Prime ministers in minority governments: the case of Hungary

Daniel Kovarek

Department of Political Science, Central European University, Vienna, Austria

ABSTRACT

Whereas early scholarship depicted minority cabinets as weak recent findings demonstrate how various factors contribute to effective minority governance. Nevertheless, the role of prime ministers (PMs) was largely ignored in the performance of these cabinets. The paper addresses this problem by comparing Hungary’s only two minority governments in an MSSD framework. Combining a qualitative review with a quantitative analysis of voting patterns in Parliament, it argues that differences in aforementioned cabinets’ policy performance can be traced back to contrasting ideological position of PMs and subsequent ideological moderation. These findings have important implications for minority governments in majoritarian and polarised contexts.

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Introduction

Throughout Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), cabinets tend to be relatively short-lived and showcase high rates of premature termination compared to their Western counterparts (Grotz and Weber 2012; Savage 2013). Nevertheless, when it comes to institutional stability, Hungary stands out as the region’s pre-eminent country. No snap elections have ever been called and except for three, all PMs have assumed their office after regular elections. This has invited scholars to examine structural and contextual factors enabling the extraordinary stability of governments – at least by CEE standards – in Hungary: a frozen party system, the constructive vote of no-confidence, entrenched bipolar competition and high levels of ideological polarisation (Vegetti 2019). At the same time, “counterfactuals ”, i.e. the single two instances of minority cabinets in Hungary were inevitably pushed to the blind spot of comparative research.

This study addresses this gap by scrutinising these two minority governments, led by Ferenc Gyurcsány and Gordon Bajnai, respectively. They provide an excellent opportunity for comparison under a MSSD framework: both cabinets were single-party ones, formally supported only by the Socialists (MSZP) and largely relying on liberal (SZDSZ) MPs when passing legislation. Despite other similar factors, such as the share of expert ministers, governments’ (negative) agenda-setting powers or party concentration, the assessment of these two cabinets’ policy performance varies considerably.
I argue that this difference can be traced back to the PMs’ contrasting ideological position – and subsequently the divergent strategies pursued when securing legislative backing for government initiatives. The paper demonstrates how Bajnai shifted his cabinet’s image towards the ideological centre by offering various policy concessions and endorsing symbolic issues traditionally owned by right-wing parties, which facilitated obtaining the votes of SZDSZ and MDF MPs. In contrast, Gyurcsány’s progressive self-positioning and leftist reform policies made it harder for other parties to externally support his minority cabinet.

According to existing scholarship, minority cabinet performance is linked to factors such as ideological proximity, location in ideological space, multilevel dynamics, bloc politics or alternative majorities (Green-Pedersen 2001; Green-Pedersen and Thomsen 2005; Field 2009; Klüver and Zubek 2018). Nonetheless, the PMs’ role in any of these mechanisms remains unexplored and invites for further empirical scrutiny. Case selection in this article rules out most aforementioned factors and addresses the gap in the literature by studying minority governments in CEE. Such cabinets occur relatively frequently in the region, but remain distinct from their well-studied Scandinavian and Western European counterparts, as polarisation and cleavages over communist successor parties potentially impedes harnessing external support from the another side of the aisle.

Despite their short tenure, the cases explored in this paper are not caretaker cabinets, but rather instances of minority party governments managing financial crises and governing through serious economic hardships. Solving such crises requires not only quick executive action and comprehensive reform policies, but also the support of the majority of legislators. Understanding how the latter is obtained by minority cabinets that undertake more than running the administration while completing their tenure should be of elevated concern for future scholarship.

The remainder of the article is organised as follows. The second section reviews institutional factors, hypothesised by existing literature to enable effective minority governance. The next section discusses the case selection. The fourth section contrasts the political career of Gyurcsány and Bajnai. The next section offers a qualitative analysis of their ideological and economic position, whereas the penultimate section performs an empirical analysis of minority cabinets’ policy performance. The last section concludes, elaborates on the generalisability of findings and showcase avenues for future research.

**Minority cabinets and policy performance**

Minority cabinets are not necessarily weak: they might perform well and govern effectively (Green-Pedersen 2001; Field 2009). Klüver and Zubek (2018) have tested two related hypotheses: one derived from the so-called positional agenda power theory and another emphasising the importance of ideological proximity. The former claims that minority cabinets’ performance is a function of their location in the centre of the ideological space, whereas the latter posits the essential role of the closeness of opposition parties to the government. For Sweden and Denmark, the authors demonstrate that ideological distance between government and opposition diminishes legislative reliability, while they find no empirical evidence for the relationship between minority cabinets’ median position in the policy space and their effectiveness.

Minority governments might also exploit multilevel dynamics: relying on regional parties, they can obtain their external support in the federal legislature in exchange for
providing sub-national support for them (Field 2009). Other studies emphasise the relevance of “alternative majorities” and “patchwork agreements” for well-performing minority governments (Green-Pedersen 2001). If these were absent, minority cabinets in Denmark could only showcase a limited governing capacity, as their presence has allowed opposition parties to seek (and obtain) policy influence without losing their political profile.

Bloc politics is also linked to effective minority governments (Green-Pedersen and Thomsen 2005). When governments cannot rely on a bloc of exclusively left- or right-wing parties for passing legislation, legislatures and cabinets are characterised by political stalemate and ineffectiveness, respectively. Contrarily, having a bloc majority splits the opposition, and incentivises at least some of the MPs to influence policy, securing government stability. Furthermore, polarisation may seriously hinder minority governments from building winning coalitions around their legislative agenda, as a certain degree of consensus across left-wing and right-wing blocs is essential for effective governance (Green-Pedersen 2001; Green-Pedersen and Thomsen 2005).

In contrast to the mentioned attributes of parties and party systems, scholarship on PMs’ role in minority governments is limited. As minority cabinets are installed, executive–legislative relations change (Lundberg 2013), but we have yet to learn more about the role of PMs without parliamentary majorities in policymaking. Some scrutinise PMs’ preference for selecting expert or partisan ministers, aiming to reinforce cabinet stability or to negotiate policy with opposition parties, respectively (Alexiadou 2015; Teruel and Mir 2018). Australia has seen some independent MPs lending external support to the Gillard cabinet primarily because of their confidence in the PM and her personal abilities (Kefford and Weeks 2018, 9). Similarly, PMs heading minority governments in Canada promoted policies of a wide ideological range as “tactical manoeuvering”, securing a majority by “utilising policy moderation”; one of them even used minority government years to push the Conservatives ideologically towards the median voter (Cody 2008, 31–33). Anecdotal evidence aside, there is little work on how PMs’ ideological position influences cabinet dynamics.

What role does the PMs’ ideological position have an effective policy performance of minority governments? How can PMs signal their cabinets’ centrist spatial position in the absence of a bipolar opposition and coalition parties’ median position? I address these questions by analysing two cases from Hungary, where PMs are relatively strong, but institutional arrangements make effective policy performance of minority governments unlikely.

I define a government’s policy performance as a function of being able to pass major legal changes, to implement important reforms concerning several policy areas and, in general, of its legislative output. This could be operationalised as a higher share of passed bills or enacting more lasting and more effective policies, as judged by experts.

Note that while I do not treat the diverse partisan composition of legislative majorities alone as an indicator of successful policy performance (i.e. cabinets are not performing better if bills are passed with the support of an ideologically heterogeneous coalition), for Hungary’s single-party minority cabinets, this is a necessary requirement for securing legislative backing for their proposals. It is also worth mentioning that (Helms 2020, 657) “legislative output, or the amount of major reform bills, of a government” is not strongly correlated with public approval (or expert evaluation) of cabinets’ performance, although this paper will make every effort to compare these two governments alongside the latter dimension as well.
By conceptualising performance in terms of policy success, I aim to present an approach well-suited for comparing cabinets, as established conceptualisations (Helms 2020, 657) – e.g. coalition stability, subsequent alternation or duration – offer little help when such variables are held constant for both cases presented in this study. Furthermore, examining patterns of legislative support for government-introduced bills and (successful or failed) realisation of reform policies seems adequate to assess a period hallmarked by a major international financial crisis.

**Case selection**

CEE tends to have relatively short-lived cabinets compared to Western Europe (Keman and Müller-Rommel 2012; Savage 2013). Nevertheless, as Hungary mostly had “cabinets fulfilling their complete term”, “government stability has not been a problem” for a country, which is often-times explicitly described in the literature as “an exception to the rule” (Grotz and Weber 2012, 699; Bergman, Ersson, and Hellström 2015, 368). The constructive vote of no-confidence (CVNC) acted as a powerful institutional factor to keep PMs and their party governments in office (Nikolenyi 2004, 133), whereas the highly polarised two-bloc system characterising pre-2010 Hungarian politics (Kovarek and Soós 2016) encouraged parties to “interact within a narrow ideological range” and restricted their coalition choices (Savage 2013, 1032).

Consequently, Hungary stands as the only CEE country where the cabinets’ survival rate is more than half of the legislative period (Keman and Müller-Rommel 2012, 15), as shown in Table 1. The fact that governments in Hungary serve out most of their term is notwithstanding a by-product of the preponderance of majority governments, associated with higher levels of stability (Sommer-Topcu and Williams 2008; Grotz and Weber 2012; Bergman, Ersson, and Hellström 2015). Unlike the rest of CEE, minority cabinets in Hungary have been much less common phenomena; nevertheless, they could rely on the CVNC (for survival) and extensive negative agenda control powers (for passing or blocking legislations). Governing majorities can control not only the floor, but can block proposals already at the committee stage (Zubek 2011), characteristics known for enhancing minority cabinet success (Field 2009, 423).

**Table 1.** PMs and party governments in Hungary (1990–2019).

| Cabinet | Date in | Date out | PM duration | Cabinet duration | Party composition | Cabinet type |
|---------|---------|----------|-------------|------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| Antall  | 1990-05-23 | 1993-12-12 | 1320 | 1320 | MDF-FKP-KDNP | SUR |
| Boris  | 1993-12-21 | 1994-05-29 | 160 | 160 | MDF-FKP-KDNP | SUR |
| Horn  | 1994-07-15 | 1998-05-24 | 1410 | 1410 | MSZP-SZDSZ | SUR |
| Orbán I | 1998-07-06 | 2002-04-21 | 1386 | 1386 | Fidesz-FKP-MDF | MWC |
| Medgyessy | 2002-05-27 | 2004-08-25 | 822 | 822 | MSZP-SZDSZ | MWC |
| Gyurcsány I | 2004-10-04 | 2006-04-23 | 1607 | 567 | MSZP-SZDSZ | MWC |
| Gyurcsány II | 2006-06-09 | 2008-04-30 | 692 | 692 | MSZP-SZDSZ | MWC |
| Gyurcsány III | 2008-05-02 | 2009-04-14 | 348 | 348 | MSZP | MIN |
| Bajnai | 2009-04-14 | 2010-04-25 | 377 | 377 | MSZP | MIN |
| Orbán II | 2010-05-29 | 2014-04-06 | 3432 | 1409 | Fidesz-KDNP | SUR |
| Orbán III | 2014-05-10 | 2018-04-08 | 1430 | 1430 | Fidesz-KDNP | SUR |
| Orbán IV | 2018-05-18 | 593 | Fidesz-KDNP | SUR |

Source: Author’s compilation. MIN: minority; MWC: minimal winning coalition; SUR: surplus coalition. PM and cabinet duration for Orbán IV are calculated until 2019-12-31.
Besides institutional factors, contextual ones like the PMs’ significant role in determining their cabinets’ policy agenda also enabled effective policy performance of minority governments. This allows to scrutinise strategies PMs might pursue in order to secure legislative backing. Curini and Hino (2012) suggest that whenever parties expect minority cabinets to be formed, they position themselves near the centre with the aim to accommodate demands of parties, which are likely to provide external support in the legislative arena. Given the exceptional powers of Hungarian PMs and their unequivocal role in determining cabinets’ policy agenda, it is not an unreasonable assumption that the same calculus (rather) applies to PMs themselves. When economic crises incentivise politicians to forge ad hoc coalitions with MPs of otherwise juxtaposed parties (Pastorella 2016), who would be better suited to signal shifting policy or ideological positions than PMs declaring crisis management as their highest priority?

In this paper, I compare Hungary’s only two minority cabinets: the one led by Ferenc Gyurcsány (2008–2009) and the one headed by his direct successor, Gordon Bajnai (2009–2010). The institutional and political context was essentially identical for both cabinets and their tenure lasted for approximately the same time. Both cabinets undertook to solve a deep economic crisis and were “under permanent pressure from the opposition”, as Fidesz-KDNP and MDF questioned these governments’ legitimacy, urged the dissolution of the National Assembly, called for snap elections and aimed to block the budget (Stumpf 2009, 475; Körösényi, Ondré, and Hajdú 2017, 97). They were single-party minority governments, backed by MPs of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP). MSZP had 190 MPs in the National Assembly, but needed 194 votes for an absolute majority. Theoretically, this could have been secured with the five independent MPs, eliminating the need to bargain with opposition parties. However, the diverse ideological background of independents made it an unlikely scenario. Furthermore, two Socialist MPs were permanently hospitalised with severe illness, effectively reducing the minority government’s plurality to 188.

Consequently, MSZP primarily relied on the external support of the SZDSZ, which declared its intention to become a “constructive opposition” party, and support only bills which are in accordance with its liberal values. These parties have governed together between 2002 and 2008 and have also been in power between 1994 and 1998. Party concentration, the effective number of parliamentary parties, ideological cohesiveness of cabinets (Bergman, Ersson, and Hellström 2015, 364) or party system polarisation are also held constant under Gyurcsány and Bajnai.

In the Hungarian case, positional agenda power cannot explain differences in cabinet performance. Both cabinets of Gyurcsány and Bajnai were built on MSZP, but the Socialists were nowhere near being a party with a central position. Quite contrarily, they occupied the left extreme of the party system, an unfavourable spatial position for minority cabinets, as it hinders governments’ ability to pass legislation with shifting alliances, negotiated on an ad hoc basis. If location in the centre of the ideological space is a prerequisite for minority cabinets to govern effectively, neither case of this study had a shot to perform well.

Ideological proximity, on the other hand, is more likely to be associated with different levels of minority cabinets’ policy performance. Whereas MSZP could not trade off the leftmost position in the party system for a median one from 2008 to 2009, it was potentially more feasible to diminish the distance between Socialists and SZDSZ, MDF or Fidesz. The
question is, how to capture government-opposition divisiveness (Klüver and Zubek 2018) for each minority cabinet?

I hypothesise that difference in policy performance stems from dissimilar partisan background of PMs. MSZP had no bipolar opposition to rely on when securing legislative backing; consequently, the party was doomed to gravitate towards the centre with respect to its ideological stance on economic and social issues alike. In the absence of snap elections, manifestos and pledges, incumbent PMs remained the only political actors who could authentically represent MSZP’s spatial position. According to this assumption, the closer these heads of governments were to the center, the more likely opposition (SZDSZ, MDF or Fidesz) MPs were to support government-initiated bills and motions.

Centrist heuristics potentially made it more appealing for MPs to lend external support to Gyurcsány or Bajnai, who were otherwise hesitant to endorse left-wing causes and had no interest in restoring MSZP’s competent image. In exchange for sustaining minority cabinets, SZDSZ or MDF could strategically count on benefitting from particular, long-desired policies, while not sharing the blame associated with unpopular policies (Sitter 2011). This way, they could have avoided being scapegoated for austerity measures deemed necessary for crisis management. It took ideologically aligned policies – that is, ones more right-wing than MSZP’s economic (or cultural) position – to support (some of) the government’s agenda. If this argument is corroborated by empirical evidence, we see a higher number of opposition MPs lending external support to the PM closer to the centre, subsequently enabling his cabinet to perform better.

The rest of the alternative explanations, discussed in the previous section, are either implausible in the Hungarian context or describe an institutional feature held constant. Multilevel dynamics bear little relevance, as Hungary is a centralised, unitary state with a weak regional level, where regional actors have no veto power (or even representation) in the unicameral parliament. As full-scale cooperation of opposition parties has remained an unrealistic scenario throughout both cabinets’ tenure, alternative majorities had no room to develop. Bloc politics have undoubtedly hallmarked Hungary, and voters were quick to punish parties abandoning (or failing to position themselves in relation to) either of the two blocs. But as the National Assembly’s partisan composition is unchanged in the MSSD framework, this cannot yield differences in cabinet performance. The ideological polarisation of party platforms reached extreme levels in Hungary (Vegetti 2019, 79), but while we lack empirical data to contrast consecutive cabinets, it would also be unrealistic to expect seismic changes over the course of just a year. If polarisation undermined policy performance, it did so for both governments.

One could posit that the poor policy performance of Gyurcsány’s minority cabinet is primarily linked to his history of conflict with the liberals. Whereas a myriad of conflicts indeed existed between the Socialist PM and SZDSZ politicians, Bajnai had a far more troublesome relationship with Socialist MPs. Many feared that Bajnai’s inexorable attitude on spotlessness and legality of EU grants (Lakner et al. 2019, 23) impedes speedy delivery of infrastructural developments, undermining their chances of re-election in their single-member districts (SMDs). As such MSZP politicians have outnumbered the entire SZDSZ parliamentary group, the “legacy of unresolved conflicts and personal frictions” (Chiru 2015, 170) should have posed a larger challenge to Bajnai than to his predecessor. Lastly, at least some SZDSZ MPs must have cultivated a close, loyal relationship with
Gyurcsány – as demonstrated by the fact that a handful of them joined his splinter party after 2011, following the electoral annihilation and dissolution of SZDSZ.

Political career of Gyurcsány and Bajnai

Similitudes aside, there is one key difference between the two governments: their leaders’ partisan embeddedness and background. Gyurcsány’s political career is often described as “meteoric,” as he rose from backbencher to PM in just four years (Körösényi, Ondré, and Hajdú 2017). Although he always had strong family links to the MSZP, he formally entered politics only in 2001 (a year after he joined the party), as a member of Péter Medgyessy’s campaign team. Once appointed as Minister of Sports and Youth Affairs, he used his cabinet position to harness support at the grassroots and subsequently obtained the chairmanship of a county-level party unit, one of the key positions in MSZP’s decentralised organisational structure (Kovarek and Soós 2016). After Medgyessy’s resignation, Gyurcsány defeated a long-time MSZP strongman in an intra-party fight and succeeded Medgyessy as PM in 2004 (Körösényi, Ondré, and Hajdú 2017). Breaking the cycles of “hyper-accountability” (Roberts 2008), Gyurcsány has become the first incumbent PM who could secure re-election in 2006.

Gyurcsány’s political career suffered a serious blow in Fall 2006, when just months after introducing austerity measures – a speech he made in front of MSZP central party figures was leaked out, in which he admitted lying to the public and covering up the state of the economy. Large-scale protests and riots, as well as subsequent police brutality, sank his approval ratings and eroded most of his leadership capital. Losing a referendum initiated by the opposition against the coalition’s reforms in March 2008 paved the way for intra-cabinet tensions and SZDSZ’s departure (Körösényi, Ondré, and Hajdú 2017), leaving MSZP to govern alone, as the first minority cabinet in post-communist Hungary. His resignation came only a year later, when the first waves of the sovereign debt crisis hit Hungary and Gyurcsány felt that his crisis-management plan lacks both intra-party and popular support.

Bajnai, quite contrarily, spent almost all of his career in business, acting as managing director and CEO of various investment companies. He was invited to Gyurcsány’s cabinet in 2007 to administer allocation of EU funds as Minister of Local Government and Regional Development. In this role, he often came into conflict with MSZP mayors and regional strongmen, as Bajnai was known for his staunch opposition to incomplete, inaccurate and potentially rigged or corrupt grant applications (Lakner et al. 2019).

He assumed his office as PM on 16 April 2009 following a CVNC, nearly a month after Gyurcsány has announced his resignation. To convince international markets, he shortly introduced a robust austerity package worth 1000 Billion HUF, including measures of tax raises, curbing social benefits, raising retirement age and cutting pensions, as well as wage freezes for public employees (Illés and Körösényi 2017). Before assuming office, he forced Socialist and liberal MPs to sign a political declaration, committing themselves to support his legislative agenda (Lakner et al. 2019, 184). This “contract” had likely made his future cabinet more credible for financial markets and also restored some of the public’s confidence in the Socialist party.
Keeping his promise, Bajnai sought no re-election. He refused the invitation to lead MSZP’s party list in the upcoming parliamentary elections (Lakner et al. 2019) and stepped down as PM in May 2010.

Measuring prime ministers’ ideological position

It is challenging to locate Bajnai and Gyurcsány in the ideological space. Whereas measurements are usually available for party manifestos published before elections, neither minority cabinet was preceded by a snap election. PMs usually compete as parliamentary candidates, but responses on self-declared ideological positions of incumbents and challengers are routinely anonymised before publishing.

Measuring cabinets’ position is a similarly hard nut to crack. At almost all times, expert surveys only ask parties’ ideological position; even when datasets report cabinets’ location on unidimensional scales, scores are usually computed as a weighted mean or median position of cabinet parties (Döring and Schwander 2015). Expert surveys are abundant on measuring PMs’ performance, but there’s none capturing cabinet heads’ position on dimensions like RILE or GALTAN (Volkens et al. 2019). This leaves us with no other choice, but to compare Gyurcsány’s and Bajnai’s left-right (or liberal-conservative) position qualitatively, with an extensive review of the international and Hungarian literature on these two PMs’ ideological character.

Described as the “champion” and “hero” of the left-liberal electorate, Gyurcsány undertook to renew MSZP and left-wing politics in Hungary, a vision inspired by Tony Blair’s Third Way approach. Appearing as a moderniser, who is “trying to create a new synthesis of Hungarian liberalism and the new social democracy”, he was also elected as chairman of the Socialist Party, a position to which he was re-elected even after his resignation as PM (Körösényi, Ondré, and Hajdú 2017, 89–90). Gyurcsány put forward a “strong political vision” and was determined to revamp MSZP’s intellectual hinterland, authoring books and founding a progressive think tank.

Contextual factors have also pulled Gyurcsány away from the centre, making his (cabinet’s) character a markedly leftist one. These include ideological pressure from central party figures of MSZP and the desire to distinguish Socialists from liberals after the coalition break-up. Gyurcsány had to maintain a delicate balance vis-à-vis MSZP strongmen. In January 2009, an influential MP published an op-ed, advocating for the left-wing turn of the party, criticising “neoliberal politics” and demanding taxation of “bankers and brokers”. The op-ed was surprisingly well-received by MSZP ministers and board members, but its pamphlet-style made it hard to operationalise its demands as policies (Ripp 2010, 39).

The genesis of Gyurcsány’s minority cabinet is also understood as his decision to sacrifice the coalition for maintaining Socialist MPs and central party figures’ support via rejecting liberal reforms. For this, he had to revive MSZP’s traditional image and protect social interests. After losing the referendum, Gyurcsány turned the liberal Minister of Health a scapegoat, depicting his own cabinet’s unpopular reforms as if they have been imposed upon the Socialists (and voters) by the SZDSZ. This allowed Gyurcsány to secure his political hinterland (MSZP politicians cheerfully welcomed the “long-awaited liberation” as the coalition was terminated) and also offered an opportunity to liberals for repositioning themselves as ardent defenders of market-friendly reforms. Socialist
politicians were hoping to strengthen MSZP’s left-wing character after the break-up, allowing to win back some of their former voters.

Gyurcsány’s tax cut plan, for instance, exemplifies the diverging policy position of former coalition partners. Whereas it was an attempt to secure liberals’ support for the budget, the plan remained unacceptable for SZDSZ. Worth less than 0.5% of GDP and financed from tax raises on other domains, the proposal was expected to have no meaningful stimulus effect (Stumpf 2009, 484–485).

Unlike Gyurcsány, Bajnai had a “somewhat apolitical character” (Illés 2014, 11): he never joined MSZP and had no family ties to the party either. He reluctantly labelled himself as a “liberal-social democrat” and “social-liberal” (Lakner et al. 2019, 180), but reiterated on multiple occasions that “the crisis does not have a worldview” and the Hungarian currency has “no party preference” either (Illés 2014, 12).

Bajnai and Gyurcsány had also articulated markedly different positions in a handful of symbolic issues. One example is the issue of diaspora Hungarians. Whereas Bajnai was receptive to Fidesz’s proposal of granting Hungarian citizenship (without voting rights) to ethnic Hungarians living in neighbouring countries, a long-cherished idea of right-wing publics in Hungary, socialist-liberal politicians and intellectuals had an ambivalent relationship with diaspora Hungarians. While in office, Gyurcsány has campaigned against extending citizenship rights at the referendum of 2004; his splinter party Democratic Coalition (DK) remains the only relevant party in contemporary Hungary vigorously opposing voting rights of diaspora Hungarians, even pledging to disenfranchise them. Contrarily, Bajnai has attempted (unsuccessfully) to convince MSZP leaders to support the Fidesz-initiated bill in Parliament in 2009.

Contrasting the PMs’ visits in the Vatican is a good proxy for their position on church-state relations. Meeting Pope John Paul II in 2004, Gyurcsány used the opportunity to scold the Hungarian Catholic Church for interfering in domestic politics and incentivising schoolchildren to protest against the government. This triggered the outrage of Fidesz politicians, accusing Gyurcsány of juxtaposing believers and non-believers. Conversely, disagreements and critiques were absent from Bajnai’s visit to Pope Benedict XVI. Bilateral relations were described as “strong and balanced”; Bajnai thanked the Church for “solidarity and support” shown during the economic crisis and even raised the issue of Catholic diaspora Hungarians (Népszabadság 2009).

Furthermore, Bajnai has abandoned MSZP’s traditional position when he attempted to speed up publishing the names of those having worked for the domestic secret police as informers during communist years. His platform resembled that of SZDSZ, which used to be the most ardent supporter of agent file transparency. This has only become more prominent after the Fidesz-initiated anti-government populist referendum in 2008. SZDSZ was campaigning on anti-Socialist platform (twisting Fidesz’s “social referendum”, using the slogan “Say no to Socialism!”), aiming to win over not just economically right-wing voters, but also anti-communist ones. Responding to pressure from liberals, Gyurcsány also aimed to appear as a proponent of disclosing these information, but his position remained inconsistent. His cabinet narrowed down the scope of names to be published, and Socialists have voted down bills on lustration and transparency of post-1956 documents under Gyurcsány’s tenure, questioning his genuine commitment on the matter.

These examples illustrate how Bajnai endorsed issues and policies traditionally characterised by right-wing parties’ issue ownership. This is not to say that Gyurcsány did not
attempt to forge (legislative) alliances across the two camps, spanning traditional cleavages: his op-ed titled “Agreement” (Megegyezés) is understood as an effort “not only to win SZDSZ over, but also to pacify Fidesz” via integrating some of the latter’s favoured policies into the PM’s manifesto (Csizmadia 2009, 510–511).

As both cabinets were self-declared “reform” and “crisis management” governments, I shall review the PMs’ economic position before moving on to evaluate the policy performance of their cabinets. Gyurcsány’s minority government has “turned back to the traditional policy line of the MSZP” (Körösényi, Ondré, and Hajdú 2017, 94). Abandoning tax cuts and privatisation – policies he once favoured –, Gyurcsány “stood to the left of all parliamentary parties in economic questions” (Tóth and Török 2015, 286). As Tóth and Török put it, shifting economic (and social) positions was a major tool for him to consolidate power. Leaving his market-friendly, liberal-progressive image behind, Gyurcsány attempted to recover the left-wing electorate’s trust by deliberately pulling away from the economic-ideological center. Contrarily, Bajnai embraced solutions suggested by the dominant neoliberal economic paradigm and actors like IMF or the European Central Bank, primarily aiming to restore credibility vis-à-vis Hungary’s creditors (Illés and Körösényi 2017).

Bajnai’s centrist strategy also included defining himself as a technocrat, a label also oftentimes used in the literature. Sitter (2011) considers his cabinet as “a more or less technocratic interim government” and Pastorella (2016) also lists Bajnai’s cabinet among technocratic governments.

However, it does not qualify as a “full technocratic government” according to the definition of McDonnell and Valbruzzi (2014) (“cabinet composed of all non-partisan, expert ministers and headed by a non-partisan prime minister”), as it was “dominantly built on the old ministers [of Gyurcsány] and projected the image of a traditional political government” (Stumpf 2010, 139). Bajnai did not only keep some of Gyurcsány’s Socialist ministers (hoping that it could facilitate cooperation with the party’s parliamentary group and make MSZP “personally” interested in his success), but also appointed MSZP members to portfolios previously held by non-partisan politicians (e.g. Minister of Local Government).

Furthermore, cabinet compositions are to be interpreted in the context they operate. Hungarian governments consistently had a high proportion of experts: 41% of all ministerial appointments brought an expert into cabinet (Ilonszki and Stefan 2018). The conduciveness of Hungarian politics for participation of experts in government partly stems from PMs’ discretionary powers to appoint (and dismiss) ministers and intention to strengthen their position vis-à-vis their own parties and coalition partners. It also reflects a longer tradition, rooted in Hungary’s pre-transition regime, which did not only tolerate, but oftentimes demanded expertise at the highest levels, appointing so-called “reform economists” to key positions of its late governments (Ilonszki and Stefan 2018, 206).

Moreover, Bajnai lacked a “sufficiently broad mandate” (Pastorella 2016, 949) for implementing his program. 204 MPs promised to pass his legislative agenda in writing, but the definition implies a broader coalition behind technocratic leaders – “widespread, cross-partisan support” for a “government of national unity “, as Pastorella (2016, 953) would put it –, and opposition actors’ commitment not to reverse policies. Bajnai could claim none of the above.
I argue that Bajnai has led a “simulated technocratic government”, where he acted as if all of his cabinet members were experts and in a manner as if he would have broad, cross-partisan legislative backing that transcends traditional cleavages. Bajnai insisted on not having “a political ambition”, and sought to appoint experts to the key positions of his government, who similarly have solely professional drives (Illés 2014, 12). Moreover, SZDSZ has been advocating for an “expert government” since fall 2008. These efforts to create the illusion of a technocratic government made it harder for the liberals to reject the investiture of Bajnai’s cabinet.

Nevertheless, as neither having a non-partisan politician to lead an MSZP government, nor the strong presence of expert ministers in cabinets was unusual in Hungary (Ilonszki and Stefan 2018), government and opposition actors have equally treated Bajnai as a traditional, partisan PM. He emphasised the need for “consent and national concordance” (Illés 2014, 13) and beliefs that “Hungary’s interest would be best served by a grand coalition, or a social contract of similar value” (Lakner et al. 2019, 181), but these statements only expressed his desires, but not parliamentary arithmetics and political realities. His self-perceived position has important implications for securing legislative backing for his program, but shall not prevent me from comparing his cabinet with Gyurcsány’s last one in a MSSD framework.

One could argue that Bajnai distanced himself from MSZP only to save the party from negative externalities of crisis-management policies, such as diminishing favourability ratings. On the contrary, he always believed that maintaining an image of competent and potent governance could have helped the Socialists’ campaign in 2010 – if they were to associate themselves (more) with his tenure and fiscal achievements (Lakner et al. 2019). The PM also avoided attacking all parties but one: far-right Jobbik, the only relevant extra-parliamentary party from which he could expect no external support. Similarly vigorous negative campaigns of other opposition parties (e.g. Fidesz tried to directly associate him with suicides of farmers, which happened during Bajnai’s tenure as CEO) were left without retorts from Bajnai’s side.

**Measuring cabinet performance**

Given their formation context, neither of the two cabinets had a formal government program or manifesto, making it impossible to assess their performance with indicators like legislative reliability.

Therefore, I start by conducting a quantitative analysis of the legislative success of governments. Using original data obtained from the official website of the National Assembly (parlament.hu) via webscraping, I first matched a dataset on proposals (N = 16,264) with another on voting record of MPs (N = 2,466,175), collected for period between 1 May 2008 and 29 May 2010. I then restricted the scope to bills initiated by the government or a minister, excluding proposals such as private member’s bills or amendments to the Standing Orders. Subsequently, I calculated the percentage of government bills presented that are approved, as well as the partisan composition of external support to scrutinise legislator voting behaviour and alliance shifting.

Table 2 demonstrates that Bajnai’s cabinet indeed performed better in the absolute and relative number of government-initiated bills. Even after restricting the scope to bills passed with less than 300 votes – a rule-of-thumb threshold for merely symbolic or
technical proposals – Gyurcsány is outperformed by his successor. Bajnai consistently faring better among Socialist MPs is striking – and hints that despite his queen sacrifice, Gyurcsány will be unable to keep party control. On average, the non-partisan PM also obtained the support of more liberal MPs, whereas his cabinet was more rejected by MDF’s conservative legislators.

These results suggest at least two potential mechanisms. First, the written agreement Bajnai enforced on MPs was possibly perceived as (morally) binding by some MPs who were otherwise reluctant to support Gyurcsány’s agenda. Furthermore, his economically liberal policies were relatively well-received by SZDSZ parliamentarians. Results are more mixed for MDF and independents. Descriptions of Gyurcsány securing majority via “buying” independent legislators with favours (Stumpf 2009, 489) and Bajnai sacking the sole independent MP, who obtained a SMD mandate and served as Minister of Local Government under his predecessor could potentially explain some of the variation in the latter.

To expand the analysis, I continue with presenting qualitative assessments of these cabinets, collected via a systematic review of Hungarian and international literature. Scholars more or less agree that Gyurcsány’s minority cabinet performed poorly, as reforms concerning several policy areas have failed or were overturned; even some measures of Gyurcsány’s previous (i.e. majority) government were withdrawn (Körösényi, Ondré, and Hajdú 2017). Gyurcsány’s minority cabinet received the lowest average performance value from respondents of a recent expert survey, conducted among Hungarian political scientists and historians (Grotz et al. 2019). Budget deficit and sovereign debt have heavily increased during Gyurcsány’s tenure; as Sitter (2011, 4) eloquently put it, “consistent and prudent economic policy took a lower priority than re-election ”. By remaining overly focused on consolidating his intra-party position, Gyurcsány “could not manage the economic crisis; not because he lacked competence or vision on how to solve it, but because neither markets, nor voters believed in his proposals,” as he had “insufficient political power to push them through” (Tóth and Török 2015, 298). Despite SZDSZ and MDF both endorsing policy proposals of the Reform Alliance,4 Gyurcsány rather (unsuccessfully) sought support for his own austerity measures (Ripp 2010) and the cabinet was constantly running behind its schedule (Stumpf 2009, 477).

Whereas Gyurcsány’s efforts to demonstrate competence and manage the crisis ended in failure, the verdict on his successor’s performance tends to be more favourable, whether made by political scientists or the wide public (Csizmadia 2009). Comparing the two governments, Simonovits (2016, 294) describes Gyurcsány’s cabinet as one

| Table 2. Government-initiated bills passed in the National Assembly under minority cabinets. |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| Passed (N) | 534 | 1237 |
| Passed (%) | 89 | 95 |
| Passed (<300 votes, N) | 340 | 1043 |
| Passed (<300 votes, %) | 84 | 94 |
| MSZP votes (μ) | 171.4 | 175.0 |
| SZDSZ votes (μ) | 11.2 | 12.2 |
| MDF votes (μ) | 5.3 | 2.6 |
| Independent votes (μ) | 1.7 | 1.4 |

Source: Author’s own calculations.
lacking “sufficient determination to cut expenditures”, being reluctant to implement necessary pension reforms “even at the peak of the crisis”. Contrarily, he approves Bajnai’s measures on retirement age, price indexation, employers’ pension contribution rate and the 13th month benefit, and deems freezing and cutting wages in the public sector adequate and “spectacular”. Bajnai “has improved the quality of governance” (Tóth and Török 2015, 373) and regained the confidence of markets and brought stability. As Illés and Körösényi (2017) put it, his policies were successful from the fiscal point of view, nonetheless they did not improve re-election chances of parties supporting his government.

Passing the budget is often viewed as one of the greatest challenges minority cabinets face, as well as a key indicator of their success. Gyurcsány could whip all Socialist MPs to support the proposal and he also harnessed the support of one MDF and two “independent” MPs – serving as minister and prime-ministerial commissioner, respectively –, but the bill would not have passed without the absence of two other MPs. Bajnai commanded a larger majority, with all Socialist MPs but one, as well as 13 SZDSZ and one independent legislators supporting the budget. Sárközy (2012, 365) commends the budget proposed by Bajnai (and the “relative ease” of its passing in Parliament), whereas others highlight how successful his cabinet was in uncovering municipal or government corruption and financial misuse (Csaba 2012, 11). The cabinet also introduced two major legal changes: it passed a new Civil Code and enacted a law on registered partnerships, essentially providing nearly all the benefits of marriage to same-sex couples. Bajnai’s centrist orientation also helped him to restore a relationship of mutual trust with the President of the Republic (Sárközy 2012, 366), a nexus characterised by deep animosity under his predecessor’s tenure.

Cabinets’ foreign policy performance also varies. Hungarian–Slovak relations were at historic lows under their tenure: Slovakia passed a bill to prohibit public use of Hungarian language and banned the President of Hungary from entering its territory. Both Gyurcsány and Bajnai held meetings with PM Robert Fico, yielding outcomes of differing success (Népszabadság 2008; Šutaj 2014).

Gyurcsány put forward a proposal of combatting extremism and (mutual) protection of minority rights, all six points of which were publicly rejected and ridiculed by Fico. Almost exactly a year later, another meeting was concluded by Fico agreeing with all 11 points drafted by the Bajnai cabinet, including largely similar (and mostly symbolic) declarations. The Slovak PM also agreed to follow the recommendations of OSCE with respect to amending the language law and expressed regret over banning President Sólyom. Pundits have interpreted the latter meeting as “leaving rock bottom behind”. For achieving this, Bajnai heavily relied on his expert Minister of Foreign Affairs, a distinguished professor of IR, who held high-level political positions under both left and right-wing governments.

Bajnai’s cabinet could pass more bills, both in relative and absolute terms. Nevertheless, the difference is smaller than what poor evaluations of Gyurcsány’s minority cabinet would imply. Results suggest that legislative performance is not (necessarily) the most important indicator of (minority) cabinets’ performance according to the judgement of scholars and the wide public. Equivalence of different performance measures (policymaking, legislative success, approval ratings, governing party’s record in the next election) warrants direct examination by future research.
Conclusion

The article investigated the policy performance of Hungary’s two minority cabinets by utilising a MSSD framework. A qualitative review of Gyurcsány’s and Bajnai’s economic and ideological position was followed by an analysis of MPs’ voting record in the National Assembly. The empirical results have provided support for the relationship between the PMs’ ideological position and their ability to secure legislative majorities. Consequently, the paper may be viewed as offering some empirical evidence for the ideological proximity hypothesis (Klüver and Zubek 2018): MSZP could not abandon its extreme position within the party system, but Bajnai consciously positioned himself closer to SZDSZ and MDF parliamentarians.

These findings expand our knowledge on performance of cabinets and PMs in CEE. Hungary’s minority governments have hitherto not been subject to empirical scrutiny, despite administering serious policy changes and tackling one of the worst economic setbacks the country has seen for decades. These cases broaden our understanding of party governments without legislative majorities in CEE. Minority cabinets occur relatively frequently in the region (Zubek 2011), but remain understudied in comparative politics. The investigated cabinets share more with other Hungarian cases than with extensively researched minority governments in Denmark, Sweden or Spain. Whereas latter cases are tales of securing legislative backing from both sides of the aisle, external support in polarised party systems of CEE is often restricted to a single flank of the parliament.

In a similar fashion, the literature on minority cabinets in countries with positive parliamentarism, a macro-institutional environment fostering government stability and effectiveness and strongly majoritarian electoral systems is almost entirely absent. Findings address this gap: to improve our understanding of the structural and contextual reasons behind Hungary having had almost exclusively multi-party, majority governments, the study provided an in-depth analysis of deviant cases, i.e. the only two instances of single-party, minority cabinets.

Corroborating findings on Spain (Field 2009), the analysis helps us to better understand survival and performance of minority governments in majoritarian contexts. It seems that governments’ tight control of the parliamentary agenda, the CVNC or PMs’ discretionary powers do not impede the creation of minority cabinets, but rather sustain them once they are formed.

This article also extends previous work on how pre-electoral agreements affect cabinet survival and performance. Bajnai, still as a Prime Minister-elect, made MPs to declare their support for core parts of his legislative agenda in writing. Further research needs to examine the effects of such agreements and the contexts in which they are formed, whether they be forged between future coalition partners (Chiru 2015), government parties and independent MPs (Kefford and Weeks 2018) or between pre-investiture executives and members of the legislatures.

At a theoretical level, the paper furthermore contributes by clarifying the character of Bajnai’s cabinet. Whereas a large part of the literature had difficulties to classify it, 5 most scholars labelled it as a “technocratic” government. Demonstrating how Bajnai lacked wide, cross-partisan support and how his cabinet’s room for manoeuvre was restricted by entrenched, bipolar competition, I showed the “simulated” nature of its technocratic character. It was a conscious attempt to pull towards the center and make (policies of) his cabinet more likely to be supported by SZDSZ and MDF parliamentarians.
I argued that differences in performance can be associated with distinct strategies of PMs to ideologically position themselves. In relation to the literature on the “presidentialisation” of politics in CEE (Hloušek 2015; Berz 2019), the findings above also stress PMs’ elevated role – in electoral, party and parliamentary arenas alike. Further research would benefit from systematic data collection on ideological position of governments and PMs, and should evaluate the degree to which median or ideologically proximate position of PMs – relative to other parties – shape legislative behaviour and influence government performance in other CEE countries.

Notes

1. Gyurcsány originally having twice the remaining office time would cause problems for cabinet survival analysis, but should not influence policy performance. It can be contended that Gyurcsány was hesitant to introduce comprehensive reforms (and passed fewer bills), because he deliberately postponed austerity measures to the end of his term. However, this seems unlikely: pushing them closer to April 2010 and idly witnessing the economic crisis to expand would have been electoral suicide for the PM, who – unlike Bajnai – was seeking reelection.

2. KDNP stands for Christian Democratic People’s Party; as a small satellite party of Fidesz, it allows and encourages dual membership, its MPs sit in a joint Fidesz-KDNP parliamentary group, strictly following party discipline. It has not contested any election alone since 1998 (Kovarek and Soós 2016).

3. In 2010, MDF has failed to pass the 5% parliamentary threshold after it selected a former Socialist minister as lead candidate and forged an electoral alliance with the liberals. LMP lost most of its voters and became irrelevant in 2018, following a half-year long turmoil emerging as a consequence of the party’s isolationist wing taking revenge on MPs and co-chairs advocating for closer electoral co-operation with left-liberal parties (Kovarek and Littvay 2019).

4. A group of economists, industrialists and academics, whose manifesto was later largely incorporated into Bajnai’s legislative agenda.

5. As Ilonszki and Stefan (2018, 212) aptly wrote, whereas “half of Bajnai’s ministers” were experts, his cabinet’s “fundamental party support makes it a borderline case”.

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Notes on contributor

Daniel Kovarek is a PhD candidate at Central European University. He studies political behaviour at the voter and the elite level; his expertise lies in the intersection of political geography and distributive politics. His research has appeared in Environmental Politics and The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, among others.
ORCID

Daniel Kovarek http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3385-3742

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