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The appearance of women's equal opportunities in the conservative political discourse of the countries of "statist feminism"

"The political parties do not have real programs concerning women's issues, only quasi programs. None of the parties can afford not having a program concerning women's issues, but they don't really know what to say in these."

This quotation is taken from an interview with a young and successful conservative woman politician (Pető 2003a). It pinpoints a disturbing similarity between the programs of different parties in Hungary when they want to say something to and about their women voters. However, the uncertainties and empty phrases in the countries of state feminism will be put aside quite soon: as soon as the election campaigns are going to intensify, and we can see which party and by what means can get measurable results by gaining more votes from women.

The root of uncertainties is partly the paradox task of defining "woman" as a political actor and as a target of political action. The definition of "the difference" of "women" happens through rhetorical actions. "Women" do not form a singular group based on shared biological characteristics: biology is not equal to predestination. Moreover, the huge historical and cultural differences between groups of women make it impossible to treat them as a homogenous group. On the other hand, "women" have initiated national and international political movements to gain and secure different rights, saying that something "binds" them

together – there are women who think that they are not only defined by the collective experience of exclusion, but also by similar, “feminine” social and psychological traits.

I do not aim to resolve these contradictions here, as they cannot be resolved. I’d rather demonstrate the complex political nature of “women’s difference”, as the primary rhetorical field of the struggle in countries with “statist feminist period”, and especially in Hungary, to gain women’s votes may be the politics of equal opportunities, where this distinction appears. However, this field is full of risks, and as my argument will show, conservative political forces have just as much chance to enhance the number of their supporters using the rhetoric of equal opportunities as left wing political forces. (Liebert 1998) I also argue that since 2001 the European Union functions more and more as an economic unit, and that as the representation of social values is overshadowed, representing something in the field of women’s equal opportunities will become more important for each party. (Pető 2003b)

Women’s equal opportunities: contradictions and disapprovals

The realization of equal opportunities is a utopian value: neither present voters nor their grandchildren will see it. (Pető, Manners forthcoming) Furthermore, the plans to realize them in a distant, contingent future are also very complex, so there is no single issue that can be called “the politics of equal opportunities”.

We can see various solutions concerning the contents and forms of legal reforms intending to realize equal opportunities all over Europe. The development of equal opportunities politics from the Rome Treaty to the Lisbon Declaration is the result of historical development, which, affected by different interest and lobby groups, has created complex systems that are sometimes built on each other, and sometimes gainsay one another, or are parallel to each other within the institutional system and the expectations of the European Union. (Pető 2003c)

The issue of equal opportunities is manifested in the field of economy. It means that people have equal opportunities if the competition for scarce resources (which are always necessarily scarce), as well as the competition for goods, and the distribution of social burdens are ruled by considerations that are relevant from the competition’s point of view. Thus, the chances of competitors are not defined by such irrelevant factors as their race, religion, class, gender,

disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and other external factors that often spoil certain people's chances.

To reach equal opportunities means that different inputs should lead to the same outputs in the market. However, to achieve this, "positive discrimination", or – using a term that is more widely accepted nowadays – "affirmative actions" to be employed. These expressions denote interventions that aim at preventing or abolishing discrimination, and want to level off disadvantages, focusing on stigmatized groups that are exposed to discrimination. But the introduction of positive action with which the idea of different input but equal output could be realized, is not accepted by the Hungarian public opinion: both conservatives and neo-liberals refuse it. One cause of this disapproval is that many think that social inequalities cannot be abolished by legal provisions. Even the exposition of the Hungarian equal opportunities law contains that the differences between people's opportunities that exist as soon as they are born cannot be eliminated by legal measures. This liberal interpretation of the law questioned the very reason for the existence of the law as soon as it was drafted, and basically excluded the use of supporting instruments.

But this is not a special situation in Eastern Europe. (Watson 2001, Bretherton 2001, Mazey 1998, Gerhard 2000) The introduction of equal opportunities measures and policies has been opposed to this day in each of our countries.

On the one hand, political parties generally refuse the idea of equal opportunities policy, and this creates the weirdest coalitions among them; on the other hand, however, legislators do not have too much possibility to actively oppose equal opportunities legislation: different UN Conventions (especially the CEDAW) and EU provisions and directives have made a significant impact (either directly or indirectly) on the legislation of these countries.

The objectives of equal opportunities can be enacted in three ways: by modifying the Constitution, through the so-called equal opportunities law, or through other laws and provisions. There are antecedents of exercising the requirement of equal treatment and of promoting equal opportunities in Hungarian law: the Constitution, § 76 of the 1959/IV. Act about the Civil Code, § 5 of the 1992/XXII. Act about the Labor Code, or the 1998/XXIV. Act about the rights and equal opportunities of people living with disabilities all contain normative provisions that are binding for persons, legal relations and institutions under their

scope. This means that the normative conception of law, which implies that it may advance the development of new, desirable attitudes, is not without antecedents. But the idea that society can be shaped and baffled in directions chosen by the legislators is also heatedly refused by both conservatives and neo-liberals in Hungary.

Those who regard social inequalities simply as a legal question also oppose the idea of equal opportunities: they think that the problem of equal opportunities is solved, as it is *de facto* regulated by the law, and they do not approve of differentiating “women’s rights” and human rights. At the same time we cannot expect miracles from legal provisions in themselves: they do not substitute for decisions on the level of the different institutions, as these institutions create and legitimate inequalities in the public discourses.

Another line of argument against equal opportunities policy is that there are naturally existing inequalities between people, regarding their abilities and talent, and thus the principle of equal opportunities builds upon natural inequalities, and does not eliminate them: indeed, it enlarges them. Those who voice this counter-argument claim that the supporting provisions suggest that those who are supported are unable to perform well without help. However, those “natural” differences are relative: all kinds of inequalities stem from social institutions and practices, and they are not formed “by themselves”, naturally.

There are other factors that impede the realization of the utopian value of equal opportunities. The appearance of equal opportunities in the norms and rights of EU member states has always been pushed through from above, and the key to their success was that the states played a major role in their formulation. In Hungary, both liberal and conservative parties show a visceral disinclination to equal opportunities politics, as they expect the state to follow the patterns of “state feminism”, the politics of pre-1989 Soviet type emancipation, especially that aspect of it which focused on women’s employment. The sociopolitical program that has been identified with state tutelage and interference since 1990 had been dropped out from the vocabulary of politics, and the parties have begun to voice the neo-liberal idea: “smart people will get ahead”. We all know the social impacts of this phenomenon by now: social differences have become enormous very fast in the narrow latitude of Hungarian economy.

What is also problematic is that the field of equal opportunities politics covers a wide scope of policy-making: it means that the viewpoint of women’s equal opportunities should be

considered and introduced into the field of political representation, employment and public services. This logic does not fit in the structure of local administration, and because of this, we can see the resistance of state administrations throughout Europe. Employing certain rhetorical devices, it is easy to manipulate, “forget”, postpone and disregard the complex and intricate system of responsibilities and financial obligations. One way of resistance is the suspension or deferment of decision-making, and questioning the actuality of the problem in question. In Hungary and its neighboring countries the absence of the political legitimization of equal opportunities politics, as well as its weak institutionalization and poorly funded system make this kind of “forgetting” very easy.

All these show that the employment and propagation of equal opportunities would cause the downfall of any political party undertaking it in Eastern-Europe, as projecting a more equal society into the distant future will not and cannot persuade voters. In the solitude of the voting box voters will think over their own opportunities: what the governing parties have done for them, and what the other parties promise to do in the future. However, the idea of “personal opportunities” is connected to employment and one’s income: it is not related to feeling solidarity with any group.

Equal opportunities and women’s political mobilization: employment and family

After analyzing the factors that set back equal opportunities politics, we arrive at the question of women’s political mobilization and the rhetorical questions of women’s political participation. This rhetoric defines the political problem for the given group, formulates the possible methods and devices of political struggle, and thus creates a point of identification for individuals, which is also the basis of recruiting new members, as well as developing and maintaining their commitment.

Supporting women’s participation in employment has always been a part of left wing political rhetoric. Of course, left wing women’s movement is a historical product of women’s employment: as women stepped out of the family and became employees, they not only experienced discrimination in the labor market, but also became members of a community, that of employees, and they gained a new identity, too.

As opposed to this, the question of women's employment is a weak point of the conservative political rhetoric, since the rhetoric of women's conservatism in Hungary is in a situation of transition. On the one hand, conservative women politicians want to restore a value system (based on the notion of the family, the nation, the church and the home) that has not existed for forty years, while the political discourse was dominated by communism. On the other hand, these values have been fundamentally altered by the emancipatory politics of state feminism, whether conservative women like it or not. Hungarian society is very different from what it was like before 1945, to which the rhetoric of traditional conservative women's politics often returns, with more or less success. However, the success of the egalitarian communist politics (even if this success is one-sided) paradoxically contributes to the present day success of conservative women's politics and the modernization of its rhetoric. The paternalistic political practice of state feminism, which told that women must be emancipated, that they are less developed, but must be raised to the level of men by means of training and education, prepared a discursive space and has provided women who are active in conservative movements with methods. Conservative women have learned from the failure of egalitarian communist policies regarding women, and they have developed new strategies: they connect "women's issues" with other political questions. They have realized that the organization of a "single issue" movement, that is, a movement focusing only on "women's" issues, is not timely at this point. While left wing politicians have chosen to interconnect "women, the Roma, and the disabled", in the conservative discourse women's political mobilization is linked to the concept of the family. (Pető 2003d)

The "family" has become a focal point of conservative women's politics. Their "family" is the model of the heterosexual, bourgeois, nuclear family, which has never had a historical existence, only as the idea of an imagined tradition. (Hardcare 1993 esp. pp. 134-139.) In this discourse the "family" is idealized: it means a peaceful shelter, a happy island, where only the best things happen. The basis of conservative women's politics is women's fear of the dangers of being dropped out of the family system: it means not only emotional isolation, but also a very real economical danger – we should just think of the difference between the wages and levels of advocacy of men and women.

It was not only the state feminism that supported women's employment: after 1989, economic necessities maintained it, too. With the development of a market economy women's unemployment rate has not grown as fast as that of men's, and yet, women often appear in the

sociological literature as the losers of the transition. (Pető 1998 and 2001) According to the interviews I conducted, Hungarian conservative women narrate their employment not as a necessity, but as part of realizing women's autonomy, as one of women's possible activities. The left wing discourse stands in direct opposition to this approach: it describes women's employment as a necessity and as the only valuable choice at the same time, supported by the Lisbon Strategy of the EU. The new economic politics of the EU, which is interested in drawing women into the labor market, does not support the institution of full-time maternity – it wants to make Western-European women leave their homes for work by all possible means: propagating part time jobs and distance work.

Conservative equal opportunities politics: ante portas

Examining the gender gap in voting, we state that women constitute a group with their own special, separate interests. During elections, women vote for political values that ensure their equal access to goods, independent of gender differences. Employing the rhetoric of equal opportunities has major political opportunities here, as this is what makes possible the formulation of “women” as a group identity. What makes it important to examine political interests and values that characterize women only is partly that in the conservative rhetoric women's difference is represented as a source of “pride, self-confidence, hope and superiority”, which means that “women's difference” is not a source of inferiority in the world of men, compared to men: it is not a “series of deficiencies”. Thus, the formulation of “women's difference” is not defensive, but a “womanly” device of the active formation of politics.

If women's difference is based on the notion of the singularity of “women's experience”, then this difference reflects a basically biological difference. It is not an accident that those who deal with feminist political theory have striven to separate “women's politics” (created by women who use the cultural symbols accepted in the given culture) from the “politics of gender”, which recognizes that it is the examination of the social institutions that discriminate women and maintain discrimination that should be emphasized. This is important because “women's politics” does not represent a political thought that is independent of men and critical of masculine structures, but rather the positive objective that suggests that women should organize in defense of their own interests. The political strategy of this kind of separation makes it possible for women to appear in the field of politics as “feminine”,

“womanly”, that is, as mothers first of all, but at the same time it allows them to use the power coming out of it. In “women’s politics”, women appear in the field of politics as those who cater for the responsibilities socially entrusted to women only, and as people who are proud of this, demanding social appreciation on this basis. This “feminine role” is a messianic and socialized role. Those women who put maternal tasks into the forefront still want to gain more political power for themselves. With this, they do reduce women’s inequalities, but only within the framework of maternity and the family. Thus the examination of agency and separate feminine activities is completely justifiable in this case, as women fulfill the expectations concerning traditional femininity, while querying it at the same time. (Estelle 1979 p. 513.) This means that the politics of women’s equal opportunities does have a conservative interpretation, which has a huge political mobilizing power in our society: it gains its force and political impact from the fact that because of the decades of state feminism, women’s identity has not been linked with concepts of power before.

In this conservative reading of women’s equal opportunities politics, women are defined and marked as different by their participation in reproduction, and by the experiences gained from this. This thought is what Julia Kristeva calls the “new truth”, which regards the “feminine” as something based upon this experience. (Kristeva 1981) However, if we accept that women are “different and better”, we also have to examine the impact of this notion on women’s political activities. The theoreticians who think that voters’ attitudes are determined by gender also state that women (uniformly), just because of knowing this “new truth”, are able to make the field of politics more positive and humane, as they are driven to do so by the values represented by them, values that are based upon this unique, singularly feminine experience: empathy, better interpersonal communication skills, a higher level of morality and care. (Some politicians of the Hungarian left wing party used this reasoning to support the candidacy of a woman to become the president of the state.) In the language of politics, equality and individual rights match these values, which, according to empirical research, play a role in shaping political party preferences if women call themselves feminists and have a strong feminist consciousness: in this case, the orientation of their values is different from that of men. But what can we say about conservative women, who declare that they are not feminists, and who define their identities, political rhetoric and activism in opposition to feminism and the politics of state feminism?

While the appearance of a new attitude of voters defined by gender opened an important political possibility for Western-European social democracy, in the context of the former communist countries, it supports the development of a conservative political discourse in the long run. (Row 2001 esp. p. 219.) Emphasizing “women’s difference”, the otherness of women leads to a strategy of separation. The political representation of the so-called “womanly” characteristics is generally connected to the left wing parties: in Hungary it is mostly connected to the liberal ally of the socialists. The concept of “women’s difference” confronting with equality meaning sameness of the statist feminist period, has appeared in the Hungarian political discourse as something based upon the “morality of care”, and the winning over of women voters also happens within the framework of motherhood. (Chodorow 1978, Giligan 1982) This implies the rise of the number of conservative women voters in the long run in this part of Europe. At the same time, conservative women politicians are not interested in translating the values of “women’s difference” into the language of politics, as it is traditionally the task of left wing liberal parties to represent these in their programs. Because of this, emphasizing “women’s difference” can remain a rhetorical turn, which makes it impossible to force either conservative or left wing / liberal parties to win over women voters, and to openly represent values regarded as women’s in order to secure their survival. This characterized Hungarian politics until the country joined the EU, but with the appearance of women’s equal opportunities rhetoric political parties have to formulate their message in relationship to this frame.

Representation is a key question of identity politics. It has two aspects: on the one hand, what identities appear in the social space (defined culturally and by multiple other factors); and on the other hand, who represents what kind of politics, who talks publicly on our behalf, and about what. (Yuval Davis 1994 p. 415.) Any political action or movement can only be successful if it represents the identity of its participants, as the place one occupies in society is the basis of the formation of identity. “Women’s interests” have not appeared in the public conservative political rhetoric of the countries characterized by state feminism. At least until now.

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