

# ***Agenda dynamics in Hungary***

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## **Research note - draft**

An old, and in some sense “over-researched” question is about the effect of the media on policy agendas. The general result, established by a number of studies, is that media thematisation inspires the policy agenda, while the reverse effect is negligible: policy agenda is only weakly influencing what the media talk about (see Vliegenthart et al., 2016). However, Hungarian CAP data suggest that in new(er) democracies the media-politics nexus might be considerably different from the patterns typical in established democracies. In a previous paper we found that in Hungary the media have a negligible effect on the policy agenda, while the latter have a strong influence on the media agenda (see Boda & Patkós, 2015). However, this conclusion resulted from a partly qualitative research and its design made the arguments somewhat shaky. Our ambition in this paper is to analyse the media-policy agenda nexus in a quantitative way.

We plan to extend the investigation to 24 years of Hungarian democracy, testing a hypothesis about the difference of the media effect under left- and right-wing governments, assuming that policy making under right-wing governments is even less responsive to the media. We will analyse the phenomenon of “parallelism” in the media, that is, how parallel media universes co-exist according to political sympathies and how differentiated their effect is on policy agendas (and vice versa) under governments of different colours. Finally, we intend to relate the patterns of media-politics effects to the stages of democracy. The quarter century of Hungarian democracy has been divided by scholarly work into three stages: transition period, consolidated democracy and crisis. We assume that the role of the media has been different during the different stages: it was weaker in the transition as well as the crisis periods and stronger during the consolidation phase when Hungarian democracy was the closest to the Western model of democracy. However, at the present stage and in this research note we limit our attention to the patterns of the media-policy agenda in the 2010-2014 parliamentary cycle.

### *Media and policy agenda*

Does the media agenda influence policy making? 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 (Vliegenthart 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 thematisation of the issues. Causality is hypothesised on the basis of temporal lags between agendas and the fact of successive

thematization.

Studies about the media's influence on the parliamentary agenda are of particular interest for us, since this is the focus of our own research as well. A number of individual country studies suggest that the media matters for parliamentary politics (e.g., Vliegenghart and Walgrave (2011), Walgrave et al. (2008), using Belgian data; Thesen (2013), using Danish data; Vliegenghart and Montes (2014), using Dutch and Spanish data). In a major study comparing data from seven countries (Belgium, Denmark, France, Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, the United Kingdom) Vliegenghart et al. (2016) reached the general conclusion that the media agenda indeed influences the subject of parliamentary questions. Their study is among the few which considered the reverse effect as well, that is parliamentary questions spurring media attention. They found that this effect is much weaker: "Interestingly, the media seem to be more inspiring for questioning than that questions seem to elicit media attention for the underlying issue" (Vliegenghart et al., 2016: 295).

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. Melenhorst (2015) argues that the Dutch legislative process on amending the regulation of MP remuneration was substantially shaped by the media coverage of the issue. However, scholars studying the factors that lead to real policy change are usually more sceptical or cautious about the influencing power of the media. 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.

The only research so far on the media and policy agenda nexus is a paper by Boda and Patkós (2015). They argue that in the 2010-2014 parliamentary cycle the government had a high agenda setting capacity in Hungary, being the initiator of the majority of policy making events which have been the most attentively followed by the media. In contrast, policy entrepreneurs were not especially able to influence the agenda of politics and the media. The large majority of the issues which appeared intensively in the media were not initiated by pressure groups, opposition parties or by the civil society. This is explained by the fact that the governing party had a two-third (constitutional) majority in the parliament and the government used this as a leverage to introduce reforms in a number of policy fields. Legislation happened at an accelerated speed and more laws were adopted in this governmental period than ever before.

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 three cases, with dramatic events. Therefore they argue that the media's potential to influence the policy agenda is weak and the same applies to their ability to spur policy change – although in some cases media coverage of issues led to legislative changes. In their qualitative analysis they focused on the extreme cases of higher than average media attention. It cannot provide a full picture but it suggests that the general media effect should be even weaker.

Our present endeavor aims at testing the results of this previous study with a quantitative methodology.

### *Research question and hypotheses*

Our research question is about the relationship between the media and the policy agendas. Does the media agenda have an influence on policy agendas, as found in established democracies, or a reverse effect is the dominant pattern due to the peculiarities of the Hungarian policy making process? Following the findings of Boda & Patkós (2015) we assume that the media had no effect on the policy agendas.

H1. The media had no significant influence on the agenda of the interpellations.

H2. The media had no significant influence on the legislative agenda.

Conversely we assume that the policy agendas affected media thematisation of issues.

H3. Interpellations influenced the media agenda.

H4. The legislative agenda influenced the media agenda.

### *Data and method*

In order to answer our hypotheses we analyze the relationship between laws, interpellations and media coverage in Hungary 2010-2014. These databases have some complementarity because the law database represents the agenda of the parliament and especially the governing majority, while the interpellations reflect the concerns of the opposition.

The data availability is different regarding the three cases. The law database contains all the laws were accepted in Hungary from 1990 to 2014, the number of the records are more than three thousands. There are three different dates concerning a law, which can be used analyzing this database: the date of introduction, the date when the parliament passed the law, and the date when it was published. In our analysis we use the date of introduction because this marks the start of beginning of an issue and this is the most relevant from the perspective of agenda formation. The timing of parliamentary sessions strongly influences the distribution of the law database, therefore we first analyze the legislative agenda in a quarter year aggregation level.

While laws express the aim of the governing parties, interpellation is a tool for the opposition to criticize the government. In the period of 1990-2014 there were almost 5000 interpellations in the Hungarian Parliament. In case of interpellations there are also three relevant dates which are usable: the date of introduction, the date of the first debate and the date when the House voted on the interpellation. In this case we also use the date of the introduction.

The media database contains the coded news of the front pages articles of the two biggest daily in Hungary, one from the left (Népszabadság) and one from the political right (Magyar Nemzet). The database includes 19,161 items. Each article received policy codes (one major topic and one subtopic code) based on its dominant policy content, according to the Hungarian version of the CAP codebook. Coding was made manually by three researchers and supervised by the research director. The data were controlled with a sample coding. The coding procedure – instructions and codebook –

followed strictly the methodology used in other CAP projects, only minor modifications has been made to adapt the original codebook to the Hungarian context. A crosswalk between the American and Hungarian codebooks is available on the webpage of the research project (<http://cap.tk.mta.hu>). Both the interpellation and the legislative databases contain the same major topic and subtopic codes, while the media database contains some additional, media specific codes for reports about sport events, weather forecasts, etc.

In order to test our hypotheses we used pooled time-series models based on the monthly and quarter year aggregations of the data. The main variables are the relative share of attention devoted to an issue in parliamentary questions and media per month. In each case we test our data with fixed, random and mixed effects (Model1-Model2-Model3).

### Results

First we introduce the monthly aggregated data in table 1. The results of the OLS model confirm that the interpellation has a weak effect on the media agenda (only the mixed model shows this connection). One percent increase in the interpellations results 0.0338 percent increase in the media for that issue. The strong association between  $media_{(t-1)}$  marks the coherence of the database and the continuity of the media issues. This model corroborates our hypothesis about the relation between the policy and the media agendas.

The other direction shows no significant relation, the media has no effect on the interpellations.

Table 1. Dependency between media and interpellation on a monthly basis (OLS-PCSE)

|                        | Media            |                  |                 |
|------------------------|------------------|------------------|-----------------|
|                        | Model1           | Model2           | Model3          |
| Media                  |                  |                  |                 |
| Media <sub>(t-1)</sub> | 0.193*** (6.34)  | 0.792*** (40.27) | 0.217*** (7.25) |
| Interpellation         | 0.0131 (1.02)    | 0.0338* (2.37)   | 0.0142 (1.11)   |
| Cons                   | 3.802*** (21.47) | 0.916*** (6.04)  | 3.684*** (4.24) |
| R <sup>2</sup>         | 0.6395           | 0.6402           |                 |

Notes: \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001

Table 2. Dependency between interpellation and media on a monthly basis (OLS-PCSE)

|                        | Interpellation  |                 |                 |
|------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                        | Model1          | Model2          | Model3          |
| Media                  | 0.0838 (1.02)   | 0.113 (1.47)    | 0.115 (1.51)    |
| Media <sub>(t-1)</sub> | 0.0333 (0.42)   | 0.0585 (0.79)   | 0.0601 (0.81)   |
| Interpellation         |                 |                 |                 |
| Cons                   | 4.104*** (7.74) | 3.845*** (4.30) | 3.829*** (4.45) |
| R <sup>2</sup>         | 0.0362          | 0.0363          |                 |

Notes: \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001

Second we present the results of the models where data was aggregated on a quarter year level. In these models, similarly to the previous ones, the distribution of the cap codes in  $(t-1)$  strongly influence  $t$ , that is, the thematic continuity is observable in this case as well. Two variables have influence on the media: as in the previous model interpellation has significant effect in  $t_i$  and the law in  $t_i$ , as well but not for  $(t-1)$ . The measure of the influence are similar in the two cases, one percent increase in the interpellations results 0.0672, and one percent increase in the law results 0.0713 percent increase in the media for a given issue. The absence of association between the media agenda on one hand, and laws and interpellations in  $(t-1)$  could be because of the structure of the data: three months are too long a duration for any agenda effect.

Table 3. Dependency between policy agenda and media on a quarter-year basis (OLS-PCSE)

|                                 | Media            |                 |                  |
|---------------------------------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|
|                                 | Model1           | Model2          | Model3           |
| Media <sub>i,t</sub>            |                  |                 |                  |
| Media <sub>(t-1)</sub>          | 0.306*** (11.06) | 0.783*** (7.77) | 0.328*** (12.05) |
| Interpellation                  | 0.0434 (1.80)    | 0.0672* (2.55)  | 0.0466 (1.95)    |
| Interpellation <sub>(t-1)</sub> | -0.0156 (-0.64)  | -0.0417 (-1.19) | -0.0149 (-0.62)  |
| Law                             | 0.0249 (1.49)    | 0.0713* (2.44)  | 0.0283 (1.70)    |
| Law <sub>(t-1)</sub>            | 0.00837 (0.50)   | 0.0271 (1.47)   | 0.0104 (0.62)    |
| Cons                            | 3.070*** (13.51) | 0.588*** (3.94) | 2.925*** (3.71)  |
| R <sup>2</sup>                  | 0.67             | 0.67            | 0.67             |

Notes: \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001

In table 4 we introduce the effects on interpellations. Here we can see that interpellation in the  $(t-1)$  has a strong effects on interpellations in  $t_i$ . In both Model 2 and 3 laws have a weak influence on interpellations.

Table 4. Dependency between media and interpellation on quarter year basis (OLS-PCSE)

|                                 | Interpellation   |                 |                 |
|---------------------------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                                 | Model1           | Model2          | Model3          |
| Media <sub>i,t</sub>            | 0.0729 (1.80)    | 0.102 (1.55)    | 0.0822* (2.09)  |
| Media <sub>(t-1)</sub>          | 0.00515 (0.14)   | -0.0490 (-1.89) | 0.00671 (0.18)  |
| Interpellation                  |                  |                 |                 |
| Interpellation <sub>(t-1)</sub> | 0.207*** (6.77)  | 0.558*** (6.44) | 0.232*** (7.68) |
| Law                             | 0.00309 (0.14)   | 0.103* (2.45)   | 0.0122 (0.57)   |
| Law <sub>(t-1)</sub>            | -0.0261 (-1.20)  | 0.0487 (1.54)   | -0.0191 (-0.89) |
| Cons                            | 3.548*** (11.84) | 1.239* (2.08)   | 3.310*** (4.75) |
| R <sup>2</sup>                  | 0.3577           | 0.3669          |                 |

Notes: \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001

In Table 5 the last possible relations (effects on laws) are presented. While in the previous cases the  $(t-1)$  strongly influenced  $t_i$ , here we can't see the same effect. The three model shows different effects, in the first one interpellations have negative effect on law, in the second both the media and interpellations have a weak effect, while interpellations in  $(t-1)$  exert a stronger effect on laws. In the third model only the media $(t-1)$  have effect on the distribution of laws. The diverse and contradictory results suggest that the aggregation level may not be appropriate for this analysis.

Table 5. Dependency between law and media on a quarter-year basis (OLS-PCSE)

|                                 | Law              |                 |                 |
|---------------------------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                                 | Model1           | Model2          | Model3          |
| Media <sub>i,t</sub>            | 0.0866 (1.49)    | 0.206* (2.25)   | 0.121* (2.16)   |
| Media <sub>(t-1)</sub>          | 0.00345 (0.06)   | 0.0258 (0.35)   | 0.0210 (0.39)   |
| Interpellation                  | 0.00641 (0.14)   | 0.197** (2.84)  | 0.0364 (0.82)   |
| Interpellation <sub>(t-1)</sub> | -0.0899* (-2.00) | 0.0608* (1.96)  | -0.0657 (-1.48) |
| Law                             |                  |                 |                 |
| Law <sub>(t-1)</sub>            | -0.0722* (-2.31) | 0.101** (2.79)  | -0.0544 (-1.76) |
| Cons                            | 5.044*** (11.66) | 1.983*** (4.65) | 4.464*** (5.53) |
| R <sup>2</sup>                  | 0.0037           | 0.1482          |                 |

Notes: \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001

## Conclusion

In this research note we tested the relation between the policy and the media agendas. Our hypotheses formulated the opposite direction of effects as did previous studies conducted in established democracies. Our models indeed indicate that the policy agendas (interpellations and laws) weakly influence the media agenda both at the monthly and the quarter year aggregation level of the data. However, the effect of the media on policy agendas is also present although only in some models. We believe that the results suggest that the reverse effect between media and the policy agendas might indeed be a plausible hypothesis in the Hungarian context, but further analyses are certainly needed.

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