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Issues that lived a day

There are times in politics that are characterized by rapid changes in the topic of the day. While, back in the good old days (if there ever was such a thing) policy issues could rule the agenda for weeks, in today's internet era, news is past tense as soon as we have read the headlines. The constant fight for government to be on top of the news cycle sometimes makes it seem like a dog chasing its own tail. The ongoing necessity to come up with something new basically erodes policy making, as the focus on the big picture is overtaken by short term actions in response to daily news. Hungarian politics is no exception.

Not long after the brutal killing of a young woman working in a tobacco store, the prime minister commented that the issue of the death penalty needs to be kept on the political agenda. The issue immediately gained attention both at home and abroad. As it is against the core values of the European Union it will most probably go nowhere. The statement however probably brought back quite a few voters to the government that had strayed to Jobbik, which had formerly been perceived as more radical than the governing Fidesz party. Once upon a time before it started its current cuteness campaign only Jobbik would have dared to suggest such a thing. This does not mean that Fidesz is following in the steps of the radical right. While the international media and the Hungarian opposition conclude that this is in line with the autocratic character of Viktor Orbán, no one actually mentions that this is no more than a highly controversial way to react to the heightened emotions that this horrible crime triggered. To go further, as part of the anger surrounding the event was that since the government had decided to black out the windows of tobacco shops in order to protect minors, many felt that the government was to blame for the crime taking place. Raising the issue of the death penalty took the attention away from this topic completely.

While voters see death penalty as a moral issue, politics sees it primarily as a matter of interest. In Hungary, the question of the death penalty does not divide voters the way it does for example the citizens of the United States. It is controversial, but the question has never really been the topic of national election campaigns, and rarely is there public debate about introducing it. It is typically raised in connection to serious crimes that gain significant media attention and politicians generally try to profit from the ensuing sentiments. But if it doesn't
make or break elections, why do Hungarian politicians turn to it from time to time? Joe Klein writes in his book *Politics Lost* of a time in 1982 when Mario Cuomo was campaigning in the primaries to run for governor of New York. The main issue of the campaign was the death penalty, which Cuomo was very much against. Once he posed the question to his audience, what would he do personally if a member of his family were victim to violent crime? He then proceeded to tell a story of his daughter being attacked. Yes, he said, his first thought was revenge, but at the same time, he also knew that that would be giving in to the very worst of human instincts. The State is meant to protect people against exactly these instincts, which is why he could not support the death penalty. While he did not necessarily convince people he was right, he did generate a wide sense of respect for his honesty and the way he opened up about the issue. In the end, according to Klein, the way he presented his case was more important than the issue itself.

If we look at the essence of this example, we can easily understand why the topic was raised. In this case what we are dealing with is a policy that the prime minister cannot and will not support. The only reason why it was raised was to direct the attention away from a possible government mistake and to win back voters lost to the radical right. There was no real intent behind this statement, and contrary to what the PM may have said, it will not stay on the agenda. It will be erased by the next “topic du jour” only to be revisited if Jobbik is once again uncomfortably nipping at Fidesz’s heels. The question of sincerity cannot even be raised in this case; it was all about the spin. When politics is controlled by polls and media, and it is, even in Hungary, there will be such direct short term reactions that are not meant to actually serve anything in the true sense of the word except to appease or motivate voters, and if necessary alienate the voters of other parties. In the end, the issue was not about the death penalty at all, but the way Viktor Orbán presented his case.