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Neoliberalism, Authoritarian Neoliberalism, and #MeToo: Discursive Constructions of Sexual Harassment and Victimhood in Hungary[1]

Neoliberalizmus, autoriter neoliberalizmus és a #MeToo: A szexuális zaklatás és az áldozatiság diszkurzív konstrukciói Magyarországon

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Abstract: This study examines public discourses surrounding sexual harassment associated with the Hungarian #MeToo case involving theatre director László Marton, with particular attention to how neoliberal ideology—especially its emphasis on individual responsibility, market logic, and personal agency—shapes these discourses. Drawing on neoliberal victim theory and employing critical discourse analysis, the research investigates the discursive construction of sexual harassment and victimhood, as well as how the victim's role and responsibility were framed before, during, and after the incident. The study also considers how the broader context of authoritarian neoliberalism in Hungary influences these constructions. The findings demonstrate that neoliberal rationality, female agency, and individual responsibility are central not only to anti-#MeToo victim-blaming discourse but also to the discourse supportive of the #MeToo movement. Representations of "undeserving" victimhood are closely tied to the discursive construction of identity in the failed neoliberal subject, portrayed as either displaying negative agency or lacking agency altogether. In contrast, the #MeToo discourse often seeks to explain and normalise victims' behaviour, at times relying on arguments grounded in neoliberal logic. A third discursive strand—specifically tied to Hungary's authoritarian context—emerges in the form of instrumentalised #MeToo rhetoric, wherein the movement's narratives are co-opted for political purposes.

Keywords: neoliberal ideology, neoliberal victim theory, authoritarian neoliberalism, sexual harassment, #metoo

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Összefoglaló: A tanulmány azt vizsgálja, hogy a neoliberális ideológia – különösen az egyéni felelősség, a cselekvőképesség és a piaci logika hangsúlyozása – hogyan formálja a szexuális zaklatással kapcsolatos nyilvános diskurzusokat a Marton László színházi rendezőhöz köthető magyarországi #MeToo-ügyben. A neoliberális áldozatelméletre építve és a kritikai diskurzuselemzés módszerét alkalmazva a kutatás a szexuális zaklatás és az áldozatiság konstrukciójára, valamint a neoliberális ideológia ebben játszott szerepére összpontosít, különös figyelmet fordítva a cselekvőképesség és felelősség kérdésére a zaklatás előtt, közben és után. Emellett azt is elemzi, hogy miként hat a magyarországi autoriter neoliberalizmus kontextusa ezekre a diskurzusokra. Az eredmények azt mutatják, hogy a neoliberális racionalitás, a női cselekvőképesség és a személyes felelősség központi szerepet játszanak mind az anti-#MeToo, mind a #MeToo diskurzusban. Az „érdemtelen áldozatiság" szoros kapcsolatban áll a bukott neoliberális ágens diszkurzív identitáskonstrukciójával, ahol az áldozat passzivitása, valamint a múlt és a jelenbéli cselekvései egyaránt problematizálódnak. Ezzel szemben a #MeToo-t támogató diskurzusok a az áldozati viselkedés megmagyarázására és normalizálására törekednek, amelyet olykor szintén neoliberális érvelésre alapoznak. Végül egy harmadik diskurzustípus is kirajzolódik, amely a #MeToo-t politikai célokra instrumentalizálja és kifejezetten a magyarországi autoriter neoliberális politikai kontextushoz köthető.

Kulcsszavak: neoliberális ideológia, neoliberális áldozatelmélet, autoriter neoliberalizmus, szexuális zaklatás, #metoo

1. Introduction

In Hungary, media scandals involving sexual abuse allegations against both Hollywood figures and local celebrities have proliferated in recent years, sparking intense public reaction concerning victims, perpetrators, and the very nature of sexual violence and harassment. As public discourse both reflects and shapes societal perceptions of sexual violence, harassment, and victimhood, high-profile cases such as those associated with the #MeToo movement merit scholarly attention. They offer fertile ground for exploring how such perceptions are embedded in broader social structures and influenced by underlying ideologies.

Academic literature widely acknowledges that acts of sexual violence and harassment—as well as the societal perceptions surrounding them—are deeply rooted in unequal gender relations and shaped by patriarchal ideologies. However, the social context in which these perceptions are embedded cannot be understood solely through the lens of gender. Neoliberal ideology, as a belief system that reinforces social hierarchies, also plays a significant role in shaping our perceptions (Van Dijk, 2011a), including those related to sexual violence and harassment (Gregor & Virágh, 2022).

Despite its relevance, the intersection of public discourse on sexual violence victimisation and neoliberal ideology remains underexplored in the international academic literature (Barca, 2018; Nagar, 2016), and has not yet been addressed in the Hungarian context. Although scholarly attention has been paid to Hungarian media cases involving sexual violence and harassment, prior research has largely focused on aspects such as the media dynamics of these cases (Nádori, 2018; Virágh, 2020b, 2022), the communication strategies employed by the accused (Schleicher,

2022), public attitudes towards sexual violence and harassment—including victim-blaming and the role of rape myths (Kende et al., 2020; Kormos, 2011; Nyúl et al., 2017; Prischetzky, 2011; Rózsás, 2022; Tóth, 2021; Virágh, 2019)—as well as on how victimhood is constructed and who is deemed a "real" or "unimpeachable" victim (Kiss et al., 2021; Virágh, 2020a).

While most of these studies acknowledge that sexual violence and harassment are embedded in unequal gender relations and shaped by patriarchal ideology, none have explicitly examined the role of neoliberal ideology in structuring public discourses on these issues. This paper seeks to address that gap by analysing how neoliberal ideology—and the authoritarian neoliberal regime that has consolidated in Hungary since 2010—shapes media discourses and societal perceptions of sexual harassment and victimhood. The analysis focuses on public discourse surrounding the case of László Marton, widely regarded as the flagship #MeToo case in Hungary.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Neoliberal ideology

Gregor and Grzebalska (2016) conceptualise neoliberalism as a regime that can be analysed from three distinct perspectives. First, in the economic sense, neoliberalism emphasises the primacy of free markets and trade. Neoliberal economic principles advocate for market deregulation, tax reductions, and extensive privatisation. Second, politically, neoliberalism involves a reduction in public redistribution and welfare policies, alongside the state's withdrawal from addressing social inequalities, thereby reinforcing existing power structures within society. Third, neoliberalism shapes social norms, making it a foundational element of contemporary culture. The transactional logic of the market extends beyond the economic sphere, influencing personal and intimate relationships. This suggests that private lives should be governed by neoliberal economic values such as efficiency, rationality, and productivity (Aczél et al., 2014). If ideology is understood as a belief system that legitimises and sustains a given regime, then neoliberalism can likewise be considered an ideological formation—one that has evolved into a hegemonic discourse shaping the interpretation of social phenomena and events. As such, it functions to uphold class domination and serves to maintain and legitimise the hierarchical social structures characteristic of global capitalism (Harvey, 2007).[3]

The core tenets of neoliberal ideology are grounded in the concepts of individualism, personal freedom, and autonomy (Elliott, 2014), which are prioritised over the collective good and public interest. While these ideals may appear liberating,

3 It should be noted that there is an ongoing debate about the end of neoliberalism. This discourse is often linked to a series of crises, rising geopolitical tensions, and strengthening protectionist tendencies (Gerstle, 2022). However, while it is true that the neoliberal order has been challenged and is undergoing a period of crisis, this does not imply the disappearance of neoliberalism as an ideology. Rather, it suggests that its previously unchallenged hegemonic position has been significantly destabilised (Fraser, 2019).

the notion of individual freedom is intricately linked to the cultural trope of individual responsibility. Thus, the freedom offered by neoliberalism is, in essence, reduced to the freedom to choose, with the individual being solely responsible for managing the risks associated with those choices. The neoliberal contract can be summarised as: *"do what you will, but at your own risk"* (Bay-Cheng, 2015, p. 283), indicating that the freedom it presents is not as liberating as it may appear on the surface. Freedom in the form of nonconformity or challenging authority is not promoted, and individual well-being and safety become civic responsibilities.

This logic is embedded in neoliberal rationality—a form of reasoning that applies market-based logic to all spheres of life, reshaping individuals as entrepreneurial subjects expected to approach everyday life through strategic decision-making, weighing potential risks and benefits in a manner akin to economic actors. The ideal neoliberal agent is an entrepreneurial, self-interested, self-reliant, and rational *homo oeconomicus* who continuously engages in cost-benefit analyses and makes ongoing calculations of risks and returns (Aczél et al., 2014; Olssen & Peters, 2005; Pollack & Rossiter, 2010). This individual is expected to bear full responsibility for the consequences of their choices, refrain from blaming others or external circumstances for unfavourable outcomes, and demonstrate resilience during hardship (Davoudi, 2017).

2.2. Neoliberal victim theory

Neoliberal mechanisms of responsibilisation, alongside the incorporation of social domains into the economic sphere, erase the very notion of the 'social', rendering the social foundations of suffering invisible and obscuring its collective, political, and structural dimensions. The *"privatization of social risk"* (Stringer, 2014, p. 40) reframes societal issues such as inequality and injustice as personal failures rather than as the result of systemic factors. As a consequence, victims of structural social issues such as homelessness, poverty, or discrimination are frequently blamed for their own victimisation and stigmatised for their behaviour and decisions. As Stringer (2014, p. 9) notes, neoliberal victim theory *"is characterized first and foremost by a victim-blaming conception of victimization as subjective and psychological, rather than social and political."* Social vulnerability is recast as personal responsibility, with victimhood framed as a self-made outcome—a natural consequence of the individual's poor decisions, inadequate risk management, or a victim personality. Within this framework, the ideal neoliberal agent avoids victimhood—and the burden it places on society—by proactively investing in their own health, safety, and well-being.

Taking poverty as an example of a structurally rooted social issue, Gans (1994) highlights how the behaviours and lifestyles of poor individuals are often depicted as products of moral failings, a lack of self-discipline, and deficient personal responsibility, rather than as outcomes of their socio-economic conditions. This discourse constructs the figure of the *"undeserving poor."* In a similar vein, Woolford

and Nelund (2013) found, in their research on vulnerable and marginalised social groups, that individuals often strive to construct an identity as active, prudent, autonomous, and responsible entrepreneurial subjects in order to demonstrate their deservingness—and, possibly, to distance themselves from the image of the *"undeserving poor"*—when seeking help from social service providers.

2.3. Female agency and victimisation in neoliberalism

At first glance, the ideals of personal freedom and autonomy may appear to align with feminist objectives. However, within a neoliberal framework—where personal freedom is inextricably linked to individual responsibility—autonomy ultimately signifies the capacity and obligation to take full responsibility for oneself. Rottenberg (2014) argues that, in the early 2010s, a distinctly neoliberal form of feminism emerged, exemplified by high-profile women in corporate leadership roles.[4] This model promotes a feminist subject who is expected to assume full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care—including breaking the glass ceiling and managing work–family balance. Since victim status is seen as undesirable and something to be avoided, neoliberal feminism claims that gender inequalities should be handled individually by promoting female agency rather than conceptualising women as victims of structural inequalities (Barca, 2018).

Neoliberalism also fosters female agency with respect to sexuality. As Bay-Cheng (2015) argues, contemporary young women are expected to assert sexual agency and exercise control over their sexuality, further complicating the normative landscape in which they must navigate. In addition to the traditional morality of the Virgin–Slut continuum, the neoliberal norm of agency is reshaping social expectations. Sexual agency becomes a key differentiator between accepted and condemned sexual behaviour. "No means no" becomes the primary criterion for distinguishing between normal sexual activity and sexual violence (Bay-Cheng, 2015), at least within mainstream feminist discourse.

However, sexual violence and harassment continue to be surrounded by stereotypical beliefs, commonly referred to as rape myths (Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Payne et al., 1999). These myths, such as the belief that ordinary middle-class men do not commit sexual violence, that violence is typically perpetrated by strangers, or that sexual harassment can be easily prevented or managed, are untrue but still widely held. In Hungary, the acceptance of rape myths is relatively high in comparison to other European countries, and attitudes toward sexual harassment are also more accepting (European Commission, 2016).

These myths contribute to the construction of the stereotypical *"real perpetrator"* (a deviant man from a lower class or an ethnic minority), as well as the hierarchy

4 The two prominent feminist manifestos to which Rottenberg (2014) refers are Sheryl Sandberg's 2013 book Lean In – written during her tenure as Chief Operating Officer of Facebook – and Anne-Marie Slaughter's 2012 article in the Atlantic, "Why Women Still Can't Have It All".

of victimhood, which distinguishes between the *"real"* victim and the *"undeserving"* victim (Bohner et al., 2013; Greer, 2007; Szabó & Virág, 2017). A substantial body of research indicates that the acceptance of rape myths is correlated with the endorsement of traditional gender roles, sexual conservatism, and sexism (Anderson et al., 1997; Aosved & Long, 2006; Burt, 1980; Lonsway et al., 2008; Rollero & Tartaglia, 2019). Moreover, the hierarchy of victimhood is gendered, with notions of *"real"* and *"undeserving"* victimhood deeply intertwined with constructions of femininity (Virágh, 2020a), particularly the Madonna-Whore dichotomy (Bareket et al., 2018). However, the role of neoliberal ideology in constructing victimhood in relation to sexual harassment remains relatively underexplored.

Neoliberal victim theory (Stringer, 2014) posits that victims of sexual violence and harassment are subjected to similar patterns of blame as those who experience other structural social injustices. In her analysis of public discourse surrounding the Steubenville rape case, Barca (2018) demonstrates that the victim's agency was frequently framed in a negative light, serving as a basis for blame rather than empowerment. Much like the figure of the "undeserving poor", the "undeserving victim" is constructed as unworthy of societal sympathy, support, or solidarity, as she is perceived to bear at least partial responsibility for her victimisation.

It is important to acknowledge, however, a crucial distinction between poverty and sexual violence: the latter is legally categorised as a crime. While neoliberal states may retreat from social redistribution, they continue to maintain—and are expected to maintain—a functioning legal system, which is foundational to the free market. Nonetheless, sexual violence often remains inadequately addressed within legal frameworks, even in Western democracies, and sexual harassment is still not classified as a criminal offense in many countries (Heymann et al., 2023; Temkin & Krahé, 2008). Furthermore, both sexual violence and poverty have underlying structural causes. Thus, a parallel can be drawn between the concepts of the *"undeserving victim"* and the *"undeserving poor"* (Gans, 1994). Just as the social construction of the undeserving poor obscures systemic inequalities and perpetuates socioeconomic hierarchies, the framing of undeserving victimhood serves to justify institutional inaction and reinforce gendered social norms and power structures (Virágh, 2020a).

2.4. Authoritarian neoliberalism in Hungary

In Hungary, neoliberal ideology began to permeate public discourse following the regime change in the early 1990s, reflecting broader regional trends across post-socialist Eastern Europe. At the time, the dominant political narrative emphasised "catching up" with the West and reintegration into Europe, which entailed the adoption of liberal democratic values and human rights alongside neoliberal economic principles (Barna et al., 2018). The neoliberal shift was not limited to the economic sphere; it also involved a discursive transformation that contributed to framing social policy as a societal burden and a fundamentally negative phenomenon (Aczél

et al., 2014). By the time of the 2008 global financial crisis, faith in the attainability of convergence with the West had significantly eroded. The Fidesz-KDNP coalition, which came to power in 2010 following a landslide electoral victory, capitalised on this widespread disillusionment. In 2014, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán declared Hungary an *"illiberal democracy"*. According to Grzebalska and Pető (2018), this declaration can be interpreted as a response to the perceived dysfunctions of global neoliberalism. The regime's opposition to liberal democratic values is, in this sense, framed as a reaction to globalisation, neoliberal governance, and the influence of international institutions in Eastern Europe.

As multiple scholars have noted, the post-2010 system in Hungary represents a hybrid formation that integrates seemingly contradictory ideological elements. Szikra (2014) characterises the regime as combining neoliberal, étatist (statist), and neoconservative components. Scheiring (2022) contends that the Orbán government did not reject neoliberalism's core tenets but instead produced a nationalist-populist mutation of it. Similarly, Lendvai-Bainton and Szelewa (2021, p. 560) conceptualise the regime as a form of *authoritarian neoliberalism,* which they define as *"a recombination of socio-political authoritarianism and neoliberalism."*

The neoliberal dimension is reflected in the implementation of radical economic reforms aligned with market society ideology, including corporate tax cuts, the introduction of a 16% flat personal income tax, major reductions in social assistance spending, as well as labour market deregulation and flexibilisation (Lendvai–Bainton & Szelewa, 2021; Scheiring, 2022; Stubbs & Lendvai–Bainton, 2020; Szikra, 2014).[5] The authoritarian dimension manifests in two primary ways. Politically, it involves the gradual dismantling of democratic institutions, procedures, and norms. Socially, it entails a rejection of social justice frameworks, the systematic deinstitutionalisation of human rights, and the marginalisation of subordinate social groups (Bruff, 2014; Stubbs & Lendvai–Bainton, 2020).

With regard to the regime's ideological underpinnings, elements of neoliberal reasoning persist, particularly in welfare and labour market discourses. These often emphasise individual responsibility, drawing rhetorical distinctions between *"deserving"* and *"undeserving"* citizens. Productive individuals who participate in *"work-based society"* and support their families are valorised, while those reliant on state support are portrayed as unproductive and subject to punitive regulation (Vidra & Virágh, 2025). On the other hand, there is a notable departure from certain core neoliberal values. "Illiberalism" explicitly rejects Western-style individualism in favour of prioritising national interest over individual autonomy (Csillag & Szelényi, 2015). Individual freedoms—especially those pertaining to lifestyle and bodily autonomy—are often subordinated to national interests. This is particularly evident

5 However, not all economic and social policy reforms are grounded in neoliberal principles. Measures such as the centralisation of primary education and the nationalisation of certain industries and sectors run counter to the neoliberal emphasis on privatisation (Scheiring, 2022; Szikra, 2014).

in policies and discourses targeting women, who are positioned as primary agents in a neoconservative, pronatalist agenda that seeks to achieve national and ethnically defined demographic renewal, often undergirded by anti-immigration rhetoric (Kövér, 2018, 2019; Stubbs & Lendvai–Bainton, 2020). The regime explicitly promotes conservative gender norms and the traditional family model, opposing gender equality and individual freedom of choice (Szikra, 2014), while also resisting or, in some cases, hijacking what it perceives as Western progressive cultural trend—commonly referred to as 'wokeism'—including, as will be shown, the #MeToo movement.

3. The László Marton case: a brief overview

The Hungarian wave of the #MeToo movement unfolded alongside global events. The *New York Times* article that exposed the powerful Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein as a sexual predator was published on October 5, 2017. Just over a week later, on October 14, 2017, Hungarian actress Lilla Sárosdi shared her own experience on Facebook:

> *"The Weinstein case makes me remember that 20 years ago a theatre director and his dear friend took me for a drive after a play […]. I was young, naive, a virgin and a fan of the theatre. I was happy to be let in to watch a rehearsal and I was fascinated by what was happening on stage […] The next moment I was sitting in a white BMW with the director, the dear friend at the wheel, at the Margaret Bridge—I will never forget the picture—I look to the side and see the Parliament. The director kneeling on the car seat, zip down, his little penis limboing in front of my eyes. 'Kiss it', I hear the instruction. I started to cry!"* (Kerner 2017)

In her initial post, Sárosdi did not name her harasser, referring to him only as a *"powerful director"*. However, following public pressure and media attention, as well as receiving messages from other victims who had experienced similar forms of harassment by the same individual, she revealed that the perpetrator was László Marton, the principal director and former executive director of Vígszínház, one of Budapest's largest theatres. Marton was 75 years old when the case came to light in the media. A prominent member of the Hungarian cultural elite, he had received numerous state awards. In contrast, Sárosdi was an independent actress with some public recognition, but with limited widespread visibility at the time. Marton initially denied the accusations, but after nine more victims came forward, he apologised publicly on October 26 and withdrew from the public eye for several months. After his absence, Marton returned to directing at a smaller theatre and passed away in September 2019.

In Anglophone contexts, several scholars argue that the #MeToo movement, which is driven by individual women speaking up and sharing their stories, aligns well with neoliberal notions of feminism (Ghadery, 2019; Ozkazanc–Pan, 2019) including the

construct of feminine bravery (Ashworth & Pedersen, 2023). Harrington (2022) further contends that the post-#MeToo era has reframed sexual violence and harassment as obstacles to the realisation of women's full economic potential, thus integrating these issues into neoliberal economic rationality and placing them on governmental agendas in Western countries. In Hungary though—despite receiving significant media attention both due to the Hollywood revelations and local cases[6]—the social perception of #MeToo and its aftermath remain ambivalent. The prevailing view is that the movement was largely unsuccessful in changing or influencing social norms and holding perpetrators accountable (Tóth, 2021; Virágh, 2022).

4. Methodology

To examine the role of neoliberal ideology in the construction of victimhood in cases of sexual harassment, this study employs the method of critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough et al., 2011; Wodak, 1997) applied to a sample of 99 public comments.

4.1. Sample

The corpus for the analysis was collected in two stages. The first stage involved gathering articles related to the László Marton case from major Hungarian online news outlets. Although the illiberal regime attempts to constrain the media and there is an ongoing initiative to take over previously critical outlets, the media landscape is not entirely controlled by the government. At the time of the Marton case, the six most visited online news sites in Hungary included the pro-government outlet Origo, as well as independent platforms such as Index, 24.hu, Blikk.hu, nlc.hu, and hvg.hu (Digitális Közönségmérési Tanács, 2017). Színhaz.org was also included in the sample due to its significance as a key institutional media outlet.

Articles were collected using the hashtags #MartonLászló and #SárosdiLilla between October 14 and October 26. This time frame was selected because the case broke in the media on October 14, when Lilla Sárosdi publicly shared her story, and concluded its first major phase on October 26, when László Marton issued a public apology. The search yielded 237 articles, with substantial content overlap, as key events and statements were repeatedly reported across various media platforms. In the second phase of data collection, comments were gathered from the original sources in which they had been published. For the purposes of this study, *comments* are defined as public statements made by individuals expressing their views about the victim, the perpetrator, the specific case, or sexual harassment as a broader social phenomenon, articulated in a particular time and context. Importantly, these are not anonymous social media comments, but rather public expressions that

6 In addition to the Marton case, other prominent figures in the theatre and television industry were accused of sexual harassment. Nevertheless, the Marton case remained the most high-profile example of the Hungarian #MeToo movement.

appear in various forms—including Facebook posts, opinion pieces, and interviews (online or televised) with public figures, celebrities, and journalists.

The elements of the corpus analysed in this study are, therefore, the comments themselves—not the articles—ensuring no overlap in the data and allowing for a more diverse representation of public opinion on the case. A total of 141 comments were initially compiled, which varied greatly in length. Since the focus of this study is on the construction of victimhood related to sexual harassment and the social perception of sexual harassment, only comments that included opinions on sexual harassment victims or the phenomenon of sexual harassment itself were retained. Comments that discussed only the perpetrator, his personality, professionalism, or his victimhood in connection to the media trial—without addressing the victims or sexual harassment—were excluded from the final sample. The final corpus consists of 99 public comments from 17 different media outlets, representing 76 distinct speakers from both pro-government and independent or opposition-aligned media.

4.2. Data analysis

Critical discourse analysis conceptualises discourse as a form of social interaction (Van Dijk, 2011b), embedded in the social context and reflective of prevailing social structures. At the same time, discourse can construct and shape those structures (Fairclough et al., 2011; Wodak, 1997). In discourse, ideologies typically appear implicitly and in fragmented forms; their functioning can be grasped through beliefs, norms, values, and identities (Van Dijk, 2011a). Discursive identities are fundamentally social and cultural in nature, both reflecting and constituting broader social structures. They can be ascribed, rejected, or assumed by individuals in continuous negotiation with others. Importantly, identities are not solely tied to the self, but can also be attributed to others. They can be constructed in both direct and indirect ways, and can be either openly discussed or symbolically conveyed (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; De Fina, 2011).

The data analysis focused on identifying the presence of neoliberal norms and values, including personal autonomy, individual responsibility, efficiency, and resilience. It also investigated whether neoliberal rationality could be detected in the speakers' argumentation. Particular attention was given to both direct and indirect identity constructions related to neoliberal ideology and victimisation, as well as to the ways in which Hungary's authoritarian neoliberal context influences and shapes these constructions. Given that the demonstration of agency is central to the construction of the ideal neoliberal subject, special emphasis was placed on how victims were portrayed—either as active or passive participants in the events described in the comments. Additionally, following Barca's (2018) framework, positive and negative agency were distinguished. Negative agency refers to a representation of sexual violence victims that mobilises agency to assign shame and blame, thereby contributing to the construction of an undeserving victim identity.

The findings are presented in the following section, supported by illustrative quotes from the public comments.

5. Results

In cases of sexual violence and harassment, public opinion often becomes polarised, with individuals aligning themselves either with the victim or the perpetrator (Boltanski, 1987; Herman, 1992). In the present case, however, three distinct types of discourse can be identified. The first, which questions the victim's credibility or deservingness and often challenges the relevance of addressing sexual harassment altogether, will be referred to as the anti-#MeToo discourse. The second, which expresses solidarity with the victim and affirms the importance and social relevance of discussing sexual harassment, will be termed the #MeToo discourse. The third, while formally aligning with #MeToo principles, appears upon closer examination to serve specific political agendas; this will be referred to as the instrumentalised #MeToo discourse. Each of these discourses operates on two levels: an individual level, which centres on the specific victims of sexual harassment, and a societal level, which addresses the broader phenomenon of sexual harassment. As will be demonstrated in the following section, the attribution of agency and responsibility serves as a key point of differentiation among these discourses.

5.1. The anti-#MeToo discourse

The individual level of the anti-#metoo discourse centres around responsibility attribution to the victim that occurs in relation to four distinct time frames: (1) before the harassment, (2) during the harassment, (3) immediately after the harassment, and (4) at the present moment.

In the first period (prior to the harassment), victims are constructed as active agents, making decisions that, in light of subsequent events, are retrospectively framed as direct antecedents that logically lead to the sexual harassment: *"the situations that arise do not happen by accident"* (Actor—Rényi, 2017). In the case of the primary victim, the most criticised and controversial decision was that Lilla Sárosdi had got into the director's car, where the harassment later took place. According to this discourse, the act is portrayed as a voluntary decision—a free choice made by the victim. In retrospect, speakers present it as both obvious and inevitable that harassment would occur under such circumstances.

> *"Lilla Sárosdi herself got into the director's car. I see what she says about how, out of shock and awe, it never occurred to her that anything could happen to her and that the director was taking advantage of her ignorance. But then that is the problem, that is what we have to talk about, that a woman who is eventually a grown-up woman*

does not even consider why an older gentleman is taking her for a drive." (Independent journalist[7]—Hont 2017, 72).

The neoliberal agent is expected to continuously assess their environment, undertaking an ongoing rational calculus of the potential risks and consequences associated with every decision. According to this logic, it is the woman's responsibility to anticipate the possibility of a hidden agenda when an older man offers her a ride. Notably, all responsibility is assigned to the victim, while the perpetrator remains unaccountable. His actions are normalised and excused; he nearly disappears as a moral agent. His behaviour is not interpreted as the result of conscious decisions, but rather as a given—part of the natural social order.

From a gender perspective, this narrative aligns with the predator/prey cognitive metaphor, implicitly framing the social situation as one characterised by extreme power imbalances. Within this framework, the predator cannot be blamed for hunting; it is the prey who must remain constantly vigilant to avoid harm. The predator's behaviour is taken for granted, while the responsibility for prevention falls squarely on the prey—in this case, the woman. Thus, the victim is constructed as an agent whose actions are subject to scrutiny and judgment. The speaker identifies the victim's ignorance as the core problem: a failure to navigate the world as an *"ultimately grown-up woman",* who should always be alert and protect herself in order to ensure her safety.

At the same time, the logic of neoliberal economics is extended to the perpetrator as well. Within this rationality, it appears natural—even expected—that the director would seek to *"take advantage"* of the situation. In neoliberalism, individuals are not blamed for attempting to maximise their benefit; rather, this behaviour is considered rational and efficient. Applied to the realm of sexuality, this leads to a commodified understanding of relationships, in which interactions—especially sexual ones—are framed as transactional. The *casting couch* thus becomes a symbolic embodiment of this logic: sexuality is interpreted as a resource, and pursuing personal gain through its exchange is seen as a legitimate strategy. In the same article, the author elaborates on this notion further:

"[E]veryone uses what is available to them. Beauty, intellect, charm, fame, money, greatness – who gets what. And no one can inappropriately qualify whose desires are stimulated by what. There are those whose senses are stimulated by the status or self-confidence that comes from power and wealth, and that is nobody's business. So it's possible that someone wants to conquer with their position or their bank account, and conquers someone who wants to do just that. And if she doesn't? Then there must be a way to avoid it. […] In any case, the option of 'no' was open. Many of Weinstein's victims

7 I use the term "independent journalist" to refer to a journalist working for a media outlet that operates independently of government influence or control. In this context, independence specifically denotes editorial and institutional autonomy from the state.

knew exactly why they were going up to the hotel room. I don't say this in a reproachful way either, I don't feel empowered to condemn the way others have found their way." (Independent journalist—Hont 2017, 72).

According to this transactional logic, various attributes such as wealth, fame, position, youth, and beauty are treated as equivalent and considered different forms of capital within this specific market. The neoliberal logic of free markets extends to intimate relationships, which should not be regulated. It is *"nobody's business"* how two parties negotiate their terms or how individuals *"find their way"* in neoliberalism. The social situation is framed as a mutually beneficial contract where both parties gain something and bring something to the table. Consequently, although the initial understanding of the situation might suggest extreme inequalities in power, this dimension is entirely erased in this part of the narrative. Youth and beauty are treated as forms of capital comparable to wealth and fame. The power imbalance between a young, inexperienced theatre fan woman and an older, famous male director is thereby made invisible.

The second time period, during the harassment, sees the victim's agency and responsibility further scrutinised. A key assumption in victim-blaming discourse—and one of the myths surrounding sexual harassment—is that harassment can be easily managed: it will cease the moment the victim says 'no' (Lonsway et al., 2008). The freedom of choice (in this case, the freedom to say 'no') is an important aspect in neoliberal ideology. Speakers in the victim-blaming discourse are eager to emphasise the neoliberal feminist phrase "No means no", but also construct the option of 'no' as always available: *"You can always say no"* (Actor—Rényi 2017) *"the option of 'no' was open"* (Independent journalist—Hont 2017, 72). As will be shown in the next section, victims' testimonies often reveal that they did not communicate their discomfort in an overt or forceful manner, but said 'no' in more implicit ways: they tried to pull away or started to cry. Consequently, in victim-blaming discourse, they are depicted as passive during the harassment—an image that directly contradicts the expectations placed on a neoliberal agent.

"Why didn't just one single lady, one out of the eight, say at the moment of the insult that 'I won't tolerate that!'? That she would have made a scandal, that she would have slapped László Marton, that she would have given a sign that something terrible had happened." (Theatre director—ATV 2017b).

Victims are expected to act as active agents when harassment occurs: to say 'no', to speak up, create a scene, or even physically resist the perpetrator to show that a boundary has been crossed. This implicitly suggests that passivity may be interpreted as consent and fails to acknowledge the inherent power imbalances in these situations. The logic also becomes more explicit in a Facebook post by a well-known actress:

> *"I cannot post 'Me too', because I've never experienced anything like that. Somehow, I could always manage the situation. It's extremely easy. If a man approaches you with disrespect, you should just leave him where he is."* (Actress—Kiss 2017).

In this narrative, although sexual harassment is acknowledged as disrespectful, the broader social context in which such harassment typically occurs is ignored. Victims are portrayed as failed neoliberal agents who could have *"managed the situation"* with ease—an ability that this speaker claims to possess. By positioning herself as a successful neoliberal woman who avoids victimhood, the speaker positions her feminine identity above that of the victim, constructing an idealised neoliberal version of femininity but also an undeserving, failed neoliberal femininity for the victims in an indirect way.

The third and fourth time periods (the time after the harassment and the present moment) are interconnected. In the aftermath of the harassment, the main victim is depicted as passive, while in the present, she is portrayed as active and agentic. However, both portrayals are regarded as problematic within the discourse. A frequently asked question is: *"Why now? Why were you silent for 20 years?"* (Independent journalist—HírTV 2017b). After the harassment, the victim is expected to demonstrate agency, either by reporting the incident or at least voicing a complaint: *"I don't really understand the Hungarian actress, why she is coming out with a story like this after 15 years. Why didn't she do so back then, may I ask?"* (Theatre director—Színház.org 2017b). However, the victim's newfound agency is not celebrated but instead used as a basis for further blame. This is partly because publicly accusing the famous director symbolically implicates the victim as a perpetrator (Virágh, 2022), and partly because the fact that she waited more than 20 years to speak out suggests that she has not properly processed her traumatic experience, thus failing to exhibit the resilient personality expected of the neoliberal agent (Davoudi, 2017).

> *"For me, it is at the very least repulsive that a mature actress, whose profession is to portray life situations, conflicts, solutions, etc., both uplifting and despicable, cannot cope with her own grievances even after decades, but jumps out of nowhere and publicly accuses a legend."* (Left-wing politician—Férfihang 2017).

Overall, on the individual level of the anti-#MeToo discourse, in two of the four time periods, the victims are portrayed as passive, thereby contradicting the idealised neoliberal identity. In the other two time periods, although the victims are depicted as agents, this represents a form of negative agency (Barca, 2018), which does not construct a positive neoliberal identity. Instead, it reinforces the notion of undeserving victimhood, serving as a basis for blaming the victims for their own victimisation.

At the societal level, the anti-#MeToo discourse resists the framing of sexual harassment as a systemic social issue for a variety of reasons. First, it tends to normalise acts that fall under the category of sexual harassment or violence,

particularly in specific social contexts such as nightclubs. In such settings, these behaviours are often perceived as part of ordinary social interaction.

> *"In a nightclub, we don't call it harassment, because you go there to have fun, to meet people. That's part of it. [...] If a girl goes to a nightclub, she knows that there are guys who are drunk and will touch her. [...] it's in the cards that he's going to go dancing in front of the girl, and grab her ass. Is that harassment?"* (Civilian passer-by—Szilágyi & Göttinger, 2017).

This statement exemplifies a neoliberal logic similar to that identified in other contexts: if a particular outcome is *"in the cards"*—that is, foreseeable—it is considered an inherent part of the risk and should be factored into individual decision-making, rather than viewed as a social problem.

A second line of argument relies on the relativisation of sexual harassment, although the specifics of this relativisation vary according to the speaker's political affiliation. Anti- #MeToo voices on the political opposition, typically with left-liberal leanings, tend to downplay sexual harassment by contrasting it with more severe forms of gender-based violence, such as physical assault or domestic abuse. In doing so, they suggest that harassment is a comparatively minor issue, undeserving of significant public concern. Conversely, speakers aligned with or supportive of the ruling party often juxtapose sexual harassment cases with instances of extreme gender-based violence committed by migrants.

> *"I don't know if you have noticed, every single day for the last two years there has been a news story about which migrant, in which country, raped whom, a little girl, a little boy, an old woman, who was killed. But for two weeks now, all we have heard is which producer, director, or actor has harassed which little girl for the fifth time. Surely it's a coincidence?"* (Pro-government journalist—Hír TV, 2017a).

Within this framework, sexual harassment and violence against women are only considered legitimate topics of concern when linked to migration, positioning the perpetrator as the *"other"* —specifically, as a migrant. Given that both global and local #MeToo narratives frequently involve elite, powerful, and often domestic figures who abuse their positions, this discourse seeks to delegitimise such cases by framing them as intentional distractions from what it claims is the *real* issue: migration.

5.2. #Metoo discourse

The #MeToo discourse operates according to a different logic compared to the victim-blaming discourse. It places full responsibility on the perpetrator, primarily by highlighting the power imbalance between the young theatre fan and the famous older director, a point repeatedly emphasised by both the victims and other speakers. For instance, Sárosdi describes her younger self as *"an 18-year-old virgin girl"* who *"went to the rehearsals with shaky legs"*, looking up to Marton, who *"was a huge authority"* (Gergely 2017). A journalist elaborates on the different dimensions of power in this particular case, which significantly limited the victim's options and established the vulnerability of the weaker party:

> *"The power, which is created by the age difference between the two persons, but is further reinforced by the celebrity-fan relationship, in which the older party cannot be excused; you cannot help but see that someone is vulnerable to you."* (Independent journalist—Kempf, 2017).

The discourse aims to hold the perpetrator accountable and, more broadly, to shed light on the embeddedness of sexual harassment in unequal societal structures, emphasising that *"everyone who holds power should come to their senses"* (Victim—Gergely 2017). However, the focus is not only on the perpetrator but also on the victim(s), whose actions and inactions are explained to absolve them of responsibility, thus distancing them from the "undeserving victim" identity. Therefore, the #Metoo discourse engages with the arguments of the victim-blaming discourse across all four time periods, challenging and contesting these ideas.

In the first time period, before the harassment, the basis for criticising the victims' actions is that they should have been more vigilant and calculated the risks carefully. However, as we learn both from the victims' accounts and from the statements defending the perpetrator, László Marton is (and was already when he harassed these women) *"a popular and universally respected artist of merit"* and a *"real gentleman"* (Actor—Rényi, 2017; Theatre director—ATV, 2017b). Although women are generally socialised to be cautious, in Marton's case, there were no apparent signs that he posed any threat. One of the victims articulates this paradox in the following way:

> *"We were warned not to talk to strangers, and some of us had met sugar daddies, but the admonitions we received from our parents and the columns we read in Bravo magazine did not give us any clues about what to do if a man we respected abused our innocence, our naivety, our infatuation. [...] That's why she doesn't leave, and even goes back, because she can't believe that a man she respects and admires, a professional greatness, could really do such a thing. [...] And she gets in the car for the same reason. She doesn't assume that a man whose direction is so sensitive, [...] who is friendly, kind, acts as if he considers her as equal, has a sweet smile and a nice jacket, that that man will pull out his penis in the car after just two or three meetings. No element in the matrix warns you that he will put you in a situation from which you cannot escape."* (Victim—Kovács B., 2017).

The initial premise—that individuals are responsible for assessing risk—is not challenged here. Instead, the speaker engages with neoliberal rationality, employing its logic to explain the victim's reasoning. She describes how the victim's risk assessment was grounded in internalised, stereotypical beliefs (or myths) about sexual violence and harassment. The speaker emphasises that in this case, the perpetrator diverges from the stereotypical image of the "real perpetrator" (Bohner et al., 2013; Szabó & Virág, 2017). As a charming, well-dressed upper-class artist and intellectual who behaves kindly and politely—rather than aggressively or threateningly—even a meticulous risk assessment could not have anticipated the possibility of sexual harassment. Yet it still occurred. Therefore, it becomes evident that one can become a victim despite being cautious and calculating the risks. The discursive identities of the responsible neoliberal agent and the (real) victim are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

In the second time period, during the harassment, the emphasis is placed on the perceived passivity of the victims. Marton's victims often describe themselves as paralysed and frozen, either due to shock or because of the previously mentioned power imbalance, which hindered them from acting as freely as they normally would.

> *"In his car, he somehow always touched my leg as he shifted gears, but after a while, he was touching my thigh so much that I couldn't wait for him to shift gears and leave me alone at least until then. What was I supposed to do? I pulled my leg away, but I didn't say anything, I didn't want to offend such a prominent man."* (Victim—Urfi, 2017).

Other voices in the discourse—often individuals identifying as insiders in the theatre world or former victims of sexual harassment unrelated to the Marton case—also acknowledge the difficulty of resisting, either verbally or physically. *"You cannot say anything in such a situation, you feel paralyzed"* (Victim—Kbv, 2017). They emphasise that saying 'no' in a professional context can have serious consequences for a victim's career. *"You can quickly destroy someone with less power and influence, and I think it goes without saying that in the vast majority of cases, the victims have far less leverage than the perpetrators"* (Independent journalist—Puskás, 2017).

> *"[T]he term 'casting couch' implies some kind of deal or at least a tender. Whoever performs better on the couch, or even lies down on it, gets the role. But that is not the case. Couches, dressing room lounges, cutting rooms, offices have no weight in the casting. The person who lies on the couch and under the director-principal director is not the one who gets the part. It's whoever they have the power to force to do so."* (Actress—Színház.org, 2017a).

Yet many of these speakers also note that, although the situation was difficult, they personally managed to resist. While they do not blame victims who remained passive and express solidarity with them, they simultaneously highlight their own capacity for resistance: *"Fortunately, I was able to stand up for myself"* (Actress—Kbv, 2017);

"Luckily, I was brave enough to defend myself" (Actress—Hvg.hu, 2017). In doing so, they construct themselves as neoliberal agents who successfully avoided victimhood, not in a competitive or judgmental manner, but in a way that affirms agency and reinforces the ideal of self-responsibility. The significant power imbalance also explains why the victims remained passive and never reported the incidents. Sárosdi herself stated that the reason for this silence was the shame experienced by the abused person (HírTV, 2017b). However, one of the victims explains this apparent inaction through the lens of neoliberal rationality again:

> *"Excuse me, to whom should I have reported it? Who would have dared to speak up? Who would have believed it? How could it have been proven? There is no physical evidence. Should I have reported to the police, saying 'Good afternoon, the director of the Vígszínház took me to a parking lot to give him a blow job, although I didn't think that's why we were going there, please investigate the case'? László Marton vs. an 18-year-old anonymous girl—I have to laugh."* (Victim—Kovács B., 2017).

In this way, the narrative aligns with neoliberal rationality by evaluating the available options, demonstrating that the decision not to report the incident was not a sign of passivity, but rather a rational and deliberate choice, given the circumstances and the fact that it would have been practically impossible to overcome such a powerful figure.

Finally, in the fourth period, the agency demonstrated by Lilla Sárosdi in coming forward with her story is framed as a heroic act, symbolising great strength and courage within the #MeToo discourse. Although agency, strength, and bravery are qualities associated with the ideal neoliberal citizen, in this case, her decision to take action can be seen as a form of self-sacrifice for others, as it involves a kind of secondary victimisation in the media. Sárosdi must endure public scrutiny for the greater cause of social change, which distances her from the self-involved neoliberal agent: *"I truly believe this is a milestone. Lilla's courage has sparked an avalanche, […] and more and more victims are finding the strength to tell us what happened"* (Independent journalist—HírTV, 2017c).

At the societal level, the #MeToo discourse frames sexual harassment as an abuse of power and advocates for broader social transformation. Sárosdi herself frequently refers to the institutional and societal power structures that enable sexual harassment and violence as "feudal" and "old". References to *"feudal old roots"* (ATV, 2017a) and the need to transcend *"a system that has been entrenched for a hundred years"* (Kovács M. D., 2017) point to pre-modern and pre-capitalist structures as the root causes of such abuses. This framing positions the dismantling of institutional and social hierarchies as part of a broader modernisation project—a long-overdue necessity—which also aligns with the discourse of catching up with more progressive societal models.

5.3 The instrumentalised #MeToo discourse

The third type of discourse initially appears to align with the #MeToo movement, as it similarly assigns responsibility exclusively to the perpetrator rather than the victim on the individual level. However, this discourse must be clearly distinguished from the core #MeToo narrative, as it serves fundamentally different objectives. Propagated exclusively by Origo, a pro-government media outlet,[8] it is primarily mobilised to achieve political ends rather than to advance gender equality. In this context, the #MeToo discourse is strategically instrumentalised for political purposes.

At the individual level, victims are neither blamed nor portrayed as heroes in the discourse. Instead, they are depicted as *"18–20 years old, naive, deceived, humiliated, and sometimes threatened girls"* (Origo 2017d). In contrast, much greater emphasis is placed on Marton, whose most salient characteristic is his alleged left-liberal identity. He is repeatedly described as a *"hyper-liberal person"* (Origo, 2017a), a *"left-liberal theatre director"* with *"left-liberal politician friends"* (Origo, 2017c), and as *"a powerful lord of the left-liberal cultural-political world"* (Origo, 2017b). Notably, the victim's similarly liberal orientation is not thematised. The discourse also demonstrates a selective approach to criticism: although various public figures from across the political spectrum—including both conservative and liberal voices—defended László Marton and criticised the victim, this discourse exclusively scrutinises and condemns opinions originating from the left-liberal side. Comparable views expressed by individuals affiliated with the government or its ideological allies are either ignored or excused.

On the societal level, the discourse frames sexual harassment as primarily embedded in hierarchical and autocratic structures, not those rooted in feudalism, but in the state socialist system. This system is discursively linked to the contemporary left-liberal milieu, which is portrayed as its ideological successor. Marton's identity is constructed symbolically and is representative of this cultural-political world; thus, his downfall is interpreted as emblematic. As Origo (2017b) puts it, Marton's fall *"may also signify the collapse of the cultural-political world of the left-liberal era stemming from the Kádár regime, along with the downfall of opinion terror."*

6. Conclusion

Based on the results, three types of discourse can be distinguished. The anti-#MeToo discourse is articulated by a diverse range of speakers, including individuals with opposition sympathies, liberals, conservatives, and pro-government affiliates. Within this discourse, constructions of undeserving victimhood are underpinned by neoliberal victim theory. (Stringer, 2014). The victim(s) were portrayed as either passive or exhibiting negative agency (Barca, 2018), which only served to further blame and shame them. The undeserving victim identity appeared to be closely

8 All the public comments included in this discourse are unsigned opinion articles, published under the name of the media outlet Origo.

linked with a failed neoliberal agent identity: a person who had failed to exercise proper risk management, made poor decisions, and lacked resilience, as evidenced by her inability to process the trauma even after twenty years. Conversely, this discourse absolves the perpetrator of responsibility entirely—his actions are naturalised and depicted not as individual choices, but as neutral circumstances or natural consequences of maximising personal benefits in the 'market of sexuality'.

Interestingly, speakers associated with the victim-blaming discourse also mobilise arguments from neoliberal feminism, but instrumentalise them to discredit the victim's story. The phrase *"you can always say no"* (Actor – Rényi 2017) is not empowering but places a further burden on victims, as the expectation is that they should express their objection clearly and unambiguously, not that the perpetrator should discern whether consent was given. Moreover, everything that occurred before the 'no' is constructed as consensual within this discourse. Sexual harassment was often naturalised and minimised as a social issue within the discourse, either by comparison to more severe instances of gender-based domestic violence or gender-based violence perpetrated by migrants—the latter perspective expressed exclusively by government officials and pro-government journalists.

In contrast, the #MeToo discourse follows an opposing logic by placing full responsibility on the perpetrator, while excusing or contextualising the perceived poor decisions or inaction of the victims. However, the emphasis on individual responsibility in both discourses underscores the pervasive influence of neoliberal ideology on the social perception of sexual harassment. In some cases, speakers explicitly invoke neoliberal rationality, suggesting that certain decisions and inactions result from risk-based cost-benefit calculations—still leading to victimisation and other stigmatised outcomes. This highlights the contradictory expectations placed on individuals under neoliberalism. Furthermore, contrary to neoliberal victim theory, sexual victimisation is acknowledged here as a social and political phenomenon, rather than merely a subjective or psychological experience.

Finally, a third type of discourse represents an instrumentalised version of the #MeToo movement, in which the thematisation of sexual harassment is mobilised for political purposes. While this discourse does not engage in victim-blaming and attributes full responsibility to the perpetrator, it does so with the explicit aim of discrediting political opponents. Notably, the authoritarian neoliberal regime responded to the #MeToo movement in two opposing yet parallel ways in the media. In the anti-#MeToo discourse, the movement was directly contested through securitisation strategies, drawing on nationalism and anti-immigrant rhetoric. In contrast, the second response involved hijacking the #MeToo discourse by instrumentalising its core narrative and redirecting public outrage toward the left-liberal cultural and political elite. Within this authoritarian neoliberal logic, sexual victimisation is only recognised as a legitimate social and political issue when it can be framed within either a nationalistic (migrant vs. native) or partisan (left-liberal vs. conservative) binary, thereby further reinforcing social polarisation.

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