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THE IMPACT OF SUNDAY CLOSURE ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT - Our study deals with the characteristics of government regulation limiting the opening hours of retail units. We have outlined the most important international literature on the topic, while focusing on the peculiarities of limiting opening hours, mainly on its effects that influence the economic sector, competition and buying habits. In the empirical part of our research, we carried out a questionnaire survey to find out how the new law – which entered into force on March 15, 2015 and restricts the trading hours on Sundays and at nights – affects customer behavior. In our research, we compared the situation before and after the act came into force. Special emphasis was placed on the time and place of purchases (type of retail unit) and on spending. We found out that customer behavior of the Hungarian shoppers had remarkably changed after the law came into force: although the time available for shopping had been considerably shortened, the amount spent on purchases had not changed. However, the types of retail outlets where this money is spent had. Besides the supermarkets and discount stores, the role of small corner shops significantly increased (the law allows them to trade freely). The society's attitude to the new system is rather negative – as our research points out. The majority of the population rejects the new, restricted trading hours and would like to re-establish the more liberal opening hours, which were in effect before March 15, 2015.

Keywords: Sunday closing, shopping malls, corner shop

INTRODUCTION

Regulating the opening hours of different retail units (on state or regional level) is not a new phenomenon; for decades, it has been a reoccurring economic problem, which also affects other fields like law, religion or ethics.

It is possible to analyze the question of the regulation of the opening hours from a merely economic point of view (based on efficiency and profit-maximizing) (Ferris, 1991). However, in our further investigation – before dealing with the Hungarian peculiarities and our research results – we attempt to provide an overview of the different points, based on international literature. As we will see, besides the economic, profit-maximizing approach, there are several other aspects: employment policy, questions of price and competition, considerations connected to government policy and religious values are also part of the rather complex problem which defines a country's own regulation of opening hours (Sikos T. T., 2000; Sikos T. T. and Hoffmann I.-NÉ, 2004; Sikos T. T., 2007; Sikos T. T., 2009; Sikos T. T. and Hoffmann I.-NÉ, 2012).

Besides Hungary, other EU countries also apply Sunday closure. "Quiet Sundays" was the initiative of the Christian Church, with partial support from some trade unions (Alsos, K. and Olberg, D., 2012) with the aim of helping employees to maintain their mental and physical health. Shops are closed in Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Norway and Turkey, but only partly; and the different countries use different regulations. The need for having days off and rest days first arose in Austria in 1895, but closures were fixed by the law only in 1910. Since then Austrian retailers have been constantly forced to modify the strict rules: first shops could be open on

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Saturday morning, then in certain cases on Saturday afternoons, mainly because Germany in 1996 eased its regulations and Austrian shoppers would leave for Germany to their shopping there.

A dynamic development in tourism also urged the changes, since restrictions had a negative effect on tourism development. Total abolishment of restrictions would create new workplaces in retail trade and would mean a considerable increase in Austrian GDP. Lifting regulations in Germany are also continuous; decisions are made on federal level, so bakeries, florists, newsagents can be open on Sundays, and shops on the stations are also allowed to sell. As a result of this, bus and railway stations incorporated another function – retailing – and were transformed into multifunctional centers (Whitney, 1995; Zikmund and d'Amico, 2001). France, with consideration to the mutual interest of buyers and retailers is constantly easing the laws on opening hours of retail units. Amendments to the law are made to enhance the activities of retailers, who refer to local peculiarities and tourism, so they can get exemption from the Sunday closing and food stores can stay open until 1 o'clock p.m. If they request, on five Sundays a year these shops can be open after that time as well (Barnes, 1984). Tourist resorts can also get exemption in case they can prove that their town is a tourist center. Anyway, this opportunity provides the retailer almost complete freedom. The situation in Belgium is similar to France concerning trade in tourist resorts; the only difference is that in return shops must be closed on another day of the week. This limitation does not refer to garden supply and furniture stores. In 2003, Slovenia held a referendum on Sunday closing, which was supported by 58% of the voters, but finally they decided to reject the proposal being afraid of the decline in demand. In Croatia Sunday closure was introduced in 2009, but due to a 15% decrease in turnover in the retail sector, after six month the regulation was withdrawn.

Strict restrictions have a negative impact on the labor market as well as on the favorable changes in GDP.

In our brief theoretical summary, we attempted to introduce the characteristics of the different systems of opening hours, which the different countries apply. Having analyzed the international examples, it is important to emphasize that state regulation of opening hours (liberalization vs. restrictions) can only be explained in a given socio-economic context, consequently, opening hours can only be defined effectively and justly when the determining social and economic factors of the given period are also considered.

The main question concerning the Hungarian system is how much the present legal frameworks are adjusted to the characteristics and needs of the Hungarian society and to what extent they help or hinder their operation.

METHODS

Based on the findings in international literature, we can state that regulating the opening hours of retail units (liberalization or restriction) greatly affects how a country's retail system operates.

The present study aims to examine the impacts of the state restriction of the opening hours in a primary research. We wish to point out changes in customer behavior caused by the new legislation after March 15, 2015.

Compared to the previous regulations, the present act in force has considerably restricted the opening hours of retail units with trading floor larger than 200 m^2 at nights and on Sundays. The Act CII of 2014 "on prohibition of work on Sundays" in the retail sector states that stores must remain closed between 22.00 and 6.00 on workdays and on Sundays and public holidays except for retailers who operate their business themselves.

Present regulations – contrary to the practices in previous decades – greatly affected the buying habits of the population who were used to permanent opening hours and had a negative impact on their feeling of comfort. The measure had wide press coverage, opponents and supporters also had their say.

The new regulation had almost immediate impacts on the society and also generated remarkable changes in the retail sector by altering the time-dimension of shopping behavior. The aim of our analysis is to discover the areas, the ways and the extent the new opening hours influenced shopping behavior. To analyze the changes, shopping behavior before and after the introduction of

Sunday closing had to be assessed. We decided to apply a self-administered questionnaire survey to get the clearest possible picture and to be able to map the changes in buying habits before and after March 15. In the questionnaire, respondents registered their shopping for one week in time periods. This method was preferred to frontal surveys and online questionnaires because – as we see it – surveyed people had enough time to answer the individual questions and could register their shopping even daily, so we could avoid a loss of data.

Data collection for the survey was conducted in two periods: in January and February 2015, before the measure was introduced and after it came into force in April and May. The first sample size was n=151, the second was n=121. For selecting the respondents, the simple random sampling method was used. We also considered it important that the two samples would partly match, so 66 persons in the second sample (observing the required security and privacy measures) were the same as in the first one.

The questionnaires consisted of the following main parts:

1. Descriptive features – name, age, occupation, education, size of the household, housing, car supply, etc. of the respondents.
2. Charts containing data on the place and time of purchasing FMCG.
3. Charts containing data on the place and time of purchasing durables.
4. Questions surveying attitudes towards Sunday closing (only in the second questionnaire).

In the questionnaire, questions referring to buying FMGC and durables were separated because buying behavior in case of these two kinds of products greatly differs in motivation, time of shopping, spending, type of retail outlet, etc.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows the main descriptive features of the samples. The distribution of the two samples by gender, age and education is similar, because almost half of the people asked participated in both surveys.

Examining the distribution data and the methodology used in the questionnaire, we can state that the sample cannot be considered representative. It is highly suitable to examine buying habits, because it consists of women mainly, with high school diploma and higher educational qualification, and young or middle-aged adults. These groups are the target groups of shopping malls and other retail units, since they have the highest discretionary income.

Table 1. *Demographic and education characteristics of the sample*

Before 15 March 2015			After 15 March 2015		
Sex, %			Sex, %		
	Male	31		Male	23
	Female	69		Female	77
Age, %			Age, %		
	under 25	11.8		under 25	19.2
	25-34 ages	31.6		25-34 ages	28.3
	35-44 ages	25		35-44 ages	24.2
	45-54 ages	19.1		45-54 ages	15
	55-64 ages	7.2		55-64 ages	7.5
	over 65	5.3		over 65	5.8
School degree, %			School degree, %		
	Elementary school	2		Elementary school	0.8
	Vocational school	6		Vocational school	3.3
	Secondary school	32.5		Secondary school	35
	BSc or BA degree	27.8		BSc or BA degree	29.2
	MSc, MA degree	31.8		MSc, MA degree	31.7

Data source: own data collection

During the survey, we attempted to have a picture of the financial situation of the respondents so that we can justify our preliminary supposition concerning their income. Respondents, in general, do not feel comfortable with answering these kinds of questions, so we used an indirect method to survey it. 79% and 78% of the people who filled in the questionnaire stated that they own a motorcar, which is above the national average – according to the Hungarian Central Statistical Office in 2010, 57 out of 100 households owned a car.

We tried to approach the financial situation of the households not only by surveying how well they are supplied with durables, but we also asked them self-administered questions on their income. On a six-point rating scale respondents considered their financial situation "rather good" (Figure 1). More than 70% of them marked points 4-6, 4 being the mode. It is remarkable that 1/3 of the respondents considered their financial situation particularly good (5-6 points). This fact is important because they create the main target group of retail businesses, because from their higher income they can buy more and better quality (consequently of larger gross-margin) products and services.

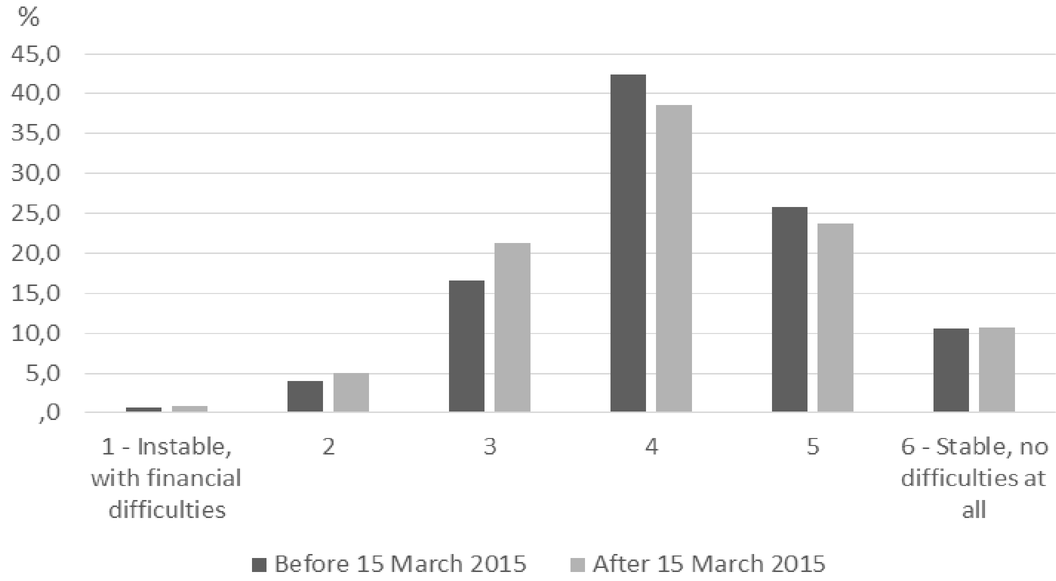

Figure 1. *Financial status of the surveyed people, %*
Source: own data collection

After exploring the demographic features and financial situation of the surveyed people, we examine the characteristics of their shopping habits. Although the main goal of our research was to explore the impacts of Sunday closing, we also examined and analyzed some important questions related to how shopping actually takes place.

The time, the volume, the quantity, etc. of shopping are influenced by the means of transport used to get to the point of purchase (Figure 2). Here we can draw two important consequences. The first one is that the use of cars for shopping has become dominant nowadays, 2/3 of people shopping for food and 4/5 of people shopping for electric appliances prefer this method of transport. The other one is that there is a considerable difference between the means used for buying foodstuff and durables. As it could be expected, people walk to the stores to buy food more often, while using a motorcar for buying more expensive, often large sized household items is much more common.

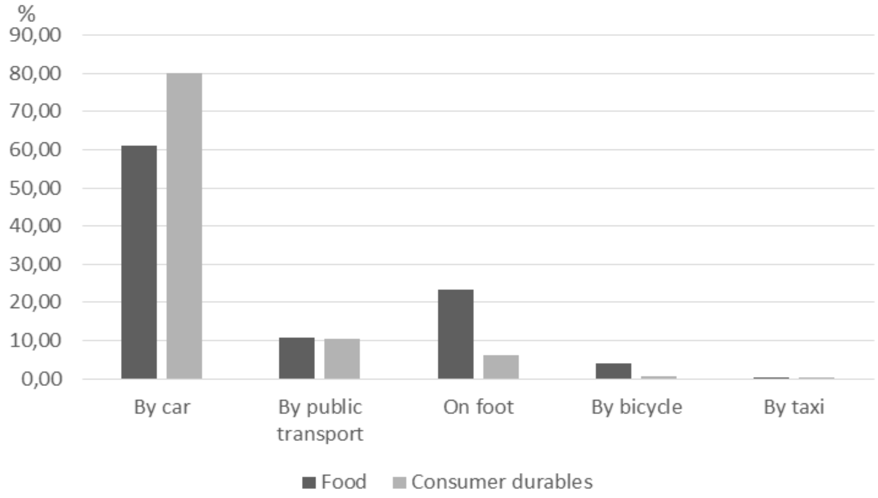

Figure 2. *Preferred means of transport, May 2015, %*
Source: own data collection

Characteristics of shopping for food and other FMCGs

In the following part of the study, we examine separately the buying habits when shopping for food and other FMCGs before and after the Sunday closure came into force. In our research, we mapped the time and day of shopping in different retail units: shopping malls, hypermarkets, supermarkets, discount stores, corner shops and online stores as well.

Because of space limitation, we do not discuss buying habits characteristics for all types of retail units, we only focus on those ones which contributed to reaching our research goals the most.

Sunday closing has the largest impact on shopping malls. Retail units with large floor-space can be regarded new “downtowns” or “cathedrals of consumption”, which do not only serve trading purposes, but also have social, cultural and service-providing aspects. As Figure 3 shows, more than 1/4 of the surveyed (28%) would visit a shopping center on Sundays. This group of potential buyers disappeared from the malls after March 15, 2015. A small part of the Sunday turnover was channeled to the other days of the week, but at the same time, the total number of visits to the malls decreased.

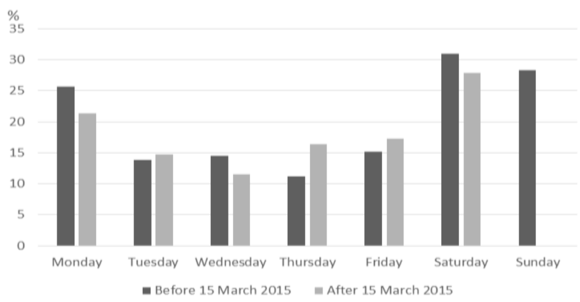

Figure 3. *Purchases in shopping centers before and after March 15, 2015, %*
Source: own data collection

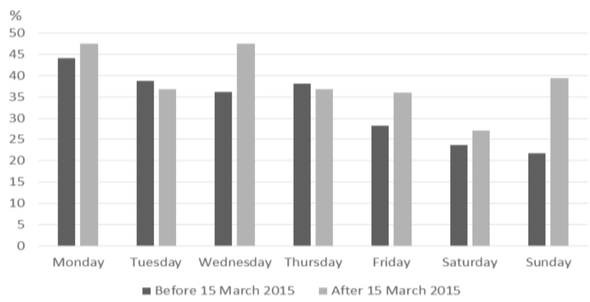

Figure 4. *Purchases in corner shops, %*
Source: own data collection

Based on our research we can say that this rearrangement of store traffic due to Sunday closing is more significant in case of hypermarkets (Tesco, Interspar, Auchan), supermarkets and discount stores, where shoppers have to re-group their shopping to the other days of the week. In these three categories of retail units the number of purchases generally grew on the other days of the week (opposed to shopping centers, see Figure 3).

Sunday closing had the least negative impact on small corner shops. A fundamental aim of the regulation was to enable shop owners to keep their stores open on Sundays. Some of them (independent owners) even gained a business advantage over their competitors. Although the regulation affects a smaller circle of corners shops only – mainly family businesses – where the owner (also) works in the shop, it still considerably contributes to the business success of the sector: on Sundays, other shops are closed, so they have to cope with a remarkably less fierce competition.

Analyzing the frequency of shopping in small shops, we can see that they suffered a relative small traffic loss by introducing Sunday closing. Only 21% of the customers (every 5th customer) do their shopping in small shops (opposed to the 28% of shopping centers), so a smaller part of store traffic was redirected to other days (especially because of the stores which are open on Sundays) (Figure 4).

Our research examines not only the days of shopping, but the times of purchases as well. Each day is divided into five periods and we examined the purchases in the different retails units in these intervals.

This analysis does not provide the opportunity to discuss the characteristics of all types of retail units, but we briefly describe the most common ones individually.

Dispersion of purchases in a day follows two main patterns: in case of retail units of larger shopping floor afternoon and evening shopping dominate, while in smaller shops store traffic is concentrated for the morning hours, the number of customers significantly decline later.

Hypermarkets, supermarkets and discount stores show a rather similar pattern for intraday purchases; however, our study concentrates on hypermarkets only. In their case, the number of customers decreased most during the day. This is probably the result of Sunday closing – buyers usually visited these retail units Sunday morning or afternoon. The new regulation ceased night shopping, since (after March 15, 2015) these stores must remain closed after 22.00.

Being open on six days a week only actually "concentrates" store traffic both inside a week and a day as well, since customers have significantly less time to visit the stores, so they must rationalize their time spent on shopping.

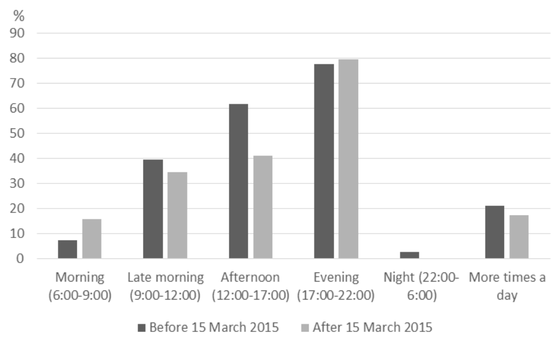

Figure 5. *Purchases in hypermarkets in different times of the day*
Source: own data collection

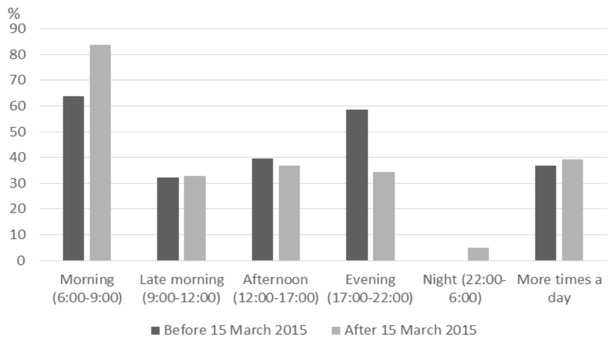

Figure 6. *Purchases in corner shops in different times of the day*
Source: own data collection

As for small stores, a completely opposite trend can be observed. While in case of stores with larger shopping area traffic is concentrated to the afternoon or evening hours, in small shops the morning hours are busier (Fig.6). Besides the increase in morning sales, we must mention that corner shops can also be open at night. Those operated by their owner can stay open after 22.00. 5% of the people surveyed do shopping in these stores; although only those corner shops are open where either the owner of a family member is present.

To determine the success of a certain type of retail outlet, the frequency of shopping and spending should be analyzed together, because these two variables together position the certain types on the scale of retail outlets.

In our research, we asked respondents to divide 100 units according to the sum they spend in the different retail outlets. Figure 7 shows, that while in retail centers the proportion of spending stagnated or decreased (shopping centers, hypermarkets), in stores of smaller shopping area (supermarkets, discount stores) a small increase can be observed. The explanation might be that customers compensate the loss in time (shops being closed on Sundays and after 22.00), they go to smaller shops that are closer to their homes and where the time spent on shopping is significantly shorter. The proportion of doing the shopping in small stores has remarkably increased after March 15, which definitely happened because these shops are open at night and on Sundays as well (with some limitation). We can surely state that the law has reached its goal: independent shop owners got into a more favorable business situation, and caused competitive disadvantage to units of retail chains with large selling floor.

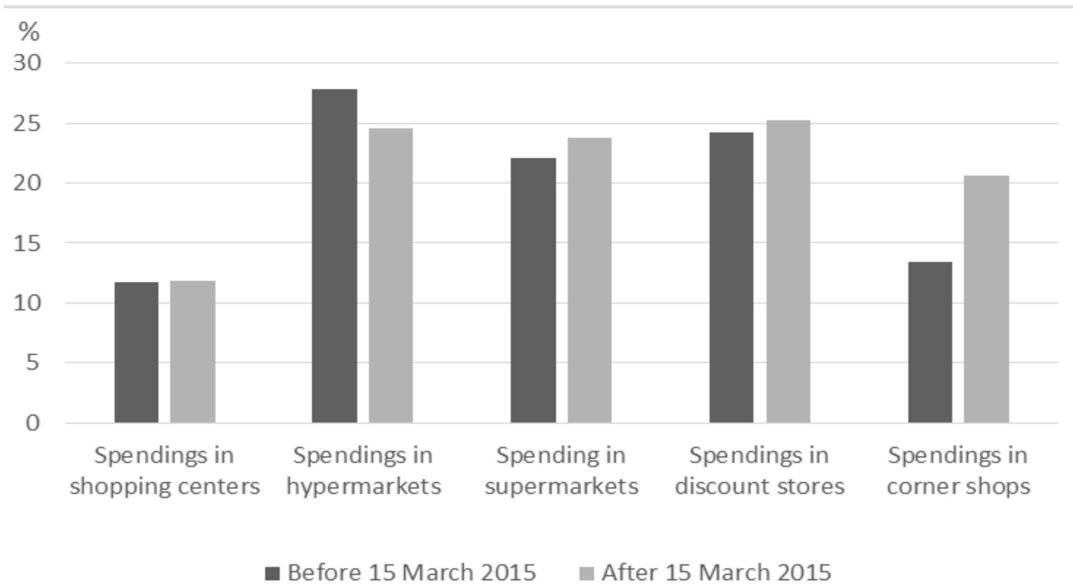

Figure 7. *Distribution of spending among different types of shops (average), %*
Source: own data collection

Sunday closing did not substantially influence the proportion of spending in shopping centers (Figure 7) because – see Figure 3 – although the frequency of shopping declined (Sunday shopping was not channeled to another days), we can suppose that buyers try to rationalize their shopping and visit these malls less frequently, but keep on buying the necessary products and services.

Characteristics of shopping for durables

The next part of the study focuses on the characteristics of shopping for durables, which is particularly important for stores selling consumer durables like shopping malls and specialized stores (Media Markt, OBI, etc.).

In our research, we found that 4/5 of the respondents did their shopping on Saturdays and 2/3 of them on Sundays, so generally customers bought their durables at weekends. Due to Sunday closing, the proportion of buying these products during the week increased considerably (Figure 8). There was a 20% increase – from 40 to 60% – in buying durables on Fridays, but this rate is above 20% on the other days as well. Considering the working hours for the majority of the Hungarian population, we can state that due to Sunday closing purchasing these products has become particularly inconvenient. Shopping for consumer durables can be done either after work, or, in many cases, only by taking a day off.

Since buying durables most of the times requires a family consensus (family members give advice or opinion), Sunday closure will probably cause further inconveniences especially for those who work on Saturdays (continuous work schedule, second job, etc.).

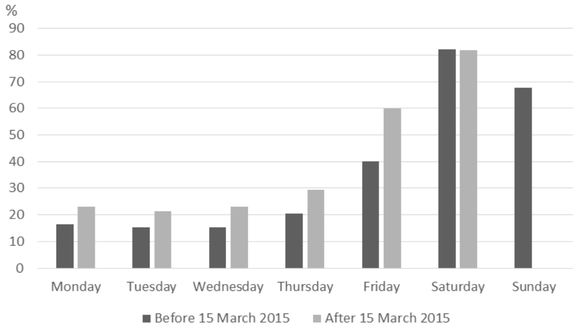

Figure 8. *Times of purchasing durables, %*
Source: own data collection

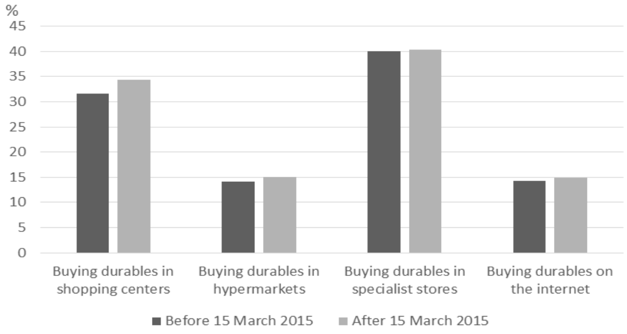

Figure 9. *Distribution of spending among different types of shops in case of durables (average) %*
Source: own data collection

Preferences of stores selling durables have not been affected by Sunday closing (unlike grocery stores). Respondents buy the products necessary for the household in the same stores as they did before March 15. The importance of shopping centers and specialist stores is remarkable: 3/4 of customer spending is performed in these stores; however, e-commerce also represents a considerable part: respondents realize their 15% spending online (Figure 9).

Public attitudes and opinions

After the overview of the population's buying habits in the case of FMCGs and consumer durables, we will deal with analyzing customer attitudes and opinions. In the questionnaire respondents had to indicate the extent they agree or disagree with the statements concerning Sunday closings on a six-point rating scale. Within the framework of these questions, they formed an opinion on Sunday closing.

We came to similar results both in case of shopping for electric appliances and for consumer durables: buyers agreed that Sunday closing made shopping for these items much more difficult (Figure 10). 70% of the surveyed people tended to agree more (points 4-6) with this statement, while 30% of them (points 1-3) did not. Almost half of the respondents (46%) clearly and totally agreed (point 6) with the statement that Sunday closing caused inconveniences.

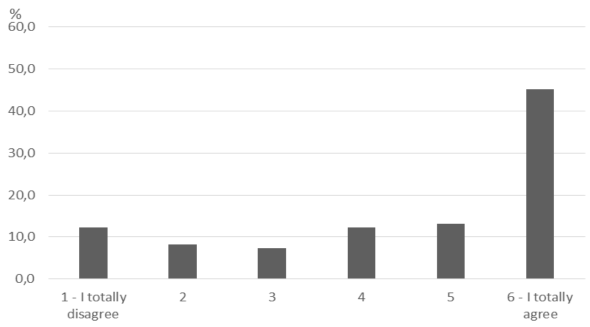

Figure 10. *"Sunday closure made shopping for food more difficult", %*
Source: own data collection

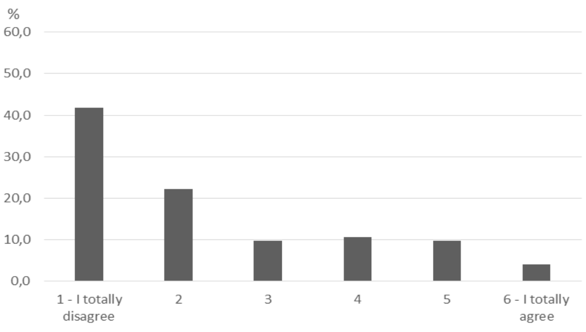

Figure 11. *"I spend less due to Sunday closure", %*
Source: own data collection

In the fierce social and political debate, one of the main arguments of the supporters was that Sunday closing helps families spend more time together. Obviously, this argument is logically flawed, since shopping – especially at weekends – is mostly a family activity, so it did not separate family members.

In spite of this, we asked the participants of the survey about their subjective perception. More than 4/5 of them (88%) said that Sunday closure did not contribute to spending more time with their families (points 1-3) and 60% of them did clearly disagree with the statement (Figure 12). Only 12% of the respondents saw Sunday closing affecting their family life in a positive way (4-6 points), but only 4% declared that they fully and clearly agreed with the statement that they could spend more time with their families.

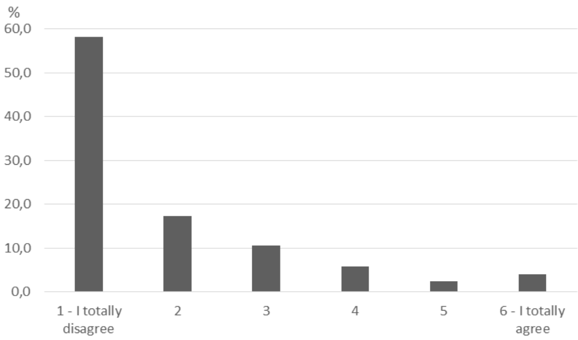

Figure 12. *"I spend more time with my family due to Sunday closure", %*
Source: own data collection

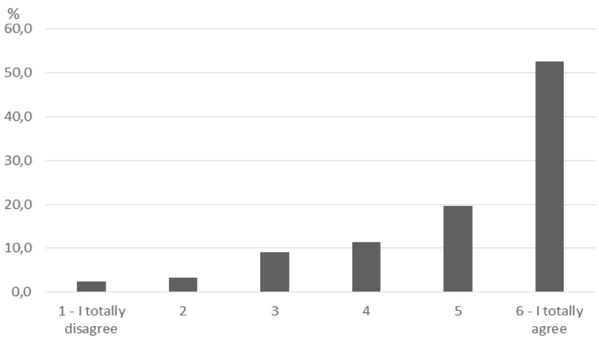

Figure 13. *"Shops are more crowded due to Sunday closure", %*
Source: own data collection

Sunday closing – besides encouraging customers to rationalize and store to extend their opening hours within the frameworks of the law – also posed a serious logistic challenge. Customers, as it can be seen from the figures, mostly concentrated their shopping to the afternoon and evening hours during the week, so crowded stores can only serve their customers after lining up for a long time (at deli counters, cash desks, customer service, etc.). The responses also support this fact. About 80% of the respondents agreed that Sunday closing made the stores more crowded (4-6 points), and more than half of them completely agreed with it (point 6) (Figure 13).

The results of our research justified that shorter opening hours cause great inconveniences, not only because shopping cannot be carried out on Sundays and at night, but because during these shorter hours stores get more crowded, thus reducing the shoppers' feeling of comfort, which was previously established.

The respondents' opinion on how much the extended opening hours could counterbalance the impact of Sunday closing (Figure 14) is in accordance with the above-described findings. As we could see, the majority of retail chains reacted to Sunday closing by extending the opening hours on weekdays, providing enough shopping opportunities and sufficient time for their potential customers. However, the opinion of the majority of respondents reflects that weekdays cannot substitute for Sundays – 85% of the surveyed people do not agree with that statement that longer opening hours on weekdays can counterbalance the effect of Sunday closure (points 1-3).

As it logically follows from the previous statements of the respondents, customers would like to re-introduce the former opening hours on Sundays (75% agreed that they would rather re-establish it if they could). Almost 2/3 of the respondents (60%) fully agreed with this statement, and only 10% declared that they completely reject the idea of re-introducing Sunday opening hours.

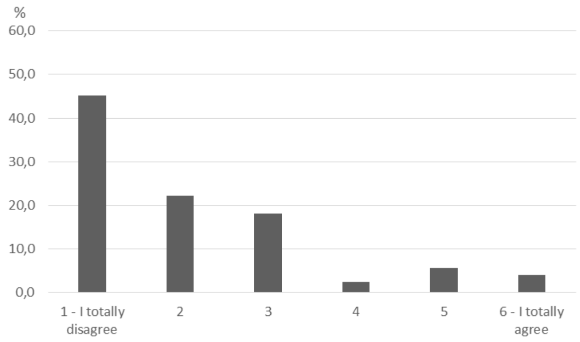

Figure 14. *"Longer opening hours during the week counterbalance the effect of Sunday closure", %*
Source: own data collection

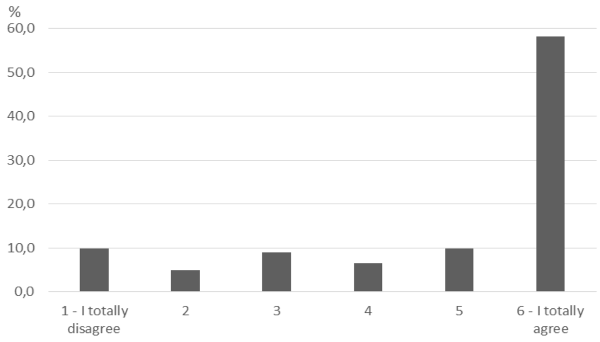

Figure 15. *"I would re-introduce the former opening hours", %*
Source: own data collection

CONCLUSIONS

Our primary research aimed to discover how Act CII of 2014 "on prohibition of work on Sundays" in the retail sector – which came into force on March 15, 2015 – changed buying habits.

In our study, we provided an overview of international literature on the topic, cited foreign examples of positive and negative impacts that similar interferences indicated in the given countries. Based on the analyzed literature we could conclude the followings:

- After the review of the international literature, we carried out a self-administered questionnaire survey. The new regulation came into force on March 15, 2015 and to get a clear picture, we carried the survey out twice, before and after the introduction of Sunday closure (February-March 2015 and April-May 2015).
- Based on the questionnaires, we can say that shopping dates naturally modified because of the obligatory Sunday and night closing, the importance of Sundays and weekdays obviously increased.
- Due to the shorter opening hours, both in case of shopping for FMCGs and durables, a decrease can be observed in the number of shopping frequency, so people buy less frequently.
- The distribution of spending has also changed, especially the share of corners shops in store traffic – which the law supports – has increased in case of FMGCs.
- The distribution of sales turnover among the individual types of retail units has not changed because of the law, specialist stores and shopping centers still dominate in this market.
- According to the opinion of the surveyed people, the new law makes shopping more inconvenient in case of all sorts of products (crowd, shorter opening hours, "Christmas-shopping season" is created in the stores); buyers claim not to spend less on the different products than they did previously.
- So far experiences show that cross-border shopping is increasing (its further growing is only withheld by the unfavorable exchange rate of the Euro).
- An increasing part of the customers turned to online shopping because of the closure, the change in 2015 was 26%.
- Retail businesses can protect themselves against the Act CII of 2014 in two ways: either they lengthen the opening hours of their stores or they decrease their prices.
- The majority of the respondents would re-introduce the former system of opening hours, i.e. they support that retail units should be open on Sundays and at nights again.

Summarizing our findings, we can say that competition inside the retail sector has changed after the introduction of the new law, which is favorable for the Hungarian MSME sector, especially in the market of FMGCs. This change within the sector is completely in accordance with the government aims; however, it does not create equal conditions for competition. The total spending of the population has only decreased to a lesser extent, although in some areas there have been considerable losses.

We should note here that in the summer of 2015 in tourist resorts the loss VAT in the state budget can be estimated as much as HUF 50-100bn[3]. The law – besides being a measure which restricts competition – also induced remarkable changes in the sector. As an additional impact, deterioration of welfare can also be observed for the majority of the population, since a decisive part of the respondents reported that Sunday closure had negative impacts and supported the idea of re-introducing of the former opening hours.

Based on our research findings (the opinion of the majority of the population), and on the impacts of some further Hungarian and international measures currently in progress (e.g. decisions of the European Committee, initiatives for a referendum) – in our opinion – the sustainability of the present system of Sunday closure is questionable even in medium term. There would be a revision of and correction to the system so that the newly introduced changes would better meet the needs of the majority of the Hungarian society and would better adjust to the social and family needs and recreational habits.

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[3] Kozák, Ákos, head of GfK Hungária, estimates that in July and August 2015 Sunday closing caused a loss of HUF 50-100bn in the government budget due to the decline in trade around tourist centers http://www.napi.hu/magyar_gazdasag/vasarnapi_zarva_tartas_kemeny_tenyek_erkeztek.602630.html

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