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POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITY OF WOMEN IN SLOVAKIA

Veronika Valkovičová*

KOBOVÁ, Ľ., MAĎAROVÁ, Z., OSTERTÁGOVÁ, A.: *Politíky a političky – Aspekty politickej subjektivity žien*. Bratislava: ASPEKT, 2011. 185 s. ISBN 978-80-85549-92-8

In 2011 a team of authors cooperating through an interest group and a publishing company ASPEKT issued company's 106th publication. This association is primarily devoted to the problematic of gender and its numerous aspects present in contemporary society. The authors collaborating on this particular publication have various academic backgrounds; they are, however, all connected via thorough study of the socio-cultural construct of gender stemming from the feminist philosophy. Though each author elaborated a different societal phenomenon in her contribution to the monograph, their interest remained common and united, i.e. to deconstruct gender implications on a particular example taken from Slovak political culture. Together they pursued a topic which is, despite its apparent ambiguity, a complex feature of social structure. It is also clear from the title of the monograph that the authors devoted their studies to the "political subjectivity of women", which is defined in the introduction to the publication by **Zuzana Maďarová** and **Jana Cviková** as a comprehensive notion depicting the status of women in a political culture. Thus, we cannot speak only of women-politicians as of the main actors related to the creation of public policies. Authors also point to women in position of recipients of these public policies and they define them in this monograph as a target group of the electoral campaign, a position that also gives them a particular subjectivity. Hence the authors pose themselves a number of

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questions through the prism of female subjectivity in politics. Emphasis is put on the under-representation of women in decision-making bodies, as well on the issue of the reproductive policy in the context of political processes in Slovakia. Gender relations are the main source of these studies and authors endeavour to demonstrate the influence of gender bias on the construction of Slovak political arenas. This publication came to light as an initiative of *Women Doing Politics* project and it contains four studies of chosen features present in Slovak political culture with a corresponding gender connotation.

The first study of this ASPEKT monograph, entitled *The women of November*, concerns an interview analysis with the protagonists of the Velvet Revolution. Author **Zuzana Maďarová** elaborates her thesis stating that the November events are present in the public discourse as a “male” historical event. This, consequently, creates a tendency to make women’s participation at the mentioned event invisible. For the needs of a thorough research, the author chose the method of oral history and she interprets a wide range of experience through narrative and half-structured interviews with anonymous women-participants of the revolutionary events. As it was previously mentioned in the introduction, this study carries a sense of *novum*, since a narrative analysis of women’s views of the November events is quite unseen in current Slovak political science. It should be mentioned, however, that a study of revolutionary media content related to gender equality can be traced back to **J. Krapfl**. The basis of **Zuzana Maďarová’s** study is though not only the significance of the events presented by the participants, but also the perception of their own roles and positions in the revolutionary movement. Author presents an *a priori* thesis, that the female protagonists are prone to perceive the November events in a rather ambiguous manner, relating to their own gender roles, which are in this case interrupting the boundaries of the public and the private sphere. Thus, on one side they were faced by the political entity of a woman-participant and on the other side by an entity of a mother/girlfriend/wife, which is submitted to the traditional division of work. After an extensive analysis of the interviews (concerning non-verbal expression as well), the author divided study’s participants into three groups from the perspective of the assessed events. Consequently, she interpreted the participants’ construction of their own political identity and role in the revolutionary committees. In conclusion, she evaluates women’s work to be beheld as “invisible” and she assigns it with the notion “infra-policy”. Through the theoretical grounds of the gender power relations, as eloquently described by Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, the author **Zuzana**

Maďarová presents a number of interesting results of her study. Quite merely of necessity, the author also works with the idea of charismatic leadership, which she believes to be a gender-burdened social construct affected by characteristics and traits believed to be typically related to men or women. To conclude, the author admits that despite her own experience with gender-oriented research, even she was sometimes obliged to confess biasing in the interaction with participants. In conclusion she comes with a simple, but eloquent evaluation when she states, that “women often did not label their activities as political, but they preferred to label them as civic, or natural”.

A different perspective of female political subjectivity is presented by **Lubica Kobová** in her contribution *The limits of Bio-Policy – Two Examples of Politicization of Women’s Sexual and Reproductive rights*. The introduction of this study states clearly that the control of women and their bodies happens to be a persistent part of political life. Therefore, this political question will constantly come back to the discourse, we may even say that it will come periodically and it is necessary to deal with its institutionalisation. Hence the author approaches this topic from a wider perspective and she delves into the theories of governmentality and their implications in Slovak conditions. The primary topic of this study is the analysis of political processes concerning the deliberations of the *National Programme of Sexual and Reproductive Health Protection* in Slovakia (2007) and the following and comparable process concerning the *National Programme of Care for Women, Safe Maternity and Reproductive Health* (2009). Concurrently, the first document aimed to achieve two goals: to facilitate women’s access to health care institutions (regarding their reproductive health) and to launch a programme providing the prevention of domestic violence and sexual abuse. Analysing the deliberations, **Lubica Kobová** concentrates on the role of non-governmental sector, which participated in the comment procedures related to the mentioned programmes. Author analyses the disapproving position of religious organisations that put the expertise and impartiality of these documents to doubt. The author forgets not to mention the discussions about the elements of the term “conception” and “unborn child”, thus the disputes surrounding the legal status of an embryo, which considerably complicated the adoption of this proposition. Of the comments procedure and the processes, which in the end led to the rejection of the proposition, the author concludes a few results. She voices an exceptional status of Roman-Catholic Church in the political culture of Slovak Republic, which is derived from the status of church and religion in Slovak the society.

She also adheres to the statements of **Miroslav Tížik**, declaring that Slovakia is currently faced by two processes: de-secularization (growth of declaratory adherence to churches) and de-laicization (weakening of the state power with a simultaneous enhancement of church power over society).

The second part of this monograph delves into the influence of gender constructs in electoral political campaign. The study of **Zuzana Maďarová** *The Image of Municipal Policy Construed as "Home"* examines a chosen example of municipal campaign. The author chose the political rally of **Milan Ftáčnik** and **Magdaléna Vášáryová** for the office of Bratislava's mayor. This campaign was simultaneously presented in the political discourse as a combat of right-wing and left-wing political spectrum and, in comparison with the previous elections it employed the usage of new social media. In this case study of a political campaign carried out by a female candidate **Magdaléna Vášáryová**, author **Zuzana Maďarová** explores a fundamental question of her political communication: Why does the politician in order to get the political office refer to the private sphere? What are the lines in which private (family, care) and public (politics and citizenship) sphere are interlinked in her political campaign? This discursive analysis evaluates particular methods of communication and via the help of ethnography it analyses the cultural codes, which created the political identity of particular actors. As a result of an extensive semiotic analysis, **Zuzana Maďarová** assessed the campaign of **Magdaléna Vášáryová** as a rather "clumsy" unity of public and private sphere, which happens to confuse the voters. This electoral campaign did not present the politician as a dynamic subject with all her experience in politics, but it depicted her as a woman who had her "home in order" and was thus aiming to govern the public affairs in the same manner. Therefore, **Zuzana Maďarová** connects the results of her study to the electoral failure of the candidate.

The last study of the monograph is a quantitative and qualitative analysis of media content related to the political campaign of Slovak presidential elections of 2009 and parliamentary elections of 2010. The main objective of **Alexandra Ostertágová** in her contribution titled *Successful, though "Weak"?* is an analysis of **Iveta Radičová's** media representation during the two aforementioned political events. Through the study of various media forms, the author tries to discover whether the contemporary image of this woman-politician held a gender biased connotation. The whole contribution of this monograph is divided into two parts – qualitative and quantitative analysis, which do not bring the same results. It is, however, quite clear that they are

complementary in their outcomes. A thorough and systematic collection of data concerning the quantitative analysis proved the media to be more liable to concentrate on a candidate, who actually holds the enquired office. Though quite unexpectedly, based on the outcomes we cannot affirm there is less media space given to **Iveta Radičová** compared to her male counterparts. Nevertheless, the qualitative analysis of contents proved the presence of clear gender bias. According to this research, **Iveta Radičová** was constantly presented with an image of an unassertive politician and her extensive experience with politics was continuously marginalized or overlooked. The media also focused on candidate's relations with her colleagues, who provided her with a sort of an abstract legitimacy. This aspect however, cannot be witnessed in such a scope in the media content related to other candidates. **Alexandra Ostertágová** unveils the political profile of **Iveta Radičová** created by the potent constructive function of media. She acquired an image of a politician who initiates her own political topics, but more likely in a position of a reacting subject.

The aforementioned studies inquire about specific examples of Slovak political culture and they engage in the socio-cultural construct of gender and its implications for the creation of political environment. Even though the political subjectivity of women happens to be a complex topic, which has not presented all its capacities, it is clear that the political subjectivity itself can be examined from different angles. These, however, could not all manage to be fitted into one monograph. This publication is a great contribution to the gender-oriented political science and it connects gender studies and political science in a truly natural and genuine manner. Furthermore, the political subjectivity of women is related to gender-sensitive policy, which is in Slovak conditions often beheld as a secondary priority. This publication is, therefore, a welcomed expertise in this field. Nevertheless, in the end it needs to be noted that the readers who do not engage in gender problematic might find this publication less comprehensive. An experience with the academic discourse related to gender and its terminology is recommended and we may go as far as to say that it is vital.