Women’s representation in the new parliament and further steps to maintain and facilitate better women’s representation in politics

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Background

Between the 2014 parliamentary election and the 2019 election, the number of women MPs in Ukraine’s parliament (the Verkhovna Rada) never exceeded 53 women or 12.6 percent; in fact, by June 2019, there were only 49 women MPs or only 11.6 percent. Prior to the new parliament taking office, Ukraine ranks 155th among 193 countries in terms of women’s representation in parliament - the lowest in Europe.

One significant outcome of the 2019 early parliamentary election is the anticipated increased representation of women in the new Verkhovna Rada. The Ukrainian parliament will likely move 50 ranks higher on the IPU database to 101st, surpassing European countries as Greece, Georgia, and Hungary in terms of women’s representation.

This paper explains how this achievement was made possible, what outcomes it will have on the distribution of public funding among eligible political parties, and suggests recommendations for better women’s representation in elected office, both in the Rada and local councils.

Women success in 2019 early parliamentary elections

The preliminary results released by the CEC for the 2019 early parliamentary elections suggest that 87 or 20.52 percent of the newly-elected MPs will be women. Out of a total of 87 women MPs elected, 61 were elected through party lists and 26 women MPs have been elected in single-member constituencies (SMCs). This means that women make up 21.11 percent of the 225 MPs elected through proportional representation in the nationwide election constituency and 13 percent of the 199 MPs elected through first-past-the-post in SMCs.

The high number of SMC-elected women is obviously a positive step forward compared to the 2014 early parliamentary elections, when only two women took seats out of 198 SMCs in the Rada. In regards to the number of women elected through party lists, the 2019 parliamentary elections are the first elections in Ukraine’s post-soviet history when leading parties included a significant number of women candidates on prominent positions on the party lists; they did this despite a lack of sanctions for failure to comply with a gender quota as well as other deficiencies in the legal framework.

1 http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif/010219.htm
Women’s success in SMCs should not, however, be overstated. Eighty-seven percent of MPs elected in SMCs were men. Based on international comparison, the firstpast-the-post electoral system is not as conducive for improving women’s representation in politics as other systems, such as proportional representation. The firstpast-the-post system can often highlight existing inequalities facing women across socio-economic spheres, such as lesser access to economic resources, funding, and stigma against women in leadership positions. Firstpast-the-post systems also rely on political parties running women in winnable districts, providing them with sufficient resources to campaign effectively, and voters accepting women as candidates and voting for them. In political parties that have entrenched patriarchal or male-dominated leadership structures, running and sufficiently supporting the candidacy of women is not always a priority.

In the recent Ukrainian parliamentary elections, women’s success in SMCs could be interpreted as a sign of the extreme popularity of the Servant of the People party rather than as systematic and purposeful reform across the political landscape: the Servant of the People nominated a significant number of women in many SMCs, while other political parties either did not nominate a high number of women or win many seats. Out of 26 women elected through SMCs, 21 were nominated by the Servant of the People. Had Servant of the People decided to nominate fewer women in winnable SMCs or only nominate candidates in a small number of districts (for instance, like the Vakarchuk-led Holos party), the overall representation of women would have been much lower.

In the absence of qualitative research (such as opinion polls or focus group research), it is unclear whether gender was a motivating factor in encouraging voters to vote for women rather than men in the districts in question. It could be assumed that voters supportive of the Servant of the People simply used both ballots to cast their votes for the Servant of the People list and any Servant of the People candidate running in the respective SMC, regardless of factors such as a candidate’s background or gender. The fact that many experienced candidates, who had repeatedly won in their districts from election to election, and who were equipped with extensive legislative experience, access to financial, administrative and other resources (and who in some cases resorted to illegal campaign tactics) were resoundingly defeated by relatively inexperienced Servant of the People candidates backs up this assumption.

Given that women’s success in the recent early elections in SMCs and party lists was tied to the popularity of a single party rather than to a systematic shift in how gender inequalities are addressed across the political landscape, further actions are still needed to translate this success into an even larger and more sustainable level of representation, not only in the Rada but likewise in local councils, the future Cabinet and other bodies.

**Advocacy efforts preceding the 2019 early parliamentary elections**

One of the key achievements of the recent parliamentary elections was the inclusion of an unprecedented number of women on party lists compared to previous elections. Most leading parties (except for the Opposition Platform for Life) included a notable number of women (20 percent or more) on party lists, which allowed for an increase in the level of women represented through the proportional component of the parallel system to 21 percent, the highest number in Ukraine’s post-Soviet history. This more active inclusion of women on party lists can be attributed to effective advocacy efforts by women MPs (many of whom were placed on party lists for the 2019
As part of an advocacy campaign that aimed to encourage political parties to nominate more women to the Rada, IFES advocated for a 40 percent gender quota combined with a so-called “zipper rule” to ensure effective placement on party lists, as well as effective sanctions for failure to comply with quota. IFES also conducted voter-awareness campaigns (both before the 2014 and 2019 elections), and encouraged party leaders to include more women on the party lists and nominate more women in winnable SMCs. IFES received written responses from some of the leading parties confirming their willingness to comply with international standards and best practices while nominating candidates for the July 21 elections.

In summary, advocacy efforts of Ukraine’s national and international stakeholders were among some of the reasons why the share of women on party lists increased from an average of 10-12 percent in the 2014 parliamentary elections to almost 20 percent in the recent early parliamentary elections. While this increase is significant, it should not exclude further measures aimed to increase women representation in elected office to 30-40 percent, which is a standard in many European democracies and in line with Ukraine’s international commitments and European ambitions.

Effects of increased women representation in the Rada

Adequate representation of women in parliament is not only a matter of figures, percentages and international recommendations. Representative democracy is reliant on the principle that those elected to office are as diverse as the people they represent. Diversity in public debate and in policy making is essential to the development of legislation and governance that truly reflects the lived experience of a population; if half of a population is absent or under-represented, there can be deep impacts on the effectiveness of policy development.

The preliminary election results suggest that two of the five parties that passed the five percent electoral threshold, the “European Solidarity” party and “Holos,” are eligible for 10 percent of the total amount of annual funding of political parties due to the fact that they ensured no less than 30 percent women’s representation among their elected MPs: the percentage of women MPs elected from Holos could be as large as 45 percent, and 36 percent from European Solidarity. The total annual amount of public funding for all eligible political parties (parties that received no less than 2 percent of the votes in the nationwide election constituency) is UAH 565 million or USD 22 million. Ten percent of this will be equally divided between Holos and European Solidarity: each of two will receive UAH 28.25 million or USD 1.1 million annually. Additional funding for compliance with the “gender” requirement foreseen in 2015 Political Finance Reform Law could strengthen the sustainability of the level of women elected from these parties and would likely encourage other parties to nominate more women in 2023 parliamentary elections.

Conclusions

The preliminary results of the 2019 early parliamentary elections suggest that 87 or 20.52 percent of the newly-elected MPs will be women. This is the highest level of women’s representation in the Rada since 1991. The election of 26 women MPs in single-member constituencies (in comparison to only two women MPs elected in SMCs in the 2014 elections) could be explained by the overall success of the Servant of the People party in the recent elections rather than as an...
indication of voters’ increased preference for women or widespread reform by political parties. Based on election results, it is fair to assume that voters who voted for the Servant of the People party list also voted for the SMC candidate from that party in their respective district: the political affiliation of that candidate likely held more sway with an individual voter than any other qualification.

For the July 21 elections, leading parties included almost 20 percent women on their lists, double the number of women on lists during the 2014 early parliamentary elections. Both national and international organizations, as well as women MPs themselves, have long been advocating for such an increase.

A higher level of women representation in the Rada, while still lower than many European states and below the international standard of 30 percent and the European target of 40 percent, should be welcomed and celebrated. It is also right to be hopeful that this momentum will lead to an even larger number of women in the Rada elected in 2023.

However, the recent success in terms of better women’s representation should not overshadow the urgent need for effective legal and practical steps aimed to ensure a higher level of women’s representation in political life.

**Recommendations**

1. The new Verkhovna Rada should consider amendments to the election laws aimed to introduce a 40 percent quota for party lists in the parliamentary elections and local council elections as well as effective sanctions for failure to comply with gender quota requirements, such as rejection of party lists by the CEC. The Parliamentary Election Law should mandate parties to include at least two representatives of either gender in each group of five candidates on the party lists for parliamentary elections.

2. The so-called “St. Petersburg” electoral system used to elect local councils (except for village and settlement councils) results in many of the same effects of the first-past-the-post system and produces highly unpredictable results for parties, candidates and voters. This system fails to ensure a better level of women’s representation in local elected office and should be replaced by a system more favorable to women, such as the proportional system.

3. The new Cabinet of Ministers must ensure that the parties that are eligible for 10 percent of the annual public funding for political parties (namely, the European Solidarity party and Holos) for compliance with the “gender” provision in the 2015 Political finance Reform Law actually receive the full amount of public funding they are eligible to.

4. When appointing the new Cabinet of Ministers, the President and the ruling coalition should ensure that women are properly represented in the Cabinet and in the leadership of government agencies.

5. Political parties should consider measures aimed to increase the level of women’s representation in the governing and supervisory internal bodies of political parties in order to promote internal party democracy as well as ensure further increase in the share of women among candidates nominated in nationwide and local elections.
6. The international community and civil society should continue their advocacy and voter-awareness efforts aimed to promote women in politics and public life.