

Can National Councils of National Minorities Be Effective Channels for Greater Political Participation of Women from National Minority Communities in Serbia?

Summary

- ▶ Women's active participation in decision-making processes in Serbia is lacking at both the local and state levels, especially political participation of women from national minority communities.
- ▶ Given an environment of decreasing social and political trust, restrictions imposed on political actors by Serbia's illiberal democratic regime and the exclusiveness of institutions for different minority issues, National Councils of National Minorities (NMCs) could be effective channels for women's political participation on a state level, making intersectional national minority issues more prominent. However, weak public institutions, a deficit of democratic political traditions and, in general, the centralisation of power within political parties threaten the principles of the democratic functioning of NMCs.
- ▶ Analysis of the normative framework relevant for the work of NMCs in Serbia shows that the question of women's participation in political life is addressed through quotas – i.e. numerical representation of women solely through the process of electing NMC members.
- ▶ Even when there are activities aimed at women within NMCs, or affirmative measures in the wider national community, they tend to be ad hoc rather than a planned approach aimed at gender equality.
- ▶ The purpose of this document is to make recommendations that will support greater political participation of women from national minorities, emphasising result-oriented actions that will directly affect women from national minority communities, especially those affected by multiple marginalisation.



Recommendations

Recommendations for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Mission in Serbia, the Ombudsman of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina and the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue of the Republic of Serbia

- ▶ Conduct regular research into national minority communities on topics that are within the scope of the council's public powers, design further steps and activities based on the results and propose recommendations for the improvement of observed shortcomings to relevant stakeholders at local and state levels, including NMCs. Continuous research could be carried out by the NMCs in cooperation with expert researchers selected through a public call.
- ▶ Organise continuous training for both male and female NMC leaders, with a focus on four key areas of the NMCs' work and how to make them gender sensitive and in line with the Law on Gender Equality. Some of the regular gatherings of NMC leaders can be used for such educational purposes.
- ▶ Organise continuous training to empower young women from national minorities to advocate for smoother and more comprehensive mainstreaming of gender perspectives in the work of NMCs.
- ▶ Improve the leadership skills of women elected to NMCs (e.g. public speaking, debating, lobbying) and also improve their knowledge of gender-inclusive budgeting.
- ▶ If feasible, organise visits to or presentations of successful models of gender mainstreaming in the work of national minorities in other countries within the region or from the EU, and also systematise affirmative actions implemented by some NMCs and improve their exchange and implementation within others.
- ▶ Monitor the introduction of gender-inclusive practices in the regular scope of NMCs' work via gender-equality indicators in their action plans and strategies in four main areas of their work.
- ▶ Support NMCs to establish a body to address gender equality in their work and make all policies and strategic documents gender inclusive.
- ▶ Increase the visibility of women in NMCs and their achievements and contributions to NMCs' work.



Recommendations for NMCs

- ▶ Conduct regular research into national minority communities on topics that are within the scope of the council's public powers, design further steps and activities based on the results and propose recommendations for the improvement of observed shortcomings to relevant stakeholders at local and state levels, including NMCs. Carry out continuous research in cooperation with expert researchers selected through a public call.
- ▶ Within NMCs, support and organise regular monthly meetings for women in decision-making positions to secure safe spaces for discussion and to create initiatives related to the improvement of the position of women from national minorities.
- ▶ Organise continuous training to empower women from national minorities to advocate for smoother and more comprehensive mainstreaming of gender perspectives in the work of NMCs, and encourage male leaders to understand the value of women's participation in NMCs and to support their ideas.
- ▶ Create working strategies and action plans to include the opinions of girls and women from different socio-economic groups within minorities, and also formulate gender-equality indicators to monitor the introduction of gender-inclusive practices in the regular scope of work of NMCs.
- ▶ Establish a strong communication platform for women from NMCs and representatives of gender-equality mechanisms at all levels in order to improve cooperation between NMCs and the Coordination Body for Gender Equality of the Government of Serbia, the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality in Serbia and the Provincial Secretariat for Social Policy, Demography and Gender Equality.
- ▶ Increase the visibility of women in NMCs and their achievements and contribution to NMCs' work.

Introduction

There are no reliable data on the political participation of women from minority groups in Serbia, since available research databases do not record the political participation of women living in Serbia in intersection with their ethnicities. However, generally, 'ethnic minorities have a muted voice in Serbian politics' (Freedom House, 2022) and women are more exposed to violence in politics than men (National Democratic Institute, 2021). Furthermore, politics at the municipal level is the biggest battlefield for female candidates seeking decision-making positions: a small number of women, and almost none under the age of 31, are in politics at the local level, which is not the case for men (Gačanica et al, 2020). The reason for this is discriminatory practices towards women in politics, due to a political climate that defends positions of power for men and as a rule assigns them to men. Women from national minorities face even greater invisibility than women from the general population. Addressing their lack of access to the real positions of power is not a priority in Serbia, and even when there is political participation of minorities at the local level, a gender-sensitised understanding of it is lacking (Kvinna till Kvina, 2020).

Bearing in mind all these barriers for women from national minorities in Serbia, National Councils of National Minorities (NMCs) might serve as effective channels for women's political participation and for making intersectional national minority issues more prominent. However, although all NMCs in Serbia function within the same legislative context, the actual circumstances in which they function depend on the number of members of a specific national minority and their territorial concentration, as well as their political organisation and networks (institutional and individual). These differences influence not just the available budgetary resources for their activities but also the political influence of a particular NMC.

The relevant legal framework of the Republic of Serbia for NMCs lays out a series of rights specifically aimed at national minorities, but only Article 72 of the Law on NMCs stipulates one aspect of gender equality in the political arena: 'On the list for the election of NMC's members, among every three candidates (first three places, second three places, and so on until the end of the list), there must be at least one candidate – a member of the less represented gender on the list' (Law on the National Councils of National Minorities, 2018). However, this legislative framework does not recognise any other specific gender elements in the selection of NMC staff from electoral lists. Next to this, since NMCs exercise public powers, they propose members of the administrative and supervisory boards in educational and cultural institutions. Article 47 of the Law on Gender Equality stipulates that an authorised proposer, while exercising the right to propose candidates for election, should 'take general and special measures to ensure a balanced representation of the sexes during the formation of permanent and temporary work bodies' (Law on Gender Equality, 2021). It follows from this that NMCs can manage male and female representation in bodies (and institutions) under their jurisdiction.

In conclusion, there are neither specific gender elements in the legislative framework of Serbia pertaining to NMCs' functioning, nor are there visible barriers to gender inclusivity in

the scope of NMCs' work. There is certainly a space for gender-inclusive practices, but only if the topic is recognised by the national minority communities themselves, or their political representatives.

Challenges for active political participation of women from NMCs in Serbia

Firstly, data obtained from this research, which was conducted in 2022 with experts working in the field of national minorities in Serbia, indicate that although the legal framework stipulates that every third person on the list for membership in NMCs should be a woman, during the selection process *female candidates often decide or are pushed towards deciding not to get involved in the work of NMCs*. They are then replaced by the next person on the list, who is often a man. Korhecz (2019) says that intra-ethnic competition for seats in NMCs is not a matter of competing programmes but rather of the representation of minorities and the controlling of the budget and institutions of NMCs, which are again related to male power: 'In this way, NMCs risk becoming, instead of institutions which enable minorities to decide on cultural politics independently from central state authorities, tools of ruling minority elites continually barring those minority members who do not affiliate with the dominant minority organization from representation' (Korhecz, 2019, p. 129).

The exceptions are Hungarian and Slovak NMCs where women are in leadership positions. The Hungarian NMC has an almost equal number of male and female members, with women occupying many leadership positions, such as vice-president, and heading different boards such as the Board for Information/Media. This is similar to the Slovak NMC, which is led by a woman.

Secondly, although there are women in leadership positions, it seems that female NMC members do not have sufficient knowledge about gender equality, gender analysis or how to make existing activity plans gender sensitive. *Even when there are activities aimed at women within NMCs, or affirmative measures in the wider national community, they tend to be ad hoc rather than a planned approach aimed at gender equality*. This competence in and knowledge about gender equality also determines how well female leaders will advocate for the interests of national minorities. For example, the aforementioned Hungarian NMC, as well as the Slovak and the Bulgarian NMCs, have prepared mid-term development strategies and action plans in four main areas (education, culture, information and official language use); however, their strategies do not directly address the issue of gender equality, nor did the creation of these documents include girls and women from rural areas affected by multiple marginalisation.

Thirdly, *gender equality seems to be less important for ethnic minority groups in general, as they feel that the 'national minority issue' is predominant and should be addressed first*, and thus they lack sensitivity around mainstream trends and requirements when it comes

to gender equality. A good example may be the NMC of the Roma national minority, which contains a network of women working on gender equality, but data on the results and effectiveness of their work are lacking.

Fourth, *internal pluralism seems to be an ever-present problem* when it comes to the representation of different interests of national minority groups, such as Romani girls from remote and rural areas or Slovak women with disabilities. Addressing this would require not only NMC leaders to visit regions where members of a certain minority live in order to familiarise themselves with their problems, concerns, ideas and needs, but also the implementation of continuous research that would include members of national minorities who are multiply marginalised and underrepresented, which is not a common practice of NMCs in Serbia. An example of this practice is research conducted by the Hungarian NMC aimed at more effective youth work.

Conclusion

Weak public institutions, a deficit of democratic political traditions and the undermining of minority issues (due to a well-developed but poorly implemented legal framework) are all obstacles to the functioning of NMCs and their effectiveness as channels for greater political participation of women from national minority communities in Serbia.

When it comes to the effective participation of women in NMCs, most male leaders are not ready to hand power over to women, and both men and women do not sufficiently realise the gender dimension beyond the numerical representation of women within NMCs. Increasing the motivation of (young) women to get involved in politics might affect the overall quality of NMC work, but a change also needs to be made to the political climate, which is still masculine in nature. The solidarity of (young) women from national minority groups should be strengthened, regardless of political party affiliation, and they should be encouraged to be louder and braver in expressing their views in public debates, so that they can fight for their interests.

The mainstreaming of minority issues thus faces both external and internal political obstacles. The most important external barriers are impassable or selective channels of communication between the government and national minority representatives, party influence and inert coordination between institutions at different levels of government to iterate the needs of national minorities and mainstream minority issues. Internal barriers are primarily based on NMC members' and leaders' poor knowledge of gender issues, and the absence of a clear policy on gender equality supported by an imprecise legal framework related to NMCs' actions in this area. Even when there are activities aimed at women within NMCs, or affirmative measures in the wider national community, they tend to be ad hoc rather than a planned approach aimed at gender equality. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen the

monitoring of NMCs' activities according to gender-sensitive indicators, and to regularly evaluate the effectiveness of NMCs' work in all four mandated areas.

The planning of effective gender-inclusive budgeting is also important for the implementation of all activities, which includes the necessity of awareness and competences for that area, as well as public powers over the allocation of public funding. One of the best practices in this regard can be seen in Hungary, where minority self-governments are able to manage their own budgets through a government decree that specifies regulations for the planning and appropriation of funds (Dobos, 2021).

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