



Gender-based violence against women politicians in Serbia

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Summary

Like any other form of gender-based violence, gender-based violence against women politicians is based on unequal power relations between men and women, but it differs from other forms of violence against women as it tends to unfold publically and collectively discourages women from getting involved in the sphere of political decision-making, thus hindering fundamental gender redistribution of power. Bearing in mind the importance of such violence and lack of insight into its characteristics, with the support of the OSCE Mission to Serbia and the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), a group of women experts carried out a research into this phenomenon in two ways: (1) through in-depth exploratory research of experiences of nine women politicians who served or serve as MPs in local assemblies, the Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina and the National Assembly of Serbia, and are members of seven different political parties; (2) through research of the media content on the sample of six media outlets and three case studies of specific aspects of media reporting about women in politics.

Experiences of violence against women politicians

The findings of the research of violence experienced by women politicians during their careers suggest that the patterns of structural, cultural and various forms of interpersonal violence are highly widespread. Violence is an integral part of their political careers and is manifested in highly different forms, both in terms of the type of violence and the perpetrators and context in which it unfolded.

In regard to **structural violence**, female respondents stated that political parties are highly centralised and the higher the posts, i.e. the more power they carry, the fewer women hold those posts. Male party leaders make key decisions without clear criteria and transparent procedures. The experiences of women show that authoritarian culture and authoritarian structures are commonplace for parties of different orientations. In such parties there is clear gender segregation in terms of duties and

women are more frequently assigned auxiliary, administrative, organisational and logistical duties, while the decision-making posts are most often given to men. There is complex interaction between gender and power, where often other factors, such as territorial affiliation, clientelistic relations, better integration in loyalty networks have greater importance in the promotion of members, though gender is always systematically present, as an intervening variable, which, along with other conditions, gives women weaker chances to reach more powerful posts. In the distribution of posts, women often fare worse simply because they have less intraparty power, which is related to their generally smaller power due to a weaker economic position, weaker social networking, which is an important social-political capital for political participation, i.e. integration in those social circles and milieux that are perceived by party strongmen as a resource important for intraparty promotion.

The situation in terms of the representation of women holding political office in legislative bodies changes owing to legal quotas, but female respondents state that things in fact do not change significantly as women who reach the positions of power reproduce the political agendas and patterns of political culture established by party leaders.

Some forms of **structural and cultural-symbolic violence** include trading in the mandates of women, without their knowledge and participation, with denigration and labelling, setting higher standards and requirements compared to men, which leads to a form of labour exploitation, removal from a post or a party due to non-accepting the role intended for them, i.e. breaking the glass ceiling and taking the positions of power that are considered to belong only to men.

Female respondents were most exposed to various forms of **psychological violence**, followed by **sexual harassment**. The experiences of physical violence are rare, but some of them also experienced **severe forms of stalking**, repeated psychological violence, aimed at limiting the freedom and integrity of female respondents, and instilling in them the fear for their own safety.

The perpetrators are highly diverse. They can be male party colleagues, superiors, those at higher hierarchical positions within the party, party male leaders, political opponents, persons from other spheres of public activity, such as the media, and

other male and female citizens. Men are most commonly identified as perpetrators in the female respondents' narratives, though some incidents are also related to women. Experiences also show that "collective perpetrators" are frequent – such as political opponents who participate as a group in an act of violence against an individual woman, which is why actual perpetrators sometimes cannot be easily identified because they act in the background, through internet bots, digital or media violence.

Protection mechanisms are entirely inadequate and the institutional protection is inappropriate, either because laws and regulations do not enable clear identification of those forms of violence that do not represent physical and sexual violence, or because of poor application of regulations which already provide some protection.

The strategies to cope with violence are therefore individual, designed in a way that victims could define them in the given context and with available resources, including the support of the family and narrow social circles, party colleagues, the media and a part of the public. They also involve personal facing the perpetrators, which empowers some women to oppose violence and reject the role of the victim.

Female solidarity, particularly of the kind that should be established through the Women's Parliamentary Network, seems to be subordinated to party loyalty and is inefficient in its task of protecting women and improving their position in legislative institutions at all levels.

A general impression among female respondents is that **violence against women politicians has been on an increase in the past years**. They associate it with increased participation of women in politics and the indications of gender redistribution of power in the sphere of political decision-making. At the same time, they are worried about discouraging and demotivating phenomena that make many women give up on political participation or remain in the position of submissive political actors, who must continuously show loyalty to male political leaders.

Solutions are seen in improving the legal and institutional framework, consistent application of the existing framework, and a change in awareness and the public

discourse, which over the past years has been increasingly marked by sexism, misogyny and violence against women in the public sphere, with women politicians most exposed to it due to their role in decision-making and because the political struggle in the current circumstances is easily replaced by violence against political actors.

Role of the media in violence against women politicians

The findings of the media content analysis suggest that **women politicians are marginalised in the media** and are much less represented than their male colleagues. In addition, particularly marginalised are women who hold office at the provincial and local levels compared to those at the national level.

The public appearances of women politicians are marked with the **absence of autonomy and integrity**, and in their public addresses they often reiterate the political agendas established by male party leaders and take an attitude of submission compared to male colleagues, even when they are not hierarchically subordinate to them in party or government structures.

The media, particularly tabloids, are **replete with content featuring gender stereotypes, sexism, hate speech and misogyny**, and women from opposition parties are particularly exposed to these forms of violence. Case studies indicate that **the media follow the appearances of key male politicians in the country**, and can change the tone of reporting about some women politicians if the leading male politicians change their attitude towards them into somewhat more positive.

The analysis suggests that **despite the increase in the number of women in the Assembly and the Government, there was no essential turnabout in power relations or an essential change of political culture**. Political culture is still dominantly masculine and features more aggressive discourse, discrediting of opponents and competitors rather than opening a dialogue about important issues, loyalty based on clientelism, violent rhetoric instead of cooperation and solidarity, which are in different analyses more often associated with female patterns of pursuing politics.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research purpose and objectives

Gender-based violence against women politicians is a specific form of gender inequality which influences the women's readiness to get involved in public political life and their capacity to truly participate in decision-making processes and be active in the sphere of public politics. It is a part of the public discourse based on structural gender inequalities and high tolerance to violence against women, and contributes to the reproduction of gender inequalities and violence against women in the sphere of public and private life. Such public discourse is marked by misogyny and patriarchal gender stereotypes. It is in the function of gender discrimination of women politicians and often aims to undermine their impartiality, influence, reputation and power.

So far, there have been no systematic researches into gender-based violence against women holding political office. This has been recognized in several independent reports of NGOs, but the insights into this issue are mainly based on the media content analysis, i.e. most often individual cases that were topical at a particular moment. Phenomenological analyses have generally been absent. It was therefore decided to carry out an exploratory research that will, in addition to the media content analysis, focus on the phenomenon of violence against women politicians, based on the experiences of women who held political office in legislative authorities at different levels: national, provincial and local. The research was carried out by a group of women experts in late autumn 2020, with the support of the OSCE Mission to Serbia and the ODIHR, with the aim to gain insight into the most important patterns, mechanisms of violence against women politicians, characteristics of perpetrators, means, causes and consequences of violence for women's political engagement and other aspects of their lives.

The research consists of two components – one focuses on personal experiences of violence during the political career and the perception of the situation and possible

solutions concerning the protection of women politicians from violence, and the other focuses on the analysis of media content about violence against women politicians.

The research was guided by a number of specific objectives:

- » To understand the diversity of forms of gender-based violence against women politicians;
- » To determine the perpetrators of such violence, including women's male party colleagues, political opponents, the media, influential personalities, male and female citizens, and to identify, if any, the differences in forms and means of violence that these different perpetrators usually use to commit violence against women politicians;
- » To gain insight into the experiences of violence that women politicians accumulate over the years of their political careers, and determine whether these experiences change depending on their age, degree of power, positions they take, strength of networks they belong to, etc.;
- » To examine potential differences in the experiences of women politicians who belong to different political parties or parties with different ideological orientation;
- » To examine the way in which women politicians who experienced violence see the causes and consequences of violence they were exposed to, how it affected their individual wellbeing, as well as their political careers, private lives, and what are possible consequences for the wider motivation of women to get involved in politics;
- » To assess the degree to which media content reproduces the discriminatory, sexist and misogynistic public discourse that women politicians are exposed to;
- » To analyse the degree to which the media representation of women in politics is also conditioned by the media being affiliated to a particular political party given that a significant portion of the media is biased in reporting and inclined to the political structure on power, i.e. to analyse the extent to which

women politicians are exposed to hate speech and misogyny depending on their party affiliation;

- » To examine wider (re)presentation of women politicians in the media.

1.2 Theoretical-conceptual framework

Gender-based violence against women politicians is a particular type of violence against women which more directly links interpersonal violence with structural and cultural-symbolic violence. It differs significantly from forms of gender-based violence, which are most often equated with direct interpersonal violence, either partner and domestic violence or violence committed by perpetrators outside the family circle, including unknown persons. Unlike such forms of violence, which tend to remain hidden, violence against women politicians largely tends to unfold on the public scene. However, it would be wrong to reduce violence against women politicians only to those forms that are used to discredit women as political actors, or to understand gender-based violence exclusively as a means of political violence. Women in politics, just like women in other spheres of society, also experience many other forms of violence, such as sexual harassment, blackmailing, psychological, physical and sexual violence by male colleagues, superiors, those above them in the hierarchies of party or government structures. In this regard, the things that other women experience as violence at work are experienced by women politicians in a specific way as it is in the political sphere that basic power relations in society are structured, restored and changed, which is why the expression of those power relations through violence as a means is even more pronounced. It is possible to say that gender-based violence against women politicians is multiplied by political violence, which is highly present in the domestic political culture.

Therefore, the starting point of this research was a multi-layered understanding of gender-based violence against women politicians. In essence, the understanding of violence relies on the definitions of gender-based violence against women, as stated in the General Recommendation No. 35 of the Convention on the Elimination of All

Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.

“...Gender-based violence against women is one of the fundamental social, political and economic means by which the subordinate position of women with respect to men and their stereotyped roles are perpetuated. [...] such violence is a critical obstacle to the achievement of substantive equality between women and men and to the enjoyment by women of their human rights and fundamental freedoms.”

Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, General Recommendation No. 35 on gender-based violence against women, updating General Recommendation No. 19

“‘Violence against women’ is understood as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”

Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, Article 3

In addition to these definitions of violence, to understand violence against women politicians, particularly important in this research are also broader definitions of violence, present in peace research or research into wider phenomena of social violence and social conflicts. In these approaches, violence is understood as a type of a social relationship where one actor or a group of actors (perpetrators of violence) take actions that harm or hurt other actor or actors (victims of violence). Violence can take form of a harmful action (physical, psychological, sexual harm) or the absence of action (e.g. failure to take any measures and actions to prevent hunger, poverty, dis-

crimination), which results in the jeopardy of health and wellbeing of victims of violence and diminishes their chances to achieve their human potential.¹

In contemporary theories of violence, there is a widely accepted differentiation among three “supertypes” of violence: structural, cultural and direct.

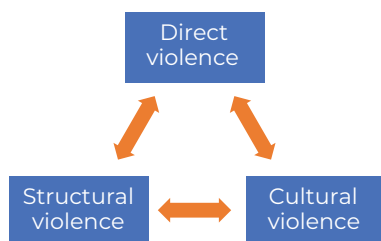
Direct violence is the form of violence where the perpetrator and the victim are directly linked – they can be individuals or groups. In this type of violence, the perpetrator and the victim are clearly differentiated, as well as the act of violence, which can be manifested as physical, sexual, psychological, economic violence and similar.

Structural violence is grounded in social structures featuring inequality, contrary to direct violence, which is most often perceived through particular forms of behaviour. It is manifested through unequal chances, limited access to particular resources or posts for individual actors, and is reproduced through long-standing institutions, norms and practices.

Cultural violence includes those aspects of culture, symbolic sphere, such as ideology, religion, language, art, science, which can be used to justify and legitimise direct or structural violence. Neither direct nor structural violence can be maintained without cultural norms and values that legitimise them.

1 Such understanding of violence was first developed by Johan Galtung (Galtung, Johan (1969), “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research“, *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 6, No. 3, pp: 167–191), and was later applied in other approaches as well. For more information about these approaches see: Babović, M. (2015), “Teorijski i istraživački pristupi u proučavanju strukturnog, kulturnog i direktnog nasilja” (“Theoretical and Research Approaches to the Study of Structural, Cultural and Direct Violence”), *Sociologija*, Vol. 57, No. 2: 331–352.

Chart 1. “Supertypes” of violence



According to the theory of Pierre Bourdieu², **symbolic violence** is a combination of structural and cultural violence. Put simply, according to Bourdieu, people are grouped in the social space based on social similarity and specificity of their groups, and tend to present themselves in respect of other groups with symbols, thus setting social limits. However, symbolic violence is not manifested only as the exclusion of other groups or preventing other groups to access a particular social space and particular resources, but also as the non-recognition of less powerful actors. The subordinated individuals or groups see the domination of others as a natural order and therefore legitimise it. They thus participate in their own subordination. As an example of widespread symbolic violence, Bourdieu mentions gender-based violence because women, just as frequently as men, believe that women are “weaker”, less capable of performing particular tasks, i.e. they accept the given gender stereotypes.

Given the multilayered nature of the concept of violence in the present research, violence against women politicians is operationalised and includes the following forms:

- » Structural violence
- » Cultural-symbolic violence
- » Physical violence
- » Sexual violence

2 Bourdieu, Pierre and Wacquant, Loïc (1992), “An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology”, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

- » Sexual harassment
- » Psychological violence
- » Stalking

A more detailed operationalisation of the stated forms of violence is presented in Annex 1.

1.3 Research methodology

The research was carried out through two components, based on entirely different methodologies:

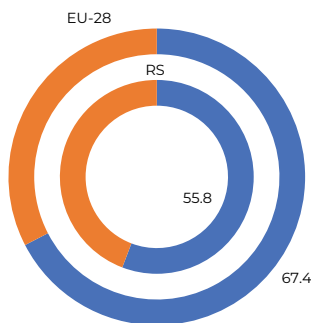
1. The research of experiences of gender-based violence against women who held or hold political office in legislative authorities at the national, provincial or local level was carried out by the method of in-depth, semi-structured interviews on the sample of nine women who are members of seven different political parties, two of which are currently on power and the five remaining ones are member of opposition parties. The interview guide is contained in Annex 2.
2. The research of media discourse about women politicians was carried out by the method of content and discourse analyses. The analyses were carried out on the sample of media content of six information portals: RTS, *Politika*, *Večernje novosti*, *Nova S*, *Informer* and *Danas*. A more detailed overview of the methodology is contained in Annex 3.

As the theme is sensitive, the research was carried out in compliance with high ethical standards in order to ensure the safety and confidentiality of data about all female respondents. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the interviews were carried out in a safe online environment and participation was voluntary. To ensure the anonymity of female respondents and bearing in mind their public office, all data that could indicate their identity were removed from the presentation of findings.

1.4 Gender inequality and the political scene in Serbia

Serbian society is marked by pronounced gender inequality both in the sphere of public life and the sphere of private, family relations. According to the Gender Equality Index of the European Institute for Gender Equality³, gender equality in Serbia is much below the average for the European Union.

Chart 2. Gender Equality Index, Serbia 2016 and EU 2019



Source: SIPRU, Gender Equality Index in the Republic of Serbia, 2018.

Gender inequality is present in the sphere of employment and labour, education, political and social participation, financial standing and income. It is also present in the sphere of private life, through unequal distribution of unpaid domestic work and care for the family. The most drastic forms are manifested as violence against women, both in public and private life, with serious consequences for the safety and wellbeing of women. Such inequality is grounded in patriarchal norms, which are still highly widespread among the Serbian population.

3 The Gender Equality Index simultaneously measures the level of achievement and the gender gap in the most important fields of gender equality policy. The Index value ranges from 1 to 100, with 100 representing full achievement, i.e. full gender equality (SIPRU, 2018).

Political participation is one of the domains where the greatest progress was recorded between 2014 and 2016. The progress is reflected primarily in the increase of the share of women among MPs of the National Assembly of Serbia and councilpersons of local assemblies. It took place owing to important legislative changes – in 2012, the 30% quotas of mandatory representation of women (i.e. the underrepresented gender) in electoral lists were defined, only to be raised to 40% in early 2020. Before the regular parliamentary, provincial and local elections in the Republic of Serbia in 2020, amendments to the Law on the Election of Members of Parliament and the Law on Local Elections were adopted – the electoral census was lowered from 5% to 3%, and an amendment was adopted envisaging that electoral lists must contain at least 40% of persons of the underrepresented gender.⁴

The parliamentary, provincial and local elections were held on 21 June 2020. Some opposition political parties (Alliance for Serbia) boycotted the elections. At the level of the Republic, most mandates (188 of 250) were won by the Serbian Progressive Party, 32 mandates by the Socialist Party of Serbia, 11 by the Serbian Patriotic Alliance, four mandates by the minority parties – the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians and the Party of Justice, and three mandates by the Party of Democratic Action of Sandžak.

Regardless of the dominant parliamentary majority achieved by the Serbian Progressive Party, the new Government was constituted four months after the formation of the new legislature of the National Assembly. With previous announcements of the President of the Republic of Serbia and the Serbian Progressive Party that women would lead a half of ministries in the new Serbian Government, the hitherto woman Prime Minister was again given the mandate to form the new Government, which now had ten women (42%).

4 Deputies of opposition political parties and organisations that are part of the Alliance for Serbia and the Enough is Enough movement boycotted the work of the Parliament of the Republic for more than a year and did not attend the voting on amendments to these laws, apart from MP Gordana Čomić, who proposed the amendments, and who was, as a result, excluded from the Democratic Party.

The protection and improvement of gender equality are the principles declaratively emphasised in the policies of all government since 2000 to date. Although at the start of her first mandate (2016), the President of the Serbian Government stated that the adoption of the law on gender equality was part of the agenda of “the first 100 days of work”, the process of adoption of the new law was stopped in 2017. After the three-years’ work on the draft new law on gender equality and positive reactions of relevant institutions and civil society organisations to the draft – the Coordination Body for Gender Equality of the Government of the Republic of Serbia was in charge of drafting – the process of adoption of the law was halted in that very Government.

Despite the increased participation of women in legislative structures of power, civil society organisations have been warning of rising violence against women in politics, as well as women in other spheres of public activity, including the strengthening of misogyny in public discourses.⁵

With the emergence of the #MeToo movement over the past years at the global level, increasingly more attention is devoted to gender-based violence committed against women in the public sphere. Women politicians, women journalists and women defenders of women’s human rights are exposed to verbal violence. According to data of the Council of Europe and the Inter-Parliamentary Union, 85.2% of interviewed women MPs suffered psychological violence during their mandates, 46.9% received threats of death or threats of rape or beating, 58.2% were the target of sexist attacks on social networks, and 24.7% suffered sexual violence.⁶

Gender-based violence against women in politics influences women’s readiness to get involved in public and political life, and their capacity to reasonably participate in

5 SOS Vojvodina, NGO report on the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence in Serbia, 2018, <https://rm.coe.int/vsosl-independent-greivio-report-2018/1680907e9b>.

6 Council of Europe, Inter-Parliamentary Union, Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe, <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/issue-briefs/2018-10/sexism-harassment-and-violence-against-women-in-parliaments-in-europe>.

decision-making processes and influence public life and public policy. Such public discourse spreads misogyny and perpetuates the deeply rooted patriarchal and gender-based stereotypes, while the discriminatory discourse against women holding political office is often aimed at undermining their impartiality, influence, reputation and power.

2. Research findings: Women politicians about the experiences of violence, perception of problems and potential solutions

The research carried out on the sample of women politicians who used to perform or now perform duties within legislative bodies at the level of the Republic, provincial or local level, has shed light on several important aspects: what are the experiences of female respondents in regard to various forms of violence, who are the perpetrators of violence, what are the causes of violence according to female respondents, what are the consequences and coping strategies, what are their experiences with institutions and protection mechanisms. This research component, in addition to personal experiences, also focused on the perception of the situation concerning violence against women in politics, and on potential solutions.

2.1 Position of women in parties and possibilities of promotion in political career

The research findings indicate that the position of women in political parties is unfavourable. The parties from which female respondents come (some have changed several parties) are highly centralised. Male party leaders decide about the most important aspects of the party system, including promotion, there is clear segregation of duties between women and men as women are assigned auxiliary, administrative duties, while decision-making posts are most often given to men. Still, the situation is changing and the most important factor contributing to changes are the electoral

quotas for persons of the underrepresented gender. Although the candidacy and promotion mechanisms have not essentially changed, i.e. they have remained centralised, authoritarian, clientelistic and nepotistic, under the force of law, room has opened for greater participation of women, which also affected the female respondents' careers, in terms of greater promotion possibilities.

2.1.1 Entry in politics

The biographies of women who participated in the research bear some similarities in terms of patterns of entering politics – they usually got involved in politics in their youth (some of them very early, before adulthood), some incentives came from individual family members or there was strong political heritage, i.e. the family's involvement in politics, while political engagement was understood as an activity that could contribute to more general social objectives, no matter in what ideological terms a desirable society was understood, rather than as an instrument or means to achieve personal interests.

“I got involved in politics desiring to contribute to changing some things that were, in my modest opinion, inappropriate.”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

“I was raised to fight for what I believe in. I was raised not to be silent and to try to improve things, and I behaved in such way.”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

“I am a leftist and Social Democrat to the bone, these are my true convictions!”

Former woman MP, Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina

“I was attracted (by the party, authors’ note) because at the start enormous energy was demonstrated capable of making a cut and introducing a different society.”

Former woman MP, Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina

Still, some female respondents were also encouraged and motivated by the opportunities for personal development and access to better life chances.

“My father always used to say that all doors will open to you if you are a highly educated woman and at the same time politically engaged.”

Woman MP

There are some differences in patterns among different generations, because some female respondents experienced early political socialisation back at the time of socialism, in the former Yugoslavia, shaping themselves according to the norms of the then League of Communists. Other female respondents experienced such early socialisation during the turbulent 1990s and are highly experienced in activism, organisation and participation in protests. The third group of female respondents got specialised in the recent period of the so-called unblocked reforms, when political power, unlike the decade after the collapse of socialism, largely entered the institutional channels of power, i.e. government.

The majority of female respondents did not encounter great resistance when entering politics in their narrow family or wider social environment, but many stated that their milieu did not take them “very seriously”.

“No one saw it very seriously. Not even myself...”

Former councilwoman in the City Assembly

2.1.2 Position of women in parties

The research findings indicate that the position of women in political parties is unfavourable. The parties from which female respondents come (some have changed several parties) are highly centralised. Male party leaders or, in the best case, the narrowest circles around the leader decide about the most important aspects of the party system, including promotion, and the higher the posts, i.e. the more power they carry, the fewer women hold those posts. Male party leaders make the key decisions without clear criteria and transparent procedures. The women's experiences show that in this regard there are no significant differences between large and small, ruling or opposition parties. Authoritarian culture permeates the parties of different orientations.

“In XX (party, authors’ note) there was a solid number of women. I would even say that some women were very active, but XX (party’s leader, authors’ note) always had the last say. This was the case not only in XX (the first party, authors’ note), but also later, in XX (the second party which the female respondent joined, authors’ note)... The leader is the one around whom everything turns... You have a party leader whose authority is inviolable, he metes out punishments and awards. It depends on him how much he will allow some things to develop, such as, for instance, the Women’s Parliamentary Network and similar... Being close to the leader was highly important.”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

“There were no women. XX (the party’s president, authors’ note) often organised the meetings of municipal boards; there were often officials in ties, and then I realized that all 50 of them were men. Only myself, as an official, and the minute taker, were women, no one else.”

Woman MP

“The problem is when you ask male leaders of our parties about the representation of women in the party. They all have a woman vice-president and all that looks very nice, but when you look deeper and see how many women there are in the party’s executive board,

how many women are board presidents, municipality presidents..., you can see that the problem is greater than it looks at first sight... Our parties function in such way that board presidents usually decide who will be a candidate for what and how that person will be promoted. I think there are very few women who lead party boards in Serbia.”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

There is clear segregation of duties between women and men as women are assigned auxiliary and administrative duties, while the decision-making posts are most often given to men. The experiences of female respondents suggest that segregation is more pronounced on higher posts. Also, some narratives indicate that in the party youth, i.e. youth organisations, differences are not so much pronounced as in the “senior” part of the party, which also suggests that the increase in power is accompanied with greater exclusion of women, i.e. greater obstacles for them to reach important posts.

“Presidents of municipal boards were all men, officials wearing ties, while in all those boards, all minute takers and secretaries were women.”

Woman MP

“...The activities of the call-centre and coffee making have always belonged to women. This did not exist in the Youth (the party’s youth organisation, authors’ note). Everything was somehow equal. The only difference that existed in the Youth was that men went to place placards. But when one looks at the senior part of the organisation, one can clearly see that it was always the case. Women were mostly engaged in administrative tasks. Very few women were board presidents. Of course, the Executive Board was fully comprised of men. There was no chance that women would be candidates at the elections for municipality presidents. But I didn’t notice it at the time.”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

The narrative of female respondent No 2 also indicates changes in the awareness about gender segregation and discrimination. What female respondents clearly perceive today as gender inequalities due to different awareness raising campaigns and legislative changes is something they did not perceive in the early phases of their political careers because gender inequalities were more or less taken for granted.

“There was always a code or an infamous number, then ten men, and women, and then you could not do it because, for instance, you were too young, but when you turn 40 or 50, it will be your turn, because before you is this or that women... Women would always get more arduous jobs, such as lists, regular records, corrections, adjustments, making phone calls, visits... Then, as well as today, men did jobs in bars... But I believe that we, unlike today, somehow accepted all that, we did not fight, we thought: ok, I can’t do it, or it doesn’t matter.”

Former woman MP, Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina

The interaction between gender and power is exceptionally complex. Female respondents state that often factors other than gender factors – territorial affiliation, coopting and promotion before one’s turn of members who can increase the party’s reputation or power, or grouping according to other narrow interest bases achieved through the mechanisms of clientelism and nepotism – are most often the chief mechanism for the structuring of party hierarchies. However, gender is always systematically present, as an intervening variable, due to which women, although fully complying with all conditions, have weaker chances to reach more important posts. In the distribution of posts, women often fare worse simply because they hold less intraparty power, which is linked with their weaker external generalized power, due to their weaker economic position and weaker social networking, which is an important social-political capital for political participation, i.e. integration in those social circles and milieux that are perceived by party strongmen as an important resource for intraparty promotion. An important role is also played by the norms that determine what is and what is not “appropriate” in the aspirations and practices of persons of different gender.

“I can’t forget that there was not a single woman in the meetings in smaller towns that I attended. When I asked: ‘Where are female members?, I would receive the answer: ‘How can I call someone’s wife to attend the meeting at seven o’clock in the evening?’; the organisation of meetings in bars and other places where women do not come influences their numbers at meetings. ‘Should someone beat me up?’. It still happens that I’m the only woman in attendance at meetings. Usually a dinner is organised after a meeting – it is a custom in our parties, and it often happens that those women who attended the meeting do not attend the dinner. I can’t say whether they were not invited or they simply don’t come. These dinners are often the occasions when ‘things are being arranged’, and women are excluded. And when it is the time for candidacy, they have a problem to stand out.”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

“I believe that there was another type of injustice and it is not much related to gender. All decisions were centralised, and we now have the same situation at the government level. So, all decisions are centralised and depend exclusively on a single person and on whether that person will decide if he needs someone in his future work or not. Many were included before their turn, for instance, in the list, although it was publicly promoted that the list was compiled after everyone put forward their candidacies through a single system and a single platform. We were then purportedly graded according to some criteria and we were thus included in the list. However, it all proved to be a cover for some other activities. There are some people who eventually became parliamentarians, but came there through personal connections and acquaintances with the party’s president and the persons who were close to him and whom he trusted more.”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

The practice of candidacy and decision-making on promotion is marked not only by sexism, but also by discrimination based on age, family status etc. The situation is similar in the labour market, where there is the practice of employers to discriminate against younger women with parent obligations, as well as older women. The narratives implicitly show that old age is somewhat differently valued among women and men in politics.

“There is a lot of lobbying. It’s hard to ensure support for women. If a woman is young, she’ll get married, get children, and will no longer deal with this.’ If she’s older, ‘what shall we do with that grandma’... During the most recent elections at the party, I lobbied for a young woman from my territory, although she was my competition; men refused to support her. Men stick together more firmly. There is rivalry, but it’s rather territorially-based.”

Woman MP

However, the situation is changing. The most important factor contributing to changes are the election quotas. Before quotas were introduced, there were different attempts to strengthen and improve the position of women in parties. Women’s forums were organised to that end in some parties. According to female respondents, this yielded results because much more attention was devoted, in a planned way, to the candidacy and distribution of women, and the negotiation power was somewhat higher owing to collective organisation. Still, more significant changes took place with the change of the electoral law and introduction of quotas for persons of the under-represented gender. According to testimonies of female respondents, although the candidacy and promotion mechanisms have not fundamentally changed, i.e. they have remained centralised, authoritarian, clientelistic and nepotistic, under the force of law room was opened for greater participation of women, which also reflected on the female respondents’ careers in terms of greater opportunities for promotion.

Female respondents state that at the beginning, the change was most often entirely formal. It was imperative only to increase the number of women, and attention was not paid to their “quality” and “merits”, particularly in parties which had few women among their ranks and which could not easily achieve the conditions prescribed by the quotas.

“(citing male colleagues, authors’ note) ‘What have you achieved now? We shall be now putting our female neighbours, grandmothers and our wives’ sisters on the lists?!?’ I think that at the first moment, this did not have an effect on our male colleagues so that they start to believe that women deserve a place in politics. But we did achieve the effect that we have 30% of women in the Assembly and that some of them managed to show their

capacities at the posts which they would not have had even a chance to try. This is how I see the quotas – as a way of giving to women a chance that they would have never got. So what if they were forced.”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

“Nowhere did I put forward my candidacy. I’m not sure that such candidacy exists now. Several people make decisions and proposals, and others adopt, and that’s it. They agreed on it among themselves. At that moment, a quota of 30% of women was introduced, and for them, I fit in that story. It was more important to them to have a woman and did not care about whether I was a student, a young 30-year-old woman or whether I had moral qualities.”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

“When I began to fight for the introduction of quota in our party documents, which was never done, one of the arguments was the following: ‘Do you think that you’re a quota, that you’re the third on the list and were elected as the Vice-President of the Assembly because you’re a woman and a quota?’. I felt very offended, and would still feel so. As this is not prescribed, a woman would not enter party bodies or reach public office. All the rest is a lie.”

Former woman MP, Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina

Some female respondents with very long political careers state that when everything is taken into account, despite some changes, things in fact remain the same, i.e. women do not get true access to the key political posts.

“...Women have understood this as a contest, and men haven’t understood it in such way. They understood it as a place that belongs to them, believing women are there to deal with peripheral things and to be in the kitchen. From this perspective, I have been in politics for 43 years and nothing has changed. Things have even become more intense – if they did not have the support of men for the sake of further promotion, those women who dared to empower them-

selves simply went within two electoral cycles. I've been following this for a long time. None of them could endure in such system for more than eight up to twelve years."

Former woman MP, Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina

2.1.3 Career development

Personal experiences of female respondents indicate various forms of structural and cultural-symbolic violence they were exposed to during their political careers. These forms include trading in mandates of women without their knowledge and participation, ignoring, denigration and labelling, setting higher standards and requirements compared to men, which leads to a form of labour exploitation, removal from a post or a party due to non-accepting the role intended for them, i.e. breaking the glass ceiling and taking the positions of power that are considered to belong only to men.

"They traded in my mandate as they understood that no one strong and big stood behind me."

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

"The first shock was the fact that I appeared in the Serbian Assembly. Nothing was expected from me but to sit and be silent. I well remember the time when I was to have my first speech. XX (the party's president – authors' note) squandered my time and I cried later. When you're a woman, you must work much harder... It's terribly exhausting."

Woman MP

"I always had a harder time than my male colleagues. I always had to work more, to prove myself. I was imposed a tutor to oversee and check me... I belong to the smallest group of party activists who work a lot for the party. To me, the party was my 24-hour life... When it showed there was no more place for me, it felt awful... I earned everything I got from the party, I received nothing out of favour."

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

“Male colleagues denigrated and belittled me. There were remarks such as ‘a girl’ or they would interrupt me: ‘...Colleague, you’re not right, but I can’t argue with such a beautiful woman, so let it be as you wish.’ These compliments were in fact disguised discrediting.”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

“With a group of male colleagues, I requested that the party be democratised and I was removed from the MP list... I saw... that, in fact, those who decide in the party are, from top to bottom, in fact, the issuers of construction permits, directors of business premises, and that they don’t know how to function otherwise; if they get out of politics, they have no other job or profession. I resigned, but I didn’t leave the party... Two months later... they kicked me out, removed me from the party and its membership. I said they behaved in such way because I am a woman...”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

“My career unfolded as expected up to the moment when I hit the glass ceiling. It was the moment when I became too independent and popular for the people leading my party. This happened to my career. Since then, my career has been turbulent but I didn’t want to give up, and they didn’t want to let me go. You then understand how valuable and successful you are; if someone assessed that you’re no longer needed, you’re gone. As a woman in politics, you must have a perfect biography and prove everything. This is absolutely the destiny of every woman in politics, there are no exceptions. Even the female leaders of the party had to go through that hell.”

Former woman MP, Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina

“No, it wasn’t easier with men. It was harder because I had to do everything on my own, particularly when I became a secretary – I had to follow the elections, membership, the social aspect. All this had to be done by someone who was writing, making phone calls, meeting people, talking to people, I had a day when I would be receiving people.”

Former woman MP, Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina

As emphasised by some female respondents, the political environment is more unfavourable today and discourages the engagement of women, despite the quotas. In such context, it is possible to expect more instrumentalised engagement of women, who can achieve personal promotion through political participation. However, it is not possible to expect women's authentic activities which would enable more radical social transformations.

2.2 Experiences of violence

The testimonies of female respondents about their experiences of violence indicate the following key findings:

- » Suffering violence is an integral part of their political careers. Violence is manifested in very different forms, both in terms of the type of violence and perpetrators, and the context in which it unfolded.
- » They were most exposed to various forms of psychological violence, followed by sexual harassment. The experiences of physical violence are rare, but some of them experienced even severe forms of stalking, repeated psychological violence, aimed at limiting their freedom and integrity, and instilling in them the fear for their own safety.
- » Symbolic violence is all-encompassing and is most often manifested in the use of pejorative expressions, sexist and misogynistic labels, whereby female respondents are classified into the categories which, along with gender determinants, carry other connotations, such as age, ethnicity, various types of capacity etc.
- » The perpetrators are highly diverse. They can be male party colleagues, superiors, those at higher hierarchical positions within the party, male party leaders, political opponents, persons from other spheres of public activity, such as the media, and other male and female citizens. Men are most commonly identified as perpetrators in the female respondents' narratives, though some incidents are also related to women. Experiences also show that "collective perpetrators" are commonplace – such as political opponents

who participate as a group in an act of violence against an individual woman, which is why sometimes actual perpetrators cannot be easily identified because they act in the background, through bots and the method of digital or media violence.

- » Protection mechanisms are entirely inadequate and the institutional protection is inappropriate, either because laws and regulations do not enable clear identification of those forms of violence that do not represent physical and sexual violence, or because of poor application of regulations which already provide some protection.
- » The strategies to cope with violence are therefore individual, designed in accordance with the available resources in the given context, including the support of the family and narrow social circles, male party colleagues, the media and a part of the public. They also involve personal facing the perpetrators, which empowers some women to oppose violence and reject the role of the victim.
- » Female solidarity, particularly of the kind that should be established through the Women's Parliamentary Network, seems to be subordinated to party loyalty and is inefficient in the system of protecting women and improving their position in legislative institutions at all levels.
- » Female respondents clearly recognize that the causes of violence are the structural relations of unequal power employed by women on the one and men on the other hand, in general in our society, particularly in the sphere where power is distributed and applied. The causes also include cultural factors typical of patriarchal culture, where women are expected to limit their activity primarily to the sphere of private relations and the family and, if they participate in public life, their role is expected to be supportive and not a leadership one.
- » A general impression among female respondents is that violence against women politicians has been on an increase in the past years. They associate it with increased participation of women in politics and the indications of gender redistribution of power in the sphere of political decision-making. At

the same time, they are worried about discouraging and demotivating factors that discourage many women from participating in politics or, if they do not discourage them entirely, they maintain them in the position of submissive political actors, who must continuously show loyalty to male political leaders.

- » Female respondents recognize similar patterns in parties taking different positions in the political spectre, although some of them state that the situation is harder for women in right-wing and conservative parties.
- » Solutions are seen in improving the legal and institutional framework, consistent application of the existing framework, and a change in awareness and the public discourse, which over the past years has been marked by increasing sexism, misogyny and violence against women in the public sphere, with women politicians most exposed to it due to their role in decision-making and because the political struggle in the current circumstances is easily replaced by violence against political actors.

2.2.1 Psychological violence

Psychological violence is defined by the Istanbul Convention as “intentional conduct of seriously impairing a person’s psychological integrity through coercion or threats” (Article 33). The psychological violence experienced by female respondents is manifested in several ways: as intimidation, denigration, verbal insults, threats, black-mailing or discrediting in public. In each its form, such violence aims to diminish the power of female respondents, their self-confidence and integrity, and to discredit them in public, whereby it is not only their reputation that is diminished, but also their credibility and legitimacy. In female respondents’ narratives, psychological violence is not always clearly differentiated as gender-based violence. It appears in forms that are applied towards men as well. Still, they particularly point out that such violence is often more easily used as a means of confrontation with women, even when it does not have an explicit gender connotation. It is in fact grounded in gender relations and relies on women’s weaker power and lower position, and on the assumptions of what is appropriate for women to do and how, which means that it carries even an indirect connotation of gender-based violence.

There are numerous examples from female respondents' experience. One such situation relates to the blackmailing of a female respondent by her party male colleague who threatened that if she did not consent to a particular decision, he would publish the details of her private life. Those were details about an emotional relationship, which could not serve, on any grounds, as something that jeopardised her or anyone else's reputation, but the connotation contained in the blackmail was sexist as something similar would be understood as praise in case of a man.

Some experiences suggest that the party leadership and some party leaders in fact build their authority on violence against party male and female colleagues, and that intraparty communication is marked by frequent verbal and psychological violence. However, even if violence does not have gender connotation, but is applied towards everyone who opposes the leader's will, women become particularly easy targets of such violence because their "self-will" is less expected and is considered "a graver wrongdoing".

"He (party's leader, authors' note) is not aggressive physically, but is verbally aggressive. He was very frequently inclined to denigrating someone. And, I'm saying this seriously, this is not related to gender. He belittled literally everyone, whoever opposed him in any way. XX (a female colleague, authors' note) and myself often opposed him. It depended on who opposed him and on whether he could cope with it in the right way. If he could not find more serious arguments, he would shout at someone and denigrate that person in public... As we did not consent to some things, XX (a female colleague, authors' note) and myself were the most frequent victims of such violence; over a longer period, XX (another female colleague, authors' note) was also a victim."

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

Verbal violence, threats and discrediting are particularly pronounced in the communication of political opponents, but they are not absent from coalition agreements or intraparty struggles for posts either. Women are an easy target of political attacks, either in case of intraparty processes or relations among parties. Although psychological violence can have similar forms in all three cases (insults, false accusations, discrediting etc.), it is used for different purposes. In the first case, violence is a means of discrediting

ing the political opponent. Attacks on individual women are sometimes “revenge” for their critical attitude towards the opposing party and for their initiatives that are not in line with the interests of the opposing party. On another occasion, an attack on a prominent woman from the opposing party is understood as a relatively easy means of discrediting the entire party. In the latter case, violence against women politicians is used as a means of coercion to accept the decisions on shaping new interparty agreements that they oppose. The third case concerns intraparty power struggles. In any case, the imposition of power is what underlies violence. Women are easier targets of violence because they hold less power within parties and in a broader social context.

“Whenever we disagreed with what was written in the document or when we introduced some things or wanted to change something in the document, the verbal violence of XX (the leader of the party that should be the coalition partner, authors’ note) would escalate directly towards the two of us. At one point, it got so severe that he guaranteed to us that we would not deal with politics in Serbia as long as he was an important person on the political scene. Out of women, only XX and myself, and I think XX, were in the room. The rest were men. There were, I don’t know, around thirty persons in the room at the time. Our perfidious torment then began, i.e. his perfidious attacks on us. At the time, from that moment onwards, we appeared on the websites that he influenced; just like XX, I read about myself disgusting things...”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

“There were unpleasant situations of verbal violence. You could clearly see when someone is angry with you and your male colleague, and how he shouts differently and expresses his anger towards a woman and towards a man. This is the experience of women politicians, it is what they experienced at different meetings. I can divide verbal violence into three types. Shouting, which is very uncouth. Denigration, which is the most prevalent; and ignorance, which comes at the third place. These are the jobs you can do as a woman, and these are the jobs for men because they know how to tackle them.”

Former woman MP, Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina

“I experienced it on several occasions; I’d choose two occasions, including the third one – being kicked out of the party is definitely a form of political violence because it was followed by an incredible outcry. I experienced such vulgar outcry during the election... and the other thing happened in XX year, when there was an altercation with XX group... At the time, it was publicly written about me, and this in fact continued until the end of the electoral process, when I was a victim of tabloid writing... those lies and insults were the worst thing. It was psychological violence... Its aim was to belittle me and make me leave politics and simply withdraw and be a housewife or... whatever, but it was important that I disappeared. This was psychological bullying and psychological violence. It was very aggressive.”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

The psychological violence described by female respondents indicates systemic violence, incidents repeated over a particular period, rather than individual undue incidents. According to their testimonies, such violence is used most often as a form of political violence. In this regard, it rather resembles stalking because multiple means are used, as well as channels, while perpetrators act as a group or have networks of co-perpetrators, as elaborated in more detail in the chapter on stalking.

2.2.2 Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment is defined by the Istanbul Convention as “any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, in particular when creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment” (Article 40). Sexual harassment is a form of violence that female respondents experienced multiple times during and in the context of their political careers. Some mentioned it was not easy for them to recognize such violence as it is often defined as a compliment or courting, and it is hard to draw a line between courting and harassment.

Female interviewer: *Have you been exposed to different forms of violence during your political career?*

Female respondent: *I believe not. Perhaps I don’t recognize all forms of violence. I believe not.*

Female interviewer: *Have you ever experienced sexual allusions or a form of sexual harassment by a male member of your political party or another political party?*

Female respondent: *This was a regular phenomenon. But, where is the borderline between sexual harassment and attempts, this borderline has probably shifted in time.*

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

Other female respondents, however, are highly capable of recognizing sexual harassment, the situation when they personally experience it, and when it targets other women from their milieu.

“I experience it (as sexual harassment, authors’ note) each time when someone makes inappropriate comments on my appearance. I believe that very young women who enter politics are very exposed to it and there is not a single woman who hasn’t experienced it to a degree. It depends a lot on the amount of power of her superior. When it comes to the issue of violence, I’d say that’s item number 1, while here it is seen as part of the folklore and not as a general problem.”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

As the previous female respondent noticed, sexual harassment is highly tolerated and is often a part of everyday communication. Types of sexual harassment are diverse – from verbal statements, through messages of sexual content, to graver forms which assume the form of sexual violence. One female respondent mentioned a number of her experiences with these different forms of violence.

“Verbal violence with messages with sexual content from high-level politicians from other parties. On an official trip a male colleague knocked on the door of my hotel room, holding a bottle of wine and two glasses. I almost got into a physical fight with a male colleague from another party who began to grab me in the middle of the corridor at the entrance into the Assembly. It was more awful when the male colleague knocked on the door. I could somehow handle the male colleague in the Assembly – everyone is in one’s own department,

you don't mind it so much. But the male colleague who knocked became a very important person, I didn't know how to handle the situation. I had to solve some things with him and I was messaging him. It all stopped with an unpleasant message with sexual content."

Woman MP

Sexual harassment is a form of violence in respect of which female respondents most rarely seek help. They mostly tend to resolve the problem on their own or they address their closest party male colleagues hoping to get some kind of protection. However, they often encounter a contemptible reaction instead of protection. Judging by one of the previous narratives, in the hierarchies of gender and power, protection depends most on how powerful is a male politician who is superior to a woman, and not the woman herself. The higher his position in the party or the state, others will refrain more from sexually harassing a woman politician who is in his service or team.

2.2.3 Physical violence

The experiences of physical violence are relatively rare among female respondents. Besides, they are not gender-specific, but are mostly related to the incidents of physical conflicts between political opponents. Female respondents often associate the responsibility for such incidents with tolerance to violence of the most powerful parties – those which form the majority in assemblies at various levels of government, and those which form the Government, although personal responsibility of direct participants in physical conflicts is also identified.

"It is a sad fact that the biggest party bears the greatest responsibility because they are the largest and they hold power. The presiding people are from their ranks, they are on their side, and were therefore very biased. But there were also provocateurs on our, opposition side – that was very frequent, and some discussions could not go on peacefully... mainly verbal violence would often happen, and there were also some situations with physical violence – for instance, we blocked the path to each other etc., which was very stupid and I don't know what to say, this is not violence, this was some physical malice... Power is held by those who

can solve the situation, and this is always the majority and not the person presiding over the session. If they don't want it to happen, they could prevent it and it wouldn't happen."

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

Physical conflicts between members of opposing parties took place during pre-election campaigns as well, when, as a rule, passions were particularly intense, but these types of conflicts most often happen among men and are not gender-determined.

The examples of physical violence also include conflicts with security guards of some institutions who prevented female respondents from entering or getting through, and the situation of physical violence by a male party colleague.

"...A male colleague physically assaulted me once. At the pinnacle or at the beginning of the end. He threw an object at me, in my office. I was scared because I had never been exposed to physical violence before that. I first felt fear, and it paralysed me. Later, I continued to feel unease in his presence, although the same situation was never repeated. Until you experience something personally, you can't understand other persons in such situations. He kept apologising to me later, justifying himself by saying that I drove him mad."

Former woman MP, Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina

2.2.4 Stalking

Stalking is defined by the Istanbul Convention as "the intentional conduct of repeatedly engaging in threatening conduct directed at another person, causing her or him to fear for her or his safety" (Article 34).⁷ Some female respondents were exposed to severe forms of stalking, over a longer period, by political opponents from other parties. In such violence against them, various types of psychological violence were used, directed through different channels, from direct verbal and almost physical ("they

7 <http://www.parlament.gov.rs/upload/archive/files/lat/pdf/zakoni/2013/2246-13Lat.pdf>.

surrounded me”) aggression and use of means of symbolic violence, with content that represents extreme examples of misogyny and sexism, to hate speech.

“There was a situation with XX (the male leader of another party, authors’ note) and all XX (members of that party, authors’ note) in the Assembly. It lasted continuously for two years – in the Assembly hall, in corridors, foyers, toilets. I was stalked by a group of people led by XX. They were offending me in the worst possible way. They would even rub my shoulder and follow me to the toilet. At one moment, they surrounded me in the Assembly hall, took documents from my table and wrote on them... At one moment, there was an open call to violence. My whole family was involved and labelled as ‘a well-known Ustasha family’... Those were all people whose words carry weight and I did not know whether a madman would attack in the street my father as “a well-known Ustasha”, because XX used those words. I got afraid in terms of safety, but I was not afraid to such an extent that I could not talk about it... There were several unknown people who were writing to me letters that were very hard to read. For instance, for some time, I was receiving the same letter every day. Then someone molested me on the phone for two–three years. He would call me ten times within an hour. He once sent the message: ‘I’m in front.’”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

“Among us XX, they attacked and offended myself the most, in the most primitive way. They would say that we were ugly and jealous of male politicians from XX party (opposing party, authors’ note). They threatened us and said they were following us and that they knew where we met. They attacked me professionally, saying I was incompetent and that I... got employed through a connection. They were making leaflets about me and XX (a female colleague, authors’ note), which they distributed around the city for several weeks. Absolutely everyone saw that, my friends and even my son, which really hurt me. In addition to verbal violence that I experienced in the Assembly, I was also exposed to violence in the media. The local media, such as XX portal, or the local TV station which invited a... He and the presenter sat in the studio and lambasted me, saying I was ill and should undergo treatment. I also experienced pressure through court disputes. These disputes were fabricated by XX party.”

Former councilwoman in the City Assembly

Stalking is sometimes hidden from public and it is sometimes open, with a significant role of the media. When it takes place stealthily, it reminds of spying with the aim to make the victim feel unsafe.

“The Assembly Speaker told me that they had a dossier about me and that they were photographing me with persons I walked with in the park or had coffee. I know that the doorman took a photo of myself and a male colleague of mine from the Assembly... I don’t have evidence for it except that the Assembly Speaker told me so. It had an effect on me. I keep thinking that someone can follow me or even hurt me.”

Former councilwoman in the City Assembly

The media play a significant role in this form of violence against women politicians. Some media are the means through which such violence takes place. In this context, female respondents most often mention the tabloid media, some media whose editorial policy is under the strong control of parties, and different web portals also controlled by some political parties. Social networks are also an important channel of communication used for the purpose of stalking and psychological abuse of some female respondents.

“They started by saying that I married well, meaning I needed a man to protect and finance me. They said I was leisured and crude, and that I dealt with politics in order to show off my colourful outfit. They said that I didn’t look good for my age and that my husband looked better; that I was jealous and couldn’t concentrate on my speech, but was trying to find who he was looking at; that I was promiscuous...”

Former councilwoman in the City Assembly

One female respondent stated that over the past years party bots have been used as a means of stalking. According to her experiences, almost all parties resort to them and the question is only at what moments the bots of a particular party get activated – it depends on who becomes the party’s target as a political competitor or adversary.

“If stalking is considered stalking on social networks by bots, which implies organised stalking, then yes... depending on the phase of my political activity. When I was in XX (the first party where she began her political career, authors’ note)..., I was stalked by the bots of XX (the opposing party, authors’ note). When I left XX (the first party where she began her political career, authors’ note), I was stalked by the bots of that party because this undermined the concept, i.e. the financial plans at that moment, and the plan of the leader of the political organisation was revealed to the smallest detail, which is when he directed those bots at me. At the moment when we refused to acquiesce in some phase of organisation of XX (a new political formation, authors’ note), I know I was stalked by bots from XX (the party that participated in the negotiations on the new formation, authors’ note). Depending on when particular things were taking place, I had different experiences with bots on social networks.”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

2.2.5 Cultural-symbolic violence

Symbolic violence is all-encompassing and is most often manifested in the use of pejorative expressions, sexist and misogynistic labels, whereby female respondents are classified into the categories which, along with gender determinants, carry other connotations, such as age, ethnicity, various types of capacity etc. One of the functions of symbolic violence is to show to a woman that what she is doing does not conform to the position that women should have according to such patterns of classification. The aim is also to show that with her roles, attitudes and patterns of behaviour, the woman does not fit into the role that she should play. This is done with the intention to denigrate a woman and instil in her the feeling of inadequacy and lower value.

“When I talked to male MPs from other regions or other republics who came to live here, they felt irritated because I was 40 and was not married, I did not cook and I came from Vojvodina, because the men of Vojvodina are considered weak and we, women, can command them, whereas in the case of those male MP it is known who is a man and who is a woman. They used to tell me that I wouldn’t behave like that if I lived in Herzegovina and Lika, and were retelling me the events of 50 years ago when a husband beat a wife because

she asked him where he was going. They were irritated by the fact that I come from the north of the country because gender-equality is more pronounced in our area.”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

In 20... in XX (the name of the municipality, authors’ note), we were setting up a gender-equality commission. A male colleague from XX (other party, authors’ note) said: ‘We all know our XX (the female respondent’s name), she is our little female colleague, she’s a good girl, I know her parents and her grandfather, but a woman should sit at home, by the stove, and she should look after children.’ What misogyny! In 20..., XX (a report, authors’ note) was adopted. A male MP from the ranks of XX (other party, authors’ note) took the floor and said: ‘All of them should stay in the kitchen, forget about politics and gender equality.’ I was waiving with the Rules of Procedure before the Assembly Speaker and he was looking at me, not understanding why I raised the issue of the violation of the Rules. I then understood that the discourse was the same in 20... and in 20... (a difference of 16 years, authors’ note).”

Former woman MP, Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina

One of the most frequent forms of symbolic violence is twofold marginalisation of women politicians based on gender and age. The emphasis on their young age, in fact, serves the function of classifying them into the category of the “inexperienced” ones, who “do not know enough”. The principle of seniority is imposed as something desirable and positive in politics. As if quality always went together with seniority.

“I entered the Assembly before the quotas. My old municipal board showed the strongest resistance. I was a young woman. The first comment was ‘a little harlot’, that’s what they called me.”

Woman MP

“Earlier I was a kiddo and a little girl. This was a particular kind of twofold discrimination. XX (an older woman MP from another party, authors’ note) was trying to convince me that it was a compliment, and I retorted it would be the same if someone told her she was “an old woman” with me convincing her it was a compliment...”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

Female respondents indicate that one of the most frequent forms of symbolic and psychological violence is using denigrating expressions for women, which should designate them as women of “loose morals”, who reached their positions through their “female attributes”, which are, in patriarchal culture, associated with sexual services, whereby women are objectified and deprived of their action potential and their social power.

“A ‘bitch’, ‘tart’, ‘hooker’... many labels relating to sexual life, and that I was ‘insufficiently fucked’. There were placards across XX (the name of the city, authors’ note) indicating I was immoral. There were no comments that I was stupid and that I was there only for the sake of the quota, but I know that many female colleagues are exposed to that. And that I am an Ustasha.”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

“There are two labels reserved for women. One is, pardon the expression, a hooker, prostitute, tart. I was not labelled in such way because I’m an older woman. This refers to younger women, aged up to around 50. After the age of 50, you are an old, stupid woman, whore... desiring shagging. As for stupidity, the same can be said for a man, but no one would say to a man that he is a turkey, while they say the same thing to a woman with pleasure... They tend to intellectually and morally denigrate, and allude to prostitution. And I must tell you, whenever I talked to women at the local level, I saw that politics is associated with such story – it is said it goes through sex, fornication... women in smaller towns are hurt a lot by such labelling because it is enough that you go to a shop and someone says something like that to you or your child. This makes women steer away from this job.”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

2.2.6 Perpetrators of violence

The picture about the perpetrators of violence is complex. As shown by the above experiences of women, in the majority of cases those are male politicians and men holding party or state political office. Those are either political opponents or party competitors, superior by function, the amount of power and authority, as well as those with the same or similar position in the party hierarchy. In some forms of violence, perpetrators act directly, as individuals who can be identified, either whether they act independently or in a group. However, violence is often committed by a group of perpetrators, who cannot be easily identified as they use direct and multiple means. This is particularly the case with systematic violence that employs various means (the media, anonymous letters, comments, bots) and types of violence (psychological, symbolic).

“I cannot single out anyone concrete (as a perpetrator, in the period when she was exposed to relentless media attacks, authors’ note), but it was the entire XX party. I’m also sure that all those people do know that what they say about me is false, but they are requested in the party to do so and they’re just doing it. They even told me that in person... They do not have a great political experience, they were simply told to do so, and they’re just listening.”

Former councilwoman in the City Assembly

In addition to male politicians, an important role in violence against women politicians is also played by the media, i.e. generally men who are the editors of daily papers, electronic media, weeklies, portals, as well as male journalists who shape media content in the spirit of violence against women.

2.3 Consequences, strategies to cope with violence and protection mechanisms

2.3.1 Consequences of violence and response strategies

The consequences of experienced violence are different. Most often mentioned in female respondents' narratives are anger, rage, as well as fear for one's own and family's safety in case of the most serious forms of stalking. It seems that the most frequent consequences of the described experiences of violence are some sort of worry and feeling sorry that family members are exposed to the media chase, particularly underage children, and feeling bad that their social networks and social environment are jeopardised by inappropriate media content about them.

“It happened... My mother-in-law, my friends from my elementary school, my brother, my family, people I know were passing by the corner shop where newspapers were sold. The picture was very striking, there was a hideous picture of myself. It was the most traumatic experience for me because it was the first time I encountered all that.”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

While some female respondents withdraw from public for some time to tackle the consequences of violence, others state they remained steadfast and continued to espouse the attitudes due to which they were harassed. They state that violence made them even stronger. Due to the duration of violence and the strength of attacks, some female respondents became more belligerent and better prepared to openly conflict with perpetrators. In some cases, they used the media for a counterattack.

“I didn't have qualms about what I was saying; on the contrary, all my attitudes were strengthened. Of course, it didn't feel pleasant, particularly as at one point it turned into an open call to violence.”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

“We entered the hall and they (security officers of a local assembly, authors’ note) pushed me a bit and stood in front of us. It did not go further than pushing. To tell you the truth, I somehow hoped it would turn into something more than pushing. I was ready. Then I understood how much anger I had in me, accumulated due to years-long violence.”

Former councilwoman in the City Assembly

“In my case it was related to the personality structure. For others, such exposure to media insults was too much, and they often met the demands placed before them. In my case, however, this encouraged me even more to fight and resist. Had they not ‘pestered’ me through that portal, I would not have written an article for XX (a newspaper, authors’ note), which in fact gave me wider popularity. I practically used XX (a newspaper, authors’ note) as a defence mechanism or to vent myself. I understood it as a compliment because I saw how much energy and resources they spent on me, and they recognized me as an opponent. The more XX (members of a party, authors’ note) attack you, the better you do your job.”

Former councilwoman in the City Assembly

However, the presence of violence in the political sphere is so great that even in the gravest cases of violence, when it lasts long, one becomes somewhat accustomed to violence; violence becomes “normalised” because female respondents stop perceiving the elements of such violence and it no longer produces the desired consequences. Unfortunately, such “normalisation” of violence is not conducive to the creation of mechanisms to combat and prevent violence, although it helps the persons exposed to such violence to endure without further victimisation and traumatisation.

“When those placards were put at the addresses where myself and my family lived, it was terrible. The worst thing is that, at one moment, you stop detecting it as a serious thing. It is only when you talk to other people that you see, through their reactions, that it’s more terrible than it seems to you. The problem is that at a particular moment, we, women, accept that as part of the job. This is perhaps the greatest problem.”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

“A great problem is the normalisation of such coarseness and rudeness, not only in the Assembly, but in society in general. When it comes to politics, it is considered completely normal that you are so much exposed to attacks and criticism. Not only the criticism of what you do, but overall criticism – of your appearance, your family etc.”

Former councilwoman in the City Assembly

When it comes to sexual harassment, female respondents try to tackle such violence on their own or they share information about it with their closest persons, family members, friends and their closest male and female colleagues. They sometimes also address their superior party male colleagues, but, as earlier mentioned, people around them often do not understand seriously such forms of violence. Those female respondents who try to tackle this on their own resort to one of the following three strategies: the strategy of ignoring or avoiding, strategy of direct communication with the perpetrator, or the counterattack strategy, i.e. some type of aggressive rejection, i.e. stance that in fact discourages the perpetrator because the “control wheel” is turned in favour of the “victim”, indicating that the victim has the power to oppose the perpetrator and retaliate.

“I don’t allow such contact either in my private or business life. There are men with whom I worked and cooperated, and who committed psychological violence against their female and male colleagues. I never allow it. I perhaps even act aggressively when I recognize something like that... I usually reacted. I would say that one should not talk in such way and I would retort by labelling the male gender. Then they comment ‘we didn’t mean it, we were joking’. Some of the women join the opposite side...”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

“Some of them said that it goes with the office held, others were scandalised, while some found it funny. There was no violence in messages. Sometimes it was funny and cute. I knew most of them. When it comes to ugly examples, when I was the Parliament Speaker, a clerk from the

municipal administration told another person to tell me that he would come to my office to show to me how he... and I would then be nice towards him. No one told me that directly.”

Woman MP

2.3.2 Reporting violence and protection mechanisms

As shown by the experiences of female respondents, there are no adequate protection mechanisms. They do not exist within the parties or in the assemblies where female respondents exercised their duties of MPs and councilwomen. Their testimonies also indicate a poor role of the police, prosecutor’s office and independent mechanisms.

The **political parties** of female respondents either do not have specific gender equality policies, or they are adopted only formally, without effective implementation, at least in regard to violence against women. There are no intraparty mechanisms of protection against gender-based violence. As in other cases, what happens with someone’s complaint or lawsuit depends on the decision of a party leader or, in the best case, the top management.

“At the time, our legal team compiled a lawsuit against the female Assembly Speaker, XX and XX (male MPs, authors’ note), the Assembly Deputy Speaker, who also played a role at a particular moment. However, the lawsuit was never filed as the male leader of the party organisation decided so. It was not only me who was to file it, but also my male colleague... He and myself remained deprived of such lawsuit. We thought that the legal team submitted it; we did everything we could for the lawsuit to be filed. However, the male leader said it should not be filed and, from this perspective, we believe it didn’t happen only because, at one point, he could not bear that someone else would be a star in the metaphorical sense; he could not bear to be outshined by anyone with their political activity compared to what he was doing in the same period... We found out that the lawsuit was not filed only when the legal deadline expired. For instance, if the legal deadline for filing a suit against someone is six months, we found out about it only after that period as we simply asked what was the status of our lawsuit, how it functioned, and then we understood the legal team that they did not even complete it.”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

Moreover, if it decides to protect its female member who was exposed to violence, it does not mean that the party would not commit the same or even worse violence against a woman from another party, or even its own member if she shows disloyalty towards the management. Party protection is therefore a highly changeable and relative concept.

There are no specific mechanisms of protection against gender-based violence in the **National Assembly of Serbia** or in the **provincial and local assemblies** where female respondents from the sample discharge their functions. However, several of them expressed doubt about the readiness to establish such mechanisms, and about the possibility of their effective implementation, given the fact that not even the basic rules of procedure of assemblies have been adequately applied to date. For instance, the Rules of Procedure of the National Assembly of Serbia define how MPs should behave towards each other, but various forms of verbal violence still take place in the Assembly. As emphasised by several female respondents, whether the Rules of Procedure are applied depends on the person presiding over sessions. As in the case of party reaction, this opens room for voluntaristic reaction of persons who, according to law, must safeguard the institutional procedures of the highest legislative body in the country.

“XX called me a turkey, he called me a turkey even in the Parliament. Pardon the expression, he called me a fart. And person XX (male/female Assembly Speaker, authors’ note) ‘didn’t hear it’. It was not only the case with me, but also with XX (another woman MP who was exposed to violence of the same male MP, authors’ note) – she was called ‘an Ustasha tart’, and the Speaker also ‘didn’t hear it.’”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

In several instances, female respondents sought protection or engaged to provide protection to their female colleagues through the **Women’s Parliamentary Network**. However, a number of problems arose, caused by the insufficiently defined decision-making procedures and conflicts between the principles of gender solidarity and party loyalty.

“As regards the Women’s Parliamentary Network, I must say that women have dual loyalty – one to their party, the other to their gender. When the party and gender loyalties clash, gender loyalty always loses. Party loyalty is always dominant – I have seen in the faces of some women that they feel bad about not reacting, but they did not dare to react because XX (the party’s leader, authors’ note) has the final say in XX party... So... they did not dare.”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

Female respondents shared different experiences concerning the reporting of violence to **the police and prosecutor’s office**, the instituting of civil lawsuits, and the work of courts. They gave up in several instances, sometimes even following the advice of lawyers, who judged that chances for success were small as witnesses gave up. A female respondent who was exposed to years-long stalking by a male leader of the opposing party and his associates pressed criminal charges and filed a civil lawsuit – both procedures are still underway. She pointed out that the procedures are slow in cases when the accused persons are MPs because they enjoy parliamentary immunity.

“My lawyer was constantly asking the question why XX was not called and we got the answer that the prosecutor’s office did not call him because he enjoyed immunity. He was called three times and did not respond, and they stopped calling him.”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

On several occasions, female respondents resorted to the aid of **independent mechanisms**, but in vain. According to them, the representatives of these bodies indicated they did not have efficient instruments at their disposal, particularly when violence takes place through the media.

“You can’t believe it. It is very complicated. On the Commissioner’s website, you must choose the grounds of discrimination on your own... The answer was that a public figure must have a somewhat higher tolerance threshold. They didn’t really help me.”

Woman MP

“...I addressed the Ombudsman and the Commissioner for Equality Protection, and she told me they can’t do anything against the writing of the media. She said not much could be done because it is the freedom of expression. On the one hand, it is the freedom of expression, on the other there is the freedom to insult. The freedom of expression does not imply the freedom to insult, it depends on how we look at things. The Ombudsman gave me support, but he also said that there are no efficient instruments...”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

2.4 Perception of the situation and possible solutions

2.4.1 Perception of the situation

Female respondents clearly recognize that the causes of violence lie in the structures of unequal power and norms of patriarchal culture. They agree that over the past years there has been an increase in the number of cases of violence against women in politics. They believe the reason is the increased participation of women in politics, which is perceived as a process of power redistribution.

“They observe her (a woman in politics, authors’ note) as someone who tries to take away a part of their power. Because power lies in politics.”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

“I believe it all boils down to the fear of some men from strong, influential woman; the fear that we, women, would take from them those positions of power. As the time goes by, it seems to me that women are increasingly more capable of handling political life than men.”

Former councilwoman in the City Assembly

“This is the attitude about women in general. Here, women in politics are seen as an embellishment, a silent plant... A woman is not allowed to be independent, authentic – this is not forgiven in politics.”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

Moreover, some female respondents believe that over the past years there has been an increase in violence against women in politics also due to a different political climate, where “everyone is given the right to behave in such way towards someone else because that person is weaker”. In place is authoritarian, aggressive political culture where political opponents are destroyed, and violence is not only tolerated, but also promoted as a form of communication.

“I believe the democratisation of society is the key thing because you can’t solve it with any rules of procedure. There simply has to be a democratic culture of expression and behaviour, the culture of confronting attitudes, which is perceived peacefully and where you fight with arguments and not with insults, lies, falsehoods and denigration. This is the essence. Our society is deeply undemocratic. We went several miles backward, and we have never been very progressive. A change took place in 2000, but it was very fragile and lasted for only several years. But even that was sluggish. Now things have to start from kindergartens. Not from the Parliament, but from kindergartens.”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

“Public discourse is utterly vulgarized, everything is allowed, everything is made crude. Everyone can address anyone in the most banal way. A line must be drawn and a restart done. There must be the will of the state to grapple with such form of violence.”

Former woman MP, Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina

“I think the lack of political culture in Serbia is the cause of all forms of violence, which is inflicted primarily on those male and female individuals who are perceived as weaker. The

general atmosphere of a vehement struggle for the word and public space, which reflects the absence of the freedom of the media and the possibility to say anything, anywhere and with a public outreach, led the assembly hall to a boiling point.”

Former woman MP, Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina

According to female respondents, there are differences between conservative and right-wing parties on the one hand and democratically-oriented parties on the other. That there is a lesser participation of women in conservative parties was also indicated by female respondents coming from those parties. Several female respondents stated that the situation is more favourable in democratic parties, i.e. parties positioned more towards the left part of the political spectrum, although this is not reflected in decision-making structures, as some of them also notice.

“There were few students and few women because it was a right-wing party.”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

“Violence is pronounced in the parties in the right half of the political spectrum, particularly in extreme right-wing parties. Women, however, are used to such violence and promote it as desirable behaviour, under the excuse that they have a chance to engage in politics and, if there was some discrimination in this regard, they wouldn’t be where they are. They are, in fact, the protectresses of such form of behaviour and are there to somehow relativise it. In the parties in the left part of the spectrum, women are somehow treated equally and no significant difference is made between women or men.”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

“I believe that the parties of social-democratic orientation respect gender equality more, while it seems to me that right-wing parties hold their small number of women only for the sake of photographing. Women don’t have any actual power there. I personally believe that my voice in XX is pretty well heard and respected. I was surprised when I saw that we

have only one woman in the Executive Board, and I reacted to that as something not normal. But then I understood that such post, in our case, requires a lot from a person – to have one’s own car, to drive it in a quality way and to finance fuel on one’s own.”

Former councilwoman in the City Assembly

Also important are the findings that indicate that in the initial phases of formation and development of some parties, the integration of women was much better than in later phases. The party was established on the principles that valued equality and emancipation, democracy and participation, and therefore the participation of women was more significant. Later (particularly during the last decade), as the influence of many parties diminished and the conditions in the wider social environment became more unfavourable, authoritarian tendencies became stronger, leading to weaker participation of women.

“The late 90’s and early 2000s were the golden age for women in my party. We had not only great support to profile ourselves, but also to be in the largest bodies of the party. Unlike other parties, we were full-fledged members in the highest bodies without a quota. The processes that took place later were painful for me, because I was not used to such degree of conservatism and patriarchalism that I began to face... We had 50% of women in the party’s executive board; they were in charge of different fields. The party thus empowered women politicians and prepared them for public office. As the time went by, the results were weaker and the party’s reputation diminished. Those on the highest positions of power tightened the belt and all social groups in the party began to lose their rights; what remained were only the obligations that were increasingly hard to fulfil.”

Former woman MP, Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina

While the loss of popularity or influence of the party in the above case led to the strengthening of authoritarian tendencies, according to the experience of a female respondent from another party, the loss of popularity and influence, particularly when the party lost the election and became a non-parliamentary party, diminished

the prestige of intraparty posts and created better opportunities for women to assume higher party positions.

“Unfortunately for us, but fortunately for women, very few people are currently interested in joining opposition parties, due to the general environment in Serbia, which is politically difficult, complicated and utterly unpleasant. Therefore, there is a small inflow of activists and people who want to participate, work in political parties, seriously expose themselves and act as the opposition to the ruling establishment. Thus, in political parties... there is no great competition and everyone is welcome, regardless of gender, religion, ethnicity or any other characteristic. There is currently a lack of activists and I immediately became in charge of (a high party function, authors’ note). The void was so great and it was so necessary that someone should get active.”

Former woman MP, Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina

2.4.2 Perception of solutions

Female respondents also proposed different solutions. Some of these solutions imply the drafting of special codes of ethics in assemblies, concerning gender-based violence. Some female respondents stated that such initiatives have already been launched, but were not successfully completed.

Some female respondents highlighted that effective implementation of the existing Rules of Procedure of the National Assembly of Serbia would help significantly suppress gender-based violence against women, particularly at assembly sessions.

However, solutions are seen primarily in special mechanisms for reporting, sanctioning and processing of cases of gender-based violence within assemblies at different levels. It is important that procedures are defined in a way that women are certain that once they report a case of violence, they will not exacerbate their situation and will not be exposed to further victimisation or retribution because the perpetrators of violence are most often persons on high positions.

The importance of raising awareness about gender-based violence was also emphasised, both among women and men holding political office, as well as in political parties.

“The problem is that the authors of the Rules of Procedure, i.e. men, do not recognize it at all. They don’t understand that women are exposed to such attacks that they cannot even dream about. Women don’t recognize it either. They must understand that each time when, for instance, the length of her skirt is commented on, when she’s told: ‘You’re a woman, we need a man to talk to’, and each time when her morals or family life are judged, as well as her appearance – that all this is not permitted and that it represents is gender-based violence. So many people have told me: ‘Well, that’s your job’. People do not have empathies in terms of what a woman politician goes through when it comes to discrimination. Therefore, the establishment of mechanisms and education of women are important, and there should not be a price that they need to pay if they want to deal with politics. It’s important to educate men to accept their female colleagues as fully-fledged beings and not as persons who strayed there for the sake of quota.”

Former woman MP, National Assembly of Serbia

3. Research findings: women politicians in the media discourse – from invisibility to misogyny

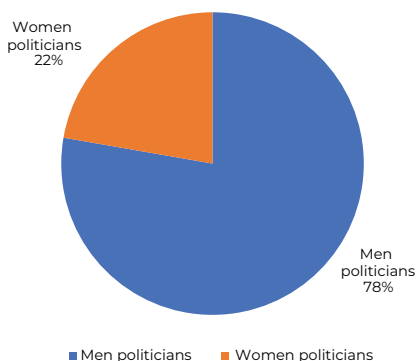
3.1 Quantitative-qualitative analysis of media content

Web portals

Of 602 articles published in section “Politics” on analysed web portals in the period from 28 October to 9 November 2020, 134 (22.2%) of them mention women who engage in politics.

In the stated period, 233 articles about women politicians were published, while 99 are in other sections, most often section “Society” or sections focusing on events at the regional or global level (e.g. “World”).

Chart 3. Number of articles in section "Politics"



Most frequently published are longer articles, which contain four and more paragraphs (124), 52 are of medium length, while 32 are short (several sentences).

The analysis shows that the most frequent are informative headlines (131), followed by sensational headlines or headlines characterized as “hooks” (35), while the number of metaphorical (21) or combined-type headlines (22) are equal.

In terms of genre, dominant are factographic (news and reports) articles – there are 121 of them, followed by articles of hybrid genre – most often a combination of text and video clips, or information or video clips published on Instagram or Twitter. Only 20 articles belong to analytical genres (article, coverage). There are 14 comments and columns, most often on the portal of the *Danas* daily, and they also appear in *Informer* and *Nova S* portal.

Authorship is diverse. It is not specified in the majority of articles (65), while 52 cases concern the transmission of agency news or reports. Authors, by their name and surname, or by initials, are specified in 45 articles. In addition, 13 articles were taken from other media, nine were written by an external author, while 24 have multiple authorship – a part was taken from other media and a part is signed by the editorial team. Authorship is very important because, in addition to contributing to authenticity and credibility, it can indicate the importance attached to a particular topic.

The most frequent reason for reporting on women politicians is a current event; pseudo-events (press conferences) appear in ten articles, while 19 concern a media initiative.

When it comes to current events, one of the key events, which was also the reason to carry out monitoring in the said period, was certainly the constitution of the Serbian Government. Indicative for the analysis is an article published in *Večernje novosti*, which has not been included in the corpus because no woman politician is mentioned in it. Namely, on the occasion of forming the Government, headed by Prime Minister Ana Brnabić, a report was published titled: “United Serbia supports the program and composition of the new Government. Palma: the opposition should applaud Vučić”. It published the statement of the head of the MP group of the United Serbia Dragan

Marković Palma, who said that his party supported the new Government, but he congratulated President of the state Aleksandar Vučić, and not President of the Government Ana Brnabić.

In regard to reporting on taking oaths of new members of the Government in the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, it is important to draw attention to two more articles also published in *Večernje novosti*. The first article – “Female partner of Ana Brnabić follows the address of the person given the mandate to form the new government. An exclusive picture from the Serbian Assembly” – shows the photograph of the Prime Minister’s female partner. This article, together with another article – “Selaković and Popović made the sign of the cross, Mihajlović changed her outfit” – indicate the need for presenting women on important positions in a sensational way. Drawing attention to a female partner or wife, and the outfit chosen for the said political event is not common when reporting concerns men, nor should it be, because this is not a topic of public interest.

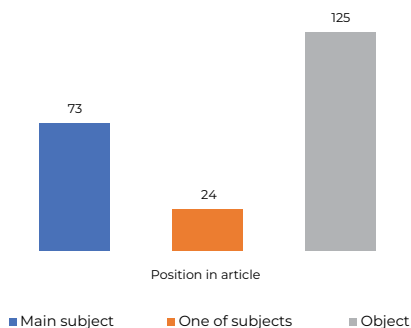
The analysis shows that Belgrade is the most frequent location of events being reported (144). Other towns in Serbia appear in only nine articles, while 24 report from the USA and 21 from Europe. Kosovo as a location appears in 12 articles.

Gender equality, as a topic in articles about women politicians, appears in only seven articles, and gender-based violence only in three articles. The majority of articles (117 of 233) concern current political events, 33 criticise current politics (most frequently on *Nova S* portal and *Danas*), while 26 are classified into news about protocol events. Other articles (26) contain information about the coronavirus or other developments.

Very important for the media content analysis is who is in the position of the subject of news, i.e. to whom male or female journalists and male or female editors give the possibility to express their opinion.

In the majority of articles (125), a woman in politics is an object. She appears in only 73 articles as the main subject, which means she was given the possibility to directly express her opinion and that her statement is cited. She is one of subjects in 24 articles.

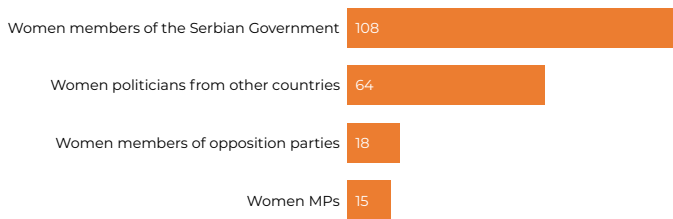
Chart 4. Position in article



In the analysed articles about women in politics (233), female members of the Serbian Government appear most often (108) – primarily Prime Minister Ana Brnabić, followed by female ministers Zorana Mihajlović and Darija Kisić Tepavčević. If these data are cross-referenced with the above finding, which indicates that current events are most frequently reported about, it is possible to conclude that the media reported about women in politics mainly following the routine of factographic transmission of statements of state male and female officials, i.e. women in politics were not in the focus of media reporting and the media did not analytically deal with gender equality issues in the political sphere.

Fifteen articles reported about women MPs at the level of the Republic, four about local and provincial women officials, two about women experts, and 18 about opposition women politicians (mainly about the member of the Party of Freedom and Justice Marinika Tepić). Foreign women politicians are mentioned 64 times, most often the candidate for USA Vice-President Kamala Harris. This finding is expected because the research was carried out at the time of the US presidential election. Also noticeable is writing about German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Acting President of Kosovo Vjosa Osmani.

Chart 5. Women in politics in analysed media



Of 233 articles about women politicians, 56 do not contain a photograph, 109 contain an individual photograph, and 69 contain a collective photograph, i.e. a woman politician is photographed as part of a group. In 91 photographs, a woman is presented in her professional role; women politicians are presented in an active role, and in 48 photographs, women politicians are posing. Only in one photograph is a woman politician shown fulfilling the traditionally understood female role, and sexual suggestiveness is present in two photographs. Although published in the research period, but not in the day when it was analysed, the photograph from *Nova S* portal is noteworthy – it shows minister Darija Kisić Tepavčević in a beauty salon during her pedicure treatment. The photograph is accompanied with a comment that the woman minister, who is also a member of the Covid-19 Crisis Response Team, did not wear a protective mask, which is obligatory in the event of close contact. However, this can be characterised as sensationalistic because, regardless of the fact that the right to privacy of public male and female officials is significantly narrowed, the photograph from the beauty salon substantiates the gender stereotypes about women holding political office which are based on commenting on women’s appearance and the implied female roles, while the professional aspect is neglected or minimised.

In 140 of cases, the text accompanying a photograph is informative, and is in the form of comment only in one case.

In 157 analysed articles, gender-sensitive language is used consistently, in 37 is used inconsistently, and in 13 articles it is not used at all.

In 78 articles, the attitude of the male or female author towards the topic is balanced, in 67 it is positive, in 35 negative, and in 29 it is neutral (protocol information).

Also noteworthy is the following: when it comes to the attitude of the media, i.e. male or female journalists towards the topic, the portals that usually positively report about female government representatives do not always do so when it comes to Vice-President of the Government and Minister Zorana Mihajlović, one of rare female Government members who consistently promotes gender equality. For instance, the *Večernje novosti* portal published an article titled: “She jumped the gun: Zorana Mihajlović congratulated Biden on his victory”. In this article, she is criticised because she, on her Instagram account, congratulated the new US President before the official results were published, but, more importantly, before the President of the Republic of Serbia congratulated. “Zorana Mihajlović cannot, either based on her office, congratulate other presidents on behalf of Serbia, and this is obviously an indicator of who the woman minister ‘rooted for’ at the US election.” It is interesting that Minister Mihajlović’s congratulations were addressed primarily to the first woman US Vice-President Kamala Harris – she wrote: “The victory is of female gender!”.

Other media outlets also made similar critical comments about Mihajlović’s action, or they at least noted that she was the first to congratulate Biden and Harris on their victory.

Public broadcasting service

During the analysis of monitoring results, particular attention was devoted to the portal of the Radio-Television of Serbia (RTS), which, being the public broadcasting service of all male and female citizens of the Republic of Serbia, is particularly obliged to report without discrimination, in a balanced manner, and to make sure that women are presented without stereotypes, outside the patriarchally understood roles and patterns. The public broadcaster has a special responsibility and importance in the process of gender sensitisation of society.

The portal of the public broadcasting service published 25 articles about women politicians in the period from 28 October to 9 November 2020. Considering the total number of analysed articles about women in politics (233), it is possible to conclude

that only 10.73% were published by the public broadcaster and that the commercial media reported more about women politicians. As the monitoring was carried out at the time of constitution of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, headed by the woman Prime Minister, with women leading ten ministries, it may be concluded that the RTS portal devoted very little attention to this topic.

The headlines of the analysed articles are mainly informative. Only one can be characterised as a hook, and three are combined. The majority of articles are long (16), eight are of medium length, and only one is short. Nineteen articles are factographic, one contains news in a row, and five articles are hybrid (a text and video clip). An RTS journalist is signed only in one article. Eleven articles do not specify authorship (only “RTS” is stated), eight are written by an agency, and five articles have multiple authorship.

Not in a single case is the media initiative the reason for reporting. Nineteen articles are about a current event and six about a pseudo-event (press conferences or press releases). These results suggest that reporting is based on the transmission of current or media-staged events with government representatives participating in them. Also noticeable is the practice of transmitting information from other media outlets (news agencies), while authorial articles about women in politics are almost invisible and analytical articles entirely invisible. These results can indicate that the RTS portal does not report entirely in accordance with the function of the exercise of the public interest prescribed by the Law on Public Media Services, which, among other things, implies “the production of informative content of public interest aimed at fostering the values of democratic society, improvement of political, gender, inter-ethnic and religious tolerance and understanding” (RS Official Gazette, No 83/2014).

The content analysis shows that Belgrade is the most frequent location of events being reported. European towns, Kosovo, Montenegro and the USA are also mentioned. The most frequent topics are current political events (13), nine articles mention women politicians within protocol events (congratulations, marking particular events), one deals with gender-based violence (but it is also protocol-related, i.e. it concerns the visit of a woman minister to a safe house). Only one article contains the criticism of current policy, though in Poland (protests due to the prohibition of abor-

tions). Women in politics are objects in ten articles, main subjects in eight, and secondary subjects in seven articles. When it comes to duties discharged, the most dominant are foreign women politicians (women ambassadors, women members of the European Parliament, the female candidate for the US Vice-President) – 16. Of local women politicians, only two female Government members are mentioned (Prime Minister Ana Brnabić (6) and Minister for Labour, Employment and Social Policy Darija Kisić Tepavčević (3)). Only once is a woman MP mentioned (Socialist Party of Serbia), while women politicians from opposition parties and women experts are not mentioned at all. These results suggest that the information about women in politics that appears on the portal of the public broadcasting service is conditioned by the agenda of political events and pseudo-events, with foreign women politicians having more chance to express their opinions compared to women politicians from Serbia. When women politicians are presented as subjects, those are government representatives, while other women who engage in politics are not mentioned.

In regard to the material accompanying an article, there is an individual photograph of a woman politician only in five cases. Eleven of 25 articles where women in politics are mentioned are without a photograph, and there are 11 collective ones – i.e. a woman politician is photographed in a group. A woman politician is presented in a professional, active role in 12 photographs, and a political pose is seen only in one photograph. The texts accompanying photographs are informative. It is interesting that in two cases women politicians are presented from the back, while the Serbian President is in the foreground.

Gender-sensitive language is fully used in 19 articles. It is not used at all in two articles, and it appears in four articles, but not entirely consistently.

The journalists' value judgment is neutral in 12 articles (protocol-related information). It is positive in eight articles, balanced in four, and negative in only one article.

It is noteworthy that the headline of the report about the meeting between the woman Prime Minister and the Serbian President with the woman President of the National Council of Switzerland reads: "Vučić met...". On the one hand, this can indicate the media marginalization of the woman President of the Serbian Government

and, on the other, from the linguistic aspect, it implies the dominance of a man who “met a woman”.

Also, in the report concerning Mini-Schengen agreement, signed by Prime Ministers of North Macedonia, Albania and Serbia, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Serbia, Ana Brnabić, is mentioned only as a signatory. None of her statements are given, while the statements of the Serbian President and men prime ministers of other countries are dominant. The Prime Minister of the Republic of Serbia is not even in the photograph.

Other media outlets reported in a similar way. They underscore that the talks with prime ministers of other countries were led by the Serbian President, while the woman Prime Minister is not mentioned at all or it is only stated they she attended the meeting. In the analysed media, in the photographs accompanying the reports from these talks, one can see that the woman President of the Serbian Government attended the meeting.

An article in *Večernje novosti* is titled: “With Rama and Zaev. Vučić at the Mini Schengen conference”. The article is based on the press release posted on Instagram, where on the account of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić “The Future of Serbia” it is stated that the President participated in the Mini Schengen conference with male prime ministers of other countries, and that woman Prime Minister Ana Brnabić and Health Minister Zlatibor Lončar were also in attendance. The Prime Minister is seen in the group photograph. The *Nova S* portal also published the information about the signing of the agreement – it is stated that “Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Prime Ministers of Albania and North Macedonia Edi Rama and Zoran Zaev participated”, while one can found out about the attendance of woman Prime Minister of Serbia Ana Brnabić only based on the group photograph, because she is not mentioned in the article.

In *Informer*, this topic is covered by two articles. The first article titled: “WE SHALL BE GOING TO THESE COUNTRIES ONLY WITH OUR IDs, AN IMPORTANT MEMORANDUM SIGNED” and subtitled: “Vučić: deepened relations between Tirana, Skopje and Belgrade”, contains only the statement of Serbian President Alek-

sandar Vučić, and also fails to mention that Serbian woman Prime Minister Ana Brnabić also participated in the meeting; the article is accompanied with two photographs where her attendance is visible. Another article, titled: “VUČIĆ AT THE MINI SCHENGEN VIDEO CONFERENCE! Details of an agreement being hammered out” (sic!), apart from containing a typo in the headline, consists of a complete text published on the official Instagram account of the Serbian President, which contains the President’s statement about this event and the information that the meeting was attended by woman President of the Serbian Government and Health Minister Zlatibor Lončar, and a group photograph of all participants.

All these articles witness to the marginalisation of Serbian woman Prime Minister and the absence of her influence on the events which, at least as the media report, she attends, but does not lead them, though she should.

3.2 Case studies

3.2.1 Media articles about specific amendments of an opposition woman MP

The research covered media articles published on the occasion of adoption of amendments to the Law on the Election of Members of Parliament and the Law on Local Elections in February 2020. The articles concern the proposed amendments of the then opposition woman MP Gordana Čomić, which envisaged that electoral lists must have at least 40% of persons of underrepresented gender, i.e. women. The research corpus consists of 26 media articles published on different web portals, but the qualitative analysis covered the most illustrative examples.

The majority of analysed articles are factographic: “The census reduced to 3%, at least 40% of women in lists” (*Danas*), “Čomić: Defending my own law is not the question of ethics but of parliamentary education” (RTS), “The Assembly about the change of electoral laws” (*Dnevnik*), i.e. these are mainly reports about developments in the National Assembly.

The attitude, i.e. support of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić certainly influenced the tone of the reporting of tabloids, which in the previous period used to convey the insults directed at opposition women politicians, including Gordana Čomić: “Vučić: Serbian Progressive Party will accept Gordana Čomić’s proposal that women make up at least 40% of candidates” (*Kurir*), and Prime Minister Ana Brnabić: “Brnabić: Gordana Čomić’s courage is stupendous, a census reduction damages the Serbian Progressive Party” (*N1 info*). Then Speaker of the National Assembly Maja Gojković also supported her opposition female colleague: “Gojković told MPs not to offend Gordana Čomić” (*N1 info*), which can be characterised as a precedent, since in the past years the opposition representatives complained about the Assembly Speaker’s discriminatory attitude towards male and female MPs who are not part of the governing coalition. The article also states that “the woman Assembly Speaker, from her parliamentary bench, invited everyone to vote for the Law to change the number of women MPs in the Assembly, because it is a historical law. [...] The woman Assembly Speaker added that men are talked about as men politicians who change their parliamentary benches, while women are said to be turncoats and the ones who ‘sell themselves’; she also said that women should not be underestimated because they are capable of making political decisions”.

Given the support to the proposal submitted by state officials, the tabloid portals, unlike their previous practice, did not criticise the initiative, but mostly dealt with the fact that, with her arrival in the National Assembly to explain the submitted amendment, MP Gordana Čomić stopped the boycott of Parliament’s work, which the majority of opposition parties decided on, including the Democratic Party, whose member Gordana Čomić was at the time. It is noteworthy that one of the reasons why opposition parties decided to boycott is also the fact that none of the amendments that they proposed was adopted during the then legislature (“The boycott went bust, Gordana Čomić returned to the Assembly. Đilas’s Boško continues to receive a salary, while doing nothing” (*Informer*); “The Democratic Party punishes the disobedient ones, Gordana Čomić is targeted because she is against the boycott” (*Informer*)).

However, some tabloids could not but repeat the insults from social networks and highlight them in the headline: “If there is a hooker in politics, it is Gordana Čomić.

Shameful insults of the woman MP from the Democratic Party because she came in the Assembly” (*Espresso*).

In regard to the above event, several analytical articles were also published, including the authorial comment “Male and female servants of the party”(Peščanik) by female researcher of the Center for Democracy Foundation Sarita Bradaš. She states that she does not share “the enthusiasm of MP Čomić about the fact that there will be at least one hundred women in the next legislature of the Assembly because, just as so far, women’s interests will not be safeguarded”. Bradaš points out that “the Assembly is not a place for decision-making, as the woman MP believes, but the place for fulfilling the President’s wishes, as confirmed by Aleksandar Vučić who, two days before voting, decided to adopt the proposal on the quota change”. The fact that the Serbian President, who should not exert influence on the National Assembly, makes the decision before it is formally adopted is confirmed by the statement: “Vučić: The parliamentary majority will accept the proposal that each electoral list has at least 40% of women” (*Danas*).

3.2.2 Media reporting about women in executive bodies

The analysis of media reporting was carried out after it was announced that Ana Brnabić would be given the mandate to form the Serbian Government and after the composition of the new Government was announced, when it was stated that 50% of members would be women.

The research covered 36 articles published on Sunday and Monday, 25 and 26 October, after Aleksandar Vučić, the President of the Republic of Serbia and of the Serbian Progressive Party, stated that Ana Brnabić was given the mandate to form the new Government, and after Ana Brnabić, following the meeting of the Presidency of the Serbian Progressive Party, presented (together with President Vučić) the composition of the Government she (they) proposed.

The majority of published articles were informative: “These are the new ministers in the Serbian Government” (*Nova S*), “The names of ministers published – Čomić, Momirović, Kisić Tepavčević, Selaković“ (*Danas*), “THESE ARE NEW MINISTERS.

Ana Brnabić has just given the names by ministry, this is how the new government will look like” (*Blic*), “VUČIĆ AND ANA BRNABIĆ ADDRESSED THE PUBLIC: the composition of the NEW SERBIAN GOVERNMENT announced” (*Espresso*) and similar. There were also clear messages that President Aleksandar Vučić directly influenced the appointment of Ana Brnabić: “Vučić: I suggested the swap of Vulin and Stefanović, defence is not a consolation prize” (*N1 info*).

Apart from these articles, dominant were those articles that commented on the path of some women experts and politicians who became minister candidates, such as: “DARIJA’S LIFE PATH WAS NOT EASY. This is how Kisić Tepavčević reached her ministerial position” (*Kurir*), or “THIS HOW DARIJA KISIĆ TEPAVČEVIĆ FARED AT SCHOOL! Her GRADUATION GPA REVEALED, YOU WON’T BELIEVE IT!” (*Espresso*), „IRENA VUJOVIĆ IS THE NEW MINISTER OF ECOLOGY: Few people remember to what position she was appointed in 2015!“ (*Espresso*), “MRS TATJANA MATIĆ: A powerful woman becoming the head of the Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications” (*Mondo*).

Some portals were also critical of the proposed composition of the Government, as shown by articles such as: “Why do they offer to Siniša Mali the position of the minister regardless of the plagiarism affair?” (*Novi Sad Information Portal 021*) or “Why has Nebojša Stefanović ‘got’ the Ministry of Defence: ‘It’s not a consolation prize, I became the President of Serbia thereafter’” (*Nedeljnik*).

Of all the articles selected for the present research, two stand out in terms of their topic and content. The first article is titled: “People from Novi Sad in Nemanjina 11: Who are they, what do they have, how much do they earn” (*Novi Sad Information Portal 021*) – the editorial board analysed the biographies and property of the proposed ministers coming from (or originating from) Novi Sad. The second, highly negative article is titled: “The middle finger of Minister Čomić” (*Nova S*) – the author expresses her highly negative attitude towards the decision of the once opposition MP and high-ranking official Gordana Čomić to accept the invitation and enter the Government of the Republic of Serbia which was proposed by the Serbian Progressive Party. The headline of the article is an allusion to the pre-election video recorded by politician Čomić on the eve of elections in 2020.

3.2.3 Insults, sexism, misogyny and hate speech in media articles about women in politics

The research covered 20 most illustrative articles that convey or entrench stereotypes, insults or hate speech in respect of women in politics. The analysis leads to the conclusion that there is a difference between the media discourse relating to women politicians belonging to opposition political parties and the discourse about women who are members of ruling parties.

Some media articles, most often tabloids, contain threats, insults and hate speech directed at women politicians from opposition parties (“A beautiful Romanian woman does not experience as her own Serbia and its citizens“ (*Alo*), “You, Ustasha whore, your face will be smacked in the next days’. The Radicals threatened, insulted and swore at Aleksandra Jerkov“ (*Espresso*). “First shave your moustache and then come to a meeting’. Šešelj brutally offended Čomić, the Assembly Speaker supported him“ (*Espresso*).

The analysis of the above examples indicates that hate speech is most frequently directed at woman MP of the Democratic Party Aleksandra Jerkov: “You’ll be left without hair, I’ll spill tar on you and cover you with goose feathers’. Šešelj brutally threatened Aleksandra Jerkov“ (*Espresso*). “I published a book ‘Ustasha whore Aleksandra Jerkov!’. Šešelj continued in his style and did not stop himself“ (*Espresso*). In that article, published in July 2020, President of the Serbian Radical Party Vojislav Šešelj states that he received summons six or seven times from the deputy higher public prosecutor. He, however, did not heed the summons as he enjoyed parliamentary immunity. “I filed a counter-complaint and I have a higher monetary claim because she called me a war criminal. That is much worse. Calling someone ‘an Ustasha wh...’ is a severe offence, but calling someone a war criminal is the gravest possible slander because I have not been declared a war criminal and I have not been committed of any war crime.” This is a one-sided, sensationalistic approach to the topic, with the breach of professional due diligence, i.e. the facts that can significantly influence the public attitude towards a particular event must not be concealed. The article omits the information that “the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals, which performs the remaining functions of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, sentenced with a final judgment the leader of the Serbian Radical

Party Vojislav Šešelj to a ten-year imprisonment sentence due to abetting and perpetrating the persecution of the Croats in the village of Hrtkovci in Vojvodina, in 1992“ (*Danas*, 2018).

The article “‘You, Ustasha whore, your face will be smacked in the next days’. The Radicals threatened, insulted and swore at Aleksandra Jerkov“ (*Espresso*) also contains hate speech and insults are very explicitly conveyed, which constitutes the breach of the Law on Public Information and Media, which forbids hate speech, unless in the case when such information is part of impartial journalistic reporting or when there is a clear intention to critically indicate discrimination, hatred or violence (RS Official Gazette, No 83/2014, Article 75 and 76), which is not the case in the given example.

In addition to misogyny, politician Aleksandra Jerkov is exposed to objectification: “Everyone looked at her and her legs at the American Embassy! The attractive MP of the Democratic Party outshone Kyle Scott, whom no one noticed. PHOTO“ (*Espresso*). This can be interpreted as another discursive strategy of reducing a woman in politics to a sex object.

A stereotypical picture is also created about some women politicians from ruling parties as they are also exposed to sexualisation and objectification: “The sexiest Serbian women politicians lead the country and they are dashing as if on the catwalk” (*Espresso*), “Four women politicians, one title. Who is the most beautiful lady of Serbian politics“ (*Espresso*).

It can be concluded that reporting about Minister Zorana Mihajlović is indicative because she is the only woman politician from the ruling structure who is exposed to misogyny: “‘You, harlot, shame on you’. A Radical showed underpants at one moment. Complete chaos and scandal at the Serbian Assembly“ (*Espresso*). “A drama in five acts. ‘Pull your dress’, ‘you, tattler’ and ‘pink underpants’: how the Radicals primitively attacked Zorana Mihajlović and WHY HER?“ (*Blic*). There is also stereotyping as focus is placed on her appearance and outfit: “Zorana Mihajlović appeared and immediately blinded those present, all eyes were set on her pink outfit” (*Alo*).

3.3 Concluding remarks

Based on the quantitative analysis, it is possible to conclude that women politicians are reported about more rarely than men politicians. It is worrying that even among the few women who deal with politics and who are reported about, the most dominant are female members of the Serbian Government and high-ranking women officials of the ruling political parties, mainly from Belgrade, whereas women politicians at the local level, women MPs and councilwomen are almost invisible.

The results of the qualitative analysis also show that women politicians are marginalised in the media. Even when they get a chance to express their opinion or raise a topic, this mainly serves the function of promoting the current political agenda, while at the same time the importance of men who hold power is emphasised, though women are not subordinate to them on the hierarchical ladder. Women politicians do not initiate or raise as important the issues of gender inequality or violence against women, unless in the case of tragic events or frequent sexist and misogynistic public discourse, which they occasionally condemn.

It is not possible to conclusively claim that the increased number of women holding influential political office contributed to the qualitative change in terms of women's position in society. It may be stated that the male principle of political culture has been assumed. It is therefore possible to say that promoting women to important duties serves only as a cover for declarative gender equality, and it is thus not possible to talk about fundamental changes. The best proof is certainly the small representation of women politicians in the media, as well as the content of articles, the room these women get and the articles that concern them. What supports this thesis is also a very small number of articles where women politicians are the subject, but also the photographs accompanying the articles as in most photographs they are a part of the group and similar. The underrepresentation of women politicians in the media is the best proof of their weak power and poor influence they exert while performing their duties.

The results of the analysis of the media discourse in articles selected as case studies suggest a high degree of hate speech, misogyny and sexism in some tabloid media directed towards women politicians, most often members of opposition political par-

ties. On the other hand, it is indicative that the dominant discourse in these media changes in line with a changing political discourse of state officials. This is indicated by the analysis of examples of reporting about politician Gordana Čomić, who, as an MP of the opposition Democratic Party, was exposed to insults. However, the tone of reporting changed at the moment when she ended the boycott of the Assembly's work due to submission of the amendment about a change of electoral quotas for the underrepresented gender and when this initiative got the support of state officials, primarily Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić.

The research shows a great difference between the media discourse concerning women politicians who are members of opposition political parties and the discourse concerning women politicians from ruling parties. Unlike hate speech and misogyny, which target women politicians from opposition parties, the media discourse about women politicians from ruling parties is somewhat subtler, but features sensationalism and objectification. This is best confirmed by the media statements about the Vice-President of the Serbian Government and a woman who served as a minister in several mandates, Zorana Mihajlović, whom the media, despite her position and influence, did not spare and visibly disfavoured her.

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Annex 1: Operationalisation of different forms of violence

Forms of violence

| | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Physical violence | Pushing, shoving, pulling, shaking, jerking, slapping, hitting, kicking, beating, stifling, hitting with objects, tying, limiting movement, inflicting harm with weapons or objects, burning. |
| Sexual violence | Sexual coercion (physical or by threats, blackmailing), coercion to participate in undesired sexual activities, undesired sexual touching of a woman, coercion to watch a sex act, coercion to participate in a sexual act with other persons. |
| Sexual harassment | Undesired touching, hugging, kissing, sexually suggestive comments or jokes, inappropriate invitations to go out, intrusive questions about private life that are offensive for a woman, intrusive comments on a woman's appearance, inappropriate looking, offensive staring, sending or showing sexually explicit content, pictures, gifts, indecent showing oneself before a woman, coercion to watch pornographic content contrary to woman's will, undesired sexually explicit emails, messages, inappropriate posts about a woman on social networks or websites which are offensive for women. |
| Psychological violence | Insulting, shouting at a woman, calling names, designating a woman as "mad" or "stupid", threats to hurt a woman or a person close to her, public denigration of a woman, blaming women for things they did not do, coercion to assume responsibility for something done by others, blackmailing with the threat to publish personal or false information which may discredit them in public life. |

Forms of violence

Stalking Repeated incidents of sending messages or letters with offensive and threatening content, threatening or anonymous telephone calls, publication of offensive content about a woman on the internet, distributing intimate photographs or video material of a woman through the internet, social networks, mobile phones, stalking, following a woman, damaging her property.

Structural violence Preventing a woman to apply for a particular post, to be elected, discrimination during promotion, explanations that women were not selected for some positions or activities because they are less eligible due to their being women, defining election or promotion criteria that are detrimental to women.

Cultural-symbolic violence Use of gender stereotypes, prejudices, sexism, misogyny against women, labelling women aimed at putting them in the categories assigned specific stereotypical characteristics and values.

Annex 2: Interview guide

Good afternoon, I am _____. I am a part of the team that carries out an exploratory research into violence against women politicians, the first of such kind in Serbia. The research is supported by the OSCE Mission to Serbia and the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). The aim of the research is to examine the main forms and patterns of violence experienced by women politicians in Serbian, and the perpetrators, consequences and strategies used by women politicians to respond to such violence. The research is exploratory, i.e. it should provide initial insights based on which it will be possible to develop the methodology of research to be carried out on a larger sample of women engaged in politics at different levels of government and within different political parties. The research is entirely anonymous and data will be anonymised. Everything that could indicate the identity of female respondents will be removed, and the analysis will have the character of a phenomenological analysis and not of personal stories. Participation in the research is voluntary. If you wish, you can decide not to answer some questions or you can stop participating in the interview at any moment if it feels inconvenient to you.

Beginnings of political career

Please describe the beginnings of your political career?

- » How did it happen that you chose the career of a woman politician? What were your reasons to enter politics? Why did you choose it?
- » Where and how did you start your career, in what political party? Why did you choose that political party?
- » How did people around you react – your family, friends, colleagues?

Career in the party

- » How would you describe the conditions for men and women which existed at the start of your career in the party? Were these conditions the same or different?
 - » Were women and men given the same tasks or not? If not, what were the differences?
 - » Did women have the same promotion opportunities as men? If not, what were the differences, and why?
 - » Could women apply for public office under equal opportunities as men?
- » How would you describe your career? Was it easier or harder to you compared to your party male colleagues? Compared to your party female colleagues?
- » Were the conditions of competition and cooperation encouraged in the party; how would you describe the climate in the party?

Career development

- » Please describe the most important post that you had in the party. Did you face obstacles on that path? What were those obstacles? Who supported you and how, who hindered you and how?
- » Please describe the most important public office that you held. What were the obstacles? Who supported you and how, who hindered you and how?

Experiences of violence

We should talk now about violence that you experienced as a woman politician. Our focus is not on private violence, family, partner or other violence that any woman can experience. If you want to mention such experiences as well, you can do so, but our focus is on violence that you experienced as a public figure, a woman politician, as well as a woman.

What would you say, during your political career have you been often exposed to violence in different forms or not?

The gravest form of violence

- » What was the gravest form of violence that you experienced?
- » When did that happen, in what phase of your political career?
- » Who was the perpetrator?
- » What means of violence were used, how was such violence manifested?
- » Where did violence take place?
- » How did you feel in that regard? How did it influence your health, self-confidence, choices you made, your career?
- » How did your family and friends react?
- » How did your female and male colleagues react?
- » What did you do in this regard, how did you cope with it? Who did you address?
- » If you addressed institutions, how did they handle the application?
- » What do you think, what would be necessary for women in your situation to be protected from such experiences? What should be done to prevent such incidents?

Thank you for sharing this experience with me. I would now ask you about other experiences, bearing in mind the entire course of your career, from the beginnings to date, and the experiences you may have had at various posts and from different sides – within the party, while holding public office, in private conditions, due to the fact that you are a public figure and a woman politician.

Physical violence

Have you ever been exposed to any form of physical violence as a woman politician? If yes (if there were several cases, ask about other cases, try to see the differences, the diversity of manifestations, perpetrators, strategies etc.):

- » When did that happen, in what phase of your political career?
- » Who was the perpetrator?
- » What means of violence were used, how was violence manifested?
- » Where did violence take place?
- » How did you feel in that regard? How did it influence your health, self-confidence, choices you made, your career?
- » What did you do in this regard, how did you cope with it? Who did you address?
- » What do you think, what would be necessary for women in your situation to be protected from such experiences? What should be done to prevent such incidents?
- » How did your family and friends react?
- » How did your female and male colleagues react?
- » Did institutions react?
- » Did the broader public react and how?

Sexual harassment and sexual violence

Have you ever been exposed to any form of sexual harassment or sexual violence as a woman politician? If yes (if there were several cases, ask about other cases, try to see the differences, the diversity of manifestations, perpetrators, strategies etc.):

- » When did that happen, in what phase of your political career?
- » Who was the perpetrator?
- » What means of violence were used, how was violence manifested?
- » Where did violence take place?
- » How did you feel in that regard? How did it influence your health, self-confidence, choices you made, your career?
- » What did you do in this regard, how did you cope with it? Who did you address?
- » What do you think, what would be necessary for women in your situation to be protected from such experiences? What should be done to prevent such incidents?
- » How did your family and friends react?
- » How did your female and male colleagues react?
- » Did institutions react?
- » Did the broader public react and how?

Psychological violence

Have you ever been exposed to any form of psychological violence as a woman politician? If yes (if there were several cases, ask about other cases, try to see the differences, the diversity of manifestations, perpetrators, strategies etc.):

- » When did that happen, in what phase of your political career?
- » Who was the perpetrator?

- » What means of violence were used, how was violence manifested?
- » Where did violence take place?
- » How did you feel in that regard? How did it influence your health, self-confidence, choices you made, your career?
- » What did you do in this regard, how did you cope with it? Who did you address?
- » What do you think, what would be necessary for women in your situation to be protected from such experiences? What should be done to prevent such incidents?
- » How did your family and friends react?
- » How did your female and male colleagues react?
- » Did institutions react?
- » Did the broader public react and how?

Stalking

Have you ever been exposed to any form of stalking as a woman politician? If yes (if there were several cases, ask about other cases, try to see the differences, the diversity of manifestations, perpetrators, strategies etc.):

- » When did that happen, in what phase of your political career?
- » Who was the perpetrator?
- » What means of violence were used, how was violence manifested?
- » Where did violence take place?
- » How did you feel in that regard? How did it influence your health, self-confidence, choices you made, your career?
- » What did you do in this regard, how did you cope with it? Who did you address?

- » What do you think, what would be necessary for women in your situation to be protected from such experiences?
- » What should be done to prevent such incidents?
- » How did your family and friends react?
- » How did your female and male colleagues react?
- » Did institutions react?
- » Did the broader public react and how?

Structural violence

- » During your political career, have you been prevented from applying for particular posts in the party and being a candidate for political office?
- » Please describe when that happened? What were the posts in question?
- » Who prevented you and with what explanation?
- » Has it ever happened that you were prevented from being elected to a post or promoted with the explanation that such position is more appropriate for men and that you are a less eligible candidate because you are a woman?
- » Have you noticed practices of open or hidden discrimination within political parties which prevent women from being elected or promoted? Are some criteria and conditions defined in such way that they systematically disprivilege women?

Cultural-symbolic violence

- » Have you experienced sexism and misogyny that are used as a means of violence?
- » How would you describe the misogynous language of violence? What words and sentences were used?
- » When did that happen, in what phase of your political career?

- » Who was the perpetrator?
- » What means of violence were used, how was violence manifested?
- » Where did violence take place?
- » How did you feel in that regard? How did it influence your health, self-confidence, choices you made, your career?
- » What did you do in this regard, how did you cope with it? Who did you address?
- » What do you think, what would be necessary for women in your situation to be protected from such experiences? What should be done to prevent such incidents?
- » How did your family and friends react?
- » How did your female and male colleagues react?
- » Did institutions react?
- » Did the broader public react and how?

Being informed / testifying to other persons' experiences

- » Did she see/know that some other women in her party or political environment suffer violence?
- » When did it happen – she should describe the situation.
- » Did she undertake any steps in terms of supporting the victim, revealing and sanctioning the perpetrator?
- » If she did not do that – why?
- » If yes, in what way? What was the reaction of the party / political or wider environment?

Experiences of violence in the sphere of private life

Although it is not in the focus of research, if they are prepared, can female respondents share the experiences of gender-based violence in private relations, partner and non-partner violence, and how did that influence their experience and reaction to violence that they experienced as women politicians?

- » Did it happen, in what relations, how did they feel then, how did they react to violence?
- » How did it influence their attitude towards the violence that they experienced as women politicians or violence against other women?

General attitudes towards violence

- » In your opinion, what are the causes of gender-based violence against women politicians?
- » Is there today more violence against women politicians than before? How do we see it? Why is that so?
- » Based on what you know, can you gain the impression that women politicians are exposed to gender-based violence to a different degree in different political parties? What could be the reasons?
- » What should be done to eliminate such violence? What should be done to ensure the protection of women politicians against violence?
- » During your career, you have tried to put some of those measures on your decision-making agenda, to introduce them or encourage their introduction? What happened with such initiatives? Where are the sources of resistance?

Thank you for your cooperation

Annex 3: **Media analysis methodology**

Research methods:

- 1. The quantitative-qualitative method of media content analysis** (for research purposes, a code list was prepared, covering the following categories: name of the media, date, code of the article, total number of articles in “Politics” section, articles about women politicians in “Politics” section, articles about women politicians in other sections, type of headline, length of article, genre, authorship, motive for reporting, location, theme, a woman in politics as the main subject, one of subjects, object, position of a woman in politics, photograph, theme of the photograph, text accompanying the photograph, use of gender-sensitive language, journalist’s value judgment of the topic).
- 2. Media discourse analysis.** The research corpus of media content consists of six information portals: RTS, *Politika*, *Večernje novosti*, *Nova S*, *Informer* and *Danas*.

To ensure the diversity of the media corpus, the research covered the portal of the public broadcasting service (RTS), two media outlets characterised as semi-tabloids (*Večernje novosti*, *Nova S*), tabloid (*Informer*) and portals of two information-political dailies (*Politika* and *Danas*).

The monitoring period – three weeks from the day of constitution of the new Serbian Government (a comparative analysis of media content of specific days in the week – in the first week, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday were monitored; in the second week, Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday were monitored; in the third week, Monday was monitored) – covers the period from 28 October to 9 November 2020.

The research also covers three case studies that imply the analysis of the discourse of the most illustrative media examples.

- 1) The analysis of media reporting about the adoption of the Law on the Election of Members of Parliament and the Law on Local Elections (the articles relating to the amendment envisaging that electoral lists must contain at least 40% of persons of the underrepresented gender, i.e. women).
- 2) The analysis of media reporting after the announcement of the name of the person given the mandate to form the Serbian Government (articles relating to Prime Minister Ana Brnabić) and the analysis of media reporting about the composition of the new Serbian Government (it was stated that 50% of Government members would be women).
- 3) The analysis of articles conveying insults, expressing sexism and misogyny towards women politicians.

The method of content analysis is applied in researches that quantify specific elements and their appearance in a particular number of articles. The content analysis examines the manifest content of communication, based on empirical data that enable researchers to process data, images, photographs and sounds as text in order to understand what they mean to people, what they enable and prevent, and what are the consequences of information being exchanged (Valić Nedeljković & Kleut, 2013: 63).

The content analysis defines the categories of content that are parts of text content (code list) and the ways in which the content is presented, and determines the frequency of those categories in the text being analysed.

As the content analysis targets a visible text and more rarely a deeper sense potentially hidden behind the manifest content, the research also relied on the media discourse analysis, i.e. the method analysing the relation between the media text and society.

The discourse cannot be understood outside the context in which it was created and the context is therefore in the focus of the media discourse research. By defining social power, Van Dijk states that it implies the control that one group exercises over another, and that the media discourse is the most effective means of power distribution. "Members of more powerful social groups and institutions, and especially their leaders (the elites), have more or less exclusive access to, and control over, one or more

types of public discourse” (Van Dijk, 2008: 9). In the analysis, additional attention is devoted to the fact concerning whom the media give the chance to talk, whom they directly quote and how they do it.

According to feminist linguistics, language is determined by the social and historical context, and as such it is an important means of creating and maintaining patriarchal ideology and repression over women (Kuzmanović Jovanović, 2013: 32). Given the political and social context of Serbia, the analysis of media discourse about women in politics is based on the model of semantic macrostructure, which deals primarily with the selection of the topic. “Ideologically based stereotypes and prejudices may thus be highlighted twice: by their important semantic function of a topic that organizes the semantic microstructures of a discourse, as well as by their schematic emphasis in the beginning or on top of a story” (Van Dijk, 2006: 355).

According to Van Dijk, the media are partial to the reproduction of dominant ideologies. “Of course there will be debate, opposition, differences of opinion, as well as differences among newspapers. However, these are well within the boundaries of tolerable ideological variation. [...] Despite the personal differences and freedom of media users in their processing and use of media discourse, the overall ideological effects of the media are undeniable – the range of acceptable social ideologies is more or less identical with those that have preferential access to the mass media” (Van Dijk, 2006: 253).

The text is the main unit of the media discourse analysis in the present research. The textual analysis helps understand what is contained in the text; however, very important can also be those elements that are omitted from the text, which is why it is also necessary to pay attention to the form and organisation of the text.

