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Women in politics: The European Union and Hungary

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Introduction

In 2005, a year after Hungary's accession to the European Union, it is time that we examine what kind of environment and expectations the Hungarian society will face and what kind of European experiences it will encounter in terms of gender equality. The impact of the EU on equal opportunities for women may be approached from many angles, including general human rights, the specific labour market situation, legal harmonization processes, etc. (Pető, 2003; Gyulavári and Kardos, 2000); and, of course, from the viewpoint of politics and decision-making. However, in general, little attention is paid to the issues of the role of women in politics.¹ One reason for this may be that Hungarian politics is dominated by inter-parties and personal conflicts and important public policy issues, as well as general matters of principle and 'common good' are pushed into the background. This explains the low level of female participation in politics: women are reluctant and unable to enter a politics that is characterized by insecurity, lack of transparency and conflict. And this is despite the fact that one of the 12 task-packages of the action programme adopted in Beijing at the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women specifically focused on women's participation in power and decision-making, and that the topic is high on the EU agenda, too. In Hungary, by contrast, at the time of this paper's publication, the government decree (no. 289/2004, X.28) establishing the Ministry of Youth, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities—the ministry responsible for the equal opportunities of women and men—makes no mention of what aspects of politics, power or decision-making should fall within the ministry's remit.

This approach differs from the thrust of the EU, namely that gender-equality policies must incorporate equality in politics and in decision-making. The validity of the EU approach is justified on both practical and theoretical grounds. From a practical point of view, the problem of inequality cannot be tackled on the narrow fronts of the economy and

¹ On this topic see Lestál (2001) and Lévai and Kiss (1999).

society, leaving the world of politics to one side, when the political decisions and programmes aimed at eliminating inequality are typically taken in conditions of inequality, namely through male dominance. As for the theory, the EU approach is rooted in the relative independence of politics; in other words, it accepts that there is not always a direct link between socio-economic and political processes or changes. The old debate on politics and on democracy—or, more specifically, on ways of achieving gender equality—is reflected in this point: should certain issues, for instance the question of political equality, be put on the agenda only once the issues of economic and social equality have been resolved, or does politics have a momentum of its own? Two opposing viewpoints appear as answers. According to one, political players can table issues for public debate before economic or social developments push them onto the political agenda (Pateman, 1988). Today, this idea is linked to institution-focused interpretations. For example, some argue that ‘independent’ politics is in a position to create (political) equality, or at least help it develop, by using supporting mechanisms and institutions (Krook, 2003). By contrast, according to the other approach, the change in women’s roles in politics follows the trends in economic and social development (see Inglehart and Norris, 2003).

The EU’s approach and some of its policies are based on the notion that politics has an elbow room, and thus it seeks to enforce certain policies of equality in countries with different backgrounds. This notion is based on a) *values*, b) *political realities*, c) the activity of *political pressure groups*, and, of course, on d) *political interests*. Suffice it to mention just one example of each of these reasons and explanations: a) the notion of equality has, from the start, influenced the founders and advocates of European integration, and has been part of the leading trends in European thought; b) it is a political reality that conditions in different countries cannot be adjusted to the level of the poorer performers in any field, least of all in equal opportunities for women; c) the European Women’s Lobby has taken firm root in the EU and has developed into a powerful pressure group since its establishment in 1990. Finally, on the subject of political interests, d) it is in the interest of the EU to gain more support among women. Although few studies focus on the fact, women are typically less enthusiastic about the European Union than men. The explanation for this may be limited knowledge and economic pessimism (Nelsen and Guth, 2000).

Without underestimating other aspects and fields of women’s equal opportunities, this paper will concentrate solely on the political conditions, and focus on two key questions: first, on the EU itself, and then a comparison will be made between women’s participation at various levels in politics across the EU and in Hungary. In other words, the question is: what are the political roles women play, have been given or have gained in EU

countries—and at various levels of EU central public policy making and in EU institutions?

The European Union—the institution through women’s eyes

The European Union as an institutional environment is rarely examined from the perspective of women’s equal opportunities. Yet this aspect should not be overlooked, for EU institutions issue directives and guidelines, and therefore the patterns they follow and the examples they set for themselves are of special relevance.

Institutional contradictions

Despite some positive changes, uncertainties cannot be neglected. Although this paper argues that the EU plays a positive role in increasing the political opportunities for women, some aspects of the EU’s operation are not necessarily beneficial in this respect: for instance, some concerns are reflected in the debates about the EU’s democratic deficit, and about the low levels of citizens’ participation and inclusion. Some institutional aspects of the EU’s operation are also the source of concern. For example, Bergquist (2004) believes that a corporative decision-making mechanism is taking shape (*via* lobbying and pressure groups), which does not favour women, who find it more difficult to enter corporative, rather than transparent and directly elected bodies. This is complemented by the overall complexity of the decision-making process, the behind-the-scenes deals in decision-making, and an overflowing committee structure, none of which helps transparent decision-making or greater female participation.

Despite the contradictions in the general institutional conditions, it must be emphasized that the EU has, for some time, been looking at the issue of equal opportunities for women in decision-making. Recommendation No. 1996/694 of the Council (in line with the principles of the Beijing programme mentioned above) required and anticipated positive action to ensure equality in decision-making. With the Amsterdam Treaty of 1997, equal rights were incorporated into EU public policies. The European Commission adopted its first comprehensive programme on gender equality in June 2000, for the period between 2001 and 2005 (*Framework Strategy on Gender Equality*). Along with promoting equal rights in the economy, in society and in the civil sector (as already required by earlier policies), the *Strategy* also aims at bringing equality into decision-making and eliminating gender stereotypes. In other words, it applies the requirement of equality to ‘public’ areas: to politics, public debate and the media. The Commission applied the same principles to its own operation, by declaring in its decision 2000/407/EC of 19 June 2000 that neither gender may have less than 40%

representation on any committee or expert group. In relation to the *Framework Strategy*, an Action Programme was also adopted, whose basic concept was *gender mainstreaming*: in other words, at each level and stage of decision-making, the impact on women has to be observed and particular public policies should assist the achievement of equal opportunities. In line with the principle of the Council's Recommendation and to accelerate its effects, on 18 January 2001 the European Parliament adopted a resolution (although this is not legally binding), whereby both genders must have a 40% quota in political institutions and decision-making positions.

Diversity

Apart from the institutional environment, the European Union's diversity is another factor that has an impact on the EU's women's policy. So far as equal opportunities for women are concerned, EU member states have different experiences, cultures and levels of development: just consider the differences between Scandinavia, Southern Europe and Central and Eastern Europe. However, as is shown by political science analyses at the level of individual countries, this diversity does not inhibit positive experiences. For instance, regarding regulations on political equality, and the quota system in particular, it is hard to withstand a new 'pattern' one party will bring in a quota (typically one on the left of the political spectrum) or will introduce some programme, and sooner or later the other parties will follow suit, since the issue is now on the agenda and anyone shopping around on the political market will see this better offer (Caul, 2001).

In the EU-15, each country has some sort of quota to assist women's participation in politics. In certain states (e.g. in Germany, Belgium, The Netherlands, Denmark and Norway) almost all parties have quota regulations (be they on the left or the right). In other countries, not all political parties or only left-wing parties apply these types of rules. However, since the early to mid-1980s, the number of parties adopting such policies has been clearly rising. In recent years, quota systems have been introduced in most of the new accession countries, but they are significantly more circumscribed in their content and scope.

Sometimes it is political pressure and other times it is a change in political values that sparks special measures to increase women's participation in politics. For instance, with voters becoming increasingly volatile and in order to gain large numbers of female votes, the traditionally non-women-friendly French politics was the first in Europe to introduce not only a quota system, but a mandatory requirement for parity, and incorporated it into the Constitution (1999). First convened in 1999, the Scottish Parliament (which, of course, has no legislative powers at the UK national level, but has more powers than a regional parliament) viewed an

increase in women's representation as a value choice and a way of distancing itself from traditional British political patterns. The richness and steady expansion of programmes that focus on women's political equality in the member states is part of the EU internal reserves.

What has been achieved?

In general, the EU has been exposed to a multitude of positive impacts and expectations regarding the issue of increasing women's participation in politics and, as a result, it has set up its equality programmes in line with its own value system. Is the EU meeting its own expectations in every respect? Not quite. Currently, there are only seven women, or 29%, among the 24 European Commissioners (one each from Denmark, Austria, The Netherlands, Lithuania, Poland, Luxembourg and Sweden). That compares with 25% in the previous term. One of the European Parliament's 17 committees dealing with internal affairs is the Committee on Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities, which has annual meetings with committees from the national parliaments in charge of gender equality—where such a committee exists. In April 2004, the European Parliament set up the so-called High-Level Group on Gender Equality, which focuses particularly on the issue of equal opportunities for women. In the first term, about one fifth of the Commission's middle-ranking and senior officials were women, and the proportion did not change significantly in 2004. It may be too early to comment on the current term, but as regards the 1999–2004 Commission, it should be mentioned that Anna Diamantopoulou, Commissioner for Employment and Social Affairs, was an influential person in the EU. Her motto, "*paper legislation is not enough*" (in other words, issues of women's equality must be reflected in day-to-day policy and based on the principle of *gender mainstreaming*) reflected her determination and often conflict-filled opinion of the EU.

On the negative side of the equation we see that only 15% of the European Parliament's committee chairs are women (30% of MEPs are women), and only two political groupings are co-chaired by women.² Women are overrepresented in committees dealing with public policies that are often regarded as having a female element, while there are other fields where women are barely present. In the EU's constitution-making process female participation was strikingly low (17%), and it is no coincidence that the draft Constitution failed to pay particular attention to women's participation in politics.

A current problem that awaits for solution is that the *Framework Strategy* mentioned above is coming to an end and there are no comprehensive

² For details see Womenlobby (2005), and EU (2005a).

programmes on the horizon to deal with equal opportunities as a priority. In fact, the Commission seeks to package gender equality in a large social programme, entitled *Progress*, due to be launched after 2007. This would be a retrograde step. The EU has failed to introduce legally binding regulations or to intervene robustly in national representation issues or the related national decision-making process. For instance, it has not stipulated gender quotas for the European Parliament elections (as was recommended by the European Women's Lobby). This fact is possibly related to the Parliament's increased role in decision-making. Political parties in member states are rediscovering the previously rather inconsequential European Parliament mandates and MPs as a means of advancing their policies (Messmer, 2003). In other words, as they begin to carry more weight, we can expect that the European Parliament seats will become less open to women, and it will be increasingly difficult to enforce EU policies on political equality for women.

Women's participation in politics in the countries of the European Union—including Hungary

How successful are the EU's positive efforts to create equality for women, given the various institutional, national and political constraints in different countries? Are there any signs of real development? What country groups and 'country situations' are out there? Of course, as far as women's political opportunities and equality are concerned, there are broader questions that need to be asked about today's Europe, regardless of the EU. Since 1990 neither the left-wing nor the conservative parties have enjoyed a hegemonic position—unlike in previous periods —, and thus the political situation may be less intense now than before. PR electoral systems prevail, which are more favourable to minority candidates (including women) than majority systems.³ In general, consensus-oriented institutional solutions are more widespread (for instance, many countries have coalition governments, in some cases with quite broad coalitions), and thus positive neutrality characterizes the political environment. Of course, the newly accessing countries are different in many respects—maybe not so much in terms of their institutional solutions, but rather in their traditions or recent and distant pasts, where issues of women's political equality rarely made it onto the public agenda (Ilonszki, 2004). It is no coincidence that the EU had serious concerns about the impact of the new member states (Bretherton, 2001). Although candidate countries were required to adopt nine directives related to equality and to integrate them into their national legal systems, these did not cover issues of political decision-making. This should come as no

³ Although this does not automatically hold true, see Ilonszki and Montgomery (2002).

surprise: even in old member states, the EU managed to introduce its relevant policies only as recommendations, as we have seen above.

Next we will examine the participation of women at various levels of politics in EU countries. In particular, the participation of women in the European Parliament, in national parliaments and governments, and in local (regional) administrations will be examined. A combined view of participation at the level of EU institutions and at various local political levels will illustrate both the potential impact of the EU and the prevalent conditions in the individual countries and country groups. Is there any coherence with respect to women's presence at different levels of politics? What is behind the lack of coherence: is it the EU's strength or its weakness that is reflected in the figures? In each case it is important to examine how Hungary fits into the European picture.

In the first direct elections to the European Parliament⁴ (1979) 17% of the MPs were women, and this rate has been gradually increasing ever since. Differences between countries have gradually narrowed at the European level. Although still relatively large differences can be observed in terms female representation at the country level the country differences are much smaller at the EU level. The explanation is related to some issues described earlier: due to the European Parliament's formerly weaker powers elections used to carry less political risk and have fewer consequences, and, as a result, female candidates had a better chance to run and win. Also, certain EU requirements as well as its socializing power, actually forced individual member states to nominate more female candidates.

Table 1 summarizes a number of points. It tracks the trend in the proportion of women representatives in the European Parliament following the elections of 1999 and 2004, displays the variance between the two results, and provides the corresponding data from EU states' national parliaments for 2004. It also shows the difference between the female composition of the European Parliament and the national parliaments in a breakdown of the EU-15 and the 10 new accession countries.

In 2004, the average proportion of female representatives was 32.5% in old and 22.8% in new member states. In total, between 1999 and 2004, the share of female representatives in the European Parliament dropped from 30.9% (194 women out of 626 MEPs) to 30.3% (222 women out of 732 MEPs). With the exception of three countries, the number of women in the European Parliament rose in each EU state—and the slight drop observed in the three countries occurred from a high level. In old member states, European Parliament numbers were more balanced than national figures, which is probably attributable to positive efforts to even up the rates. Differences among the member states are more visible at the national level: Italy, Portugal, Greece, Ireland and France are lower down the order, which is not

⁴ In earlier periods, members were delegated.

surprising, while in the case of the UK, we must take the electoral system into account. A plus sign in the last column of *Table 1* shows that women's participation is higher in the European Parliament than in the given country's national legislature, while a negative sign denotes the reverse. Differences of around 5% are negligible. The greater the positive difference, the harder it might be to elevate the role of women in politics in the given country. It is no coincidence that France, Luxembourg and Ireland are again at the top, although Luxembourg's result is difficult to interpret, given its small size.

Table 1

Share of female MPs in the European Parliament (1999, 2004)
and in national parliaments (2004), (%)

Country	Women's share in the EP		Women's share in national parliaments	Difference in the composition	
	1999* (1)	2004 (2)	2004 (3)	of the EP, 2004/1999 (2)–(1)	of the EP and of the national parliament, 2004 (2)–(3)
<i>Old EU member states</i>					
Austria	38.1	38.9	33.9	+0.8	+5.0
Belgium	28.0	29.2	35.3	+1.2	–6.1
Denmark	37.5	35.7	38.0	–1.8	–2.3
Finland	43.8	35.7	37.5	–8.1	–1.8
France	40.2	43.6	12.2	+3.4	+31.4
Germany	30.9	31.3	32.2	+0.4	–0.9
Greece	16.0	29.2	14.0	+13.2	+15.2
Ireland	33.3	38.5	13.3	+5.2	+25.2
Italy	10.3	19.2	11.5	+8.9	+7.7
Luxembourg	33.3	50.0	20.0	+16.7	+30.0
The Netherlands	32.3	44.4	36.7	+12.1	+7.7
Portugal	20.0	25.0	19.1	+5.0	+5.9
Spain	34.4	33.3	36.0	–1.1	–2.7
Sweden	50.0	57.9	45.3	+7.9	+12.6
United Kingdom	24.1	24.4	17.9	+0.3	+6.5
<i>New EU states</i>					
Cyprus	–	0.0	10.7	–	–10.7
Czech Republic	–	20.8	17.0	–	+3.8
Estonia	–	33.3	18.8	–	+14.5
Hungary	–	33.3	9.8	–	+23.5
Latvia	–	22.2	21.0	–	+1.2
Lithuania	–	38.5	10.6	–	+27.9
Malta	–	0.0	9.2	–	–9.2
Poland	–	13.0	20.2	–	–7.2
Slovakia	–	35.7	19.3	–	+16.4

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Slovenia	–	42.9	12.2	–	+30.7
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Source: *Freedman (2002: 180) and EU (2005b).

The situation is different in the new member states. National figures are clearly lower, participation differences between the European Parliament and the national parliaments are large, and, with the exception of Poland, all the former socialist countries show a positive variance between women’s presence in the European Parliament and in their national parliaments. However, due to the size of the countries, these percentages often apply to a small number of MPs. Interestingly, of all the former socialist countries, the participation of women in the national parliament is lowest in Hungary—while in the European Parliament elections Hungary achieved the EU average, primarily due to the position of the socialist party and its EU-compliant nomination strategies.

From a feminist point of view, the efforts to get women into political decision-making are rooted in the assumption that an appropriate level of female representation will have a positive impact on the political agenda and political decisions. Although it falls outside the scope of this chapter, it should be noted that female MEPs from the new member states are significantly different from their peers in the old EU countries in terms of political orientation: female MEPs from the old member states are overrepresented in the socialist and social-democratic parties (PES) and among the European greens (Greens/EFA), while female MEPs from the former socialist countries are better represented in the people’s party parliamentary group (EPP–ED), and some are also present in small, anti-EU groups. This all points to the fact that, while positive efforts to increase the level of female participation (at EU or national level) are welcome, decisions also need to be examined to be able to accurately assess the political consequences of participation.

The figures for participation in government bear only a partial similarity to those for national parliament and the European Parliament (*Table 2*).

The ratio of female government ministers more or less corresponds to the figures for female participation in national parliaments as shown in *Table 1*. There are countries where women hold a steady one third of the portfolios, or even more (Finland and Germany come out on top, with 50%). Positions in national government are influenced by changes in the governing party’s composition after elections, since there are more women ministers in left-leaning governments. For instance, in Spain the election of the socialist party in 2004 resulted in a significant jump in the number of female MPs. The data from the UK are worthy of comment: the presence of women is much higher in government than in parliament, which reflects the preference of the prime minister and central party politics. There were two countries with no female ministers at the end of 2004 (Cyprus and Slovakia), and a further five had a single female cabinet member (Greece, Italy, Estonia, Poland and Slovenia).

Women's representation in government is significantly lower in the new member countries. Comparison of the four columns will reveal that representation rates are largely consistent at each political level in the various

Table 2

Women's share in national and local (regional) government in 2000 and 2004, and in regional bodies in 2004 (%)

Country	Ratio of women ministers in government *		Women's participation in 2004	
	2000	December 2004	in regional governments	regional bodies
<i>Old EU member states</i>				
Austria	31	36	n.a.	n.a.
Belgium	22	21	31	37
Denmark	45	29	–	27
Finland	39	47	44	50
France	30	18	48	Presidents of the 26 regions are all men, except for one
Germany	35	46	33	25
Greece	12	6	18	Presidents are men in all 54 administrative units
Ireland	19	21	–	12 (incomplete)
Italy	14	9	10	15
Luxembourg	28	17	–	–
The Netherlands	31	31	30	18
Portugal	12	17	n.a.	2 (bodies of very few members)
Spain	17	44	37	31
Sweden	50	50	–	60 (mainly two-member bodies)
United Kingdom	35	26	–	–
<i>New EU states</i>				
Cyprus	0	0	–	–
Czech Republic	0	12	15	13
Estonia	13	8	–	–
Hungary	6	12	13	–
Latvia	30	25	–	n.a.
Lithuania	0	15	–	–
Malta	8	15	–	–
Poland	5	6	15	12.5
Slovakia	6	0	14	The 8 regions are headed by men
Slovenia	7	7	–	–

Source: 2000: COM (2001); 2004: The EU's website (EU, 2005c).⁵

⁵ On the referenced website there is information about the regional councils in the EU-15 countries and about regional governments in 17 member states. The situation is sometimes complicated, because each country has a different public administration system: for example, there is not necessarily an executive that heads local bodies (Sweden) or else the local body

n.a. : not available; –: not applicable; * : rounded figures.

countries, which demonstrates the strength of traditions and national political processes. In the light of this, it is all the more interesting to see how the impact of the European Union is making member states more similar in this respect, as can also be seen in *Table 1*. The EU's equal-opportunity policies are thus carried out in the context of national traditions and the positive balancing effect of the EU.

In terms of most of the figures, Hungary resembles the other new member countries; changes between 2000 and 2004 occurred only in government (due to the new government), and a more marked development in women's political participation was brought about by the European Parliament elections.⁶ Hungary lags behind not only in the field of equal opportunity for women and other aspects of women's rights, but also in terms of women's participation in public life.

A new phase?

The European Union has already embarked on many important tasks in relation to the achievement of equal opportunities for women, and it appears to continue its role in this respect. From the point of view of promoting equal opportunities for women, the EU is a positive association, although some of its critics say it deals too much with the issue. (Critics on the left worry that the advocates of women's equality will divert attention from the task of resolving social and economic inequalities while the radical right is concerned about traditional values.) However, with its programmes and activities in other fields, the EU has shown that it aims to resolve inequalities of other types.

By analysing the EU's organizational and political impact, it appears that—partly due to this impact—we are in a phase of positive development regarding the achievement of gender-based equal opportunities. Just as the second wave of feminism in the 1960s (following the first wave of middle-class feminism at the turn of the century) upset the liberal male social contract with its radical approach, and then in the 1980s, a third wave of state feminism elevated the issue to the national-state level in many countries and saw it enshrined in state equal-opportunities programmes, so today—at least in the European context—we could be seeing a fourth wave of *EU-feminism*. With European integration the issue has crossed national frontiers and has gained international relevance. In addition, the positive benefit

has a leader, but there is also a separate elected regional officer, too, for example a prefect (e.g. in France or in Greece). To explain the concept: in Hungary, the regional body is the county assembly, and the executive consists of a single person, i.e. its president.

⁶ For a detailed description of the local municipality level and its partial positive processes, see: Bocz and Sághi (2003), Koncz (2003), Lendvai (2004).

gender equality reaps from internationalization and the spread of democracy cannot be denied. In many regions (be it Latin America or South Africa), the third wave of democratization resulted in equal-opportunity programmes that can be an example to central European countries (e.g. the introduction of quotas in certain political institutions).

It is, therefore, fair to say that we live in a period of EU-feminism. Although the principle of equality was, from the start, a value endorsed by the EU, the concept of equal opportunity for women was boosted by the expansion of the EU, and was reinforced by the experiences and practices of the old member states (e.g. Denmark and The Netherlands), by the accession of the Nordic countries (Sweden and Finland), and by other challenges, national or international. It is in Hungary's profoundest interests to make best use of the opportunities, including equal opportunities for women. Today, there are three influences or conditions that could form the basis of a programme for progression. First, there is the influence of the EU, with its requirements and pressures. Secondly, we should take it as a warning that countries deemed 'less developed' than Hungary in terms of social structure and other aspects—whether old or new members—are much more advanced in these processes. And thirdly, the idea that politics has its relative independence—that it is not merely an adjunct, but is a force capable of building (or destroying)—appears to be justified in many respects. Based on all this, equal-opportunity programmes for women in Hungary are worth examining further.

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