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Feminist Perspectives in Political Science in Central and Eastern Europe

Feminist political analysis has become an integral part of both the political science research output and the wider institutionalization of the profession. Overall, this is a welcome if overdue development. We are convinced that studying politics without taking into account the gendered aspect of our social and political lives can only offer a hobbled and incomplete picture. Paraphrasing **Ackerly and True** (2018), studying politics without gender would be equivalent to instituting democracy without women - it is of course possible, historically, we have seen that to be the case, but we also recognize the central untenability and futility of such endeavours. This recognition was the primary driving motivator for why we convened this special issue. We aimed to contribute to the mainstreaming of gendered perspectives in political science - in both the Slovak and CEE contexts - not just by providing a venue for scholars still often working on topics perceived by some in the discipline as 'marginal' (Do Mar Pereira, 2017; Boulila, Cheung, Lehotai, 2019), but to showcase the importance and potential strengths of such work.

Here we do not wish to offer yet another exhortation towards a greater recognition and inclusivity of the growing variety of post-positivist methods and topics studied in political sciences (cf. Valkovičová, Hardoš, 2020). As **Campbell and Childs** (2013) claim, political science scholarship infused with feminist perspectives of methodology, ontology, and epistemology, has always sought impact. By recognising that social science research inherently carries the values and objectives of the researcher (Mills, 1968), feminist scholars of political science aim to bring in what is understood as "hard objectivity" (Harding, 1995) - the recognition of one's situatedness in the social context, one's power and privilege of producing knowledge. Within this special issue, we simply offer this collection of articles as a demonstration, not only of the mere viability of the approaches informed by feminism, but also of their essential need for an engaged, reflective, and knowledge-promoting social science. This need has become all the more apparent with the confluence of economic, political, and social crises that have rocked the region.

The institutionalisation of gender studies within social sciences has been contested in and outside of the CEE region (Do Mar Pereira, 2017). In the CEE region, this may be partially explained by the generally slow development of social sciences, which had been under the ideological pressure of the former regimes (Oates-Indruchová, 2008). The slow progress is commented on by **Mügge, Evans and Engeli** (2016) who claim that incorporating gender studies into political sciences (by, e.g., including it into textbooks and readings) is crucial, since power is inherent in gender structures. **Carroll and Zerilli** (1993) and **Kantola and Lombardo** (2016) summarise the main contributions of including gender studies into political sciences:

- It has inspired the rethinking of some scholarly concepts and questions (some previously taken for granted) from the perspective of gender analysis;
- It has provided a variety of different analytical approaches to analysing politics;
- It has expanded the boundaries of "the political" by recognising that "personal is political" and shining light on the politicisation of topics previously regarded as being part of the "private sphere";
- It strengthened the link between the theory and the praxis (e.g., by refocusing on the individual).

An example of the abovementioned contributions can be found in the objective of feminist security studies scholars (along with practitioners) as the first ones to draw attention to rape/sexual violence as a gender-based practice and a "weapon of conflict" (Průgl, Tickner, 2018, p. 78). Let alone the challenge of scholarly concepts, the methodology of political sciences has also been infused with feminist perspectives, which aim to engage with practitioners and subjects of their research, fostering genuine knowledge exchange, and treat their communication partners (i.e., research subjects) with collegial respect (Campbell, Childs, 2013). Moreover, gender studies within political sciences are also a very dynamic and adaptable field, which is not only demonstrated in its shift from the early "add women and stir" perspective, to complex studies of gender structures (Feitz, 2016). It is no longer true, that gender studies scholars are merely "led to analyse how masculinity and femininity shape politics", the recent scholarship is also asking gender-sensitive questions by observing that some perspectives are missing from the produced knowledge on social and political reality (Ackerley, True, 2010, p. 138). The latter is what **Enloe** (2004)

understands to be the “feminist curiosity”, critical tool of enquiry about the gendered nature of political process.

Despite being progressively accepted since the 1980s (Kantola, Lombardo, 2016), gender studies scholarship has been under attack from outside of the discipline, by a variety of political actors for its objective to provide the analysis of inequality and structures of oppression (Frey et al., 2014). As a convenient proxy, gender studies scholarship and scholars have become the target of far-right and neo-conservative political actors and their rhetoric of “gender ideology”, labelling them “ideologues - genderists”, the “threatening others” (Korolczuk, Graff, 2018). What we are currently witnessing across Europe are mostly oppositional practices of three types: academic de-institutionalisation, targeting of financial resources/budgets, and harassment/bullying of gender studies scholars (Kállay, Valkovičová 2020). The most blatant example of de-institutionalisation of gender studies as a study module was orchestrated by political elites directly in Hungary (Petö, 2018). In Poland, scholars have witnessed the establishment of “public black lists” of those teaching gender and sexuality studies (Engeli, 2019). In Romania, political elites almost succeeded in legally eliminating teaching gender theory in educational institutions (Tidey, 2020).

Indeed, politics in Central and Eastern Europe is currently discussed mostly in relation to populist and far-right political tendencies, democratic backsliding, and the attacks on gender equality (Dietze, Roth, eds., 2020). For example, **Corredor** (2019) claims that we can even speak of “anti-genderism” as a social movement force of a reactionary kind, responding to the emancipatory claims of feminist and LGBTI social movements. **Petö** (2018) also argues that the scholarship of gender studies is irreconcilable with the Hungarian government’s chauvinistic policies which are fostering the narrative of women predominantly in their positions of mothers and carers. **Paternotte and Verloo** (2020) even contend that across Europe, political scientists have been experiencing attacks, which showcases the populist and far-right actors’ interest in controlling the knowledge of social sciences and humanities: “Because of its object, political science appears as particularly frail when opposing power, and these changes are threatening its quality and future existence in Europe” (Paternotte, Verloo, 2020, p.288).

It is thus no surprise that gender studies scholars of political sciences have been interested in these developments - the enthusiasm can be observed in the reappearing panels and sessions at the European Conference of Politics and

Gender (ECPG). CEE countries have experienced mass civic mobilisations against restrictions of human rights, women's rights, corruption, and social insecurities (Graff, Korolczuk, 2021). Some of these issues were exacerbated by the COVID 19 pandemic, which also reopened questions about the global dimension of healthcare and social systems, as well as the uneven relations within and among European countries, seeing the precarious conditions of workers migrating from the East to the West and the differing political responses to this situation (Maďarová, Harďoš, Ostertágová, 2020).

This special issue was conceived in search of explorations of the complex political and social development in both the CEE and the wider region from a gender perspective. While acknowledging the "liminality of the differentiation of the East/West nexus" (Barát, Annus, 2012, p. 121) and multidirectional connections between different political spaces, we consider CEE a rich and unexplored sphere of research in gender and politics (Popa, Krizsan, 2016).

Feminist research of politics from CEE has often interrogated East/West relations and the relevance of Western concepts and theories for understanding specific realities (Kepplová, 2014), however, it often remains absent from Anglo-Saxon and continental research (Popa, Krizsan, 2016). Therefore, this special issue has aimed to showcase the variety of feminist scholarship of politics, polity, and policymaking. We have solicited and received a variety of theoretical, empirical, and comparative contributions, all of which apply a feminist perspective in political sciences.

Two of the present studies focus directly on various aspects of the so-called anti-gender mobilisation. While **Jorune Linkevičiute** focuses on the role of mainstream media in the promotion of "gender ideology" rhetoric and frames during the public debates surrounding the Istanbul Convention in Lithuania, **Zuzana Očenášová** focuses on the systemic and case-specific mechanisms of mobilisations in Slovakia, which resulted in the rejection of the convention ratification by the Slovak National Council. Both of these authors focus on the "gender ideology" rhetoric as a mobilising resource.

Also concerned by the right-wing attacks, **Eszter Kováts** and **Elena Zacharenko** instead investigate the changing meaning of the term "gender" in the official EU documents on gender equality policies. They invite analytical reflection to what extent these developments within the policy process represent emancipatory logic. Furthermore, the ambiguity of the term, they argue, can be seized by right-wing critics of reproductive rights and rights of same-sex couples.

In her qualitative research, **Kristína Papcúnová** examines the Czech case of feminist organizing. She interviews women involved in various aspects of the feminist political movement who reflect on their involvement and on the women's movement under state socialism and their current post-socialist context.

A more conventional topic of gender representation, but with innovative quantitative approaches is addressed by two collectives of authors, **Silvia Hudáčková** and **Darina Malová**, and **Matúš Sloboda**, **Veronika Valkovičová** and **Klaudia Šupáková**. While both of the texts deal with the topic of gender representation at Slovak ministries, the former approaches the topic by focusing on portfolio allocation, asking questions of when and why women become nominated into ministerial positions. The latter asks different questions by adopting the theoretical framework of the so-called gender regimes within organisations, thus focusing on the connections between career growth for women and their representation in positions of power.

Finally, feminist political analysis in the empirical mode would never be possible without the preceding normative work. One important strand of feminist philosophy that informed social and political analysis was the feminist ethics of care. In her article, **Adriana Jesenková** offers a careful and detailed elucidation of Joan Tronto's contribution to the ethics of care.

We believe that this issue¹ will provide readers with a deeper excursion into the Central European perspective on the current discourse in political science. When we talk about gender in the political sciences, we discuss more than just biological differences, we open questions about the cultures, values, and norms that are inherent in our world. The above case studies as well as selected areas in which the feminist perspective of studying political contexts can contribute to the current debate as well as a deeper understanding of the contemporary world. It is essential today that we reveal gender as a key factor in research that can reveal unpleasant truths about the world.

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