

2012/5

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Abstract

The dramatic loss of popularity of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) between 2006-2010 is one of the two most massive declines in public support since Hungary's regime transition. Since the attitudinal and structural characteristics of the Hungarian society did not change fundamentally, the relationship between changes in party preferences, the political agenda and media consumption provides a better explanation of MSZP's fall. Various waves of austerity measures, unsuccessful reform initiatives and corruption affairs dominated the agenda the most and had the largest impact on party preferences. The three key issues punctured MSZP's credibility in two areas that had previously served as its main area of attraction: its commitment to the state's role in caring for citizens and its conflict-minimising approach to governance. The permanently negative news cycles ensured that those disenchanted with the Socialists would solidly remain among the undecideds or with the new party they had chosen.

Introduction

By the end of the 1990s the Hungarian party system became consolidated and ultimately even frozen (Enyedi 2007). Two main parties, the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) and the right-wing Fidesz dominated the political landscape: at the 2002 and 2006 elections they divided some 85% of all votes between them. Though there were many minor and even some major swings in their popularity, there was never a single month when either Fidesz' or MSZP's popularity dropped below 30% (among voters with a party preference), nor did either of them pass 55%. A growing number of voters identified with one party or the other, and even in international comparison Hungarian voters appeared loyal (Tóka 2005: 32)

The almost two-party system that emerged in 1998, however, ceased to exist shortly after the 2006 election. The Socialists' level of support began to decline already a few weeks after their election victory. Following a steep fall during the summer, the decline continued at a slower pace, but nevertheless unceasingly. Also surprising (in addition to its plummeting in the polls) is that the most successful party of the post-transition period – i.e. the party with the most electoral victories – was incapable of fighting its way back to its earlier level of support. As a consequence, during the 2010 elections its objective was no longer victory but merely to outpoll the radical right Jobbik party. This goal was ultimately realised, albeit by the narrow

margin of two percent. MSZP's rival, Fidesz, however garnered an absolute majority of the votes.

Hence the phenomenon that the present study examines is the following: Why did MSZP's support decline this drastically between 2006 and 2010 (from 43% to 19%)? What caused the party's prolonged crisis and why did its loss of popularity endure over time?

The assumption of this research is that the primary cause behind this development was not that the attitudinal or structural characteristics of Hungarian society changed fundamentally. Therefore, in seeking to explain this phenomenon this paper does not focus on socio-demographic features or attitudes, but on the relationship between changes in party preferences and the political agenda. It is also clear that a political defeat of this magnitude also includes leadership and organisational failure. For this reason, this paper does not aim to provide a full explanation for the erosion of the Hungarian Socialist Party, but rather investigates only one dimension that the authors consider of key importance for the 2006-2010 period. This factor is the political agenda: analysis of what and how the voters perceived of the major political developments. As the political agenda was mainly shaped by the government, the study primarily focuses on MSZP and addresses the characteristics of opposition communication only briefly.

The article starts by reviewing the relevant literature on political agenda and the impact of the media. Subsequently, the hypotheses formulated in the conceptual framework are tested, as well as the interrelationship between political agenda, media consumption and the fluctuations in party preferences are examined. Moving from general towards specific observations, the study presents those issues that dominated the agenda and assesses their impact on the popularity of the Socialist Party. By the end of the study, light is shed on the question of how the news items that generated the most media attention led to the gradual erosion of MSZP's support over the past couple of years.

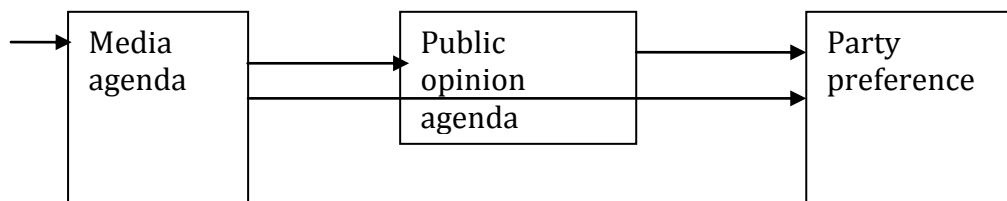
Conceptual framework: Political agenda and party preferences

The academic literature argues that in the long-run party preferences are determined by social background variables, socialization and attitudes (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944, Converse 1963; for an overview see Franklin et al. 2009, Bornschier 2009). A party's popularity rises when the ideology it stands for becomes more popular. On a societal level, however, value preferences shift only very gradually, but citizens' party preferences can change rapidly, monthly or even weekly. An examination of the media and the public opinion agenda provides the tool for understanding the short and medium-term fluctuations in party preferences and the impact of campaigns. This article refers to political agenda (or simply agenda) as an overall category that includes both media and public opinion agenda.

What this study concentrates on is how media agenda and public opinion agenda influenced party preferences. As Graph 1 shows, public opinion agenda is determined by the media to a significant degree (McCombs and Shaw 1972), and the latter itself has a direct

impact on party preferences (framing, Iyengar-Kinder 1987). Thus, the three factors need to be examined jointly (priming, Weaver 1991, Kiouisis and McCombs 2004)¹.

Graph 1



In this approach, the public opinion agenda constitutes a filter of sorts, which can alter the impact of the media on party preferences². Regarding this impact, several hypotheses can be formulated:

As far as the mechanism is concerned, it is by no means indifferent how general political awareness influence citizens' perception of the news (Zaller 1992). Awareness is an important variable as it can circumscribe the potential circle of those who change their preferences. Zaller believes that those citizens who are not preoccupied with politics cannot in reality change their party preference because they will not even try to find out about the news that analysts deem 'seminal' (first hypothesis, awareness theory).

Following this argument, it goes without saying that the frequency of media consumption is a crucial variable. The more attentive a citizen is - more time she spends watching TV -, the more likely she will adopt the interpretation and opinion-climate of the media (Gerbner 1969)³. According to the second hypothesis (cultivation theory), the degree of influence depends heavily on the frequency of media-usage. Furthermore, if the communication flow is one sided and benefits only one party (this is the case in this study), the voter will adjust her party choice accordingly.

If instinctive party loyalties determine how news is perceived, then the impact of the media can only be limited. It is party preferences that influence media consumption rather than vice versa (third hypothesis, theory of selective exposure, Klapper 1949, Iyengar et al. 2008). If, on the other hand, issues reach everyone regardless of political views, then it would be correct to assume that these issues can influence party preferences.

It is far from clear which issues influence party preferences and to what degree they do so. As the empirical data show, there are issues that receive much attention in the media, exert a big impact on public opinion, and then also affect party preferences. However, there are also issues that share the first two aforementioned characteristics but nevertheless completely fail to influence party choice. Issues that are at the centre of attention over several months are generally more likely to have a transformative effect on voters' party preferences. But even when it comes to these, it is nowhere near irrelevant under what circumstances they exert such an effect and when they end up ultimately fading without having made a splash.

¹ An increasing number of scholars active in this field addressed not only the impact of the media but also the factors that shape media agenda (Berkovitz 1992, Yoon 2005, Zaller 1999). However, the scope of this paper is limited to the examination of the media-impact.

² For a comprehensive overview of agenda research see Scheufele-Tewksbury 2007, Roessler 2008, Bennett-Iyengar 2010

³ For an overview, see Morgan et al. 2009.

According to Dayan and Katz (1993), a news story will have a significant impact if people can relate to it on an emotional level, that is if they see relevant aspects of their own concerns and identity reflected therein. If, however, the media consumer cannot imagine him or herself being party to an event, then the story likely will not have an effect on his or her voting preference (fourth hypothesis, performative effect).

There is also scarce knowledge about how far voters' memory reaches back. If they can remember many issues (McCombs 2004: 38), then a more careful examination is needed in the relationship between party choice and public opinion agenda. In this approach the negative impact of individual issues accumulates in the minds of citizens. Thus, it is impossible to determine what issue has led to any given voter's disenchantment with its favourite party. This cumulative impact is not unknown in the academic literature either (Son-Weaver 2006). Son and Weaver showed – in the context of the connection between media and public opinion rather than between public opinion and party choice – that the impact of a given story does not necessarily manifest itself immediately: it may present over time, cumulatively combined with other issues (fifth hypothesis, cumulative effect).

Even if the prior hypothesis is rejected and it is assumed that at a given time only a single issue can play a decisive role in citizens' thinking – since they forget the previous issue by then –, it is still possible that the impact of that issue will manifest itself with delay. This may result from the fact that the voter only finds out about it later – though in our case this is not very likely⁴ – but also because the internalised issue only changes his or her party preferences later, the event exerts its impact with delay (for example because of the discourse surrounding the issue). This is the sixth hypothesis (delay effect). There is no consensus in the academic literature about how long the lead time of a certain issue is. According to Kiouisis and McCombs (2004), the time it takes for an issue on the media's agenda to move into the centre of public perception may take anywhere from a week to half a year. Furthermore, it is also not clear how long it takes for internalised news to influence party choice.

Below, the hypotheses above will be examined and tested.

Empirical analysis

As it was already noted, the focus of this paper is on the relationship between the issues considered important by public opinion on one hand, and party preferences on the other. In this analysis the factors that determined the public's perception of the news agenda are also discussed.

The perception of news is not substantially influenced by how much someone turns to the main media outlets, how informed s/he is or which party s/he would vote for. The most striking tendency surrounding the perception of key events was that there were no marked correlations⁵. The least informed persons were not less likely to be informed about most news

⁴ A delay of two-three weeks follows from the logic of the survey: that is the average time distance between the appearance of an issue and the actual data collection.

⁵ Logistic regression models were run, in which the dependent variables were the reception of the events (has heard about it or not) and the independent variables were media-consumption, socio-demographic data, political

items than the more informed respondents. Not only did political interest not have a discernible impact on awareness, but in most cases those with lower educational attainment or those living in rural areas were equally informed with those who were more interested, better educated or residents of the capital.

It appears likely that the issues in question were more accessible and easier to relate to even for the average citizen (austerity measures, corruption affairs, fees for hospitals and general practice visits, tuition fees, etc.), that is why citizens less interested in politics were no worse informed. Thus, we can reject the first hypothesis. Another development that the awareness theory would have failed to predict was that between 2006 and 2010 it was precisely these politically less interested voters who were least likely to change their party preferences. MSZP lost ground among all social groups, but it lost most support in those strata that were interested in politics (Table 1). According to the awareness theory they should have been the most resistant towards negative news about MSZP. At the same time, it would be an exaggeration to claim that it was above all the intelligentsia that turned on MSZP: public opinion poll company Medián's earlier research showed that the party lost most support in the group with the lowest educational attainment (Medián 2010).

Table 1: The evolution of MSZP's support by political interest (in percent)

Interest in politics	MSZP (June 2006)	MSZP (March 2010)	Difference (rounded numbers)
Not at all	22	8	-14
Somewhat	30	15	-16
Average	36	20	-16
Very much	36	17	-18
Total	30	14	-16

Source: Medián monthly omnibus survey

The perception of news may be closely related to media consumption. According to the second hypothesis, the impact of the media is proportional to its consumption: those who watch television the most are also most likely to adopt its interpretation of reality. This theory, too, fails to reflect the present Hungarian situation, however. There is absolutely no linear relationship between the consumption of the most widely watched or read media outlets examined by us and voters' party preferences, even though the news and issues they presented in the past four years were overwhelmingly damaging for MSZP.

attentiveness and party preference variables. In all cases, small Nagelkerke R-squares came out as results. Exponential Betas of the political interest variable proved to be significant only in 3 cases out of the 10 main events of the period. This means that politically attentive citizens were no less receptive. Moreover, in two cases (related to the austerity measures of 2006) those who were less interested in politics generally, were more likely to be informed about the events.

Table 2: The evolution of MSZP's support by media consumption (percentage)

Media outlet	Frequency	MSZP (June 2006)	MSZP (March 2010)	Difference (rounded numbers)
RTL Klub Híradó (News)	Never	29	10	19
	Rarely	27	13	14
	Several times a week	30	13	16
	Daily	35	18	16
TV2 Tények (Facts)	Never	28	15	13
	Rarely	27	13	14
	Several times a week	30	13	16
	Daily	38	17	20
M1 Híradó (News)	Never	31	14	17
	Rarely	25	11	14
	Several times a week	30	16	13
	Daily	41	20	21
Total		30	14	16

Source: Medián monthly omnibus survey

An analysis of RTL Klub's news shows that MSZP lost most voters among those who never watched it, while the situation was the reverse with the TV2 and M1 news: here the most enthusiastic viewers were most likely to be turned off by the Socialists. At the same time, the differences are not statistically significant, the process of disillusionment with the Socialist Party is far more likely to be a steady evolution. Not only the aforementioned news shows, but all the radios, televisions and internet-based outlets reported about the most important issues of the term, and a fair proportion of these were assessed uniformly (that is everyone condemned MSZP on account of its corruption affairs, for instance). Thus an average citizen would not even need to watch RTL Klub or TV2 in order to notice the news – which were overwhelmingly unfavourable for the Socialist Party.

The third hypothesis had to be rejected as well (theory of selective exposure). MSZP voters were just as likely to consider negative news about their party important as Fidesz-

supporters. All issues were perceived almost the same way by MSZP-supporters as by those loyal to Fidesz (a 99% correlation),⁶ even though an overwhelming majority of issues was embarrassing for the Hungarian Socialist Party and hence it would have made sense for left-wing voters to exhibit a greater predilection for ignoring them.

An examination of the factors that influenced the public opinion agenda reveals that the entire society was informed about the main events of the term, regardless of political affiliation, level of awareness and media consumption. MSZP's loss of support was more or less evenly distributed and reached all social groups.

Before the presentation of the issues that attracted the most attention between 2006 and 2010, the methodology used for their analysis is introduced briefly.

From 2006 to 2010 monthly survey data were gathered to investigate the public reception of the news. In addition to the standard examination of party preferences, the questionnaire also included questions concerning awareness about the 15 most discussed public affairs issues in the given month, as well as the assessment of their respective importance.

The database of the survey data was linked with the content analysis of the media agenda by assigning the content variable, which tracked the mainstream media presentation of each issue, as a contextual variable to the public opinion survey database. The content analyses covered the mainstream media⁷. The orientation of individual issues was identified by the average of the perceived political leaning of their presentation. In the following steps these contextual variables and the perceived salience of the 15 main issues were used to design a composite indicator. This variable contains information about the expert evaluation of the political tendency of each issue, the knowledge thereof, as well as the assessment of its importance. A synthesised indicator was compiled based on the aforementioned indicators, which contains comprehensively the same information for all 15 issues in the given time period. This indicator is presented in Graph 2.

The composite indicator would fall to its minimum if the publication of a news item would exclusively benefit the right (negative values), and reach its maximum value when it would exclusively benefit the left (positive values). Minimum values suggested that not only several unfavourable events occurred for the Socialist Party but they were also of enormous importance for the public. Over the four years, the maximum average value of the contextual variables (the presentation of the 15 top issues) was plus 4, while its minimum was minus 17; the personal indicator weighted by importance (e.g. the composite index) reached a maximum of plus 21 and a minimum of minus 198 points.

Since the index contains both media and public opinion components we shall refer to it as the political agenda index. Although the two components could differ theoretically, this was not the case in the examined period. It can be stated that the key issues had the same

⁶ This was calculated by comparing the averages of our composite indicator for Fidesz and MSZP supporters. There was practically no difference between the two voting blocs in terms of whether the issues they considered important were beneficial for MSZP or for Fidesz.

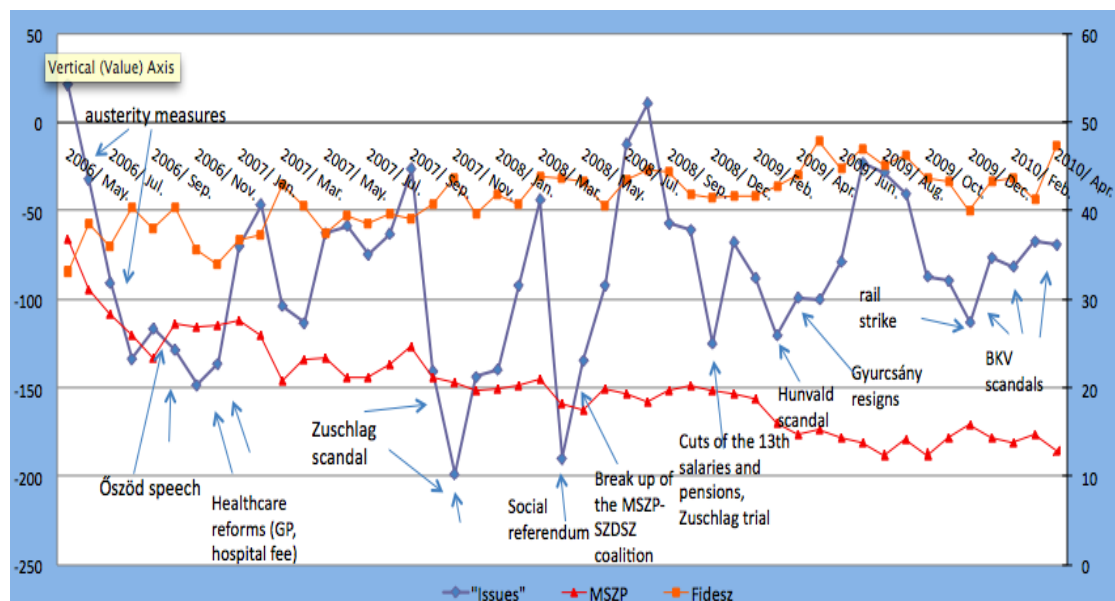
⁷ The most watched news programmes of the three most watched television channels (RTL Klub, TV2, M1), as well as the two most widely read political broadsheets (Népszabadság and Magyar Nemzet) were examined in this research.

importance both on the media agenda and the public opinion agenda. The issues that citizens considered most important were also those prominently featured in the media.

The key issues: austerity, reforms and corruption affairs

It would be an easy explanation – and one that numerous opinion columns have in fact put forth – to attribute MSZP’s decline in the polls between 2006 and 2010 to the memorable political events that generated massive reactions (including the Ószöd-speech⁸, the resulting riots and the police response to them; the March 2008 referendum⁹; and the replacement of the prime minister in March 2009). Yet the data on the political agenda, collected regularly on a monthly basis, and their comparison with the climate of public opinion, party preferences and the assessment of leading politicians direct our attentions to other issues and contexts.

Graph 2: Political agenda and the evolution of the two major parties’ support



Source: Monthly omnibus surveys of Medián Public Opinion and Market Research Institute

⁸ Having won the 2006 election, Prime Minister Gyurcsány revealed to his parliamentary group that the MSZP-government did not provide a full picture about the state of the economy before 2006 in order to win elections. The speech was leaked four months later and caused enormous public indignation. Fidesz – the main right-wing opposition party of the time - built its communication on this speech for years. This offensive opposition strategy – helped by a growing right-wing media empire – largely contributed to PM Gyurcsány’s loss of credibility.

⁹ In March 2008 a referendum was held about the tuition fee and two health care fees. The overwhelming majority (more than 80%) of the Hungarian citizens rejected the fees introduced by the Socialist government. The huge defeat altered government policy and, as shall be elaborated in sub-section 4.2, strongly contributed to the fall of MSZP.

Note: The horizontal axis denotes months, the vertical axis on the left side shows the values on the synthesised index, while the vertical axis on the right displays the proportion of voters expressing a preference for either party.

The Socialist Party was on the defensive throughout the entire previous term. A key piece of evidence in support of this claim is that from June 2008 on there was not a single month when news favourable to MSZP dominated the agenda. The continuous defensive stance and the incessant stream of embarrassing news led to the gradual erosion of support. The party suffered its greatest decline in popular esteem immediately in the months following the entry into office of the second Gyurcsány-government, at the time when the prime minister announced his austerity package. At that point the party's support within the population at large (that is among all those entitled to vote rather than only those with party preferences) had dropped from 37% in May 2006 to 26% in August. MSZP's relative position vis-à-vis Fidesz fell by 20% below the level seen immediately after the elections. Subsequently, the remaining voters disillusioned from the socialists at a more gradual pace. During this process increasingly lower levels of support followed one another; the party held steady at each of these levels at least for a while. Yet when compared to specific points in time, these phases combined to a downward trend and ever declining popularity numbers for MSZP. In this part, three major issues are examined that according to the political agenda data were present most persistently and had the most significant effect on the Socialists' political latitude during the 2006-2010 term. The austerity measures, the unsuccessful reform policies and the corruption scandals had the largest impact in terms of undermining MSZP. The domination of these three issues on the political agenda between 2006 and 2010 led to its massive drop in the polls and made it impossible for the party to climb back towards the end of the term.

Austerity measures

Following its election victory in April 2006, MSZP no longer concealed that austerity measures would have to be implemented. That the Gyurcsány-government was planning such steps had already made it into the top 15 news in April and May, though no specific measures had been announced. Finally, the government verified the predictions that it was planning to take drastic steps in spite of campaign commitments to the contrary. The MSZP-SZDSZ coalition government did so in the first set of measures it adopted following its taking office on 9th June, the so-called New Balance Programme. In the framework of this programme austerity measures were taken such as the raising of gas prices by 30%, that of electricity by 10-14%, while the medium VAT rate was increased from 15% to 20% and employee contributions were also increased (Financial Times 2006). Also part of the package were elements that increased the burdens of enterprises and news spread about impending reorganisations and layoffs in the public sphere.

The political headwind rapidly picked up steam. On the political agenda five exceptionally negative months followed consecutively for MSZP between July and November

2006 (the combined total indicator of the 15 most important news fell under minus 100 in each of these months). The only other times that they experienced comparably dramatic numbers were during the peak of the debate about the health reform, in the autumn of 2007, and then again at the time of the social referendum initiated by Fidesz and the subsequent break-up of the coalition, in Spring 2008. The general public sentiment became very negative pretty quickly as well: as compared to 49% in June, already by August 2006 72% said that things in Hungary was headed in the wrong direction.

Ferenc Gyurcsány's announcements immediately made their effect felt in MSZP's and the PM's approval ratings. The almost automatic trend of voters moving towards the winner completely failed to materialise this time around. By the end of the summer of 2006, the Hungarian Socialist Party had experienced its greatest drop in support in the entire term to come. As a result of the austerity measures, MSZP's support had reached the level that even the leaking of Gyurcsány's Ószöd speech did not deteriorate further (26-28%). Thus counter to the general perception, Ferenc Gyurcsány's popularity did not implode as a result of the public dissemination of his secret speech. While in May 2006 55% of respondents said that they wished him to play an important role in politics (a standard question to measure a politician's popularity in Hungary), by August this ratio had dropped to 34%, which was the level measured in the months following the release of the Ószöd speech.

In other words, the credibility crisis had commenced already before the political tensions got out of hand in September 2006. For large segments of the population, the content of the Ószöd speech was no surprise, but its unvarnished style reinforced the process already felt by many. The striking tension between the campaign promises and the actual governance, as well as the painful measures imposed by the government, caused the first and also most drastic stage in MSZP's and Gyurcsány's tumble. The most significant medium-term effect of the prime minister's speech – which also provoked street demonstrations – was that it reinforced the disenchantment with the government and thereby removed any chance that the loss of popularity would only be temporary.

The first wave of austerity measures and the corresponding loss of political credibility proved most damaging for Ferenc Gyurcsány. However, his actions announced in response to the economic crisis and the further loss of popularity provided the final impetus for his resignation. The global crisis led to an economic emergency in Hungary and the government was compelled to turn to the IMF and the EU for assistance. New austerity measures affecting the population were also felt to be necessary. The bonus monthly salary, the so-called 13th month salary, was abolished in the public sphere, and even though on 17 October 2008 the prime minister stated that the bonus 13th month pension would continue, by 28 October he had to concede that this benefit too would only be available for those 62 or older and would be capped at 80.000 forints (roughly 260 euros). The pension issue illustrates well how the economic crisis compelled the government to take ever harsher measures. In his annual 'State of Hungary' address on 16 February 2009, Gyurcsány spoke of abolishing the 13th month pension and raising the retirement age (Wall Street Journal 2009).

By autumn 2008, MSZP had stabilised at a 20% level of support, but as a result of the next round of crisis management policies it fell to 16% by March 2009. At this point a paltry 6% of respondents thought that things were going in the right direction. These data showed

that a significant proportion of the remaining MSZP-sympathisers were also worried about the events and developments. When Gyurcsány announced his resignation on 21 March 2009, his personal popularity had reached the lowest point till then: a mere 18% of respondents wanted him in an important public position. Though the MSZP supporters had the same conviction in their own leaders' (first Gyurcsány, then especially Gordon Bajnai) ability to manage the economic crisis as the Fidesz-supporters had in Orbán,¹⁰ at this stage a climate of opinion had developed which held that 'it's Gyurcsány's fault'.

From the events on the political agenda and the evolution of MSZP's popularity it emerges that it is very crucial indeed who the person is that seeks to make society accept painful measures. As compared to the crisis periods of Gyurcsány, whose political credibility had been shattered, the first months of the Bajnai-government were seen as decidedly calm. This is especially spectacular in light of the fact that following his confirmation by the Parliament in April 2009, new PM Gordon Bajnai successfully requested that the legislature pass an austerity package that was more severe than any of his predecessor's acts.¹¹ The month of April, which of course also featured MSZP's embarrassing search for a new prime minister, was naturally a disastrous defeat for MSZP in the agenda (minus 100). Subsequently, however, the Bajnai-government's early period was marked by less negative months than had become customary before. Even after this grace period it was no longer the crisis management measures that most spoiled the overall agenda, but rather the various corruption scandals that Socialist politicians were caught up in. This too shows that in no small part it was the austerity measures that devastated MSZP's popularity in such a striking manner, because they were obviously antithetical to the campaign promises the party had previously made. A segment of the electorate felt betrayed, which explains their quick and forceful reaction, for it was not only financially engaged by the issue but was also emotionally caught up in it. This corroborates the fourth hypothesis (performative effect). This sentiment may also have been a factor in explaining why the Bajnai-government was not punished for implementing even harsher measures. Voters at this point had anticipated such policies. The new prime minister began governing while MSZP stood at 15% in the polls, and though there were some fluctuations over the course of the year – 12% in July 2009 and 16% in December 2009 were the low and high points, respectively – during his last full month in office, March 2010, the Socialist Party still stood at 15% support. In other words, already at the end of the Gyurcsány-era MSZP's popularity had sunk to a level that the party held on to until the elections a year later.

Unsuccessful reform policies

¹⁰ In February 2009 Gyurcsány received a 3.81 on a 5-point scale from MSZP voters and Orbán a 3.69 from Fidesz voters. In October 2009 Bajnai's crisis management was evaluated as 3.96 by MSZP's supporters, while Orbán's was given a score of 4.11 by his party's voters.

¹¹ In his crisis management package, Gordon Bajnai announcements included the following: raising the retirement age to 65 years, the complete discontinuation of the 13th monthly pension, the gradual scrapping of subsidies for household gas consumption, the introduction of a real estate tax and the raising of the VAT rate from 20% to 25%.

The Gyurcsány-government's initial strategic idea had been to restore fiscal balance and implement reforms early in its term, in the hope that the subsequent growth and the benefits of the reforms would give it a chance to succeed in the next election campaign (New York Times 2007). As far as the reform initiatives were concerned, they not only failed to create the chance of success, but in fact ended up playing a decisive role in weakening the links between MSZP and its voters who had held out even after the initial austerity measures.

Following his victory in 2006, Ferenc Gyurcsány promised sweeping changes in a number of areas, including healthcare, education and public administration. Based on the political agenda data it can be stated that the healthcare reform attempt was the one that moved into the centre of attention. The plans for reforming public administration never made it into the 15 top news stories, while reports about education featured there only sporadically (for instance when the tuition fees were announced or when students took to the streets). The prolonged debate about the healthcare reform, however, was on the top 15 list right from May 2006 to July 2008, for two years straight. It often featured on the top of the list.

The government had already suffered the adverse popularity effects of the healthcare changes before it had even implemented the planned measures. Following the elections there were speculations for months surrounding the question of what shape the specifics of the healthcare reform would take. Moreover, the general practice and the hospital fees – along with the tuition fee in higher education – were mentioned in the same context as the austerity measures, thus reinforcing the image proffered by the opposition, namely that the reforms were nothing but alternative ways of 'austerity'.

The news about the subject had without fail presented the envisioned changes and their anticipated effects in a strongly negative frame. The importance of the health care issue is signified by the fact that in the post-Őszöd speech period it was not until after the first wave of the healthcare reform in February-March 2007 that both MSZP's and Ferenc Gyurcsány's support began to decline again. In March 2007 the Socialist Party suffered a 5% drop in support (from 26 to 21), as did the PM (from 32 to 27).

The autumn of 2007 brought evidence that for the Gyurcsány-government there could be an even more unfavourable combination than the implementation of the unpopular healthcare reform. During this time, the press was dominated by reports about the policy conflicts between the Socialists and the liberal Free Democrats (SZDSZ). These stories gained additional traction through Fidesz' continuous attacks and anti-market rhetoric. MSZP suffered the losses stemming from standing up for a liberal healthcare reform, despite the fact that there was substantial opposition among the Socialists to the health policy course charted by the liberal minister of health, Ágnes Horváth. Rather than the 25% that the party held in September 2007, Medián measured only a 20% level of support for MSZP in November. The socialist-liberal policy conflict also manifested itself in prolonged internal debates within MSZP (Eurofound 2008). The simultaneous presence on the agenda of the debate about the marketisation of the healthcare system and the emergence of a corruption scandal involving the Socialist youth organisation resulted in the most negative political agenda cycle for MSZP in the entire 2006-2010 term. Over the entire period between September and December 2007, negative news for the government constituted an overwhelming majority among the top items:

at the ‘best’ time, the score was minus 140 points in this period, while in October, the low point, it stood at minus 198.

The PM who was in principle open to liberal-type solutions, was forced to manoeuvre between his fellow socialists and liberal SZDSZ. The liberals fought tooth and nail for individual responsibility and ensuring that the healthcare system be governed by market principles, while MSZP was defending the state’s dominant role in healthcare. The end result – a system with multiple private and a state insurance provider, in which private capital would nevertheless only have a minority role – was ultimately dear to no one: for a part of MSZP it was already too liberal, while for SZDSZ politicians it did not go far enough.

Still, the issue was useful for opposition party Fidesz who based their anti-government strategy on social populism at the policy level. Fidesz attacked the governing parties from the left and questioned the fundamental left-wing commitments of the Socialists. By placing self-reliance and a market approach front and centre, Gyurcsány entered to an economic policy path that was wholly alien to the majority of MSZP-voters and their paternalistic values, which envisioned a strong role for the state (Bíró Nagy 2011). Having occupied the economic left at that stage, all Fidesz had to do was to lay back and await the result of the ‘social referendum’ it had initiated about some of the government’s most symbolic measures in healthcare and education. The referendum saw a larger than expected turnout and an overwhelming support for the notion that the state continue to finance and guarantee the services in question. The elitist and contentious approach of Gyurcsány’s reform policies may also have played a role in the rejection of the government’s policies by the Socialist base. Conflict-avoidance and – logically following from this attitude – a demand for seeking consensus has been one of the crucial characteristics of left-wing voters for decades (Karácsony 2009). Gyurcsány’s policies completely failed to satisfy this voter expectation.

Gyurcsány’s liberal policies seriously damaged the traditional leftist character of the Socialist Party. According to a 2009 survey, only 25% of the population regarded MSZP as the representative party of the working class and the poor, whereas more than 60% considered MSZP as the party of the elite (Tóth 2011:187).

Fidesz’ victory at the ‘social referendum’ in 2008 not only succeeded in abolishing the controversial reform measures but also ended up tearing apart the coalition barely a month later and completely wiped out MSZP’s enthusiasm for reform. The Gyurcsány-government, bereft of its parliamentary majority, abandoned the healthcare reform in which it had invested enormous efforts. Following the massive agenda defeats in March 2008 (minus 190) and April (minus 135) the grand reform schemes were relegated into the background. Thus hardly any of the healthcare reforms planned in the first half of the term were realised, but MSZP nevertheless suffered all the adverse consequences of the lengthy and failed process because all that was visible from the government’s goals were the liberal reform policies.

The result of the social referendum shows that the healthcare reform had an extraordinarily harmful effect on the popularity of the Socialist Party: the support for general practice and hospital fees, 18% and 16% respectively, fell far behind even the combined popularity of MSZP and SZDSZ (24% in that month). In other words, even parts of the Socialists’ electorate rejected the cornerstone of the government’s reform (or at least did not vote for it in the referendum). By definition, this is referred to as negative issue-ownership

(Petrocik 1996), that is even a segment of its own voters believes the party to be wrong on a given issue.

Corruption affairs

Apart from the austerity measures and the reform policies that dominated the first two years, the issues that defined the 2006-2010 term were the corruption affairs involving Socialist politicians. The first year and a half in the term of the second Gyurcsány-government was free of such scandals, but when the first one broke – the Zuschlag-affair, a corruption scandal involving leaders of the youth socialist organisation – the storm it unleashed was all the greater. János Zuschlag's arrest and the subsequent trial swept through the press with an elementary force, topping the list of leading news items on the political agenda in both May 2008 and February 2009.

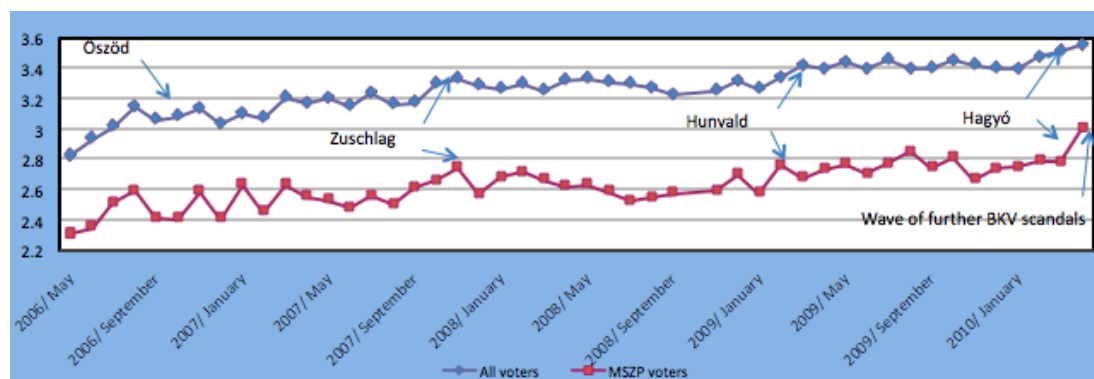
The power of corruption cases in shaping the agenda was apparent once again when the real estate scandal in Budapest's Erzsébetváros district became a similarly important case in the second half of the term. When the case first erupted in December 2008-January 2009, 'only' local SZDSZ politicians were suspected of wrongdoing. Nevertheless, the story immediately topped the ranking of most important items on the agenda. Subsequently, the arrest of Socialist district mayor György Hunvald, as well as his resignation from the Budapest city council, also made it among the top news of the first months of 2009 (Budapest Times 2009). But the item related to this scandal that proved to be most influential in the media was the news that Hunvald continues to receive his salary under arrest. The importance of this story is underlined by the fact that after its release in September 2009, it overshadowed even the current developments in the Budapest public transportation company's (BKV) corruption scandal.

Scandals connected to financial abuses by politicians had the greatest negative impact on the Bajnai-government. From July 2009 until the elections in 2010 corruption affairs were among the top news every month, in five of these months even at the top of the list. In four instances it was the BKV-scandal, and once it was the aforementioned Hunvald affair, which encumbered the crisis management work of the Bajnai government. The 100 million forint (approximately 300,000 euros) severance payment for the public transportation authority's HR director catapulted the BKV scandal to the top of the news already during the summer, and it became a staple of the news for the rest of the year. It only became the number one story again when the scandal reached Budapest's socialist Deputy Mayor Miklós Hagyó (Budapest Times 2010). From January 2010 on the BKV scandal – Hagyó's resignation, the arrest of several BKV managers, the so-called Nokia box scandal, i.e. the use of mobile phone boxes to deliver wads of illicit cash – proved to be the story with the largest impact. This simultaneously meant that corruption emerged as one of the dominant issues in the 2010 election campaign, providing lots of and easily exploitable ammunition to those political forces who demanded fundamental changes and a clean public life. There could not have been a more suitable time for anti-corruption rhetoric: during the last two and a half years of the term, such issues dominated the agenda for 11 months.

In terms of public support, MSZP's position did not take a turn for worse as a result of the corruption scandals. Nevertheless, the scandals may have played a role in that they might have prevented MSZP from regaining some of its strength. The public opinion climate improved somewhat for the party after the low it experienced at the time of Ferenc Gyurcsány's resignation and the embarrassing search for a new prime minister. In March 2009 a mere 6% of respondents thought the country was on the right track, a year later that number rose to 15%. However, the better public assessment of the Bajnai-government as compared to its predecessor did not lead to growing support for MSZP.

As the time-series shows (Graph 3), by the end of the term even the hard core of MSZP supporters that stood by the party to the end considered MSZP more corrupt than the average of the entirety of society had four years earlier.

Graph 3: MSZP's "corruption index" in public opinion



Source: Medián monthly omnibus surveys

Note: Average values on a 4 point scale. 1= shady financial dealings are not at all typical for them, 4= shady financial dealings are very typical for them

It is a sign of the damage wreaked by the corruption scandals that society reacted quickly and unequivocally to the affairs. Following the arrests of Zuschlag, Hunvald and then Hagyó, the ratio of those who thought MSZP corrupt rose significantly. In between two corruption affairs, the proportion of those who thought of MSZP as corrupt stagnated, but at a much higher level than previously. In other words, a large proportion of voters and the remaining MSZP supporters as well paid close attention to the political agenda and reacted to it either already during the same month or subsequently. This suggests that events do not tend to have a delayed effect (sixth hypothesis), yet we cannot be sure whether the time gap is not greater when it comes to other issues. The nature of the issue can determine the scope of the delay. What appears clear is that voters have a good memory, at least when it comes to issues that featured prominently on the agenda. The gradual decline in popularity suggests that the variety and sum of unfavourable news began to add up in the minds of citizens (fifth hypothesis, cumulative effect).

Conclusion

With the exception of the fourth and fifth hypotheses (performative effect and cumulative effect) all the hypotheses formulated in the conceptual part of the study have been rejected. The vast majority of society was informed about the main events of the term. The main issues of the past four years were simple and easy to grasp, and thus they elicited the interest even of those portions of society who are generally indifferent about politics. The rule of thumb was that those events that were easiest to relate to on a personal level also most rapidly and drastically transformed preferences. Thus, the impact of painful austerity measures and corruption affairs was most easy to track. In the context of voter preferences, the effects stemmed not only from material considerations but also from the fact that these policies were antithetical to the previous campaign promises and that they hence elicited an emotional response (fourth hypothesis). The latter eliminated the chance of MSZP regaining any strength in the last year of the term. The general practice, hospital and tuition fees are also simple concepts, but the reform plan that they are associated with is nothing if not complex – therefore their impact was not “pure”, but they did play a substantial role in the gradual erosion of MSZP’s support. The events of autumn 2006 (the leaking of Gyurcsány’s Őszöd-speech and the subsequent riots), the replacement of PM Gyurcsány and the BKV-scandal were also among the easily comprehensible issues – yet they failed to generate immediate discernible changes in the alignment of party preferences.

It appears realistic to assume that since most voters had already abandoned MSZP by the autumn of 2006 on account of the austerity package, and hence they could not leave the party again even though they probably considered later prominent events unacceptable as well, which is why these latter events had no effect on MSZP’s popularity. The remaining base of support dissipated gradually because of the new issues that kept continuously cropping up, but the party’s core supporters were not touched even by the later problems. At the same time, the permanently negative news cycles ensured that those disenchanted with the Socialists would solidly remain among the undecideds or with the new party they had chosen. In light of this logic, even those affairs that appeared to be insignificant in the analyses could have played a role. Moreover, it needs to be pointed out that the prevailing attitude concerning Ferenc Gyurcsány also could have contributed to the downward spiral of the Socialist Party. The climate of opinion was so overwhelmingly negatively inclined against Gyurcsány’s person that even those of his programmatic proposals that under ‘normal’ circumstances might have become popular were the subject of protests and forceful criticisms.

In addition to the role played by the sequence of events, it is also reasonable to assume that the cumulative effect contributed to erosion (fifth hypothesis). Another reason why there could not have been a very strong connection between the evolution of MSZP’s support and the trends in the political agenda was that voters do not necessarily punish their parties when they are most upset about a given issue. The patience and loyalty of many MSZP voters wore thin gradually, with the result that at a certain point they were fed up and left the Socialists. But there could have been many reasons behind their disenchantment. We cannot necessarily assume that they left on account of the events in the given month of their departure.

Many factors may have played a role in the development that the austerity measures, the unsuccessful reforms and the corruption affairs had the largest impact on party preferences. These issues dominated the political agenda for many months, which is why they could weaken and erode the ties between MSZP and its voters. These three topics were the issues that most visibly defined the Socialists' term in government and punctured MSZP's credibility precisely in two areas that had previously served as its main area of attraction: its commitment to the state's role in caring for citizens and its conflict-minimising approach to governance. Still, the importance of these pre-eminent issues allows for another interpretation as well.

When conducting agenda analysis the relevant question is not only which issues have moved into the centre of attention. At least as important is the question of what issues never reached the voters in the first place. When voters rendered their verdict on MSZP, then the issues analysed above played the greatest role in their decision-making process, while many other, more favourable aspects for MSZP never even entered into the equation. During previous elections, for example, one of the main arguments in favour of MSZP was that it was a consensus-seeker, as opposed to the 'power-hungry' Fidesz. In addition to the fact that MSZP forfeited considerable portions of its favourable profile, there was no event to change the perception of Fidesz. With regard to the outcome of the race for voter support it was certainly decisive that for most voters considerations about Fidesz lost their urgency because most of them focused on the issues examined above. In other words, Fidesz did not become 'more moderate' in the eyes of the voters but rather the political agenda – in line with the priming theory – reframed political competition in a way that only revolved around issues that were unfavourable for MSZP. As a result, only very few voters cared in April 2010 whether and in how far Fidesz was consensus-seeking and what consequences a two-thirds majority in Parliament might result in.

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