Driven by politics: agenda setting and policy making in Hungary 2010-2014

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Zsolt BODA and Veronika PATKÓS

Center for Social Sciences
Hungarian Academy of Sciences
boda.zsolt@tk.mta.hu
patkos.veronika@tk.mta.hu

Abstract

A general assumption about the policy making process in Hungary is that in the past four years it has been largely dominated by political initiatives originating from the government and the ruling party. That is, policy change has been primarily driven by political initiatives of the power centre, instead of being responsive to the concerns of the public. In our study, we are empirically testing the hypothesis about the politically driven policy change, using the media agenda and legislative agendas of the Hungarian Comparative Agendas Project. We identified the important policy changes as those topics to which the media has provided a larger-than-average coverage on a yearly basis. Outstanding coverage has been usually linked to one policy issue, and in most of the cases, we found some kind of policy decision related to the issue. However, locating the policy decision or the first interpellation related to the given issue we found that they usually preceded the media coverage – that is, instead of the media agenda pulling the policy agenda, the general logic is just the opposite: media is talking about the policy initiatives of the government. Only a few cases show the 'textbook case' of increased media coverage spurring political interest.

Introduction

On the aftermath of the 2010 elections when Fidesz, a conservative party got a constitutional majority in the Hungarian national parliament the new Prime Minister Viktor Orbán stated that what had happened marked an era which was "more than a government change, but less than a regime change". He was in fact signaling that important and deep developments were to be expected in the Hungarian polity and policy making. Indeed, in the coming years the Fidesz majority voted a new constitution and passed a number of important laws that considerably altered the system of checks and balances that had developed since the 1990 regime change from communism to democracy. The speed of legislation has been the highest of the past two decades and large-scale policy reforms have been adopted in fields of education policy, justice policy, social policy, and energy policy, just to name a few. The

reforms have been formulated and implemented in a top-down fashion. Orbán called his governance style "political governance" meaning the primacy of central, governmental action over any other kind of initiatives in the policy making process.

In our study, we focus on the media agenda, on one hand, and policy change, on the other. We identified the important policy changes as those issues to which the media has provided a larger-than-average coverage and searched for their origin: whether the issue had emerged as a public concern, or as a political initiative. We assumed that because of the high speed of policy making in Hungary the media had been dominated by the issues raised by politics and the capacity of the media to set their own agenda had remained weak. We also hypothesized that the logic of "political governance" implies that the issues covered by the media would practically not affect the policy agenda or spur policy change, that is, the effect of the media agenda on policy making is very weak. Our method is an extreme case analysis: instead of quantitatively analyzing the whole discourse stream of both the media and politics we focus on those cases when media attention was high. If we find that the agenda setting of the media was weak in those instances, it is justified to assume that their thematizing and policy influencing potential would look even weaker in 'normal' times. Our method does not allow to test the hypotheses that we formulated, rather to make them more robust or bring some 'probative value' (Kay and Baker 2011) to them.

The case of Hungary that we study here is special in some respect. The scale and speed of political changes that have happened between 2010 and 2015 are rare in Europe and compare to the East European regime changes of the early 1990s. The voluntarism of Fidesz and its unconstraint use of power make also its governance quite peculiar, to say the least. However, we assume that the case of politics-led policy making is not that unique in the East Central European region. The countries of the East Central European are less pluralistic than most of the Western European countries or the U.S., and they are typically majoritarian democracies with weak consensual elements. Policy venues do not abound, while advocacy groups and civil society organizations are limited in both number and strength. The political activity of the people is generally lower than in Western Europe or the US. As newcomers in the European Union their policy making have long been dominated by an accelerated and forced adoption of the *acquis communautaire*, which is, by definition, a prime example of the top-down and undemocratic policy making. We would argue that these countries are characterized by weak policy capacities compared to Western European countries, not to mention the U.S. We argue that weak policy capacities of the society coupled with the tradition of state-led reforms strengthens the top-down elements of the policy making. In other words what we could observe in Hungary is like a caricature: displays in an exaggerated way the already existing features of the policy making in the East Central European countries.

Our paper is the first systematic effort to shed some light on the relationship between the media agenda and policy change in an East Central European country. We use the databases of the Hungarian Comparative Agendas Project – the first ones in the ECE region. Therefore, our case selection is highly arbitrary, constraint by the availability of data. Future research should clarify the extent to which our findings can be generalized across the region and what are the differences between countries.

2

The role of the media in the policy making process

Do the media agenda influence policy making? Talking about the media as an agent of power that captures politics is a popular idea. Politicians themselves tend to believe that media have a major effect on legislative agendas (Van Aelst and Walgrave 2011). The empirical studies that address this question usually find an effect in terms of the media having an influence on the agendas of political parties (Green-Pedersen and Stubager 2010), the parliament (Vliegenhart and Walgrave 2011, Walgrave and Soroka 2008) or the government (Walgrave and Soroka 2008). Studies typically rely on longitudinal comparisons of the different agendas using quantitative time series analysis assessing the time sequence between media attention and political thematization of the issues. Causality is hypothesized on the basis of temporal lags between agendas and the fact of successive thematization.

However, some point to the limits of the media power in setting policy agendas. Van Aelst and Walgrave (2011) argue that in most of the cases the media effect is indeed rather weak. But one should not necessary conflate all the cases together: differentiation might be advisable in terms of the type of the issues, institutions or political period. Tresch et al. (2013) argue that media analyses should consider only those news that have potential domestic policy content. News stories about international affairs or the coverage of issues that do not have policy implications distort the picture, because in these cases media thematization cannot have a meaningful policy effect. Soroka (2002) proposes a threefold typology making the distinction between sensational, prominent and governmental issues. Sensational issues are marked by dramatic events and intensive media coverage which is difficult to ignore by politics. Prominent issues are those where both people and the politicians have their own personal experiences and therefore media coverage has only a moderate effect on policy agendas (e.g., the economic situation). Governmental issues are typically highly technical (like the setting up a new governmental agency) with very limited interest for the media or the public. We believe that differentiating between issue types is meaningful, but have serious doubts about the possibility of classify the policy areas into those categories – an enterprise undertook by Soroka (2002) or Walgrave et al. (2008). Sensational issues may happen at any policy areas, while it is certainly not true that environmental policy or transportation policy would always consist of sensational issues.

Apart from issue characteristics, other factors may also influence the agenda-setting potential of the media. Institutions may differ from each other in terms of their responsiveness to public concerns: parliaments and individual MPs were found to be more receptive of the media effect than governments (Walgrave et al. 2008). Of course, the phase of the electoral cycle is also important: parties are more responsive before than after elections (Green-Pedersen and Stubager 2010). The nature of the media system also plays a role: politicians' attention to media news is more selective in those countries which are characterized by parallelism, that is, strong ties exist between specific parties and media outlets (Vliegenthart and Mena Montes 2014).

Only a few studies have gone as far as to talk about the media effect on policy change, but there are some. For instance, John (2006) found a statistically significant association between

media agendas and the change in national government allocations of urban budgets in England. However, scholars studying the factors that lead to real policy change are usually more skeptical or cautious about the influencing power of the media. For instance, John Kingdon the 'founding father' of the multiple streams framework (see Kingdon 1995, Zachariades 2008) did not attribute a prominent role to the media, to say the least. Issue characteristics may partly explain why he found such a weak media influence on policy in his seminal and often-cited book (Kingdon 1995). The policy areas (health policy, transportation policy) as well as the issues he was dealing with in his empirical studies were not really sensational ones. The rather technical questions on how the regulation of HMOs (Health management Organizations) or trucking should have evolved were not those that would have grasped the imagination of the public. However, this should not retain researchers to use his model if they believe that it offers a meaningful framework for understanding the role of the media in the policy process. Kingdon argued that the 'policy window' leading to a policy change opens up when three streams converge: the problem stream (the construction and the salience of issues), the policy stream (offering solutions) and the political stream (the attention and the interest of the decision maker to deal with the issue). The media can first and foremost play a role in the problem stream: contributing to the public perception and construction of a problem. Media studies have proven that the media agenda influences public opinion through both the framing and the priming effects.

The punctuated equilibrium theory (see Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 2009) assigns a somewhat more important role to the media in policy change than the multiple streams framework. It argues that if an issue is heavily present in both the media and people's concerns, than there are good chances that politics also starts to deal with it and this may lead to sudden and even large policy changes. The reason is that attention spans are limited in decision makers just as they are in people, but the intensive presence of an issue on different agendas might be compelling. However, when explaining the vigorous U.S. legislative activity in terms of criminal policy at the late 1960s, True, Jones and Baumgartner (2007: 160) still portrays a kind of co-production between the media, the public and the decision maker, arguing that

„(…) three important measures of attention and agenda access came into phase all at once: press coverage of crime stories, the proportion of Americans saying that crime was the most important problem facing the nation (MIP), and congressional hearings on crime and justice. It is not possible to say which of the three variables is the primary cause; all three are intertwined in a complex positive feedback process."

In other words, it is sometimes difficult to separate the agendas and clearly draw the direction of influences. At the same time, it may also be difficult to assess the proper role of the different social actors in policy change. The policy process might take long time to get to the decision and many policy actors may intervene during the formulation phase. If causality is not more than a strong hypothesis when one compares the succession of media coverage and policy agendas this is even more so in the case of media agendas and decisions. Causality, if any, is obscured by the complexity of events and the number of intervening factors and agents during the policy formulation phase. Tresch et al. (2013) argue that the effect of the media is different according to the phases of the policy cycle. It is obviously the strongest during the

agenda setting phase and it diminishes during the policy formulation and decision making phases. And, obviously, the policy response to a media challenge may also be differentiated, ranging from symbolic actions to large-scale policy changes (punctuations).

Assessing the proper role of the media in influencing public policy is further complicated by the fact that in many cases the media are not necessarily the original source of information or ideas, but they "only" reflect events, or reproduce and spread ideas pushed by policy entrepreneurs etc. (Van Aelst and Walgrave 2011). However, an important finding of the media studies is that the media have their own agenda and their own way of framing, and thereby either elevating or diminishing the importance of the news. Still, some distinctions between issues might be meaningful. There is an obvious difference between reporting about an objective, dramatic event (for instance, a terrorist attack) and brining up, constructing public issue through investigative journalism, whistle-blowers etc. (for instance uncovering a political corruption case). In the latter case, the independent agenda-setting power of the media is obvious, while in the former it is limited, even if they can do a lot to either inflate or reduce the importance of the given issue.

Research question, data and method

Here we aim at analyzing the Hungarian policy process from the perspective of the media agenda and its interaction with both the policy agenda and the legislation in the previous governmental cycle (2010-2014). Our research question concerns the relationship between the media agenda, the policy agenda and decisions. Following the approach of the mainstream literature on the topic one should assume that high media coverage of an issue should have an effect on the policy agenda, and, possibly, on policy making (decisions). However, given the highly centralized nature of policy making – which is a common place in Hungary, however, no systematic attempt has been made yet to describe its patterns and logic – we assume that the media effect is weak and the influence points rather into the other direction: policy making largely affects the media agenda. This influence has not been dealt with in the literature, presumably because it does not seem to be very interesting: it is obvious that the media report about politics, political decisions or the parliamentary debates. However we believe that if this is the predominant pattern in the media – policy making nexus and the media effect on policy is negligible than this sheds light on the peculiarity of the Hungarian policy making process.

Therefore our hypotheses are as follows:

H1. The media was heavily constrained in setting their agenda independent from the legislative agenda.

We assume that the intensive parliamentary work and the sometimes controversial decisions have been thematized by the media. That is, fast policy change and the large-scale policy reforms have certainly affected the media agenda. Therefore it is dubious whether the media was able to set their own agenda, bring up issues and provide intensive coverage to them, given that policy change by its share speed provided a lot of content to the media.

H2. The media had a negligible influence on the policy agenda.

Whether the media was able to cover and construct issues independent from politics is one question; whether the thematization of the media had any influence on the policy agenda, is another. Our second hypothesis concerns the effect on the policy agenda that we assume was negligible.

H3. The media was not able to influence policy change.

The relationship between the media agenda and decisions is somewhat more complicated than the one between the agendas. Therefore we assume that the effect of the media is even weaker (close to zero) in this case.

Our approach is an extreme case analysis focusing on the peeks of media attention and intends to reconstruct the dynamics of agenda effect for each case. In this sense it bears some resemblance to the approach undertaken by Boydstun et al. (2014) who focus on "media storms", that is cases of larger-than average coverage of issues. However, theirs is a quantitative analysis that our databases do not allow yet. Our method combines elements of both quantitative and qualitative analysis: while the cases make up a sample of high media attention as they were selected according to previously set criteria, the cases were examined in a qualitative way identifying dominant issues and reconstructing the flow of events. While this approach is obviously unable to describe the general patterns of agenda formation or test the above hypotheses it may have some probative value to the hypotheses, as "leverage for" or "leverage against" the hypotheses (Kay and Baker 2011). If, confirming our expectations, the media's agenda setting power is limited in these cases of intensive media coverage, one can hypothesized that it is even more constrained in the totality of the cases.

We operationalize media agenda in a specific sense, focusing on intensive, higher than average coverage of topics. That is, we do not look at the entire media agenda, but rather the peeks of media attention. We assume that given the peculiarities of the policy making in Hungary the agenda setting potential of the media is constrained anyway, and even an intensive coverage has only limited effect on politics.

We conceptualize policy agenda as the topics covered by the parliamentary interpellations and the legislative agenda (approved laws). Interpellations reflect the concerns of political parties – what they think is important and should be dealt with. True, interpellations give a distorted picture on the policy agenda, as they are first and foremost used by the opposition: 77% of all the interpellations were coming from the MPs of the opposition, and the remaining 27% came from the MPs of the ruling party.[1] However, the legislative agenda reflect almost exclusively the agenda of the ruling party, as only few bills (exactly three) proposed by the opposition were accepted by the majority. Therefore, we assume that important issues were covered by either interpellations or the legislative agenda. Unlike Walgrave et al. (2008) we do not differentiate between the recipients of the media effect, that is, whether the parliament or the government follows more closely the media agenda. However, given the strong executive control over the legislative power on one hand, and the accelerated speed of policy making,

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[1] The ruling party consists in fact of two parties: Fidesz and the Christian Democrats. However, the latter party has not presented itself at elections independently from Fidesz and its popularity is below any measures, so for the sake of simplicity we treat them as one party.

we can fairly assume that there is a high correlation between the legislative agenda of the parliament and the agenda of the government.

We operationalize policy change as a parliamentary decision, regardless of its actual or failed implementation. We do not consider either whether it can be considered as a substantive measure addressing the problem at hand or consists only of symbolic action.

Following similar studies, we conceptualize the effect on agendas as a simple temporal succession in the thematization of an issue. That is, if intensive media coverage of an issue was followed by interpellations concerning the matter, we assume that the media influenced the policy agenda. If legislative action also happened we assume that the media agenda had an effect on policy change. In the first place we did not differentiate between issues created exclusively by the media and those where an important or dramatic event have shaped the agendas. We have conceptual reservations concerning any exercise that would assess the 'real' contribution of the media to the construction of a public issue. In many cases, this would be simply impossible to do. However, there might be some clear cases when a dramatic event as an 'external shock' shapes both the media and the political agendas and where the independent agenda setting potential of the media should not be overstated.

Our study uses the first databases of the Hungarian Policy Agendas Project: media, interpellations and legislation. These databases are under construction and suffer from important deficiencies.[2] We still hope that the study points to a good direction and provides some meaningful findings.

The media database includes the coded front pages of the two most important Hungarian quality daily broadsheets (Népszabadság, left-wing and Magyar Nemzet, right-wing). Each article received policy or media codes (major topic and subtopic) according to the Hungarian version of the Comparative Agendas Project codebook.[3]

The legislative database contains data on the accepted laws, as opposed to bills, therefore it signals the real policy change.

We combined two procedures when selecting the periods of intensive media coverage of policy topics. First, comparing yearly averages we selected those cases where the frequency of the media coverage according to subtopics was twice of the four-year average and reached at least twenty articles. This resulted 13 cases. Second, assuming that the thematization of some issues might be intensive in a shorter period without necessarily being noticeable on a yearly basis, we compared the average media attention to topics according to quarter-years as well, and selected those cases where the frequency of a policy subtopic coverage outnumbered by two the quarter-year averages and reached at least the number of twenty. This procedure yielded 25 cases, obviously with some overlaps with the yearly comparison. Our selection procedure is, of course, highly arbitrary and has some limitations – just as any other procedure would have its own.

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[2] For instance the media database is a single coded one. It includes the references to the articles, but do not contain the full texts.

[3] The database also includes the title of the article, keywords, date of publication, the relative importance of the article on the page, the URL of the article and a short abstract. Similar data – mutatis mutandis – are included in the interpellation and the legislative databases.

Following the advice of Tresch et al. (2013) we excluded the cases of international politics and focused only on domestic policy topics. Taking into account the overlaps, we finally got 27cases of high media attention.

A difficulty we had to face was that while the databases categorize items according to policy topics, in reality policy making is more about issues, and we could not assume that topics undisputable correspond to issues. However, when looking at the articles we found that in the overwhelming majority of the cases the heightened media coverage was attributable to one issue, meaning that the relative majority (typically more than one third) of the articles dealt with a specific issue or issue-cluster. However, in such a qualitative analysis it is difficult to use objective criteria to judge what counts as one issue. For instance, we have a case of intensive media coverage of police-related problems: in 2012 a high number of article were published about the police. Many of them were dealing with police misbehavior (corruption and other issues), while others with institutional changes inside the police that were partly the consequences of legal changes of the previous year and partly decisions made by the government. Are these articles all part of the same issue? One could imagine that policy entrepreneurs may capitalize on the heightened coverage of the police, suggesting that there are some problems with them that need to be addressed. That is, the case could be treated as a loosely integrated issue-cluster. However, we decided to treat the case as the expression of two issues: police misbehavior and police reorganization. First, they separately met the criteria of case selection (see above). Second, the treatment of the topic (police) is fairly different in the two types of articles, and no article established a connection between the two problems.

That is, when we were looking for the traces of issues among the interpellations or laws we could not mechanically rely on the subtopic codes. In order to avoid passing by reality we performed keyword searches using the most important terms and proper names related to the issues, as well in the interpellations and laws databases besides using the subtopic and major topic codings and finally applied subjective criteria when identifying specific issues.

Findings

Out of our 27 cases of intensive media attention the large majority, 21 (78% of the cases) were made up by the media coverage of some policy action: the announcement of a new bill or a government program and the final vote of a new law. As many bills were not preceded by prior analysis, debate or other preparatory activities and the time was typically very short between the proposal of a bill and the final vote, in most of the cases the media covered in a short period of time (2-3 months) the policy process from problem definition through policy formulation (these two usually collapsed into an unprecedented motion from the government or an MP) to the decision. In many cases, the lack of preparatory works coupled with the large scale of the changes embodied into the policy proposals were the rather justified causes of heightened media attention. Analysts, stakeholders, journalists and politicians reacted to the policy proposals in a focused manner during a relatively short period of time.

Two examples for this kind of policy formation are the introduction of a major reform of the pension system and the overhead (household bills) reduction programs. Both of these topics received attention in the media after the government announced its decision about some important changes in the respective areas (see Figures 1 and 2). A similar pattern is observable in case of the remaining issues (see the list in the Appendix). It is therefore clear that – in conformity with our expectations – politics has been able to set the media agenda to a large extent.

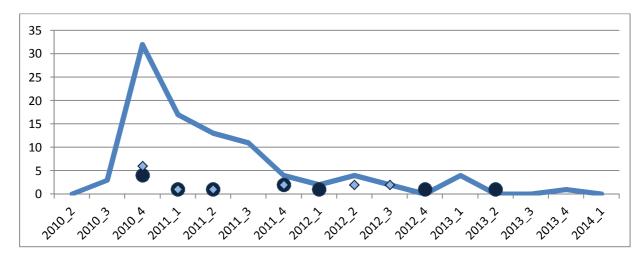Figure 1. Overhead reduction. The government declares its decision about overhead reduction on 6 December 2012.

Figure 2. Pension system and pension funds. The government introduced new rules that practically led to the nationalization of private pension funds on October 2010.

Only 6 cases (22%) of intensive media attention cannot be unequivocally attributed to political initiatives – that is, these are the cases where the independent agenda setting of the media can be caught out. However, out of them 2 are sensational issues linked to a dramatic event: the 2013 flood (floods are a recurrent danger in Hungary) and the catastrophe of a red sludge reservoir (the biggest industrial accident ever in Hungary causing several deaths and

the destruction of a village), (see Figures 3 and 4). These cases understandably provoked a jump in both media and political attention, and promoted legislative changes, so at first sight they could be considered textbook cases. However, given the objective occurrence of dramatic events with a compelling weight that spurred attention, these are not necessarily the best examples of the independent agenda setting by the media.
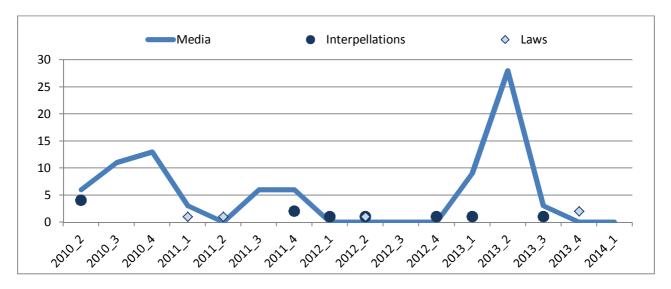

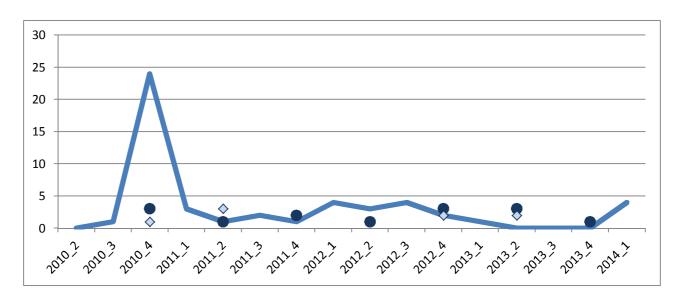Figure 3. Floods and disaster recovery.

Figure 4. Disaster of the red sludge reservoir.

We considered the four remaining cases as potential examples of agenda setting by the media. At a closer look we found that, in fact, two of the cases seem to portray some media effect or even policy change. In another case there is a policy agenda effect interpellations following the media coverage), and one case exhibits no clear features. Let us give some details on these cases!

The first issue which clearly exhibits a media effect is the plagiarism scandal of Pál Schmitt, the President of the Republic. The scandal broke out in January 2012, when a Hungarian news portal stated that the overwhelming majority of the doctoral thesis of President Pál Schmitt had been lifted and translated from other scholarly works. First, Schmitt denied the allegations. After some months, when a committee at the university conducted an investigation, the University Senate withdrew Schmitt's doctorate title. Some days later, on 2 April 2012, Schmitt announced his resignation to the Hungarian Parliament as President. Even if there were no interpellations and laws related to the topic, it would be absurd to say that there has not been a policy change or that the topic has not thematized the political discourse. We would rather say that both the agenda setting effect and the political influence of the media are obvious in the present case, even if our data portray only part of the scandal.
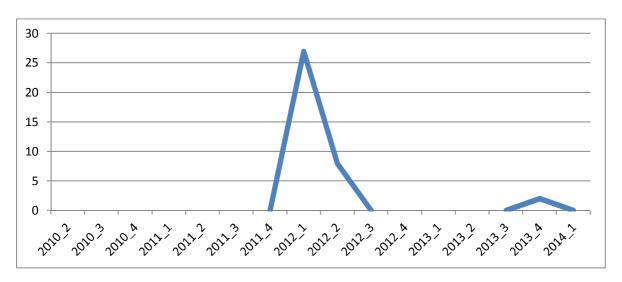

Figure 5. The plagiarism scandal of Pál Schmitt.

The Biszku-case falls also close to the textbook case of media effect on policy agenda and policy change. In this case the issue emerged in the media in June 2010, at the releasing of a documentary film about Béla Biszku, one of the last living communist leaders (Minister of the Interior after the anti-communist revolution of 1956) who adopted a permissive tone when speaking about the sanctions after the revolution and negated the crimes of the communist era. After the releasing of the film, international lawyers have been interviewed whether Béla Biszku could be sued for crimes against humanity. Some months later, in November 2010 an opposition party politician interpelled the Attorney General about the case. In January 2011 Biszku has been accused of negation of crimes of communist totalitarianism. In October 2011 a governing party politician introduced a bill which has been accepted in December, and, as a consequence, in the firsts of January 2012 prosecutors opened a new investigation against Béla Biszku, who has been sued for war crimes and crimes against humanity more than one year later, in October 2013. The media covered the issue from the beginning, however, we can see on Figure 3 that politics reacted promptly, and high media actually did not precede, but rather followed the increasing political interest. In order words, we consider this case a

relatively weaker one from the perspective of the independent agenda setting and policy effect of the media. We can at best speak about a "co-production" between the media and politics.
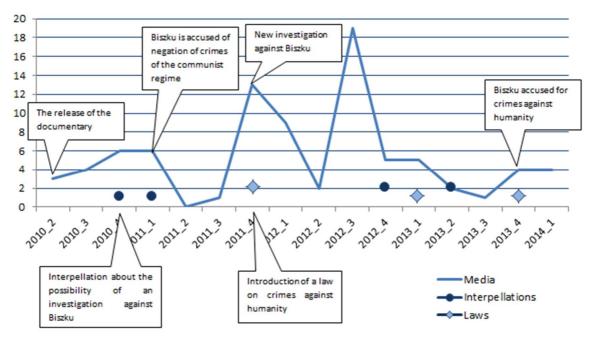

Figure 6. The timeline of the Biszku case: the intensity of media attention, interpellations, laws and actions related to the issue.

Compared to the previous case, police-related topics have received a much more intensive media coverage (see Figure 7). Especially in 2012 there was a heightened media attention to the police, with some 30 to 70 front page articles. We identified two, similarly important issue-clusters here: that of police reorganization and other institutional issues, and that of police corruption and accounts of unprofessional behavior and abusive practices. The first is a reaction to the legal changes of the previous year (therefore we included among the politics-led media issues), but the latter constitutes a potential media-effect case. This case is that of a somewhat high intensity media coverage coupled with parallel and successive policy attention with even policy change. However, an important background information to this case is that the issue of police misbehavior has been continuously covered by the media and has got considerable political attention since 2006. In Fall 2006, under the Socialist government the police reacted with unprecedented brutality to a mass demonstration, and the government basically discarded its responsibility concerning the attack. Six years later some legal cases were still on their way and many details of the police attack remained unknown. Right-wing politicians used every occasion to refer back to this scandal and accuse the Socialists for their complicity in it. That is, since the issue of police misbehavior was more or less permanently on the agenda it would be bold to state an unidirectional media effect on the policy agenda in 2012, however, our data show that at that time there was indeed a surge is media attention and an interpellation also happened in the issue. Therefore we cannot exclude some media effect on the policy agenda.
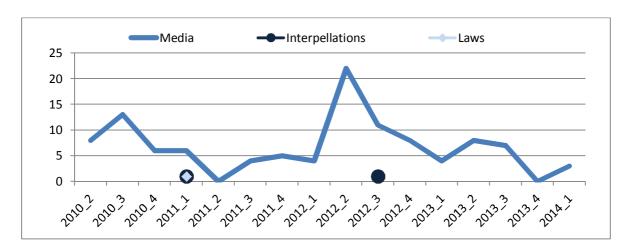
Figure 7. Misbehavior in the police service.

The last case in our analysis is related to the prosecution of a group of mobsters who killed six Roma people in racist attacks, including a 5-year-old boy. The Hungarian court has found all the four men guilty, and three of them were given life terms. The brutal crime wave occurred in 2008 and 2009. Figure 5 shows that intensive media cover did not affect interpellations in this topic, and it did not provoke any policy change. Seemingly, the issue did not enter in the policy agenda.
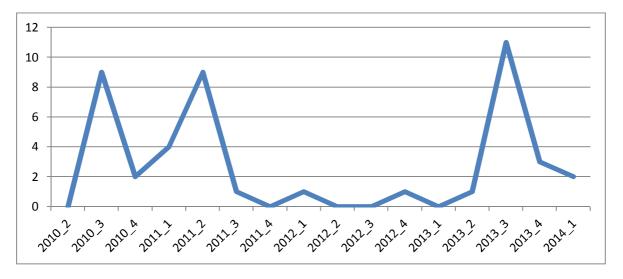

Figure 8. The prosecution of racist mobsters.

In sum, we have only one 'textbook-case' of media effect, that of the plagiarism and the resignation of President Schmitt, when the media brought up an issue, extensively covered it, and this led to some political changes. We also found a case of 'co-production' between the media and politics, that of the responsibility of former communist leaders. Media attention and political attention grew together, leading to both agenda effects (interpellations) and policy change (laws). Then we have a relatively weak case with a possible agenda effect, that of police misbehavior. What makes the case weak is the fact that the topic has been more or

less permanently on both the media and political agenda since 2006. These are three cases with possible media effects. We have one more with no apparent effect (the prosecution of racist mobsters) and two issues that cover dramatic events (red sludge disaster and floods) where the independent agenda setting of the media is rather dubious, given the objective weight of the issues.

Although our qualitative analysis could not lead to unequivocal results, we argue that it brought some probative value to our hypotheses, especially H1 and H2. It seems meaningful to assume that the media had very limited potential to set their own agenda: the media agenda has been largely dominated by political initiatives and governmental actions. We also found, that, in accordance with H2, the media had only negligible effect on the policy agenda: in three cases out of the 27 (not mentioning the two dramatic events). Finally, we cannot corroborate H3 in its strict form: it is not true that the media had no effect on policy change. However, conform to our expectations, the media influence on policy change was even smaller than that on policy agenda (interpellations).

Discussion: policy capacities, political leadership, and the role of the state

We argue that the agenda setting and policy influencing capacity of the media is extremely weak in Hungary. Further studies should probably depart from this hypotheses. As no similar study has been undertaken in other Central and Eastern European countries, we do not know to what extent can this proposition be generalized to the region, but we assume that it can. What explains the relative weakness of the media and the primacy of 'political governance'? In this section we raise the issue of weak policy capacities outside the government – a concept which needs further studies and empirical underpinnings.

The punctuated equilibrium theory as well as other models of the policy process, like for instance the advocacy coalition framework (see Sabatier 2008) portray the role of political leadership in the policy change as limited by a number of social, institutional, political and cognitive factors. Policy subsystems are described as policy monopolies that have the knowledge, capacity and even authority to deal with the problems of specific policy areas. Interest groups and advocacy coalitions act as policy entrepreneurs that play the role of change agents while at the same time provide negative feedbacks when other players seek to subvert the status quo. The fragmented institutional structure that characterize the polity of developed countries, and especially the U.S, as well as the different checks and balances built into the decision making process all pose important constraints on the changing potential of the political leadership. The conflict between the parallel emerging of potential problems on one hand and the mostly serial processing of them by the decision makers, on the other, show the cognitive limitations built into the policy process. Finally, decision makers have to take account issues of legitimacy: as Hetherington (2005) observed policy change, especially the one that requires some sacrifice on behalf of the citizens (like redistribution policies helping the poor) are more likely to happen in times when public trust towards the government is high.

Under the conditions set by a fragmented polity, checks and balances, a critical and independent media, a reactive public, a large number of policy actors (lobby groups, advocacy groups, NGOs etc.) and strong party competition it is miracle that policy change happen at all. Indeed, the traditional view on policy change is that if it happens at all, it happens incrementally (Lindblom). The punctuated equilibrium theory demonstrates that while incrementalism may be the general pattern of policy change, still large changes do indeed happen, when the policy monopolies are broken by the political leadership and macropolitics takes over the logic of subsystems. It also follows that the punctuated equilibrium theory assigns an important role to the decision maker. The same applies to the multiple streams framework: the political stream is needed for the policy window to open up.

However, the constraints are there, and this is the reason why the intensification of public attention, or political mobilization are important. They not only help to focus the attention of the decision maker, but give her the much needed legitimacy to break the policy monopoly, elevate the issue on the macropolitical level and initiate a policy change despite institutional and political resistance (True, Jones and Baumgartner 2007, Real-Dato 2009).

However, these considerations are much less relevant in a polity where policy networks and policy monopolies are not well organized, the number of policy actors is low, mobilization is more difficult to achieve, policy venues do not abound, the media system is characterized by parallelism, the executive power is strong, the administration is hierarchically organized, while checks and balances are weak. Under these conditions the government receives much less initiatives from policy entrepreneurs and the latter face substantial difficulties if they want to advance their pet projects, mobilize the public, set the agendas or have access to the decision makers. The government has a high degree of freedom in setting the agenda and initiating change - even large scale changes - as political, constitutional and other institutional constraints are much less compelling. In other words, the policy capacities of the society are weak, while state capacities are relatively strong.

We argue that this is the case of Hungary, and – to a varying degree – that of the other ECE countries[6] as well.

We conceptualize policy capacities of the society as distinct from the policy capacities of the state. The 'state capacity' literature focuses on the problems of underdeveloped countries and weak states where the coercive capacity (enforcement of laws), extractive capacity (collecting taxes) or even the administrative capacities of the state are seriously undermined. East Central European countries do exhibit relatively strong state capacities, which is not necessary the case of other ex-communist countries of Easter Europe, East-South Europe or Central Asia (Bohle and Greskovits 2012, Fortin 2010).

However, policy making in today's complex societies requires more than a strong enough state which is able to more or less enforce laws, collect a fair amount of taxes and administer itself. Policy making is a complex process involving a number of actors and dynamics through which problems relevant for the society are identified, then socially acceptable, more or less effective and feasible solutions developed and finally implemented in order to solve, mitigate

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[6] Including the following countries: Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia (see Bohle and Greskovits 2012).

or at least deal with those problems. Values, interests, knowledge come into play; individuals, organizations, institutions intervene; politics, social concerns, economic logic interact to produce some kind of response to the collectively identified challenges. State capacities are crucial, but policy making is, or should be, more than the state's affair – the institutional performance of the state is better in those countries where strong independent organizations exist (see Brinkerhof 1999, Tusalem 2007). However, policy capacities in this large sense depend on a number of conditions, like venues that serve to gather social inputs; an active civil society with large number of actors (parties, NGOs, think-tanks or citizens etc.) who formulate problems and solutions, and mobilize for or against specific policy proposals; independent media that provide fora for critical opinions or new policy ideas; democratic and responsive institutions that provide the mechanisms to interact and communicate with the stakeholders, etc.

Those policy capacities are relatively weak in Hungary and the ECE region in general. For instance, the civil society is relatively underdeveloped, especially those organizations – advocacy groups, think-tanks – are of short supply which would be able to influence the policy making process (Sebestyén 2001, Rose-Ackerman 2007). Of course, the coin has two sides: policy venues provided by the state are also rare and the consequence is a disequilibrium between the public input and administrative performance in policy making – experts inside the government and some privileged interest groups have a disproportionate influence on the policy process (Rose-Ackerman 2007: 35).

Wyka (2009) argues that the media in the Central European countries (Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary) are generally characterized by the devaluation of quality journalism, homogenization of media content, uncritical reporting and commercialization and fail to excise the role of public watchdog. Wyka is mostly blaming the profit-oriented Western media companies for that, but we may add that political influence on the media is still non-negligible in the region, especially Hungary since 2010 (see Bajomi-Lázár 2014). Concerns of both excessive commercialization and political inference are also raised concerning the Bulgarian (Nacheva 2008) and the Slovenian (Kuhar and Ramet 2012) media. The characteristics of a media system do play a role in how and to what extent are the media influencing the policy process (Vliegenthart and Mena Montes 2014). While we do not any systematic study about the policy agenda setting potential of the media in ECE countries, our assumption is that the media in this region have relatively limited capabilities in influencing the policy process.

So far we haven't differentiate between the countries of the region, because we believe that some generalization might be allowed: the above described features characterized the policy making process of the ECE countries. However, important differences exist inside the region (see Bohle and Greskovits 2012). The case of Hungary that we analyzed has its own peculiarity.

In Hungary the 2010 elections were won by Fidesz, a conservative party with the constitutional majority (2/3 of the seats). The formerly ruling Socialist Party practically collapsed under corruption charges and the severe consequences of the economic crisis. Fidesz immediately started to use its constitutional power in order to redesign basic

institutions of the polity (in 2011 even a new constitution was voted by the parliament), and initiate reforms in a number of policy areas. In the following we are summing up some of those developments of the Fidesz rule that might be important from a policy perspective.[7]

- Illiberal tendencies (Bozóki 2011). Weakening checks and balances (e.g. redesigning the power of the Constitutional Court), and/or circumvent institutional constraints by politically loyal appointees.
- The executive branch of government dominates the legislative branch to a large extent (Korkut 2012). This is hardly a new trend in Hungary, however, Fidesz has further disciplined its MPs through formal and informal norms. Bills originating from the opposition have had practically no chances to be approved.
- An accelerated speed of the legislation. According to our own calculations, during the period of 2010-2014 the average time between the submission of a bill and the final vote was 34 days, the shortest since 1990. The average number of laws approved per year was more than 200, again, the highest number since 1990 (in the previous years the number of adopted laws never surpassed 150).
- Centralization. Several formerly decentralized institutions and bodies have been centralized, hierarchically reorganized, or their autonomy curtailed, including the local governments and schools (Hajnal and Rosta 2014).
- Abolishing corporatist institutions, and further weakening the few consensual elements in the Hungarian policy making. Lobbying has become obscure, its public venues abrogated (Bartha 2015).
- Political influence on the media. Public broadcasting has been submitted to the political interests of Fidesz. Independent media have been the target of bullying campaigns, and cut off from governmental publicity expenditures (Bajomi-Lázár 2014, CRCB 2013)
- Squeezing independent civil society. State subsidies to NGOs have been severely curtailed, and the funding is politically controlled. Independent NGOs have been harassed by a number of state authorities.

In sum, the changes from 2010 made the Hungarian political system more closed than before and further limited the policy venues. If in the pluralist system of the U.S. the government may find it difficult to push a policy proposal forward among the many institutional constraints and against the negative feedback of powerful interest groups, the situation is just the reversed in Hungary. Policy actors outside the government, be them parties, trade-unions, lobby groups (except the privileged ones) or NGOs face considerable difficulties to influence policy making which has been overwhelmingly dominated by the initiatives of the government – this is 'political governance' at work.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the government has a high agenda setting capacity in Hungary, being the initiator of the majority of the events which have been the most attentively followed by the media. In contrast, policy entrepreneurs are not especially able to influence the agenda of

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[7] For a more detailed analysis see Bozóki (2011), Korkut (2012),

politics and the media. As we hypothesized, the large majority of the issues which appeared intensively in the media have not been initiated by pressure groups, opposition parties or by the civil society.

In the investigated period, the media have practically not been able to set their agenda independently from the legislative agenda of the governing party. The intensification of media attention in most cases coincided with governmental initiatives, or, in two cases, with dramatic events. We found only 4 cases when an independent agenda setting activity can be assumed. A closer look at those cases proved that only 3 of them (a bit more than one tenth of our sample) exhibit some policy agenda and/or policy change effect. There were only one case, the President's plagiarism case which was an independent media initiative and which led to political change (the resignation of the President). The case of former communists' responsibility is one of a coproduction between politics and the media, as attention to the issue grew parallel in both the newspapers and the parliament, finally leading to policy changes (new laws). The case of police misbehavior is rather a weak case of potential media effect on policy agenda: one interpellation happened after an intensive media coverage period.

Therefore, we argue that the media's potential to influence policy agenda is very weak and the same applies to their ability to spur policy change. Note that we took the cases of intensive media attention, with a high coverage of issues. That is, in our qualitative analysis we focused on the extreme cases. It cannot provide a full picture but it clearly suggests that the general media effect should be even weaker.

Our analysis focused on Hungary but we assume that somewhat similar patterns must prevail in other ECE countries as well, characterized by weak policy capacities of the society. Further research should clarify the differences and similarities between the ECE countries as well as the origins of policy initiatives or the extent of policy responsiveness in those societies.

Appendix

Analysed issues of high media attention

Issues related to a governmental policy action:
Appointment of a new president of the Hungarian National Bank
Debates about the new budget
Overhead Reduction
Construction of the monument for the victims of German occupation
Law about agricultural lands
Reform of pension system and pension funds
Labor reform
University reform
Reform of education
Expansion of the nuclear plant of Paks
Financial problems of public transportation
New governmental program for EU funds' allocation
Electronic tolling system
Introduction of national food vouchers
Measures for holders of foreign currency loans
Media law
Nominations and appointments
Accountability of socialist politicians - various corruption issues and other misconducts
Reforms of taxation
Constitutional reform
News about the electoral reform and elections

Catastrophes:
Floods and disaster relief
Red mud disaster

Other issues emerged in the media:

Plagiarism scandal of President Schmitt
Misbehaviour in the police service
"Biszku case" legal action against a former communist leader
The prosecution of racist mobsters

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