

Brainstorming on "Women and the reconciliation process in Bosnia and Herzegovina"

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"Women in local government"

Thank you very much for giving the Congress the opportunity to present our work to the participants of this brainstorming session. I especially welcome the (only) six female mayors of Bosnia and Herzegovina and I am very pleased that you are part of this delegation.

Before I start talking about what we are doing on political participation of women, I would like to say a few words on the Congress itself as a statutory body of the Council of Europe and what we have been doing on gender related issues in general.

Six main tasks of the Congress as a political organ of the Council of Europe:

- Forum of exchange of local and regional politicians from the 47 member states
- Consultative body for the Committee of Ministers when preparing conventions or recommendations to member states with a local and / or regional dimension (examples: Gender equality in sport; Lobbying, ...)
- Monitoring body for local and regional democracy: regular country reports on the implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government and observation of local and regional elections
- Operational secretariat implementing the local and regional dimension of CoE Action Plans (focus on the legal framework and elected politicians)
- Part of the "distribution chain" for CoE policies, campaigns etc. (Alliance of Cities to combat violent extremism; Alliance for Roma inclusion, ...)

As regards gender equality, the Congress has produced several key reports and I will mention only a few here.

Congress texts on gender issues

In our report on gender mainstreaming at local level, the main message was a call to local and regional authorities to

- make a public commitment to gender equality to promote effective equality between men and women;
- to allocate human and financial resources more effectively,
- collect gender disaggregated statistics;
- use this information to convince politicians and citizens of the need to adopt a gender mainstreaming policy.

Our report on fighting the increasing poverty of women started from the basic consideration that women, who are more vulnerable socially and economically than men, are the first to suffer the effects of the

economic crisis. This requires specific measures to improve the economic situation of women. We recommended that States should, for example,

- take stock of the existing situation by establishing statistical tools to measure women's income poverty
- adopt policies and take measures that will prevent 'the new poor' – the victims of austerity policies – from falling into 'chronic' poverty,
- review their legislation in order to individualise social and economic rights so as to empower women as individuals often responsible for children as single parents.

The economic empowerment of women is an essential step in enhancing women's chances in political life as actors.

In our report on gender budgeting we called on all levels of government to allocate funds for implementing gender budgeting at local and regional levels and to collect gender disaggregated data. In fact, this is one recurring theme in all our gender related texts. As our thematic spokesperson on gender equality always says when she takes the floor, we cannot produce reliable policies or take measures without relevant data. This is the baseline for any meaningful action.

Example: Representation of women in Swiss political institutions:
<https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/politik/wahlen/frauen.html>

The Congress was also very active in the Council of Europe campaign to combat domestic violence against women as of 2004. We adopted a resolution and a recommendation to the member States on this issue. You will find links and the details of all these documents in the compilation of our thematic activities which I brought with me. They are available in English and French.

Women, political participation and the electoral process

Coming to the subject of my intervention today, participation of women in public and political life is a subject that is an essential part of our work in the Congress that we care deeply about.

In 2016, Congress members adopted a report on "Women's political participation and representation at local and regional levels". Our report provided an overview of the solid legal and policy framework of the Council of Europe which support balanced participation and representation of women and men in political decision-making.

All Council of Europe member States guarantee legal equality between women and men, including the right to stand for election and to be elected. However, in practice, women are still seriously underrepresented. They are often discriminated against or face negative attitudes which disempower them in public and political life.

The Council of Europe has been working on balanced participation since the 1980s. Its pioneering work in the field of human rights and gender equality has resulted in a solid legal and policy framework which can considerably advance women's rights and bring member States closer to real gender equality.

In 2003, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted Recommendation (2003)3 which defines a quota for the minimum representation of 40% of both sexes in all decision-making bodies in political or public life.

At the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, just like in every organ of the Council of Europe, we strive to ensure women's presence and equal representation. The Congress therefore introduced a quota of 30% for the under-represented sex in all national delegations, applying both to representatives and substitutes. As a consequence we managed to increase the percentage of women in the Congress for the first time to 40% in 2012¹. I admit we are proud of this achievement in a period of less than a decade and we maintain this level of over 40%.

¹ 40,74% in October 2017; the participation in the session was 37%.

Only in 2016 Congress members elected for the first time a woman as president – Gudrun Mosler-Törnström, Vice-President of the regional parliament of Land Salzburg - and today women constitute 65% of the executive of the Congress: 11 out of 17 Bureau members are women.

All this could not have been achieved without the implementation of quotas. It is necessary to admit that it was not accomplished overnight but required hard work not only on the part of the Congress but also from other bodies of the Council of Europe.

The delegation from Bosnia and Herzegovina to the Congress currently has 10 members (5 representatives and 5 substitutes). 3 seats are currently vacant. So we have currently 7 members among which 3 women (rate of 42,83%, which complies both with the Congress quota (30%) and with the quota set by the Committee of Ministers' (40%)². All national delegations will be renewed at the (35th) session in October 2018.

Solutions for enhancing women's participation in political life are not straightforward; they involve a variety of parameters. One of them is an implementation of electoral quotas, which is an efficient way of increasing women's participation and representation at local and regional councils. Your country has introduced a gender quota for municipal councils prescribing a minimum of 40% of the underrepresented gender on each candidate's list. I salute this as a step in the right direction.

I think quotas are more productive if and when they are combined with financial penalties in case of non-compliance. It is important to stress that especially in that regard, local and regional levels of government constitute a great starting point for such change, which later on can be translated onto the national level.

This kind of objective, however, needs to be first of all designed correctly and later on consistently implemented. Electoral systems require reform and adjustment. In some cases they may hamper women's political participation, instead of promoting gender-balanced representation. That should be addressed among others at the level of political parties and their nomination processes.

Political parties as Gatekeepers

Political parties have the power to recruit, select and nominate candidates. They are the gatekeepers to gender balance in political decision-making because they control the nomination processes.

According to a study just published by the Council of Europe "Balanced participation of women and men on decision-making", which analyses data of 2016³ "political parties in Europe were largely led by men, which may partly explain the lack of gender balance in the composition of other decision-making bodies for which political parties have a large influence. In 26 countries including Bosnia and Herzegovina, out of a total of 43 observed, there was no single woman party leader at national level.

Therefore capacity-building programs, candidate trainings and recruitment programs must be developed to improve this situation. Skills and leadership training is important for women in preparation for standing as candidates and should be encouraged at all levels.

However when discussing a way forward to improving women's participation in political decision making, we must also look at the bigger picture. Legal work in that matter needs to be accompanied by political, social as well a cultural changes.

Addressing the obstacles to participation

First of all we need to finally start appreciating women's 'added value'. I am convinced, and I am sure you agree, that women bring their own angle of vision to the situations, problems and challenges our societies

² Recommendation Rec(2003)3 on balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making (minimum representation of 40% of each sex)

³ Page 59, Section III - Political parties

<https://rm.coe.int/analytical-report-data-2016-/1680751a3e>

are confronted with. They offer a different opinion from their own unique experience. Therefore their participation in decision-making bodies is very important, as these bodies create a framework for democratic action through laws and regulations.

To have a chance for such participation however, one must first think of a starting point. I believe it is the **grassroots level** which offers women better chances to become **members of municipal or regional councils, mayors or presidents of regions**. These constitute a level where women for the first time become directly involved in a day-to-day administration of communities.

Experience shows that, when encouraging women's participation in political decision-making, proper "working conditions" for politicians have to be established and special needs for women have to be taken into account. The Congress addressed these questions in a report of 2015: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/congress/-/debate-on-conditions-of-office-of-local-and-regional-elected-representatives->

A political climate and economic independence is needed to be able to devote time for political engagement. For that reason, a **societal environment** is necessary, which would for example provide child care for mothers or give women security and not prevent them from attaining positions of power considering for example family situation.

We must also recognise the **cultural factor**, which influences women's participation in political and public decision making. Prevailing traditional gender roles hamper women's image as leaders and those in position of power or authority. This can partly be overcome by training and encouragement. Example: training course organised by Land Salzburg: http://service.salzburg.gv.at/lkorj/Index?cmd=detail_ind&nachrid=59202

Of course depending on the **religion as well as cultural traditions**, the role of women in the society differs. However we should strive for strengthening their image not only as mothers, but one as equal to men. They are capable of facing, addressing and responding to the challenges local authorities are confronted with. Key role in this regard should be played by gender sensitive civic education and action, with an aim of eliminating gender stereotypes and promoting equality of sexes.

Women from minority groups

Participation of women from minority groups and from the Roma community is also a subject that needs to be addressed.

The Congress has for many years been working to improve the situation of the Roma, including Roma women in politics, who suffer from severe forms of discrimination also within their own communities.

For this reason the Congress adopted Resolution 333 in 2011 underlining that the voice of Roma women needs to be heard and that they have to be involved in representative bodies.⁴

With few exceptions Roma women are virtually excluded from political representation in Europe, which thereby weakens democracy and human rights. There are exceptions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example in Visoko⁵ where the mayor is a woman belonging to the Roma community and I am very happy to see that Ms Amra Babic is with us today.

The Congress has pursued through the Alliance of Cities and Regions for the Inclusion of Roma and Travellers activities that set out to promote Roma political participation on the local level. Increasing Roma women's representation is a goal within these efforts.

In 2016 the Alliance supported four workshops prior to the local elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Three of the four workshops focused on using the right to vote. The fourth workshop addressed Roma who were actually running for office as local councilors. 20 Roma participants were trained on how to build

⁴ <https://rm.coe.int/1680719e6e>

⁵ Near Sarajevo; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Visoko

up a recognizable image and how to speak in public. In the end, 10 of them were elected into councilor positions, alas only one of them was a woman.

The electoral process

I would like to say a few words on the election process itself now and the observation of local elections held on 2 October 2016 in your country by the Congress.

The observation of political participation at territorial level is one of our core activities.

Last year following the invitation by the President of the Central Election Commission a Congress delegation observed the local elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina held on 2 October 2016. We deployed a delegation of 32 members including members of the EU Committee of the Regions. 12 teams visited some 250 polling stations.

We know that these elections took place against a background of ethnic tensions following the 25 September 2016 referendum in Republika Srpska on the national day of the entity. Widespread political discourse focusing on ethnic issues including nationalistic attitudes was promoted during the electoral campaign.

Nevertheless we noted that voting was held – with the exception of a few violent incidents – in a calm and orderly manner overall.

Regarding the results of the Bosnian local elections, we noted that in the mayoral race the number of female candidates increased to 26 as compared to the 2012 local elections.

As for municipal councils, we welcome the amendment to the Election Law that allows a gender quota to prescribe a minimum of 40% of the underrepresented gender on each candidate's list.

However it seems that, in reality, the efficiency of this quota was limited by the “preferential voting system”. Voters could choose to rank candidates on the list, thus undermining the chances of women candidates to be elected. Moreover, after the 2012 local elections, it was reported that elected women resigned in exchange of another job and were replaced in office by men from their list.

Consequently, in our election observation report on the Bosnian local elections we have invited the authorities to ensure that female participation is *de facto* guaranteed and female mayors and councillors are given the opportunity to remain in office for the duration of the term they have been elected for.

I would like to conclude my remarks here and I would be very interested to hear your views in the following discussion on how women can contribute to dialogue and reconciliation.