

Media and Politics. Aspects and Transformations in the Hungarian Regional Media

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Summary: The changes that have been introduced lately in Hungary affected several levels of regional organization. Yet they have not realized an overall system that could be put in effect after criteria have changed.

In my research I map how the local press's influence and thematizing scope depend on countrywide power relations and how are the central and the local political directives interrelated. I will make my theses in view of these aspects.

1.1 Introduction:

The changes that have been introduced lately in Hungary affected several levels of regional organization. Yet they have not realized an overall system that could be put in effect after criteria have changed.

Since both politics and space can be defined only with difficulties, and, what's more, since space – according to the regional and local episteme that discuss space – can be defined mostly in terms of its geographic extension, the social discourse of space often crops up as a question of local government exclusively, and in some cases are considered as problems of government and organization.

But updated approaches of political science, philosophy, sociology and anthropology cannot get stuck at this level: attention ought to be paid to the symbolic representation of regional phenomena, like the opinion generating effects of the media which more and more influence parts of the society both on the local and on a nationwide level.

In my Ph.D. research I map how the local press's influence and thematizing scope depend on countrywide power relations and how are the central and the local political directives interrelated. I will make my theses in view of these aspects.

I will also analyse those events of the recent past that have been related to politics and have also troubled local public opinion trust in politicians quite much.

For this purpose I have chosen the often used “agenda setting analysis” which explicitly reveals that it is not the world that drives the press but, on the contrary, the press makes the world go around.

Hungary’s joining the European Union has opened new dimensions in the analysis of the media (both electronic and printed media), since the Union’s directives exclusively concern the radio and the television, and the legal organization of the printed press is the individual member countries’ competence, a matter of internal government.

These fact, however, are not sufficient for our purposes and we also have to consider those economic segments that have made the division of the market and the polis¹ viable (c.f. marketability and public service) which has generated a very different and brand new order of consumption in the world of the news.

The present local structure still incorporates long-term determinations, yet the present spatial operation and organization of the economy and the society cannot be derived from processes of the past. The new directions have been mapped out by the new structures that were generated right after the change of the political regime: and the present is being formed by new economic and social institutions and agents. Processes of globalization and increasingly important problems of the shaping of information networks and that of the protection of the environment play more and more influence.

1.2 Identity and Mediatisation

In the 1990s the sovereign subjects of the nation states became strategic agents trying to recognize their interests and the interests they represented in the context of a systematically distributed sovereignty in the global system of interaction. They may exercise considerable influence but they do not have power in comparison with the supranational macro powers and the subnational micro processes. On the one hand, to promote the performance and the marketability of their economies they have to make a tight alliance with global economic interests and they have to conform to the global rules that are promoting stock exchange, while they ask their societies to be patient till the people’s interest deriving from corporate inventiveness gets to them.

On the other hand, nation states survive partly because of a historic inactivity, partly because they are the form in which the nations and the people hosted in the states’ territory can have their last resort and hope against the whirlwind of global processes. That is, the more a state underlies social bonding, the less effective it

¹ Deborah Stone defines the market as a social system in which the individuals are keen on their own welfare via the exchange of things with other individuals.

becomes as one of the agents in the global system of distributional power. The more successful they become on the planetary scene the less effective they are in representing their national voters. This basic contradiction was defining the politics of the millennium almost all over the world.

To maintain and to develop cultural identity and the sovereign forms of communication communities and individuals will have to cope both with mass media technology and with the code monopolizing empire of picture production that also increasingly degenerates interpersonal communication.

Manuel Castels thinks that the conflicting trends of globalization and identity have been forming our world and our lives. The revolution in informational technology and the restructuring of capitalism generated new forms of society: the network society.

Due to new communicational technologies the local media, especially the radio and the cable television have extremely increased their scope parallel with the globalization of the media. Most of these media – that often transmit programmes in collaboration with other local media – have made strong ties with definite wide ranges of the audience while avoiding the standardized programmes of the mass media. This way they get rid of the traditional (immediate or mediate) channels of control that nation states have given birth to generating tv-networks and also in contrast with major newspapers. The local and regional media employs flexible communicational technologies and their political autonomy has been increasing in the formation of public opinion – this was forming a trend as important as the globalization of the media.²

The earlier tight relation between class status and political choice has been basically challenged during the elections. The increasing heterogeneity of experience is the index of that problem that worlds of experience are being also shaped by the media. In this case the class-related types of recognition are as active as the gender- and age-specific ones – e.g. in the habits of watching television.

1.3 The Paradox

Everything pronounced by self-made leading media experts concerning electronic media, and especially television broadcasting has been challenged by now. Both

² According to Bourdieu, the social area's and the social field's relationship is: the area is the whole, the field is just a piece of it. Bourdieu analyses the territory of the relative homogeneous classes.

politically and culturally it is not any more possible to consider television as the sublime agency of transmitting cultural values; neither is it valid to think that news programmes can only be filled with news about political and public political events.

Hungarian television has been restructured at an unbelievable speed during the last ten or twelve years. A paradox situation has resulted from the sharp divide between the public service television and that of commercial television. The service of the polis and the commercialism that is organized by economic interests seemingly are in opposition since – as their names suggest – they do not share a unique aim. But if we pay more attention to the mechanisms in the background it is obvious that there is some partnership and a total competition that establishes cohesion in this dual order.

The public service television channels (MTV1, MTV2, Duna Televízió) are still rigidly attached to the principle inherited from an age that has been long gone, according to which tradition television ought to be preserved as the channel for transferring values. The audience should be urged to become consumers of an elite culture without fail. The paradox effect reveals itself at this point. Soap operas intersect transmissions of theatre performances and magazines; the structure of news programmes loosens, popular cultural effects become more dominant.

Commercial media (RTL Klub, TV2), at the beginning, were not yet ready to launch a definite massive programme quite independent of traditional television partly because the technology and the professional background both had come from the once hegemonic “royal” Hungarian television. As time was passing by (actually it took a single year – 1997/1998) many of the crossover staff were used and refused because they were unable to survive a situation that had never happened before in the history of Hungarian television.

The other side of the coin is the pack of information (news) programmes. These have the same role in both types of television, that is: public service. And this, consequently, has been leading to another conflicting situation.

Here I have to refer to some statements of mine from above: to deal with politics, to inform the viewer about the affairs of the world is not any more limited to display “what really happened” for the media consumers. We often use the term “thematization” these days: it is, actually, the substitution for another term: agenda setting which refers to the feature that it is not the world that directs media, on the contrary, it is the media that makes the world go around. (There might be numberless examples for this, e.g. the political agent past of a politician; the young neo-fascist woman’s extremities; or, for that matter, the unexpected loss of masses of jobs.)

As duality is concerned, the channelling of foreign affair events does not always reveal the facts (and this holds for both types of media), since public service media is always strongly dependent on the government in power; while

commercial media would employ partial information (which is a professional inauthenticity) for the sake of their ad/hoc media partners.

This results in the politicians turning their back to the media. They try to handle their public press relations informing the audience by themselves.

1.4 Centrality and locality in the electronic media

Countrywide transmitting channels (MTV, Duna Televízió, RTL Klub, TV2) possess some privileged position in the channelling of public political events. They are hosted in the capital and because daily political events mostly happen there, they can inform their audience about the minutest flickers in politics. And what's more: they have correspondents in each county centre. The MTV regional studios entertain good relations with the local (city) televisions. But they are not in a privileged position exclusively because of this. Their review of foreign political events and their commentary on them are less dependent on local power relations. They do not have to worry about an accidental financial nuisance in their operation in case they have processed something delicate. And in a television's life economic independence is actual freedom.

Commercial televisions may even have more freedom from this point of view, since if they inform about some public political event they are much less prone to surveillance. This may also be the reason why they can handle events – that political power would definitely not let public service televisions inform about independently – with excess, in the form of a “top story”.

The local or city television's situation is even more troubled. Law does not let local governments direct these media solely. The original intention of the law was to obstruct politics in influencing the supply of information. Yet it is well-known that local governments may and do support local televisions. On the whole, the media operating in the KHT system work in a “multifunctional” system: they are neither solely commercial, nor are they solely public service televisions.

There are cases, like the closing of factories, political scandals, the monitoring of local infrastructure, matters of consumers' rights, where they cannot provide unbiased factual information. In some cases they simply do not intend to go against their “employers.” It also may happen that political conflict erases interviews about the opening of a seemingly independent exhibition or some cultural event promoted by the actual political opposition.

1.5 The Media Act

The thought of a democratic Media Act was born in the heat of the change of the political regime in 1989. The law was passed after seven years of pregnancy and labour in the Hungarian Parliament on 21st December, 1995. It came into effect as the 1996 First Act Concerning Radio and Television Transmission (hence Media Act) in February 1996.

The Media Act brought about a radical legal and professional change. It did not stabilize a concept of the radio and television culture based on the privileged position of the public media which had been formed during the long decades of the state party regime. It was not the result of an organic development. The young Hungarian democracy did this with a definite political intention: to create the freedom of media, a multiform world of the media. They wanted to secure this legally.

Before the Media Act was passed the majority of the media – the almost privileged Hungarian Radio and Hungarian Television – was operating between 1990 and 1995 among the legal remains of the earlier Hungarian Party State. Another group of the media – like the cable televisions that had spread in the 1980s – was left without legalization. Commercial media were only marginal in Hungary before the passing of the Act.

The passing of the Act was late and, consequently, the construction of a Hungarian commercial media – and, hence, a plural media market – was late in comparison with Western European countries', and what's more, in comparison with a number of Central and Eastern European countries' structural change of the media market.

Besides the market, there was a contradictory situation concerning the law. The Republic was announced, political pluralism was established, the transfer to market economy and capitalism was launched: the democratic metamorphosis of the country was completed. The 1990 modification of the Constitution announces the freedom of the press and of speech; the sanctity of property and the freedom of enterprise. The regulation of the world of the media and the situation attached to the Media Act did not match the requirements of the political system and the requirements made by the Constitution. Four contradictory aspects of this situation should be discussed here:

1. In the regulation of the media it was partly the communist regime's media regulation that was still in operation.
2. In the contradictory and legally chaotic situation the Constitutional Court was called to comment on the law (c.f. 37/1992 Act of the Constitutional Court).
3. Several areas – among them the whole range of commercial media, the non-profit media, media-networks, and the public service media itself –

were left unregulated, or, the temporary regulations (like the permissions issued for local media studios) were to be regulated by law in the long run.

4. As a result of all this a democratic, plural media system could not start to work until the passing of the Media Act, and the state had the monopoly of the media almost exclusively till 1996.

This was due to the fact that the Media Act was to be passed in the Parliament with an absolute majority (2/3). So as to pass the Act an essential agreement of the parties consisting the democratic parliament (between 1990 and 1994 the fate of Acts to be passed by an absolute majority mostly depended on the government party, MDF and their opposition, SZDSZ) was needed. This, however, because of the so-called media war and the political distrustfulness could not be achieved. These parties, on the other hand, had agreed that until the Act is passed, that is, until the shaping of a democratic media regulation, the granting of a frequency moratorium was needed: countrywide frequencies with great importance should not be distributed without legal rules in an unregulated situation.

Not only the preparatory time for the Hungarian Media Act was unusually long, its length is also unusual: it took 45 pages in the Hungarian Bulletin to announce the 162 paragraphs of the law. The Hungarian Parliament has made a complex and multifaceted media act.

1.6 The Regionalization of the Media

The Regional Committee made a statement as a conclusion of the debate that concerned the evaluation of structure, foci and context in October, 2005 where in the 19th entry they mention the indispensable role of the regional media, especially that of local press, especially because the latter is intelligible and can communicate with the citizens in their own languages.

In Hungary there are no linguistic boundaries, yet in singular cases regional specificities can make regional communication important.³ No one else will spot the loci and mode of changes for the codificators but the local television people. So they themselves will have to make the law change the way it ought to change in order to maintain local television operation.

In case of televisions in the possession of local governments the indispensable condition of operation is the cooperation with the local government as the owner

³ The open hearing of citizens' problems and fears and the definition of their troubles problems with the help of the media in collaboration with the European Parliament. The *RB* – in collaboration with other European institutions and with the financial support of the European Committee – would organize local and regional media sessions every year. The scheduled date of the first session is in 2006.

of the medium. *HOTE* will be represented by a leading representative at the negotiations between the owner and the television, during which they work out the conditions of cooperation.

At the same time they will take an active part in the shaping and constructing of regional identity as, besides their manifold chores, their uttermost aim is still the same: to create and strengthen local television consciousness; to unite and in this unity professionally and economically strengthen the local televisions and make them well marketable. They should become cornerstones of reference not only in their localities but also regionally and within the country.

There is nothing wrong with this aspect in itself, but before and after the joining of the EU the “average citizen” learnt this phrase, “region” as a catch phrase with some magic scope. Consequently, independent of and prior to regional consciousness, there was a mystique point of reference that could suggest that “regionalism” was kin to some kind of magic.

In my theses I examine the regionalization of the South Trans-Danubian Region (Baranya, Somogy and Tolna Counties) media, meanwhile the question of the Lake Balaton region’s becoming an independent region cropped up.

There has already been a proposition for the modification of legal regulation at the Parliament; and the proposition suggested that the local governments of the 164 towns and villages that are concerned should make a election at the same time with the European Union election in the spring to support the initiation.

“The central government refused to consider the question of the Lake Balaton Region. We have given up our hopes too easily and too fast which decreases our chances considerably. We shall hand in the proposition for the Parliament in two or three weeks,” said István Bóka, mayor of Balatonfüred, FIDESZ MP, head of the Lake Balaton Alliance that unites the local governments.

Jenő Szalóki, mayor of Gyenesdiás, arguing on behalf of the independent Balaton Region, explained that there had been a hundred years’ tradition of handling the Balaton Region as a singular major region with an independent developmental scheme. According to public opinion elections, 82% of the local inhabitants support the formation of the Balaton Region. Árpád Balázs, mayor of Siófok said that as far as he knew every local government might decide whether to pull a vote in which they could ask local people if they wanted the Balaton Region to be formed. The poll could be organized at the same time with the spring elections about the European Union. This would, according to him, also increase the readiness to participate in the EU elections in the Balaton Region.

A suggestion was made at the Alliance Balaton’s Board Meeting, according to which since owners of weekend cottages who are not permanent residents at the Lake Balaton could not participate in the polls they should organize the collection of subscriptions with which they could express their opinion on behalf of making

the Balaton Region and independent region. Further suggestions were made to set up an office in support of the independent region, and in addition to this, the local government of the 164 places and of those that would also like to join the Region, relying on their right to hand in propositions, should send their statement concerning the Balaton Region to the government as soon as possible.⁴

This is a good example that shows that generating regions is a profitable trade. Becoming independent was attached to plans of shaping an overall regional medium (it is still in construction independent of the region's physical realization), hoping that they could develop the medium with the help of EU money. This would certainly increase the chance of drawing the wrath of all the three regions that claim ownership over the Lake Balaton (Western, Central- and South Tans-Danubia).

The joining of the EU meant a challenge for Hungary concerning the supply of information for the local and regional public opinion; and also the further development of a multilingual euro-regional information service providing information about cross-border connections.

The following issues might be the possible targets:⁵

- The verification of regionalism and euro-regionalism.
- Promoting regional identity and promoting cohesion.
- The supply of information needed by the society in connection with EU membership.
- Promotion of the development of infrastructure sufficient for the establishment of Informational Society.
- Promotion of regional media perspective (cultural, social, scientific, educational, life-style, fitness, preserving the environment, labour market, Euro-Atlantic integrational, nationalism, sports, consumers' rights, rehabilitational and local government operation monitoring programmes, articles).
- Promotion of media collaboration in European perspectives and promotion of Euro-regional programmes and publications.

NKF has issued a programme, "The marketability of regions". The report on this programme⁶ reveals that the role of the regions in the increasingly intense development of regions and their economic competence make the local governments face new phenomena. The claim for economic development has

⁴ "Balaton" – MTI, 2003

⁵ Regional Media Foundation (NGO), December 2002

⁶ www.rkk.hu

contributed to the mapping of network structures and to the increasingly closer cooperation with the economic sector. This also made bureaucratic methods more flexible. Regional media may give, actually, has given efficient help for this because regional media is ready to accept partnership, network cooperation, and elements of interest in performance.

1.7 Perspective

Gabriell Cseh and Miklós Sükösd think that the Hungarian Media Act, historically, is novel, and its availability and strength or weaknesses will be revealed by the passing of time. Its honour is undoubtedly that it has established the bases for the establishment of a dual media market in Hungary. When the Act had been passed the legal operation of countrywide and local radios and televisions became possible. The present Act in operation has been based on the patterns of German and French models.

Mihály Gálik, János Horváth, Péter Szente were already referring to a failure. They constructed the basis of a new Media Act already in 2003. They explain in the preambulum of their proposition the reasons why the First Act of 1996 (the Media Act) failed and suggest how the legal regulation of public service and commercial media operation could be made more perfect.

Experts suggest various reasons for the failure. When considering the facts they refer to the well-known English media researcher, Colin Sparks who knows the Hungarian (Czech, Slovak and Polish) media situation from sufficient distance and impartially:

We may draw the conclusion that whatever the Acts say the sufficient political and economic criteria among which public service media could flourish do not exist in Central and Eastern Europe. ...In the whole region politics deeply permeate the control over radio and television operation irrespective of legal regulation or political reality.”

MPs assume that this statement, however it was made seven years ago, is still valid. One of the aspects of the core problem is the one the authors have had to face themselves while doing research: should they be looking for an ideal solution or a politically viable suggestion for the solution would still do? Whatever idea one makes he has to face this dilemma. This is the case in present day Hungary's media situation where the structure of the organization of radios and televisions, their programmes and their controls are one of the most central arena for the collision of public speech and political warfare.

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