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The Party Colonisation of the Media

The Case of Hungary

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Media scholars looking into the relationship between political and media systems in the former communist countries have mainly worked on the assumption that parties seek control over the media in order to suppress critical voices and to gain favourable coverage so that they can influence voting behaviour, but have barely explored political actors' other possible motivations. Meanwhile, political scientists studying the region's countries have often focused on parties' relationship to the state and the resources that they extracted from state institutions such as ministries and municipalities but largely ignored the relationship between parties and the media. This article, written as part of the project Media and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe, attempts to link these two traditions of research. Introducing the concept of the party colonisation of the media, it looks into what benefits other than suppressing criticism and gaining favourable coverage parties may gain from controlling the media. It uses the example of Hungary to illustrate how the party colonisation of the media works. It also intends to assess how different patterns of media colonisation affect media freedom.

Keywords: *media capture; media freedom; party systems; public service media; colonisation*

Media Freedom in the East and the West

In April 2010, the Hungarian Wireless Agency reports, a delegation of the Hungarian media authority paid a visit to the People's Democratic Republic of China. The representatives of the authority met with Zhang Haitao, Deputy Minister of the Chinese State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television, and requested a detailed documentation of China's media policy. Head of the Hungarian delegation Tamás Tirts, nominated by the Christian Democratic People's Party to the authority, told the news agency that Hungary needed a new broadcasting regulation and a new media system.[1]

Later in April 2010, Hungary held legislative elections that brought the conserva-
tive Fidesz party and its ally the Christian Democrats more than two-thirds of seats
in parliament. During the next few months, the new parliament passed regulation
that established a National Media and Telecommunication Authority to supervise, in
addition to private radio and television, the print press and the internet. The new
regulation also created a Public Service Foundation to manage the public institutions
Hungarian Television, Hungarian Radio, Danube Television, and the Hungarian
News Agency. The National Media and Telecommunications Authority is headed by
a Media Council, chaired by former member and MP of the Fidesz party Annamária
Szalai, herself directly appointed by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. All four members
of the Media Council have been nominated and elected by Fidesz. In the new struc-
ture, Annamária Szalai has unprecedented powers to supervise both the private and
the public media.

Hungary's new media regulation generated international concern and was criti-
cised by the European Federation of Journalists, the Helsinki Foundation, the
International Press Institute, the OSCE Representative on the Freedom of the Media,
and Reporters Without Borders, among others. The European Commission recom-
mended amendments to the law. Freedom House's annual press freedom reports
released in 2011 and 2012 downgraded Hungary. The organisation, which lists coun-
tries in the categories "free" (0–30 points), "partly free" (31–60 points) and "not
free" (61–100 points), gave Hungary 30 points for 2010 and 36 points for 2011,
making it one of the lowest-scoring of the Central and Eastern European countries.
This was in contrast to 2009, when its score of 23 points was about average for the
region.[2] Hungary had not received such a poor result since the 1990s. Reporters
Without Borders also downgraded Hungary.[3] The establishment of media freedom
was a major project of the democratic oppositions during the political transforma-
tions of 1989–1991 in the former communist countries of Central and Eastern
Europe, including the young Fidesz party in Hungary. Few would have expected
such a drastic return to what some analysts describe as authoritarian media policy.[4]

To be sure, Hungary is not the only country in Central and Eastern Europe where
media freedom has been a recurring issue. The freedom of the media was formally
declared during the last political transformation, but it failed to consolidate in many
of the region's countries.[5] Despite the adoption of media laws, the establishment of
institutions designed to protect public broadcasters' independence, and the wide-
spread privatisation of the media, media freedom was repeatedly challenged
throughout the 1990s and 2000s. From Slovenia to Poland and from the Czech
Republic to Bulgaria, many of the new (sometimes old-new) political elites have
attempted to exert pressure on the media. Some of these attempts have succeeded; a
wide range of sources describe a deficit of media freedom in many of the region's
countries. Most analysts agree that the performance of the news media has fallen
short of both normative expectations and the standards set by the media in more
advanced democracies.[6] As Trionfi put it,

There is no doubt that press freedom in the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe has made impressive progress since the breakdown of the communist system. However, journalists are still continually confronted with a number of laws and practices that effectively limit their freedom of expression and the free flow of information. . . . From defamation to national security, from privacy to contempt of court, laws are widely used to suppress information and opinions that have the right to be seen in the light of the day. Public representatives also have a tendency to forget that the public has the right to access information. . . . Physical harassment, threats and intimidation are also used to discourage inconvenient reports.[7]

Quantitative measurements of media freedom confirm this assessment. Freedom House's historical press freedom indexes in the period 1993–2010 suggest that the status of media freedom was poorer in the majority of the European Union's eastern member states than in the majority of the western ones. The organisation uses criteria regarding the media's legal, political, and economic environment; of a total of twenty-three questions asked, twenty are related to political pressures.[8] Given the nature of the assessment criteria, this implies that the media were exposed to more political pressure in the European Union's new democracies than in the old ones (see Figure 1).

Of all media, public service broadcasters seem particularly exposed to political pressures. A study focusing on public television in twenty European countries and conducted by the Open Society Institute in 2005 suggests that public service media were highly vulnerable because buffer institutions failed to protect their professional autonomy and independence from political pressures.[10] As Dragomir and Thompson note in a follow-up study by the same organisation in 2008 in nine European countries, including Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia,

The political elites in many of the new democracies are determined to keep control of PSB. In the early 2000s, when their countries had recently joined the Council of Europe and were in many cases pursuing accession to the European Union, these elites showed signs of willingness to refrain from influencing these media. Today, by contrast, they openly strive to restore and maintain tight control, usually by appointing loyal people to governing bodies. [In Poland,] members of TVP's Supervisory Board continue to be drawn from party ranks and lack professional expertise. They have included the owner of a local hippodrome, a close associate of the mayor of Warsaw, a retired lawyer and a purveyor of herbal remedies to the former Prime Minister's mother. The Romanian SRTV continues to be selected on the same old mechanism that keeps the institution in political harness. [In Slovakia,] the governing coalition interfered grossly in both the appointment of the STV Director-General and the appointment of its governing structures.[11]

When explaining the recurring deficit of media freedom in many of the former communist countries, most analysts implicitly or explicitly rely on the assumption

Figure 1
Freedom House press freedom average rankings, Central and Eastern Europe versus Western Europe (without Cyprus and Malta), 1993–2010[9]
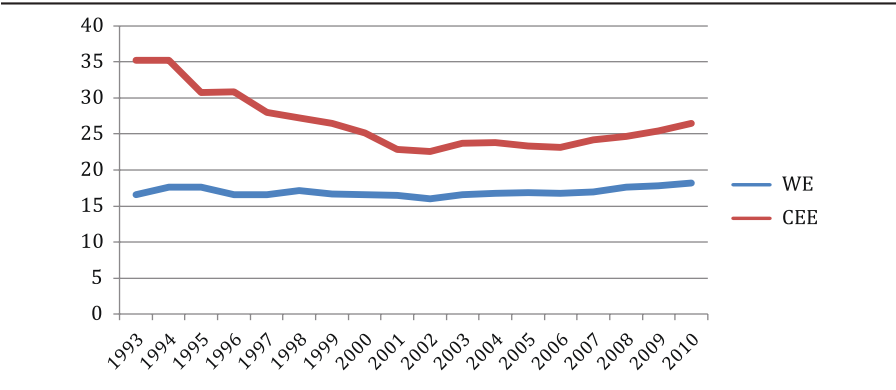
Source: Based on Freedom House's historical data.

that political actors seek control over the media in order to suppress critical voices and to gain favourable coverage—that is, to exert censorship and propaganda—in order to influence public opinion and voting behaviour. But this assumption has not been tested empirically as yet. This article looks into whether evidence supports this recurring claim and, introducing the concept of the party colonisation of the media, it explores what benefits other than suppressing criticism and gaining favourable coverage parties may gain from controlling the media. It uses the example of Hungary to illustrate how the party colonisation of the media works. It also intends to assess how different patterns of media colonisation affect media freedom.

Theories of Media Capture

Several authors use the concept of *media capture* to describe informal pressures on the media in the former communist countries. While the concept has no consensual definition, most authors seem to agree that the benefit of media capture is the media's influence on public opinion and voting behaviour, that is, capturers' ability to articulate their views and to assert their ideologies, whether it is political parties or related business interest groups that exert pressure on the media. Corneo, for example, argues that the "media can influence voting outcomes" and, capturing media, "the rich can influence information in a media outlet at a cost."[12] Petrova suggests that "mass media, being the most important source of information on public affairs for the general public, provides a convenient means for manipulating

public opinion."[13] Besley and Prat note that the point in media capture is that the media "affects the voters' information and hence their voting decisions."[14] Mungiu-Pippidi describes media capture as

> a situation in which the media has not succeeded in becoming autonomous to manifest a will of its own and to exercise its main function, notably of informing people, but has persisted in an intermediate state, whereas various groups, not just the government, use it for other purposes,[15]

but she does not specify what other purposes media capture may serve.'

Empirical evidence, however, does not seem to be consistent with the general view that the media can efficiently shape public opinion and voting behaviour. Media effects research and reception studies suggest that the media's influence has been largely over-stated, especially because personal experiences and interpersonal communication over-write the messages transmitted by the media. In a plural media environment, people tend to listen selectively to only those outlets that reinforce their predispositions.[16] Some findings even assert that pro-government propaganda may actually have a boomerang effect in that it may alienate, rather than mobilise, the incumbent parties' supporters.[17] Common knowledge confirms this line of argument: communism fell despite party states' extensive control over the media in many of the late communist countries. It also is noteworthy that electoral volatility is high and cabinets change frequently in the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe,[18] which suggests that parties' recurring capture of and influence over the media do not guarantee electoral victory.

Further, because of the recent rise of commercial broadcasters, online news portals, and the social media, patterns of media use have changed. The reach and audience share of public service television, the most frequent target of political elites, has shrunk over the past two decades, and the once undisputed hegemons of the air are now only watched by less than 30 or 20 percent and, in some countries, 10 percent of the population—the only exception in Central and Eastern Europe to this rule being Poland, where public television still has a major audience share.[19] It would simply be irrational for politicians to expect that public broadcasters with such a limited reach could have a huge impact on voters in plural media landscapes, where audiences are exposed to a variety of messages.

"Media and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe," a European Research Council project based at Oxford University, looks into how political systems affect media systems, and asks what kind of democracy is needed for the media to perform their agreed-on normative functions.[20] In 2010 and 2011, the project team conducted some three hundred interviews with media professionals, politicians, political communicators, and social scientists in the ten former communist countries that joined the European Union in 2004 and 2007.[21] The interviews with senior representatives of thirty-five parties in ten countries have indeed revealed that some of the political elites had doubts about the media's ability to influence public opinion and voting

behaviour. When asked about this, several of them noted that the media's role may be overstated, and the media's actual impact may be lesser than the political (and journalistic) elites think.

For example, a representative of the Czech Social Democratic Party was of the opinion that "the relationship between the press and people's behaviour is often unpredictable." In Hungary, a senior member of the Politics Can Be Different party observed that "the past twenty years are evidence that those who submit public service media to tight government control will lose the next elections," and a former senior leader of the Free Democrats' Alliance noted that "media capture didn't work." A leading politician of the Polish Peasant Party suggested that "there are more proofs that those who control the media are more likely to lose the elections than win them." In Romania, an interviewee representing the Democratic Liberal Party said that "my party, like any political party, overestimates the role of the media," and added that President Băsescu had won the election in a hostile media environment. A representative of the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union noted that "the media don't have such an influence as they like to think about themselves." Another interviewee, speaking for the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union, observed that "if anybody wants to control the public service media, it is rather counter-productive. . . . The voter is not stupid." In Slovenia, a senior politician speaking for the Social Democrats suggested that "excessive media control eventually fires back," and another one, of the Slovenian People's Party, said that the capture of the media "never pays off," as the public easily recognises media bias. To be sure, other interviews conducted during the research revealed that other politicians still maintained the view that the media were an efficient tool to influence public opinion and voting behaviour. Yet the findings above warn that the mono-causal view explaining media capture with the media's alleged influence and underlying most of the literature may not offer the full picture.

It should also be noted that nearly all of the parties whose representatives were interviewed commission public opinion surveys. Some parties also pre-test messages via focus group research before releasing them. One party, notably the Labour Party in Lithuania, had been established on the basis of preliminary market research. This suggests that parties' communication today is designed in such a way that they try to meet the demands of either the general public or their own constituencies, that is, to tell people what people want to hear. Put differently, most parties try to follow, rather than lead, public opinion—which is another reason why one should seek additional motives behind parties' efforts to control the media. The concept of the party colonisation of the media, to be elaborated in the next section, attempts to account for these motives.

The Party Colonisation of the Media

In an attempt to reveal what benefits media capture may bring to parties in Central and Eastern Europe, and in search of an explanation why the status of media

freedom is generally poorer in the new democracies of the European Union than in the old ones, one may want to take a look at some of these countries' party systems indicators, and especially those that distinguish them from their counterparts in Western Europe. Comparative studies of party systems show that political parties in the new democracies of the European Union are less embedded in society and hence less stable than those in the old ones. The data provided by Mair and van Biezen for the period 1997–2000, though not covering all of the European Union's member states, show that in the new democracies on average 2.84 percent of the electorate assumed membership in a political party as opposed to 4.40 percent in the old ones. And although there are some old democracies such as the United Kingdom and France, where the ratio of party members was lower than that in the new democracies (1.92 and 1.57 percent, respectively), these western countries' absolute numbers of party membership were much higher than those of any eastern country.[22] The survey data collected in 2006 by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance reveal that on average 14.30 percent of respondents in the European Union's eastern member states, including the then candidate countries Bulgaria and Romania, "tended to trust" political parties, as opposed to an average of 29.2 percent in the then fifteen western member states.[23] Mainwaring and Torcal's findings show that the new democracies had higher electoral volatility than the old ones: it was 40.75 percent on average in the eastern member states as opposed to 13.44 percent in the western ones.[24] Lower party membership figures suggest that fewer people participated in party building and organisation in the European Union's eastern member states. Lesser trust in parties and higher electoral volatility are indicative that parties in the region's countries could not appeal effectively to their potential voters, nor could they mobilise their most likely supporters, notably citizens whose votes they had earned at least once before.

Speaking of post-communist countries, O'Dwyer observes that because of small party memberships and limited membership dues, parties must rely on state jobs and resources to honour party organisers' work.[25] Kopecký also reminds of parties' week social roots in Central and Eastern Europe when describing what he calls the "party colonization of the state," a strategy whereby "state resources are traded for political support" in order to enable parties "to compensate their feeble position in society by a strong grip over the public sector."[26] The party colonisation of the state aims at enhancing party patronage, as "public jobs are allocated to party supporters as a reward for services rendered, or as a prepayment for services to be provided in the future."[27] Since Michels's landmark book *Political Parties* (1911), political scientists have widely considered parties to have a vested interest in maximising their power and stabilising their positions.[28]

It has been argued in the previous section that theories of media capture do not offer the full picture when it comes to explaining parties' efforts to control the media in general and public service broadcasters in particular, and thereby restricting media freedom. In fact, some of the politicians interviewed during the research hinted at other possible motives. In the Czech Republic, a senior representative of the

Tradition Responsibility Prosperity 09 party said that "the public service media are a big business, there is a lot of money involved in them. [Control over public broadcasters] is rather a question of business than influencing what the media say." In Hungary, a former senior member of the Free Democrats' Alliance said that "the buying of films, who was employed and who was on the screen—all of this was about the money. . . . If a company is commissioned to produce a programme, it may afford to produce campaign material for party X." Another interviewee, representing the Hungarian Socialist Party, noted (and this is worth quoting at some length) that

> the media are big business. Certain [public service] programmes can be commissioned to certain companies, but it is not film production companies that profit from this and would immediately transfer a part of the money to the party, even though there might be the usual percentage [to be paid for corruption]. Rather, it is the intellectual and cultural circle around the party that is being fed this way. You can call it indirect party funding, even though the money is not spent on party events, but on building a clientele.

In light of this, theories of the party colonisation of the state should be extended to also relate to the media. The party colonisation of the media may be defined as *a strategy aimed at extracting from the media resources such as airtime, frequencies, positions and money, and channelling them to party loyalists in order to reward them for various services*. It may target all media—public and private alike—but its primary targets are the regulatory authorities and public service broadcasters that parties may oversee more easily than private outlets, as the appointment mechanisms of their regulatory boards are designed in ways that enable them to delegate their supporters into these institutions. Most of the new democracies' parties are still in an early phase of party building and are lacking close links with society, which they try to compensate with the colonisation of the media, while the old democracies' parties have been able to establish closer links with society over the past several decades, and hence do not need to colonise the media, or not as extensively as their counterparts in the new democracies do—this may be one of many explanations for the deficit of media freedom that one can discern in several of the Central and Eastern European countries as opposed to most of Western Europe.

The concept of "media colonisation" is both narrower and broader than that of "media capture." It is narrower in that it focuses on state media and party control, and largely ignores private outlets and business groups' influence. And it is broader in that, in addition to the distortion of information, it also associates other purposes with control over the media, notably the extraction of resources (while at the same time acknowledging that the media's assumed impact on voting behaviour is also among the many possible motivations for attempts to control the media).

The party colonisation of the media should also be distinguished from other kin concepts, notably "press partisanship" and "political parallelism." Seymour-Ure suggests, in the context of Western European countries, that "where competing

parties exist, one might expect to find a connection not only between individual papers and parties but also a correspondence, or parallelism, between the range of papers and the range of parties," while Hallin and Mancini define political parallelism as "the extent to which the media reflect distinct political orientations in their news and current affairs reporting, and sometimes also the entertainment content."[29] While media content is biased in favour of certain parties in both cases, there are major differences as well. First, colonised state media are used to reach all potential voters, whereas party newspapers—whether formally or informally linked with parties—are principally agents of intraparty communication. Second, colonised state media broadcast via publicly owned frequencies and are mainly funded from taxpayers' money, while party newspapers typically do not rely on state assets, and therefore may not be used to extract public resources for partisan purposes. Third, colonised state media are controlled by parties in a non-transparent manner, while party newspapers operate transparently in that the general public is aware that they are run by or are associated with parties and voice partisan views. Fourth, unlike state media, party newspapers are not expected to be neutral in political debates, nor are they expected to ensure parties' transparency and accountability. And fifth, the party colonisation of the media implies the involuntary submission of editors and journalists to the party will, while the party press is based on jointly shared ideological and political beliefs and loyalties as well as voluntary co-operation between party leaders and journalists.

It has been suggested that some of the parties in Central and Eastern Europe seek to colonise the media in order to reach voters and to compensate their feeble social roots by means of party patronage. But if parties in the new democracies are so weak, one may ask, how could they be able to colonise these realms?

Kopecký observes that the constitutions of all of the former communist countries that are now members of the European Union define political participation almost exclusively in terms of parties, the only exception to this rule being Latvia.[30] Grzymała-Busse argues in a similar vein when addressing the question how parties, if so feeble, can colonise the state, and notes that parties in Central and Eastern Europe have a practical monopoly over policy making and the redistribution of resources, because of the relative weakness of other political actors such as presidents, civil society, and the trade unions.[31] Put differently, parties in Central and Eastern Europe may be weaker than their counterparts in Western Europe, yet they are stronger than their potential rivals in their respective countries.

This also holds for the media: the boards of the national media authorities and public service broadcasters are designed in ways that enable parties, and especially the governing parties, to play a key part in the nomination and election of their members in nearly all of the region's countries. The exceptions are Lithuania and Slovenia, where non-governmental organisations also have the right to nominate members to the boards of public service broadcasters. The members of the media authority, though, are elected by parliament's majority in Slovenia too.

The Case of Hungary

The example of Hungary is illustrative of the party colonisation of the media, yet it should be noted that party/media links in other Central and Eastern European countries may display different patterns.

The post-transformation media history of Hungary can be divided in three distinct periods marked with different regulatory regimes. Of these, this section will briefly overview the first (that of the media war) and the second (the consolidation of media freedom), and explore in more detail the third (the de-consolidation of media freedom), looking into media colonisation mechanisms and the resulting channelling of sources, including airtime, frequencies, positions and money, to party clients and hinterlands.

The Media War (1990–1995)

The first period was one of a so-called *media war* fought between parties for the control of the media, especially of public service broadcasters. Between 1990 and 1995, there was no broadcasting regulation in Hungary, as the coalition and the opposition parties could not agree on the text of the law, despite repeated attempts. Consequently, state-owned Hungarian Radio (MR) and Hungarian Television (MTV) preserved their broadcasting monopoly on the national level, and private broadcasters were not licensed. By virtue of a pact between the then biggest coalition force, the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) and the then biggest opposition party the Free Democrats' Alliance (SZDSZ) in 1990, their Director Generals were jointly appointed by Prime Minister József Antall (MDF) and President of the Republic Árpád Göncz (formerly SZDSZ).

In an atmosphere of growing political polarisation, Antall, unable to remove Elemér Hankiss, Director General of MTV and Csaba Gombár, that of MR, established a second state institution called Danube Television (DTV) in 1992, gathering his party's supporters, and channelled MTV's and MR's budgets under the authority of the Prime Minister's Office. Finally, in early 1993, the Director Generals of both MTV and MR were removed, and party loyalists were appointed to replace them. This was followed by the sacking of 129 staff members, critical of the government, and their replacement with pro-government journalists.

The next government, of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) in coalition with SZDSZ and headed by Prime Minister Gyula Horn, began its rule by sacking the leaders of MTV and MR, which move was, again, followed by the massive dismissal of journalists, this time a total of 174 people.[32]

Freedom House's historical press freedom data goes back to 1993 only. In the last three years of the media war period, the organisation granted Hungary 30–38 points, listing it with the "partly free press" countries.

Multi-party Control Over the Media (1996–2010)

The second period may be described as one of the gradual *consolidation of media freedom*. It was marked with the adoption of the Radio and Television Act in 1996 with a consensus of all parties but one in parliament, including those of the opposition, as well as the resulting launch of nationwide private broadcasters in 1997 and 1998 and the ensuing ending of public service broadcasters' monopoly, and lasted until early 2010.

The 1996 Radio and Television Act established Boards of Trustees to head the three public broadcasters. The executive committees of the Boards consisted of at least eight members, half of whom were delegated by the coalition and the other half by the opposition parties. The Chairs of the Boards were elected by parliament (i.e., technically the governing parties), and the Vice-Chairs were nominated by the opposition parties. In addition to parties' nominees, professional and civil organisations could also delegate members to the Boards, but their powers were more restricted than those of the executive committees, the latter being in control of the appointment of the Director Generals as well as the approval of the institutions' annual financial plans. Despite this arrangement, the firing of old senior managers and editors and the hiring of new ones after changes of government continued to be a recurring practice throughout this second period.

The law also established the media authority National Radio and Television Board (ORTT) to manage frequency allocation and the redistribution of licence fee revenues. ORTT had at least five members. Its Chair was jointly appointed by the Prime Minister and the President of the Republic, and the members were nominated by the fractions of the parliamentary parties, with each fraction nominating one member.

Miklós Haraszti, MP and media policy expert of the Free Democrats' Association (1990–1994) and Representative on Freedom of the Media for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (2004–2010) remembers the 1996 Radio and Television Act like this:

> The broadcasting act was based on an agreement. The point of the agreement . . . was that there was no other way. And this is how corruption was born. . . . it was to establish Boards of Trustees including opposition nominees in exchange for the authorisation of commercial broadcasting, which had become an ideological issue. . . . Multi-party control was part of the principle. . . . it was about *the establishment of sinecures*, which was personally enforced by [senior Fidesz politician Tamás] Deutch. . . . The Free Democrats' Alliance's beautiful self-restraining rule came to produce sinecures in an attempt to politically equilibrate the boards, since they could not be de-politicised. That was the second best solution. . . . Civil representation also became a means to produce sinecures. . . . The stake of the Radio and Television Act was, in my expectation, to eliminate the ultimate reason that had triggered the media war, namely Hungarian Television's evening news bulletin, which had a monopoly until that point.[33]

ORTT made several controversial decisions regarding frequency allocation, particularly when terrestrial frequencies were distributed to nationwide commercial television channels in 1997 in an unlawful manner, as a court decision later noted.[34] One of the tender's winner was TV2 (MTM-SBS), represented by Dezső Pintér, Prime Minister Gyula Horn's former speechwriter.

During this second period, not only public service broadcasters and the media authority, but private broadcasters too were submitted to multi-party control. As a contemporary observer noted,

> Party people sit on the supervising authority of the media as well as the National Radio and Television Board; furthermore, an inter-party bargain made it possible for the two commercial channels to be granted frequencies by this body, even though they submitted deficient tenders. . . . In both [private] television channels there was an advisory body of party delegates operating until quite recently. At RTL Klub, for instance, it was an advisor to the Prime Minister who occupied one of these posts, and on one occasion she did indeed interfere in the editing of a comedy show. It is a daily practice that parties and ministries make phone calls to news editors when they wish to make a half-minute appearance.[35]

The way how the resources extracted from the media were re-distributed to support parties' clients and hinterlands is poorly documented. However, one example of such practices was that of the educational youth sci-fi series *Space Gammas*, produced by Zsuzsa Czégé's Flix Invest Ltd. for a total of 350 million forints (1,831,023 euros at the 1996 average exchange rate) and comprising 160 episodes (1995–1998).[36] The series was connected with the so-called Xenia Fever movement, headed by Andor Schmuck, organiser of Prime Minister Horn's Movement for a Free European Hungary and a close associate of socialist Minister of Labour Péter Kiss. The Xenia Fever movement, which was granted a two-million-forint (10,463 euros) state support, was advertising and selling various goods for the youth, including an energy drink produced by WÉS Joint Stock Company, owned by socialist investor László Máté.[37] Another company remembered for a highly controversial contract with Hungarian Television was Ferenc Tolvaly's MTM Communication, commissioned to buy films abroad for the public service broadcaster. Tolvaly himself was associated with the Hungarian Socialist Party, yet one of his sub-contractors was István Peták, who later was delegated to Hungarian Television's board of trustees by the conservative Hungarian Democratic Forum.[38] A further noteworthy construction was that of the political talk show programme broadcast in the mornings under the name *Sun TV* on Hungarian Television's Channel 2. The production was using Hungarian Television's frequency free of charge and could sell advertising time for its own benefit.[39] In exchange for this to happen—that is, for non-interference into the business of *Sun TV*—politicians of all parties could come to the show virtually any time they wanted.[40]

How exactly ORTT's budget was spent is difficult to trace back today, especially as links between beneficiary companies and parties were all but transparent, yet the amounts were considerable for a country of Hungary's size. One brief example though may shed some light on how the system worked. In 2007, ORTT imposed a special fine on the commercial television channel RTL Klub. The authority's income generated this way was distributed to support cultural events, film production and book publishing. Each of ORTT's then six members had a 12-million-forint budget (47,750 euros at the 2007 average exchange rate) to support projects of their own choice, and the authority as a whole a further 38 million forints (151,210 euros) to distribute jointly. László Meszleny, delegated to ORTT by the Christian Democrats, granted support from his budget to *Porta*, the monthly magazine of his party.[41]

During this period of multi-party media control, the status of media freedom as measured by Freedom House improved constantly, albeit hectically, from 31 points in 1996 to 23 points in 2009. This improvement is likely explained by the fact that party representatives sitting in the various boards could mutually restrain each other's efforts to exert excessive control over the media. The regulatory regime made sure that all parties would have some influence on the media, but none of them would have too much influence. Governing parties, however, had a greater influence than opposition parties. Throughout most of the period, the news and current affairs programmes of public service broadcasters displayed a marked pro-government bias. In 1999, for example, the then government and the coalition parties featured in 76–84 percent of all domestic political news broadcast on MTV; on several issues only coalition politicians were asked to comment, while the opposition did not get any airtime at all.[42]

One-Party Control over the Media (2010–Present Day)

The improvement of media freedom was no longer the case during the third period, starting in mid-2010, best described as the *de-consolidation of media freedom*. The winner of the elections, Viktor Orbán's Christian, national, and conservative government, used its supermajority of mandates to change media law, and adopted a Media Constitution and a Multimedia Act that regulate all outlets on all platforms, including the print press, television, radio, and the Internet. The new regulation created a regime whereby the ruling party took all: multi-party media control gave way to one-party control.[43]

The new regulation established a new supervisory body called the National Media and Telecommunications Authority (NMHH), managed by the Media Council. The Media Council's four members have been appointed by parliament's ad hoc appointment commission; currently, all of them are Fidesz nominees. The Media Council's Chair Annamária Szalai, has been directly appointed by Prime Minister Orbán and, technically speaking, heads both NMHH and the Media Council. The

four members and the Chair have been elected for an unusually long, nine-year term. The Chair's and the members' mandate may be renewed.

NMHH is in charge of frequency distribution and is free to define the allocation criteria. During the first eighteen months of its mandate, it distributed thirty-five local radio frequencies, of which eighteen were granted to pro-government stations (Radio Maria obtained seven, Catholic Radio two, the protestant Radio Europe three, and Chain Bridge Radio five licences). At the same time, the authority refused to renew the frequency concession of long-standing left-liberal Club Radio, the last of the opposition voices on the air.[44] The most valuable frequency for commercial broadcasting, reaching a potential audience of 3.3 million people, was granted to Prodo Voice, a company owned by a certain G. P. J. Ligtenberg, a close business associate of Zsolt Nyerges, the latter being a business partner of Lajos Simicska, Fidesz's former Director of Finances.[45]

The authority is in charge of content monitoring as well, and may impose fines of up to 200 million forints (716,000 euros at the 2011 average exchange rate) on media outlets that breach the law. Whether an outlet breaks the law or not is a matter of arbitrary judgement, as the new regulation prescribes a series of undefined, and therefore rather fuzzy, restrictions on content.[46]

The new regulation united MTV, MR, DTV, and the Hungarian News Agency (MTI) in the Public Service Foundation, managed by a board of trustees, consisting of seven members and a chair. The chair and one member are delegated by the Media Council, three members by the governing parties, and three by the opposition parties. The board elected the Director Generals of the three public service broadcasters. It also elected the Supervisory Committee of MTI which, in turn, appointed the Director General of the news agency. Breaking with previous practice, MTI today releases news free of charge for all outlets, which has eventually led to the closing down of its only private rival, the Independent News Agency.

The new regulation has also created a Media Service and Asset Management Fund (hereafter Media Fund) to manage the funding of the public service broadcasters MTV, MR, and DTV. The Media Fund's Director has been appointed by Annamária Szalai, Chair of the Media Council.

NMHH and the Media Council are in control of substantial financial resources. By virtue of the 2011 Budget Act, the media authority had a budget of more than 29 billion forints (10,386,500 euros at the 2011 average exchange rate) for its own costs and the Media Fund a budget of over 63 billion forints (22,563,660 euros) to distribute; thus, the total sum Annamária Szalai ultimately controlled amounted to about 0.3 percent of the national GDP.[47] The new regulation does not specify the Media Fund's allocation criteria.

The new regulation outsourced the production of the three public service broadcasters' news bulletins to MTI, and that of other programmes to the Media Fund. The number of each of the three public service broadcasters' employees has been reduced to a mere forty-nine people. Hence, neither the Directors General nor the Boards of Trustees (having some opposition nominees) of the public service broadcasters have

much influence on production and programming.[48]

MTI's new Director General, Csaba Belénessy, is a former editor-in-chief of pro-Fidesz Chain Bridge Radio. MTV has hired a number of pro-Fidesz journalists and activists, including Péter Obersovszky, former anchor of pro-Fidesz Echo TV, and István Gulyás, former news director of pro-Fidesz NewsTV. Philip Rákay, former master of ceremony of Fidesz's street demonstrations, was appointed supervisor to the institution. The list of freshly appointed Fidesz loyalists could be long continued. Most of them receive wages of more than 1,000,000 forints (3,580 euros) a month, while the average Hungarian earns 210,000 forints (750 euros).[49]

Public service broadcasters outsource programme production and advertising to companies close to the Fidesz party. For example, Hung-Ister, a firm formerly owned by Simicska, former Director of Finances of the Fidesz party, has been commissioned to produce twelve episodes of the quiz show *Hungary, I Love You* for 19 million forints (68,050 euros) per episode, not including a one-off grant of nearly 38 million forints (136,100 euros) to prepare the programme's headline, which has also been covered by the Media Fund.[50] The very same company has been commissioned to produce *Good Luck News*, broadcast on MTV for the National Lottery Company, for an annual amount of nearly 400 million forints (1,432,615 euros).[51] The Media Fund commissioned the consortium Publimont, headed by a company partly owned by Simicska's wife, to conduct an outdoor advertising campaign for MTV for more than 104 million forints (372,480 euros).[52] Furthermore, the Media Fund bought the soap opera *Martians* from Brand Lab Ltd., a company owned by the brother of Árpád Habony, Prime Minister Orbán's chief communication advisor.[53] Prestige Media Advertising Company, headed by former Fidesz party leader Attila Várhelyi, has been contracted to provide the Media Fund with general marketing-communication advice for a monthly 787,000 forints fee (2,820 euros).[54] The National Cultural Fund granted 35,000,000 forints (125,350 euros) to Zsolt Bayer, member of Fidesz and journalist working for pro-Fidesz Echo TV and Magyar Hírlap to redo the documentary series *One and a Half Million Steps in Hungary* for Hungarian Television. State-owned OTP bank granted another 8,500,000 forints (30,440 euros) for the project.[55]

In MTV's major evening news bulletin *Newsreel*, produced by MTI, coalition party representatives had their voices heard in 83 percent of all news items, while the opposition parties had far less opportunity to comment on current affairs in late 2010.[56] The major news bulletin "Midday Chronicle" broadcast on MR and produced by the same news agency displayed a marked pro-government bias as well: in mid-2011, 74 percent of all news items covered either the government or Fidesz and the Christian Democrats, while the opposition's MSZP featured in only 19 percent of the news, Movement for a Better Hungary in 6 percent, and Politics Can Be Different hardly at all.[57]

In short, Fidesz has built a centralised, pyramid-shaped, institutional structure with the Media Council's Chair on top, herself appointed by the Prime Minister. This

construction enables the governing party to control nearly all media. As noted, Freedom House downgraded Hungary. The organisation's *Nation's in Transit 2011* report also observed that the new media regulation "drastically curtailed the independence of public-service television and radio broadcasters, and established a new authority over broadcast media, print publications, and the internet," which it described as an "alarming concentration of political power over the media."[58] To be sure, Hungary is not China. But the mainstream media are increasingly exposed to the government's interference, and one-party rule has been established in the media realm.

Summary and Conclusions

It has been argued in this article that some parties in Central and Eastern Europe and especially in Hungary assume control over the media not only in order to suppress critical voices and to gain favourable coverage but also to extract various resources from the media. In particular, media colonisation is aimed at the exploitation of the media in order to achieve the following objectives:

1. Parties may through the colonised media *call on their constituencies* that otherwise they have no direct contact with, because of relatively weak party structures. For example, by gaining control over the three public service broadcasters' airtime, Fidesz may now mobilise its supporters and address undecided voters through their uniform news bulletins, which display a clear pro-government bias. Also, releasing news free of charge via the Hungarian News Agency, now under the direction of a Fidesz loyalist, the governing party can also shape some of the private outlets' news coverage.

2. Parties may through the colonised media *deploy new resources for indirect party funding*. They may channel broadcasting frequencies as well as financial resources devoted to programme production and advertising from colonised public service broadcasters and the Media Fund to private production houses and media outlets. For example, Fidesz has made sure that radio frequencies be granted to either its ideological associates such as Maria Radio and Chain Bridge Radio, or companies associated with its business hinterland such as Prodo Voice. Fidesz can also outsource programme production and advertising to companies run by its supporters such as Publimont and Prestige Media Advertising Company.

3. Parties may through the colonised media *engage in party patronage*. They may offer well-paying jobs to their supporters in exchange for past and future services. For example, under the Orbán Government, the Hungarian News Agency and Hungarian Television hired a number of pro-Fidesz journalists and activists such as Csaba Belénessy and Phillip Rákay.

4. Parties may through media colonisation *paralyse their rivals* by denying them access to all of the resources above in order to reduce rival parties' latitude, visibility, and funding opportunities. For example, Fidesz established a media supervisory structure in such a way that rival parties' representatives are now excluded and have consequently lost control over the redistribution of the various media resources.

The history of post-transformation media in Hungary, briefly outlined above, also suggests a distinction between different patterns of the party colonisation of the media. *Multi-party colonisation*, whereby all parliamentary parties' nominees are granted seats in the various supervisory bodies, offers all parties' representatives a chance to mutually constrain each other's colonisation opportunities. In this stalemate situation, media freedom may increase, as all parties have access to some resources, but none of them can control all resources. *One-party colonisation*, by contrast, offers no internal checks and balances provided by other parties' nominees, and the ruling party may abuse its influence over the media without encountering much counter-pressure. As a result, media freedom may be severely restricted.

Needless to say, the party colonisation of the media is problematic from a normative perspective. It not only is a form of corruption in that public resources are traded for partisan loyalties, but also blurs the transparency and hinders the accountability of the political parties that control the media.

Of course, the thesis of the party colonisation of the media does not suggest that *any party* (or any coalition of parties) would colonise the media to an equal degree, once granted the opportunity. In Hungary, for example, both the left-liberal cabinet of Prime Minister Gyula Horn (1994–1998) and the second right-conservative cabinet of Premier Viktor Orbán (2010–present) had about the same share of mandates in parliament (278 and 263 votes out of 386, respectively), which, theoretically speaking, enabled the both of them to amend media regulation to fit their own needs. However, the former cabinet was seeking consensual media policy and passed regulation that enabled opposition parties to delegate representatives to the media's supervisory bodies, while the latter adopted media regulation without any consultation with the opposition of the day, and shaped the media's supervisory structure in a way that enabled its own loyalists to take all of the decision-making positions needed to take control of the distribution of media resources. Further research therefore should address the question of which parties under what conditions are more likely to colonise the media.

Notes

1. See the press release at http://www.hirextra.hu/2010/04/18/tirts-tamas-pekingben-a-magyar-kinai-mediakapcsolatokrol/ (accessed February 8, 2011).

2. See http://www.freedomhouse.org/images/File/fop/2011/FOTP2011GlobalRegionalTables.pdf and http://www.freedomhouse.org/images/File/fop/2011/FOTP2011OverviewEssay.pdf (accessed 5 July 2011) and http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Global%20and%20Regional%20Press%20 Freedom%20Rankings.pdf (accessed May 2, 2012).

3. See http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2011-2012,1043.html (accessed March 12, 2012).

4. See, e.g., *Tribune Magazine*, http://www.tribunemagazine.co.uk/2011/01/stand-up-against-autocracy-and-authoritarianism/; *The Washington Post*, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2010/12/26/AR2010122601791.html; *The Budapest Times*, www.budapesttimes.hu/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=16787&Itemid=210; and *Die Welt*, http://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article11869003/Puszta-Putin-Victor-Orban-fuehrt-2011-Europa-an.html (accessed February 16, 2011).

5. P. Bajomi-Lázár, "The Consolidation of Media Freedom in Post-communist Countries," in *Finding the Right Place on the Map: Central and Eastern European Media Change in Global Perspective*, ed. K. Jakubowicz and M. Sükösd, 73–84 (Bristol, UK: Intellect Books, 2008).

6. See, e.g., S. Splichal, *Media Beyond Socialism: Theory and Practice in Central Europe* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994); P. David, K. Jakubowicz, and P. Novosel, eds., *Glasnost and After: Media and Change in Central and Eastern Europe* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1995); G. Liana, ed., *The Post-Socialist Media: What Power the West?* (Aldershot, UK: Avebury, 1995); J. Downing, *Internationalizing Media Theory: Transition, Power, Culture. Reflections on the Media in Russia, Poland and Hungary, 1980–1995* (London: Sage, 1996); P. O'Neil, ed., *Post-Communism and the Media in Eastern Europe* (London: Frank Cass, 1997); C. Sparks, with A. Reading, *Communism, Capitalism, and the Mass Media* (London: Sage, 1998); G. Richard and A. Mugham, eds., *Democracy and the Media. A Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); P. Bajomi-Lázár and I. Hegedűs, eds., *Media and Politics* (Budapest: Új Mandátum Publishing House, 2001); P. Gross, *Entangled Evolutions. Media and Democratization in Eastern Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); P. David and K. Jakubowicz, eds., *Business as Usual: Continuity and Change in East Central European Media* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2003); M. Sükösd and P. Bajomi-Lázár, eds., *Reinventing Media. Media Policy Reform in East Central Europe* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2003); A. Czepek, M. Hellwig, and E. Nowak, eds., *Press Freedom and Pluralism in Europe* (Bristol, UK: Intellect Books, 2009).

7. B. Trionfi, "Freedom of the Media in Central and Eastern Europe," in Bajomi-Lázár and Hegedűs, *Media and Politics*, 93–95.

8. The questions assess the constitutional guarantees of free speech, the independence of the judiciary, the independence of media authorities, government's control over information, access to information, self-censorship, state ownership, the transparency and concentration of private media, the state's role in allocating advertising revenues and subsidies, etc. For a detailed description of Freedom House's research methodology, see http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=350&ana_page=348&year=2008 (accessed February 9, 2011).

9. The higher the score, the less freedom the media have.

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40. Personal communication by senior public service journalists Miklós Győrffy (Budapest, April 20, 2012) and István Wisinger (Budapest, May 2, 2012).

41. "Az RTL pénzét osztogatja az ORTT" [ORTT distributes RTL Klub's Money], Index, http://index .hu/kultur/media/ortt5121/ (accessed May 25, 2011).

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43. Whether Fidesz and its Christian Democratic coalition ally are two parties or one is not an easy question. They both have parliamentary fractions of their own, but they run on a joint list at the 2010 legislative elections; without Fidesz's support, the Christian Democrats would likely not have passed the 5 percent parliamentary threshold.

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45. "Nyerges-közeli cég kapta a legértékesebb rádiófrekvenciát" [The Most Valuable Radio Frequency Has Been Granted to a Company Close to Mr. Nyerges], *Magyar Narancs*, December 27, 2011.

46. E.g., the 2010 Media Constitution stipulates that "the exercise of the freedom of the press may not . . . violate public morals" (Art. 4.3). The 2010 Multimedia Act bans "programmes which may seriously impair the physical, mental or moral development of minors, particularly those that involve pornography or extreme and/or unnecessary scenes of violence" (Art. 9.7). The 2011 Family Protection Act prescribes that "media content providers must provide services in such a way that they respect the institution of marriage as well as the values of the family and childcare" (Art. 5).

47. "Elfogadták a médiahatóság és a médiatanács jövő évi költségvetését" [Parliament Adopted the Media Authority's and the Media Council's Budget for the Next Year], *Népszava*, December 6, 2010.

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49. See, e.g., "MTV: új arc csak jobbról jöhet" [Hungarian Television: All New Faces Come from the Right], *Népszava*, August 3, 2010; Á. Lampé, "Egymilliós havi fizetést kapnak a közmédia új urai" [The New Lords of Hungarian Television Get a Million Forints a Month], *168 Óra*, October 6, 2011.

50. "A semmiből is tud pénzt cisnálni Simicska" [Mr. Simicska Can Make Money out of Nothing], *Népszava*, February 21, 2012.

51. "Frontbarátság egymilliárd fölött" [Front-friendship for over a billion forints], *atlatszo.hu*, August 15, 2011.

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54. "Kormányzati hátszéllel megy a szórakoztatás" [Entertainment with Governmental Support], *Népszava*, March 9, 2012.

55. "Rockenbauer nyomában járna Bauer Zsolt" [Zsolt Bauer to follow Zoltán Rockenbauer], see http://index.hu/kultur/media/2011/05/21/bayer_zsolt_rockenbauer_nyomdokaiba_lepne/ (accessed July 13, 2012).

56. The study conducted by the Republikon Institute was published on January 5, 2011. See http:// index.hu/kultur/media/2011/01/05/jobbra_tolodott_az_mtv/ (accessed January 13, 2011).

57. The content analysis conducted by Policy Solutions Institutions was published on July 28, 2011. See http://hvg.hu/itthon/20110728_kossuth_radio_fidesz#utm_source=20110728_thomas_melia_nemeth _zsolt&utm_medium=Flyer&utm_campaign=hvg.hu (accessed March 13, 2012).

58. See http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/inline_images/NIT-2011-Hungary.pdf (accessed March 9, 2011).

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