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# Women in the Parliament of Montenegro



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## How to make each seat matter?

Women in Montenegrin Parliament are both misrepresented and underrepresented. Although improvements were made, impact of female MPs remains unclear and is perceived by the public as rather low. With expected rise of number of female MPs in elections on 16 October 2016, set of measures ensuring their visibility is necessary in order to be able to call Montenegro a parliamentary democracy.

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Currently, there is 18,5% of women in the Parliament of Montenegro, which is the highest share of women in the history of this institution. To be very precise, 18,5% means that 15 out of 81 seats in the Parliament are held by women. Last elections, held on 16 October 2016, will be a test for the quota system, which has been reformed since the last elections 2012. Nevertheless, irrespective of how many women are sitting in the Parliament, their engagement, initiative, independence and dedication to gender issues is unclear and will be the primary focus of this paper.

## How did we get here?

The position of women in the Parliament, just like the position of women in any other institution, or for that matter the position of any minority group in Montenegro, is primarily regulated by positive discrimination through quotas. Quotas are positive measures, which have a clear end-goal of ensuring equal representation of both genders (or of adequate representation of a minority) in the decision-making structures.

Gender equality was for the first time proclaimed in the Constitution of Montenegro in 2007. A series of laws regulate this issue: the Law on the Election of Councilors and Representatives, the Law on Gender Equality, the Law on the Prevention of Discrimination, the Law on Political Parties, the Law on the Financing of Political Parties and the Law on Local Assemblies.

There were two reforms of the election legislation regarding women. First, in 2011 when “30% quota system” was introduced, share of women in the Parliament rose from 13.6% to 17%. During their current term, their share in the Parliament dropped to 14,8% (11 MPs), to now 18,5%. This was due to the fact that when a female MP resigned, she was replaced with a male MP. Again, it is important to understand that we are talking about the difference of 11, 12, 13 or 14 women at any given point. Not only is this

result very low, but also the obvious questions should be posed: Why did the legal provision of a 30% quota not produce such representation, and why did this number change in only one term? The reasons lie in the implementation measures of this legislative provision. On one hand, the Law did not solve the issue of the position of the women on party election lists. Namely, it only stipulated that there should be 30% women on the list, without stating their positioning on the list, leading to female representative mostly being at the bottom of the party election lists. The second reason is that once a woman acquired a mandate, there was no provision guaranteeing that she will be replaced by another female MP.

Although the current share of women in the Parliament of Montenegro is the highest in history, Montenegro is in the last place in the region: Bosnia and Herzegovina (21.4%), Croatia (23.8%), Macedonia (30.9%), Slovenia (32.2%) and Serbia (32.4%).<sup>1</sup>

Of course, this was recognized as a problem from the very beginning and even more so after this inefficiency of the quota system. The Law on the Election of Councilors and Representatives was amended again in 2013 and it stipulated a provision that every fourth candidate on party election list ought to be from the less represented gender and that a candidate who stops their mandate is to be replaced by a candidate of the less represented gender. Since this change, we have not had Parliamentary elections, but there were local elections and the change was from 5% to 27% of female MPs in local assemblies.

There is an obvious issue that rises from this provision, which did give results – why every fourth candidate on the list? Precisely this amendment is an indicative point of female influence in the Parliament of Montenegro. At the time of the draft of the proposal for amending the law, the Committee for Gender Equality and a majority of female MPs supported a “1 in 3” proposal. They were unable to persuade their male colleagues in the Parliament to accept this, and everything

<sup>1</sup> *Women in Politics*, UNDP and IPSOS Strategic Marketing, Montenegro, June 2012

ended with a defeat in which even those female MPs, which were pushing for the “1 in 3” proposal, voted for the adopted version. Thus, now we have legislation, which states that each party list for the elections ought to have 30% of women, but one in four is designated for a less represented gender. This result reflects a lack of influence of the women in the Parliament at the time when this law was amended (2013), which is when current Parliamentarians were in power.

Regarding the institutional framework, the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights is in charge of the gender equality strategies. Thus, in 2013, the National Action Plan for Achieving the Gender Equality was adopted. What is indicative regarding its implementation is that on one side, fewer institutions are involved in this phase than it was planned and their budget was rather limited. Beside the Ministry (Department for Gender Equality), the two following institutions directly implement this plan: the Committee for Gender Equality in the Parliament of Montenegro and the Ombudsman.

The international community follows the general issue of gender equality closely. The European Commission’s Country Report from 2015<sup>2</sup> states that there has been success in the alignment with the legislation of the EU on gender equality, but that what Montenegro lacks the most are strong institutions dealing with human rights in general. Within the framework of the UN Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, even though the observations of the Committee were given in 2011, the numbers provided are still very much true for the present situation. Namely, in their concluding observations they note that women are significantly underrepresented in Parliament, parliamentary committees, municipalities, political parties, managing positions of ministries, etc. Currently, there are 14 committees in the Parliament of Montenegro with only three female chairs. Moreover, each of the committees has between 15% and 30% of female MPs. The

exception is Committee for Gender Equality with over 85% of women (only one male MP).

## Obstacles and opportunities

The Parliament is one of the pillar institutions of Montenegrin democracy, yet trust in this institution, especially in terms of improving and preserving gender equality, is rather low. Namely, a 2012 IPSOS Strategic Marketing survey shows that citizens, when asked which structures in the society contribute the most to the improvement of life of women in Montenegro, named female NGOs (39%), women themselves (30%), international organizations (13%), the Parliament of Montenegro (5%), local self-governments (4%) and political parties (3%). This data shows that Parliament is not trusted at all as an institution that can provide gender equality and one of the reasons for this is the possibility of this institution being viewed as male dominated.

There are three most important pillars of women support in politics and potentials for their higher level of influence that can at the same time jeopardize this goal. These three spheres are both opportunities and threats for female proactive political engagement: media, local level and parties’ structures and consequently their larger influence.

### • *Female MPs and media*

In 2013, the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights<sup>3</sup> conducted a research of the local media (all major and influential media houses were included). This research shows that 78,1% of media quotes are by men, and only 21,9% by women. In addition to this, research shows that less of the 1% of the content could be called “female content” in the sense that it targets issues

2 EU Montenegro 2015 Report can be found on: [http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key\\_documents/2015/20151110\\_report\\_montenegro.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2015/20151110_report_montenegro.pdf)

3 *Monitoring: Gender Sensitivity of Montenegrin Media*, Ministry of Human and Minority Rights, November 2013, Podgorica

mostly concerning women. Within this content, over 60% has a tendency to strengthen gender stereotypes. When one looks at the gender structure of persons preparing these news, 66% were prepared by female journalists. This is interesting because this high number of female journalists does not influence the content in media, which could portray a different vision of women, not just as mothers and wives, but also as integral part of politics, for example.

Based on the research done by the Center for Monitoring in 2014<sup>4</sup> regarding the perception of citizens, 45,1% said that women are not represented in the media at all (10,7%) or that they are not reported on enough (34,4%), while 37,4% stated that women are mostly reported on in the news. If we compare the perception of 37,4% of the citizens who believe that women are sufficiently represented in the media, and compare it to the results of previously described research on media content, there is a discrepancy between what the media offers and how the public perceives it.

Media is an important tool in terms of shaping the public opinion with how it chooses to portray women in public life. Thus, it can be both an opportunity and a threat in political image of female MPs. Montenegro is often perceived as a traditional country with values such as family and motherhood still being a primary focus of media and general public. If a woman in public life stands up for a topic, which might not be supported by the public, accusations she will face will touch mostly upon her personal life. It is important that the media recognize the danger of this trend and conduct professionally in conveying messages of female MPs.

### • *Women in Local Assemblies*

Since the amendments referring to quota in 2013, after the local elections in 2014 in Montenegro, the number of women in the local assemblies almost doubled. Despite this fact, key positions of

<sup>4</sup> *Political Activism of Women in Montenegro*, Center for Monitoring, November 2014, Podgorica

power, such as the president of the municipality or vice-president are held mainly by men: only 6 out of 78 persons in positions of power on local level are women, including the president of the municipality of Kolasin, the only female municipal president in Montenegro. There are only two female presidents of municipal assemblies, compared to 21 male presidents. In addition, male vice-presidents of the municipalities are in the majority: 33 compared to three female ones.

The local level is extremely important for the overall picture of the impact of women in the National Parliament, since women who are placed on party election lists are mostly those who came from local municipalities. Some of the interlocutors consulted during the process of drafting this paper, argued that mostly the highest party structures, being under the pressure to fulfill mere quota, pick female candidates, who were either prominent or easy to cooperate at the local level. Thus, it is important to pay attention to empowering those candidates and tackling the issue from the lowest level.

### • *Women in Political Parties*

In addition to media presence and local politics, another very important aspect of female exercise of influence are the political parties themselves. Most of the parties in Montenegro have stipulated that their ruling structures need to have 30% representation of women. This, however, is not always the case.

During the desk research of statutes of six prominent Montenegrin parties (Democratic Party of Socialists, NOVA, Socialist People's Party, Pozitivna, DEMOS, Democrats, Movement for Change), following joint conclusions can be made:

- Most of the parties stipulate in their statutes that 30% of less represented gender will be ensured in party's structures. The exception is NOVA, which does not provide for such rule.
- Most of the parties do not have 30% of less represented gender in all structures. Best



examples of female participation are Socialist People's Party and Democrats.

- All parties have men as their leaders, except for HGI.
- All parties have some type of Forum of Women, although not developed to the same extent, meaning that in some cases they organize events and activities, but in other they just exist as a section on a webpage.

Since Montenegro will have parliamentary elections on 16 October, all elections lists were submitted to the State Election Commission. The lists fulfill the legal minimum of 30% of women on the lists with one in four position reserved for a woman. However, the problem is the fact that parties are willing to fulfill only what is required by the law, none of them go beyond the legal minimum.

Political campaigns are mostly focused on male candidates. Key speakers of almost all party campaigns were male. Here it is important to bear in mind that due to the very hierarchic structures of the political parties in Montenegro, campaigns are focused on the leaders of the parties and parties as a whole entity. This makes it even more difficult for women to portray themselves during the campaigns.

Two main problems can be addressed through financial incentives within the issue of underrepresentation of women in political parties. First, women face obstacles related to childcare and other family-related issues, which are, in a traditional society such as Montenegrin, quite important. Here, parties could separate certain funds to support such cases and help women in parties with childcare and other expenses. This is a practice, which was successfully implemented in Canada. Of course, these incentives are fixed amounts predetermined by party structures.

Second issue is related to the fact that parties themselves do not see their benefit of promoting involvement of women within their structures. Thus, legislative provisions should be proposed in order to empower the state to have financial incentives for parties, which involve women more frequently in their structures and cam-

paigns. In addition to this, practice shows that some states develop free media time for parties promoting gender equality, which can be a very effective tool.

## Parliamentary life for female MPs

During months of June and July, interviews were conducted with six parliamentarians who gave much clearer picture about their perception of their influence by using concrete examples. Originally, the purpose of interviews was to involve some male MPs, but there was no positive response from their side.<sup>5</sup>

What is striking is that when asked about the number of independent initiatives of their own within the parties, female MPs would give various numbers. However, once asked to be precise and state such initiative, they would either state those initiatives, which were joint party ones or just say that they cannot remember since they function within their parties as a team. None of them was able to neither provide exact numbers backed with specific data nor compare between the number of individual and party initiatives.

When asked about the quota system, a majority of MPs interviewed, tend to prefer quality to quantity. They see the quota system as important but not crucial.

Further on, there have been failed attempts to create a female parliamentary group. When asked to explain why these attempts failed, parliamentarians saw the blame in other female MPs and the parties they came from. Although personal issues are something that cannot be proved, it is safe to assume that the fact that all female MPs

<sup>5</sup> The interviews were conducted in the period of political demonstrations and boycotts of Parliament by part of opposition, which can be an explanation for rather low interest in this topic.



were willing to sit at the same table, shows their understanding of the importance of such step. Whether the reasons were of personal nature, or party affiliation and the lack of strength to pursue this goal, it is of the utmost importance not to give up in the future of trying to gather women, at least around gender issues.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Women in the Parliament of Montenegro are improving their position steadily, although compared to the rest of the region of Western Balkans (not to mention EU countries) they are far behind. It is obvious that the share of women in our structures and levels is way below EU standards. Their influence in the previous term is difficult to measure but two events showcased directly their limitations: failure of the Law amendment, which would include “1 in 3” rule, and failure to create the Parliamentary Group of Women. Although the actors involved list different reasons for these two failures, it is apparent that women in the Parliament of Montenegro do not all commit equally to promoting gender equality and actively engaging in the issue.

There is a number of activities, which needs to be realized in order to create an environment for the real change in substance not just numbers. Since this is a complex issue and “influence” is quite difficult to measure, the following steps need to be taken in order to start moving in the right direction when it comes to gender equality

in its substance:

1. The Law on the Election of Members of the Parliament ought to be amended so that every third person on the party list is from the less present gender in the parliament.
2. Women in political parties need to actively engage and revive their party forums.
3. It is necessary to create an environment and invest efforts to educate new coming MPs after general elections and create enabling environment for establishment of women’s parliamentary network
4. The Government of Montenegro should take into account incentive measures for the parties, such as: paying female seats in the Parliament more, dedicating fixed amount of budget for Women’s Forums, granting free media time to political parties promoting gender equality. Thus, Law on the Financing of Political Parties should be amended accordingly.
5. It is necessary to educate and empower women at local level as mobilization of women in politics would respectively give better results at local level and gradually encourage their political work at national level.
6. Male MPs should be involved actively in all activities dealing with gender equality since they still see the topic of gender equality as something that is immanently female.
7. Media should promote success stories of female MPs and portray them for their professional, rather than personal achievements.
8. Media should use women as source of info and experts more frequently.

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