

News Coverage of Domestic Violence in Post-Socialist Hungary: Shifts in Meaning and the Gender Aspect

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses, with the help of a CDA-based, historically comparative multiple case study, how news media portrayals of domestic violence have shifted in Hungary as the country's sociopolitical structure has changed between 2002 and 2013, and how the aspect of gender has been gradually introduced and recognized as a structural element of violence, in line with shifting constructions of victimhood. It attempts at illustrating how domestic violence was brought into public attention in a Central-Eastern European country that, for political-historical reasons, has traditionally been hostile to feminism, and also delineating an alternative trajectory for issue-formation and -development, one that was characteristically different from how the domestic violence originally emerged into public attention in Anglo-American societies in the 1970s.

KEYWORDS

Central-Eastern Europe; discursive change; domestic violence; Hungary; news media; post-socialism
Introduction

Introduction

This paper discusses how news media portrayals of domestic violence have shifted in Hungary, a Central-Eastern European (CEE) country, as the country's sociopolitical structure has changed between 2002 and 2013, and how the aspect of gender has been gradually introduced and recognized as a structural element of violence, in line with shifting constructions of victimhood. Specifically, whereas in English-speaking Western countries domestic violence was brought to public attention by second-wave feminism in the 1970s, and was from the start constructed with a focus on women as the main group of victims (Dobash and Dobash 1979, 1992; Hearn 1998; Johnson 1995; Martin 1976; Stark 2007), in Hungary the emergence of the discourse on domestic violence followed a different trajectory, one in which the connection of the issue to feminism and gender was less evident initially. As I will argue in the following pages, Hungary followed a different route not least because feminism had not been present in the CEE region after the Second World War until the 1990s (instead, it was expropriated and distorted by state socialism), and even after the fall of the Berlin Wall any political issue or goal openly connected to the equality of sexes has for long provoked strong negative sentiments in CEE societies. This resulted, among other things, as I attempt to demonstrate in this study, that gender as a structural element of abuse became publicly acknowledged only gradually in Hungary, in line with feminism slowly gaining social acceptance in the country.

To be sure, English-speaking Western countries, too, are familiar with de-gendered constructions of domestic violence, as for example the popularity of the so-called "family violence" approach in these countries demonstrates, with its focus on family members' pathological coping behaviours and its ignorance to asymmetrical power imbalance between women and men in families. However, whereas in these societies both feminist and non-feminist discourses have been simultaneously in operation in the construction of domestic violence since the 1970s, in the CEE region

feminist discourses had for long been missing. CEE countries including Hungary, having been Soviet satellite states between 1949 and 1989–1990, remained untouched by secondwave feminism until the 1990s (Brier 2019).

Regarding Hungary specifically, although the first-wave feminist movement had been present in the country since the 1900s (Szapor 2004), after the Second World War, when the Soviets took control of Hungary as part of their political expansion into the CEE region, the feminist movement was systematically silenced (Pető 1998). In the following decades feminism was proclaimed unnecessary, with the explanation that equality between the sexes would be achieved with the advent of communism (DeSilva 1993). This resulted in domestic violence against women remaining entirely “invisible” and “unheard of” under state socialism, and only sporadically noted in the 1990s (Margit 2002). Even when after the fall of the Berlin Wall women’s and gender equality issues, including that of domestic violence, could become subjects of public discussion for the first time since decades, the widespread disdain for feminism—endemic in the entire post-socialist region (Brier 2019)—made it difficult to raise public attention to domestic violence through framing it as a women’s issue. This indeed has not occurred, as I hope to illustrate in the next pages, until the early 2010s.

Feminist Constructions of Domestic Violence and Their Counter-Constructions in the Mediated Public Sphere

In line with feminist understandings of the issue, this study views domestic violence against women as a frequent type of interpersonal and structural violence that is primarily enabled by gendered inequalities, but also intersects with a complex range of other power inequalities like those based on race, ethnicity, class, religion or even age (Crenshaw 1991). Domestic violence is structural in the sense that, despite occurring between individuals, it is rooted in well-established structures of domination and inequalities of power at a broader social level (Galtung 1969). As Boyle (2005, 84–93) noted, while domestic violence does not have a clear-cut, once-and-for-all definition, neither in feminist literature, feminist discourses all construct it as gendered and as a type of violence, moreover, a type of violence that should be understood in the context of patriarchal social arrangements. Over recent decades, in feminist literature, domestic violence has also been increasingly grasped in terms of a calculated, instrumental, ongoing and cumulative abuse of power and control in relationships that primarily attacks the victims’ agency by depriving victims of rights and resources that are “critical to personhood and citizenship” (Hearn 1998; Johnson 1995; Stark 2007, 5). Forms of domestic violence are typically historically, locally and culturally varied and generally context-specific (Hearn 1998, 31–32).

The social meaning of domestic violence—that is, the meaning constructions that circulate in the broader society with regard to the issue at a given time and in a given space—is typically shaped by several discourses simultaneously, depending on locally and historically specific contexts. In modern societies it is the media that have a key role in shaping and circulating these meaning constructions, by filtering out or backgrounding certain discourses while at the same time highlighting others. Specifically, the media, through their symbolic power, can endow certain—strictly selected and regulated—discourses with the position of a seemingly contradiction-free, natural-looking understanding of the social reality, while excluding, marginalizing or silencing other discourses, and thereby construct our perception of the social (Couldry 2003). For example in the news coverage of domestic violence cases, decisions about which term to use to describe the events—and consequently how to construct the crime that a given term refers to—is on the one hand always the product of actual configurations of power between various discourses that are in operation in the construction of domestic violence at a given time and in a given space, but, on the other hand, these decisions also powerfully produce the “social reality” of domestic violence for viewers. These decisions can open up or close down certain possibilities for viewers to imagine whether, for example, intimate partner relationships can be abusive; in which segments of society such relationships tend to be located; what to think about the motivations and agency of people in these relationships; what assumptions to make about the prevalence of domestic violence in society, and even its possible causes or solutions. This

also implies that elements of discourses that go against already established and therefore more powerful ways in which social reality is perceived, and that thereby give an oppositional interpretation of social reality—as for example feminist constructions of domestic violence in Hungary in the early 2000s did—typically face discursive resistance in the mediated public sphere. This key role that the media play in the construction of social life, including in the regulation of possible meanings of and attitudes towards domestic violence, is today widely theorized in the context of mediation, that is the broader social impact of the media through their omnipresent and multidirectional influence on our everyday lives (Couldry and Hepp 2013; Livingstone 2009).

In line with the above, ever since domestic violence has been brought to public attention by second-wave feminism in the US and the UK in the early 1970s, it has been constantly exposed to attempts of redefinition by discourses that question the feminist frames of domestic violence, and most importantly its status as violence and its gendered nature. As discussed earlier with reference to Boyle (2005, 84–93), feminist discourses, despite their differing definitions of domestic violence, all construct it as gendered and as a type of violence (and also as a type of violence that should be understood in the context of patriarchal social arrangements). It is these two traits of the feminist constructions of domestic violence that counter-constructions typically seek to challenge.

Regarding these counter-constructions specifically, since the early 2000s “patriarchal resistance” to feminist constructions of domestic violence has repeatedly been noted by feminist literature across a range of countries and public discourses such as the media, public policies, psychiatric and judicial discourses, and even volunteer services helping battered women (for the notion of “patriarchal resistance” see Berns 2001). These studies have documented the subtle and repeated de-gendering of domestic violence, but have also revealed various recurrent strategies by which the status of domestic violence as violence can be questioned and/or blurred. These include the obfuscation of perpetrators’ responsibility or the concealment of their violence (Coates and Wade 2007; Phillips and Henderson 1999), the diversion of attention from perpetrators’ responsibility to that of victims (Berns 2001; Eastal, Holland, and Judd 2015; Nixon and Tutty 2009; Thapar-Björkert and Morgan 2010), and the concealing of victims’ resistance or blaming and pathologising of victims (Coates and Wade 2007; Thapar-Björkert and Morgan 2010), to name just some typical examples. The absence from discourse of men as perpetrators, combined with the visibility of women as victims, can also be considered as typical (Phillips and Henderson 1999).

Regarding literature on the news media specifically, it similarly found that media reporting of domestic violence against women tends to downplay male violence and its pervasiveness in societies, and instead to shift responsibility either onto (female) victims or onto social groups whose violence is traditionally both less accepted and at the same time more marked. The issue, they found, also tends to be portrayed as exceptional (thereby disregarding the scale that connects “normal” people to perpetrators), is often presented in a sensationalist style, and its more prevalent forms typically remain only sporadically represented, while other less frequent types, for example cases ending in murder, receive a disproportionate amount of attention (see e.g., Berns 1999, 2001, 2004; Braber 2015; Carter 1998; Eastal, Holland, and Judd 2015; Fairbairn and Dawson 2013; Gillespie et al. 2013; Meyers 1994, 1997; Simons and Morgan 2018; Nettleton 2011; Pepin 2016).

In contrast to the abundance of Anglo-American literature on how domestic violence is portrayed in the media, academic discussion of the issue in Hungary—or in any other CEE country for that matter—is mostly missing. English-language research—which often discusses the case of Hungary and other CEE countries within the framework of cross-country comparisons—although relatively abundant in publications that consider domestic violence against women as an object of public discourses in these countries, is strongly public-policy-oriented and therefore tends to overlook the role of the media (see Dombos, Horvath, and Krizsan 2007; Fábíán 2010, 2014, 2017; Krizsan and Popa 2010, 2014; Krizsán and Roggeband 2018; Krizsán, Paantjens, and van Lamoen 2005). English-language literature on the media portrayal of domestic violence in these countries remains at

best sporadic (for a notable exception see Băluță 2015 from Romania). Similarly there is only one piece of English-language scholarly writing dedicated specifically to the media portrayal of the issue in Hungary, an article discussing an Amnesty International media campaign (Goehring, Renegar, and Puhl 2017). Hungarian-language literature on the subject is similarly limited to only two publications: the contributions to a round-table discussion collected in one volume with three brief essays (23 pages in total) on the topic of “women in the media as victims of violence” (Balogh, Kassa, and Sinkó 2011), and a scholarly article on the portrayal of domestic violence in a popular Hungarian daily soap (Császár and Gregor 2016). Otherwise, existing Hungarian-language research, as I discuss shortly, is mostly limited to discussing the issue from criminal, judicial or psychological points of view.

Breaking Out of Silence: Domestic Violence at the Turn of the Millennium in Hungary

Despite decades of silence around the issue, academic literature on domestic violence (*családon belüli erőszak*—which literally translates as “violence in the family”) started to emerge in Hungary as early as the 1990s. The first, ground-breaking works were published at the end of the decade (Morvai 1998; Tóth 1999), and approached domestic violence from a women-centred, feminist point of view, although one, written by Tóth (1999), equated domestic violence with male violence against spouses and children. The subsequent decade saw a boom in the academic discussion of the topic, with publications extending from feminist to family-violence approaches, and with an increased focus on children as victims (for a brief overview of Hungarian-language literature on domestic violence in the 2000s see Tóth and Róbert 2010, 31–36). This literature, although it included some prevalence studies, predominantly discussed the issue from a criminal, judicial or psychological point of view, or was written as guidelines for people in relevant professions, like police officers or child-care workers (but never journalists), and characteristically clashed over the significance of the gender aspect. As Tóth and Róbert (2010, 32–33) note, a significant proportion of this literature had an overtly anti-feminist tone, as a reaction to the first-wave feminist studies on the issue, and was centred around the claim that victims are men and women equally.

In contrast to the relatively early appearance of the issue (and the term) in academic publications, domestic violence did not emerge into public attention until the early 2000s: as the archive of the Hungarian news agency MTI (n.d.) demonstrates, before 2002 domestic violence (“*családon belüli erőszak*”)—as well as cognate terms like child abuse (“*gyerekbántalmazás*”) and violence against women (“*nők elleni erőszak*”)—had been mentioned only sporadically in the Hungarian media. The fact that before 2002 Hungarian news editors were mostly ignorant of domestic violence issues can be well illustrated also by two excerpts below from the interviews that Margit (2002) carried out with female journalists at that time about the sexist newsroom culture in the country in the 1990s:

I wanted to write about violence against women in 1995. I had a fight ending in shouting with my editor, who told me that I was lying. He told me that it was impossible that a woman would put up with her husband battering, humiliating and raping her for years. [...] Once I was writing about marital rape: I was subject to public ridicule in the editorial room.

Margit (2002) also diagnosed a strong resistance from editors’ side to so-called “feminist issues” such as abortion or violence against women, as a result of which these issues were pushed into a “spiral of silence”, as she stated, that is they were repeatedly blocked at all levels of decision processes in newsrooms.

Domestic violence first erupted into public attention, was named as such, and came to be represented as a special type of violence during the tragic story of 14-year-old Kitti Simek in 2002. This was a complex case of domestic violence, where a male perpetrator had been systematically abusing his entire family, but the case was shaped into a news story with a nearly exclusive focus on his teenage step-daughter, who, after suffering a decade of abuse from the man, shot him dead. Although

the Hungarian news media had already covered other cases, too, that we can retrospectively label as instances of domestic violence—typically cases of wife battering—, the Simek case was the decisive one in that this new act of naming indicated the emergence of a new discourse, moreover, the story received enormous publicity (as female underage murderers had high newsworthiness in newsrooms), which ultimately enabled this case to raise awareness to the issue in the country as well in newsrooms. Naturally, the emergence of this new term does not tell us anything about the ways in which the social meaning of domestic violence was discursively constructed for the public at the time—it is these ways that form the object of the present study together with the ways in which domestic violence has been subsequently and progressively introduced in the Hungarian news media in the twenty-first century. My core interest is in discursive change—the ongoing re-distribution and re-utilisation of available discursive elements and the ways in which new meanings of domestic violence have been circulated in broader Hungarian society by the media—and in how this ongoing change has ultimately fed into long-term shifts in dominant meanings regarding the aspect of gender as a structural element of violence, in line with shifting constructions of victimhood.

Methods and Data

In line with the present paper's focus being on long-term discursive changes in media texts, the chosen method is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) combined with a historically comparative multiple case study framework. CDA is an umbrella term denoting a particular group of textual analyses that employ a critical, socially engaged and hermeneutic approach to texts, with special attention paid to the relations between language (meaning-making) and power. CDA also typically makes ample reference to the context of the discourses under study, which facilitates its combination with a multiple case study design. Of the various versions of CDA, this paper uses that developed by Norman Fairclough (1992), because it focuses specifically on discursive change.

The opening and closing years for the present research are 2002 and 2013, two years already acknowledged in existing literature as key moments in the history of anti-domestic violence struggles in Hungary, although their media-related aspects have so far not been explored, but only their relevance to policy changes or feminist activism. Specifically, 2002 is known for being the year when domestic violence first provoked wider public attention and local feminist activists started to push for its criminalization (Morvai 2004). The year of 2013 is when this criminalization actually took place: in June 2013 the Bill on Intimate Partner Violence passed in the Hungarian Parliament. With this, Hungary officially acknowledged the status of domestic violence as violence (although gender as the structural element of the issue remained, and still to this day remains, unacknowledged by the law).

The cases were selected on the basis of their data richness, high publicity and relevance. Since this paper aims at taking account of the shifting meanings of domestic violence, it considers all “domestic violence” cases that Hungarian media outlets named as such, irrespective of whether they corresponded to today's Anglo-American understanding of the term. High publicity is employed as a selection criterion despite previous findings that indicated that it was typically non-ordinary cases that received extensive media coverage at the expense of more frequent forms of domestic violence (see Boyle 2005; Carter 1998). For the purposes of the present research, however, these non-ordinary, “exceptional” cases have something that ordinary cases do not have: a large amount of symbolic power (that is power to define the social meaning of domestic violence more effectively than other cases do) and also a higher level of data-richness (given that cases of high publicity also usually produce more media texts). This latter decision also allowed to analyse media texts in depth, which would have been more difficult with a larger sample.

Based on the above, three cases have been selected spanning the 2002–2013 decade. Specifically, (a) the case of 14-year-old Kitti Simek from 2002, who, after suffering a decade of abuse from her stepfather, shot the man dead; (b) the case of Roland Damu, an actor and media celebrity known for his role in a popular daily soap opera, who battered and raped his ex-girlfriend in November 2010, and became the first high-profile perpetrator of domestic violence sentenced to prison in

Hungary in April 2012; and (c) the case of József Balogh, an MP of the conservative-nationalist party FIDESZ, who battered his cohabiting girlfriend in April 2013 to the point where she was in need of hospitalization. Balogh became a household name in Hungary after he blatantly lied about his girlfriend's injuries in front of the television cameras and blamed their family dog for the woman's wounds, thereby drawing more attention to his case. The importance of these cases can be further exemplified by the fact that as of 2021 Hungarian media outlets still today repeatedly follow up on the characters in these news stories, and thereby ongoing media coverage sustains a public, collective memory of these cases among Hungarians.

The analysis has been restricted to television news and televised current affairs, given that, according to numerous studies (Cushion 2012, 2015; Miller 2010, 11–19), until at least the mid-2010s television was still the most influential medium across the world, including in Hungary. Data was sampled from the three major national broadcasters leading viewership statistics throughout the whole 2002–2013 period: commercial broadcasters TV2, RTL Klub and—significantly lagging behind these—the main channel MTV (renamed M1 in 2005) of the national public service broadcaster (for statistics see AGB Nielsen n.d.). Audiovisual materials produced by the three major Hungarian broadcasters are freely and publicly available in the National Audiovisual Archive (NAVA) digital archive. In the one and only case where, due to gaps in legislation, material from commercial broadcasters was missing—the case from 2002—, broadcast news was substituted with print news from one tabloid (Blikk) and one broadsheet (Népszabadság), both with the highest circulation numbers in the country at the time. Based on the above-mentioned criteria, there were altogether 249 pieces of news to analyse.

The three cases—that is, three snapshots of domestic violence cases mediated by television in three different, historically specific media milieus—were explored through a twofold analytical framework. Discourses were investigated in terms of (a) naming (that is terms or names that the media employed to describe and construct types of violence, including the characterization of these specific types of violence, and—if there were any—references to their social prevalence), and (b) agency (that is the portrayal of the actors in violence—perpetrator, victim—their attributes and characterization including their gender, attributions of responsibility, and allocations of motives if there were any). Ultimately, it was explored how domestic violence was constructed in terms of the identity of the events and its actors by the Hungarian news media, as these constructions emerged and changed over time through historically and locally specific technologies (television) and genres of mediation (television news and televised current affairs). That is, although this paper analyses specific media texts with the help of CDA, the primary focus of study is the discourse(s) that these texts articulated, combined or re-arranged, where discourse is understood as a regime of systematic semiotic choices in media texts (evidenced by patterns of co-appearance and combination), through which domestic violence could become meaningful to Hungarians. The selected cases are used as indicators of discursive shifts over time in media portrayals of domestic violence.

Findings

The Kitti Simek Case (2002): Acknowledging Abuse but Sidelining Gender

In August 2002, 14-year-old Kitti Simek, after suffering a decade of abuse from her stepfather, shot the man dead. Findings from this case indicate that the media tended to give priority to the age-related aspects of the victimization, at the expense of similarly important aspects including that of gender. The media assigned victim status to the teenage girl nearly exclusively, this despite the fact that the story was more complex since she was both a victim (of abuse) and a perpetrator (of homicide), moreover, not the sole victim of her stepfather's abuse. This was mirrored in the terms that media outlets used to tell the story and categorize the crime: media outlets referred to the story as a case of domestic violence (Népszabadság), child abuse and child sexual abuse (MTV1), or physical and emotional terror and terror in the family (Blikk). Interestingly, although both Népszabadság and Blikk employed a feminist terminology (“domestic violence” and “terror in the family”) to describe the

crime—that is, two terms that had originally been coined by Hungarian feminists publishing on the topic with a (partial or full) focus on adult women as victims of violence (Tóth 1999; Morvai 1998)—, news media outlets failed, apart from some sporadic mentions, to consider the mother, too, as a victim of abuse, despite the fact that she, like her daughter, suffered decade-long abuse from Kitti's stepfather.

This strong tendency to give priority to the age-related aspects of the victimization powerfully pushed the entire meaning of the element of abuse in the direction of child abuse. Even if the aspect of gender came up from time to time through Kitti's sexual molestation, the focus remained steadily on innocent and vulnerable child-victims, and other victims who did not conform fully to this description—because for example they were adults—, were sidelined. Notably, it was only political daily *Népszabadság* that attempted to locate the events also within the context of gendered power inequalities. Ironically, when on 20 September 2002 local feminist activists launched a petition, as a reaction to the Simek case, for the criminalization of domestic violence, the petition, too, focused intensely on—both male and female—children as victims, at the expense of adult women (for the petition see Morvai 2004). Thereby a gender-blind discourse of victimhood emerged that severely downplayed gender as the structural element of abuse.

Media texts also created a black and white discourse on domestic violence regarding how they depicted (child) victims and perpetrators. The teenage girl was portrayed—until a major turn in the media coverage of the story later changed her public image—in positive terms (“good-natured”, “amicable”) and also as strongly marked by her vulnerability, and therefore as a subject particularly worthy of compassion, understanding and help. Media texts reported that she “put an end to a decade-long dread”, “shot him [the stepfather] in desperation”, and “could not endure the beating any more”. At the same time, media texts created a monster-like personality for her abusive stepfather, and thereby depicted him as clearly an outsider from society: the man was described as someone who “professed extreme right-wing ideas, and collected Nazi books”, was “racist and an arms and weapons maniac”, “unemployed”, and who “in the spirit of Nazism, kept his whole family in severe physical and emotional terror”.

This black and white discourse had, overall, ambiguous implications for the media portrayal of domestic violence. Specifically, by putting a child-victim—that is someone who, due to her age, could not be held responsible for her own victimization—in the centre of media discussions on domestic violence had the positive implication that it kept, at least initially, the coverage of the case entirely free of victimblaming discourses. This was all the more important since victim-blaming is a frequent discursive counter-move in portrayals of domestic violence—as previous Anglo-American feminist media criticism, discussed earlier, has pointed out—and which serves to question, blur or conceal the violence aspect of domestic violence. The element of abuse in the Simek story was acknowledged as a type of violence (even if not necessarily a gendered type of violence) without any specific difficulty. On the negative side, depicting the stepfather as a monster-like personality and thereby removing the perpetrator from mainstream society meant that his abusive behaviour was presented as exceptional rather than prevalent, and the coverage thereby failed to highlight its social context or investigate the spectrum of behaviour that connects “normal” people with perpetrators. The tabloid newspaper *Blikk* in particular constructed the domestic violence as mostly rooted in the perpetrator's specific deviance and, therefore, as an individual problem: *Blikk*'s focus was on “exotic” details presented in a sensationalist manner.

Overall, the discursive object that emerged through this novel discourse in 2002 in Hungary, and was named, alongside other terms, as domestic violence, conformed only partially to feminist constructions of domestic violence, as Boyle (2005, 84–93) defined them. Most notably, while it was successfully presented as a type of violence, its specific connection to gender remained unacknowledged. It was still an important step ahead, considering that media attention to the violent aspects of the Simeks' intimate and family life made public a large amount of private information about the abuse, and thereby gave the broader Hungarian public an unprecedented insight into the nature of

violence in families.

The Roland Damu Case (2010): Acknowledging Gender as a Structural Element of Abuse

In 2010 soap opera actor and TV personality Roland Damu was outed as having abused his ex-fiancée. Until the media brought the Damu case to public attention, domestic violence cases, although regularly reported on by the news media, did not inspire extensive media coverage or discussion in Hungary, with the notable exception of the aforementioned Simek case. Findings from the Damu case indicate that the main issue at stake in this case was the re-defining of domestic violence—which had previously been constructed as affecting mostly children and structurally not connected to gender at all—to include the gender aspect. Findings, however, also reveal some problematic points where media outlets closed down certain possibilities of challenging patriarchal assumptions about this type of violence.

On the positive side, names and labels by which media outlets referred to Damu's violence and the ways in which they described the actors of violence (that is perpetrators and victims) indicate a shift towards acknowledging gender as the structural element of abuse. This change was most spectacularly present in the current affairs programmes of the two national commercial broadcasters (RTL Klub, TV2), which specifically dealt with the issue of "domestic violence" (named as such) apropos of the Damu story and aimed to refute some popular misconceptions about the issue—primarily victimblaming—with the help of feminist experts. These current affairs programmes—by consistently referring to perpetrators as "husbands", "ex-husbands" or "boyfriends" and victims as "women" or "abused women"—unambiguously constructed domestic violence as male violence against female intimate partners. Although names and labels employed in media texts elsewhere in relation to Damu's violence tended to relapse to a gender-blind legal terminology ("severe assault" and "illegal restraint"), whenever the constraints of legal discourse were left behind and "domestic violence" was used to refer to Damu's violence, the term was unambiguously constructed as male violence against women. This, overall, is indicative of the fact that the issue of gender indeed played a significant role in how domestic violence was constructed by the media through the Damu case in 2010–2012 in Hungary.

On the negative side, despite an increased focus on the gender aspect, media coverage tended to wipe out exactly those characteristics of intimate partner violence that relevant literature had been stressing since the mid-1990s: its nature as an ongoing and cumulative abuse of power and control in relationships with which perpetrators characteristically target their victims' agency (Johnson 1995; Stark 2007). There was an increased media focus on the "why did she stay?" question, exploring the motives of women who stay in abusive relationships, which ultimately emerged into central place in the media discussion of this news story, but perpetrators' coercive control did not receive adequate discussion. Instead, this focus on women who stay ultimately led to an exclusive focus on women as victims—a pervasive pattern in media portrayals of domestic violence across the Western world that opens up vast possibilities for victim-blaming, as Berns (1999, 2001, 2004) and Nettleton (2011) have convincingly pointed out. Perpetrators, their responsibility, motivations and what they gained through violence were not discussed, and the media thereby contributed to shift attention from perpetrators' responsibility and from the violence status of their actions onto women's enigmatic lack of agency to leave abusive relationships.

This was most spectacularly present in those two 20-minute-long interviews that Damu's ex-girlfriend—who mostly evaded media attention—gave to commercial broadcaster TV2 on 11 April 2011 and 15 April 2012. In the 2011 interview for example the anchor started to bombard the ex-girlfriend with a string of questions, after she confessed that Damu had hit her in the sixth month of their relationship: "then why did you stay with him for another one and a half years?"; "but were you being this naive? You believed him each and every time that he would change?"; "how is it possible to stay in love with a man who beats you up every day?" (TV2, Frizbi, 17 April 2011). Damu, however, mostly managed to avoid being questioned about his responsibility and motives: he simply denied his

violence, even after he was found guilty in court.

In all, although domestic violence was unambiguously constructed as gender-based and characteristically affecting women, findings indicate that, along with the emergence of female adults—that is, actors with apparent agency, not yet present in 2002—as the main victims, the focus shifted from perpetrators' responsibility and from the violence status of their actions to adult women's alleged contribution to their own victimization, and their specific lack of the agency required to stand up to it. Thereby a discourse of gendered complicit victimhood was created, which diverted attention, at least partially, from perpetrators' responsibility to that of victims.

The József Balogh Case (2013): Commercial Broadcasters Embracing a Feminist Approach

The case of József Balogh—an MP from the ruling right-wing, national-conservative political party FIDESZ, exposed by television as both a woman-batterer and a liar in late April 2013—developed into a leading news story at a specific moment when, for the first time in Hungarian history, there had been a public controversy over domestic violence in the country for a while. Specifically, due to an earlier rise of digital feminist activism in the country in September 2012 as a response to a failed inclusion of domestic violence on the parliamentary agenda, feminist voices emerged, unprecedentedly, at centre stage of national public discourses on domestic violence, backed up by wider social support. As a consequence, a new discursive antagonism emerged: whereas feminist activists' constructions of the issue constructed domestic violence with an increased focus on gender and on women as victims, its counter-constructions, promoted by the Hungarian government, heavily downplayed the relevance of gender. Accordingly, the ways in which Balogh's story was reported differed considerably according to the degree of governmental political control that broadcasters (and their selected interviewees) were subject to.

Specifically, the public service broadcaster M1 and state officials, whom all broadcasters regularly interviewed or referenced, were under strong control and therefore tended to obscure and downplay the crime. M1 mostly ignored the story and reported on it only once, when on the 2 May Balogh, the perpetrator, spectacularly loosened his ties with the political party in government. In contrast, the two commercial broadcasters RTL Klub and TV2 were less bound by political constraints, and therefore able to explore the subject more freely. These broadcasters reported on the story every day, and gave preference to the feminist constructions of domestic violence.

Since the story was mostly reported on by these latter two broadcasters, the dilemma of naming was less spectacular during this case. Media texts nearly unanimously referred to Balogh's deeds as "battering" of a girlfriend (TV2) and as "abuse" of a female "cohabiting partner" (RTL Klub), and understood them as pertaining to the broader issue of "domestic violence", understood as male violence against women. These two broadcasters further constructed Balogh's crime as male violence against a female intimate partner by repeatedly presenting information on the issue from feminist sources: RTL Klub for example presented excerpts from an anti-domestic-violence campaign video, while TV2 invited the employee of a feminist NGO to comment on the case, allowing her to appear on screen in a long video footage, where the expert argued for domestic violence being a violation of human rights, and put it in close connection with the issue of equality between the sexes. Besides locating domestic violence in mainstream society by stressing its high social prevalence, the expert also invoked certain political values ("democratic", "European" and "of the twenty-first century") and thereby located the issue of prevention of domestic violence in the broader context of the country's EU membership and of a generally democratic political establishment: "in a democratic, European country in the twenty-first century the equality between the sexes is not an issue of party politics, or one of taste, it is an issue of fundamental human rights" (TV2, Tények, 30 April 2013).

In contrast, governmental counter-constructions—which were present on screens either directly, as voiced by state officials, or indirectly, as quoted from the press announcement of FIDESZ—referred to the battering as "family conflict" and as "a severe problem going on between the politician and his

life partner”, and thereby partly shifted the blame onto the victim, as if both parties had been equally involved in the event. When the term “abuse” was mentioned, specifically in the one and only news item public broadcaster M1 dedicated the Balogh story on May 2, it was not, as in feminist constructions of the issue, subsumed under the broader issue of “domestic violence”, or, for that matter, under male violence against women, but was left unspecified. In this news report, M1 only reported that “a couple of days ago the politician’s life partner was hospitalised, because, based on information from the press, the politician has abused her” (emphasis mine) (M1, Híradó Este, 2 May 2013). Thus, although M1 did communicate the basic pieces of information about the nature of Balogh’s crime—the words “abuse” and “hospitalised” did appear in the text—at the same time it also created a context around these claims that obscured the sources of information and their credibility, including the fact that the girlfriend’s injuries had been officially documented and reported to the police. The causes of her hospitalization were especially vaguely described and presented as mere speculation by the press. In this way M1 partly acknowledged the abuse, but at the same time also obscured important details about it. (This was in harsh contrast with the outspokenness of RTL Klub and TV2. These broadcasters were, from the start, very clear about what type of crime and how severe crime Balogh had committed: they informed their viewers that the girlfriend’s injuries were “severe” and that she had been hospitalized. RTL Klub also added that her nose had been broken.)

In a manner similar to M1’s vague reporting style, the press announcement from FIDESZ from 29 April 2013, which condemned “all types of violence, especially if targeted at women, children, the elderly or other people in vulnerable positions”, listed women as only one among the many social groups vulnerable to domestic violence, and thereby shifted attention away from the gender aspect of violence. With these discursive tactics, the government was able to conceal the perpetrator’s responsibility to some extent, and to question the gender-based nature of the violence he had committed. This governmental discourse therefore showed a strong similarity to the widespread discursive tactics that previous Anglo-American feminist media criticism, discussed earlier, had identified as patriarchal discursive resistance to domestic violence, both in terms of de-gendering the crime, and downplaying its violence status.

Discussion

The above findings indicate that in Hungary—in contrast to the UK or the US—gender as a structural element of domestic violence was initially pushed into the background. The issue entered the Hungarian media agenda with the gender aspect sidelined in favour of an intense focus on innocent children as victims and “monster-like” deviant perpetrators. This type of media coverage failed to adequately highlight the social context of the issue including its high prevalence in societies and its embeddedness in patriarchal social arrangements. Nonetheless, between 2002 and 2013 media coverage notably shifted towards a growing awareness to gender as the structural element of violence, and the focus also shifted from child abuse to male violence against women in intimate relationships, as findings from the Damu and Balogh cases demonstrate. The relevance of feminist perspectives on the issue were also gradually increasingly acknowledged: the media coverage of the Damu case indicated that by 2010 it was possible to present domestic violence as a “women’s issue” and invite feminists in newsrooms as experts; whereas the József Balogh case from 2013 presented a further step forward in the sense that it made commercial broadcasters take sides with the feminist understanding of domestic violence—namely, that it is gender-based and qualify for violence—against a newly emerged anti-feminist governmental discourse and also confront a prominent member of the ruling party as a perpetrator.

In line with this growing awareness to the gender aspect, constructions of victimhood and perpetrator-hood, too, changed. Whereas the Simek case presented domestic violence as mostly rooted in the perpetrator’s specific, individual deviance and activated a gender-blind but compassionate discourse on victimhood specifically tailored to children (that is victims who, due to their age, could not be held responsible for their own victimization), the Damu case was marked by the appearance of

adult women as the main group of victims (that is actors with apparent agency), a media focus on victims' enigmatic susceptibility to violence, and also an (at least partial) concealment and downplaying of men's violence. In case of the Balogh case, however, victim-blaming and concealment of male violence were only sporadically present (despite an adult woman having been the victim), due to commercial broadcasters taking side with feminist understandings of domestic violence, and dominating the news coverage of the story. Thereby both the gender and the violence aspects of domestic violence became—at least in these broadcasters' presentation—acknowledged. This, especially if compared with Margit's (2002) earlier findings about Hungarian newsroom practices in the 1990s, and editors' tendency to cast as lies and fantasy the idea of a husband battering and humiliating his wife for years, indicates that by the early 2010s new attitudes started to gain hold in Hungarian newsrooms towards the issue.

Conclusions

This paper analysed, with the help of a CDA-based, historically comparative multiple case study that used three high-profile news stories as indicators of discursive shifts, how news media portrayals of domestic violence changed in Hungary between 2002 and 2013. It investigated how domestic violence was brought into public attention in a Central-Eastern European (CEE) country that, for political-historical reasons, has traditionally been hostile to feminism. The findings indicate that when domestic violence erupted into public attention in Hungary in 2002 it was mostly understood as child abuse, and adult women were sidelined as victims. Between 2002 and 2013 the social meaning of domestic violence shifted from a focus on children as victims to male violence against women in intimate relationships, in line with feminism slowly gaining social acceptance in Hungarian newsrooms.

This delineates an alternative trajectory of issue-formation and -development for domestic violence, one that is characteristically different from that registered in Anglo-American societies, where the feminist movement has been from the start the main driving force behind shedding public light on domestic violence and accordingly the issue was *ab ovo* constructed as a form of gender-based violence with a focus on women as the main group of victims. In contrast, Hungary—similarly to other CEE countries—lacked a widespread feminist movement until lately, which made it difficult to raise public attention to domestic violence through framing it as a women's issue, despite the fact that the country underwent a democratization process after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and in the post-1989 period women's and gender equality issues, including that of domestic violence, could become subjects of public discussion for the first time since decades. Considered that currently literature on domestic violence in the media from CEE countries is, as discussed earlier, rather sporadic, it would be fruitful to pursue further research on how other CEE countries coped with this combination of a lack of widespread feminist movement in the postsocialist era on the one hand and the task of bringing public attention to domestic violence by the media on the other hand.

This would be all the more important because, as it has been lately pointed out by for example Suchland (2011) and Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert, and Koobak (2019), with the end of the Cold War the entire former "Second World" including the CEE region has practically fallen through the gaps of the newly established First/Third World dichotomy within transnational feminist scholarship and acquired a "nonregion status" there. Postsocialist feminisms, these authors argue, are therefore rarely being taken relevant on their own, with their locally specific cultural-political knowledge and temporalities, instead increasingly become understood through Western-centric frames that often represent themselves as "universal and delocalised" (Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert, and Koobak 2019, 82). Pursuing further research on the media portrayals of domestic violence in CEE countries could therefore also generate a deeper understanding of postsocialist feminisms, their locally specific knowledge, temporalities, terminologies, and their interactions with local practices of journalism.

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