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The Hungarian Agendas Project

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The Hungarian Policy Agendas Project was established in 2013. It was initiated and has been led by Zsolt Boda and Miklós Sebők, both researchers at the Institute for Political Science, Centre for Social Sciences of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. It forms part of the Institute's endeavor to contribute to the development of policy studies, a much neglected part of political science in Hungary.

The Comparative Agendas Project, and the underlying paradigm of Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET), served as a natural starting point for conducting policy research in a Central Eastern European country with no deep traditions in policy research for at least two reasons. First, because it involves the creation of large-scale databases that can be used in different kinds of empirical analyses pursuing research questions unrelated to PET in the future. In this, our project not only contributes to the growing research community of CAP, but also to Hungarian political science in general.

Second, the general PET framework directly links policy to politics: policy topics and issues to political actors and institutions. This approach promotes the emancipation of policy studies within political science in Hungary where policy issues are most often discussed along field-specific, technical or expert logics. From our perspective, one of the biggest strengths of PET is that it highlights the profoundly political nature of policymaking.

11.1 The Hungarian Political System

Hungary became a democracy after the regime change of 1990, in the "third wave" of democratization (Huntington, 1991), along with other countries in the region. However, the legacy of the *ancien régime* is still haunting

Hungary in many respects. The pre-1989, socialist system was characterized by the overwhelming role of the state in both the economy and politics. Governance and policymaking was extremely centralized, closed, and dominated by the Socialist party, with few policy venues and very sparse participatory opportunities. Independent civil society was virtually nonexistent, except for some small opposition circles with a limited outreach to the larger society and a few semi-legal movements in less politicized fields like culture or nature conservation. As a result, the transition process to a democratic system was ushered in by changes in global politics and it was orchestrated by the political and cultural elite rather than by mass mobilization from below.

Hungary is a unicameral parliamentary democracy with a relatively strongly institutionalized division of power and a system of checks and balances. MPs have been elected through a mixed electoral system ever since 1990. The prime minister is elected by the National Assembly with a simple majority. The president of the Republic is elected by the National Assembly for a period of five years, which creates a shifted overlap between the presidential and the governmental cycles. The president must sign each piece of legislation and has the right to either send them back to the National Assembly for further consideration or ask the Constitutional Court to review them. Local municipalities have had relatively high political autonomy and a wide range of responsibilities from education to healthcare.

Despite the high social costs of the transition process, the decade of the 1990s brought about a consolidation in both economic and political terms. Hungary experienced an intensive influx of foreign direct investment; GDP started to grow; the country applied for membership of the European Union, which resulted in EU accession in 2004. In politics the two-block system stabilized with the Hungarian Socialist Party as the leading force of the left and Fidesz as the strongest party of the right. Although political polarization increased significantly, the political system appeared to be strong enough to provide the needed stability. However, the second half of the 2000s was marked by a series of political and economic crises, which led to a landslide in Hungarian politics at the 2010 elections. Two new parties, a radical right and a green party, gained seats in the National Assembly, the Socialist party collapsed, while Fidesz won a two-thirds majority.

Using its power, Fidesz initiated large-scale institutional reforms, including the passing of a new constitution, the "Basic Law," in 2011. These reforms have certainly weakened the system of checks and balances: laws requiring a two-thirds majority (which, most of the time, would require a consensus among the governing parties and the opposition) were reduced in number; the rights of the Constitutional Court were curtailed and the possibility of popular motions was eliminated; the Office of the Commissioner for

Fundamental Rights was weakened; a wave of centralization reduced the autonomy of local municipalities.

The extent to which the Fidesz reforms have modified the political system in Hungary is still a matter of debate for political scientists. András Bozóki (2015: 3) argues that Fidesz "has significantly altered the country's legal, social and political infrastructure." While not denying the significance and the scope of the changes, András Körösényi (2015) suggests that the reforms are less important in terms of the formal or legal elements of the political system. The institutions of checks and balances, although weakened, are still in place. The novelty of the Fidesz approach is that it has managed to control or appease these institutions through politically loyal appointees. Körösényi argues that Fidesz imposed a new style of governance and a new political culture, characterized by extremely centralized decision-making, a rejection of the culture of consensus, and a unilateral use of power. In other words, democratic backsliding is less a consequence of institutional changes, but of informal practices.

The political style of Fidesz has had an effect on governance and policy-making as well. The executive branch of government dominates the legislative branch to a large extent (Korkut, 2012). This is hardly a new trend in Hungary, however, Fidesz has further disciplined its MPs through formal and informal norms. Bills originating from the opposition have had practically no chance to be approved since 2010. The speed of the legislation process has further accelerated. According to our own calculations, during the period of 2010–14 the average time between the submission of a bill and the final vote was thirty-four days, the shortest since 1990. Before 2010, the yearly number of adopted laws never surpassed 150. Since 2010, the average number of laws approved per year was more than two hundred, the highest number since 1990.

11.2 Datasets

The Hungarian Policy Agendas Project started in 2013 with the support of the Hungarian Scientific Research Fund (OTKA).[1] Adopting the coding system of the Comparative Agendas Project, our country project released a wide range of databases up until the second quarter of 2017 (see Table 11.1).

We put special emphasis on collecting data for each major phase of the policy process: inputs (media, public opinion, party platforms), policy processes (interpellations, laws, executive decrees, and speeches) and outputs (final accounts). We also prioritized modules that may be of wider interest for social scientists such as newspaper front pages (communication studies), laws (legal studies), and budgets (economics).

Table 11.1. Datasets of the Hungarian Policy Agendas Project

Module	Number of observations	Method of policy coding	Time frame	Coding level
Media	20,992	Hand-coded and automated text classification	2010–14	Whole text of individual front-page articles
Party platforms	12,857	Hand-coded	1990; 1994; 1998; 2002; 2006; 2010	Quasi-sentence
Interpellations	4907	Hand-coded	1990–2014	Whole text
Laws	3407	Hand-coded	1990–2014	Whole text
Executive speeches	6687	Hand-coded	1990–2014	Paragraphs
Executive decrees	16,418	Hand-coded	1990–2015	Whole text (excluding appendices)
Budgets and Final Accounts	51,667	Automated text classification	1868–2013	Line items

Source: Comparative Agendas Project—Hungary

Our approach evolved in terms of the underlying methodology of coding. We started out with what is considered to be the gold standard for such endeavors: double-blind hand-coding. Over time we have initiated a process of adopting automated text classification for most of our modules. This evolution is best illustrated by the history of our media database. Our first dataset (for the period 2010–14) was hand-coded, and yielded over 20,000 observations. A switch to automated text classification (which is under way in 2017 for the period 1990–2010) presented itself as an inevitable choice. In light of these experiences our budgets and final accounts datasets were prepared with the help of a dictionary-based classifier algorithm by design.

Turning now to the specifics of each module, our party platform database was compiled from various online and library sources for thirty-five party platforms of eight different parties with a parliamentary group for the period between 1990 and 2014. Here we followed the conventions of manifesto research by coding quasi-sentences. Media data was obtained from the coding of front pages of two major Hungarian daily newspapers, *Magyar Nemzet* and *Népszabadság* for the period 2010–14. Both of these were papers of record in this period, representing the political right and left, respectively. (As of 2016, *Népszabadság* was discontinued by its new, right-wing, publishers.)

The interpellations database contains interpellations, a form of parliamentary question, performed in parliament from the 1990–4 electoral cycle through the 2010–14 electoral cycle (Sebők et al., 2017). All MPs are eligible to submit written forms of interpellations. Plenary agenda access for oral presentations, however, is limited by institutional constraints (limited debate time and parliamentary group by-laws). Our database concerning laws covers the same period. Individual MPs, committees, and the government are all

entitled to introduce bills. Nevertheless, plenary access is usually tightly controlled by government parties through committees, which results in governing majority dominance in adopting laws in the unicameral legislature. For both interpellations and laws, the underlying raw databases were downloaded from the Hungarian National Assembly website.

Executive decrees regulate the minutiae of policy subsystems and are adopted by the cabinet, its individual members or by the prime minister himself/herself. They are usually prepared by the ministries and in some cases also reflect the impact of lobbyists and the results of societal consultations. Executive speeches in our database are confined to plenary speeches of the incumbent prime minister in parliament. This is the only "process stage" (Baumgartner et al., 2009: 604) database for which the unit of analysis is not the whole text (of the interpellation, law, decree). In this case, in line with the structural characteristics of executive speeches, the coding level was set at the paragraph level. In most cases, paragraphs are the smallest units for which separate policy topic codes could be assigned.

Finally, our dataset concerning adopted budgets and final accounts (containing information on both appropriations and actual outlays) was compiled from electronic and paper-based official documents. The database covers over 150 years of budgetary history. Coding was carried out by relying on automated content analysis (dictionary-based scripts) on the line item level (for more technical details, see Sebők and Berki (2017)). All databases mentioned above include a wide variety of additional variables beyond policy topic coding. They can be downloaded after free registration from the Hungarian Project's website (cap.tk.mta.hu), and they are also available at the joint comparative website of CAP.

11.3 Specificities of the Hungarian Project

Due to the post-communist political development of Hungary our country project shows some specificities vis-à-vis more established projects in Western Europe and the United States. Three areas are worth mentioning: the codebook, the specific list of datasets and the availability of data for non-democratic periods.

First, our codebook accounts for some peculiarities of post-regime-change Hungarian policy development. While it remains perfectly compatible with the Master Codebook, it also adopts the terminology used in Hungarian policy sciences. Examples of such rephrasing include the reference to the state instead of government in multiple instances; the inclusion of EU funds for farm subsidies; or competition policy for antitrust regulation. Nevertheless, none of these terminological changes affect coding comparability as they only

serve as an aid for local coders to correctly select the policy code pertinent to the given subject.

In some cases new substantial minor topic codes were also introduced in the Hungarian codebook, which describe policy topics that are not relevant for countries that have no post-communist past. Full comparability was maintained since all these subtopics were nested under an internationally recognized major topic and a direct reference to the relevant minor topic codes was also inserted in the comparative crosswalk. For instance, Hungary has a centralized healthcare system that makes the differentiation of public and private health insurance and healthcare necessary (in comparative work, however, both were listed under health insurance). Similarly, matters related to the millions of "Hungarians beyond the borders" and the diaspora were justified in getting a separate minor topic code. The same holds for issues related to restitution and the crimes of the non-democratic regimes in Hungarian history (we return to this topic in the concluding section).

Second, the relative underdevelopment of Hungarian quantitative social sciences also shaped our research agenda to a large extent. Even basic research questions—such as the role the mandate source (party list or single member district) of individual MPs plays in their legislative activities—required extensive data collection on behalf of our team. In the case of interpellations it was the Hungarian CAP that digitalized the paper-based collection for the first democratic government cycle of 1990–4 for the first time. Similarly, our colleagues scanned and cleaned data for budgets from the 1860s onward as they were not published in any format suitable for data analysis. A further problem is the unavailability of public agenda data from most important questions type surveys. In the event our project provided funding for a limited set of surveys.

The Hungarian CAP published a number of additional databases that were required to address our research questions. These include, inter alia, a complete database equipped with multiple dozens of variables of all MPs and similar datasets for the committees, parties, and parliamentary group leadership of the National Assembly as well as data on governments or the geographical composition of single-member districts.

Third, the turbulent political history of Hungary allows for the comparison of policy agendas of various subsequent regimes. Therefore, our current efforts are focused on the extension of our datasets to the decades—or, in some cases, centuries—preceding the regime change of 1990. The wide variety of particular regime forms in Hungarian history offer a fertile ground for the testing of hypotheses related to the role of regime type in shaping policy agendas (see e.g., Baumgartner et al., 2017). Accordingly, we have started new modules on historical data with the first new datasets covering interpellations (1945–90) and budgets (1868–1990).

11.4 Perspectives: The Politics of Communism and Restitution

One example of the aforementioned political system-specific coding problems is related to restitution and crimes committed during the various types of authoritarian regimes in Hungarian history. For natural reasons, of all these systems of government, at the time of the regime change of 1990 it was the communist regime—and its office-holders—who received most of the attention of the public, the media, and the political elite. Nevertheless, subsequent debates similarly highlighted the crimes of right-wing authoritarian and Nazi regimes of the period preceding 1945. In fact, these debates related to crimes and justice, remembrance and restitution, and in general the role of Hungarian leaders and the nation itself in twentieth-century world politics served as the basis for some of the most persistent political cleavages in post-regime change Hungarian politics and policymaking.

In light of these considerations the project introduced a specific minor topic code for issues concerning pre-1990 political history, with topics covered such as restitution and compensation for nationalized property, the prosecution of former office-holders and secret police agents, and policy issues related to the politics of remembrance in general. This addition to the codebook enabled researchers associated with the Hungarian CAP to compile case studies related to the interplay of high-octane political issues and policy agendas while maintaining the comparability of our results (as we discussed in Section 11.3).

One such case was related to Béla Biszku, one of the last living communist leaders as former Minister of the Interior after the anti-communist revolution of 1956 (Boda and Patkós, 2015). While a hot topic during the transition period, the role of Biszku in crimes committed against opposition figures and ordinary citizens during the communist era was less of a major agenda item for more than two decades following regime change. Eventually this topic re-emerged in the media in June 2010, with the release of a documentary film about Biszku, in which he adopted a permissive tone when speaking about the sanctions after the 1956 revolution and the execution of prime minister Imre Nagy. His statements in the film provoked indignation and lawyers in the media suggested that he should be tried for crimes against humanity.

Some months later an opposition party MP asked the attorney general about the case in an interpellation. Eventually, in January 2011, Biszku was formally accused of denial of crimes of communist totalitarianism. In October 2011, a governing party politician from the Fidesz party introduced a bill on crimes of the communist era that was approved in December the same year, and, as a consequence, Béla Biszku was charged with war crimes and crimes against humanity in October 2013. Although media coverage was continuous after the release of the documentary, as we can see in Figure 11.1, political and
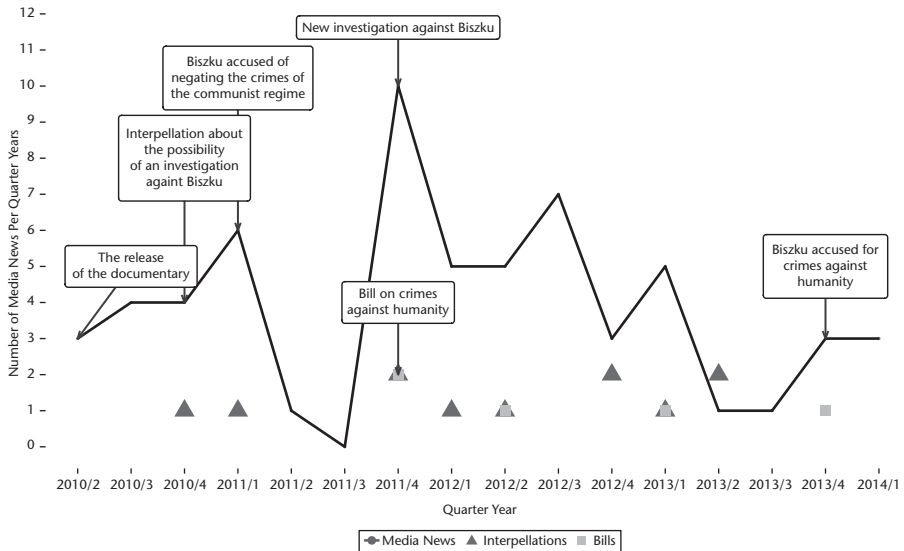
Figure 11.1. Béla Biszku's case
Source: Comparative Agendas Project—Hungary

government actors (notably, prosecutors) were quick to react and elevate the issue to the macro-political level.

Media attention only surged after these actors had taken up the issue and (re-)presented it as part of the national discourse (see the point in the media time series in the 4th quarter of 2011). In other words, the independent agenda-setting power of the media is not verified in this case. At best, media and politics "co-produced" a major agenda item in domestic political discourse.

Note

1. See the website of the project at http://cap.tk.mta.hu/en.

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