CNATDCU complained of "shameless trampling of all human and professional dignity, while ignoring the most elementary principles of academic freedom".

In an open letter sent to European Union heads of state last week, 16 Romanian authors and intellectuals, including Andrei Pleșu, rector of the New Europe College in Bucharest and former Romanian minister of foreign affairs, expressed concerns that the affair might damage the reputation of Romanian society at large.

Hasty change

At Friday's meeting, the CNATDCU had concluded that "a significant portion" of Ponta's thesis is "composed of texts extracted from works of other authors and copied verbatim, without mentioning this fact and without including references to the original sources".

But because the panel was disbanded before it delivered its conclusion, the ruling has no legal value, and its recommendation to the ministry of education that Ponta's PhD be withdrawn will probably go unheeded.

The government has turned the case over to the national research-ethics council, which now has 90 days to investigate the allegations. Ponta replaced the members of this body earlier this year, following allegations of plagiarism against his former science and education minister, Ioan Mang (see '[Plagiarism charge for Romanian minister](#)').

The opposition Democrat-Liberal Party has called on Ponta to step down. But the prime minister, leader of the Social Democratic Party, holds that his only mistake was to list the sources in his thesis unconventionally, and has described the allegations of misconduct as part of a political campaign against him.

Ponta's thesis supervisor, Romanian law scholar and former prime minister Adrian Năstase, last week began a two-year prison sentence for corruption. The authors of the books from which Ponta is said to have plagiarized, including the Romanian law scholars



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Romanian Prime Minister Victor Ponta has been accused of plagiarizing around one-quarter of his PhD thesis.

Dumitru Diaconu and Vasile Crețu, indicated that they have no interest whatsoever in the case and its outcome, says Andruh. Another scholar Ponta is accused of plagiarizing, Ion Diaconu, has [forcefully denied](#) that the prime minister improperly duplicated his work.

Andruh says that he will no longer be involved in research committees of any kind in Romania. “I’m sick and tired of it,” he says. “I tried my best but I just cannot support mediocrity.”

Nature | doi:10.1038/nature.2012.10926

References

1. Schiermeier, Q. *Nature* **486**, 305 (2012).
2. Ponta, V. *Curtea Penală Internațională*. PhD thesis, Univ. Bucharest (2003).