

## “Balanced” in the balance

*Balanced was one of the most prominent buzzwords in politics in the past few months. The requirement of balanced news production was the most vociferously attacked aspect of the controversial media law, in large part because the term is nebulous and thus its application provides the Media Council with an overbroad mandate to request changes in news production. At Policy Solutions, we were interested in finding out how the television news on national TVs fare in terms of politically balancing their reporting.*

Especially among young people it's fashionable these days to declare the death of television news and to proclaim the internet the hegemonic victor in the battle for readers/viewers' attention. Given the predilections of today's youth, that may very well herald the future. As for now, with numerous people still using television as their primary and often even only source of information, any talk of internet hegemony or television irrelevance is severely misguided and betrays an ivory tower understanding of Hungarian realities.

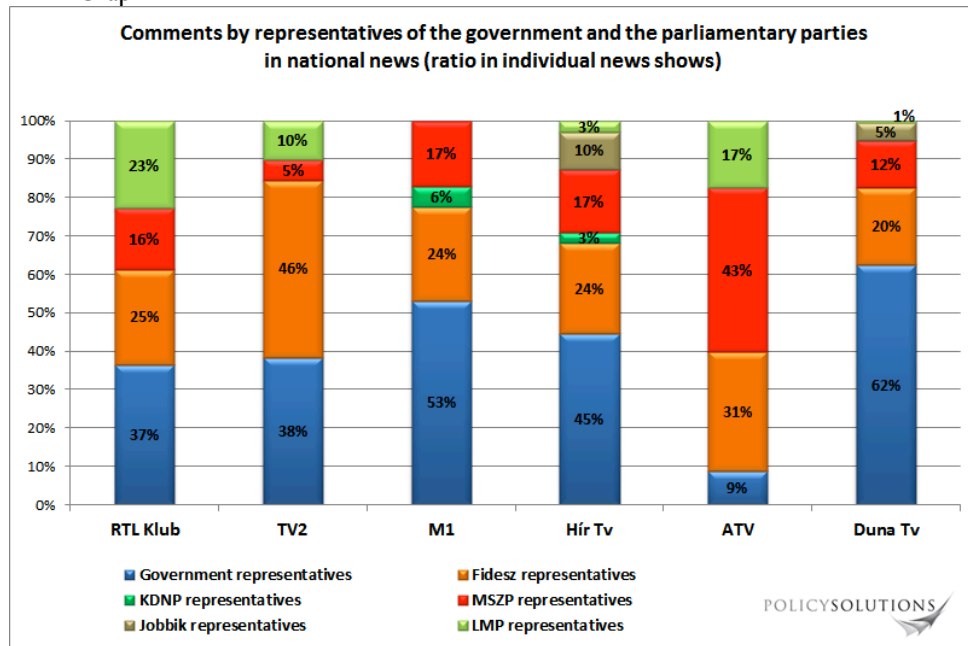
Television news matters, therefore. It is definitely less influential than it was ten years ago, but it will continue to shape political information and public understanding at least for a few more years to come. This in turn means that the content of television news matters as well, which is why we decided to take a look at these news and investigate in particular how much space they offer to the government and opposition, respectively. Given that media access is one of the most important tools for influencing public opinion and thus for presenting political alternatives in a democracy, the seemingly mundane question of who gets how much screen time is in fact one of the key measures of the quality of democracy.

### **An empirical analysis of news shows**

Starting on the 21st February 2011, *Policy Solutions* reviewed the evening news of the six national television channels (RTL Klub, TV2, M1, Hír Tv, ATV, Duna TV) in order to find out how these present the political parties and whether their shows are likely to meet the Media Law's requirement to be balanced.

Our detailed analysis shows that with the notable exception of RTL Klub, the concept of balanced is practically absent from evening news: politicians of Fidesz-KDNP are the absolute rulers among those asked to speak in the evening news (see Graph 1).

Graph I



The percentage of comments on domestic news events provided by government party politicians is 84% on TV2, 83% on M1, 82% on Duna TV and – maybe somewhat surprisingly – 72% on Hungary’s version of Fox News, Hír TV. The two public television channels, M1 and Duna TV, grant even larger dominance to the governing parties than the openly ideological Hír TV.

It is certainly natural to some extent that representatives of the governing parties would be dominant in the news – they have to explain government policies. But at the same time democratic politics cannot work well if the opposition does not have sufficient access to television viewers – and their paltry presence in most news shows is certainly part of the explanation why so many voters disaffected by Fidesz have not yet been able to declare an alternative choice, swelling the ranks of the undecideds rather than opting for one of the opposition parties.

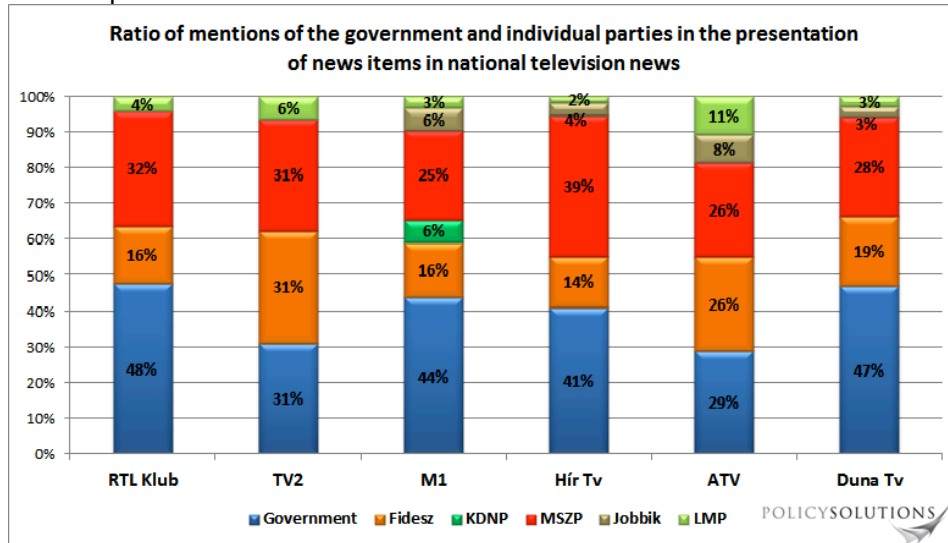
## In television news, European standards are far away

In terms of offering all sides the chance to comment, RTL Klub’s news show comes closest to corresponding to European principles for news production. It grants government politicians the chance to comment on policy events 62% of the total time allotted for politicians’ commentary. Fidesz-KDNP politicians are significantly underrepresented, however, in the left-leaning ATV’s news show (40%). ATV is at the same time MSZP’s last refuge: in 43% of the relevant news segments Socialist politicians are called upon to comment. ATV is also the only television channel where opposition politicians’ comments outweigh those of government representatives.

If one were to look only at how often individual parties were mentioned, then one might draw precisely the conclusion hinted at above: that the television news only overrepresent government politicians because the government is in the position of generally initiating

policies (Graph 2). In terms of the number of news, a “mere” 50-60% of the news is dominated by the governing parties.

Graph 2

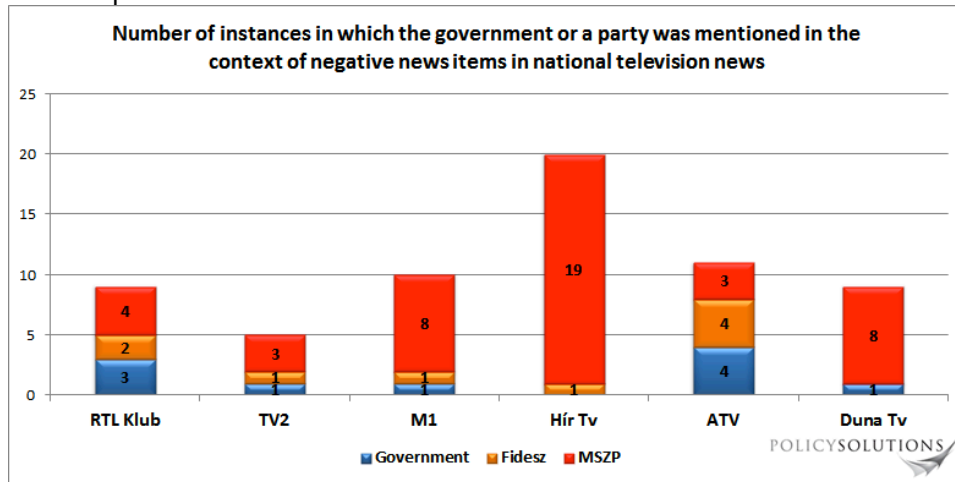


## For Socialists, not all news is good news

Digging a little deeper, however, and analysing the context of individual pieces of news it emerges that while reports unfavourable for Fidesz or the government are almost completely absent in TV news, the overwhelming majority of news concerning the Hungarian Socialist Party in turn casts a bad light on the party or is presented in a way as to make MSZP look bad.

A year after Fidesz’ ascension to power, most of the negative news on all channels – with the exception of ATV – concern MSZP (Graph 3). Not a single piece of news that placed the Socialists in a positive context appeared on either Hír TV, M1, Duna TV or TV2. Though MSZP is the only opposition party that makes a substantial appearance in all of the television news, in almost all instances it appears in the context of an adverse climate of opinion. It must be also mentioned that corruption scandals related to Socialist politicians are still high on the agenda – this fact partly provides an explanation to the negative coverage of MSZP.

Graph 3



The two other opposition parties have neither natural allies in the news industry nor can they count on any distinguished attention from the mainstream outlets. Jobbik, of course, has a vast network of underground media that do its bidding, but there is a limit to their effectiveness: a significant proportion of the population – and especially those rural voters Jobbik seeks to court – either have no internet access or make scant use of it – and even if they did, the youthful and extremist style of the Jobbik online scene might not be necessarily to their taste. LMP has virtually no media outlets and hence it is even more dependent on fair access to mainstream television news.

### For smaller parties, access is even more difficult

Jobbik’s media access difficulties are further increased by the fact that as far as both grand commercial channels, RTL Klub and TV2, are concerned, the extremist party is “in quarantine.” It gets most attention on ATV, where 8 % of news items involve Jobbik. As far as the possibility to comment is concerned, Jobbik’s situation is even worse: only Hír and Duna TVs gave Jobbik politicians the chance to speak, and both these offered only negligible opportunities.

LMP also hardly makes into the evening news, though it is not in a similar state of forced isolation as Jobbik. Though only to a minimal degree, it is nevertheless present in all news shows. In terms of the ratio of all news items, its presence is strongest on ATV (11%), while in terms of the time allotted for politicians’ statements, it fares best on RTL Klub (23%). In fact, in the time period under review, RTL Klub allotted LMP politicians more time to comment than the Socialists’ representatives. Moreover, what may be beneficial for Jobbik and LMP is that in all of the programmes reviewed they were discussed in either a neutral or a positive context – neither party was the subject of a negative news item.

### The public media is sadly no exception

What is most striking about the two public media channels (M1 and Duna TV) is not that they stand out to any significant degree from the other TV channels; what is remarkable in

fact it's that they don't stand out at all. The average data that betray a vast dominance in the media of government politicians suggest that, on the whole, balanced is not a suitable term for describing any of the major media outlets save RTL Klub.

This would be an intolerable situation in and of itself, but one would nevertheless expect the public media to be different. In addition to generally different expectations vis-à-vis public media, another reason why one would anticipate the Hungarian state-owned channels to behave differently from their private competitors is that the government has fought tooth and nail to retain the requirement of balanced reporting for all types of media. Though it ultimately caved to the EU's demand to remove it for most media, the requirement remains in place for television channels.