

# Women's (under)representation in the Hungarian Parliament

Réka Várnagy, PhD

October 2013

*This paper was commissioned by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR).*

*The opinions and information it contains do not necessarily reflect the policy and position of ODIHR or its partners, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and the Central European University's School of Public Policy.*

## Introduction

---

Currently, only 9% of Hungarian MPs are women and the outlook for the upcoming 2014 parliamentary elections suggests no improvement. The single-digit percentage of female parliamentarians has proven to be one of the most stable phenomena of the Hungarian political system, resisting government changes, the transformation of the party system and the recent constitutional reform. In order to better understand the resistance to the inclusion of women in political life and possibly facilitate a more inclusive political field, the structure of opportunity for female politicians needs to be scrutinized. The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) has developed a comprehensive framework for advancing gender equality in elected office, offering a six-step action plan for intervention: constitutional rules, electoral system, legal quotas, parliamentary reform, party rules and recruitment procedures and capacity development (Norris-Krook, 2011). When studying the Hungarian structures, this six-step framework will be applied to gain a comprehensive view of the different formal and informal mechanisms preventing women from aiming for and gaining parliamentary mandate.

Looking back at the history of women's political participation in Hungary, the demand for voting rights emerged as early as the 1840s. Women were first granted the right to vote in Hungary in 1918, although in the first half of the twentieth century, several censuses were introduced constraining female suffrage to a great extent. Women attained full suffrage in Hungary in 1945, but the ensuing communist era inhibited the democratic functioning of the political system. While the percentage of women elected to the Hungarian parliament showed a steady increase from 1949 to 1980 (from 18% to 30% respectively), it only reflected the top-down pressure of a false, equalitarian political façade. The democratization process did not contribute to the increased inclusion of women in political decision making: the lack of political commitment to ensure a critical level of women's representation was reflected in the sharp decline of female MPs elected at the first democratic elections in 1990 (7%). The proportion of women in the legislature stabilised at a low single-digit level, barely exceeding 10% in 1994 and 2006, now placing Hungary as the lowest ranked among the new Central-Eastern European EU member states and among the 57 OSCE participating States.

**Table 1: The proportion of female MPs in the new Central-Eastern European EU member states**

Country	Year of first democratic elections	Percentage of female MPs in the lower house	Year of last democratic elections	Percentage of female MPs in the lower house
Slovenia	1990	13,3	2011	32,2
Bulgaria	1990	8,2	2013	24,6
Lithuania	1990	9,9	2012	24,1
Croatia	1992	4	2011	23,8
Poland	1991	9,1	2011	23,7
Latvia	1990	15	2011	23
Czech Republic	1990	10	2010	22
Estonia	1990	5,7	2011	20,8
Slovakia	1990	12	2012	18,7
Romania	1990	3,7	2012	13,3
Hungary	1990	7,3	2010	9,1

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union, IPU (<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>, September 2013)

## Constitutional rights

There are no constitutional barriers to female political representation in Hungary. The amendments to the Hungarian Constitution of 1949 introduced at the time of regime change ensured the equal treatment of all citizens, while the current Hungarian constitution explicitly refers to women and their equal civil rights. Article XV of the Hungarian Constitution states that “women and men shall have equal rights” and stresses that “by means of separate measures, Hungary shall promote the achievement of equality of opportunity and social inclusion.” However, concerning political rights, there are no special legal measures applied, while the

institutional context is often disadvantageous to women. Although there have been several attempts in Hungary to introduce legal quotas to increase female representation in the field of politics, these failed due to insufficient social mobilisation and lack of political will. The constitutional promise is thus waiting to be fulfilled.

## Electoral system

---

The Hungarian electoral system has undergone a major reform in 2011 and will be applied for the first time in the upcoming parliamentary elections in 2014. While it is yet unknown how the new provisions will affect the chances of women to get elected to the Hungarian National Assembly, the assessment of the old electoral system allows for the identification of driving forces and critical factors in the election of female representatives. The electoral system applied in the period from 1990 to 2010 was a result of a negotiated transition, in which the interests of the old and the new political elite were reconciled in the creation of a mixed system. The 386 parliamentary mandates were distributed among *three tiers*: 176 mandates were allocated in *Single Member Districts* (SMDs), a maximum of 152 mandates were distributed on *proportional party lists regionally*, while a minimum of 58 were *compensatory mandates distributed on national party lists*. In the SMDs, a two-round, absolute majority system was applied, while a threshold of 5% was established for party lists. Regarding the functioning of the electoral system, it was favourable to the largest parties with the winner being overrepresented in terms of mandates compared to its share of the vote (Benoit, 2005).

The mixed electoral system allows for the comparative analysis of the proportional and the majoritarian tier to assess whether the Hungarian experiences are in line with the expectation of the proportional tier being more favourable to female representation (Matland, 1998). Regarding candidacy, the electoral system itself does not discourage female candidates, as their share has been on the rise during the last two decades (see table 2).

**Table 2: Electoral candidates according to their gender, 1990-2010**

Electoral cycle	Male candidates		Female candidates	
	Number	%	Number	%
1990	3191	91	316	9
1994	4084	88,5	529	11,5
1998	3657	85,8	605	14,2
2002	2840	82,2	614	17,8
2006	2284	83,3	456	16,7
2010	2020	80,8	495	19,2

Source: Farkas - Vajda (1991) and Ilonszki-Várnagy (2012)

The fact that the increase of female candidates does not translate into an increase in the actual representation suggests that the majoritarian nature of the electoral system may be posing additional barriers for female candidates to get elected. The 1990 elections show that 78% of women MPs winning parliamentary mandates did so either on regional or national lists (Ilonszki-Montgomery, 2002). However, in the period from 1994 to 2006 this proportion decreased (67%) while already one third of women elected won their mandates in SMDs. A shift from the national lists towards the territorial party lists can also be observed: while in 1990, the national party lists were the most favourable to women, in the consecutive elections most of the female mandates were won on territorial party lists.

Following an invitation from Hungary's Foreign Minister, ODIHR deployed an election assessment mission to assess the parliamentary elections on 11 April 2010. The final assessment report observed that the number of women MPs has decreased since 2006 from 43 (11.1 per cent) to 35 (9.1 per cent). The report also called for “more effective measures (...) to ensure the wider representation of women in parliament. Such measures could include guidelines for

political parties to ensure that women are equally represented on party lists and placed in positions to be elected.”<sup>1</sup>

### *What are the driving forces behind these trends?*

Due to the domination of two parties in the Hungarian party system, the two large parties - the Conservative Fidesz–Hungarian Civic Union (Fidesz) and the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) - dominate the SMDs and the territorial party lists, while smaller parties win most of their mandates on national lists. The rise of resourceful Socialist women candidates explains the female mandates won in SMDs, while territorial lists proved to be more advantageous to Fidesz female candidates. This trend discontinued in 2010 with the Socialists losing their SMD mandates, and party lists becoming again the most important tiers for women to win parliamentary seats (out of the 35 female mandates 26 were won on either regional or national party lists). This data should be handled with caution though, as the “advantageous” territorial lists translate into a very low success rate for female candidates. Despite the increase of mandates won on territorial lists by the two largest parties, the winnable positions were not opened up to women: the Socialist party tended to nominate its preferred female candidates in more than one tier, ensuring their success, but blocking other female candidates to step up to their places. Fidesz placed only a few female candidates on winnable positions on its lists (Ilonszki-Várnagy, 2007).

### *Electoral reform*

The electoral changes to be applied in the 2014 parliamentary elections include a decrease in parliamentary seats, the allocation of mandates through two tiers (SMDs and national party lists) in one round and the introduction of differentiated thresholds (5% threshold still exists in case of a party-list, and 10% in case of two parties' joint list, 15% in case of three or more parties' joint list). The reduction of the parliamentary seats from 386 to 199 already implies a stronger

---

<sup>1</sup> OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), Election Assessment Mission Report, Republic of Hungary - Parliamentary Elections (11 April 2010), p. 22-23..

competition among incumbents and potential candidates. The reform further strengthens the majoritarian element of the election process, allocating 106 mandates out of 199 to SMDs. The rest (93 mandates) will be distributed on national party lists, to which not only the losers' votes will be transferred, but also the "surplus" votes that were not necessary to win an SMD mandate. Thus, the intensification of the competition will be present on two levels: first the shrinking number of mandates encourages the de-selection of women who are less susceptible to incumbency advantage (the advantage of those already in power through the high rate of re-election), currently mainly men (Murray, 2008). Second, the quest for surplus votes will motivate the nomination of known politicians who are almost always men, even in safe constituencies, leaving very little space for newcomers. This trend will be further enforced by the single round system applied in SMDs that underlines the need for political alliances to negotiate and choose a common candidate before the elections (instead of in between the two rounds). The decreasing chances for running does not only affect the chances for winning a mandate for female candidates but also the chances of aspirants which lessens their visibility and further strengthens the stereotype of only male candidates running for public office.

## Legal quotas

---

The Hungarian legal framework does not include any legal measures aimed at increasing women's participation in the political process. Legal quotas have not been adopted, despite several attempts to introduce them in the political system. The first and probably the most well-known attempt occurred in 2007 when two Liberal MPs introduced two bills to the Parliament, aiming at enhancing female representation in politics. Both bills were rather ambitious: one proposed the obligatory introduction of the zipper system on party lists, both for national and local elections, along with a proposal for a one-third gender quota to be applied to the selection of the Ministers of State; while the other bill proposed a critical presence of women in governments, asking for 30% female ministers. Both bills failed to pass in the Parliament, but the debate around the topic of legal gender quota offered an insight into the political elite's view of the question. First of all, most parties had not developed a clear stand on the issue. The two large parties were divided. Among the Socialists, pro and contra arguments were raised by well-known female politicians, while most of the Conservative Fidesz politicians abstained from voting.



Disapproval was expressed in the ranks of the Christian-Democrats and the Conservative Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) and even within the Liberal party, the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ), whose members proposed the bills. The contra arguments included fear from having „token-women” instead of women who deserved to be elected based on their merit, the right of voters to decide who to send to the parliament, the question of political culture that cannot be changed by one act, and the fear for other under-represented groups asking for similar rights. The pro arguments reflected on the democratic deficit caused by the under-representation of women, the effectiveness of quotas to ensure a level playing field and the presentation of the quota as a first step towards gender equality (Papp, 2008).

In the consecutive debates about the legal gender quotas, similar arguments emerged. One important difference was that in 2010, a grassroots initiative coming from civil society tackled the issue by initiating a referendum on the subject of gender quotas. The initiative did not succeed in collecting enough signatures for a referendum. There are several explanations to the low level of mobilisation: the public interest was not challenged as the civil society is weak both in terms of social and financial capital needed to raise awareness while the media remained ignorant to the event.

The third attempt occurred in 2011 when two MPs of different opposition groups proposed a quota-bill, requiring 33% of women candidates on party lists. The cross-party co-operation around this issue triggered some interest and political debate, but the proposed bill did not gain sufficient support and quickly failed.

There is a common factor to be observed in all the attempts to introduce legal gender quotas in Hungary: the quota question was introduced by individual MPs who often lacked support of their own parties. The political elite, including both male and female politicians, does not seem open towards gender quotas, while the bottom-up pressure of the public or civil society is not strong enough. Without a devoted promoter in the Parliament, quota legislation is far from being adopted or even considered seriously.

## Parliamentary reforms

---

The lack of gender-sensitive reforms is also evident within the parliamentary institution itself. The current parliamentary reform, which amended the rules of procedures and introduced a Law on the Parliament (Act XXXVI of 2012 on the National Assembly ), did not even intend to transform the political arena to better accommodate women. Issues that should have been considered are gender mainstreaming of parliamentary procedures, activities, and budgets; the establishment of structures for women MPs; and gender-sensitive working conditions, hours, and cultures in the Parliament. Gender-balanced appointments to parliamentary committees, flexible working hours, avoidance of late-night parliamentary sessions, and child care services for parliamentarians are some practical issues that facilitate the participation of women and men in the parliament, helping both women and men to better combine their work and family life. Further, not only the formal but the informal procedures are hostile towards women: the tone of the parliamentary debates is often sexist and offenders are rarely sanctioned.

## Party rules and recruitment

---

The analysis of the electoral system along with the overview of the proposed, but failed, quota bills underline the importance of political parties in the inclusion of women in their structures and political decision-making, more broadly. Clearly, women's political representation is not a priority for Hungarian political parties. As Table 3 shows, no political party in Hungary made an effort to systemically include a high number of female MPs within its ranks.

**Table 3: The number and percentage of seats occupied by women according to parties, 1990-2010**

Party	1990		1994		1998		2002		2006		2010	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
MDF	8	4.8	6	15.8	1	5.9	1	4.2	1	9.8	-	-
SZDSZ	8	8.5	11	15.7	3	12.5	2	10.0	2	10.0	-	-
MSZP	5	15.1	22	10.5	14	10.4	23	12.9	25	13.1	5	8,5
FIDESZ	2	9.1	1	5.0	10	6.7	9	5.5	11	7.8	20	8,8
KDNP	1	4.7	1	4.5	-	-	-	-	2	8.7	2	5,4
FKGP	3	6.8	2	7.7	3	6.2	-	-	-	-	-	-
MIÉP	-	-	-	-	1	7.1	-	-	-	-	-	-
Jobbik	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	6,4
LMP	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	5	31,2
Összes	28	7.3	43	11.1	32	8.3	35	9.1	41	10.6	35	9,1

Source: Ilonszki-Kelemen-Széles, 2003:14 and Ilonszki-Várnagy, 2007

The early consolidation of the Hungarian party system inhibited the emergence of a new elite, promoting and discussing the question of gender equality. Still, we can observe the emergence of a left-right divide, with the Hungarian Socialist Party accommodating a slightly higher proportion of female MPs. This is in accordance with the fact that in 2002, the MSZP adopted a quota of 20% for female and young candidates, although without specific measures on the placement of candidates or additional resources such as training offered to women, the quota often plays a symbolic role only. The weakness of the voluntary quota became evident in 2010 when the shrinking political space overwrote the political commitment to gender equality and resulted in the lowest proportion of female politicians in the Socialist benches. The de-selection of women points to another problem in gender representation: on the one hand, the political elite is becoming more and more professional and closed, with increasing re-election rates among male politicians. On the other hand though, the rate of fluctuation among female politicians is on the rise. The rate of newcomers among female MPs reached 60% in the 2010 parliamentary cycle

(compared to 44% of male MPs). While the openness of the political field is desirable, the fact that many women often serve only one term in the parliament is an obstacle to the emergence of a professional female political elite.

According to Caul, new values and new strategies can be introduced when new actors enter the political field, as these political entrepreneurs aim at gaining new voters while they do not fear losing old supporters (2001:1218). The election of 2010, which redrew the political landscape by the disintegration of old parties and the introduction of new ones, allowed for the emergence of a new green party, Politics Can Be Different (LMP). This party presented the highest proportion of female MPs ever in the Hungarian Parliament, due to the party's strict gender quota and the training offered by the party to its women candidates.

Regarding political parties, it is crucial to address informal processes that hinder female participation. The low transparency of the recruitment processes and the informal negotiations within political parties are disadvantageous to women, who often miss out on opportunities of political bargaining (Várnagy, 2010). Party and campaign financing are additional issues that need to be addressed, since the lack of transparency and effective regulation can result in blurred financing practices within political parties (Ilonszki-Iván, 2006), which can be disadvantageous to women.

### Capacity development

In terms of capacity development, it is crucial to strengthen civil organisations that address gender equality issues in Hungary. Hungarian civil society could benefit from additional technical and financial support and lacks social embeddedness, which often limits its possibility to contribute to capacity development. This is certainly true for women's organisations, whose numbers are hard to estimate. Many organisations are labelled women's organizations, due to the fact that they address issues traditionally linked with women, such as child care or domestic violence. Yet, many women's organisation abstain from activism around political issues, as Fábíán notes, instead rather offering services in areas of welfare and education. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) offering services through or in co-operation with local or national governments, can make these NGOs vulnerable and dependent. Thus, activists often perceive that they need to be apolitical in their domestic environments to be able to continue

their work (Fábián, 2007:117). As a consequence, there is only a limited number of civil organisations implementing projects to promote women's political participation and strengthen the capacities of women to engage politically. In terms of lobbying there are three umbrella organisations that genuinely represent their member organisations and women's interests. The fact that these organisations have co-operated on several occasions in order to increase women's representation emphasizes that there is a widespread agreement in the civil sphere concerning the need for more women in politics. In 2007, these organisations co-operated closely in a joint effort for the introduction of a legal gender quota. Recently, they acted jointly to raise awareness about the importance of women's political inclusion in the upcoming 2014 general elections. In a joint declaration, they outlined the negative effects of the electoral reform on women's representation and called upon parties to strengthen women's inclusion. They issued several guidelines to the parties; the most important regarding the introduction of the parity system for nominations on the party lists, meaning the alternate nomination of women and men on the lists, with each group reaching 50% of the candidate pool.<sup>2</sup>

Capacity-building does not only happen outside of politics, but also inside. Women sections or groups within political parties are the main suspects for promoting their members' advancement. While most Hungarian parties have an intra-party division for female members, party discipline and party interest articulated by the male party elite seem to override their voices. The lack of strong female politicians who could promote the issue is evident, although some exceptions exist. These exceptions are often coming from the outside circles of parties, such as the European Parliamentary Party Groups, where women are over-represented in comparison to national legislatures. Currently, women amount to 36% of all Hungarian Members of the European Parliament (MEP). The analysis of the career pattern of Hungarian MEPs suggest that, while domestic political resources are important in getting selected, professional experience acquired at the European level is also taken into consideration, along with the European expectation for gender equality (Várnagy, 2009).

Women are not only present above the national level in European politics, but also below, in local politics. The number of female mayors is on the rise from 10% in 1990 to 18% in 2010.

---

<sup>2</sup> The joint declaration is available in Hungarian at the website of the Hungarian Women's Lobby: <http://noierdek.hu/?p=25078>.

While this trend suggests that women are active in local politics, it is important to note that most of them participate in the life of small settlements, where independents, instead of political parties, dominate the political field. As we climb the territorial hierarchy towards larger and more resourceful towns and cities, independents along with female politicians disappear from elected office: 21% of mayors are women in settlements with less than 1000 inhabitants, while this rate drops to 7% in cities with more than 10 000 inhabitants (Ilonszki-Várnagy, 2012).

## Conclusion

---

The assessment of the structure of opportunities suggests that a more gender-sensitive institutional reform is necessary to promote women's participation in political decision-making. While the constitutional framework guarantees the equality of rights *de jure*, the legal framework, including the electoral system, do not provide *de facto* equal rights and opportunities for women and men to engage in political and public life on an equal footing. Further, there are no legal incentives, such as gender quotas, to promote women's representation in Hungary. Rules can be changed, however, if there is the opportunity and the will to do so. The examples of the European Parliament and the local politics suggest that there is capacity to build on, a baseline to start promoting active involvement of women in national legislative politics. There are two crucial actors that can bring about change: women's organisations and political parties. Women's organisations play a role in capacity building and awareness-raising among the wider public, which are necessary to advance gender equality issues and promote women's participation at all levels of decision-making. Political parties are responsible for improving their internal practices of recruitment and financing, so as to facilitate women's involvement in their ranks and in elected office more broadly. There are various tools and methods to reach these goals, but first and above all, women's political participation, as the basis of democracy, should become a political priority.

## About the author

Réka Várnagy, PhD is Assistant Professor at the Institute of Political Science, Corvinus University of Budapest, her research interest include gender and politics and legislative politics.

## References

- Benoit, Kenneth (2005): Hungary: Holding Back the Tiers In: M. Gallagher – P. Mitchel (eds): *The Politics of Electoral Systems*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 231-252.
- Caul, Miki (2001): Political Parties and the Adoption of Candidate Gender Quotas: a Cross-National Analysis. In: *The Journal of Politics*, 63(4):1214-1229.
- Fábián, Katalin (2007): Making an Appearance: The Formation of Women's Groups in Hungary In: *Aspasia*, 1: 103-127.
- Farkas E. János – Vajda Á. (1991): Az 1990-es parlamenti választások képviselőjelöltjeinek társadalmi jellemzői. In: Kurtán S. – Sándor P.- Vass L. (eds.): *Magyarország politikai évkönyve 1991*. Budapest: DKMK 87-99.
- Ilonszki Gabriella – K. Montgomery (2002): Több demokrácia, kevesebb képviselet? *Politikatudományi Szemle* 2002(3-4): 7-34.
- Ilonszki Gabriella - B. Kelemen I. – Széles Zs. (2003): *Fordulóponton. Képviselőnők 1998-2002* Budapest: Mirovni Institut.
- Ilonszki Gabriella - Iván Gábor (2006): **Hiba! A hiperhivatkozás érvénytelen.** In: *Az Elemző* (1): 41-62.
- Ilonszki Gabriella - Várnagy R. (2007): Vegyes választási rendszer és női képviselet. *Politikatudományi Szemle* 2007(1): 93-109.
- Matland, Richard (1998): Women's legislative representation in national legislatures: a comparison of democracies in developed and developing countries. In: *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 28 (1), 109–125.
- Murray, Rainbow (2008): The power of sex and incumbency. *Party Politics*, 14(5): 539-554.
- Norris, Pippa – M. L. Krook (2011): Gender Equality in Elected Office: A Six-Step Action Plan. OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), downloaded from <http://www.osce.org/odihr/78432> on 15 October, 2013.
- OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), Election Assessment Mission Report, Republic of Hungary - Parliamentary Elections (11 April 2010), downloaded from <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/71075> on 15 October 2013.
- Papp Zsófia (2008): A nemek esélyegyenlőségének problémája, ahogy a képviselők látják. in: Ilonszki G.- Hámor Sz. – Papp Zs. –Juhász. B. –Sáfrány R. : *A női kvóta Magyarországon.A 2007-es év vitája a politikai esélyegyenlőségről*. Budapest:Szociális és Munkügyi Minisztérium, 51-78.
- Várnagy Réka (2010): Jelöltállítás a 2009-es európai parlamenti választásokon. *Politikatudományi Szemle*, 2010(4): 9-24.
- Várnagy Réka – Ilonszki G. (2012): Üvegplafonok. Pártok fent és lent *Politikatudományi Szemle*, 2012(4):7-28.