Political Finance and Gender Equality in Ukrainian Elections

Political finance and gender equality in elections are directly interlinked from the nomination stage to fundraising and through the campaign period. In Ukraine, a widespread perception that women lack ties with the business community to raise enough funds for campaigning may significantly reduce their chances to be nominated by a party. However, based on research conducted by Chesno and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), if nominated, women who represent major parties appear to be equally – if not more – effective in raising and spending funds, at least from legal sources. To ensure a more level playing field for all candidates, including women, Ukraine must strive to further strengthen public oversight and financial transparency, and encourage party leadership to run and support women candidates.

Key findings stemming from IFES’ research efforts are summarized below. These findings and recommendations are based on a number of interviews with women and men candidates who participated in the 2019 parliamentary elections, representatives of political parties, and political experts. In also includes analysis of the official data reflected in financial reports of the candidates, as well as desk research. The full research and analysis from these elections is anticipated to be published in a longer academic article at a later date. This summary was made possible through the support of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Global Affairs Canada (GAC) and UK aid based on a working document funded through GAC.

Since independence, the number of women in the Rada has increased, culminating in the historic high of the current 20.5 percent women MPs elected in the 2019 elections. However, the number of women elected in single member constituencies (SMCs) and those on the closed party lists varies significantly, with 60 women elected on party lists and only 27 in SMCs.

Running in SMCs is significantly more challenging for candidates due to a higher cost of election campaign; income and resource inequalities can often make this even more difficult for women. At the same time, the majority of the women elected through party lists came from a single party that received the majority of seats, rather than through a large number of parties placing women high on their party lists. Although some progress was made in regulating the role of money in Ukrainian politics, including through the adoption of the 2015 Political Finance Reform Law, more must be done to ensure these reforms bolster equality.

Political finance regulations introduced a “gender bonus” in 2015, meaning that those political parties that ensure 30 or more percent women among their elected representatives are eligible to receive 10 percent of the total public funding for political parties. Following the 2019 election, only two out of the five political parties that made it to parliament met the 30 percent gender quota – Holos and European Solidarity. Therefore, the gender-targeted share of the annual public funding will be distributed equally between these two parties, which equates to UAH 27 million or USD 1 million for

1 Current data via [http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm](http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm)
each party per year. However, the parties are not obliged to spend the extra funding on promoting women’s participation.

Uneven access to financial resources is another important factor that might negatively influence women’s electoral participation. In Ukraine, lackluster enforcement of political finance regulations has an adverse effect on women. Moreover, ineffective oversight and weak sanctions for violations may encourage those candidates with substantial financial resources and ties to wealthy donors – in particular men who generally have more connection to business\(^3\) – to misuse existing legal gaps for their benefit in elections.

**Although the interviewed party representatives voiced a widespread opinion that voters tend to choose men over women as candidates, public opinion data shows the opposite.** According to IFES national surveys on electoral matters held after the 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections, voters see less importance in gender in selecting candidate.\(^4\) Overall, 64 percent of Ukrainians saw no difference between male and female candidates after the presidential election, with a slight decrease to 60 percent after parliamentary elections. Moreover, 17 percent of voters were more likely to support a woman candidate over man after the 2019 presidential election, which increased to 22 percent after the parliamentary elections. Such a discrepancy between survey data and attitudes of parties and candidates regarding the voters’ preference of men over women may point to the fact that women face discrimination not at the polling stations, but during the selection process.

To stand in parliamentary elections, independent candidates and parties that nominate candidates in SMCs are required to pay a deposit of UAH 41,730, which is returned if the respective candidate becomes an MP.\(^5\) Although this amount is significantly lower than in presidential election, it is still a considerable sum if compared with Ukraine’s gross national income per capita of UAH 72,000 in 2018.\(^6\) This is even more so for women candidates, considering an approximate 22 percent gender pay gap.\(^7\)

Overall, there are four main sources that can be used to finance presidential and parliamentary campaigns: funds of a political party, candidate’s personal funds, donations from companies, and donations from individuals. Generally, for SMCS, political parties do not provide funding for individual candidates.

In Ukraine, the mandate of campaign finance oversight is divided between the Central Election Commission (CEC) and the National Agency for the Prevention of Corruption (NAPC). However, these oversight bodies lack institutional capacity and substantial resources to conduct thorough analysis of financial reports. Although most of the candidates in the 2019 parliamentary elections submitted their financial reports in due time, the NAPC and the CEC conducted very formal analysis of these reports.

---


5 To submit a list of candidates for proportional seats, political parties make a deposit of UAH 4,173,000, approximately USD 154,100, which is returned if they meet the national five-percent vote threshold.


focusing on minor violations, rather than identifying contravention of donation rules or unreported expenses.

Violations of political finance rules, together with weak oversight and enforcement, can also undermine the level playing field among the candidates favoring those who have access to upper echelons of power or those who can abuse their office and use state resources for their campaign. As a result, women are often disadvantaged due to lack of incumbency and close links with business communities. Analysis of the financial reports of the 2019 parliamentary candidates shows that, on average, women had 20 percent less campaign funds than men candidates, with this divergence being even higher among independent candidates. However, if only taking into account the five most successful political parties, the ratio changes: the election funds of women candidates were 20 percent larger than those of their men counterparts.

When it comes to the sources of funding of the election campaign, men were more likely to use their savings for campaigning and receive donations from businesses, while women were more likely to receive donations from individual people. With women receiving a high number of donations from individuals, they also face challenges due to the complex donation requirements: to make a contribution, a person must visit a bank in person and submit a written statement. These strict requirements often discourage potential donors. Recently, the Ukrainian parliament allowed simplified procedures for making donation to ordinary political parties’ accounts through online banking, but the cumbersome procedures remain in place for donations to campaign accounts.

If statistical outliers are removed, financial statements indicate that women candidates received significantly less funding from businesses than men, potentially due to the largely male-dominated business community in Ukraine. However, due to the high number of individual donations they received, women from the political parties that received seats in the Rada received more funding overall.

It is important, however, to note that women often face more challenges in raising this funding, even when they are successful in doing so. Women, for example, are often tasked with household duties or are more dramatically impacted by income inequality.

Ability to spent funds for campaigning is equally important for a successful campaign. In Ukraine, national campaigns tend to be expensive, with parties and candidates using majority of their funds for media and advertisement. This drives up the overall cost of elections, posing additional barriers for those not receiving large donations, particularly women candidates.

In general, there are strong, but complex relations between political finance and gender equality in Ukraine. Women face greater obstacles in achieving winnable nominations because of the common perception that women have less financial independence and insufficient financial background to run their campaigns. This statement is also amplified by the fact that men usually establish stronger connections with male-dominated business networks and, consequently, get more support. Although no interlocutors reported any explicit discrimination against women within political parties, there are still very few efforts made to level the electoral opportunities for men and women, in particular during the nomination process.
These findings point to the need to reform and increase financial transparency of election campaigns that would contribute to a level playing field for men and women and eliminate major obstacles faced by women. Efforts of different stakeholders are necessary to ensure meaningful progress towards better gender equality in Ukrainian politics. Key recommendations might include:

**For the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine**

- Simplify the procedures for donations to all party and candidates accounts, including during all types of elections;
- Consider limiting the most expensive types of campaigning, such as TV and outdoor advertisement;
- Provide oversight agencies with necessary mandates and resources to be able to control campaign finance and identify contraventions of donation and transparency rules;
- Consider earmarking a certain share of public funding allocated to political parties for promoting women’s political participation.

**For the NAPC and the CEC**

- Establish coordination ahead of elections to ensure effective division of oversight responsibilities;
- Improve monitoring and analysis of election financial report of candidates and parties to focus on serious violations of campaign finance rules;
- Collect gender-disaggregated data on financing of parties and candidates and consider ways of facilitating equal playing field for men and women candidates using state oversight tools.

**For Political Parties**

- Ensure equal chances for nominations in winnable positions for men and women candidates in all types of elections;
- Establish financial and other incentives for women to become candidates in elections and hold leadership positions within party structures;
- Consider allocating funds that can be used for supporting election campaigns of women candidates;
- Develop and implement initiatives aimed at supporting women politicians and improving their leadership, communication, and fundraising skills.

---

*This analysis was developed by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) through the support of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Global Affairs Canada and UK aid. The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, nor the governments of the United States, Canada, or the UK.*