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**Women in political  
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# Position of women in political decision-making in Croatia

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## 1. Policy context and position of women in political decision-making

### 1.1. Policy context

The 1990s were marked by re-traditionalisation and women's re-domestication discourse and gender equality was not considered as a social problem what worsened the position of women in Croatia and delayed improvements in their political or other rights. If we look at policy developments in the area of gender equality, the 2000 may be considered as a turning point as it brought a change in public and political climate, including a more favourable gender equality discourse. A left-centre coalition came to power for the first time, which was more inclined to gender equality agenda and opened for collaboration with women's organisations on these topics, and EU membership become a primary political goal. Since then a more comprehensive institutional setting for gender equality started to emerge, as well as improvements in gender equality policy and legislation. However, there is an obvious implementation gap and changes in gender equality practices were of smaller intensity (for more details see Dobrotić et al. 2013).

The same holds for political decision-making. The 1990s were marked by low participation of women in decision-making what is attributed to the political factors (unconsolidated party system, semi-presidential constitutional framework and one party's monopoly), socio-economic factors (low employment rates, the 1991-1995 war consequences) and ideological factors (ethnicised nationalism, re-traditionalisation and women's re-domestication discourse) (Tomić-Kuludrović and Kunac 2000; Dobrotić et al. 2013; Siročić 2014). In 1999, before the 2000 parliamentary elections, a proportional electoral system was introduced, which is considered as a women-friendly concerning the balanced participation in politics (Deželan et al. 2013; Siročić and Sutlović 2013). As it will be presented afterwards, the introduction of a proportional electoral system has indeed been a crucial political factor that brought an important increase in women's share in political decision-making in Croatia.

The proportional electoral system replaced a majority (1990) and combined electoral model (1992, 1995). Political parties are proposing closed election lists in 11 voting units (one of them is the diaspora voting unit for non-resident Croatian citizens). There is a 5 % electoral threshold and seats are distributed according to the d'Hondt method. Eight representatives of national minorities are elected by a relative majority of votes from separate lists for national minorities. With 2015 parliamentary

elections a preferential voting was introduced.<sup>1</sup> A local elections are following the same rules, while the direct elections are held for the president, and since 2009 for the municipal and city mayors and county prefects (in two rounds, if no candidate secures a simple majority of votes in the first round the two candidates who had the highest number of votes go into the second round).

With left-centre coalition and under the pressure and advocacy of women's groups, as well as the obligations related to the EU negotiation process, the institutional and legislative changes in the area of gender equality intensified in early 2000s (Špehar 2007; Broz 2013; Deželan et al. 2013; Dobrotić et al. 2013; Siročić and Sutlović 2013). Regarding the political decision-making, in 2001 the Act on Political Parties (Official Gazette 36/2001, par.19) brought an amendment aimed at enhancement of gender balanced political participation - parties become entitled to 10 % higher remuneration from the public budget for each representative of the underrepresented sex. Despite the advocacy of women's organisations and experts, the 2003 Act on Gender Equality failed to introduce a gender quotas, and it only prescribed the obligation of political parties to adopt every four year a plan of action regarding the equal representation of women and man in political decision-making and determine the methods for the promotion of balanced representation of men and women in party bodies and at the electoral lists (Official Gazette 116/2003, par.15).

Gender quotas were eventually introduced with the 2008 Act on Gender Equality (Official Gazette 82/08, par.12, 15&35) and political parties become obliged to form electoral lists with at least 40 % of candidates of each sex. The political parties who fail to meet this criteria should face a financial sanctions (for parliamentary elections HRK 50,000; European elections HRK 40,000; local elections HRK 20,000). Nevertheless, the transitional period of three election cycles for enforcement of quotas was defined, which is still in effect as there was a problem with interpretation of this provision. It is under-defined what the `three election cycles` actually means and whether all elections (parliamentary, local, European) should be counted together or separately. While women's organisations` and gender equality institutions` interpretation foresaw that the implementation of sanctions should start with local elections in 2013, the official interpretation stated how full implementation should start with local elections in 2017 and parliamentary elections in 2019 (Broz 2013, Ombudsperson for Gender Equality 2013). Moreover, although this was advocated by the women's organisations and experts, the zipper principle was not introduced and women are usually placed on less attractive places, i.e. at the bottom of the list. Also, the proposal to refuse the electoral lists which do not respect the gender quotas was not supported (Broz 2013; Ombudsperson for Gender Equality 2016).

## 1.2. Position of women in political decision-making

A substantial pendulum effect may be noticed in political decision-making, as a rather stagnant share of women in parliament in the last decade of socialism (13-17 %) declined to 4-7 % in elections in the 1990s, and increased again to 22 % in the 2000 elections, and remained close to that level through the following elections (18-21 %) (Dobrotić et al. 2013). In the last parliamentary elections (2015) the share of elected female candidates decreased to 15 % (Ombudsperson for Gender Equality 2016). Although the share of female candidates is growing in the last decade, this can be prescribed to smaller political parties who do not have a real

<sup>1</sup> A preferential voting was first implemented in 2013 elections to the European Parliament.

chance to win a mandate (Broz 2013), and women are usually at lower positions on the electoral lists. Consequently, more women are usually entering the parliament after the formation of the government and the boards of public institutions. E.g. after the 2011 elections the share of women in parliament reached the level of 25 % (there were 20 % of elected women), and after the 2015 parliamentary elections the level of 21 % (there were 15 % of elected women) (Ombudsperson for Gender Equality 2016).

The top tier of the executive branch followed the same pattern. There were few female ministers during the 1990s (0 to 9.5 %), ranging between 10.5-28.6 % in the 2000s. Currently there are 3 female ministers (out of 23 members of the government). The share of functionaries (around 30 %) and ambassadors (around 20 %) is steadily growing (Dobrotić et al. 2013; CSB 2015). In European elections 2014 there were 34.5 % of female candidates (38.4 % in 2013) (Ombudsperson for Gender Equality 2014), and currently there are 45 % of elected female MEPs (European Parliament 2016). Also, at presidential elections in 2014, a first female president was elected.

This process lagged at local level, as city councils reached a 20% threshold only around 2009 (Dobrotić et al. 2013), and municipal councils reached the level observed in the last decade of socialism (16-17 %) in the 2013 elections. After the 2013 local elections there were: 16.1 % of women in municipal councils, 22.6 % in city councils, 20.7 % in county assemblies, 6.8 % of female municipal majors and 7.9 % of female city majors. Only one woman was elected as a county prefect (Ombudsperson for Gender Equality 2013), who eventually resigned due to corruption investigation. There are evident regional differences in female representation at local level, ranging from 8.9 to 27.1 % in municipal councils, and from 13.5 to 33.3 % in city councils (Ombudsperson for Gender Equality 2013).

While a low participation of women in politics in 1990s was a clear result of prevailing political culture marked by the re-traditionalisation and women's re-domestication discourse which promoted a traditional vision of gender distribution, and displaced gender equality from public agenda (see Dobrotić et al. 2013.), a presented increase in women's participation in politics in the 2000s, besides the change in public and political climate and more favourable gender equality discourse (Broz 2013), closely connected with introduction of proportional electoral system (Deželan et al. 2013; Siročić and Sutlović 2013). Further policy initiatives such as gender quotas and financial stimulations introduced in 2000s did not bring notable improvements, particularly as the sanctions are of milder character (resulting in financial consequences and not in rejection of candidate lists) and they have not been implemented yet. The political will to implement quotas is at low level and bigger political parties are even willing to pay for sanctions, while a zipper principle has not been introduced which would prevent placing women at lower positions on electoral lists (e.g. Broz 2013; Deželan et al. 2013; Dobrotić et al. 2013; Zore 2013). Besides the political factors, barriers to gender-balanced representation may be found in socio-economic inequalities caused by gender inequalities and segregation at the labour market and gender inequalities in the private sphere (Siročić and Sutlović 2013; Dobrotić et al. 2013). A less favourable position of women in political participation is also closely discussed in connection to "class question", as it is considered that women of higher socio-economic status, who are economically independent, are in better position to enter the politics as they have more resources to deal with problems related to childcare and traditional division of domestic work (Siročić and Sutlović 2013).

That is clearly reflected in public opinion surveys as besides the prejudices (34.7 % of respondents in 2011) and patriarchal norms in society (28.5 %), the double burden of women (42.6 %) and lack of time for political activation (what is often interpreted as a lack of interest) is seen as one of the most important factors which prevents women from entering the politics. Croatian society is seen as patriarchal, with prevailing stereotypes about gender norms and men`s power in society; the politics is seen as a “man activity” (Šinko 2013; Siročić and Sutlović 2013); and the traditional division of childcare and housework prevails (Dobrotić and Pećnik 2013). Public opinion surveys also indicate how the reasons for low participation of women in political decision-making may be found in men`s rules in the politics, lack of family support, lack of interest of political parties and in stereotyped education (Šinko 2013; Leinert-Novosel 2011). There is also evident lack of political will to bring advancement in this area (Zore 2013) and gender equality culture in general.

That results in political climate where existent gender equality mechanisms are not efficient enough and non-favourable messages are communicated to the public in relation to balanced representation in decision-making. This topic is often considered as unimportant and marginal, while the elected female representatives are poorly involved in its promotion (partially not to discredit themselves) (Zore 2013). The topic is mainly discussed around the elections on the initiative of women`s organisations, particularly as after the entrance in the EU an important `push` factor who asked for changes in this area `disappeared`, and the topics related to gender equality lost on its importance.

## 2. Recent reforms and policy debates

Before the 2015 elections there was an intention to strengthen the sanctions for not respecting the 40 % gender quotas at parliamentary elections – by rejecting the electoral lists which are not going to be in line with that provision. That was also regulated with an amendment of the Act on Election of the Representatives in the Croatian Parliament (Official Gazette 19/2015, par. 21). However, the Constitutional Court abolished a part of the provision stating that the electoral list on which at least 40 % of both sexes was not represented is not valid. In their view this provision was not constitutional as it had `disproportionately restrictive effect on the freedom of nomination of authorised participants in electoral competition, but also in relation to the general development of a multi-party democratic system as the highest value of Croatian constitutional system`.<sup>2</sup> In explanation of its decision the Constitutional Court reposed also on the practice of the European Court of Human Rights regarding to the candidate lists for the election of their judges where the candidate lists cannot be rejected solely due to gender-related issues, as well as on their opinion that the primary criteria for election of judges should be an ability of the potential candidate (Official Gazette 104/2015).

It is important to stress how the decision of the Constitutional Court also implied that the financial sanctions for not respecting the 40 % gender quotas defined by the Act on Gender Equality should be applied already in 2015 parliamentary elections. However, after the 2015 parliamentary elections the State Attorney did not initiated any infringement procedures against the proposers of the electoral lists which failed to respect the gender quotas, as in line with their interpretation there was not legal requirements for financial sanctions yet as in line with the Act on Gender Equality they should be applied with the 2019 parliamentary elections.

<sup>2</sup> Gender equality was seen as a lower constitutional value.

### 3. Transferability aspects

The Slovenian discussion paper and the fact sheet on France practice clearly point at the importance of implementation of gender quotas in combination with the zipped principle, and also on the strong impact of sanctions in the cases of non-compliance with gender quotas. The situation in Croatia additionally confirms the importance of these two aspects of practices in political decision-making as the gender quotas which have been introduced in 2008 and were not followed by the zipped principle or strong sanctions did not result in visible improvements regarding the women's presence in political decision-making in Croatia. Adversely, the last parliamentary elections brought the worst outcome since the 1990s. The analysis of the electoral lists for 2015 parliamentary elections shows that 80.1 % of electoral lists and 77.4 % of proposers of the electoral lists did respect the gender quotas. However, women were placed on the lowest positions on the lists (usually at last four places on the list) and among those proposers who did not respect the gender quotas were the two biggest coalitions which won the highest share of votes (Ombudsperson for Gender Equality 2016). Hence, solely the introduction of gender quotas is not having the same effect as the introduction of gender quotas in combination with the zipper principle, while the strict implementation of sanctions in the cases of non-compliance with gender quotas is the only guarantee that all the political parties are going to follow them.

The zipper principle and stricter sanctions (e.g. rejection of electoral lists) are advocated from women's organisations, some experts and institutions (e.g. Ombudsperson for Gender Equality) for longer period in Croatia, but there has not been a strong political will to put them into the practice and there is in generally a lack of genuine commitment to gender equality agenda in Croatia. Moreover, as it has been discussed previously, there is still a problem with implementation of existing financial sanctions, while the amendment which aimed to implement further sanctions in the form of rejection of the electoral lists which do not comply with the gender quotas was withdrawn by the Constitutional Court which considered this type of sanctions unconstitutional. That decision put advocates of further improvements related to gender quotas in difficult position. It also speaks about the importance to work on political culture in Croatia and to address a prevailing traditional stereotypes and gender norms about the role of women and men in the society. There is also necessary to address other barriers to female political activation such as double burden and lack of time to become politically active.

The Slovenian case also indicates an interesting mobilising strategy around the advocacy of gender quotas, which relied on cross-party coalition (particularly of the women's groups of political parties) and coalition with women in other leading positions in the field of law, economy, media, science etc., but also with powerful men who support the equal representation of women and men in politics and are in position to influence the public opinion. Women's organisations have always been an important actors that argued for changes in the area of women's presence in political decision-making in Croatia, however, there is a need for wider mobilisation to break prejudices and stereotypes and to raise awareness about the importance of this policy area, and put this topic higher on political agenda. That is particularly important as recently there have been a lot of other changes or proposals for changes which are not favourable from the perspective of gender-related rights (e.g. changes in the labour market, reproductive rights, financing of civil society sector), which also asks the mobilisation of resources of women's organisations and it is not leaving enough space and financial resources to mobilise around all the issues.

## 4. Conclusions and recommendations

To reach a noticeable improvement in female participation in political decision-making above all a genuine commitment to a gender equality agenda at national, but also at European level is needed which would respect all the aspects of unfavourable position of women in society and not solely those which serve a wider, usually economic goals. Affirmative measures, when applied, should be ambitious in their character to become effective. Croatian case clearly indicates that solely an introduction of gender quotas which are not followed by the zipped principle and strong sanctions is not bringing expected results in terms of women's participation in political decision-making.

Equally important, affirmative measures should be combined with wider social policy measures and measures at the labour market which should ensure a needed preconditions for women's participation in public life, especially in terms of enabling them time and the resources for political engagement. Also, an unfavourable political culture, which is still stereotypical about the role of men and women in the society should be addressed. There is a need to work with general public to rise a public awareness on the importance of balanced participation of men and women in politics, and especially with young women and men – not solely to break the prejudices and stereotypes related to gender equality, but generally about the politics and to motivate them to involve in politics. The education system should have an important role in this process, but also the media who should provide an equal treatment for both, men and women, in media (e.g. they should invite more women to speak about the topics which are considered as more `important` such as finance, economy, the labour market etc., leave the practice of commenting solely an appearance of female politicians, etc.).

The last but not the least, a set of measures should be addressed towards the political parties which are still mainly man-dominated. They should be additionally educated about the importance of women's presence in the decision-making and motivated to involve more women also on leading positions within their political parties.



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