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Women and the Language of Hungarian Politics

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While celebrating the 100th anniversary of Finnish women's suffrage, after expressing our acknowledgments and thanks, we have to say: now we know that enfranchisement was not the final goal but just the beginning. The liberal thinkers who believed in the equality of women and men and worked to have it acknowledged in society – for instance, John Stuart Mill or Mary Wollstonecraft – may have thought that equal rights would mean the equality of the sexes. Now we already know that the systems of thought that are serving the interests of the groups holding power and their means of mental influence are far too stable and efficient: pure formal equality of rights will not abolish the oppression of socially disadvantaged groups. In the discriminating process which is deeply embedded in our culture, those who are discriminated against participate as well, since they think that being discriminated against is natural, well-founded or at least explicable.

The Hungarian political discourse of the last few years also bears witness to the fact that traditional culture and the fear of being stigmatized are often much stronger than one's own interests. Here, of course, the great differences between our conscious and unconscious actions, decisions, role constructions and attitudes play a considerable role. Often we may consciously refuse to accept a certain attitude, while our unconscious reactions serve to maintain and strengthen it.

In this paper, I will examine a classical example of this: how Hungarian female politicians in their discourse strengthen the gender stereotypes that express a patriarchal system of values. In doing this – although a great part of women politicians in their conscious acts reject this system of values – they conserve a system of customs and opinions which undermines their own position by implicitly questioning the legitimation of their own professional career.

I will thus examine what Bourdieu (1994: 19) writes in connection with gender stereotypes: the socially disadvantaged contribute to their own discrimination by tacitly accepting, without consciously deciding to accept, the boundaries forced upon them, or they may even by their own actions recreate such boundaries that already have ceased to exist in the system of society.

My data stems from a leading Hungarian weekly, *168 óra*. I chose this newspaper because its interviews preserve the dialogic form, i.e. the discourse partner is “visible” and so are the roles offered by the interviewer. It contains interviews with representatives of all three Hungarian political ideology groups – Social Democrat, Liberal and Conservative. This weekly also regularly deals with the question of women’s political roles and conveys the message of considering this an important theme.

I studied the items of the above mentioned weekly published between 2002 and 2004 when there were quite many active female politicians in the Hungarian political life: three ministers, a party leader, the faction leader of the bigger government party, and some leading politicians in most parties. However, in the studied period there were altogether 31 interviews made with women politicians. The most striking characteristics of these interviews was perhaps that in two thirds of the interviews the reporter, in one way or another, mentioned the fact that the interviewee was a woman, even though her name and photo unmistakably showed her sex. As there is no single case in which a male person’s interview would contain a remark on his sex, it is unquestionable that for women, appearing in politics is understood as marked, uncommon, “non-default” behaviour. Making politics as a woman may also be a target of sarcasm in the interviews: if a woman participates in politics, it is not just unusual but even “strange” or “unnatural”. In the

men's interviews, stronger expressions or irony are never directed towards the sex or gender identity of the interviewed person.

The interviews clearly show what kind of stereotypes about "feminine" politicizing are present in Hungarian public discourse.

"Feminine" politics

The first stereotype is that there are "female" and "male" ways of making politics. This idea was never questioned in any of the interviews. It is mentioned as something given, as something evident, and thus never dealt with more explicitly.

One of the strongest stereotypes is that women are more gentle, nicer, and more understanding than men. According to a view popular worldwide women's politics are basically and inherently different from men's politics, and this is connected with the idea that women, due to their biological endowment, make their decisions on an emotional basis, while men make rationally and logically founded decisions (Ross 2003, 39–41). As one of the most fashionable stereotypes in today's Hungary concerns "the dreadful general atmosphere in Hungarian politics", the generally popular argument of "women being less aggressive" is also used in connection with female politicians.

"In Hungary, women do not like making politics, because the tone and the atmosphere which characterizes our public life is, to put it mildly, not feminine. However, women could be of use here as well. It is well known that *it was women who softened the atmosphere of the European Parliament.*" (Introduction to an interview with Zita Gurmai, 2004/19)

In the English-speaking world, women politicians readily apply this stereotype to themselves, as they hope to profit from being considered as more gentle and more caring than male politicians (Ross 2002, 131). The Hungarian women politicians, too, have a self-image which essentially includes being more empathic than men. A conservative woman politician uses this argument to explain that a division of labour similar to that in a home is also needed in political life:

"*We women are more sensitive*, while God has blessed men with stronger physiology." (Ilona Vigh, leader of the women's fraction of Fidesz-MPSZ, 2003/33)

This stereotype, together with the fact that politics in itself means marked behaviour for a woman, may be pursued so far that, for a journalist, it also means *style*. In the following quotation, the implicit assumption is that male politicians may have different characteristics and style but for women politicians, the primary quality in any case is being female. The interview was made with the chair (speaker of the house) of the Hungarian parliament:

"You are the fourth chair [a gender neutral word in Hungarian] of the parliament since the change of the political system. All previous chairs represented a *different style*. After the professorial pathos of Professor Szabad, after the teacher mentality of Zoltán Gál, after the estate-steward behaviour of János Áder, *you are the first woman*."

It is also typical, and not only for Hungarian women politicians, to reject the attribute *feminist*. But in Hungary, this is particularly the case, as *feminist* in public discourse denotes women with aberrant femininity, "abnormal", man-like behaviour, unkempt, bitter women. On the other hand, *feminist* is associated with "the woman question" of the Communist times and may thus belong to the anti-Communist way of speaking. Thirdly, it also belongs to the anti-American way of speaking, and in this framework it is understood as a phenomenon foreign to "real" Hungarian culture (Barát, Pataki & Pócs 2004).

In the rejection of feminism, it is also essential (and evident from the already mentioned examination): Hungarian women politicians believe that they have the greatest chances to rise to politically important positions if they minimize their deviations from men. For this reason, they also fail to admit that a woman's chances in politics are restricted – they regularly use their own successful career as a counter-example (Ilonszki 2003, 85). This is connected with the fact that women politicians, although some of them recognize the importance of gender issues, do not make use of this recognition in their political agenda –

and also with the fact that an obligation to gender issues does not override the representative duties towards the party (Ilonszki 2003, 84).

In the interviews with Socialist women politicians, the question of quotas was often dealt with, since the MSZP – as the only party in Hungary – has a 20% quota for women in its parliamentary list. In these cases, in all of them, the two possibilities are played against each other: either she was chosen in the women's quota, or she is capable. This opposition of course implies that a capable woman has no need for support in form of quotas, a capable woman will make her way in politics on her own. This “why do we need it, if somebody is capable” interpretation of quotas, finally, implies the statement that women in today's Hungarian society are not disadvantaged when it comes to public positions. This implicitly conceals the existing male dominance and also conserves it.

“Housewives of the country”

According to one basic, deeply rooted or even millennial stereotype, a woman's place is at home, at the hearth, they are responsible for the security of the home, for the maintenance of the family, while men belong to the “public life”. Female politicians in the English-speaking world are also frequently asked about how they combine their family life with politics (Ross 2002, 87). This stereotype did not wane even in the decades of Socialism, despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of women had a job: only they had to work a “second shift”, the society still saw the household chores as their duty. A great part of women politicians want to meet these expectations even doubly: on one hand, most of them feel obliged to assure that they are also very capable as housewives, on the other hand, they extend this role metaphorically to their political activities. The “housewife” stereotype thus appears in the interviews both in a concrete and in a metaphorical sense.

We can reveal it to you, there's one thing we agreed upon. We will not speak about such things that are usually spoken about with you. I mean, oh, how interesting, a woman leading a “male” ministry. *Who will make the apricot jam?* And, it could be the ministry of health or *love*

affairs, but really, this is about weapons etc. etc. (Interview with Mónika Lamperth, Minister of Internal Affairs, 2002/24)

According to the metaphorical extension of the “housewife” stereotype, women are needed in politics because they are better experts in housekeeping and the whole country is just like a big household. These expressions were not used by journalists but by the female politicians themselves, independently of their party, i.e. their ideological background. We might state that this looks like a “good idea”, as a female politician can use it to solve the role conflict between the social expectations (“women’s job is housekeeping”) and the role they have assumed in public life.

— Doesn’t it seem a little insulting to you that the first thing that a male politician thinks about, when asked about women’s role in public life, is the shopping bag?

— No. On the contrary, I’m happy to see that our male colleagues have realized *who it is who really heads the housekeeping. The country must also be run like a household*, so they can count on our opinion. (Ilona Vigh, leader of the Fidesz Women’s organization, 2003/33)

The second strong social expectation connected with women is that “a woman should remain a woman”, that is, she should try to please the men by being beautiful, pretty, not only gentle but also “feminine” in her appearance – she should as far as possible comply to the current ideals of beauty. In the interviews by Ross many female politicians in the English-speaking world complained about journalists being mainly interested in their appearance and connecting their appearance with their capability and suitability for their work (Ross 2002, 89). In addition to this, for women “excessive prettiness” may turn to a disadvantage: for male politicians, it is always favourable to be good-looking and attractive, for female politicians not necessarily, on the contrary – prettiness may have a negative effect (Ross 2002, 140). In the interviews examined here, the combination of “female politician” and beauty also appears repeatedly:

“A presentiment: for you, the politically most boring day in 2003 will be the 15th of February. On the preceding day, *you will obviously go to the hairdresser’s, then on Saturday you will put on your most beautiful dress and accept your mandate for a new leader’s position.*” (The reporter to Ibolya Dávid, leader of MDF, 2003/6)

The double expectation – a female politician should be a “woman”, but yet not so very feminine – is most concisely expressed in the words of a female protocol adviser. It is obvious that she considers it “natural”: female politicians must comply to many more expectations than male politicians, and also in her interpretation, the default politician is a male.

“The feminine appearance is important, but it must be controlled. People should not keep saying, “look, what a pretty thing she’s wearing”, but as she starts speaking, people should pay attention to what she says. Wearing something with an unusual pattern, something interesting is problematic. This is something a woman can only wear once. Because people will notice it and if they see her once again wearing it, they will say: she’s wearing it again.” (Interview with Ibolya Görög, 2004/46)

Strangely enough, a concise example of stereotypes related to women is given by a report about the then female minister of equal opportunities, who at that time changed her position to become a Member of the European Parliament. The relevant details of the rather lengthy description:

- (1) She is dressed in composed black, her skirt ending just a hair’s breadth above the knee. She makes coffee, serves lemonade. In her kitchen, a much-used cookbook – from the youth of her aunts. With this book, she cooked the first Schmarrn in her life. Among the friends of her first husband, András Lányi [famous philosophers], he also had a part in the lady finding her vocation. My landlady is cosily curled up in the corner of the sofa in her living-room. At home, the world of politics is formed by interests – she says –, this is difficult terrain for a woman with emotional-rational motives. When did you cook something really big? – I cooked chicken last week-end. –

That's nothing to speak about. – Her husband can take the stress, sometimes he even enjoys the protocol: theatre, receptions, dinners. In the ball season he even had the opportunity to brush up his dancing skills. This comes in handy, as dancing is one of Katalin's hobbies. Of course, there are still worries: you cannot be a 100 percent grandmother even if 99 percent of your little free time belongs to your grandchild. (About Katalin Lévai, 2004/21.)

Conclusions

The roles of female politicians as formed in the discourse are, of course, always the result of the interaction between the journalist and the interviewed person, that is, constructed jointly by them. It may be both the journalist and the interviewee who take the initiative in constructing the role. Of course, there can be conflicts in the roles being formed (for instance, the interview subject will not accept the initiative of the journalist), but I found only one example for this: the role proposed was the role of a *feminist female politician*. Women politicians do not reject the stereotypical roles (housewife, feminine woman), and so there are no conflicts in constructing roles of this type.

What Ross found out about politics and media culture in English-speaking countries seems to hold true also for my corpus. First, the media show the female politicians primarily as women and only secondarily as politicians (Ross 2002, 81). Second, the media undermine the female politicians' authority in numerous hardly observable steps (Ross 2002, 80). Third, the media pay extra attention to female politicians' appearance, to their femininity or lack of femininity, complaining at the same time that women are too feminine to represent leading, important themes (Ross 2002, 69). Fourth, the media deal differently with male and female politicians, and this discourse helps to maintain intellectual habits that in practice lead to discrimination. (Ross 2002, 99).

It is hard to get rid of stereotypes, even in an editorial team of a paper which, as can be inferred from its editorial practices, tries to liberate itself from sexist attitudes, and even in cases where it is obvious that the female politicians by complying to stereotypical expectations only undermine their own authority. There are many reasons for

this. The expectations, however culturally constructed, seem to be natural and unquestionable, since they function in the subconscious, as an incontrollable activity. In this case, what is cultural has been “somaticized”, and this means really “the construction of the subconscious” (Bourdieu 1994, 30). As Bourdieu points out, beside the conflicting stereotypes referring to women or men, we will learn to know a series of homologous oppositions, culture organizes the habits, the qualities and even the professions in oppositions. In addition to this, the restrictions that we have internalized are at their strongest at the same time as rights and liberties become formally general. In our case: as women’s equality is realized on paper, the overt oppression is replaced by “internal conviction” (Bourdieu 1994, 19).

Precisely this deep internalization explains why women politicians, even if they already begin to realize what is really happening, fail to see its importance. The interviews by Ross show that the interviewed women politicians, although they realize that the media are primarily interested in their appearance and their private life, only seldom think that this, together with the language and imagery used in the media, could undermine their authority as a politician. They refused to admit that this trivialization – paying attention to their appearance, using their first names, making photos of them in “feminine” surroundings instead of, for instance, the Parliament – destroys their credibility (Ross 2002, 166). Ross is probably right in claiming that not only the voters and the media are guilty of the retention of gender stereotypes. Female politicians themselves, too, want to comply to the stereotypes, in order to profit from them (Ross 2002, 139–140). But probably, we could add, female politicians often do not realize that they have accepted the traditional “female” role as offered to them by the media, as offering the roles and automatically accepting them often happens on levels of meaning that are not so readily accessible for linguistic consciousness.

The time has come to take the second step after the first one that was taken 100 years ago, the second step which will not be easier than the first one: it is time to liberate our thinking as well.

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