ARTICLES

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THE RULING DISCOURSE ON PROPER WOMANHOOD IN THE HUNGARIAN PARLIAMENT

ABSTRACT: Starting with a debate in September 2012 on the incorporation of domestic violence as a distinct offence in Hungary's new Criminal Code, the issue of gender and proper womanhood has regularly re-surfaced in statements made by ruling coalition MPs in parliamentary debates. Drawing on discourse analysis, this study investigates a selection of these statements in the context of the government's current policy and public discourse. The paper argues that these discourses outline an essentialist model reflective of a dominant ideology that is traditional, Christian, patriarchal and heteronormative, which, by hinting at women's accountability for certain social ills, also allows for a chain of associations that ultimately results in the subversion of the overall social status of women, dividing and marginalising them further and discrediting any claims or actions aimed at establishing a more egalitarian society in the country.

KEY WORDS: Hungary, political discourse, FIDESZ-KDNP coalition, gender hierarchy, proper womanhood, motherhood.

The Hungarian Government and Its Policies

In the 2010 parliamentary elections in Hungary, over two-thirds of the seats were won by the FIDESZ-Hungarian Civic Alliance and their election partner, the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP). Consequently, the two parties were entitled to form a coalition government, one which is often described as

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centre-right on the political spectrum. While the political position and ideology of the current government has been characterised in a variety of ways, such as the Hungarian "New Right" with a mixed ideology (Bozoki), "Christian and nationalist" (Tartakoff), "the conservative third way" (Pétervàry), "Christian socialist" (Méltányosság) and the "mafia state" or "octopus state" for its putative long reach (Magyar et al.), it is important to point out some of the specific features of the government's policy that may account for such a wide range of interpretations.

The FIDESZ-KDNP government can indeed be regarded as conservative, nationalistic and Christian in terms of the social and cultural values it represents. On the other hand, it also displays a particular animosity towards the free market economy and towards business sectors typically regarded as relatively profitable, such as banking, and foreign/Western capital represented in Hungary by large multinationals. Hence, a tendency to expand central government control—which is often coupled with state ownership—of particular segments of the economy has strengthened since the government assumed power. Moreover, pronounced political domination over Hungarian culture, the media, the education system and numerous other areas has evoked in many, especially among the older generations, memories of governing practices under socialism.[1] These actions signify an increasing political objective of normalising, regulating and controlling the whole of society as well as boosting the overall power and authority of the government and its close allies centred on the authoritative figure of the Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán.

As in some other parliamentary systems, because the political party or parties that win a parliamentary election are also entitled to form the new government in Hungary, members of which are usually also MPs themselves, there is no strict separation of the legislative and executive powers. This is particularly the case when MPs are encouraged to form a solid bloc and vote first and foremost along party lines, a common state of affairs since the regime change in 1990. The current government, with firm support from coalition MPs, made use of its legislative power and replaced the country's constitution with a new document called

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[1] In a heated parliamentary debate, the Prime Minister even stated: "In the eighties, I was not fighting against dictatorship; I was fighting against those who were doing [*sic!*] dictatorship" (Szalay).

the Fundamental Law, which went into force on January 1, 2012. Forced through Parliament by a two-thirds majority of the ruling coalition, the new Law was not based on an overall social consensus and thus was received with serial criticism. One such criticism was concerned with the institutionalisation of heteronormativity and the unambiguous preference for traditional gender roles expressed through the definition of marriage and family in Article L, in the section entitled Foundation:

(1) Hungary shall protect the institution of marriage as the union of a man and a woman established by voluntary decision and the family as the basis of the nation's survival. Marriage and parent-child relations provide the basis for a family.[2]

(2) Hungary shall encourage the commitment to have children (7).

The sense of social conservatism and a Christian value system is captured further in Article II, in the section entitled Freedom and Responsibility: "Human dignity shall be inviolable. Every human being shall have the right to life and human dignity; embryonic and foetal life shall be subject to protection from the moment of conception" (11). Although leading politicians in the ruling coalition have claimed that this statement merely carries symbolic significance, the Ministry of Human Resources since then has funded various programmes towards this end, such as a controversial pro-life campaign launched by the Agota Foundation.

Through its executive power, the government has also taken certain measures and implemented various programmes to achieve these objectives. These have included the introduction of family taxation, which offers significant tax deductions to "large families," which are defined as those with three or more children. The demographic programme passed in 2013 was primarily designed to encourage natural population growth through various types of benefit and support granted to families, such as a new system of housing support and more favourable conditions for maternity leave. The regulation of abortion[3] represents another example of state interference in this regard in the private affairs of citizens and in the medical profession in general. These examples illustrate that through the Law and its execution, Christian

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[2] The second sentence was added in spring 2013, the fourth time the Law was amended.

[3] Currently, abortion is legal in Hungary under certain conditions. A recent addendum to the issue was the status of the abortion pill, which was passed in May 2012, and then, within two weeks, the decision was rescinded as a result of a parliamentary debate initiated by the Christian Democrats.

conservative norms and ideas have increasingly become the legally binding reality for every citizen living within the borders of Hungary.

Public Governmental Discourse

The coalition has made apt use of its access to media channels to develop a public discourse in support of its value-system and policy, part of which regards the social role and position of women. Fairclough sees "discourses as ways of representing aspects of the world . . . associated with the different relations people have to the world, which in turn depends on their positions in the world" (124). Moreover, drawing on Fairclough, Baker and Galasinski emphasise that "discourse is constitutive of and constituted by social and political realities," (65) which are confirmed by means of power expressive of ideologies that are underlying "structures of signification" (66). They conclude that the study of discourse is thus a useful tool to "reveal the ideological framings of discursive practices," (25) to which this study also hopes to contribute.

The Hungarian government has developed a series of discursive strategies to contextualise, argue and justify its policies. It has ensured wide dissemination of these through the regulation, centralisation and government control of the media. In the government's public communication, certain tropes, such as family, nation, danger, attack, independence, defence and success, have surfaced regularly, with shifts in meaning, foci and relevance (Szabó 2007). I argue that the family, defined as the "basis for the nation's survival" (Fundamental Law 7), occupies a key position in this matrix of signifiers.

Foucault points out the importance of the family in modernity, in particular in the politics of emerging nation-states. He argues that, as of the mid-eighteenth century, governments have started to rely on the family as an exceptional tool of governance since they realised that "certain factors within the population, such as sexual behaviour, demographics, the number of children or consumption can be accessed only through the family" (119). Political power, therefore, has come to politicise the presumably private, familial space to shape and govern the nation, aiming to determine family matters and thus gender roles on the basis of government interests (Collins, Strach).

I emphasise that the family as an institution is not only central to governing, but also to constructing the nation as a unique and sovereign group of people. This phenomenon is not exclusive to Hungary, but is shared in varying degrees among nation-states that have located ethnicity at the core of their national consciousness. In his study of the constitution of nation-states, Smith distinguishes between "two models and trajectories of nation formation, the civic-territorial and the ethnic-genealogical," (4) of which Hungary is characterised by the latter. I consider ethnicity as "instrumental" (Smith 9) in the symbolic construction of Hungarian national identity in numerous ways, the most important segment of which for the current discussion is that the "'ethnicity' of a community . . . presupposes the uniformity and antiquity of its origins, as a result of which it may be viewed as a natural grouping and its characteristics as inherent in the population" (Greenfeld 13). Indeed, as captured by Bátory's definition of Hungarian identity as a "kin-state identity," central to the construction of Hungarian national identity is the consciousness of shared ethnic origin: it places the existence of the community in a historical continuum based on common blood descent and therefore constructing the image of Hungarians as a naturally evolving, authentic group defined though kinship, and not as a political or cultural "invention" (Sollors, Hobsbawm) or "imagined community" (Anderson).

The concept of nationhood constructed through that of ethnicity is inherently structured along gender lines: authors such as Domosh and Seager (160-167), McDowell (44-50), Rose (66-77) and Yuval-Davis (1-6, 25-29) discuss various ways in which the rhetorical construction of ethnicity rests on the notion of biological reproduction and thus of motherhood. This understanding throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries became culturally embedded in the feminisation of religion (Putney 7, 74-76, DeRogatis 211-212, Marsden 83-84), in which a relevant conceptual shift was indicated by modelling modern womanhood on the example of the Virgin Mary and sacred motherhood (DeRogatis 211)—a shift which also found its way to Hungary, where it prevailed well into the twentieth century (Balogh).

In terms of social structure, modernity advocated the model of the nuclear family for a middle class emerging through expansive industrialisation. The model became widespread in Europe and the US throughout the 19th century, marked by the separation of

the private and public spheres and specific, accentuated gender roles that placed women in the domestic realm, primarily as wives and mothers (Marsh 21-32). A true woman, according to this model, was expected to have "four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity," of which "piety was the core of woman's virtue, the source of her strength" (Welter 152). Paradoxically, while these virtues were expected to keep women in the private realm, the logic and arguments to justify it also stimulated the birth of the first women's movements and organisations, thus contributing to the emergence of a powerful social conscience, public presence and voice for women (Kelly), a phenomenon that also characterized Hungary even during the first half of the 20th century (Sipos).

The current Hungarian government, by focusing on nationhood conflated with ethnicity and thus endowing it with the notions of an inherently shared identity and culture, has succeeded in creating a populist discourse aimed at evoking an emotional unity and solidarity among the population, to which its policies in general can easily be appended. In order to heighten the sense of solidarity and constitute its own position as the sole power that can lead the nation, the government has also engaged in discourses of fear. I argue that this rhetoric is in line with the type of discourse Calhoun characterises as features of governments that are suspicious of globalisation. He concludes that one pronounced feature of such a discourse is that these nations "are generally presented in terms of inherited identities and solidarities in need of defence" (147). In the case of Hungary, a culture of fear is imposed upon the population through government discourse that relies heavily on the rhetoric of war—a feature that has historically figured in the construction of Hungarian nationhood because of the series of wars it had to engage in to achieve independent statehood (Kiss).

The current government's messages regularly reiterate that the Hungarian nation is under attack, both foreign and domestic. It is argued that the European Union presents a foreign political danger to the nation, while the IMF, foreign investors, multinationals and banks pose an economic threat. Since the government discursively identifies itself with the nation, every Hungarian critic of government practices is constituted as a domestic enemy of the nation (Szabó 129). This type of discourse not only heightens the emotional zeal among the people, but it also positions the government rhetorically in a military context:

Hungarians have been regularly hearing that their nation is in danger and that the government, engaged in a successful war of independence, represents the force that has managed to and will continue to defend Hungarians from these attacks. Furthermore, with a recent shift in the discourse, it is no longer merely Hungarian people that are being defended, but Hungarian *families*.

This introduction of the familial into the discourse of fear highlights further gender-related implications that the discourse of militarisation itself evokes. In her study of gendering ideologies and practices in Israel, for example, Berkovitch has found that the "environmental threat" (Sanday, quoted in Berkovitch 616) has increased "the masculine ethos" (606) in society, while confirming Israeli motherhood as the national mission through which women could be mobilised and incorporated into the state as citizens. In Hungary, the rhetoric of war framed by a series of perceived threats has created a culture of fear and/or uncertainty, which is rounded out by further concerns about negative demographic changes in the form of an aging and shrinking population.[4] While mobility has also contributed to this problem—indeed, the number of Hungarians that have migrated from the country is estimated to be around half a million, a significant number in a country of fewer than 10 million inhabitants—government communication still emphasises the need for natural reproduction, targeting women first and foremost to contribute to this imperative national project. All these indicate that concepts around which government discourse is structured, such as nation, family, attack and danger, not only overlap, but are loaded in terms of gender, conveying a message that locates the social significance of women in their role as mothers, while positioning them within a traditional gender hierarchy as well.

Parliamentary Discourse on Women

This rhetorical construction of women's role is echoed in a selection of statements made by ruling coalition MPs during parliamentary sessions. The main set of excerpts to be discussed

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[4] According to Hungary's National Census of 2011, the average number of children per family was 1.3, marriage rates were declining, only 44% of the population lived in families, etc.

is taken from a parliamentary debate on the legal status of domestic violence (Fábián) that took place on 10 September 2012. The issue was placed on the docket as a result of a civil initiative: in response to Parliament's[5] original refusal to recognise domestic violence—usually referred to in Hungarian as "violence within the family"—as a distinct offence, over one hundred thousand signatures were collected to demand its incorporation into the new Criminal Code. Reflective of the importance that the governing parties assigned to the matter, the discussion was scheduled for 3 a.m. This met with opposition outrage, as an outcome of which it was moved up to 9.30 p.m. Only seven MPs were present from the ruling parties, but the following words from one of them, István Varga,[6] were sufficient to immediately stir up a heated debate: "Maybe mothers should go back to mainly raising children, and maybe they should be primarily concerned about having not just one or two, but three, or rather four or five children in this society. Then we'd have a reason to respect each other more, and domestic violence wouldn't even come up."

The first sentence reflects the MP's identification with the logic of the Fundamental Law: if domestic violence is violence within the family, which is defined by law as a social group with parents and a child or children, then the female adult member of the family is by definition a mother. This lays the groundwork for the upcoming discourse that reflects and confirms traditional, essentialist approaches to gender roles. Accordingly, female representation in his discourse is achieved through the function of motherhood—something the MP seems to assess on the basis of the number of live births a woman has given. His reductionism, on the one hand, reflects the typically gendered nature of discourse on the topic of children in Hungary as far as it tends to be connected to women, both as a biological process as well as a social and cultural responsibility (Joó). The sentence suggests that having children is solely a matter of women's free will and choice: no reference is made to men—as if they either had no responsibility in the matter or performed their duties par

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[5] In the 2010 elections, only 9% of parliamentary seats were won by women. They comprised 8% of the FIDESZ-Christian Democrat coalition, 8% the Hungarian Socialist Party, 4% of the far right nationalist Jobbik party, and 31% of the centre-left, green liberal party Politics Can Be Different (LMP).

[6] A member of FIDESZ, he is the 60-year-old father of five children. His marital status is unclear.

excellence—nor to any social, economic, health-related or other factors that may also be considered in planning children.

Implied in this sentence is women's responsibility for the negative demographic change: the decreasing number of births and the resultant shrinking of the Hungarian population. Although the MP is unclear about the number of children a proper woman is expected to have, he is hinting at giving birth to at least three, but preferably more children. This ambiguity may be understood either as granting the freedom to determine the number of children one wishes to have beyond three or as an intentional vagueness. The informational gap in the discourse may also provide the government with the freedom to change their expectations, thus leaving women—discursively constituted as solely responsible for the number of children they have—in a state of permanent self-doubt about their performance as birth givers.[7]

This vagueness, however, also contributes to the confirmation of patriarchal power within the family, creating a faulty and highly simplified logic based on which domestic violence cannot be regarded as a crime but as a familial act for which women—as inappropriate mothers—may be held responsible. This is achieved by a logical twist introduced through the concept of respect. The excerpt hints at the gendered nature of violence within the family, which is typically committed against women. Women as potential victims, however, become constituted as potential perpetrators in this discourse: they give birth to children, the number of which is found insufficient by the husband, as a result of which he is justified in not respecting her and thus in expressing his dissatisfaction in the form of violence.

The social responsibility among women for certain problems has since then been implied in other parliamentary debates as well. Almost exactly a year later, for example, Parliament was discussing the problem of homeless people and their visibility in frequented public spaces. One of the Christian Democrat MPs, Tamás Lukács,[8] unexpectedly referred back to the debate on domestic violence when he argued as follows: "When, as a result of outside pressure or pressure from other groups, we work on a law on domestic violence, we do not realise that we are passing

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[7] This is especially interesting as one of the most famous slogans used by Viktor Orbán offered a clear understanding of the model family in 2000: "Two parents, three rooms, three children, four wheels."

[8] Aged 63, with 5 children, he heads the parliamentary Human Rights Committee.

laws to solve a problem and, in doing so, create another problem, and thus we stand here surprised that we have the problem of homeless people . . . I braved a homeless shelter, where the story told by 8 out of 10 men started with: 'when I got a divorce . . . '. Is no one responsible for this?"

Through a series of conflations and often unfounded associations, he seemed to imply that civil society was wrong to pressure Parliament to consider domestic violence as a legal offence; that the debate over the recognition of domestic violence as an offence accounted for some divorce cases; and that the majority of homeless people were men who, in their autobiographical narratives, identified divorce as the initial reason for their current state. The MP was ultimately blaming civil society activists, mainly women, and victims of domestic violence filing for divorce, primarily women, for homelessness in the country. The act of assigning collective blame to women is solely grounded in his personal experience and not in research findings or specific studies of the issue, which is a recurring feature of statements made by ruling coalition MPs in heated debates.

During the discussion on domestic violence, Varga's words stirred up fervent reactions from certain opposition MPs—of whom three were women—in response to which Varga clarified his position: "The most important calling for women, ladies, especially young ladies, is to have children. Besides this, naturally, once everyone has given birth to two, three or four children and has given enough to the homeland and everyone is happy, and [*sic!*] afterwards everyone can fulfil herself and must work at different places . . . The birth rate is the lowest in Hungary. Women have forgotten about giving birth while they were busy with getting emancipated." He not only confirmed his position that childbearing lies at the heart of proper womanhood, but through a more refined choice of words he attached it to the culturally loaded, old-fashioned word for "ladies" as opposed to the more generic "women." In his statement, motherhood functions as the social construction through which women can contribute to the nation, like a gendered duty of citizenship, as well as a source of happiness. Varga defined motherhood as a calling, a spiritual and moral responsibility of a higher degree, that enjoys primacy in the lives of proper women, to which paid employment must remain secondary. At this point, however, he briefly shifted into a register reflective of a more egalitarian language use, referring to work as fulfilment for women, as if leaving motherhood out of the

equation. In the last sentence, however, he returned to his original logic, presenting female emancipation in opposition to motherhood and thus to proper womanhood. Additionally, since women are able to contribute to the success of the nation as mothers, the last sentence by extension also implies that women concerned primarily with self-fulfilment and gender equality fail to serve the nation in their proper capacity.

Another coalition MP, Ottó Karvalics,[9] lent a political dimension to the debate when he argued as follows: "A faulty education system and a female visibility in the negative sense have brought it [violence] into the family." The education system to which he referred resulted from a series of educational reforms introduced under previous, primarily leftist and liberal governments, whose parties are currently in the opposition. In order to correct the perceived shortcomings of this system, the present government, once it had assumed power, initiated a reconstruction of public education, which included changing the curriculum for some subjects and introducing ethics or morality as compulsory. The statement thus also forms part of the discourse that justifies these interventions in the education system.

István Szávay,[10] a member of the right-wing nationalist Jobbik party, expressed his support of coalition views in his statement, which also illustrates the cultural logic and gendered pattern of masculine language use: "I did not want to say anything, but Katalin Ertsey[11] has simulated my adrenalin level, so I must speak up … [I]n the midst of the great defence of women's rights, in the fight for equal rights, their message has often slipped into hatred of men, into the expression of some kind of female superiority." The conflation of the protection of women's rights and the struggle towards a more egalitarian society with a sense of female superiority and hatred towards men is an increasingly common discursive practice aimed at undermining advocates of women's equality and discrediting any activism, political or professional discourse that point outs shortcomings of gender equality in the country (Barát). It also clusters these as ideologies and practices that jeopardise social stability and the country itself.

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[9] Aged 66, married with two children.
[10] Aged 32, married with no children.
[11] Female opposition MP.

The growing frustration with which certain ruling MPs approach gender equality and its proponents is conveyed through the intensity of the words used by the leader of the Christian Democratic People's Party, Péter Harrach[12], a theologian by training, during a parliamentary debate on 30 September 2013 over government policy on state funding for families: "Opposition ultra-feminists try to depict ruling coalition MPs as boors for campaign purposes . . . Christians respect women, as God created them in his own image, but they respect mothers even more as it [motherhood] is the complete self-fulfilment of womanhood." In Harrach's discourse, the views of the political opposition are conflated with extreme feminism and the opposition itself is accused of campaigning over six months before election time. He positions Christians—and thus himself and the coalition—in contrast to them and confirms the sanctity of motherhood—endowed by faith—as the complete fulfilment of womanhood. Through this logic, he provides a religious explanation to justify his claim, one that cannot be challenged lightly, as it becomes a matter of belief.

The Construction of Proper Womanhood

These examples illustrate particular ideological presumptions and changing socio-cultural tendencies encouraged by the current political power structure in Hungary. Although reality is far more diverse, treating gendered female bodies as comprising a homogeneous group and influencing their self-perception and particular life choices through discourses, particular policies and institutions do impact women's lives increasingly. Therefore, government discourses and policies do matter as they designate people's opportunities, life courses and positions, which are different for men and for women. Thus gender does matter.

Statements made by the ruling coalition in Parliament clearly indicate the politicisation of gender: the political elite advocates the model of motherhood as the desired example for Hungarian women, hearkening back to a model of true womanhood that spread in the nineteenth century and confirming gender hierarchy with heteronormative masculine power and patriarchy as the norm. Unlike this model, however, the current political emphasis

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[12] Aged 66, with 3 children.

is placed on female reproductive capacity and performance. In relation to that, any form of deviation towards a more egalitarian gender perspective, from the fundamental belief in the right of choice and self-determination to the demand for equal rights and recognition, is dismissed as a leftist-liberal project—which is not necessarily the case by definition. Moreover, egalitarianism is also conflated with the socialist period—when political discourse conveyed the idea of complete gender equality, and therefore a rejection of that political establishment has often translated into a rejection of the era's "forced emancipation"—as well as with foreign, that is, Western, influence—often camouflaged in the discourse as feminism. Feminism, in turn, is frequently used with an implied characterisation of extremist, man-hating, greedy, career-oriented, flamboyant single women who resent marriage and refuse to have children, which has long carried a negative connotation in mainstream Hungarian society (Acsady and Hochberg). Non-conformist women are thus often misrepresented as indifferent if not hostile to the current government and thus, to the nation, both in political and ethnic terms.

Due to the overtly vague definition of domesticity, women have been, implicitly or explicitly, held responsible for specific social problems, such as divorce and homelessness; they therefore often appear as the guilty party and as perpetrators. I argue that this is partially possible because women are typically discussed as separate from men in whatever familial project they are associated with. Men tend to be only implied in discourses on family, but their role or position is not problematized. This could also be observed in connection with the proposition of the infertility tax, for example, later referred to as the childless tax, which was considered as a potential levy on women.

Operating as a free floating signifier, motherhood also allows for the power structure to change its discourse and momentary expectations at will, granting a flexibility to governmental and patriarchal rule as well as maintaining the heightened psychological zeal in women to perform better. In the meanwhile, women are faced with the recognition that whatever they do may not be good enough. Moreover, the ruling coalition's divisive discourse can undermine any female solidarity and women's movement—that have emerged only modestly since the regime change (Arpad and Marinovich)—and deepen divisions between their various groups. Women thus unintentionally re-institute and naturalise heteronormativity as well as masculine and

patriarchal power positions as part of their "unconscious ideological" (Ahall) realm, degrading and marginalising themselves and their own sex even further in the midst of the great Hungarian national project.

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