

SIG TUR AD ASTRA

II

EDITORS

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KINGA BELIZNAI BÓDI

Collection
of student papers
on **Hungarian**
and **Croatian**
legal history 2017

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Table of content

Croatian–Hungarian Legal History Summer School.....	2
András SZABÓ: The regulation of the exceptional power.....	3
Matija PLAŠĆ: Constitutionality in the first Yugoslavia (1918–1941)	9
Rita ANGELI: “Open and close” – The final points of the educational politics during the dualism.....	17
Mateo VLAČIĆ: Citizenship in communist Croatia (1945–1990)	23
Patrik SZABÓ: Women’s suffrage in Hungary and abroad	31
Martina PROTEGA: Political rights and freedoms in the Banovina of Croatia	43
Lilla BARTUSZEK: The beautiful Budapest – The formation and participation of the capital in the system of state administration	50
Darija ŽELJKO: <i>Heimatrecht</i> in Croatia–Slavonia (1868–1918).....	57
Gréta ZANÓCZ: The history of centralization and decentralization in Hungary especially in the civil era.....	63
Ana TURIĆ: Constitutional position of Croatia in the federal and republic constitution of 1974	70
Adelheid NAGY: The role and significance of the “Press Code of '48” in the Hungarian regulation of Press Law.....	78
Alen ŠUKURICA: Constitutional position of Croatia–Slavonia according to the Croatian–Hungarian Compromise	83
Luca VARGA: The comparison of the Croatian and Hungarian public administration after the Compromise.....	89
Ingrid RÁK–RADI: Voices of the Croatian nation in the Hungarian parliament	94

Patrik SZABÓ: Women's suffrage in Hungary and abroad

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1. Introduction

Due to their different economic and cultural development several countries have applied different forms of government throughout the history. All these have resulted a significant temporal distinction regarding the territorial evolution of the ideas of the Enlightenment and the civic era. In the second half of the 18th century in Western Europe and in the United States of America several fundamental human rights got guaranteed, whereas both in Hungary and in the Central European region, they could only be assured by the revolutionary wave of 1848, and could evolve after the Compromise of 1867. The revolutions of the 19th century and the beginning of the civic era conceived some reform-thoughts that influenced the whole society, such as the idea of the extension of rights and basing the parliament on the representation of the people, which correlated to the extension of suffrage.

As a result of the changing economic and social tendencies and the demand for equality and popular sovereignty the political and legal situation of women became a subject of the public discussions. The fight for the political rights of women began, of which the most meaningful stages were the French Revolution, the revolutions of 1848, and the black integrationist movements in the USA. After the World War I heavy social changes happened. The turnout of the industrial proletariat and their multitudinous access to employment made women demand their rights in connection with labour and education and they even wanted to have a more secure legal and financial position in marriage. These claims were acquired by the most progressive movements, whose success was mainly determined by their endurance, commitment and the way they took advantage of the political situation. All these resulted a step by step observable legal regulation of women's rights, which ended up with the universal suffrage.

2. Suffrage in the world

Among the member states of the USA women, who were elder than twenty-one first in Wyoming in 1869 were given electoral entitlement, in 1917 five more states gave them the right to vote within the confines of the primary before the presidential elections and finally in 1920 the 19th amendment entered into force and gave women the right to vote. In Germany, women almost simultaneously gained suffrage. In 1919 the Weimar Constitution came into force, and guaranteed universal, equal and secret suffrage for both men and women, who were elder than twenty. Besides this, women came into electoral entitlement in 1915 in Denmark, in 1918 in Austria, in 1920 in Czechoslovakia and in 1921 in Sweden. Nevertheless, these results could not come true without a movement, which set an example for the other European campaigns of women with its structure and techniques, and for this reason we particularly have to mention the fight of the English suffragettes.

In England, the fight for suffrage began relatively early. In 1869 women came into municipal suffrage with equal conditions to men, and the 1840's even organized movements of women existed, but the whole story stepped on a higher level than ever before, when in 1903 Emmeline Pankhurst established Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). The most significant aims of the movement were to increase the public activity of women, get equal education to men and terminate the subordinated domestic role of women. They were against everyone who did not support their case. They targeted the buildings of state institutions, destructed churches and schools. They tried to disturb the events taking part in the presence of the king with shouting and exploding bombs, but they also organized some mass meetings. The government squeezed the members of the movement so hard even though their actions were violent, but in principle did not mean to kill anyone. The well-known hunger strikes of the imprisoned feminist started in 1909 which the government tried to solve with the so called forced feeding. A mystical image of them used to exist and their heroic idea was completed by Emily Davison, who died because of jumping in front of the king's horse, and whose funeral turned into an enormous sympathy-protest. At the beginning of the turn of the century the social support of the movement was

quite remarkable, but they never managed to take part in institutional politics, and after their violent strategy had failed in 1915 WSPU finally broke up.¹

The significance of the suffragettes is still controversial. They were the first, who systematically fought for women's rights and set an example for the other movements in Europe, but that is also a fact that their support was not as considerable as they stated and the social and economic changes following the World War I rather determined that women gained suffrage. First, in 1918 the English ladies over thirty got the right to vote with the rating according to property and literacy and eventually in 1920 all women, who were elder than twenty-one years came into universal suffrage.

3. The regulation of women's suffrage in Hungary

3.1. The beginnings

Regarding the Hungarian regulation of women's political rights, we can only talk about relevant legislative results in the 20th century, despite the most progressively thinking persons of the 18th century, who were often ridiculed, supported women's claims for their rights. After Joseph II had died reformatory movements came alive, that first dealt with the intellectual status of women. Most of the claims of the modern movements of women were worded within the confines of these discussions. The intellectuals of this period often referred to the English constitutional development and aimed to extend the right of having equal education and taking part in public life, and according to the natural law they demanded equality between men and women, but yet only restricted for the noble women.

3.2. Reform era

This period of history could not even assure the most fundamental educational needs of women consequently their political rights did not become one of the main points of the social debates. The most significant result of this period was that it could make women join the fight for the Hungarian language. As an answer given to the cultural policy of Vienna the intellectuals started to emphasize the need for Hungarian language education

¹ NÁZER, Ádám: Harc a női jogokért. Szüfrazettek [Fight for the women's rights. Suffragettes]. In: Rubicon, 2007/8., http://www.rubicon.hu/magyar/oldalak/harc_a_noi_jogokert_szufrazettek [Access on 5th March 2017]

including raising the learning level of women. Despite these ambitions we can realize no improvement regarding the social and public situation of women. The main reason for this is that the feminine ideal did not change at all and women were only considered as mistresses, mothers and wives and their education was also subordinated to this mission. Among the ones who supported the idea of giving women a better education we have to highlight the work of Blanka Teleky, whose goal was to impart women in an equal education, which she thought to be a condition of the legal equality between the two sexes. She opened her Hungarian language teacher's training college for women in 1846 in Pest, where the best-known teachers of the country worked, using the most modern methods.²

The first question affecting the regulation of the political rights of women became a subject of the parliamentary debates in 1843 and 1844. The suffrage of the civic and noble women became an item of the agenda at the regional sessions. A few representatives wanted to give even the civic women this entitlement, but there were concepts that would have granted this right for all the women who were elder than 18 and single. Even though, neither of these ideas came alive, the parliament could show up an important result. A team led by Ferenc Deák worked out a bill which ordered teacher's training colleges to be set up in Budapest, where besides the feminine tasks the same subjects must have been taught similarly to the same institutions for men. On the other hand, this bill would have guaranteed the same legal status for the schoolmistresses compared to men, but this time the revolutionary legislation failed.

3.3. The Revolution of 1848 and the war of independence

The ideas of the reform era mainly influenced the revolution of 1848 that ruined the antipathy against politically active women and especially condemned the public inactivity of them. Even though the revolution could not cause concrete results, meant a big step for women towards their emancipation. The Act 5 of 1848 on suffrage raised the proportion of citizens who were able to vote from 4 % to 10 %, but similarly to the fire raisers and murderers women did not come into electoral entitlement. The Acts of April guaranteed the

² SCHULLER, Gabriella: Az úttörők. Magyar nőtörténeti arcképcsarnok [Pioneers. Hall of fame of Hungarian women]. In: Rubicon, 2007/8., http://www.rubicon.hu/magyar/oldalak/az_uttorok_magyar_notorteneti_arckepcsarnok [Access on 5th March 2017]

basements of the civic transformation and the most important franchises but not everybody was satisfied with the regulation. The most radically thinking revolutionist aimed to expand suffrage for women and even for the cotter and day laborers. There was also a conception which would have granted both active and passive electoral entitlement for every citizen who were elder than twenty. However, the contemporary Hungarian society was not ready to accept reforms like these for which the reason is that the conservative, family-orientated feminine ideal was still alive and moreover the women themselves were not even ready for practicing their rights on a wide range like this.³

The absolutistic era, coming after the repression of the revolution did not serve the emancipation of women. Due to the bare and overdue pedagogy and the failing educational situation of women their fight for their civil rights began to decline. The powerfully centralized society fundamentally condemned the idea of the extension of rights and supported the view considering running a household and raising children as the profession of women.⁴ The only breakthrough of the era was the teacher's training college reform executed in 1856. As a result of the program the first state-funded colleges were built first in Pest than all around the country.

3.4. The era of dualism

With the Austro–Hungarian Compromise of 1867 Hungary stepped on the way of becoming a civil society, but it is partly surprising that women's suffrage also became a topic of the parliamentary debate because the conservative view about women and their social role did not change at all. The ruling Freedom Party's feminine ideal consisted of attributes like "the obedient wife and the good countrywoman" that changed only decades later due to the more intensive unfolding of capitalism and the civil ideas. In the 1870's the question of women became a part of the public life, after different clubs had been established to represent the interest of women. These clubs substantiated the work of the later social democratic and civil movements of women, but they did not claim the extension of the

³ SIMÁNDI, Irén: A nők parlamenti választójogának története Magyarországon, 1919–1945 [The history of women's suffrage in Hungary 1919–1945]. In: Rubicon, 2009/4 onlineplusz, http://www.rubicon.hu/magyar/oldalak/a_nok_parlamenti_valasztojoganak_tortenete_magyarorszagon_19_1945/ [Access on 5th March 2017]

⁴ NAGYNÉ SZEGVÁRI, Katalin: A női választójog külföldön és hazánkban [Women's suffrage in abroad and in Hungary]. Budapest, 2001, HVG-ORAC, p. 54.

political and legal rights of women as a part of their programs. The civil women's movement led by Pálné Veres imported the western ideas and defined the question of women as a cultural and educational question. Similarly to the black integration movements in the USA they aimed to liberate women from their intellectual dependence, consequently they emphasized the importance of improving the education of them which they claimed as a human right. Analysing the cultural situation of women, they pointed out the failures of the government and stressing the role of the well-educated women in the family they demanded the opening of different cultural fields, higher education and intellectual professions for women. Moreover, their newspaper urged the support of self-maintaining women and fought for their labour and cultural rights.

During the time of dualism vital debates took place on the public role of women in the parliament. During the parliamentary term from 1869 to '72 the self-government suffrage of the noble widows became a point of the controversies but the Act 42 of 1870 did not let them have electoral entitlement.⁵ The Act was relevant considering the rights of women because it was the first time they handed in their petition on the self-government and national suffrage. The b) point of the §40 of the Act indirectly granted suffrage for women and according to the §40 women living in the village were represented by procurators.

3.5. Parliamentary session between 1872 and '75

Since the revolution the economic and the cultural background of the country changed a lot. As a consequence of the industrialization the working class began to develop and the social status of women was also undergoing a change. The universal and secret suffrage plus the political and civil equality of women became a part of the programs of the far-left parties.

During the parliamentary session from 1872 to 1875 not only the electoral entitlement of women but their labour rights and employment came also into question even though the most significant subject of the debates was their majority. István Teleszky, a well-known civil lawyer of the era and Tivadar Pauler, a professor and the rector of the

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

University in Budapest aimed to guarantee the majority of women who were elder than twenty-four or got married. They based their proposal on the Codex Zurich which declared that women liberated from tutelage and paternal power with their marriage and these could not be set back even if the marriage ended when she was minor. The parliament accepted the bill so Act 23 of 1874 on "The majority of women" could come into force and finally terminated the ruling of Tripartite, according to which men became major at the age of twenty-four and women at the age of sixteen.

The next negotiation on women's suffrage took place in 1874, when two similar but substantially different proposals were the subjects of the sessions. One of the proposals supported women's complete political and civil emancipation and the introduction of the universal and secret suffrage emphasizing that women who used to be the part of the "honorator" class were also entitled to vote. On the other hand, the other proposal aimed to enforce the newness gradually and would have granted the right to take part in the elections for the chartered schoolmistresses and midwives etc.⁶ Despite their fundamental distinctions both of them got condemned, so even the modest extension of rights could not come true.

After the turn of the century, as a consequence of the economic and cultural changes the social status of women also altered. In 1895 women were allowed to go to the faculty of medicines, pharmaceuticals and arts and with the wider acknowledgement of their claims their possibilities became broader and the development of the organized movements of women finally began. At the beginning of the 20th century three stream of these kinds of movements must be separated: the Hungarian feminists, the social democrat feminine movement and the Christian-socialist direction. The Feminist's Club was established by Róza Bedy-Schwimmer in 1904. Among the goals of the club besides the political and educational rights of women the fight for suffrage became more and more important. Their techniques were mostly similar to the English suffragettes, but they also tried to strengthen their arguments with articles, meetings and declarations. The association organized an international conference on women's suffrage in Budapest in 1913, in which besides 230 reporters more than 3000 person participated, who came from all around the world. The international press appreciated the organization, which – according to the feminist – was

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 67-70.

not remarkable for the material they discussed but the international spirit it created.⁷ After the World War I had broken out the aim of feminists was to avoid the economic and moral collision of hinterland, so they concentrated on correcting the mistakes of the government's social policy, the protection of women and children and labour exchange.

The domestic development of the social democrat movement of women began at the early years of the 20th century. The followers of the campaign were committed to expanding suffrage and represented the most radical standpoint that is proven by the program accepted by the 10th Congress of the Hungarian Socialist Party. The program claimed direct, secret, equal and universal suffrage for all citizens who were elder than twenty-four regardless on their gender. Moreover, they demanded the complete equality between the two sexes and forbidding night work and jobs that were harmful for women.

The social democrat movement was based on a class-oriented ideology and found the interests of women and the working-class similar. Distinctly, the Christian-socialist movements of women were not defined by a social class and did not connect to any political parties. This direction involved Christian feminism that aimed to preserve social harmony by financially supporting the workers and the cultivation of the religious spirit. Besides the domestication of the progressive movements, they wanted to protect the traditional role of women in the family and to ruin the obstacles against the intellectual civilization of them. The result of their operation was the above-mentioned ministerial decree that let women take part in the higher education and made the number of women studying at university higher.⁸

Despite the work of the organized movements of women and the results they gained at the field of education and culture the period from the turning of the century to the beginning of the World War I did not help the legal regulation of the rights of women, but after the war had broken out heavy changes came at all fields of life including the fight for suffrage. Women increasingly took part in the production and contributed to the supplement of the soldiers fighting on the front line so the question of electoral entitlement became a part of the public life again and its regulation went inevitable. In 1917 the radicals,

⁷ CZEFEFNER, Dóra: Nemzetköziség a századforduló hazai feminista mozgalmában [Internationalism in the Hungarian feminist movement at the turn of the century], Újkor.hu, <http://ujkor.hu/content/nemzetkoziseg-a-szazadfordulo-hazai-feminista-mozgalmaban> [Access on 5th March 2017]

⁸ NAGYNÉ, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

the social democrats and the democrats established the “Block of Suffrage” led by Mihály Károlyi and Vilmos Vázsonyi. The latter handed in a bill in 1917 in which he equally determined the general necessities of suffrage. These conditions were the age of 24, the Hungarian citizenship and the ability of reading and writing. Nevertheless, there were differences regarding the special conditions because of a stricter rating of literacy but being a widow of a soldier counted as an alternative rating. This proposal was behind the European regulation but it would have affected almost 300 000 women and would have been satisfying regarding the domestic situation but it failed because of the withstanding of the conservatives.

During the World War I several social changes happened and women proved their commitment at the field of labour so consequently the electoral entitlement became a subject of the parliamentary debates again in 1918. Part of the aristocrats joined the “Block of Suffrage” and supported the idea, but the congressmen who opposed thought the reforms were unsure and in their opinion the fight was not only for emancipation but the political power. Prime minister, Sándor Wekerle handed in a bill in 1918, in which he named three alternative necessities. Women who had secondary qualification or was a wife of a man having the same qualification or worked in the agriculture or in industry and paid at least hundred crown direct tax and were single or divorced could have had suffrage, but the proposal got condemned. It was clear that suffrage for women is only reachable by a democratic revolution, which finally happened in 1918 and as a consequence the Károlyi-government published Act 1 of 1918.⁹

3.6. Act I of People of 1918

This Act was the first in Hungary to declare equal, direct, universal and secret suffrage for all the Hungarian citizens who were elder than twenty-four years old and were a Hungarian citizen for more than six years. The only difference between men and women was, that apart from the previously mentioned ratings women were required to be able to read and write to have electoral capacity, but due to the events of the war no elections were held based on these regulations.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

3.7. The Soviet Republic (1919)

The Act I of People of 1918 and the fall of the Károlyi-government was followed by the Soviet Republic in Hungary in 1919 where the regulation of suffrage was quite antidemocratic because even though it was regardless on sex and nationality, only those came into electoral entitlement who were elder than eighteen years old and did socially useful work. As a result and as a violation of popular sovereignty all the workers and the soldiers of the Red Army and even citizens of other countries got entitled to vote, but on the other hand clericals; capitalist and merchantmen got excluded from suffrage.

3.8. No. 5985/1919. Prime Minister's decree

The next truly significant legal document was the No. 5985/1919. Prime Minister's decree published by Prime Minister István Friedrich, which aimed to create political support for the ruling government, and therefore introduced stricter ratings regarding age, citizenship and inhabitancy. The only difference between the rules concerning to men and women was, that the latter were still required to have the ability of reading and writing.¹⁰ In 1920 elections were held where Hungarian women voted for the first time, and as a result of the elections the first female MP called Margit Slachta became a member of the parliament as a Christian socialist representative.¹¹ On the other hand, these elections raised the power of those who demanded the stricter regulation of suffrage, and as a result of their claim another decree got published in 1922.

3.9. No. 2200/1922 Prime Minister's decree

The No. 2200/1922 Prime Minister's decree – generally called "Lex Bethlen" – was published by Prime Minister István Bethlen and aimed to politically stabilize and consolidate the country. It was more antidemocratic than the previous regulations because of the higher requirements it included. The most important change for women was, that they had to be elder than thirty years old to be entitled to vote. Regarding the effects of the decree, we have to highlight, that it decreased the number of voters with a million persons and

¹⁰ MEZEY, Barna: Alkotmánytörténet [Constitutional history], Budapest, 2003, Osiris Kiadó, p. 325.

¹¹ SIMÁNDI, *op. cit.*