

The political heritage of Anna Kéthly

Summary by Anna Vidák

Anna Kéthly (1889-1976) was one of the most predominant politicians of the Hungarian left in the 20th century. On the event held on 29 November 2017 the question from political and historical aspects was raised what heritage the lifework of Anna Kéthly, social democratic politician, feminist, Member of the Parliament leaves for today's politics.

The event was moderated by **Andrea Pető**, professor of CEU Gender Studies Department.

In his opening, **Jan Niklas Engels**, director of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's representation in Budapest, highlighted a few of Kéthly's political views that are still relevant for the social democracy today. Anna Kéthly fought for women's equality before the law and female emancipation while being constantly aware of the poor and worker women being even more oppressed and she claimed systematic changes are essential. Knowing that the representation of all social classes could only be possible in a bottom-up system, she had relation with people of different socio-economic backgrounds from all around the country and she represented them in the Parliament. She was trade union member, recognizing that a viable social democracy is not only the job of the political parties, but it is a cooperation of the parties and socially active actors who fight for democracy and justice. She saw the Nazi danger coming and she was not afraid to speak up against it. According to the director of FES Budapest, there should be a Heroines' Square in Budapest, with a statue of Anna Kéthly.

The keynote speaker was **Zsuzsanna B. Kádár**, historian. She talked about Anna Kéthly's political role and her actions. Kéthly was elected to the parliament in 1922. Immediately she started to work for abolishing the censuses of age and literacy (in both cases the conditions were stricter for women than men), and the normative motherhood (one didn't have to meet the literacy census if she had three or more children). The suffrage with no census differentiating between men and women was only applied after 1945 in Hungary. She was also the first one in Hungary's history to address women's dependency within their families, their education and their unequal rights. In terms of women's rights she was in opposition with the feminist movement as well, as in that time the movement consisted mostly of bourgeois women and by gaining suffrage it became less active as a movement, and Kéthly believed they did not represent worker women.

Parallel to her political career she was member of a trade union, as she recognized the importance of the cooperation of these spheres. Her party suggested lots of changes in the defence of the workers, which included different sorts of insurances, pension, period of notice and restriction of working hours. In the economic crisis of 1929-33 she fought for introducing welfare actions (e.g. unemployment and housing aid, progressive tax system), however, the Horthy-system's response to the crisis was restraint.

Along with her party, she firmly spoke up against the Jewish laws and the persecution of the Jews. During the mass killing of Novi Sad in 1942 the Hungarian soldiers committed a mass murder based on ethnicity, killing Jews, Gypsies and Serbians. When speaking up against it, she received multiple death threats and as a response she said: *“Who is scared should rather become a confectioner lady”*.

After 1945 the communist party compromised with the social democratic party (led by György Masorsán and Árpád Szakasits), and as a result the two parties fused. Kéthly however did not support it, as the communist party’s vision was a revisionist socialism as opposed to hers which was a democratic socialism. She saw the dictatorship coming and spoke up against it, her party drove her out. Thus in 1956 when the Social Democratic Party was re-established as an autonomous party she was amongst the leaders, and in the government of Imre Nagy she became a minister (for two days).

In the second part of the event **Andrea Pető** continued the discussion on Anna Kéthly’s political heritage with politicians from six parties. The party called Együtt was represented by **Nóra Hajdu** board member, Párbeszéd by **Gergely Karácsony** prime minister candidate, DK by **János Schiffer** president of the constituency no. 4, Momentum by **Tamás Soproni** board member, MSZP by **Kata Tüttő** board member and LMP by **Péter Ungár** board member. In the panel discussion the politicians debated on Anna Kéthly’s politics and lifework, raised questions about what the modern politics could learn from her, why we scarcely hear about her, in what ways her work is relevant for these parties and how we ought to commemorate her.

The panel discussion can be watched here:

https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=1734399426592896&id=193944440638410

At the beginning of the discussions the politicians were asked to talk about where they heard of Anna Kéthly first and what they had read by her. **Nóra Hajdu** first heard of her at a high school history class. Later as she worked in the publishing house called Napvilág, she had the chance to read and proofread the book from her letters, edited by Erzsébet Strassenreiter. **Gergely Karácsony** was encouraged by his uncle to read about her, later in university he read Anna Kéthly’s publications and speeches. **János Schiffer** first heard about her in his family, as his grandfather was one of the editors of the book called *The Hungarian Social Democratic Party in the Parliament*, which was partly about Kéthly. **Péter Ungár** read one of her speeches against the numerus clausus in a book about the Jewish laws. He was amazed by her speaking from a different point of view than most of the people opposing these laws. For **Tamás Soproni** her book was a milestone in his political view, for she was the first left-wing politician he had read, and her book was the first that discussed the topics of society and people instead of nation. **Kata Tüttő** in the district where she was a representative (12th) initiated to build statues not only for men, but for historical women like Anna Kéthly or Vilma Hugonnai too. That is when she read of her.

The second round was about quotes by Kéthly the politicians had previously been asked to bring with them. The quote *“Who is scared should rather become a confectioner lady”* made **Kata Tüttő** think about her own fears concerning her children’s and Hungary’s future. She was afraid that there is no institution that can protect people from the authorities’ abuse of power. **Tamás Soproni** recommended the following quote: *“There are in this country, in the factories, in the workhouses, in*

the meadows, out on the fields, and there are among the hopelessly struggling unemployed absolute relative and far more youth than that you address in the name of saving the youth.” Suggesting this quote he emphasised that as opposed to the majority in the parliament, Kéthly found the youth’s equal representation important regardless of their social class, which is important for Momentum as well. **Péter Ungár** quoted her from the debate on the Jewish laws: *“The Right reduces the serious problem of the Hungarian capitalism full of horrific malpractices to ‘the Jewish question’”* He thinks that it is a big mistake the opposition today makes that instead of finding structural causes, they stigmatize problems as pure exclusion, as they stigmatize the ones representing these exclusive ideologies, and they use all their energies to prove they are not exclusive. The issue in which **János Schiffer** agrees with Kéthly the most is that the Hungarian society needs a bottom-up socialism. He chose this quote: *“We have to learn that it is only the power of the oppressed that can stand up against the power of the oppressors and this system’s inhumanity and injustice.”* **Gergely Karácsony** read an extract from Anna Kéthly’s first speech in the parliament: *“Our homeland’s fate is not only our fate. This country’s fate is and in the first place is the one of our descendants’.”* What he found the most valuable in her politics is that she recognized that the most endangered social groups are women and children, she initiated the supply of resources for them. In his opinion Kéthly represented the aspect of social sustainability about justice between generations. **Nóra Hajdu** emphasized that Kéthly recognized that social democracy must address multiple social issues simultaneously. She illustrated it with the following quote: *“The magical dragon was a very modest monster. One virgin in a year as a sacrifice was enough for him. The operation of the reactionary dragon can be proved by the horrible statistics of the country. Infant- and child mortality rates, the tragic destruction of endemic – tuberculosis, pox, alcoholism - the workers’ lives ruined by unemployment, the overcrowded institutes taking care of lunatics, the tremendous growth of suicide rates: they all are responsible for the dragon’s appetite. Us, the social democrats set out to fight the two hundred forty-five headed dragon. We want to fight this in open and secret districts as well... And then the parliament where the social democracy’s dragon-killers sit together, will make sure that everyone who works, can eat!”*

The next question was that despite Kéthly’s precedent political career why she did not turn out as a reference point for the Hungarian progressive politics. **Hajdu** answered that the Left could not use the politicians between the first and the second World War as references because the parties had to be rebuilt, and it was difficult to determine “what to keep and what to reject.” They also had different priorities, the Hungarian left turned into a different direction of operating. Furthermore, the Hungarian public does not recognize the precedent female heroes. **Karácsony** and **Soproni** problematized this issue as well. **Soproni** added that in a society that sees women only as caretakers, it is difficult to view a woman as a role model. He views having female heroes as a process in which Hungarian society is already progressing. On that note, **Tüttő** said, that Kéthly’s biggest social effect was that in spite of her having to bare criticisms and insults (concerning her look and her behaviour) that her fellow male politicians did not have to, she proved that women do have a place in the parliament. **Karácsony** agreed with the previous speakers and he said that Kéthly could have an effect on the opposition by her being in the opposition for most of her political career, she only spent two days as a minister. Besides, she could not be a heroine in Hungary, as the heroes are determined

by the dominant ideology, and her ideology is far too different from the current one. He problematized the fact that after the '89 regime change the Hungarian society accepted the capitalist system without criticism. They did not look into the differences between the types of capitalism, and how big of a difference there is between the Swedish and the Italian capitalism for instance. The problem according to Karácsony is that after '89 and after the socialist dictatorship our society rejected all forms of socialism, thus, instead of taking the heritage of socialism represented by Kéthly as a reference, the Hungarian society "leaned into the already existing capitalism." **Ungár** added that one of the global problems of the Left is the lack of historical embeddedness. Furthermore, the opposition must decide who they will commemorate, who they choose as references: consensual actors (pointing out that Karácsony mentioned a statue being built for Margit Slachta in Zugló, to commemorate the Christian democrat and first female member of Hungarian parliament) or they create new remembrance policy. He views this as an essential issue, as a well-structured remembrance policy and historical symbols can result in a more effective representation. It is an important part of the remembrance policy for the Left to have discussions on the ways they commemorate (positive or negative) specific characters of the socialist dictatorship. And in that this debate, it is unavoidable to have judgments (he mentioned the Left's György Lukács-cult as a negative example). According to **Schiffer** neither the communist party, nor the parties after 1989 had interest in following Kéthly's heritage, thus it was forgotten. Today, the parties rely more on the media and they are only successful if they have a good marketing, while back in Kéthly's time the social democratic parties were similar to movements, and for today's parties her heritage became irrelevant. To this **Tüttő** added that after '89 there was only one party, the Hungarian Social Democratic Party (MSZDP) that used her heritage as their symbol, but MSZDP, she added does not have either male or female symbols.

In her next question, **Andrea Pető** asked the politicians which political move they think is precedent in Kéthly's work. For **Tüttő** it is her persistence what is precedent. Her persistence made her take steps that do not have an instant, but a long term effect. **Soproni** found her rejecting fear precedent and that her decisions always followed a consequent set of values, no matter what others' opinion around her was. **Schiffer** also found this aspect of her precedent. He was also inspired by Kéthly's party actively opposing the constantly growing fascism in the '30s. **Ungár** appreciated the most that Kéthly rejected the fusion of the two parties, which was not only a political debate, but protected the national sovereignty as well. What he also found precedent was that even though her social democracy does not accept the Trianon Peace Treaty's parts that tear away parts of the country, it takes the interests of workers and the poor into account. **Karácsony** highlighted that she made only good decisions. He said that there are only a few political actors who always made the right decisions. According to **Hajdu** it is respectable that Kéthly always spoke up against the Jewish Laws and also that she addressed women's issues, always taking the different female realities into consideration and she worked a lot on the social democracy and welfare practices.

Andrea Pető asked the participants about the remembrance policy they envision for the future. **Karácsony** supports commemorating consensual characters, because he finds it important that remembrance unites people, and the consensual are the only ones who can make this happen. We

have to find people who were on the right side of the Second World War and the socialist dictatorship as well. He finds it important to be tolerant about the life courses, as we can always find something not to identify with in each political character, and even though they made many good decision they made some bad ones as well. **Schiffer** views a tolerant remembrance policy essential as well, that can create democratic traditions in Hungary. As an example he said that they did not destroy the tsarist statue in Finland after the Russian left the country. **Soproni** and **Hajdu** also preferred consensual characters to commemorate, **Soproni** added that the imperfectness of these characters make them seem more realistic. **Hajdu** finds those remembrance policies that help the Hungarian society recover from its' traumas essential. The remembrance policy which is not united leads to failure. As opposed to this discourse **Ungár** claims that to build a memorial always requires an ideological debate and a decision as a result of that debate, not commemorating consensual characters. In **Tüttő**'s view it is important to build monuments of consensual characters, but it is just as important to make the debate on them visible for the public in an attention-gripping way.

For the question from the audience, what would Anna Kéthly's opinion be on each party attending the panel, **Karácsony** stated that she would be in the opposition, it is possible that she would have a good relationship with all the parties, **Schiffer** said that Kéthly would support the federation/ close co-operation of the parties. **Tüttő** presumed, she would have supported MSZP in 2002, **Soproni** believed their relationship would be asymmetric: Momentum would view her as a positive figure, Kéthly would rather be critical to the party. **Ungár** said that in 2014, unhappily but she would have voted for them, but at the 2018 elections she would happily vote for LMP. According to **Hajdu** at the 2014 elections Együtt would have been too market-oriented for Kéthly, she could identify more easily with the party at the 2018 elections.