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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

**Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:**

Pető, A. (2012). Far Rights Movements and Gendered Mobilisation in Hungary. *Queries: The European progressive magazine*, 1, 130-135. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-72980-0>

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# Far Right Movements and Gendered Mobilization in Hungary



By **Andrea PETŐ**

## Introduction

In this paper is strictly focused on a so far painfully neglected phenomenon: the gender appeal of the far right for women. Consciously therefore, the author will not refer to the discussion of the dominant normative political masculinity that has resurfaced in recent years. The study is not rooted in the traditional political sciences' methods, but instead seeks to contribute to a new field of analysis. It explores possible causes of the popularity of the far right among women in Hungary. In doing so, it does not deny however that there is a considerable gender gap in terms of support for far right political views. In the light of the Median Survey, men are in fact twice more likely than women to identify with such views.

Hungary is last but one in Europe when it comes to the number of female members of parliament – which substantially mirrors political situation in the country. Nevertheless, **it is the far right movement that has offered space for the emergence of energetic women leaders<sup>1</sup> - while the other parties have failed to convince many women to become active in party politics.** The initial preconditions of such circumstances are well reflected in a research that was conducted by Anett Sörös among radical right wing university students in Debrecen. Sörös distinguished three groups of students: (1) those, who identify themselves with a party; (2) those, who think in slogans; and (3) those, who think and demand further radicalization of the programme. Within the first group, she found an equal (!) representation of men and women; while in the other two groups, masculine culture was dominant.<sup>2</sup> This result shows the heterogeneity of the far right groups, as well as diversity of motives that attract respectively men and women to those parties.

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<sup>1</sup> On the refounding of the Arrow Cross Party, the Hungarian Nazi party of WWII after 1989 see: A. Pető, *Gendered Memory of Military Violence in Eastern Europe in the 20th century*, [in:] *The Gender of Memory. Cultures of Remembrance in Nineteenth- and Twentieth- Century Europe*, S. Palatschek & S. Schraut (eds.), Campus Verlag 2008 pp. 237-253.

<sup>2</sup> A. Sörös, *A szélsőjobboldali ideológia reprezentációja a debreceni egyetemisták csoportviszonyaiban (Representation of extreme right ideology among university students in Debrecen) MSZT 2010. éves közgyűlés. Előadás kézirat. (manuscript) 2010.*

## Historical roots

In the earlier work, the author analyzed how gendered political citizenship was formulated after 1920 – which was a year, when Hungarian women obtained a selective right to vote.<sup>3</sup> There are two elements, which have been translated from the interwar political rhetoric into the present political discourse, as far as right wing women’s political mobilization is concerned. This shows an astonishing continuity within the political discourse. This is despite the 50 years of communism, during which period this discourse was pushed into subculture and into families.

The first continuing thread is the definition of Hungary as a sick entity or body, whereby the rhetoric demands healing from women, whose “natural duty” is to heal and to provide care. The politics of motherhood thus define citizenship of women through maternal thinking<sup>4</sup>. According to the far right, the “sickness” stems not only from the trauma of Trianon Peace Treaty of 1920 – when Hungary lost two thirds of its territory. Nowadays, it is additionally associated with impacts of neo-liberalism and globalization. This rhetoric carries also anti-Semitic overtones.

The second element defines women’s political work in a category of frame for a “mission”. Though it may appear to be generally universal for the right wing, there are obviously several differences between the conservative and far right discourses in their respective approaches<sup>5</sup>. Conservative framework draws a parallel between mission and sacrifice. Far right’s discourse offers agency to “women of value,” while contrasting it with a construct of so called “the other”, who are the unworthy. Exclusion, xenophobia and racism dominate in this mobilizational frame.

## Virgin Mary as a “rival set of emblems”

In her previous book on conservative women in politics after 1989, the author demonstrated that the symbol of the Virgin Mary is being effectively used for the purpose of guiding women’s political mobilization on the right. This is the case for both conservative and far right politics.<sup>6</sup>

Blackbourn argued, the symbols of the cult of the Virgin Mary “were a rival set of emblems” to the flags, anthems and monuments – that construct are constructs of identification with the modern nation-state.<sup>7</sup> In the post 1989 context, the re-emerging cult of the Virgin Mary in Hungary also served as an alternative political “set of emblems”. The success of it can be explained by the open-endedness of the political rhetorical frame of the concept. The Virgin Mary can be also seen as transposition of the “Great Lady of Hungarians”. Such an interpretation offers additionally a cadre to embrace in parallel different ethnical, religious and cultural elements (Catholic, Protestant, ancient Hungarian, Sumerian, and Indian). It could as well serve as a site for questioning patriarchy.

3 A. Pető, *The Rhetoric of Weaving and Healing: Women’s Work In Interwar Hungary, a Failed Anti-Democratic Utopia.*, [in:] *Rhetorics of Work.*, Y. Yannitsiotis, D. Lampropoulou & C. Salvaterra (eds.), University of Pisa Press 2008, pp. 63-83.

4 M. G. Dietz, *Citizenship with a Feminist Face: The Problem with Maternal Thinking*, [in:] *Feminism the Public and the Private*, J. B. Landes. (ed.), Oxford University Press 1998, pp. 45-65.

5 A. Pető, *Napasszonyok és Holdkissasszonyok. A mai magyar konzervatív női politizálás alaklata*, Balassi 2003.

6 A. Pető, *Die Marien in der Sonne (Die Apokalyptischen Madonnen)*, [in:] *Frau und Nation. Woman and Nation*, J. Laakso (ed./Hg.), Finno-Ugrian Studies in Austria 5. Verlag 2008pp. 137-174.

7 D. Blackbourn, *Marpingen, Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in a Nineteenth-Century German Village*, Vintage Books 2001 p. 27.



The complex patchwork cult of the Virgin Mary offers therefore much. It provides a certain agency, which can be used to unite and mobilize. It also relates to victorious victimhood over communism, which approach allows a comfort of not responding to any moral needs as far as examining the various forms of collaboration with communism regime in the past. This normative cult of motherhood aims not only to encourage sentiments and hence strengthen “the nation”. It also defines the relationship between the two genders. In details, it can apply as a moral compass in determining certain masculine behavioral patterns (e. g. violence against women). This may serve as an explanation of what potentially attracts women in the logic of the far right.

## Temporality and party structures

The far right party in the Hungarian party system is a new phenomenon. This new structure offered a space for new members, among them women. Many of them had not been active in politics before or had been disappointed with other far right party formations.

Analysis of developments in 1989 show that the elite turnover usually presents opportunities for women in party politics, because the party gatekeepers often represent the main obstacles to women’s entry into party politics.<sup>8</sup> However, elite turnover was only one factor promoting women’s participation in far right politics.

**The other factor was that the far right organizations were founded as NGOs. Some of them do not change their statutes and do not register as a political party.** This does not have an impact on public believes according to which they are perceives as political parties nevertheless. Such organizations are therefore entitled to make use of all the tools available to civil society. This explains creation within them awareness-raising and self-help groups. In addition, they can expose themselves on the public squares, using the right of an NGO to hold (provocative) public protests. Finally, the nature of their organizations is makes women susceptible towards them: **research has shown that women are more likely to be mobilized by NGOs than by parties.**

Last but not least, the far right organizations are stronger in villages and towns rather than they are in big cities. Traditionally these are the areas where women’s participation in politics is higher.

## Generation matters

There are three major groups that can be distinguished among the far right supporters. The first of them encompassed people born around the time of the collapse of communism. The second embraces “older” women, who, as mentioned above, had previously inactive politically. The third one falls into category of “the first-time voters”, within which far right wing is disproportionately popular.

In case of young people, it seems that their (typical) general hostility towards establishment and overall

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<sup>8</sup> A. Pető, *Im-possibilities of Turnovers, the Moment of Entering into Politics by Hungarian Conservative Women in 1989 in: The Small Histories of Great Events in Czechoslovakia after 1948, 1968 and 1989.* Z. Profantova (ed.) Veda Publishing House of the Slovak Academy of Sciences 2006 pp. 142-155.

rebelliousness have not generated votes for far left. Instead this group shows tendencies to believe that neo-Nazism (its rhetoric, symbols etc.) is sort of “cool”.

On the other hand, what induces women’s participation in the far right movements are the changing socio-economic circumstances. Evolution of the Hungarian educational system, which experienced advent of mass higher education, meant that graduates with university degrees are no longer guaranteed jobs. Hence increasing participation of women in higher education coincides with decline of chances that a diploma effectively should offer. Therefore also many women graduates face discrimination in the labor market, which results in their frustration and their vulnerability to “anti” arguments - anti-globalizational, anti-neoliberal and anti-Semitic ones.

According to number of surveys, the typical far right supporter lives outside Budapest, has a higher educational degree and struggles with economic problems.

## **Lack of gender-based mobilization**

The issues raised by the extreme right are “non-gendered” issues: anti-Roma, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, anti-globalization, anti-establishment. **The extreme right avoids addressing women as “women”. They are labeled as “mothers” (or as future mothers) and are integrated into a family policy that advocates heterosexual nuclear families.** Furthermore, the discourse of the far right relates to family and motherhood, not to individuals. The framework of normative motherhood and the “patriarchal bargain” opens up space for women’s agency. Therefore the concept of “family” also regulates dominant masculinity and secures the position of women in marriage, “protecting” them against the extramarital affairs of their husbands. Normative motherhood is a useful strategy, one that secures the financial and moral support of men in a society where women earn on average 17% less than men working in the same positions. This way of thinking permits women to distance themselves from the openly criticized gender politics i.e. of the EU. It also exempts them from the dilemma that defining their identity as women can be potentially described as a “problem identity”.

## **Failure of the utopian rhetoric of the EU gender equality discourse**

Concerning the above mentioned hostility toward the EU, in the 2000s a gender gap in political behavior surfaced for the first time since 1989. Since the 2006 elections, Hungarian women have tended to vote for conservative parties that are skeptical of the EU and critical towards policies aimed at both equality in general and at increasing women’s employment in particular (such as Lisbon Strategy and Europe 2020).

In the former Central and Eastern European countries, conservative and/or religious women’s organizations outnumber organizations with explicitly feminist agendas. The equal opportunities’ rhetoric increased the gap between the different gender regimes as far as their views on women’s employment are concerned. In the leftist discourse, women’s employment is considered a necessity and effectively also value, which defines a woman. Meanwhile, in the conservative and right wing discourse, women’s employment is seen as a choice and as a form of exercising agency.

## Conclusions

Far right radicalism and the movements hostile towards the EU are using specific rhetoric. They refer to the symbolism of the Virgin Mary, which figure they use as an agency to formulate and enhance certain messages (on motherhood and national duties among them). In longer term, **it concerns a linguistic monopoly of far right over family and motherhood, which is falls into a specific conservative interpretation concerning demographic crises**<sup>9</sup>. The backdrop of an economic crisis and eroding welfare systems pose an additional challenge in formulating a counter-argument. Meanwhile, also the role and meaning of the nation state and of Hungarian political citizenship are being called into question.

**Andrea PETŐ** is an associate professor of Gender Studies at Central European University in Budapest. She has edited twelve volumes in English, six in Hungarian, and two in Russian, and her works have appeared in many other languages. She has also been a guest professor at the universities of Toronto, Buenos Aires, Stockholm, and Frankfurt. Her books include *Women in Hungarian Politics, 1945-1951* (Columbia University Press/East European Monographs New York, 2003); and *Geschlecht, Politik und Stalinismus in Ungarn: Eine Biographie von Júlia Rajk* (Gender, Politics and Stalinism in Hungary: A Biography of Julia Rajk) (Gabriele Schäfer Verlag, 2007). Presently she is working on *gendered memory of WWII and political extremisms*. In 2005 she received the Officer's Cross Order of Merit of The Republic of Hungary from the President of the Hungarian Republic in 2005, and in 2006, the Bolyai Prize from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

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<sup>9</sup> A. Pető, *Anti-Modernist Political Thoughts on Motherhood in Europe in a Historical Perspective*, [in:] *Reframing Demographic Change in Europe. Perspectives on Gender and Welfare State Transformations*, H. Kahlert and W. Ernst (eds.) Focus Gender. Band 11. Lit Verlag 2010, pp. 189-201.

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