



The EU Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality

**Women in political
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Women in Political Decision-making in Bulgaria

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1. Introduction

After the fall of the Berlin Wall there was a dramatic decrease in the number of women politicians elected to parliaments across Central and Eastern Europe. Women almost "disappeared" from the political scene in 90ies, and their number started growing at the beginning of the new Millennium, slowly in some and quite fast in other decision-making structures. The level of about 20% of female MPs, which was reached in the Bulgarian socialist parliament in mid-80ies, was achieved again about 15 years later, and stays at the same level, with one exception, since then. The number of women mayors of municipalities elected with majority vote is about 10%, and stays at the same level for last 25 years. However, in comparison with the socialist past and with the first decade after the political changes in 1989, the number of female ministers in the Cabinet shows remarkable growth from 0 to 50% of total.

1.1. Relevant country context

The tendency of involving more women in politics and governance in last 15 years in Bulgaria is quite outstanding and visible. Women got positions of duty, they did not hold even during the socialist period of the "state feminism". The quality of posts women were entitled to in recent years slowly change the common notions on what type of public "job" is better attributed to be held by women. In a sociological survey conducted in 2000 the majority of respondents (53.8%) claim that "gender is not important", but preference was expressed for male deputies by a ratio of 7:1¹. 15 years later 74% of respondents answered that there should be more women in politics, and the share of men who agree with this is 66%². Today the most accepted political persons are women. According to the results of the recent opinion poll (February 2016) there are 4 women among the 10 most endorsed Bulgarian politicians on 1st (62%), 2nd (55%), 4th (44%) and 10th (31%) place³. The last Bulgarian Forbes selection from 2015 of the top 25 most influential women shows that women from politics and the state power constitute over half of them (14). However, these ratings do not make difference between the elected and the appointed to office.

1.1.1. Legislation

There are no specific binding provisions on advancement of women in political decision-making or aiming at electoral gender parity in the Bulgarian legislation -

¹ Stoilova, Rumiana, Georgi Fotev, Valentina Zlatanova and Nikolai Tilkidjiev. Bulgarian Women in Transition: Inequalities, Risks and Social Costs. SOCO Project Paper No. 78, Vienna, 2000

² <http://www.gallup-international.bg/bg/%D0%9F%D1%83%D0%B1%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%B8/2015/252-Equality>

³ http://exacta.bg/?page_id=54.

neither in the Law on Political Parties, nor in the Electoral Code. The Law on Protection against Discrimination stipulates in Art. 38 that the state and public bodies and the bodies of local self-government carry out the policy of advancement of balanced participation of women and men [...] in governance and decision-making. The 40% quota for employment in public administration for the representatives of the less represented sex concerning all other equal grounds, was abolished from the law in 2006.

The recently adopted (15.04.2016) first ever Law on Equality Between Women and Men proclaims that the state policy is based among others on the principles of equal opportunities in all spheres of public, economic and political life, and the balanced representation of women and men in all decision-making bodies (Art. 2). The law also proclaims that the state policy on equality between women and men is realised among others through the adoption of temporary affirmative measures (Art. 4), which are not particularly specified (Art. 15). Between the first and the second reading of the bill suggestions on equal representation of women and men in the state bodies and local authorities, in the National Assembly, in the lists for European Parliament elections, and in Municipal Councils were made, but were rejected by the plenary.

1.1.2. Policy documents and measures

The National Strategy for Promotion of Gender Equality (2009-2015) includes as its third objective, the promotion of gender equality in governance and decision-making - in politics, in economy, and in the field of development of science. The review of the National Action Plans of its implementation shows that from 2013 onward "Advancement of equality between women and men in the processes of decision-making" is among their operational goals. However, no measures on the equality in representation and participation of women and men in political decision-making have been implemented in the last three years. The recommendations of the CEDAW Committee (2012) to provide incentives to political parties to nominate equal numbers of women and men as candidates, to adopt electoral rules that guarantee women an equal chance of being elected and to create an enabling environment for political participation of disadvantaged groups of women were not reflected in the Governmental Action Plan for the Implementation of the Committee Conclusions (2013-2016).

1.1.3. Political parties' activities in the field

Bulgarian Socialist Party is the only one that in 2008 has adopted in its Statutes a voluntary gender quota of 40% for party governing bodies (Art 17, p. 2) as a self-regulatory commitment. The party leadership had also recommended to its organisations in electoral constituencies to introduce 30% quota for women, which however had a little impact on electoral lists. For the political parties there are no incentives for gender balance in the electoral lists through public subsidies. There was a single attempt to use the Zipper system (one man/one woman) in arranging the candidates' lists for the 2009 European Parliament (EP) elections by a centre-right wing party, who won the elections. However, this attempt was not repeated again neither by the same, nor by another political party. The voluntary quotas of 40% women in the electoral lists and in first five positions in the lists which majority of political parties had accepted for the EP elections after the EU accession of the country, are not kept in the following elections.

There are more female party leaders nowadays than ever before in the past. Some of them, even though not represented in the parliament, are very strong opinion

makers. However, female party leadership does not directly reflect in increasing the number of women in the party governing bodies⁴.

Women's organisations were established in those political parties who were present at the time of the country accession to the EU in 2007. The new entities who are not members of the political parties' families present in the EP do not follow the same policy. The existing women's parties' fractions are mainly engaged in charitable, cultural and other social initiatives, and less in political work, being also more segregate in their own parties, than opening them to the politically active women in other parties or to outside the party structures. Capacity building trainings for women candidates are project based, often with international funding or organised in cooperation with NGOs.

1.1.4. Awareness raising initiatives, including research

The researches of women's political participation and representation are quite scarce, mainly attributed to the internationally funded projects and initiatives, thus written and publicized mainly in English, which diminish the opportunities of the general public to be introduced to their observations and conclusions. NGOs participated in many internationally run campaigns or initiatives by capacity building or awareness raising like the 50/50 EWL campaign, "Women can do it" project, but have no sustainable financial support and are dependent on external (international) funding.

1.2. Statistics and data on female representation in political decision-making

The statistical information on participation of women and female representation in political decision-making is not publicly available. On the other hand, women post holders are visible in media - especially the female members of the Cabinet and the active female parliamentarians. This creates in the public the impression shared by the politicians and by media that women in Bulgaria have full access to all layers of power and decision-making in the country.

The big shift in involving more women in politics and governance is reflected not only in the numbers of women who have taken office, but also in the quality of their posts and positions. The Bulgarians have elected female Vice-president of the Republic twice since the 1990 - in 1992-1993, and in 2012. The political analysts anticipate that a female candidacy for the forthcoming presidential elections in fall 2016 is a possible option. For a first time in its history the Bulgarian National Assembly was chaired by woman president in 2009-2013. She is chairing the Assembly again since 2014 for second mandate. Female MPs have been elected from their parliamentary fractions as Vice-Presidents of the Assembly since early 90ies.

In the current mandate of the National Assembly (2014-2018) 6 out of 23 Parliamentary Standing Committees are chaired by women - of budget and finance, of foreign policy, of education and science, of healthcare, of culture and media, of interaction with the NGOs and for citizens' complaints. Four out of 10 Ad

⁴ For example, women comprise less than 19% in the Executive Council of the Bulgarian Socialist Party after the election of a female party leader for a first time in its over one hundred years history. The same situation is observed in one of the centre-right wing parties, a junior partner in the ruling coalition, where the female party leader presides the party Executive Council without a single woman member.

hoc Committees are also chaired by female MPs. It has to be pointed out that there are only 3 female MPs who serve their third mandate. Majority of female MPs serve their first, and in very rare cases their second mandate. The Ombudsperson and the presidents of other independent bodies such as the Commission for Protection against Discrimination and the Council for Electronic Media are women. For the whole socialist period before the political changes (1944-1989) there were less than 10 women appointed as ministers. For the first time in its history, the country had in mid-90ies female prime minister and female foreign minister. While the ratio of elected women is decreasing (parliament), or stays at the same level (local authorities), the number of appointed women in government is vastly increasing (ministers in the cabinet, deputy ministers, heads of state agencies and other independent bodies), and their portfolio is changing as well. 50% of ministers in the current Cabinet are women - Minister of Interior, Minister of Justice, Minister of Ecology and Water, Minister of Agriculture, Minister of Tourism, Minister of Energy, Minister of Regional Development and Public Works, Minister of Education and Science, and Minister of Labour and Social Policy. However with very few exceptions, they are taken their ministerial posts coming from the central administration structures, rather than from the spheres outside the government. It is not the case with the male ministers in the same Cabinet, as the majority of them are coming from the political parties and very few from outside the politics.

For a first time in its history the capital city of Sofia has a woman mayor from 2009 who is serving her third consecutive mandate elected in direct elections. The introduction of more women on power positions in central government however did not contribute to the increase in the share of female mayors (about 10% in the last 25 years). The share of women in city and municipal councils is about 30%. Since the accession to the EU in 2007 the Bulgarian government has nominated only females to be members of the European Commission. The second Bulgarian EU Commissioner serves her second consecutive mandate, as Vice-President of the Commission for Budget and Human Resources.

The Director-General of UNESCO is a Bulgarian female diplomat with solid career in foreign affairs being an Ambassador, a deputy minister and an acting minister of foreign affairs. She is both the first female and the first Eastern European to head the agency, where she is serving since 2009 for her second term. Four out of seven members of the Governing Council (57%) and one of three Deputy Governors of the Bulgarian National Bank are women.

All these results come to confirm the observation that the inclusion of women in decision-making is easier to achieve through appointments than through an election process⁵. Parties tend to promote women in greater numbers or in higher positions in the early and uncertain stages of their development⁶. The newly established parties tend to including more women in their lists, whereas "older" parties are more conservative and less inclusive. The new parties also tend to recruit "new faces"

⁵ Voynova, Sevdalina. Overview of strategies applied in Bulgaria to increase women's participation and representation, WEDO Women's Environment and Development Organisation, 17 July 2006, <http://www.wedo.org/wp-content/uploads/overview-of-strategies-applied-in-bulgaria.doc>

⁶ Nedyalka Videva, Miglena Nikolchina, Nadezhda Alexandrova and Nadezhda Radulova. Identifying Barriers. Enlargement, Gender and Governance (EGG), EU Framework 5, Project No: HPSE-CT-2002-00115; see also the other reports on the topic at <http://www.qub.ac.uk/egg/>

outside the political class⁷. Very often there are female new faces who enter politics very young and have a very fast career growth, but rarely stay in politics for a longer period of time.

The monitoring of the elections and appointments in decision-making bodies shows that most of women who hold posts in recent 15 years were nominated and appointed by centre and right-wing political parties⁸. Moreover, simply increasing the number of women in visible and responsible positions does not always result in integration of gender perspectives in policy formulation. Women's alliances across parties do not exist thus women in politics have little influence over adoption of gender-sensitive policies and in promoting women's political activism. Despite formal proclamations of gender equality, women's participation in positions of power is mediated and severely limited by a number of factors, including traditional paternalistic attitudes. The press coverage of female politicians is refracted through the prism of gender stereotypes, which, in turn, exhibits signs of the post communist masculinisation of democracy⁹.

2. Policy debate

The topic of women at leading positions in politics and government became more frequent in public space after 2009 when many women took positions "for the first time in Bulgarian history". The issue was a topic for months lasting discussions in the social media. The issue of women's political representation is very rarely raised in election campaigns of women candidates, and is not an issue in political parties' campaigns or debates. The notion that women in power actually represent other women never appeared in the public debates in last 15 years. Women's NGOs have been most active in their efforts to address the under-representation of women in decision-making (which seems to be in striking contrast to public opinion), and to raise awareness on the concept of gender equal power sharing.

The debate on quotas in Bulgaria is quite tough with little prospects to be accepted by politicians and by the general public. Bulgarian society had experience with different types of quota during the socialist period, which nowadays are considered as unfair, e.g. 50% quota for boys and girls to study in a foreign language high school or in the university; reserved quota for ethnic minority students and for the children of honoured party functionaries for university admission; etc. Thus any debates on special measures for advancement of women either in political or economic decision-making are not welcomed. The public discussions usually show the deep lack of understanding of quota as an affirmative action not only by the broaden public, but also by the legislative, having in mind the vague and inconsistent appearance of the term in the existing laws. Many women politicians from all parts of the political spectrum are also very much against quota for women in decision-making and loudly express these opinions in front of different audiences. However there are individual but still weak voices of female politicians

⁷ Krasteva, Anna. Младият политик [The Young Politician]. In: Кръстева А. (съст.) Българският политик: щрихи към портрета. София: НБУ, 2010, https://annakrasteva.wordpress.com/2009/09/16/mladiat_politik/

⁸ Rashkova Ekaterina, Zankina Emilia, When Less means More: Influential women of the Right – the case of Bulgaria, The Legal Regulation of Political Parties, Working Paper No. 19, <http://www.partylaw.leidenuniv.nl/uploads/wp1912.pdf>

⁹ Ibrosheva, Elza, Raicheva-Stover, Maria. MPs with Skirts: Or How the Popular Press in Bulgaria Portrays Women Politicians, Observatorio (OBS) Journal, 3:1, 2009, <http://www.obs.obercom.pt/index.php/obs/article/view/251>

from the centre-right and the centre-left spectrum who stand for the need of public debate on the issue of quota for women at all levels of decision-making.

3. Transferability aspects

Both good practices from France and Slovenia present examples of the way to introduce legal changes in the national legislation including introduction of quota or parity as legal instrument for advancement of women in decision-making.

For the majority of the general public, political parties' activists, including many women who are holding office, in Bulgaria this issue seemed to be solved. It is perceived as a relic of the socialist past, and not a problem of the present day as the common notion is that people should be promoted and advanced based on their merits. The rise of the number of women appointed to office did not contribute to raising awareness of the need for gender balanced representation in political decision-making. It also did not contribute to the increase in the share of women in elected political positions (see Annexes).

The debate on introduction of legislative affirmative binding measures to advance female representation in the decision-making bodies at all levels need also extensive study of their consistence with the Constitution of the state. At this moment political parties are very far away from these discussions as there is no common understanding in the political body of the country why and how to advance women's participation in decision-making.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

The major barrier to women's participation in Bulgaria is the very invisibility of the barriers that produce the otherwise quite visible asymmetry of men and women in the public sphere. Women have very little say in the structural reforms during the transition period after the political changes in 1989 and their specific needs were not taken into consideration by the Bulgarian politics. Bulgarian political parties show lack or little interest in women's or gender matters as in their electoral programmes appears only maternity protection as an issue that to some extent reflects women voters' interests¹⁰. Women's involvement as voters is largely insufficiently researched. Bulgarian politics has not yet proposed substantial reasons for women to change political preferences on the basis of clear interests and policy issues, and gender appears to be the least important in voter's motivation¹¹. It seems that parties are the main gatekeepers to women's entrance into the political field as they do not formulate national priorities in the sphere of advancement of women and their candidates are often not chosen by transparent process.

The good numbers of female representation in power the Bulgarians are proud of are unstable without legislative and awareness raising measures. These might consist of: incentives to political parties to nominate equal numbers of women and

¹⁰ Pachkova, Petya. Българските жени – в голямата политика [The Bulgarian Women - in the Big Politics], Year book of the Philosophy and Political Science Department 2, University Publishing House "Neofit Rilski", 2012.

¹¹ Popivanov, Boris. Женското електорално участие в България в началото на XXI век [Women's electoral participation in Bulgaria at the beginning of XXI century]. In: Равнопоставеност на половете в политиката. Българският опит [Gender Equality in Politics. The Bulgarian Experience], 2013, <http://www.fes.bg/?cid=13&NewsId=1160>

men as candidates, adoption of electoral rules that guarantee women an equal chance of being elected, creation of an enabling environment for political participation of disadvantaged groups of women, elaboration and funding of programmes for encouraging young women to enter politics.

Annex

National Assembly elections	Period	Share of elected women
7 GNA	10.07.1990-02.10.1991	8,5%
36 NA	04.11.1991-17.10.1994	14,1%
37 NA	12.01.1995-13.02.1997	12,9%
38 NA	07.05.1997- 19.04.2001	11%
39 NA	05.07.2001-17.06.2005	27%
40 NA	11.07.2005 - 25.06.2009	22%
41 NA	14.07.2009 - 14.03.2013	23%
42 NA	21.05.2013 - 05.08.2014	23%
43 NA	27.10.2014	20% - 19%*

* Current number, after appointments to the Government.

Source: National Assembly; Държавни мъже и работни пчелички (State Men and Working Bees), Фондация ЖАР (WAD Foundation), 2000; Calculation of the author

European Parliament elections	Number of seats	Share of elected women
2007 - 2009	18 - 8 women	44%
2009 - 2011	17 - 8 women	47%
2011 - 2014	18- 8 women	44%
2014 - present	17 - 5 women	29%

Source: Central Election Commission; Calculation of the author

Share of women in the Cabinet

	Prime-minister	Vice-prime ministers	Ministers	Share of women total	Ruling party
21.09.1990 - 20.12.1990	M	2 M - 1 W	15 M - 1 W	11%	Bulgarian Socialist Party
22.12.1990 - 08.11.1991	M	3	15 M - 1 W	6%	Coalition
08.12.1991 - 30.12.1992	M	2 M	13 M - 1 W	7%	Right wing coalition
30.12.1992 - 17.10.1994	M	3 M	14 M	0%	Coalition, liberal
17.10.1994 - 25.01.1995	W	2 M - 1 W	14 M - 1 W	12%	Caretaker Government
25.01.1995 - 12.02.1997	M	4 M	15 M - 1 W	6%	Left wing coalition
12.02.1997 - 21.05.1997	M	2 M	15 M - 1 W	6%	Caretaker Government
21.05.1997 - 24.07.2001	M	3 M	12 M - 3 W	19%	Right wing coalition
24.07.2001 - 16.08.2005	M	2 M - 1 W 2 M*	14 M - 2 W 13 M - 5 W	13% 28%*	Liberal-Socialist coalition

16.08.2005 - 27.07.2009	M	2 M - 1 W	14 M - 3 W	18%	Socialist-Liberal coalition
27.07.2009 - 13.03.2013	M	2 M	12 M - 4 W	25%	GERB
13.03. -29.05 2013	M	3 W	12 M - 4 W	25%	Caretaker Government
29.05.2013 - 06.08.2014	M	1 W	10 M - 6 W	38%	Socialist-Liberal coalition
06.08. - 07.11.2014	M	2 M - 2 W	10 M - 5 W	33%	Caretaker Government
07.11.2014 - present	M	2 M - 2 W 1 M - 2 W**	12 M - 5 W 8 M - 9 W**	29% 53%**	Coalition

* Status at the end of the mandate

** Current status in June 2016 after personal changes and replacements

Source: Wikipedia; Calculations of the author