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Marketing Culture and
the Celebrity Politician

The Restyling of Politics in Hungary



Institute for Political Science
Hungarian Academy of Sciences



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Marketing Culture and the Celebrity Politician

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(Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány)

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The second half of 2004 brought amazing changes in the political life of Hungary. The most important turn was the fall of Prime Minister Péter Medgyessy¹, and the election of the new Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány² by the Parliament. It was not much less interesting to see the new Prime Minister try to introduce and use new communication style and means. The experiment was called tabloidization, or boulevardization by the political analyst, who criticised it although understood the reasons. The efforts were understandable particularly until they seemed successful, that is, until the beginning of 2005: what else could justify the deployment of new communications means if not the improvement of the indices of the polls. And that was what happened; in August the Hungarian Socialist Party (HSP), the leading party in government was lagging behind the Alliance of Young Democrats (AYD), the leading party in opposition by 18 percent, from October on, that is, from the election of Ferenc Gyurcsány, the gap was decreasing remarkably. By the Spring of 2005, however, the experiment seems to have lost its impetus, the Prime Minister himself seems to have given it up, perhaps mainly because the communications moves bumped into walls and sometimes proved to be counterproductive.

The paper presents the trial and the failure. I will use and weigh two approaches, the one of political marketing and that of popular culture studies. According to my hypothesis, the communications offensive led by Ferenc Gyurcsány used considerations and tools taken from political marketing. In the framework of that strategy of political marketing, however, the use of the components of popular culture was very important, therefore an analysis based on the popular culture paradigm is also necessary.

In the following, I am presenting the approach of political marketing; then criticisms raised by popular culture studies against political marketing approach; afterwards I am to outline the part of popular culture approach that will be used in the analysis; and in the end, the analysis itself follows.

¹ To be pronounced as peter medyeshy.

² To be pronounced as ferents dyurchaany.

Marketing and political marketing

In the present study, I refer to political marketing as the way of thinking and the arsenal of tools the foundation of which was laid by Philip Kotler.³ One may divide political marketing into two paradigms. The first is starting from the single transaction between the vendor and the customer, while the other one takes the stable relationship between the partners as its model. Since political marketing still sees the former the more relevant, I will present that one in more details.

The marketing of the single transactions

This paradigm of marketing emphasizes the importance of marketing in developing a product that would be attractive for the customer, the ways by which the company makes it easier for the customer to find the product. The model presumes that the relationship between the partners is over at the very moment the customer took the product and paid for it.

The model of political marketing that refers to this paradigm as a great help in understanding and shaping political communication is election campaign. Election campaigns are rather short indeed; the parties offer something they hope is attractive for the citizens, who in turn take their choice. And voting is the same for the political market as buying for the commercial market. The analogue is the more suitable for a view of politics and political communication that approaching citizens' participation does not look farther than their reaction to campaigns in general, election campaigns in particular.

To make the framework the simplest, I count the following components of marketing the most important:

1. **Client-centeredness.** As for politics, client-centeredness means that a politician should not be content with propagating the ideas, which derive from her mind and soul, supposing that they are attractive enough to conquer the needed amount of voters. If she wanted to know what to talk about and how to behave in the public sphere, she should poll and interrogate the public, her public and the publics she may be able to get. And it is not just the party programme and the pledges that are concerned, but the general socializing role a party and a politician are to play: there are groups among the citizens who are satisfied with the mere voting at the elections, while others want to hear about the party and the leader more often, others need some opportunities to take part in demonstrations, rallies or festivals and other events loosely connected to the party and politics.

2. **Segmentation.** Politics had realized the potentialities in segmentation a decade before business did (Bannon 2004). As early as in the twenties, Sidney Webb urged Labour not to consider the electorate a homogeneous grey mass, but to differentiate it according to age, gender, leisure time activities etc. (Wring 2005). One of the most difficult questions for political marketing is segmentation: what are the really relevant criteria according to which it is worth and useful segmenting the citizens? Is it suitable to follow the ones offered by sociology (gender, age, city-country, that is, criteria based on the place in production) or one should rather choose others (electoral past, trust or apathy towards politics, consumption habits etc.)? Moreover the party should also judge which groups are hopefully stable supporters, which are uncertain thus to be conquered or to be kept neutral and which are for

³ Since Kotler's is a huge oeuvre, I listed the most important works of his in the references.

its opponents, but most of the time the boundaries are not fixed, that is, the party has to decide where to draw the lines. Segments can and should be found not only in the electorate but also within the party itself: members, activists, employees important in implementing communication and campaigns. The party's leaders have to run marketing inside the party too.

3. **Marketing mix.** One of the magic words of marketing is marketing mix, marketing programme. The organization has to design different marketing mix for each segment. Traditionally marketing programme consists of four elements, the four Ps. There have been several different interpretations of the Ps, and some authors talk about more Ps, but I insist on the traditional version. The four Ps are: product, price, placement and promotion.

- a. **Product.** Product is what party offers to the voters for the votes. A party's product is the whole bunch of policies basically. But party image, leader image and other components can also be found among the products.⁴ There are segments that find policy issues the most important, for others the well-dressed leader is the main point. As customer buys not the company itself but its product, the voter buys not the party but a package of its policies and/or leader image and/or party image, or we would rather talk about trust and identification. The voter needs something from the party that he/she can trust and/or identify with.
- b. **Price.** Price is what the party charges for the product. Price means votes first of all, and there are huge groups of people who are not ready to do anything for politics and parties but voting in every four or five or so years. But there are other important segments as well, ones that need much more possibility of participation in politics and in the life of their party. Wring (1997) and others speak of voter involvement that may contain emotional investment: the fear or hope felt in response to the party's messages on the rival party and the future respectively. Some segments are open to the negative campaign, that is, they are ready to respond with fear; others, however, exposed to the negative messages may feel alienated from the party. Still others want to support the party in distributing leaflets or answering calls in call centres.
- c. **Placement.** Placement is the way by which the party makes itself accessible for the clients. Visits of the leader in towns and villages as well as her or her staff's answering of emails sent by the citizens can be listed as placements. One may also count the presence of party offices and activists in the constituencies as placement. Recently the aspect of placement has increased its importance in campaign communication.
- d. **Promotion.** This P may be the most known among the four components of marketing programme. Television advertisements, leaflets, brochures, placards, direct mail, telemarketing and political SMS belong to this group of means. As in the case of the rest, promotion also has to be adjusted to the needs and styles of the given segment, that is, each segment has to be approached via different types of promotion.

One may say that political marketing studies, that is, the direction of political science that analyses politics using marketing approach, does its work following those components, the main differences come from the different weights the streams give to one or the other P. Jennifer Lees-Marshment, the leading author in British political marketing studies, underlines

⁴ Jennifer Lees-Marshment (2001) defines several aspects of party product.

the importance of product design. She scrutinizes the ways parties follow or not the needs of the electorate instead of finding out and propagate their own ideas. She finds the party designing its product leaning mostly on polls and focus group findings the most effective and successful the most probably.

Relationship marketing

Lees-Marshment as well as Pippa Norris (2002) and others emphasize the thought of permanent campaign. They claim that political communication does not end on the day of elections; it begins well before the official start and goes on after the elections well into the period of governance. Despite, political communication studies and political marketing studies have not faced the possibility that a different marketing paradigm should be used instead of the model of single transaction marketing. Relationship marketing could be that one.

The main point in relationship marketing is the drift away from the single transaction and focusing on the stable relationship with the clients instead. The vendor does not consider the relations with the customer is ending in the moment of delivery and payment, but wants to keep up the connection with the partner and tries to convince the other side to do the same. In the most advanced version, the purchase is just a kind of episode in the good relationship between the partners, which endures rare delays in payment or problems in delivery.

Relationship marketing has several levels. The simplest is database marketing. The vendor establishes a database on the customers in order to draw their attention to new products and to send them small presents on their birthday or Christmas etc. On a higher level, the vendor consults the customer as early as in the early period of product development in order to satisfy the customer's needs the most completely. The essence of relationship marketing is the very close linkage between vendor and customer.

All that can be and actually has been transposed into politics too. When Stephan Henneberg (2004) criticizes political marketing studies because of their insistence on marketing mix while business marketing has passed well beyond towards relationship marketing, he is right in the case of the studies only. Politics, political parties have already deployed more or less of relationship marketing. In Hungary, the bigger parties established and update databases, they use them in sending direct mail to citizens, and it is probable that they have been hoarding mobile phone numbers for some time. And in the relationship marketing focus one may also include the old campaign means turned fashionable again: the intensive presence of activists in the electoral districts as well as the more and more frequent pilgrimages of leading politicians in their own constituencies.

Marketing culture

Broadening the concept of marketing Philip Kotler stretched it “vertically” as well. Marketing is not only an arsenal of tools but also a kind of consciousness usable in all the relationships where exchange of values are taking place. From there it is only one step to rewrite all human communication on the language of exchange of values, that is, on the language of marketing. After all do not the idea and concept of communication contain the thought of exchange inherently? Post-modern society turns to be the society of communication, that is, the society of exchange, consequently it can and should be analysed with the help of marketing analysis, of marketing consciousness in all its details.

But there is another point in Kotler’s view of marketing where culture and marketing get very close to each other. He claims that for long firms have produced not tangible products but ones that carry abstract values. One may rather say: companies produce products that reify abstract ideas. He writes: the firm sells not lipstick but beauty, the lipstick on the offer is just one of the vehicles or means of beauty.

The corporations need that turn in order to make a full use of segmentation. Because of its abstract character, beauty means different things to each customer, the individual customer can choose lipstick according to her beauty, or to her imagination of beauty, the company should offer several lipsticks, the wide assortment may in turn convince the customer that whatever she thinks of the way to beauty, she will find the appropriate vehicle, the suitable solution among the products of the company.

It is hard to stand the temptation to add the parallel of the political slogans. The opaque, general political slogan makes it possible for a lot of people to project into it anything they want to, and, thereby identify with the party.

That is one of the ways how marketing becomes culture.

To make it simple, I omit here the several definitions of culture one can find in the literature. For the present paper culture is the domain of attitudes, meaning attributions and valuations. Consequently, the intense presence of marketing in society has two effects: first, to the culture it introduces secretly the thought that abstract ideas and ideals are to be objectified in commodities and products; second, it makes natural for the customer or user to search for meanings in products.

The present study presupposes that marketing becomes culture in the way media became media culture for Altheide and Snow (1979). They claimed that media had not only turned important for every possible social process but it also became media culture since all the social institutions (from politics through church and sport) adapted their form to its formats. Paradoxically, even the media themselves had to adapt to media culture in the end, because media culture had been formed by other institutions.

Marketing culture, therefore, is an attitude, a way of meaning attribution and valuation that refers to every social process as exchange, and, consequently, to the partners in exchange it proposes the deployment of marketing consciousness and tools, shortly the client-centeredness, segmentation and marketing mix as well as the tricks of relationship marketing.

I differentiate two regions of marketing culture:

- The first is the group of politicians in general, and their political communications advisors in particular. Marketing culture be it consciousness or arsenal, has penetrated this group first of all, and its intensity varies by time and the person of politician.

- The other region is the mainstream culture. Marketing tools and even the consciousness penetrate the mainstream culture too, the customers meet numerous marketing tools used by companies, and often hear that politicians and parties use political marketing. Moreover, marketing seems to have been used more and more often in politics since parties and politicians began to presume that citizens had a consumerist relation to politics. Parties are inclined to think that citizens makes political calculations before voting decision just like they do it in the commercial market.⁵

One may say: when a politician sees no voters but different segments of voters who should be approached with different policy issues, different images, via different media and in different places, and whom to ask different kinds of support; and when voters do not insist on the same party at elections after elections but calculate the input and the outcome of their political efforts, being fully aware that every party uses (manipulative) political marketing arsenal, then we may feel entitled to study politics with political marketing approach in mind.

Political marketing culture seen from popular culture

One can find several criticisms that have doubted whether one should use marketing approach in studying politics. It is worth trying to answer them not at least because in replying I will have the possibility to make my views clearer.

John Street (2003) raises some criticisms against marketing approach, or rather, against economic theories of democracy. The first is that these theories consider

Politics is driven by instrumentality, with rational action being viewed as the mechanistic matching of means and ends. ... [But] there is another rationality available that is premised, not on instrumentality, but on expressivity based around the recognition and realisation of some concept of the 'good life'. (Street 2003: 91)

As far as the first part of the argument is concerned that is true; political marketing is first of all something that is used on purpose by political players. But if we refer to political marketing as something based on marketing culture, that is, if we accept that tools belonging to the political marketing arsenal are being used not on purpose but because they are taken for granted, given by the local political culture ("everybody does it"), then political marketing approach is very useful to find the components of political communication stemming from mainstream political culture.

As for the second part, yes, politics is a variegated sphere, there are politicians successful because express something that cannot be dug out by opinion research or focus groups. But one may consider politicians to be products offered by the parties; some have autonomous views on good life, others do not, and (political) market will decide which one is the most fashionable in the season. It does not mean that all the others will disappear: the colours of politics come from the also variegated electorate. There are segments that need politicians with mission or with just something special in their style, and there are segments whom a party is supposed to offer a pragmatic leader, someone who tries to find out what the voters want.

⁵ Jennifer Lees-Marshment (2004) begins her book on the political marketing revolution with "the rise of the political consumer".

Street comes back to this point a bit later writing

The rational calculations of Downsian and Schumpeterian citizens would not generate the required response, any more than 'need' explains why people buy particular cars, records or clothes. (91-92).

Marketing and public relations always started from the point that the first task is to uncover the customers' needs for the customers themselves. The product the company offers to the consumer should be positioned as the solution to the problem of the customer, to the problem whose existence is not always clear for the customer. In several cases the advertisements raise needs that would not exist without them. Edward Bernays, the father of public relations studies gave "Crystallizing Public Opinion" as the title to his book because that is what he thought of public relations. Following Freud he said that the main task of public relations or propaganda is to crystallize the diffuse, scattered drives of public opinion, of the masses around certain objects. To put it another way: the citizens have a great number of conscious and unconscious needs, wills and wishes and the parties and politicians would rather round up them around the party, the leader, the slogans, the gestures, a tie or a hat - as Freud would imagine the motion of libido.

Since most of these needs and wishes are not reflected, since they are given in the culture and subcultures, it is not easy for the opinion polls to raise questions about them. Therefore the parties have to try to find them, or rather to find politicians, slogans and other requisites to offer for crystallizing. Thus, one may say that marketing comes into the process on the very point where the party has to find out what to offer. What marketing can proffer is some so far successful products or tools; the politicians have to choose.⁶ The attempts are repeated continuously, political marketing collects the lessons and use them as instruments in the next turn. But meanwhile the needs may change and the process begins.

It will never end, therefore, there is enough space for improvisation, for the artistic or expressive aspects of politics - if not elsewhere, in the act of choice at least. Political marketing is neither omnipotent (it is always difficult to find out what to offer for crystallizing) nor lacks means (there are very effective tools, effective for some segments at least).⁷

⁶ If one takes a look at the book by Ron Faucheux (1998), one will find a lot of envisioned cases a candidate may have to face during the campaign and not one but four or five possible ways proposed by advisors to follow. In the end the candidate has to choose.

⁷ We might also say that politics is not about needs and wishes, and we must not use their language. But then the question arises: why popular culture paradigm could give a better language.

Celebrity politician in the popular culture studies

It was worth dealing with one of the criticisms raised by John Street against political marketing perspective in order to make it clear what a political marketing study can do studying celebrity politicians. I would not negate, however, the results of the popular culture studies. Liesbet Van Zoonen (2004) and John Street (1997) have made important analyses in the field, helping us understand politics starting from popular culture. Below I am using, however, the approach of David Marshall, because this one may be considered the most elaborated if one wants to study celebrity politicians.

The components of a celebrity

Marshall concentrates on the celebrities of the popular culture; his interpretation of celebrity politician is a supplement of that study. He suggests that the emergence of celebrity politician is just the consequence of the conquer of popular culture by stars, which forces political parties to produce their own stars. That is why speaking of politics Marshall does not attempt more than to uncover the components of the popular cultural celebrities in the image of the leading politicians. He does not seem to think that politics needs a separate typology of celebrity. Politics, Marshall may say, would not produce celebrities on its own.

Let's see what makes a celebrity.

In general, Marshall defines celebrities as public figures whose private lives are as important and widely publicized as their professional performances. If the public, mainly the tabloid media, electronic as well as printed, does not pay attention to the private life of an actor or a talk show host, she does not qualify a celebrity. I am going to use that definition in the study of the Hungarian Prime Minister and take a look at his media performances, whether his private life is a frequent subject in the interviews and reports either in the tabloid or in the broad sheet press. If the answer is positive, we may define him a political celebrity. It is quite usual that press gives some kind of background information on the family of the politician, but if those efforts are regularly fed by the politician, then we should talk about an attempt to turn celebrity.

Marshall quotes Leo Lowenthal on the narratives of origin of celebrities in the first half of the twentieth century. While until the nineteenth century the celebrities had had a religious background or an historical legitimacy, in the next century, celebrities secularised and produced two different narratives about their spring up: hard work and blind luck.

- The narrative of hard work was characteristic in the twenties but it can be found today as well. According to that the celebrity's success and fame are based on hard work, that is, on authentic and functional performance on his professional field. An actress is very good because she has always wanted to play, spent her time in cinemas and theatres, played in pieces in the school already etc. That was the way she has developed her talent and artistic means. In the case of politicians hard work narrative is very probable: he has always been very active in different student and other movements, worked hard in the party during elections campaigns for the victory of the organisation, that is, he has been socialized for politics and for the higher posts he has taken. It is rather frequent that he has sacrificed or subordinated his private life to the requirements of politics.

- In the thirties, a new narrative began to replace or push back the previous one, the story of blind luck and circumstance. One has become successful not because of her talent's systematic development but because the success has found her, her talent has actually been uncovered suddenly. Politics is not a very probable field for such a history because while circumstance and luck do not seem dangerous factors in entertainment, they do in politics: it does not sound well if a prime minister is chosen by sheer luck and not qualified by his real talent and experiences.
- Marshall does not mention a third possible narrative, that of the successful outsider. From time to time, we see persons arise to the highest political levels or near them whose past is linked to another sphere, namely, business. Silvio Berlusconi may be the best example, but Ross Perot is close to that. In this narrative the business success qualifies the person to a leading politician, the bigger industrial empire he built the more acceptable it seems that he become politician because managing a huge corporation resembles political activity. That narrative leans on the American interpretation of elite, according to which business is not the hotbed of corruption but a respectable domain, where success cannot be objected morally, just the opposite. Business success brings fortune to the person, that is, financial independence, therefore, the story goes, the businessman turned politician will not want to get rich in politics, will not be susceptible to corruption.

I am going to find the narrative of origin put forward by Ferenc Gyurcsány and to submit it under the categories.

Marshall defines three main types of celebrity: film, television and pop celebrity.

- Film celebrity keeps the greatest distance from the audience. She makes films rarely, therefore, she appears seldom in talk shows and interviews, far more seldom than media celebrity: talk show hosts or soap opera actors. Film celebrity has three stages:
 - o the first one is qualified by physical features: youth, beauty, muscles etc.;
 - o the second by personality, by the harmony or coincidence between his personality and the characters he plays: it is not accidental that his performances are so perfect;
 - o finally the third type is the autonomous celebrity: she is such a great personality that she can afford leaving the previous type of roles and experiment with a new one, that is, neither physical features, nor personality traits can hinder her carrier, therefore, she is able to play anything physically as well as psychologically

One may differentiate those stages in the case of the politicians too, and it is interesting to see whether politicians want to climb from one stage to the next, and the components of which stage try to use in image-making.

- Television celebrity can be met everyday on the screen, like our family, therefore his main feature is familiarity. Marshall separates three types again:
 - o talk show host or news reel anchor is the first: he personifies the stability in the stream of mostly tragic or funny events; he represents mainstream culture for us facing extremities; helps us understand and interpret what we see.
 - o soap opera heroine is also met everyday, but she is in fiction, in stories where the same characters get into different moral dilemmas and crises, and seeing their decisions, we get more and more knowledge of their personality.

- Finally the situation comedy actor is defined; in his case not the persons but the family, its stability is the main point: whatever crisis may happen to the characters in the beginning of the episode, in the end everybody gets back to the state occupied before.

The parallel we may find in politics with situation comedy is the conflicts in the parliament: they are not without humour,⁸ and the actors seldom change their posts and the political balance of power rarely alter because of such conflicts. As far as soap opera heroine is concerned, the question is which politician would be willing to let the audience scrutinize the development of her personality, politicians rather try to project a stable personality instead. Something like the role of the host and anchor is at politicians' disposal if they are interviewed regularly by an important channel. In this case, the audience count on his appearance, interpretation and opinion on the current issues.

- Marshall does not separate types among the pop celebrities, he rather speaks about specific features.
 - The main characteristics and ambition is authenticity. The pop star does everything to differ from her colleagues, in musical codes first of all, but in dressing, hair-do, lyrics etc. too.
 - Pop music is a community genre. That is shown by the primacy of the bands versus soloists. But the musicians' close connection to their own audience is even more important sociologically. When a pop star creates differences versus colleagues, she generates a separate segment in the audience.
 - Finally the continuous compulsion of innovation is another feature of pop celebrities. The records are supposed to differ from each other even if they belong to the same sound.

Politicians also want to differ from colleagues, sometimes even from their own party, and definitely from the rivals. We anticipate the presence of the same efforts in leader image-making as in the case of the pop star. Community building is another natural and rational attempt on the side of the politicians, but it is much more difficult to say whether those efforts concern the colleagues or rather the citizens. Perhaps in the present day culture, cultural attitudes prefer soloists in politics to bands, a leader is more attractive than a committee. Innovation can also be found among the components of the image of a leading politician.

Starting from Marshall, one could say that in a culture where most of the public figures have the characteristics of celebrity, an ambitious party and ambitious politicians cannot ignore it and miss the needed features. The question is whether successful politician is successful because she has always had those characteristics and at the best point of time she expressed them in front of the audience, or feeling the requirements of time and culture parties select the most appropriate candidates, or the politician's staff is able to build up successful politicians knowing the needed requisites.

⁸ According to a saying, it impossible for a Central European man to survive without much sense of humour.

Political marketing and the components of popular culture

For political marketing perspective, the starting point is that celebrity politicians emerge because of considerations similar to marketing consciousness. A party, its decision makers think that in order to get greater support the party has to conquer segments that require a celebrity politician to personify or personalize the party. It is not a must that the decision makers should be aware of the prescriptions of political marketing, living in the culture they can have the impressions which they turn into such a decision. Afterwards they select from the possible and self-appointed candidates; on the grounds, which one would be at ease with the communications surroundings saturated by popular culture.

The party weighs up the pros and cons because every political move has a trade-off aspect: which segments will turn away and which will give support, what is the net balance. There are segments that reject celebrity politicians, their votes may be lost. Political marketing will not prescribe that every party should have a celebrity politician. Even where the mainstream culture is fully saturated with stars and celebrities, there might be segments big enough for a smaller party to get into the parliament with their support.

It also means that there is hardly any party, particularly among the big ones, that counts exclusively on the segments favouring popular cultural elements in communication. They always pay attention to other segments too, therefore, even the leaders positioned as celebrities keep up communication with the rest of the segments. In the study below, I underline the points where Ferenc Gyurcsány, a celebrity politician, makes gestures towards segments not preferring popular moves. The differentiation between popular and non popular communications is not always simple, but I suppose that different types are carried out in different media: popular moves are covered mainly by tabloid press and television, while quality papers concentrate on “serious” issues.

In short, I claim that the party makes a decision that one of the leaders of the party should be someone inclined to be a celebrity and then the process begins. I think that happened in Hungary in 2004. In Ferenc Gyurcsány, the Hungarian Socialist Party found a person who took the role of the celebrity politician with pleasure, and he has had a staff that has consciously worked on his image of celebrity. On the other hand, Ferenc Gyurcsány is not just a celebrity, he communicates with other segments as well.

Method

The parts of the method could be seen above: I will try to submit the communications moves of Ferenc Gyurcsány and their media coverage under the different narratives of origin and under the different features of popular cultural celebrities. Every time I will also try to explain the same moves from a political marketing perspective in order to demonstrate that both perspectives are important to understand what happened. I am concentrating on the period between the August of 2004 and the February of 2005. I cannot deal with all of the communications events (that was a very dense half year) because the policy initiatives, interviews, speeches, writings and gestures produced by Ferenc Gyurcsány piled up enormously. The cases analysed below are examples, their mere occurrence may demonstrate the appearance of popular elements or the implementation of a political marketing strategy in the prime ministerial communication.

My sources were the tabloid daily of the highest circulation in Hungary, the most read leftist and rightist quality papers, *Népszabadság* and *Magyar Nemzet* respectively. I also studied the articles of Index the most popular news portal in Hungary.

My analysis tries to present the blocks with the help of which the Hungarian citizens could build up the image of Ferenc Gyurcsány, the prime minister of Hungary. I will focus mainly on the elements coming from popular culture.

Marketing culture and tabloidization in Hungary

First I have to show that it is relevant to speak about marketing culture and popular culture in Hungary and consequently, to use those two perspectives. To some it up, one could say that after the end of the eighties and particularly after the middle of the nineties the tendency of tabloidization and the use of political marketing penetrated the Hungarian public sphere.

Political marketing in Hungary

Since there is no scientific analysis on the subject, I can base my summary on impressions and scattered studies. I will handle political marketing and public relations together because I think public relations belongs to the product component (party image, leader image) of political marketing.

Hungarian journalism links the beginnings of the deliberate use of political communication and political marketing to the Alliance of Young Democrats (AYD). In short: around 1994, the party considered the media surroundings hostile to its efforts, and wanted to find out the ways of neutralizing the hostility. Since then can one realize the elements of media management and information management in the communication of the party. The extensive use of such means and political marketing consciousness was among the reasons why AYD grew from a small party in the middle of the decade to the leading party in government in 1998.

After 1998 Hungarian Socialist Party (HSP) had to realize that the knowledge and use of the rules and tools of communication is inevitable for a successful organization. In 2002 it led a very consistent and steady campaign and marketing strategy and won the elections. Ron Werber, a campaign advisor from abroad and some database software played important part in the victory. Werber emphasized local campaigning, that is, the placement aspect of political marketing, while database helped relationship marketing to a great deal.

Since 2002, AYL has learnt a lot. If HSP used groups of activists in the local campaigns, AYL wanted to reach the same goal by reorganizing its hierarchy and adjusting the lower units of the organization to the electoral districts. The party put much weight on database building: in the Spring 2004, during the European election campaign the party initiated a petition all around in the country, which delivered a great number of addresses for the database. The first deployment of the database was carried out in the campaign of the referendum in November and December. The party also established a media domain during its period in government.

As a party in government, HSP did not develop political marketing arsenal - Werber remained and the activists implemented some campaigns. The only innovation was the opening towards tabloid media. First it was shy later on a bit more steady.

One can say that since the middle of the nineties, the Hungarian citizen regularly meets the tricks of political marketing and is told by each party that in a morally problematic way its rival is using political marketing and public relations. That accusation is asserted less and less by the parties themselves, but by the journalists and the intellectuals.

Tabloidization⁹ in Hungary

Before the end of the eighties, there was no tabloid medium in Hungary and the customs of media consumption detained the increase of the tabloid market even afterwards. According to studies, the birth of the private television channels changed the media landscape, but then the change has proved radical. Before 1997, when the two big private channels started, it was not proper to read or watch tabloid media.

- In 1994, Blikk, the most read tabloid or boulevard daily paper had a circulation of 100 thousand while the leading quality daily sold 282 thousand. Even as late as in 1999, the Blikk's figure was still around 100 thousand but Népszabadság fell to 210 thousand. The tendencies crossed in 2002 and in the first half of 2004 Blikk was above 250 thousand while Népszabadság under 165 thousand.¹⁰ Weekly market played an important part in the tabloidization: several new titles sprang up and the grounding fever still does not seem to be over.

- Similar developments could be seen in the market of television since the end of the nineties. Public television which used to have a monopoly position until 1997 in Hungary, has had a share below 20 percent for years, while the two private channels with national access have had ones above 30 percent each. It is true that the programmes qualified officially as public services (weekly news magazines and quiz shows like the Millionaire show) have managed to get between the most popular pieces but their public character is rather questionable. Moreover, the most watched programmes of the public television are those that are surely the most tabloid.¹¹

⁹ Tabloidization is a much debated concept, and contains several aspects beyond the changes of the numbers of circulation and market share. Here I cannot go into details. For a very good elaboration see Sparks-Tulloch 2000.

¹⁰ Data from the archive of www.matesz.hu.

¹¹ For the data of one of the latest week see: <http://index.hu/kultur/media/11het>.

In short, one can say that printed and electronic tabloid have won during the last eight years in Hungary. The average Hungarian reads more and more tabloid papers and magazines, and watches more and more tabloid programmes. And since tabloid papers are mostly on the celebrities of the private television, we could say that tabloid does not let the media consumer go for a minute.

The tabloidization of politics in Hungary

Political parties have done their best to adapt to the communications surrounding of this kind. AYL, being a conservative party, and its leader, who until recently had taken conservative identity fairly seriously, have not dared to go too far towards tabloidization. HSP has been much more open.

Examples to illustrate what I refer to as tabloid communications move:

- In the Spring of 2003 the government sponsored the private channel that hosted a reality show similar to Big Brother. The goal was to have one of the participants travel to Brussels and thereby publicize Hungary's European integration. The justification to counter the doubts was that a great part of the population can be reached through this medium only.
- In the end of March 2004, Prime Minister Péter Medgyessy suddenly gave a telephone call to a music radio station and declared live that he was going to give amnesty to a pig on the occasion of the 1 of April. The farmers were entitled to apply for the document of amnesty, the winner was not to be butchered within a year.
- The period of the European elections campaign did not lack in popular moves either. Once the Prime Minister participated in a funny programme of parody and met his alter ego too.

The press secretary leading government communication proved to be a very close colleague and ally of Ferenc Gyurcsány in the Summer of 2004, but it is very probable that Gyurcsány first as a political advisor of the Prime Minister afterwards as a minister had much influence on the communication strategy of Péter Medgyessy.

The elements of popular culture in the communication of Ferenc Gyurcsány

The further part of the paper presents the components of the Prime Minister that can be interpreted according to David Marshall's typology. Several times I am also going to give a political marketing interpretation.

The narrative of origin

I mentioned two main types of narrative: hard work and blind luck. Now, the story of the Prime Minister has to shed light on the process by which he became successful first as a business man and then as a politician.

The most characteristic version goes as follows:

As a child, I had a dream that once we would have a much better life and we would be people of fortune. You know, and I am attacked frequently, I have managed to reach that. Let me add: it was an odd, exceptional, unrepeatable period. It would be harder today.¹²

The story of the capacities that surely back the development to leading politician also belong to the narrative of origin. Another speech remembers that:

...I have learnt what it means to take responsibility for two or three people. And then for firms. For one thousand of families at least. For a small village in Somogy county, called Bábonymegyer, or for a Transdanubian town, its name is Mosonmagyaróvár. But I have got farther. I know what it means being Hungarian and give job in Székelyudvarhely or Újvidék¹³. I know what responsibility is. I have learnt it, I have suffered it. I have had many failures and I have had many successes.¹⁴

We have seen that according to Lowenthal, in the twentieth century, the success stories based on luck became more popular versus hard work narratives.¹⁵ Ferenc Gyurcsány does not claim that hard work helped him rise so high. He rather mentions "odd, exceptional, unrepeatable period". His narrative may be put into the framework of popular culture.

According to the other interpretation, for Ferenc Gyurcsány it was just impossible to choose the hard work narrative and for three reasons:

- Firstly, because that narrative would suggest that the audience did not work hard enough. It would be too harsh even in the case of a conservative politician, but Ferenc Gyurcsány is a leftist one.
- Secondly, with having been attacked even inside his own party because of his money-making it would have sounded provocative to allude to hard work. And still he does

¹² Speech by Ferenc Gyurcsány in Szeged on the occasion of a town meeting on 18 September 2004. The Prime Minister's speeches and interviews can be found on the website: www.miniszterelnok.hu.

¹³ The two last settlements are located outside Hungary but they have large Hungarian population.

¹⁴ Speech by Ferenc Gyurcsány in Köröcsarnok, on 28 September 2004.

¹⁵ The tendency underlines the truth of the cultural paradigm or at least gives strength to the view that production seems to have lost its primacy in determining culture. See: Nash 2000.

not want to refer to blind luck, he wants to emphasize his own talent, therefore, on the one hand, he mentions odd, exceptional times, on the other, however, he finishes with a sentence that suggests he could do it again though it would be more difficult.

- Finally the third reason is that he had become the prime minister candidate of the party almost by chance. Until the August of 2004, nobody would have thought that there could be an exchange of prime minister at all, and that Ferenc Gyurcsány would be prime minister in Hungary before the Spring of 2005 at the earliest.

By this narrative of origin the politician not only obeys the requirement of popular culture but, so to say, makes a compromise about his past with those who claimed that he had been granted loans and given information just in time because of his political and family connections. The story of origins is addressed to two segments at least, two segments can receive important messages:

- one is the fan of popular culture, for whom it is acceptable, even familiar if sunshine suddenly smiles upon someone;
- the other one is the group that has always felt suspicious the fast speed of money making of the late communists and would like to see that Ferenc Gyurcsány does not refer to his business past as the fruit of his own efforts alone but confesses that unrepeatably circumstances also helped him.

The film celebrity

1. Physical features.

In the 3 and 7 October issues Blikk published articles on Ferenc Gyurcsány's weekly run to the parliament where his office is located.¹⁶ The articles reveal that he always did it but so far without body guards. The occasion of the first article is exactly that the body guards are afraid that they will not be able to keep pace with the Prime Minister for the whole distance of six kilometres. We are informed that the problem is that he is very fast because he is a trained runner. The article of the 7 October compares the performances of the Prime Minister and the leader of the opposition. According to measurements, they would get to the finish line together because Viktor Orbán, the other leader, is also a sportsman.

The morning run may have found way into the tabloid paper not only because popular culture prefers the human side of official but also because the investment of body, be it the body of a politician, is very close to a popular cultural genre. Marshall himself underlines that if not otherwise, the celebrity by his/her body makes coherence among incoherent spheres of life, levels of culture (Marshall 1997: xi). Moreover, politics implies significant bodily burdens, it is important to know that the leader has a healthy and fit body.

From a political marketing or public relations point of view other interpretations are also possible.

One may raise the idea of public relations that the youth of a politician is to be demonstrated by a media event, one should not only talk about it. Even the abstract ideas have to be made tangible, sensory object. What we see is just the demonstration of the youth and impetus¹⁷ of

¹⁶ The run of that day was covered by the private televisions too, therefore, it was certainly a communications event by the Prime Minister, rather than the fruit of the alertness of reporters.

¹⁷ „Impetus” is a frequently used word in the young socialists' public talks.

the new generation of the Hungarian Socialist Party, of its pertinacious efforts that differentiate the new leaders of the party from the old guard. The morning run and its wide media coverage is aimed at the impressing the message of this kind into the mind and memory of the audience.

The emphasis on the youth of the Prime Minister and later of the new president of the party is important for the internal as well as the external communications of the party because it underlines the message claimed frequently that born after 1956, the new leaders are innocent, free from the sins of the regime before 1989.

2. The harmony of personality and role

In his speeches and interviews, Ferenc Gyurcsány deals with his own person in great lengths, more than Hungarian prime ministers did before. On the occasion of the presentation of government programme in a rally, he begins the speech with these words:

I am Ferenc Gyurcsány. Forty-three. The prime minister candidate of the Hungarian Socialist Party. A proud leftist.

And in the end of the same speech he repeats the first words to emphasize their importance:

I am Ferenc Gyurcsány. Forty-three. A guy from Pápa.¹⁸ The son of a driver's companion father and a lady spinner mother. The father of four fantastic children, the husband of a marvellous wife. I was born on the bit harder side of life, but in integrity, surrounded by much love. I have become a successful man living in affluence. I know power offers me not the opportunity to rise, name it frankly, the opportunity to grow rich. ... I became a businessman first. I have learnt to direct, manage, to take responsibility for people. I have learnt to read numbers and I have learnt to see the human being behind the numbers.

As a matter of fact, the whole speech is basically about himself, and discusses the question: how one could be a leftist billionaire, how he, with such a near past and experiences, can be the leftist prime minister of a coalition of socialist majority. We can see in the quotations that Ferenc Gyurcsány presents himself not just as a leftist but as a proud leftist, that is, the discrepancy between being leftist and billionaire is not embarrassing for him.

- He says he can be leftist without embarrassment because he came from a very humble family.
- Moreover, his present fortune is also a guarantee against taking the advantage of power to grow rich.
- Besides, in contradistinction to the poor, he as a businessman has learnt to direct and take responsibility for others, and what else is to be the main task of a politician than to direct and make responsible decisions.

It is clear that fortune is no more than the secondary result of a career that is not about fortune and money making but piling up experience in responsible management of people. Fortune does not push everybody to another world, he can remain the same person able to become indignant at injustice, the same person who he was originally. Following the logic of cultural political sociology (Nash 2000) we could say that, according to Ferenc Gyurcsány, the political attitudes and behaviour are determined not by the place in economy, but by identity, which is shaped by much more factors than just the financial background. And then fortune is

¹⁸ His hometown in Transdanubia.

not a disadvantage for a leftist politician anymore but an advantage that makes leftist attitudes possible. At one point, the speech confirms that leftist stand is independent of financial state and is the part of the personality:

Those who raise the question how one can remain leftist when one is not poor anymore proclaim their selfishness actually. Left is not the concern of the poor. Just the opposite. Poverty is not the concern of the poor either, but of all of us, of Hungary.

By this argumentation the politician fulfilled the celebrity criterion that it should be possible to establish harmony between personality and role. The contradiction between the two is no more than appearance, in fact they reinforce each other: the politician is not selfish, therefore, he can be leftist.

For the traditional interpretation it is not very surprising that the speech on the government programme deals with the person of the prime minister and almost nothing else. Since there is no too much time left until the next elections in 2006, and since the Prime Minister's economic scope for action is rather small (huge budgetary deficit seen by Brussels with high brows) the government programme itself is very short, there are no many policy initiatives to talk about.

Moreover, the party expects that the Prime Minister should make himself better known and prove his much better communications skills than his predecessor has. Communications skills are supposed to be demonstrated by the creation of a narrative that reconciles leftist identity with the fact that Ferenc Gyurcsány is among the richest one hundred people in Hungary. It is important because his fortune has been and will be for long a ground for attack used frequently by the right.

3. Autonomy

According to the narratives, fortune increases autonomy excluding the possibility of corruption. There are other fields, however, where Ferenc Gyurcsány fights for autonomy.

The 27 of August, that is, just after his being nominated prime minister, Blikk published an interview with Ferenc Gyurcsány under the title "Gyurcsány had a binge till one a.m.". The readers are informed that on learning the nomination, Klára, his wife, gave him a big kiss and assured him that she loved him. The "approximately 20 friends" amused themselves a lot, and it was difficult to send them away at one. The children were interested in the question of bodyguards, but Ferenc Gyurcsány told them that he had sent them home and he would use his own old car. The reporter asks the politician about the safety appliances of the house, and that query leads the talk to the problem of the wish of protecting the family's usual way of life. Ferenc Gyurcsány says: "I want to go shopping to the shop around the corner on my own in the future too. I would like to drive the car ... I want to be the father of the children and the normal husband of my wife."¹⁹ He is asked about his travel to the Olympics²⁰ as well, for us the main detail is that he was going to pay the travelling costs.

¹⁹ The insistence on the civil life and the safety appliances are the subjects of the interview published in the 30 September issue of the tabloid daily. The repetition is the first sign that the private life of the Prime Minister is not colourful enough to offer new and new topics all the time, or monthly at least.

²⁰ Ferenc Gyurcsány was the Minister of Children, Youth and Sports at that time.

The reader gets an inside view of the politician's private life. The answers make us understand how valuable he finds the small details of his family's life, how far away that life world is from being colonized by politics.

- He mentions his wife by her first name, suggesting she is not just a wife but a respectable individual of equal standing. That is true for the children as well: the story of their reaction to the nomination shows that however being the hero of the day and the focus of the feast the politician had enough energy based probably on love to pay attention to them.
- It is not surprising then that he has a life outside politics that valuable enough to be protected. We hear of the old car on which one can hold on, the house which is so important to keep that it is worth financing the safety appliances. We also get to know the shop around the corner where he wants to go regularly also when prime minister. Altogether he wants to remain normal for the family.
- Fortune does not come up as a separate topic but is lurking behind several points: the costs of the safety, the travel to Athens, and even behind the invitation of the friends to the party, because approximately 20 guests presuppose a fairly large house. This fortune is not for show off but has positive consequences concerning the family life instead: it makes possible the autonomy, it lets the politician protect the way of life of the family from the inconvenient changes after nomination.
- The shop around the corner associates the local web of human relations, because it is very probable that Ferenc Gyurcsány keeps to the shop not because of its stock or assortment but because of the people he meets there from time to time. The formula "approximately 20 friends" suggests that the politician has such an open web of friendly connections that he does not know how many people were actually present in the feast.

One can sum the message of the interview saying there is no element in it that could be dissonant for the regular reader of tabloid. One cannot claim that it might aim at more than one specific segment, the group of tabloid readers. The task is performed with sense of style indeed. Not being dissonant does not mean that there is no individual taste. We consider as such the point of the bodyguards, the old car and the respect towards Klára, the wife. Ferenc Gyurcsány adapts to the general image of politician and diverges from it a bit.

Television celebrity

Above I presumed that it is rather improbable that a politician be too close to the character of a television celebrity. Therefore, I do not find it necessary to study all the three parallels with the celebrity types. I will be content with searching for the most important features defined by Marshall in the image of Ferenc Gyurcsány. They are intimacy and familiarity, I will try to find the components of them in order to know whether the politician is similar to a television celebrity.

The regular presence in the public sphere is true without doubt. It is not surprising in the case of a prime minister who is the most powerful person in politics in Hungary. But Ferenc Gyurcsány has leaped beyond that, he can be met not only in news reels and news magazines. In the period of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, the public radio introduced a weekly programme of interview with the politician. Every Wednesday in the morning peak time Viktor Orbán talked to a reporter. The next prime minister, Péter Medgyessy gave up this habit, but he was rather bad in talking. After some hesitation, Ferenc Gyurcsány resumed the series. He hesitated because in the period of Viktor Orbán, the leftist politicians and journalists attacked the interviews accusing the radio with boot licking. Besides Ferenc

Gyurcsány has been in a delicate position as for Viktor Orbán: he was chosen to be an equal rival of the rightist leader, therefore he has to resemble Orbán, but he is supposed to be better, that is, different from him too. In the end the communications profits of regular interviews must have been more attractive for the staff and himself.

Still a point of regular presence is the long articles in *Blikk* on the days around 10 of every month.²¹ These materials are always on topics exciting the tabloid readers: mostly on the private life of the Prime Minister, sometimes on juicy political issues.

For example in the 4th of October issue we can read a lengthy article on Ferenc Gyurcsány's mother. The son used to visit the mother regularly but since he was nominated prime minister and actually leads the government, she comes to pay visit. The mother

revealed she had never thought Ferenc Gyurcsány would be a politician all the less because as a child he said he wanted to be a priest in part-time job. After his First Communion he went to church frequently, "he liked Communion wafer very much".

On one of the accompanying photographs one can see the smiling face of Ferenc Gyurcsány who, according to the caption, "wanted to be a priest".

The article is rather astonishing because it is about a late young communist who used to have fairly high posts in youth organizations. Moreover Ferenc Gyurcsány must have been a very young boy when he wanted to be a priest otherwise he would not planned to take it as a part-time job. But if he was very young then and did not break up with his mother why did she receive the news on his carrier with surprise? I only wanted to show that the article tells us an impossible story but it does not matter because the overall impression is very favourable: we see a young boy who wants to be a priest, and although later he becomes a young communist politician, we cannot help guessing his attraction to the church may have been alive even if secretly, otherwise the mother would not have been so surprised by his political carrier.²²

The other main topic of the article is food and cooking. The mother gives her son vanilla cream bun as a gift on the occasion of the taking of prime minister's oath, and however occupied the politician must have been he and his wife eats from the cake. Then comes the Communion wafer fan young boy, followed by the description of the grandmother's visits. Although she does not lodge with the son's family she is very glad to cook to the grandchildren but prefers the son's cooking. "Feri²³ is an outstanding cook, in the weekends he relaxes by preparing something delicious."

The position of the politician's mother is fairly familiar: she gives food to the son as well as to the grandchildren. The picture is not disturbed by Ferenc Gyurcsány's passion for cooking because he cooks not usually but only for relaxation. These fragments make up a picture of an ideal relationship between mother and son: he likes eating (wafer as well as vanilla cream bun)

²¹ There may be several reasons of the timing; I have to guess. It is not improbable that the timing is aimed at the period of surveys of the opinion research companies, particularly the one that publishes results in *Népszabadság*. If you think that by a tabloid material you can improve the image of the Prime Minister, then it is worth putting something into an issue of the biggest tabloid exactly in the period when the most important polling company will ask the citizens about the Prime Minister.

²² It is not clear whether this information has had anything to do with the rare characterization of Ferenc Gyurcsány's spoken style as priestly.

²³ Feri is the usual nickname for Ferenc. Ferenc Gyurcsány is the first prime minister whose nicknames is well-known for the public. We know Fletó, another nickname as well, that has been used outside the family.

while she is glad to cook. Harmony can be found on an unconscious level too: the son does not take a ride or collect stamps to take some rest but does something that is linked to the mother.²⁴

Intimacy involves specific uses of language, e.g., first name basis, or the addressing that is called *tutoiement* in French and can be found in Hungarian as well.

Ferenc Gyurcsány is willing to change to *tutoiement* in very surprising moments. In his first speech after being nominated he used this form in speaking to mostly old miners.²⁵ Beside *tutoiement* the reporters and the people present must have been shocked when on the 4th of November, giving a speech on the occasion of the fall of the 1956 revolution he used the first name of Imre Nagy addressing the martyr politician saying: “Imre, how do you think one should get on with this quarrelsome world?” *Tutoiement* and first name basis are inherent features of popular culture and they have become quite general in the television programmes, particularly in the reality shows where nobody seems to have a full name only first name or rather nickname.

It is worth taking a glance of the photograph below. One can see a moment of the celebrations of the 1956 revolution. István Hiller, the president of HSP and Ferenc Gyurcsány surround the sculpture of Imre Nagy, while one can see Gyula Molnár, the president of the party’s Budapest organization in the background. The three men were elected to their posts during the previous weeks, they are in their early forties; as I mentioned it, born after 1956, they are self-identified as young and free of the sins of the past regime.



²⁴ If you please: he regresses not to the phallic or to the anal but to the oral stage.

²⁵ „Gyurcsány szemöldökén a szénpor”, Index, 2 September 2004, index.hu/politika/gyurba0902.

Perhaps, for a popular cultural analysis the bodily components would be the most remarkable. The politicians not only surround the sculpture but touch it as well. The successor, Ferenc Gyurcsány touches it with both hands and even looks into the eyes of the executed prime minister who looks back. One may say this is a marvellous moment: solemn but bright. It is solemn and bright because by a reversed laying on of hands the young politicians seem to be asking for a consecration. And at least one of them seems to get the consecration since the sculpture looks at Ferenc Gyurcsány, his remote successor. And then is it not natural to address the predecessor on first name? Particularly if we take into account that Imre Nagy has a bunch of red carnation in his hands and red carnation is the logo of the Hungarian Socialist Party.

Modernist interpretation would try to find a different meaning, a public relations event on purpose, not just the spontaneous borrowing of popular cultural elements. One may rather speak about calculated gestures, even manipulation. It is not a custom in Hungary to touch a sculpture during a celebration, no-one ever addressed Imre Nagy on first name, particularly because he was executed, it must be intentional to put red carnation into the sculpture's hands (Gyula Molnár has white carnation actually) etc. The almost perfect triptych rather seems to be the result of the efforts by the young generation of the socialist leaders to get legitimacy from the late prime minister. I think Ferenc Gyurcsány and István Hiller are stroking the sculpture not spontaneously; they rather want to demonstrate that they have taken over the leadership from the previous generation, some members of which actually fought against the revolution.

Pop celebrity

1. Authenticity

One can be authentic in various ways. It may come from inside irrespective of others. But one can be original by being different from everybody else on purpose. In the case of Ferenc Gyurcsány, we mostly find examples of the second type.

In the case of a politician authenticity may manifest itself in new slogans, new language. Ferenc Gyurcsány is well known of such efforts. One of his most used words is "impetus"; he likes the formula: "make a better Hungary"²⁶ or the struggle with injustice. Without internal information I guess only that words like "republic", "equal opportunity" used by Péter Medgyessy, his predecessor came originally from him, the political advisor, just like the idea of certain communications moves such as the participation in funny tabloid television programmes.

One can also find distinctive features that serve exclusively the differentiation from other politicians in general, from the old leaders of the party in particular. I have already mentioned the physical features, the age and endurance. His communications skills differentiate him from his predecessor first of all and they are coming from inside but cannot be separated from the fact that he was selected exactly because of them.²⁷

²⁶ „Make a better Hungary” sounds rather clumsy in Hungarian too. It is hard to hush away the association with the frequently heard formula of Hollywood films: “you can do it!”, “you have done it!” etc., particularly because make and do is the same word in Hungarian.

²⁷ In the middle of August there were two possible politicians for the party to nominate, the other one is called Péter Kiss. Before the congress that finally chose Ferenc Gyurcsány, his supporters raised the argument: “Imagine Péter Kiss against Viktor Orbán in 2006 in the television debate between the prime minister candidate.”

Paradoxically, sometimes Ferenc Gyurcsány's originality manifests itself in not caring for originality. He has systematically taken the slogans of the coalition partner, alluding to the fact that he is the prime minister of the whole coalition government. It is more difficult to explain when he is taking the slogans of the opposition. In the Spring of 2004, during the European elections campaign Fidesz used the slogan „Job, home, security”. In the beginning of 2005, Ferenc Gyurcsány took the slogan saying those should abandon the slogan who does not like that he use it.

For the traditional interpretation these forced differences are the most remarkable because they underline the starting point that politics is a relational genre, where one can find less individual self expression than the consequences of the partners' continuous monitoring of one another. Politicians and political parties cannot stand vacuum situations: they want to penetrate everywhere that is not forbidden by law. That is why sometimes originality is no more than the discovery and appropriation of new segments or new communications tools.

2. Community aspect

We have already seen that family, including his mother, is very important for Ferenc Gyurcsány. We do not find, however, a wider community until March 2005. In August 2004, he addresses the whole party through the congress that will nominate him, later he seems to be left alone.

In the company of István Hiller the would be president, on the 3rd of September he meets the teams of activists trained by Ron Weber.²⁸ He speaks of the need to create, to “make” a better Hungary, and “You, I and the Pisti Hiller”²⁹ will make it. Characteristically he does not mention the party or the coalition as if the activists, István Hiller and himself were the only forces he can count on. But that case is still hopeful, because Istvan Hiller is in the competition for the presidency of the party and he will succeed in the middle of October. Yet during the campaign before the December referendum it turns out that the new president is unable to discipline the party, and many think that in spite of the serious constitutional worries³⁰ Ferenc Gyurcsány had to take part in the campaign in order not to let the party's stand be even more defeated by the opposition. A bit later, in the beginning of 2005, some guessed that the Prime Minister would take over the presidency of the party in some months.

The Prime Minister himself is responsible that the government does not look like a community. In Hungary, the ministers are invited and selected by the prime minister, and Ferenc Gyurcsány seems to have chosen persons who are unknown for the public and do not threaten his communications domination. He runs a one man show.

The citizens could be another field of community building. Ferenc Gyurcsány made the first step towards that community as late as in March 2005, when his tabloid offensive was over. In March and April he visits one university per week and after the official programme, he meets the students in a pub nearby frequented by the youth. The photos taken there show the Prime Minister first time among other people as if he belonged to their community.

²⁸ „Gyurcsány: Ti, én, és a Hiller Pisti”, Népszabadság, 4 September 2004.

²⁹ Pisti is the customary nickname of István. Again a case of tutoiement and first name address.

³⁰ In principle, the high public offices are supposed not to declare their opinion on the questions on referendum.

For a political marketing perspective, the loneliness of the Prime Minister is not surprising at all. One of the products of a party is leader image; and the leader is a lonesome person, not just one of a company.

3. Innovation

Marshall considers continuous innovation an indispensable requisite for a pop star. It is very difficult for a politician to meet that requirement, particularly if we have easily communicable novelties in mind. The arsenal cannot be renewed often, the most plausible solution is innovation in topics and issues.

Ferenc Gyurcsány has proved to be very innovative in political and policy initiatives, one can draw such a conclusion from the criticism of the fellow politicians and the media intellectuals. In politics it is not enough to initiate something, one is supposed to push through it, otherwise more and more issues and initiatives look failures.

Our focus being popular topics, we can say that they have run out rather soon, there have been more and more repetition. Let's see the list!

I have already mentioned that two topics covered in the Blikk interview in August were repeated in the end of September.

In the beginning of January 2005, in the 10th of January issue, Blikk wrote about the television talk show where Ferenc Gyurcsány mentioned his cancer he had had a couple of years before. The tabloid covered it as a big sensation, though the story had been published on the 4th of October 2004, by Story, the tabloid weekly of the highest circulation.

In the beginning of October, the selection of the new government spokespersons was a leading issue. According to rumours, the Prime Minister preferred a lady from a private television but she did not accept the offer. In the end the government got two spokespersons: a lady from the economic press and a young man who used to be the anchor of a rather tabloid programme in one of the big private television channels. The latter proved to be a very good subject to write about for weeks.

Tabloid is very fond of the meeting of stars. Ferenc Gyurcsány delivered the first story of that kind in the middle of October. He was the organizer and host of the conference of the leftist leaders of the world. The biggest star was Tony Blair. The British prime minister, New Labour and the British politics in general are usually referred to as models for Hungarian politicians and particularly for the Hungarian socialists. Unfortunately, the meeting proved to be a failure because Tony Blair argued fiercely with the Spanish prime minister in the Iraqi war and left Hungary very soon.

The material of the 10th of November is a long interview again full of repetitions. We are informed again that the Prime Minister has an especially deep relationship with his wife; we get to know to what extent the family has managed to protect private life; we meet the well known topics: the mother's visits, the safety appliances, the morning runs and the passion for cooking. There are two new motives only: the pocket money of the children and the mother in law; the latter is receiving not more than a half sentence. The shortage is so gnawing that the reporter has to raise current parliamentary issues. The most outstanding information is that the interview is said to be made in the car of the Prime Minister, because he is so busy that he could not have received the reporter otherwise.

The end of November is the first time when Ferenc Gyurcsány's wife becomes news; she could be seen on photographs before in the daily. Now we get the information that she used to smoke secretly, and now she participates in a campaign among the youth against smoking.

The topic timed for the 10th of December is the so called agent case. In Hungary the different governments have always drawn back from the publication of the list of agents employed by the secret police during the communist regime. Now, Ferenc Gyurcsány claimed that in the near future the parliament will make the necessary steps to do that. The reinvigoration of the agent case always gives rise to excitement in Hungary. That is why it may have seemed to be a good feed for the tabloid. But it proved to be counterproductive. The daily published a very critical commentary expressing unbelief in the seriousness of the move.

Another story around the 10th of December is the Prime Minister's visit to the troops in Iraq. This one is a photo opportunity first of all and the tabloid exploits it entirely. One sees Ferenc Gyurcsány in tank and in helm, behind machine gun and among soldiers in the desert.

By the end of the month the customary report on the holiday plans of the leading politicians.

On the 10th of January the tabloid publishes the article I have mentioned already of the talk show disclosure of cancer.

On the 6th of February every daily writes about a case happened on the 20th of January. A 12 years old girl strayed away from home in the country side and after some travelling accidentally she found herself in front of the house of the Prime Minister in Budapest. There the Prime Minister himself³¹ found her, gave her lodging for the night and had her carried back home the next day.

The events around the 10th of February are the ski accident of Klára Dobrev, the Prime Minister's wife, and Ferenc Gyurcsány's business breakfast open to anyone who pays the participation fee.

The middle of the month brought a rather serious mistake of the Prime Minister that caused problems in foreign policy. HSP celebrated its anniversary and one of the points was the imitation of a funny private television programme. In the television seven humorists comment political and other news. Now, in the party evening five leading politicians, the Prime Minister one of them, did the same. In a comment meant to be humorous and ironic, Ferenc Gyurcsány said the Saudi football team was full of terrorists. An international scandal erupted, the ambassadors of the Arab countries in Budapest held a meeting, the Saudi government called home its ambassador, the visit of the president of the Hungarian parliament had to be postponed, Ferenc Gyurcsány was compelled to apologize several times.³²

One can see that by the time passing the interviews are vanishing, all we have is a couple of astonishing cases, some of them are suspicious even for the tabloid. The marvellous finding of the girl urged the Blikk to give the title: "PR action or a good deed?"

It is not surprising: the different film, television and pop celebrities are able to remain interesting because to a certain extent that is their job and they are accepted and expected to deliver exciting novelties from a much wider spectrum of behaviour and activity than a

³¹ Other versions claimed that the guard did it.

³² I must add that this was not the first time when the Prime Minister was willing to use offending remarks just for a laugh. Afterwards he always apologized but he became considered someone unable to curb his tongue.

politician is. Most of the time politicians are involved in routine tasks or in activities that are difficult to communicate in an entertaining way. Neither their professional nor private lives are so colourful to produce enough material for the media of popular culture.

In a nutshell, I would say that the methodological framework for the analysis of a specific field of popular culture has given a great help in understanding and interpreting Ferenc Gyurcsány's communication from August 2004 to February 2005. I think only the all-pervasive presence of popular culture in Hungary can explain why a lot of communications moves have been possible: from the gestures around Imre Nagy to the coverage of the accident of the Prime Minister's wife, from the morning radio interviews to the morning runs. We could also see, however, that most of the communications moves were explainable easily without leaning on the popular cultural perspective, that is, nothing questioned the pre-supposition that even the Prime Ministerial gestures closest to the models of popular culture can be interpreted as moves aimed at some well defined segments of the political market.

Conclusion

The trial of popularising the Prime Ministerial communication seems to have lost its impetus by the February 2005. The so far customary moves have failed to come, and the Prime Minister himself explicitly claimed that politics should be more than communications babbling, more than mere political communication.

What were the reasons?

- The staff has run out of topics. We have seen its stages above.
- He has run into foreign policy walls. One of them was erected by Tony Blair, the other one by the Saudi diplomacy. In foreign policy meetings are not only or not always about public relations. The Saudi case showed that diplomacy does not allow formulas coming from popular culture.
- Ferenc Gyurcsány has proved to have difficulties in controlling his verbal drives; it caused several political complications within the borders too.
- Viktor Orbán, the rival picked up the glove. After some hesitation, he gave the customary “state of the union” speech in such a form that one had to draw the conclusion his staff is as full of ideas and he himself as good in communication as the other side. The two tour de force balanced each other.
- Economic troubles. Communication is capable of a lot of things, it is not able, however, to cover the economic difficulties Hungary and the government has had to face.

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