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Without Remedy: Lessons Learned from a Gendered Analysis of the 2018 Hungarian General Elections

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One could ask: What was that feminist colleague thinking when she announced in 2018 that she wanted to join a new Facebook group, called “Feminism of the Hungarian Sociological Association” (FHSA)? The new group included two administrators whom that same self-declared feminist scholar had previously ‘blocked’ as friends. This was the question that the group administrators FHSA actually asked themselves, when that ostensibly fierce, fearless and dedicated feminist activist submitted her request to join the new site – after she had already played a key role in trolling and destroying the oldest, most visited professional Facebook page called “Gender Studies in Hungary”. The latter group had served as the most important infrastructure for feminist activism and teaching in recent years when public space and funding began shrinking considerably. In 2017, the Hungarian community of scholars and activists were shaken by several events that were long in coming, which pointed at serious political challenges that feminist politics now face.

At first glance, the inner turmoil witnessed in virtual space around who could ban and exclude whom from a closed, professional Facebook group may have had nothing to do with the results of three consecutive elections in Hungary. The Fidesz Magyar Polgári Szövetség (FIDESZ) party, in coalition with the Christian Democratic Party (Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt/KDNP), won all three, starting in 2010. In 2018, they increased their electoral support by an additional 440.000 votes. Significantly, this victory occurred even though the FIDESZ-KDNP government has been under international pressure for dismantling the rule of law, undermining the freedom of press, restricting women’s rights, and mismanaging European Union (EU) funds, among other concerns (Pető 2017a). The government was nonetheless able to use the critique it encountered received abroad to its own advantage in the domestic arena where votes matter. These parties utilized external criticisms to justify an intensification of government rhetoric, claiming that Brussels, migrants and György Soros have waged a war against Hungary while illegitimately interfering in its domestic affairs. While opposition activists gave interviews to the foreign press, participated in hearings and attended informal dinners abroad, FIDESZ used government funding to mobilize voters in the countryside, often by distributing campaign donations or pressuring citizens to vote for its incumbents. In contrast to mainstream views, I argue that it is crucial to examine the strategies behind FIDESZ’s consecutive victo-