



# Celebratory Politics: Late Modern Promotionalism and Political Communication

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*This paper introduces the term “celebratory politics”, and theorizes it as a typical emanation of late modern, mediatised, promotional politics. Celebratory politics emerges when a political actor mobilizes a vast amount of promotional resources so that its opponents feel forced to suspend their criticism and (although reluctantly) support the protagonist. Celebratory performances are maximally sensation-seeking and spectacular, they create a promotionally aggrandized, expressive ideological commodity which dooms all competitors to silence and makes resistance particularly difficult for the audience. Celebratory performances have the power of temporarily suspending the fundamentally competitive character of democratic politics.*

*The paper presents an empirical, survey-based case study from the 2001-2 electoral campaign in Hungary. That year, the right-wing Government mobilized an unprecedented propaganda, successfully creating a celebratory space from which the left-wing Opposition deliberately stepped out. In spite of its glamorous aura, the Government’s performance suscitated mixed audience reactions: its high attention-grabbing force was at odds with its unquestionably weaker power to politically engage voters. The intense and complex reactions elicited by the analysed celebratory performance will allow us to reflect on the effects of “commercial media logic” on democratic politics.*


## Introduction: from competition to celebration

The logics of promotion and competition have long been recognized to shape together the media environment of late modern politics. Apparently, politics cannot immunize itself from the commercial logic of late capitalist culture, which fosters the hyper-competition of cultural commodities, and induces the very escalation of promotionalism. Indeed, as politics fuses with today's promotional culture (Wernick 1991: 147), and political visions are increasingly promoted and sold as commodities, late modern political and popular cultural markets increasingly appear as structurally similar: places where valued cultural products compete for consumers' appreciation (Scammell 1999: 722). It would be hard to provide a precise estimate of how deep the above convergence is, however, it is rather telling that a number of scholars have envisioned a full conjuncture, and have argued that "politics has become more of a cultural industry, increasingly resembling a talent show or popularity contest" (Corner & Pels 2003: 2; Street 1998). Understandably, the signs that politics is transforming into a commercially driven, promotional competition of political commodities incited an enormous wave of responses on the part of communication scholars.

Promotionalism and hyper-competition, the two above factors so typical of late modern media, have been interpreted along two characteristic narratives in scholarly literature. Critical scholars have grasped them as interdependent, inextricable foundational principles of today's media culture. The critical argument has assumed that competition and promotion are mutually reinforcing factors: the sharper the former, the more the logic of the latter dominates the scene, and the two intertwine into a clean-cut, univocal, inescapable "media logic" (Altheide & Snow 1979). According to critics, the apparent logic of promotion/competition would increasingly condition late modern politics and submit it to the interconnected imperatives of sensationalism, simplicity, personalization, scandal, trivia, and spectacle (Patterson 1993; Blumler & Gurevitch 1995; Cappella & Jamieson 1997; Hart 1994; Moog & Sluyter-Beltrao 2001).<sup>1</sup> Opposed to these critics, scholars developing a more pragmatic interpretation have played the above factors against one another. They have argued that the sharp competition of mutually exclusive promotional appeals enables people to understand the goals and means of publicity in a hypercompetitive context. As an inevitable side-product of commercial competition, the sensation-seeking machineries of publicity reveal their own persuasive intent to the audience, which allows people to critically discount sensationalist/promotional appeals. From a pragmatist

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<sup>1</sup> In other words, critics have assumed that commercial media impose on public actors a set of imperatives which define how the audience has to be addressed and enchanted in a context of commercial competition. The above, sensationalist rules of communication, critics have warned, alienate voters ("public cynicism" argument) and downgrade politics to a hollow play of attractivity where simply the "best looking" contestant will prevail (political "spectacle" argument).



viewpoint, commercialized media culture appears as multimodal and ephemeral, driven by multiple coexisting „logics”, which may diverge and combine in unexpected manners. Disruptive citizen reactions - like cynicism, tribalism or alienation - are not a priori encoded in the system: they may well be triggered but also overwritten by contextual factors (Zaller 2001; Scammell 1999, 2003; Morris 2006).

In the above debate, pragmatists have suggested that the logic of competition interferes with that of promotion, while critics have assumed that the two factors are reinforcing each other. In the following, I will explore a third scenario. The central question of this paper would like to address those exceptional political contexts where the logic of promotion cannibalizes that of competition. Such contexts emerge when a political actor mobilizes a vast amount of promotional resources so that its opponents feel forced to suspend their criticism and (although reluctantly) support the protagonist. As a result, political and media actors temporarily suspend the fundamentally competitive character of the democratic political market. The type of political performance that seeks to monopolize a discourse and erase all controversy with an almost irresistible symbolic force will be grasped by the term “celebratory politics”. Celebratory performances are maximally sensation-seeking and spectacular, they create a promotionally aggrandized, expressive ideological commodity which dooms all competitors to silence and makes resistance particularly difficult for the audience.

In a certain sense, celebratory performances are borderline cases: they do not emerge every day, but when they do, they get as close as imaginable to the frontier where democratic politics ends and spectacle begins. But it is especially their borderline character that allows us to use them as a litmus test for scholarly theories about commercial media logic and democratic politics. From a critical angle, it might be argued that what reveals itself in celebratory politics is the ultimate goal of promotional competition, that is, the suspension of competition itself by the means of promotional propaganda. Seen from this view, the emergence of successful celebratory performances is necessary, for they are the fullest emanation of an external, objective “commercial media logic”. From a pragmatist angle, which sees commercial media as a field of constant tensions and fractions, it is not the apparent dictates of commercialism that find themselves mirrored in celebratory politics. Instead, it is the contextual play of actors’ (good or bad) inspirations, (false) assumptions and (mis)perceptions which may allow a promotional voice to achieve temporary monopoly in the public sphere. The dangers brought about by the fact that promotional voices may suspend political competition are self-evident. What is an open question in the light of the above debate is where to place the source of these dangers: in the apparent, systemic imperatives of commercial media, or in the contextual strategies of actors who try to adapt to what they (mis)perceive in a given moment as the inescapable logic of media. This basic dilemma lurks behind the analysis developed in the following.




As a first step, the paper provides a detailed definition, then, it explores the place of celebratory politics in the broader context of today's promotional culture, that is marked by an intense use of marketing, branding and media management strategies in all cultural markets. I will identify four recent trends allowing the script of celebratory politics to emerge: the first is the changing politics of "issue ownership" in a late modern political landscape, the second is an increasing need to create "harmony" in a cynical cultural and political environment, the third is actors' increasing efforts to "gain momentum" on competitive cultural markets, and the fourth factor is the strong influence of risk-averse consultants on political actors.

In the next step we will turn to an empirical, survey-based case study from the 2001-2 electoral campaign in Hungary. As it will be revealed, the right-wing Government mobilized an unprecedented propaganda that year, successfully creating a celebratory space from which the left-wing Opposition deliberately stepped out. In a number of issues (like the introduction of a state-subsidiarized real estate credit or the opening of the newly built National Theater) the Government was able to blow its trumpet without a single intervening "false note". These uncontested issues, although rather marginal on the overall media agenda, received prominent attention from voters, who not only felt these issues "more important" than others, but also spontaneously identified them as interrelated and sharing a common message. In a word, the Government's uncontested, well-polished, promotional issues moved to the top of audiences' agenda perception, and were commonly recognized as interconnected constituents of a "broader" political mission. At the same time, empirical evidence has also been found that "celebratory" issues' high attention-grabbing force was at odds with their unquestionably weaker power to politically engage voters. They simply were judged inauthentic by large segments of voters, who rejected the celebratory campaign in spite of the fact that parties in opposition did not actively feed this rejection (since they had opportunistically decided to leave the above issues undebated). The intense and complex reactions elicited by the analysed celebratory performance will allow us to return to our initial questions about media logic and democratic politics.

### **What is celebratory politics?**

The term celebratory politics refers in this paper to a newly emerging form of political performance which applies the promotional techniques of commercial culture to the broader field of political discourse and policy making, with the aim of creating a symbolic space from which all political controversy is excluded. Celebratory politics is enacted when political actors, relying on the symbolic and aesthetic power of popular media, successfully banish debate and controversy from a given terrain of political discourse and surround themselves with a positive, inclusive and harmonic aura. Most importantly, what allows



political “celebrators” to blow their trumpets unperturbed is the complicit support of their political opponents and of media actors. The above opportunism results from actors’ awareness of the extraordinary cultural power of popular media to celebrate a case and to dismiss the sceptical and the non-engaged. Politicians and journalists may find it too risky to contest what they perceive to be actually consensual, and try to avoid becoming hurt by the consensus-defending force of popular media.


American politicians’ almost unanimous support for the Iraq war in 2003 has been a typical instance of celebratory politics. The Republican Government led a celebratory campaign exploiting all the symbolic resources that post-9/11 popular media could offer for a “patriotic” cause (Rojecki 2008; Kull et al. 2003). Most Democratic representatives provisionally rallied with the GOP, instead of contesting what they perceived to be the overall dominant mood.<sup>2</sup> It goes without question that Democrats perceived correctly what was in (and “on”) the air at the time: subsequent research has shown that „pro-war views were overwhelmingly more frequent” among the commentators of major networks (Kull et al. 2003: 593). However, as the same authors have also convincingly shown, the GOP’s propaganda machine and the TV networks’ complicity were not the only factors in play. For they did not represent by far the majoritarian preferences of the electorate. There was a huge amount of uncertainty about the justness of the cause across the public - and it is only by overcoming these concerns that the public’s consent was won in the end. Kull, Ramsay and Lewis have rightly stressed that political and media propaganda won consent by feeding „misperceptions” about the war. What needs to be added, however, is that this consent might not have been achieved, had Democrats not given up the political representation of the public’s existing concerns about incumbent foreign policy.

Celebratory politics does not need to bring about such devastating consequences. The NATO and EU accession of many Eastern European countries has also been commonly and uncritically celebrated by mainstream politicians (Szczerbiak 2004; Krasovec & Lajh 2004). As suggested by Kapitány and Kapitány, the public discourse about the EU enlargement before Hungary’s accession smoothly found its culmination point in the accession celebration events in 2004, where

the European Union appear[ed] as: a peaceful, merry world; a land without borders; a world of tolerance; a world of cultural diversity; a land of modernity, technical and scientific development; a new historical period; an urban culture; a land of brotherhood, an alliance of peoples; home of youth and future; a land of Christian traditions; a synthesis between tradition and modernity; a world of creativity; the emergence of a new world (after the communist past of Eastern Europe). (2006: 127)

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<sup>2</sup> For the British case see Robinson et al. 2009.



The above list entails the celebratory symbols that were interwoven into a mobilizing promotional campaign, which was joined at the time even by the more sceptical mainstream parties. It is hard to reconstruct whether they joined the cause by inner conviction or by the fear that by talking about any objections or conditions regarding the accession, they could be easily polluted by the charge of “fundamentalism”.<sup>3</sup>

Celebratory politics has been grasped above primarily in terms of political performance (that is, saying and doing, doing by saying), and not simply in those of communication or campaigning. This implies that the main protagonists and beneficiaries of celebratory politics are parties in government, who are able to amalgamate campaigning, political discourse and policy making (in line with the permanent campaign logic that dominates today’s politics). Celebratory performances diverge from conventional positive campaigning in that they praise not merely the results, but the making itself of the government’s politics. Policy measures - the very process of their preparation and realization - become an integral part of the performance. Unlike positive campaigns which praise the results of good governance, celebratory performances glorify the action of ‘doing’ itself: the moment of political decision, the act of investment in the future, the ethos of risk taking and entrepreneurship. What is being praised here is political action and leadership itself<sup>4</sup>, that is, the act of mobilizing the political community. Citizens’ engagement and participation is quintessential with regards to the performance’s success and legitimation. Without audiences participating in the above celebration of ‘making politics’, the performance would inevitably fall back into the dubious status of ‘campaigning’ (and would imminently be challenged by political opponents). With the above celebration of political action, celebratory politics combines the principles of charismatic leadership and democratic politics. This conjuncture alone would not represent a risk: indeed, democracy badly needs its charismatic leaders. The dangers of celebratory politics lie elsewhere: in political actors’ willingness and success to enforce, with the help of promotional machineries, the undebatedness of this leadership. This mechanism, its functioning and consequences, will be addressed in the followings.

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<sup>3</sup> The above fear may not have been groundless: there is some modest empirical evidence suggesting that the popularity of the right-wing opposition in Hungary had been in decline until the party stopped its euro-sceptical rhetoric in late 2003. (Karácsony 2004)

<sup>4</sup> The importance of leadership effects in celebratory performances has been revealed in Kull, Ramsay and Lewis’s study, which makes it clear that Americans’ support for the Iraq war was a function of their sympathies with the President. „This was a standard rally-round-the-president effect, no doubt intensified by a felt imperative to close ranks in the post-September 11 environment.” (Kull et al. 2003: 596)

## Celebratory Politics: the promotional enforcement of issue ownership, harmony and momentum

In this chapter, I will examine the broader cultural context which allows the logic of promotionalism to suspend the competition of ideas and with it a foundational principle of democracy. As a start, a recourse is necessary here to an old thesis of political economy, namely that eliminating competition pays off for the individual market player, and that such monopolistic aspirations are widespread on various markets. In the commercialized market of today's politics and factual media, actors are following similar strategies, reacting to the fact that they have lost much of the control over their messages in today's hypercompetitive media environment (as suggested by reports on the breakdown of gatekeeping (Williams & Delli Carpini 2000) or the loss of journalistic control over political scandals (Liebes & Blondheim 2005)). Seeking to regain lost control by all means available, actors mobilize various promotional machines to "suspend" competition and impose uncontested experiences on consumers. These aspirations are feeding the now-dominant idea that voter loyalty can be best secured through establishing, by promotional means, an unchallenged control over voter experience - obviously not over its totality, but some of its significant parts and moments.

In the following, I will focus within the broader field of popular culture and politics on three typical cultural forms which represent the above efforts toward enforced monopolistic control. The first form is "issue ownership", the second is "harmony", the third is "momentum". As I will argue, these cultural forms are all about creating uncontested, uncompetitive spaces - and this is why they serve as rich resources for the kind of political performance analysed in this paper. Celebratory politics is all about the promotional enforcement of issue ownership, harmony and momentum in the field of politics.

1. The changing politics of "issue ownership" in a postmodern political landscape is the first factor behind celebratory politics. The phenomenon theorised as "issue ownership" (Petrocik 1996) is an important antecedent of celebratory politics. According to Petrocik's well-known model, voters tend to connect specific issues to particular parties (e.g. social welfare to Democrats or national defence to Republicans in the USA), assuming that the latter have a prominent and well-proven ability to handle them. Parties themselves try to profit as much as possible from their long-term issue handling reputations (Petrocik 1996: 826). Most importantly, the "issue ownership" model assumes that parties' control over issues is a function of their long-term embeddedness within the electorate. Logically, "the more stable the party system, i.e., the more predictable the group character and size of the party's base, the easier to select the issues upon which to focus a campaign" (Petrocik 1996: 829). However, it is exactly the above stability of the political landscape that seems to be obscured with „the


dissolution of previously more firm anchorages of political attitudes” (Blumler & Gurevitch 1995: 207) in late modernity. To a certain extent, parties have lost their conventional electoral roots and are in a constant need of reinventing their “disembedded” identities in today’s ephemeral, fluctuating political culture.<sup>5</sup> Thus, it is reasonable to argue that today’s political parties need to invest increasing amounts of energy if they want to keep the benefits of “owning” issues.<sup>6</sup> Seen through this lens, celebratory performances can be seen as attempts to promotionally “enforce” issue ownership in a highly uncertain political landscape.

2. The second factor allowing the celebratory script to emerge is political actors’ growing need to create “harmony” in a cynical cultural and political environment. Creating harmonious symbolic spaces has always been fundamental to popular cultural industries, aiming to control the desire and satisfaction of consumers. From its beginnings, media advertising has been aimed at avoiding controversy and at creating a harmonious space in which the appeal of the promoted cultural product can work at its best, and people’s intense emotional attachment to the centrally installed performer - a star, a film, a band - can be enacted and relived. Although the above promotional techniques had been widely used in political advertisements in the broadcast era, political actors in the last two decades had an unprecedented opportunity to expand and intensify the promotional production of political harmony. With the rise of a commercially driven media environment, popular cultural scripts for creating harmony have gained prominent importance, given their potential for arousing consumer satisfaction. Political actors have intensely relied on popular scripts of harmony-making. The first of these is media “witnessing”. Utterances enacted according to this script present themselves as self-evidently incontestable, given the ultimate inaccessibility of the personal experience that lies behind

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<sup>5</sup> This paper cannot even try to sketch the extended scholarly debates around the “postmodern” transformations that have supposedly undermined the foundational political cleavages of Western political systems. Suffice to say here that these presumed transformations (however deep or superficial they may be) are corroding, to some extent, political parties’ long-term “issue ownerships”. Among the supposed processes triggering the “disembedding” of parties from their electoral base, the most important ones are: the presumed decrease of class voting and partisan de-alignment (Dalton 2000); the rise of “cartel parties” and an exclusive “political class” that is financed by the state and alienated from society (Katz & Mair 1995); the narrowing of national policy alternatives due to economic globalization and supranational integration (Moog & Sluyter-Beltrao 2003); the historical crisis of the Left and the rise of a New Left that accepts capitalist hegemony.

<sup>6</sup> It seems equally probable that in less stable political systems - like the new democracies of Eastern Europe - a long-term “issue handling reputation” of parties never really existed. About the extreme instability of political loyalties in Eastern Europe, see (Tóka 1998).




them (Peters 2001). This potential of incontestability has been exploited through “testimonial” campaign spots, which pretend to create an “unmediated” place where ordinary people can proclaim their “authentic” feelings about the state of the country (on other political forms of testimonial narratives, see MacDonald 2000). “Testimonials” are vital elements of celebratory performances.

The second popular cultural script of harmony creation is to be found in the classical celebrity interview genre, which creates a personal, friendly and harmonious aura around the personality. Politicians have recognized that by occupying the seat of celebrities in easy-to-consume, entertaining contexts like talk shows, they will be able to promote themselves, uncontested. Indeed, the above “calculated strategy to ‘humanize’ the candidate in settings that make for positive television imagery” (Witcover 1999: 49) may successfully work in various contexts. For example, late night talk shows in the USA have been shown to enable politicians to humanize themselves (Baum 2005), to present a positive mask, a “political persona” (van Zoonen & Holtz-Bacha 2000) which represents their promotionally tailored “ordinary” personality - warm, caring, funny, moral, or sexy. Hostile questions and “face-threatening” (Goffman 1990) events are entirely missing from this genre.

The third harmony creating script which relates directly to celebratory politics is that of “Conquests”, as theorised by Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz (1992). The Conquest script of Media Events embodied the way broadcast television ritualized extraordinary moments of charismatic achievement, like the signing of a new peace treaty, the fall of the Iron Curtain, or the Moon landing. In popular cultural imagination, Conquests have been constructed as ‘turning points’, events of ‘collective’ interest, historical ‘beginnings’. They have been orchestrated, in Kenneth Burke’s expression, as ‘mystic moments’, as a ‘stage of revelation after which all is felt to be different’ (Burke 1969: 305). In the late modern commercial media landscape, the script of Conquest has been heavily appropriated in everyday media discourse. In contemporary politics, practically any political event or policy measure can be orchestrated as the “Moon landing” of the day.

Due to the above scripts of witnessing, celebrity and conquest, the promotional political landscape is rich with harmonious symbolic spaces. However, these promotional efforts are by far too weak to restore people’s trust in politics, or to efficiently mobilize them. For political actors themselves deliberately seek to destroy their opponents’ harmony seeking strategies with “negative, or attack politics [that] has become an antidote to [...] highly polished promotional politics” (Turner 2001: 240). Given the paradoxical fact that efforts to create harmony tend to trigger antagonism, political actors are trying to exploit any issue where harmony is temporarily hard to contest. In these cases, actors rely on the above popular cultural scripts in creating harmony and imposing it



on opponents. “Enforced harmony” is a key feature of celebratory performances.

3. The third factor fostering the rise of celebratory politics is the overall pursuit of “momentum” in competitive cultural markets. As it has been observed in various cultural markets, the sharper the competition for consumers’ applause, the less the cultural producers are able to predict (or influence) which cultural product will be valued by the public. Their sense of uncertainty feeds an opportunistic strategy of simply following audiences’ ephemeral tastes. This attitude dooms cultural producers (artists, record companies, politicians, journalists etc.) to a never-ending run after the actual buzz, the last wave of audience engagement. Rightly or not, cultural producers are convinced that today’s commercial culture makes the rule of ‘15 minutes of fame’ more prevalent than ever. The winning strategy, accordingly, would lie in maximally exploiting the aforementioned short-term waves of passion. Recording companies, for example, have increasingly been concerned about the radical volatility of audience interests, this nomadic attitude which can rapidly propel a song to the top of the charts, only to forget about it the day after. Acknowledging the above volatility, companies gave up their conventional strategy of carefully „building up” the brand of the albums they release (Anand & Peterson 2000). Instead of tenderly orienting consumer tastes, as it would be implied by a brand building strategy (for political implications, see Scammell 1999), recording companies have decided to follow the crowd’s twists and turns as quickly and as closely as possible. This new marketing rule, called „get hot or go home” by industry insiders (Anand & Peterson 2000: 279), is all about over-promoting albums which hit an immediate success, at the price of redeploying ad resources from other records which sell worse in the first few weeks after their release. In the field of political journalism, just as if the above „get hot or go home” rule was reincarnating, journalists have been trying to handle market uncertainty by simply “running with the pack” (Liebes & Blondheim 2005) and covering what everyone else is covering. Accordingly, in today’s media environment, news on wars, scandals or catastrophes may spread out like epidemics along all the competing media platforms and gain ubiquitous media presence. These epidemic waves („feeding frenzies”, as Sabato (1991) called them at the dawn of the new media era) are paradoxical consequences of media competition, which increases the potential costs of omitting stories that arouse collective interest. What the two above examples show is that actors of competitive markets try to maximally amplify and exploit the actual waves of audience interest and affect. In politics, actors are seeking the very same goal: that of „gain(ing) and keep(ing) momentum”, as it has been



formulated by a chief political marketing expert of the British Labour Party (Gould 1998: 294). Political actors might succeed in amplifying momentum to such an extent that even opponents feel compelled to „join the pack”. Such cases of promotionally enforced momentum are referred to as celebratory politics in this paper.

4. Neither the above celebratory strategies to enforce issue ownership, harmony and momentum, nor the opportunistic inclination of oppositional voices to go silent can be understood without acknowledging the highly risk averse, competition-evading attitude typical of the political consultancy industry. Seen from this angle, celebratory politics is a form of “media management” - another symptom of the increasing influence of political consultants for the political process. As literature on political consultancy has commonly pointed out, the reason why politicians trust external experts with “managing” their media performance is a widespread frustration that political messages cannot be controlled in a highly uncertain, competitive environment<sup>7</sup>. However, paradoxically, the more consultants are “managing” the above risk, the more their mere presence feeds a hyper-awareness of media as an uncertain universe, a hostile jungle where everything is acceptable in order to survive. In the above paranoid and paralysing climate, consultant-driven politicians have developed a prominent - and most criticized (see Schlesinger 2006) - coping strategy, which consists of the systematic avoidance of all face-threatening impulses. “Government by spin” means the evasion of any kind of controversy about government itself (and “managing”, instead of explicitly reacting to, hostile journalistic questions, awkward affairs, policy objections, scandals, etc.). One way to achieve conflict-free communication, politicians seek to “extract as much positive media coverage out of a given situation as possible” and try to “develop this almost to an art form” (Gaber 2000: 515). Seen through the excessively risk-averse lenses of political consultants, any political issue that allows avoiding controversy may seem to be the potential “golden goal” of political competition. Accordingly, issues that can be appropriated and “owned”, that can be imbued with a harmonious aura (resulting either from lived experience, personality or charisma), issues that trigger an uplifting “momentum”, are primary assets in professional, spin-doctored politics. At the same time, the same excessive risk aversion strategy of consultants may urge oppositional voices to suspend attacking issues that actually are too popular. Since consultant-driven political actors are primarily interested

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<sup>7</sup> Miller and Dinan (2000) have traced back the rise of the PR industry in Britain to the end of the post-war corporatist political consensus.



in avoiding loss of popularity at any price, they may temporarily agree to go silent, in the hope that this opportunism will pay off in the long run.

### The orchestration of celebratory politics in 2001-2002


In the following chapters, I will present the orchestration and effects of a monumental celebratory performance in 2001-2002, and its role in the final reconstitution of the political Right in Hungary. The creator and leading force of the Hungarian New Right has been the party called *Fidesz* (Alliance of Young Democrats), the most stable and popular right-wing party in Central Europe since 1998. The history of the party dates back to the years of democratic transition.<sup>8</sup> By 1998, the number of *Fidesz* voters rose to a level of 30% of the total population, which was enough to counterbalance the similarly extended electorate behind the leading force of the political left, the post-communist Hungarian Socialist Party (*MSZP*). After a successful electoral campaign, the *Fidesz* led right wing coalition triumphed over the incumbent government of socialists and liberals. In 1998, a quasi two-party system emerged in Hungary: the two leading political forces, *Fidesz* and *MSZP* accounted for 72% of parliamentary mandates between 1998 and 2002.

Political analysts tend to overlook the ultimate importance of the new, highly promotional media environment in the successful reconstitution of the political Right in Hungary. In 1997, seven years after the democratic transition, the media system was deregulated in Hungary, which allowed the multinational media corporations Bertelsmann and SBS Broadcasting to operate two private broadcast TV channels (*TV2* and *RTL Klub*) on the Hungarian media market. The appearance of commercial TV channels in Hungary made a profound contribution to the formation of the New Right. Commercial media as a terrain of symbolic warfare was much easier to understand and handle for the young, ex-liberal, conservative *Fidesz* politicians than for their post-communist opponents from an older generation. From 1997 on, and especially during their years in government between 1998 and 2002, *Fidesz* leaders played upon the potential of the new, promotional media environment with a unique sense and vigour. Using various promotional means<sup>9</sup>, they took their political camp's central identifying symbols (like "right-wing", "national", or "conservative") out of their conventional discursive context designated by traditionalism, rurality or religiousness. Instead, *Fidesz* actors created a new, multifocal, mediated right-wing identity, expressed by strong and appealing symbols

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<sup>8</sup> The party has been present in the Parliament since the first democratic elections in 1990, and performed a radical shift in the eight years that followed, turning from a marginal, alternative, liberal party into the leading force of the political right.

<sup>9</sup> The logic of promotional communication was present very early in the self-understanding of *Fidesz* politicians. As one of them revealed on a university forum in 1998, they aimed to offer and sell a "political vision" rather than getting involved in endless debates.



which were not, however, arranged around one stable and central core.<sup>10</sup> The mediated reconstitution of the Right in Hungary - and the key role of its political leader's personality within it - evoked the creation of New Labour in Britain a few years earlier.

Although, generally speaking, *Fidesz* communicators have successfully exploited the promotional potential of commercial media, they had prevalent conflicts with some of its actors sympathizing with left-wing political forces.<sup>11</sup> This ambivalence resulted in a rather schizophrenic situation. On the one hand, the right-wing élite was constantly blaming commercial television stations for their hostility, supposedly resulting from their consumerist, cosmopolitan, secular character and fraternizing attitude with post-communist political forces. Meanwhile, actors of the left-wing élite nourished a never-ending moral panic over the *Fidesz* "propaganda machine" and the unscrupulous degradation of politics to spin, promotion, and tabloidized media spectacle (see some of the essays in (Sükösd & Vásárhelyi 2002)). The *Fidesz* vantage point in addressing people through the means of modern marketing was treated in an almost common-sense fashion in the left-wing press, projecting a common image of PM *Viktor Orbán* as a talented, well-prepared, real communicator with dubious intentions.


Although *Fidesz*, after 4 years in government, lost the elections in 2002, their last year in power played a salient role in the consolidation of a formerly ephemeral electoral base into a loyal New Right electorate in Hungary.<sup>12</sup> In 2001, after three years in government, *Fidesz* politicians launched a harsh and expressive campaign, with the aim of expanding their stable and ideologically committed electoral core and, at the same time, keeping the sympathy of larger and less committed voter segments. Obviously, these two aims were not necessarily in harmony: the ideological closure and harshness needed by the former may easily hinder the latter. This duality manifested itself in the Right's campaign, expressing on the one hand a bitter antagonism between (post)communist and national-democratic forces, while, on the other hand, presenting an image of economic recovery, social harmony, and a collective

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<sup>10</sup> This interpretation seemingly contradicts the popular image of the 2002 campaign as brutally "tearing up" society into two disconnected parts with antagonistic, and internally homogeneous value systems. However, this interpretation reflects the common interest of both political camps and their élite networks in projecting their antagonism onto the totality of society. The political views and opinions of everyday people sketch out a much more complex and ambivalent picture.

<sup>11</sup> The most explicitly left-biased programme is a weekly infotainment talk show ("Heti Hetes"), a licensed programme of RTL (the original's title is "Sieben Tage, Sieben Köpfe"), with journalists and artists commenting on politics. The talk show played an important role in left-wing mobilization.

<sup>12</sup> As subsequent research has demonstrated, the 2001-2 period was quintessential in consolidating the extreme political volatility that characterized Hungary, among other young democracies in the post-communist region of Central Europe (Tóka, 1998).



“take off”. *Fidesz* campaign strategists creatively established a common discursive ground for both of these narratives.

The basis of the *Fidesz* vision consisted of two symbolic messages. The first one expressed the idea of Change, the crossing of the border between Old and New, as proclaimed in the election programme “The Future has Begun”. The *Fidesz* campaign itself was very wittingly orchestrated as a rite of passage, through which the amorphous aggregate of disintegrated individuals was being transformed into a self-conscious political community. The second metaphor, the imaginary figure of the “*polgár*” (e.g. the German “*Bürger*”, citizen and bourgeois at the same time), was aimed at providing this transformation with meaning. Being - becoming - a “*polgár*” emblemized at the same time the entrepreneurial attitude of the bourgeois, the political duties of the citizen and the communal engagement of the civil society member, each aspect representing the republican ethos of individual and communal responsibility. The above symbols together constituted a field of association wide enough to be simultaneously connectable to various positions of identification. The slogan “*Hajrá Magyarország!*” (that could be translated, considering the role that Berlusconi’s consultants played in designing the *Fidesz* campaign, as “*Forza Hungary*”) and the new world populated by *polgárs* was equally meaningful for the committed and the uncommitted, the anticommunist, the nationalist, the faithful, the consumer interested in economic growth and increasing living standards, the lower classes wanting a socially responsible state, and the upper classes celebrating individual entrepreneurship.

With the above, astutely flexible usage of a few unificatory symbols, *Fidesz* promoted a new “alliance” between the government and the people, and presented the two sides as together taking the nation’s common destiny in their hands. In their vision, politics was represented as a service, a providing state, in which - as was made explicit several times - the main task of the government is to govern, and to move beyond political mud-throwing. The ethos of collective entrepreneurship symbolized by the term “alliance” excludes political controversy and supports celebratory communication. Throughout the performance, the Government positioned itself as the catalyst of the above collective momentum.

Importantly, as we shall see, the celebratory performance of socio-economic recovery was enacted through several important policy measures: partly long-term economic and cultural investments, partly the reallocation of state funds from the poor to the middle-class by implementing state subsidized loans for farmers, students and real estate buyers. All these measures were promoted as part of the government’s ‘*Széchenyi* project’, named after a 19<sup>th</sup> century statesman. The programme itself was advertised on thousands of billboards, set up compulsorily by all organizations financed by it. Day by day, various actors - local politicians, civil organizers of opening launches, private entrepreneurs, economists - joined with their own testimonies the celebratory performance initiated by the government.

## The media framing and effects of celebratory issues - empirical analysis

The celebratory performance of *Fidesz* was enacted through a bundle of media-friendly, event-like issues, all meant to represent the country's collective momentum and the Government's catalysing role. These heavily eventized issues of the 2001-2 electoral campaign will be called "celebratory" issues in the followings. They will be distinguished from more conventional, conflict-driven political debates (which will be referred to, to keep it simple, as "debater" issues). Celebratory issues stood apart clearly from debater ones, given their outstandingly positive presentation by TV news and newspapers. Moreover, given their semantic overlap, celebratory issues formed an almost uncontested discursive space. Let us turn then to these issues and their media coverage.

The following analysis will be based on data gathered in 2002, in the framework of a research on the formation and reception of the political agenda in Hungary. The research - triangulating content analysis, focus group and survey methods - was aimed at assessing the success of the agenda setting strategies of news organs and political parties. The fifteen most frequently covered issues of the 2002 campaign period were selected for analysis, regardless of whether they were explicitly political or not. The 15 issues ranged from traditional political debates about ideology-driven policy measures to the life imprisonment of a paedophile murderer. The editorial strategies of five news organs were analysed<sup>13</sup> by coding all the news they presented during two and a half months from the 1<sup>st</sup> of January till the 15<sup>th</sup> of March 2002 (which was the early and middle period of the campaign preceding the elections on the 8<sup>th</sup> of April).


The content analysis enables us to assess the general positivity or ambiguity of each of the fifteen issues examined.<sup>14</sup> Two aspects of positivity have been explored: the overall positive or negative tone of utterances, and the overall support of utterers' towards the government's and the opposition's standpoint. These two variables are presented in the first two columns of Table 1, in relation to each of the 15 issues examined. The first column represents the average positivity of an issue's coverage, while the second column reveals the average proportion of utterances supporting the government and the opposition<sup>15</sup>. The next three columns show the average weight of each issue on the overall agenda of the five news organs, on the agenda of *Fidesz* and on that

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<sup>13</sup> Three of them were early evening news programs, that of PSB television (*m1*) and those of its main commercial competitors (*RTL Klub*, *TV2*). The two leading press organs were also included in the analysis: the left-wing daily *Népszabadság* ('People's Freedom') and the right-wing daily *Magyar Nemzet* ('Hungarian Nation').

<sup>14</sup> The basic unit of analysis was not the news item, but the 'utterance'. A typical news item was decomposed into 3 or 4 actors' utterances.

<sup>15</sup> The numbers represent the overall proportion of pro-government and pro-opposition utterances, made by politicians, journalists, experts and other actors.



of the leading party of the opposition, the post-communist Hungarian Socialist Party (*MSZP*).

The last column of the table presents evidence gathered from a representative survey of Hungarian citizens, conducted between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> of March. Respondents were asked which issues of the campaign they found “personally relevant”. Each respondent had to choose 5 items from the menu of 15 content analysed issues. Thus, while an issue of average relevance was selected by 33% of respondents, the selection rates of individual issues ranged from 14 to 52%. The survey results will be analysed in the next chapter.

**Table 1 on the following page shows the overall positivity and political bias of issues’ media portrayal.<sup>16</sup> Issues’ weight on the overall media agenda and on the two leading political parties’ agenda.**


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<sup>16</sup> It has to be noted that in the case of politically insignificant issues the government’s lead may be disproportionately high. This is due to the fact that these issues are outside the universe of political competition, and it is mostly civil servants, and not prominent political leaders, who speak about the handling of problems.



	Content analysis:					type of issue	Survey analysis:
	Positivity (% of positive utterances)	Support for Gov (%) : Opp(%)	Weight on media agenda (%)	Weight on Fidesz agenda (%)	Weight on MSZP agenda (%)		The proportion of voters feeling an issue personally relevant (%)
The government introduces subsidized real estate credit.	93	88 : 0	3	5,5	--	Celebratory	51
The government launches a referendum campaign for Hungary to be nominated as host of the 2012 Olympic Games.	66	76 : 10	6	10	3		52
The opening of the new National Theatre.	53	28 : 9	4	0,5	--		39
The government opens the House of Terror, dedicated to the victims of Communism and Fascism.	46	59 : 22	5	6,5	2,5		33
The PM flew to Boston on state expense to accept the prize of a university.	44	60 : 33	3	2,5	3	Debater	38
The right-wing government introduced a law providing special status to Hungarian minorities living abroad.	39	58 : 27	40	35	43		33
A debate on the date and place of the TV debate between the incumbent PM and the socialist PM nominee.	20	40 : 40	6	16	26		46
Conflict with Czech and Slovak Republic because Hungarian PM urges the abrogation of the Benes decrees dismissing German and Hungarian minorities after World War II.	17	38 : 38	12	14	13		15
The extreme right, MIÉP, offers to enter a coalition with the right-wing party leading government (Fidesz).	12	65 : 31	4	8,5	6		18
The socialist PM nominee's corruption affair.	6	50 : 38	2	1	2		14
An insurance company abrogates its contracts with people living in areas endangered by river floods.	31	30 : 3	3	--	1	Off party politics	27
Cheap import chicken meat contaminated by antibiotics appears in Hungary.	25	14 : 0	5	--	0,5		42
Nurses go on a country-wide strike for higher living and work standards.	18	36 : 53	2	0,5	--		23
A man suspected of killing a little girl was sentenced for life, though the evidence is in question.	0	0 : 2	3	--	--		25
Two policemen were sentenced for beating a homeless person (the beating was recorded with a VCR).	0	0 : 0	3	--	--		39
Average means / the sum of values	mean=35%	mean=50% :25%	Σ=100%	Σ=100%	Σ=100%		mean=33%

Table 1. Media coverage, political coverage and audience appreciation of the 15 issues analysed.




Let us start interpreting Table 1 from below, with the first two items of the last row. The first number represents the overall presence of “positive” utterances on the media agenda (understood here as the totality of the 15 issues analyzed). On average, about only one third (35%) of all utterances proved to be positive. The second item in the last row signals that pro-Government utterances altogether (made by politicians, journalists and all other actors) occupy 50% of the media agenda, in contrast to the 25% weight of pro-Opposition discourse. The remaining 25% are neutral utterances made typically by news anchors or independent experts. These data verify that the overall Hungarian news media landscape in 2002 was shaped according to international tendencies, that means, the prevalence of negativity in the news genre (Patterson 1993), and the twofold overrepresentation of the Government side actors compared to Opposition side actors (which is the widely accepted “2:1” rule).

However, a closer look reveals that the above general numbers hide substantial variation in the media and political handling of singular issues. Apparently, the coverage of some political issues was spectacularly conflict-free. Considering the outstanding weight of positive and pro-Government utterances in their media coverage, I have ranged the first four issues in Table 1 into the genre of celebratory politics.<sup>17</sup> The government’s celebratory issues can be divided into two groups: that of media-friendly events and that of a single policy issue which, although the most positively covered of all, was less “eventized”. This latter issue is to be found in the first row of Table 1. It represents the introduction, only two months before the elections, of a state-subsidized real estate credit helping people in buying their first apartment. No political or other actors questioned these measures at all (which, later, were criticized for shifting social policy in a wrong and unsustainable direction). The three other celebratory issues were typical pseudo-events, aimed at representing the vision of a strong and viable (national) community. One of them was a referendum campaign the Government launched for Hungary’s nomination to host the 2012

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<sup>17</sup> In the first three issues listed in Table 1, the absolute majority of utterances proved positive. The weight of positive coverage approached 50% in the case of the fourth issue, as well (the opening of the House of Terror Museum). Regarding the utterers’ support of the two political camps, the issues arranged themselves very similarly. In the first three issues, the government’s position was very strong, and the overall proportion of pro-government and pro-opposition utterances significantly exceeded the average value of 2 to 1. From this aspect, the House of Terror’s opening, with a 3 to 1 lead of pro-government utterances, seems to be closer to the first three issues. Although similar in many respects to the House of Terror issue, I have omitted from the celebratory issues the state-financed flight of PM *Viktor Orbán* to Boston to receive a prize from Tufts University. The dubious financing of the flight made the issue highly ambivalent, oscillating between the debater and the celebratory category. The issue was among the most extraordinary aspects of the 2002 campaign. For now, it is enough to note that its recent classification as “debater” does not significantly influence the results of the following analysis.



Olympic Games. Several hundreds of thousands of signatures were collected in support of the government. The third celebratory issue of the 2002 campaign was the opening of the new National Theatre building, with the premiere timed to take place three weeks before the elections. The last celebratory issue, the opening of the House of Terror museum commemorating the victims of communism, was another opening ceremony, another mobilizing act in the row of events praising the dawn of a new era.<sup>18</sup>

The above celebratory issues' positive media coverage resulted from the reluctance of the opposition to challenge and debate these issues (as presented in column 5 of Table 1). Politicians of *MSZP*, the leading left-wing party, opportunistically avoided any critical comments about celebratory issues, which seemed so appealing and incontestable at the time. While *Fidesz* actors devoted 22% of their utterances to celebratory issues, socialists devoted only 5,5% (which makes 11 utterances altogether). What is more, even in those rare moments when they spoke out on celebratory issues, socialists were not critical at all: the majority of their sporadic utterances, 7 out of 11, were positive!<sup>19</sup> As Table 1 shows, left-wing parties were much more active in conventional, conflict-ridden, "debater" issues than in "celebratory" ones. They aspired to construct a negative vision of *Fidesz* as an aggressive, unscrupulous political force - and hoped (somewhat rightly, as we will see) that their harsh attack politics will deter voters from their opponent's seductive harmony. Thus, political controversy was heavily accentuated in more conventional political issues, assigned as "debater" in Table 1.<sup>20</sup>


The last aspect of celebratory issues that has to be dealt with is their weight on the media agenda. Our data show that the celebratory issues of *Fidesz*

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<sup>18</sup> Although the museum's heavily spectacularized mnemopolitics was sharply debated on various intellectual fora, the general media representation of the opening was rather uncritical and devoid of explicit ideological debates. The news programmes on the two private TV channels - the most popular news organs in Hungary - covered the event even more positively than other organs (55% of utterances being positive). From their angle, the opening of the museum was just another cultural event to be reported on, similar to the opening of the new National Theatre.

<sup>19</sup> Unlike socialists, politicians of the liberal *SZDSZ*, the smaller party in opposition, did try to denounce some of the celebratory issues. However, given their minor role in the media, they did not manage to re-position the issues and destroy their - often overwhelming - positiveness.

<sup>20</sup> Two of these issues dominated political discourse in the period examined. The most prominent one addressed the problem of national identity and belonging. The *Fidesz* government provided Hungarian minorities in surrounding countries with a special citizenship status, including rights to employment, social insurance and education (but not to political participation). The challenges these measures brought to the country - in policy, political and ideological terms equally - provided this issue with an outstanding weight on the media agenda (around 50% in the press and 30% in commercial TV news). The second most prominent issue was a typical late modern ballyhoo on the mediatized political process: it was a futile debate about which PM nominee and party is entitled to set the parameters of the televised debate of nominees.



received limited media coverage. While the four celebratory issues together occupied only 18% of the overall media agenda, the weight of debater issues was much larger (68%). Perhaps, this limitation has been the price of keeping celebratory issues uncontested, uncontaminated by political controversy. Arguably, too aggressive an expansion of celebratory issues might have left political opponents with too little alternative space for contesting the Government. Celebratory politics is too dependent on opponents' - always conditional - willingness to temporarily withdraw their criticism. There are good reasons to assume that the effect of the highly positive coverage of celebratory issues in 2002 was to some extent moderated by their relatively marginal position on the media agenda.

The above content analytical evidence makes clear that the governing party *Fidesz* was able to perform its vision of national recovery by a set of closely controlled and uncontested issues. In the followings, we will examine whether and how the above unperturbed celebratory campaign was mirrored in voters' agenda perception and political loyalty. Did celebratory issues attract audience attention? And if so, were they able to successfully impose their promotional message on the audience?

For assessing what personal importance people attributed to the fifteen issues analysed, survey respondents were asked to select the five issues they felt were the most relevant personally.<sup>21</sup> As revealed in the last column of Table 1, the importance attributed to issues varied considerably, with a "selection rate" of issues ranging from 14% to 52%. Only two issues were found relevant by the majority, the two that enjoyed the most unequivocal and uncontested celebratory coverage (the real estate credit issue (51%) and the Olympics referendum issue (52%)). The relevance attributed to the four celebratory issues on average surpassed by far the average salience level of conventional, "debater" issues. Even the status law issue was judged important only by one third of the people - which is in sharp contrast to the issue's pervasive presence on all media channels, and the hysteria it provoked.<sup>22</sup> From Table 1, we may intuitively conclude that the more celebratory the tone of a political issue was, the more relevance people attributed to it. Along the lines of this intuition, content and survey evidence was combined, and the correlation of the three aspects of issue coverage (positivity, political support, weight) was correlated with the individual issues' "relevance scores" as revealed by the survey analysis.

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<sup>21</sup> As each issue had a 33% chance of being selected by a respondent, an issue of "average importance" for the public would be selected by one third of the respondents.

<sup>22</sup> Most importantly, these issues did not fail because they might have been too complex, or too distant from people's everyday lives. Parties in opposition did their best to draw up the darkest possible scenario for the everyday social consequences of the status law issue. People were provided with detailed information about the potential everyday consequences of the opening of the Hungarian labour market to people coming from surrounding countries (not only of Hungarian ethnicity).

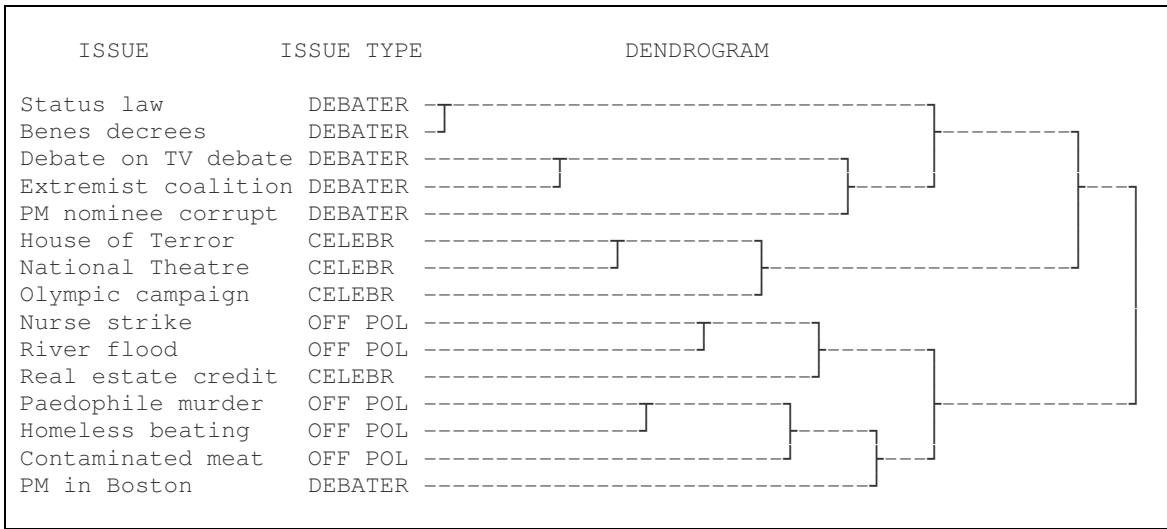
	Issue coverage (content analysis):			Issue perception (survey):
	positivity	support	weight	personal relevance
positivity		<b>0.89</b>	<b>(-.06)</b>	<b>0.8</b>
support			<b>(-.18)</b>	<b>0.67</b>
weight				<b>(-.07)</b>

**Table 2.** Media coverage, political coverage and audience appreciation of the 15 issues analysed. (Pearson correlation coefficients. Values in parentheses are not significant at a 0.05 level. The analysis has been based on the values presented in Table 1.<sup>23</sup>)

Table 2 demonstrates the extraordinary success of celebratory politics in attracting audience attention. Correlation coefficients reveal an almost perfect correspondence between the celebratory tone of an issue (its positivity and pro-Government bias) and the relevance people attribute to it. Although relatively marginal, celebratory issues crowded out all other political issues, like the otherwise omnipresent status law issue, from people’s agenda perception.

Celebratory issues not only grabbed outstanding attention, but also embodied a particular genre of politics in the eyes of the people, who were aware of their similarity. This awareness has manifested itself in the patterns of people’s issue relevance judgements. Some issues were frequently co-selected, while others “repelled” each other in people’s minds. The hidden trends of issue preferences were explored by cluster analysing the fifteen issues. The interrelationship between issues is presented in the diagram below (Figure 1). The closer the issues on the diagram, the more frequently they were co-selected to be included in the five personally most relevant issues. By contrast, issues arranged into different clusters were only rarely co-selected.

<sup>23</sup> The variable “support” is the quotient of pro-Government and pro-Opposition utterances. Only the 10 explicitly political issues have been examined.




**Figure 1.** The 15 issues’ “relevance structure”, as perceived by the public (based on survey analysis) - Hierarchical cluster analysis

People proved themselves aware of the basic genre cleavages of news discourse, as demonstrated by the diagram above. Political issues stand apart from off-political ones, and there is a clear cleavage between debater and celebratory issues as well. Even the finer distinctions are meaningful: inside the “debater” cluster, the two policy issues (status law and Benes decree) are dissociated from issues directly related to the electoral campaign.<sup>24</sup> The above issue structure demonstrates that people selected between issues neither randomly, nor following individual interests. They were aware of the main dramaturgical and genre cleavages presented by media and political actors, and took them into consideration when formulating their preferences. People were aware that they were offered a new genre of mobilization, an unusually strong and appealing vision made up of celebratory issues: the Olympic campaign, the opening of the National Theatre and the House of Terror Museum. The fourth celebratory issue, the new real estate credit, was typically co-selected with “social issues”, that is, off political issues of larger social importance which people clearly distinguished from more tabloid issues.

On the whole, we may conclude that celebratory issues had a prominent power to attract audience interest, and on top of all that, they were perceived as interrelated, embodying the same symbolic message. Their systematic co-selection and co-omission by respondents proves that in people’s eyes

<sup>24</sup> Inside the off-political cluster, broader social problems (the nurses’ strike and river flood insurance) stand apart from biopolitical issues addressing the management and integrity of the body (contaminated meat, beating of homeless people, and paedophile murders). Only two political issues were assigned to the off-political cluster: the real estate credit and PM Orbán’s flight to Boston. This indicates the general appeal and ability of these issues to address people who are otherwise uninterested in party politics.



celebratory issues transcended themselves, and stood for something more general: they represented the mobilizing vision of national recovery promoted by the Government.

The above analysis suggests that *Fidesz* politicians were able to blow their own trumpet through celebratory issues enjoying the prominent attention of the audience. However, as it will be presented, the intense attention these issues provoked did not translate itself into a similarly vivid engagement with the values celebrated. People's attitudes about the two most popular celebratory issues proved highly ambivalent, even among right wing voters. The promise of celebratory communication, the suspension of political controversy, was not fulfilled. The Olympic campaign was backed by only 27% of the population, with 73% explicitly opposing it. People were more split about the real estate credit, 40% being for and another 40% against, with 20% neutral or undecided.<sup>25</sup> This widespread reluctance to engage with the *Fidesz* performance is absolutely considerable, given the relative lack of issue-related criticism people could have been provided with by parties in opposition or by critical journalists.

In Table 3, people's attitudes about the two most important celebratory issues will be examined in three voter segments (self-reported voters of government, those of the opposition and the undecided). According to our representative sample, in 2002, each above segment comprised around one third of the overall population.

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<sup>25</sup> In the absence of attitude questions on the two other celebratory issues, only the reception of the Olympic campaign and the real estate subsidy will be explored. People's attitude to the Olympic campaign was measured by a four-grade scale variable, while opinions about the real estate credit were estimated by a five-grade scale variable.


“We have problems much more important and urgent than the Olympic games.”				“The subsidized real estate credit helps those who need it.”			
		Attitude about statement above				Attitude about statement above	
Political affiliation	Claims issue is relevant	disagrees	agrees	Political affiliation	Claims issue is relevant	agrees	disagrees OR neutral
votes for Gov.	No (42%)	35	65	votes for Gov.	No (44%)	53	47
	Yes (58%)	57	43		Yes (56%)	64	36
	total	48	52		total	59	41
undecided	No (52%)	15	85	undecided	No (48%)	29	71
	Yes (48%)	31	69		Yes (52%)	45	55
	total	23	77		total	37	63
votes for Opp.	No (53%)	6	94	votes for Opp.	No (56%)	20	80
	Yes (47%)	18	82		Yes (44%)	26	74
	total	12	88		total	23	77

**Table 3.** The evaluation of celebratory issues, as a function of their perception as being “personally relevant” and voters’ political affiliation

The first thing to be observed is that the “personal relevance” attributed to celebratory issues was only slightly influenced by people’s political affiliations: 58 and 56% of right-wing voters treated the two issues as personally relevant, as opposed to the 47 and 44% among left-wing voters claiming the same. Celebratory issues’ appeal had a reach well beyond the Governments’ electoral basis.<sup>26</sup> Large segments of differently-minded or undecided people marked celebratory politics as personally relevant, not accepting the left-wing parties’ primary focus on campaign issues and debater politics.

The overall salience of celebratory issues, however, did not result in a clear-cut rallying effect. Their relative lack of mobilizing force manifests itself in two interrelated factors. The first is that the “personal relevance” people attributed to the issues did not imply their more positive stance towards them. In other words, people did not select the issues as “personally relevant” because they would have judged them much more favourably than those omitting the issues. The number of people judging the individual issues

<sup>26</sup> If the four issues are all taken together, the differences are more accentuated: 50% of left wing, oppositional voters selected less than 2 issues as important, while only 30% of the right wing, pro-Government voters did the same. This is due to the fact that the attention of the audience in relation to the National Theatre opening was slightly more split politically (46% of right-wing and 30% of left-wing voters paying attention).



positively was only 10-15% higher among people who selected the given issues as being “personally relevant” than among those people who omitted them from their selection.<sup>27</sup> Importantly, among the politically undecided, only the minority (31% and 45%) of those marking the issues as personally relevant proved to welcome it. The second factor disproving the claim that celebratory issues could have exerted strong rallying effects lies in the highly partisan reception of these issues. In spite of the opposition’s absentist strategy on celebratory issues, people’s attitudes about these issues were heavily determined by their political stance. In the right-wing segment, 48% of voters backed the idea of hosting the Olympics, and 59% welcomed the real estate credit subsidy. The corresponding numbers among the left-wing were, respectively, 12% and 23% (and 23% and 37% among the politically undecided).

### **Discussion: celebratory politics in the light of various media power theories**


Let us start by briefly summarizing our empirical findings. We have distinguished a bundle of promotionally orchestrated political issues, which were closely integrated into the *Fidesz* campaign, uncontested by the political opposition, and very positively covered by the media. “Celebratory issues” had a prominent power of grabbing attention and obscuring alternative issues on the mental “issue salience map” of audiences. People not only attentively followed these issues, but were also aware of their similarity and common core message. In a word, voters’ attention had been successfully attracted by a set of interrelated, uncontested, Government-controlled, promotional issues. However, the above attention did not translate itself into affirmation, and celebratory issues by far did not trigger a “celebratory” reception. On the contrary, a large number of people marked them as “personally relevant” just because they felt frightened or upset about them.

The above findings may add new insights to established scholarly narratives about media power. In the followings, the above case study will be connected to four existing theoretical models: theories of Agenda Setting, “media malaise”, new partizanship and propaganda. Finally, the intense but deeply ambiguous power of celebratory politics will be theorised in terms of “productivity”.

Our findings call for reconsidering a basic assumption of Agenda Setting research, according to which it is the frequency of issue coverage that frames popular agenda perception (McCombs & Reynolds 2002). In our case, issues’ weight on the media agenda played no role at all. People’s attention was

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<sup>27</sup> This difference was stable (from 10 to 15%) in each voter segment, and in relation to both issues (except for the reception of the Olympic campaign in the right-wing segment). In the right-wing segment, the Olympic campaign attracted attention and a favourable opinion at the same time: among those not finding the issue relevant, only 35% had a positive opinion about it, in contrast to the 57% of those selecting the issue into their personal top 5.



aroused by relatively marginal issues that they found appealing and expressive, representing a new genre of communication, projecting a firm political vision. Arguably, in a promotional media environment, highly expressive issues may have a higher chance of capturing audiences' imagination than issues presented repetitively, but with less aesthetic power. If an issue lacks an aura of exceptionality, it risks merging, however frequently it may be covered, into the loud and disturbing noise of today's cluttered, attraction-hunting media environment. By contrast, issues that are seen as exceptional, however marginal coverage they receive, may have an increasing chance to attract audience attention. There are good reasons to argue that late modern media rewards issues that are able to rise, by their exceptional aesthetic force, above the usual, disorienting media clutter. Celebratory politics may be a typical and successful way to create the above aura of exceptionality, to attract audience attention and, as the classical AS formula suggests, to "tell people what to think about".

The above attractivity of celebratory issues challenges some aspects of the dominant critical scholarly narrative on media commercialization. Reacting to the commercialization process in the '90-es, critical scholars have objected that media actors' relentless competition for audience attention allows the sensationalist frameworks of the scandal, the horse race and the power game to take over the media coverage of politics. This type of coverage, critics have argued, produces an alienated, cynical electorate (Cappella & Jamieson 1997) which, following the cues offered by television, "feel[s] good about feeling bad about politics" (Hart 1994: 10). The underlying assumption has been that "dirty politics" is mostly attractive for the audience. However, what our case study suggests is that people are not always that self-evidently responsive to the negative coverage of politics. In the 2002 campaign, the negativity of an issue's coverage strongly decreased its chance of being listened to by audiences. The things people were the least interested in were mud-throwing, controversy and scandal "in themselves". What aroused their interest, by contrast, was the New Right's celebratory vision of national recovery. The fact that people were aroused by an expressive political vision (and voted for or against it in unprecedented proportions) undermines the '90-es' public cynicism argument.

The Governmental celebration of the nation's rebirth did not alienate the electorate, on the contrary, it fed people's civic commitment to follow politics, and, although unintentionally, it also strengthened the existing trends of electoral polarization. As we have seen, voters received celebratory issues with high attention and highly partisan attitudes. This constellation connects our case to recent accounts concerning the rise of an engaged and attentive "new partisan voter" (Bafumi & Shapiro 2009). Recently a number of researchers have discerned a significant polarization of the electorate in Western democracies. As some of them have argued, this process has been at least partly triggered by the same sensation-seeking media mechanisms that had earlier been objected to for alienating people from politics (Mutz 2006;




Davis 2006). As argued earlier, it is clear that in Hungary, the new commercial media environment significantly contributed to the emergence of an unprecedentedly hostile antagonism in politics. On the one hand, the Government used all possible symbolic means to equate its own vision of recovery and its own electoral base with the entire community of the nation. This exclusivist vision was lurking - most often by implicit allusions - behind all “celebratory” communication. On the other hand, the socialist and liberal opposition, although leaving celebratory issues uncontested, led an immensely negative campaign. They maximally aggrandized the alleged threat of the *Fidesz* regime, depicting it as unscrupulous, corrupt, arrogant, antidemocratic, nationalist and insensitive to the problems of the poor. The 2002 electoral campaign was orchestrated as a cosmological fight between Good and Evil<sup>28</sup>, and this deep antagonism undermined the Government’s efforts to promote and maintain a harmonious celebratory space. Our finding that voters interpreted celebratory issues based on their political affiliations suggests that the logic of partisanship triumphed over promotionally created political harmony.

The “new partisanship” model, however, grasps only half of the story. For, the reception of celebratory issues was not entirely driven by partisan cues, which in fact is hard to explain with a model of strong partisanship. This model holds a disturbingly “tribal” assumption, namely that voters in the late modern era would increasingly let themselves be “driven” by their parties’ ever sharpening, hardliner rhetoric. This explanation only partially applies to our findings. It applies, certainly, to the fact that the left-wing electorate debunked celebratory issues almost unanimously. However, even in this case, one might rightly argue that if left-wing voters had been that keen to loyally follow their parties’ cues, they would have entirely ignored celebratory issues, which had no place at all on the left-wing parties’ agenda. In spite of socialists’ efforts to marginalize celebratory issues, their voters did pay passionate attention to them. It was the left-wing electorate - and not the parties - who decided that celebratory issues would play a key role in anti-governmental mobilization. The two other voter segments’ reactions raise even more troubling dilemmas. The question is why only a minority of the right-wing voters sympathized with the overhyped Olympics campaign, and why only 58% of them thought that the entirely harmonious real estate credit issue was justified? Why did the politically undecided voters reject the Government’s celebratory vision? The model of partisan propaganda leaves the above findings unexplained.

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<sup>28</sup> In this respect, the 2002 election campaign in Hungary evokes the 2004 elections in the USA. In both cases, the symbolic force of popular politics triggered never before experienced heights of electoral participation. The widespread perception among voters that these elections were of prominent personal importance was triggered by the symbolic force of the same popular media, which might have stimulated apathy in other political contexts.




Arguably, what the above rejection highlights is the inherent uncertainty of promotional performances in a promotional cultural environment. As it has been widely recognized, promotional culture not only spreads out publicity but also destabilizes it, by permanently accentuating its basic goals (“selling”) and means (“influencing”). In other words, promotional culture cultivates a widespread advertising literacy (Meijer 1998; Muniz & O’Guinn 2001; O’Donohoe 2001), which urges people to discount expressive promotional messages, and regularly scrutinize how faithfully publicities mirror the “real” qualities of the promoted product. It is exactly the above self-revealing character of promotional communication that may stand behind the relative failure of the *Fidesz* performance. As executors of a highly expressive, promotional campaign, *Fidesz* politicians displayed, instead of hiding, their own promotional intents, and exposed themselves as promoters with dubious intentions. Their vision of national recovery and their governance itself was seen by too many people as a monumental and manipulative political publicity show. What may have aroused many voters’ interest was not the polished celebratory message in itself, but its discrepancy with the experience that in everyday life, there are not as many things to celebrate. Since the above widespread public antipathy emerged in a lack of clear counter-arguments made by parties in opposition, there are good reasons to argue that the relative failure of celebratory issues embodies the inherent instability of promotional politics. The fact that celebratory issues had such a good press and such a bad reception highlights the very limits of new promotional politics’ propagandistic potential.<sup>29</sup>

Nothing could better illustrate the contingency of celebratory performances in general than the very demise and afterlife of our discussed celebratory issues. In the very final stage of the electoral campaign, an unprecedented political hysteria erupted, erasing the harmony of celebratory issues. This radical change was initiated by the socialists who were behind according to the polls, and, as a last attempt, launched a bitterly negative campaign 10 days before the elections.<sup>30</sup> Leaving behind their strategy of evasion, they directly attacked the government’s Olympics referendum. The subsequent weeks brought a virulent political battle, a negative campaign on both sides, a further polarization of the political arena: a sudden and full restitution of political antagonism.

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<sup>29</sup> The above contingency questions the applicability of the term propaganda itself to late modern promotionalism. As John Corner has argued, with “the growth of a culture of political publicity within the context of a more widespread promotionalism in public and commercial life complicates our sense of what propaganda is and the kind of ethical criteria appropriate to judging it” (2007: 673).

<sup>30</sup> It is important to note that the above discussed survey was conducted a week before the eruption of this controversy, thus the ambivalent reception of the celebratory issues cannot be attributed to the negative campaign of the socialists.



We may conclude that the analysed celebratory performance stands as a unique combination of a highly attractive, attention-raising appeal, and of a deeply contingent ideological potential. Celebratory issues, by their promotional appeal, arouse the attention of large audience segments, and, by the same appeal, made many of these people feel uncomfortable. People's outstanding attention turned celebratory issues into something more than well-promoted political commodities (what they had originally been intended to be). Instead, and well beyond this, the celebratory politics of *Fidesz* emerged as the symbolic terrain *per se* on which political differences and controversy were constituted, and pro-government and anti-government positions equally gained meaning for the audience. In other words, celebratory issues become the ideological signposts compared to which people defined their political identities, either fully negatively, as they did on the left, or in a more positive, still ambivalent, way, as they did on the right.

Although the above constellation clearly verifies people's capacity to discount publicity, it also points to the unquestionable potential of promotional communication to present itself as the prominent symbolic terrain where political controversy is constituted. The celebratory performance of *Fidesz*, although unsuccessful in veiling political controversy, was certainly able to rearticulate and channel it. With its extreme gravitational force, it reframed ordinary discourses about democratic politics, economic recovery, or the nation as a political community. Celebratory issues were the object of intense attention; served as signposts for engagement and disengagement at the same time; provoked discourse. They were refused by the majority of voters, still, made part of a performance that successfully mobilized many of them; induced people to queue for tickets, attend meetings or sign up for the Olympics referendum (almost a million signatures!). In the end, they were erased by a sudden outburst of political hysteria.

The above multidirectional trajectory suggests that promotional performances in the new media environment may trigger hardly controllable flows of media power. Promotional politics condenses various sorts of uncontrollable energies and trigger fluctuating waves of media effects. Promotional performances' power lies less in imposing some rigid ideology than catalyzing a much more diffuse 'productivity' (Fiske 1996): the focusing of attention, the polarization of the audience, the intensification of discourse, the proliferation of related stories, knowledge and identities, the creation of new narratives. Successful promotional performances in politics create an aura of exceptionality and festivity, in this respect they are inheritants of media events: they are not rigid spectacles, but multivocal 'concerts of performances' (Dayan-Katz 1992: 140), sites of 'maximum turbulence' (Fiske 1996: 8).

## Conclusion

The above analysis has grasped the power of celebratory politics as a multivocal and turbulent productivity, a mixture of an outstanding attention-raising appeal and an ambiguous political mobilizing force. I will devote my concluding lines to exploring what this finding may add to our understanding of commercial media logic and democratic politics.


It is undeniable that by presenting celebratory politics' productivity as multidimensional, my above argument has backed pragmatists' point that the "logic" of commercial media is open, fragmentary and tensionful rather than predefined, clean-cut and univocal. However, there is a tendency among pragmatists to optimistically conclude that, after all, things keep going well, and the „importance of political substance, as against media hype" (Zaller 2001: 182) has not been severely challenged by commercialization. This conclusion is hard to accept in the light of the above analysis. For, celebratory politics' ephemerality, by its very nature, cannot stand as a strict rule guaranteeing that all celebratory performances will be multivocally interpreted. In any contexts where a celebratory performance suspends democratic debate, there is a danger that the promoter will succeed in mobilizing and manipulating the electorate.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, once a Government engages in a celebratory performance, it will take policy measures which - even if totally crippled in terms of propagandistic value - will leave their trace on the whole of society. Uncontested and uncontrolled politics may lead to disastrous consequences which will impose themselves upon the community long after the celebration has ended and democratic political controversy has been restituted. This is exactly what happened in Hungary. The 2002 performance was only the first act of a long spectacle of celebratory politics, which remorselessly downgraded democracy to spin, and, in its populist haste, brought the country's economy to the verge of total collapse. In 2009, the country still has not recovered - economically, politically, psychologically - from the wounds made by consecutive waves of celebratory performance in 2002, 2003 and 2006.<sup>32</sup>

If celebratory politics' ephemerality does not imply that it is harmless, its potential dangers should neither be aggrandized and associated with a univocal

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<sup>31</sup> This was the case in America during the time of Gulf War II. As research on the US Government's propaganda has demonstrated, the President had „remarkable capacities to move the public to support his decision [...] [and] to lead members of the public to assume false beliefs in support of his position." The research has also made clear that the media in this case could not „be counted on to play the critical role of doggedly challenging the administration." (Kull et al. 2003: 597-8) It is beyond question that the second Gulf War case was a typical embodiment of celebratory politics, where the media and the political opposition equally withdrew their criticism. It is hard to assess whether a more intense oppositional strategy could have hijacked the President's celebratory propaganda - my above ephemerality argument suggests it might have.

<sup>32</sup> This issue cannot be addressed in this article - it is to be developed in a further article.



and inescapable “logic” of commercial media. Given the widespread antipathy they triggered, one might ask whether Government politicians were really following some “objective” imperatives of attractivity when they engaged in an excessively promotional celebratory performance, in the hope of buying electoral loyalty. Equally questionable were their political opponents’ worries that any attempt to confront celebratory issues would fall back on their heads. Both above misjudgements arose from the overall assumption that the apparent, objective, inescapable logic of today’s media rewards the cleverest manipulator, the best “salesman”.

In the light of the above study, I am arguing that any belief in the prominence of promotional propaganda results from the fundamental misperception that there exists an apparent, clean-cut “media logic” which rewards the wittiest propagandist. My final point is that celebratory politics and other spectacular forms of promotionism are neither necessary nor irresistible, but crystallize themselves from - to borrow an eloquent term from Jeffrey Alexander (2006) - „iterative sequences of misperformance” enacted by deluded politicians. Celebratory politics, to use a behavioural term, is a „social trap”, a vicious circle of misjudged agency, where all the actors misperceive their own and others’ scope of action, and sacrifice their long-term interests for highly uncertain and illusory short-term gains.

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