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Awareness or Change? Conservative Women's Participation in Politics after 1989

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## Introduction

I am grateful that I was asked to comment the *Background document* of this very important conference. From the early years of women's struggle for redefining citizenship, women's participation in formal political institutions has been investigated and measured. In my contribution I would like to draw the attention to a very specific so far under-researched case: to the missing women in the conservative and extreme right wing political parties who entered into the newly formed party system in 1989.

In the vast academic literature as the main obstacle of women's increasing participation in politics where they could actively represent their interests the party structure and the party systems are mentioned. (Matland, Montgomery 2003, Wolcox, Stark, Thomas 2003) In the historical moment of 1989, new parties were formed and a new party structure was constructed in Hungary as well as in other countries of transition therefore the party structure as an obstacle is not valid. (Pető 2006a) After the first democratic election in the Hungarian conservative and extreme right wing parties' women's participation remained very low. (Table 1.) I am analyzing how conservative women got into party politics without any institutional background, consequently without any previous party political experiences and at the same time without the influence of party as a gatekeeper in 1989 and what obstacles they experienced in practicing their active citizenship. In order to investigate how conservative women experienced the transformation and what do they think of human rights discourse I am analyzing how those 25 women who are (were) active in politics narrated why they joined to politics and how did they experience the world of politics. This comment paper therefore analyses the processes how women explain why they joined to these newly formed conservative parties taking Hungary as a case study. This article explores the process how this situation was created underlining the paradox that conservative women did not want to participate actively in

politics but they narrated in the interview the process of their experienced marginalization in the field of politics as a problem.<sup>1</sup> I would like to finish the analyses with conclusions hoping to enrich the theoretical debate on different European legacies of women's political mobilization.

After the “statist feminist” period

The collapse of “statist feminist period” (Havelkova 2000) also posed an important question to human rights activists and theorists. As a result of democratic elections of 1989-1990-1991 the participation of women in the national parliament in the former communist countries decreased from 25-30% up to 10%. The value of democracy according to Robert Dahl consists of three elements: competition, participation and civil liberties. (Dahl 1986) In Eastern Europe the pre-1989 voluntarist, quasi democratic characteristic of the political system after the Round Table negotiations was counterbalanced by the post 1989 liberal “non-participatory” democracy. (Pető, Szapor 2004) Democracy arrived to East in the form of a globalised neoliberal project where human rights do not include women's rights without a considerable pressure. For women who actively took part either in the East European opposition movements or in the transition process the non-sensitivity of the new ruling elite towards gender equality came as a surprise. (Penn 2005, Pető 1997 and 2006b) The other surprise of the transition process was that the number of women's NGOs with human rights agenda remained low while the number of women NGOs with conservative agenda rapidly increased.

“Human rights” as a discourse seemed to be a desirable alternative from the former communist block; however its implementation conveniently melted into patriarchal system which was previously not touched by the communist system, but also served as a site of resistance against the communist regime. Conservative resistance to communism was based on restoring so-called “female virtues” in the family according to the cult of the Virgin Mary and it aimed at preserving family values in private life against the pseudo-equality of state socialism. During communism, stereotypical women's characteristics such as intimacy, sensitivity, or family centeredness were performed to resist a “statist feminism” whose rhetoric was aimed against exactly these characteristics. (Pető 2003a, Pető 2008

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<sup>1</sup> I interviewed 25 Hungarian politicians, active, conservative, and female, who represent different generations in the capital and also in other Hungarian urban centers. I made 25 life story narrative interviews with women whose conservatism is manifested in their political activities in women's NGOs or foundations and in conservative political parties such as *Magyar Demokrata Fórum* (MDF, Hungarian Democratic Forum), *Keresztény Demokrata Néppárt*, (KDNP, Christian Democratic People's Party), *Magyar Demokrata Néppárt* (MDNP, Hungarian Democratic People's Party), *Fiatal Demokraták* (FIDESZ, Young Democrats), *Magyar és Élet Igazság Pártja* (MIÉP, Party of Hungarian Truth and Life), *Független Kisgazda Párt* (FKGP, Smallholders' Party).

forthcoming) The paradox, how a woman might be active in public when the conservative discourse expects them to stay passive, was solved with the post-1990 revival of the cult of the Virgin Mary in e. g. Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Croatia and Slovenia, not with the adaptation of human rights discourse. This narrative frame was celebrating normative motherhood and at the same time did not encourage women to take up any role in politics. (Pető 2003b) The “politics of motherhood” was used in the recent mass mobilization in Hungary on demonstration of 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2006 against the leftist liberal government. (Illustration 1.)

Recent scholarship on Eastern Europe is underlining that the past ten years brought the alarming worsening of women’s position in these societies: their public, social and economic roles were diminishing in the past decade. This social process is usually described as the “masculinization” of post-socialist Eastern Europe. (Watson, 1993) In the past ten years the position of women in the “East” is converging to position of women in the “West” as far as formal criteria’s of equality as employment, participation in politics, etc are concerned. (The number of women MPs in the first democratically elected Hungarian Parliament (7%) decreased dramatically in a comparison with the “statist feminist” period (25%) and reached the same level as e.g. in Great Britain in the same year, in 1990. The same tendency can be observed in the case of women’s employment.) The economic position of women in Eastern Europe which were very favorable due to the implementation of the norm of gender equality not only in the employment sphere but also in the social security provisions as free and accessible childcare, worsened considerably.

I can not even think of reviewing the extensive literature on the impact of the EU membership to these countries, but I would like to mention one important feature, to which I will return in the conclusions. 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. 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 maternal activity – it wants to make “European women” leave their homes for work by all possible means: propagating part time jobs and work-life balance.

#### The birth of new conservative parties and movements in Hungary

The conservative women's associations were banned between 1945 and 1951 and no political parties with this type of party rhetoric were operating between 1948 and 1989. (Pető 2003c) Studying conservative women in politics it is impossible to point out either personal or institutional continuity. Interviewed women agreed upon the experience of marginality and discrimination. The interviewees belonged to the social group which did not take part in the communist party so even the possibility of working in a political party was a new experience for them. It is difficult to explain why one woman becomes passionately political while another with a relatively similar background and emotional setup does not. With conservative women I am trying to survey how they narrate their involvement into politics, what narrative framework they find appropriate to describe this personal and unique experience or the steps leading up to their decision to join politics. This analysis also provides an answer to the question of the formation of political identities.

Entering politics has changed women's lives to various extents: some experiences it as dramatic conversion, some as pure accident but all of them assess it as a dramatic change of their lives. (Snow, Machalek 1984) Stories of conversion are narratives which describe a sudden change in the individual's life. This change generally occurs by some external influence after negative sequences in life and provides a purpose and significance. This is a basic motif in Christian culture and a frequently used metaphor in narratives. Women were seldom given the chance to recount their lives since their field of activity had almost never been considered “important”, therefore when describing

their own experience they borrowed ready-made phrases and pre-fabricated narrative frameworks. Stories of conversion are no exception to that, either. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, before the enfranchisement of women stories of conversion were the only narrative form of female life-experience to participate in public life. Women established religious schools, organized collections of donation and founded missionary communities following their conversion that is they could legitimately be active in public. At the same time the experience of conversion gave women a chance to be active in public and also to prepare other women for the advent of conversion. We might interpret stories of conversion as a socially accepted opportunity that enabled women to act publicly within an environment and ideological frame (like Christian fundamentalism) which otherwise wouldn't support any female activity other than working in the family or serving the husband. 20th century stories of conversion follow the same narrative pattern but conversion itself may take two directions. With the acquisition of suffrage, the introduction of divorce and the increase of female employment the leading role of man as economic and moral head of family have started to crumble. Almost each of the interviewed women belonging to Hungarian conservative groups had a conversion element in their description of entering politics, but it was mostly typical of the spiritual conservative group. The narrative of conversion is substituting the narrative of human rights in this context.

#### Conservative women's participation in politics: explanations

Returning to questions raised earlier, why one woman joins a conservative political party and why the other does not or how do they translate to their own personal level and opportunities offered by human rights, we are to refine it further by asking: if both joined the same party, why do they describe their decision in narrative frames which entirely different from each other? For quite some time sociologists have used the "brain-washing" argument for the explanation of conversion, and it has long dominated explanations. Even today it is often declared that conservative women are "deceived" or have a "false consciousness" opposing women who are describing their experiences in "human rights" framework.

The second, so far rather popular explanation concerning the reason why someone chooses a life radically different from the previous one enlists personality disorders, such as the respect of authoritarianism, the desire to be subordinated in an insecure society. Those possessing a "searching" type of identity are especially responsive to the experience of conversion.

The third explanatory frame relates political activity to personal conflicts, marital or family problems, i.e. the individual wants to decrease tension by way of conversion. The explanation is rendered authentic by the converted person emphasizing the dramatic significance of these conflicts as opposed to the inner peace after conversion.

The fourth frame of explanation, which is a structural frame, is analyzing social characteristics which lead the individual of a given position in the social structure to conversion. Here it is mostly about poor, marginalized and in some cases lonely people who find a long desired community this way. However, our interviewees had not been in marginal position, not even before entering politics.

The fifth explanatory argument stresses social influence as one element affecting conversion. Most importantly social networks are forwarding information and anything else to be known about conversion. Social networks are also motivating the individual to approach a situation which then radically alters the life of a politically active woman.

The narrative sets things in order in a life which is otherwise chaotic and disorderly. These stories, however, follow acquired and socially accepted patterns of narrative which is not the narrative of human rights.

The experience of discrimination as political mobilization force

The key issue of identity policy is representation and it is first determined by what identities appear in culturally and otherwise defined social space and secondly by who represents what policy, who talks about what in public on our behalf. Conservative women mentioned their experience of discrimination almost without exception, but that never appeared in their political rhetoric. This “missing link” is preventing the adaptation of human rights discourse.

The rhetoric strategy used by conservative women denies the existence of a general structural phenomenon of discrimination, yet the individual experience outcores the expected narrative.

The experience of discrimination is present in the life of almost each woman interviewed in the project. But the explanation of the individual experience happens within various frames: with traditional, emancipated or spiritual conservative frames. Their decision, why they made up their minds to enter the male-dominated world of politics has not by any of them been explained with an intention to fight against discrimination they experienced as “women”. Organizations in principle should meet their members’ requirements and consequently be able to maintain their dedication.

Belonging to an organization also helps the individual to carry on, because in times of conflicts serving the great common “cause” may come in handy in constructing the rhetoric.

## Conclusions

The sheer existence of the European Union with its supranational character, universal values of human rights and its institutional system is the main actor of value transfer in the new member states of the European Union. (Manners, Pető 2006, Pető 2003d) As after the EU enlargement process the external becomes internal, it also means the complex realities of post socialist gender relations will be contributing to the already pressing uncertainties and inconsistencies of EU gender equality norm and its implementation policies which will challenge the provisional facilitating instruments. During the enlargement talks between the EU delegation and the national governments formal technical criteria were set up how to measure and how to achieve gender equality in these countries without explicitly considering political implications, consequences and costs of these attempts to alter historical patterns of discrimination. The Amsterdam Treaty clearly defines two components of the *acquis* as anti-discrimination legislation and gender equality mechanisms. The governments of the accession countries interpreted the norm of gender equality in the framework of anti-discriminatory legislation and the policy site is the employment. If it stays so conservative women’s political discourse on politics of motherhood might stay dominant over women’s human rights discourse and in the future, not only in countries with “statist feminist” heritage.

## Appendix

Table 1.

Percentage of Women in Hungarian Parliament by Party 1990-2006 (%)<sup>2</sup>

<b>Party</b>	<b>1990-1994</b>	<b>1994-1998</b>	<b>1998-2002</b>	<b>2002-2006</b>
<i>FIDESZ</i> <sup>3</sup>	9,1	5,0	6,8	5,5
<i>FKGP</i>	6,8	7,7	6,3	n. e.
<i>KDNP</i>	4,8	4,5	n. e.	n. e.
<i>MDF</i>	4,8	15,8	5,9	4,2
<i>MIÉP</i>	n. e. (not elected)	n. e.	7,1	n. e.
MSZP	15,2	11,0	10,4	12,9
SZDSZ	8,5	15,7	12,5	10,0
Independent	14,3	0	n. e.	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>7,3</b>	<b>11,1</b>	<b>8,3</b>	<b>10,6</b>

Illustration 1.

Demonstration in front of the Hungarian Parliament, Budapest on 23 October 2006. (Index Photos)



<sup>2</sup> Based on the webpage of [www.valasztas.hu](http://www.valasztas.hu)

<sup>3</sup> Conservative Parties by italics

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