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# Breaking Barriers to Women's Participation in Politics in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine

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## Summary

For Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, the long road to EU membership requires not only economic convergence and approximation of their laws with the EU *acquis communautaire* but also the adoption of EU fundamental values, including progress toward gender equality. In the context of their efforts to pursue reforms and to build democratic institutions, these countries have no choice but incorporate a gender lens into their political discourse and practice. However, their common underlying characteristics, as well as a similar level of external pressure from donors and international organizations, are not necessarily leading to similar results for their gender-related reform attempts, in particular when it comes women's participation in politics.

This paper examines the barriers that still inhibit women's political participation in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. It explains the main roots of women's underrepresentation, first looking at public attitudes in the three countries regarding the efficiency of women politicians and the male-dominated political environment. Based on interviews with women politicians in the three countries, the research focuses on the use of gender quotas for participation in elections at the national and local levels. It describes the path to introducing gender quotas and explores the factors that determine the limits of their effectiveness. The paper then looks at other instruments for mainstreaming gender-balanced policies and their enduring limitations.

The most tangible positive results related to these reforms are the introduction of gender quotas in elections in all three countries, a shift to full proportional representation in the electoral system that resulted in a rapid increase in the proportion of women in parliament in Moldova, and the introduction of a rule mandating the replacement of elected women by other women in case of leaving their seat early in Georgia at the local and national level.

Women politicians continue to face many gender-related challenges. Non-transparent recruitment in political parties, loopholes in legislation that allow parties to circumvent gender quotas, and the weakness and ineffectiveness formal institutions intended to mainstream gender equality are key obstacles for women in starting and developing a political career. At the societal level, much of the public still holds deep-seated gender stereotypes that act as barriers to women taking more active part in the political decision-making process. The numerous persistent factors that hamper women's political participation prove that Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine still have much to do to create a level playing field for men and women in politics.

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The paper offers recommendations for domestic and external actors—including lawmakers, political parties, the media, and foreign donors—on possible ways to enhance women's participation with policy approaches concerning female leadership and gender-balanced decision-making.

The recommendations for domestic actors in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine include to encourage parties to introduce internal women's quotas and to create "women's wings;" to organize gender audits of parties to determine the degree of gender equality in their internal processes, procedures, structure and policies; to introduce anti-sexism norms and sanctions in legislation for the media sector as well as independent regulators in each of the relevant sectors that will monitor and detect any violations

in them; and to introduce a system of anonymous direct complaints in all institutions that will make it easier for women politicians to report sexism or discrimination.

Recommendations for external actors include to build into their capacity-building programs individual-level support to women politicians, to provide support to women politicians at the local level, to develop indicators aimed at assessing the progress

in mainstreaming gender equality as well as conduct gender audits of formal institutions and political parties, to facilitate the exchange of best practices and sharing experience between those parties that have progressed in mainstreaming gender equality and those that still need guidance in this regard, and to support civil society organizations in conducting appraisals of progress in the implementation of gender policies by state institutions.

## Introduction

Gender equality is one indicator of how developed a country is. The value placed on it in a society and in its various institutions, which includes ensuring equal participation of women and men in socially important decisions, determines the wellbeing of everyone in a country, and thus contributes to a higher level of democracy, a more developed economy, and improved lives. In the context of their chosen course to pursue reforms and to build democratic institutions, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine have no choice but incorporate a gender lens into their political discourse and practice.

This paper provides an analysis of the latest reforms regarding women's participation in politics in these three countries that have a common history, goals, and external threat. Their shared totalitarian legacy has shaped their contemporary pro-EU identity and their tense relations with Russia, which is involved in conflicts on the territory of all three. Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine have signed Association Agreements with the EU, and they have formed an Association Trio with the aim to enhance cooperation among themselves. However, what they mostly need on the path to joining the EU is practical changes. Carrying out reforms is vital for all of them but here they diverge—each follows this common goal in a different way. The long road to EU membership requires not only economic convergence and approximation of national laws with the EU *acquis communautaire* but also the adoption of EU fundamental values, including achieving substantive progress toward gender equality.

Their common underlying characteristics, as well as a similar level of external pressure from donors and international organizations in all three countries, do not necessarily lead to similar results for their gender-related reform attempts. Moldova has made more progress in this regard than Georgia and Ukraine. This paper examines the key factors that have contributed to the different rate of progress in increasing the presence of women in politics, and it identifies the challenges and factors that inhibit women's political

engagement in all three countries. The focus is particularly on gender quotas and mechanisms that seek to institutionalize gender equality. The research is based on 31 interviews conducted between May 2021 and March 2022 with women involved in politics at the national or local level in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. (See the list of interviewees in the Appendix).

The first section sets out the state of play in women's representation in politics in Soviet times and today. It explains the main roots of women's underrepresentation in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, and it explores how this has changed or not since the collapse of the Soviet Union. It concludes with an analysis of public attitudes in the three countries regarding the efficiency of women politicians and the male-dominated political environment. The second section focuses on gender quotas for participation in elections at the national and local levels, before looking at other instruments for mainstreaming gender-balanced policies in the three countries. It describes the path to introducing gender quotas and explores the factors that determine the limits of their effectiveness. The paper concludes by looking at key factors that still hamper women's representation in politics in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, and by offering recommendations for external donors, lawmakers, political parties, and the media on possible ways to enhance it with policy approaches concerning female leadership and gender-balanced decision-making.

## Women in Politics Then and Now

Historically, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine have had a shared attitude toward gender equality. In 1980–1987, women made up 33 percent of the members of the Supreme Council of the Soviet Union, 36 percent of the Supreme Councils of Soviet Republics, and 50 percent of regional (territorial, regional, and district) and local (county, city, settlement, and village) councils.<sup>1</sup> A direct comparison with the representation of

1 N. M. Stepanova, M. M. Kyrychenko, and E. V. Kochkina, *Gender Reconstruction of Political Systems*, Aleteya, 2004.

women in the legislatures of Western countries at the time would be inappropriate, however, since in the Soviet Union elections were decorative and members of the Supreme Council had a marginal role in decision-making. As members of the Supreme Council of the Soviet Union, women were more seen than heard. Their inclusion as members of the different Supreme Councils was viewed as a solution to the problem of representation for workers, of whom men made up only 49 percent in the 1970s.<sup>2</sup>

All decisions were made by Communist Party bodies, where women were severely underrepresented. From 1919 to 1991, women made up only 1.9 percent of the members of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, which was the highest policymaking authority within the party.<sup>3</sup> Over the same period, the percentage of women members of the Political Bureaus of the Communist Party at the level of the Georgian, Moldavian, and Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republics was not higher than 3 percent.<sup>4</sup> Contrary to Lenin's once very popular saying in the Soviet Union that "Any cook should be able to rule the country," and thus any woman, in practice the Communist Party did not intend to give women the opportunity to actually determine policy.

Since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, Moldova has eventually made considerable progress in gender equality in political life while Georgia and Ukraine are still far from doing the same. A key challenge for the latter two is a substantial gap in formal political representation for women.

Moldova, where women make up with 53.5 percent of registered voters, ranks 77<sup>th</sup> out of 156 countries in the 2021 Global Gender Equality Index in terms of women's parliamentary representation, with 40 of

101 seats (40 percent) held by women. For the sake of comparison, women constituted 3.7 percent of members of the country's first parliament at independence (1990–1994).<sup>5</sup> As of August 2021, Moldova was one of only two countries where both the president and prime minister were women. However, the representation of women in the cabinet of ministers has been uneven, ranging from 9 percent (1999–2001) to 5 percent (2009–2011) to 53.8 percent (mid 2019) to 11.1 percent (end of 2019) to 29.4 percent (2021).<sup>6</sup> The current cabinet has 13 ministers, three of whom are women, although a woman was appointed minister of internal affairs for the first time.

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While women make up 52 percent of Georgia's registered voters, their participation in the adoption of political decisions and in the policymaking process is very low, with change in this regard very slow. According to the 2021 Global Gender Equality Index, Georgia ranks 99<sup>th</sup> in terms women's representation in parliament.<sup>7</sup> Following the elections in late 2020, women made up 20.7 percent of parliamentarians, compared with 11 percent in the parliament elected in 2012 and 15 percent in the one elected in 2016. Since 2010, women's share of ministerial-level positions has

2 Carol Nechemias, "Women's Participation: From Lenin to Gorbachev," in Wilma Rule and Norma Noonan (eds.), *Russian Women in Politics and Society*, Greenwood Press, 1996, p. 21.

3 A. D. Chernev, 229 *Kremlin Leaders*, Rodina, 1996, p.82.

4 Jerry Hough, "Women and Women's Issues in Soviet Policy Debates," in Dorothy Atkinson, Alexander Dallin, and Gail Lapidus (eds.), *Women in Russia*, Harvester Press, 1978, pp. 356–357.

5 Enhancing Democracy in Moldova through Inclusive and Transparent Elections Project, [2021 Early Parliamentary Elections. Gender Perspective](#), UNDP, 2021.

6 Valentina Bodrug-Lungu, [Republic of Moldova Country Gender Equality Brief](#), UN Women, 2021.

7 World Economic Forum, [Global Gender Gap Report 2021](#), March 2021.

also substantially improved, from 5.6 percent in 2010 to 27.3 percent in 2018 and 20 percent in 2022.<sup>8</sup>

Currently 60 percent of registered voters in Ukraine are women. However, their participation in political decision-making is still low. According to the 2021 Global Gender Equality Index, the country ranks 98<sup>th</sup> in terms of women's representation in parliament. In 2021, women made up 20.8 percent of parliamentarians and 13 percent of the cabinet of ministers.<sup>9</sup>

### Public Attitudes

Citizens of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine see gender equality as one of the main achievements of their respective country. According to one survey, Moldovans and Ukrainians are more satisfied with the level of gender equality in their country than with any other political value—including media freedom, respect for human rights, and good governance—while Georgians are more positive about freedom of speech and freedom of media than about gender equality.<sup>10</sup> In Moldova and Ukraine, slightly more men reported being satisfied with gender equality and other democratic values more than women did. However, despite the fact that gender equality is perceived as one of the main values in all three countries, public attitudes toward women in politics demonstrate deeply rooted stereotypes and reveal an internal dichotomy in this regard.

In a 2021 survey in Georgia, 46 percent of respondents said that the 20.7 percent proportion of female parliamentarians was too low, 36 percent said it was about right, and 6 percent said it was too high.<sup>11</sup> There were differences in views based on social and demo-

graphic variables. Women, people under the age of 35, and people with higher education were more likely to say the number of women in parliament was too low. Meanwhile, 54 percent of respondents said increasing the number of female parliamentarians would have a positive impact on the country and 9 percent that it would have the opposite effect. A majority of women and people with higher education said a higher number of female parliamentarians would be a positive. In another 2021 survey, 49 percent said that the best proportion of women and men in parliament would be 50–50.<sup>12</sup>

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In a 2018 survey in Moldova, 61.3 percent of respondents said that gender would not matter to them when it came to voting for a parliamentary candidate. Only 9 percent stated that they would prefer to vote for a woman but 28.9 percent for a man. Forty-three percent of respondents said that the number of women in parliament was too low while 6 percent said it was too high, with 50 percent of female respondents and 34 percent of male ones saying the number was too low.<sup>13</sup>

In a 2018 survey in Ukraine, 66 percent of respondents said that politics was male-dominated—36 percent said that this was how it should be and 61 percent that they would like a more equal balance.<sup>14</sup> In a 2020 survey, 82 percent said they were in favor

8 South Caucasus Poverty and Equity Team, [Country Gender Assessment Georgia](#), World Bank Group.

9 Platform for Gender Equality from Moldova, [Alternative report on the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women \(CEDAW\) in the Republic of Moldova](#), European Country of Origin Information Network, 2020.

10 EU Neighbours east, [Opinion Survey 2020: Regional Overview](#), European Union, June 16, 2020.

11 Caucasus Research Resource Centers Georgia, [Future of Georgia Survey Report](#), 2021.

12 Caucasus Research Resource Centers Georgia, [Public attitudes in Georgia](#), 2021.

13 Gender Barometer, [How do Women and Men Participate in Politics and Decision-Making?](#), UN Women, 2018.

14 Office of Vice Prime Minister Ivanna Klymush-Tsintsadze, [Ukraine National Survey on Equality Between Men and Women July 2018](#), 2018.



of women going into politics. Respondents broadly agreed that gender was not a particularly important factor in whether members of parliament were effective in their work. However, respondents tended to say that men would be more effective in executive positions such as city or village mayor, head of regional state administration, prime minister, and president.<sup>15</sup>

### Gender Quotas at the National Level

The introduction of gender quotas for elections is viewed by most organizations fighting for gender equality as one of the most critical political reforms of the last two decades in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Quotas could become an effective way in improving women's representation, but only when implemented correctly.

#### Georgia

In Georgia, several attempts have been made to introduce gender quotas for elections. In 2011, the parliament passed legislation for a voluntary quota backed with a financial incentive. Parties were promised an additional 10 percent in state funding for their campaigns if they would submit electoral lists with at least 20 percent of candidates being women. However, just two parties met that requirement in the 2012 elections and neither won any seats. This triggered a discussion about the introduction of mandatory quotas for parliamentary membership and party lists. In 2015, the Task Force on Women's Political Participation—a nonpartisan advocacy platform—called for the introduction of a “zebra” quota system; that is, one that would require every second candidate on party lists to be a woman, with an incentive of 30 percent additional state funding for cooperating parties. The proposal was rejected by the parliament, without it being presented in the plenary. That same year, two members of parliament submitted an alternative legislative initiative that would require that one of every

three candidates in party lists should be of the less represented gender on the list. In a first, this initiative was discussed in a plenary session of the parliament. However, there was no vote on it.

In 2017, another initiative backed by the efforts of several women's rights groups received the signature of 37,000 citizens. This again called for a “zebra” gender quota for lists for parliamentary elections, and also for replacing any elected member relinquishing their electoral mandate with the next successful candidate on the party list who is of the same gender. However, the parliament voted down the related legislative proposal in 2018.

An attempt to introduce gender quotas was finally successful in 2020 before the last elections. Under a new law, all parties contending for parliament now have to award at least every fourth party-list seat they win to a person of a different gender from the previous three. In practical terms, that means at least 30 of the 120 seats chosen on a proportional basis go to women. The 30 seats for which candidates are directly elected from districts are not subject to the quota. Georgia is due to switch to a fully proportional system in 2024, at which point at least 37 seats in parliament will be set aside for women. Further changes will go into effect in 2028, when the one-in-every-four formula will be replaced by one-in-every-three, so that at least 50 seats will go to women.

#### Moldova

In Moldova, the discussion on the adoption of a gender quota started in the 1990s. In 1997, two women parliamentarians launched an initiative to introduce a provision in the electoral code requiring a minimum of 30 percent women candidates on party lists, but this was not adopted. When a new law on political parties was being drafted in 2007, there was a proposal to introduce a to-be-defined quota for women as one of the requirements for the registration of parties, but

<sup>15</sup> Rating Group Ukraine, [The role of women in Ukrainian society](#), Sociological Group “Rating”, 2020.

this also was not adopted.<sup>16</sup> Another initiative in 2010 failed after a group of parliamentarians introduced a draft law to modify the Electoral Code by imposing a minimum quota of 30 percent of women on candidate lists for all elections.<sup>17</sup> Finally in 2016 a new law introduced a minimum quota of 40 percent representation of each gender, without reference to their position on the lists, to increase women's representation in political and public decision-making.

The law also amended the Law on Government to include a 40 percent minimum quota of representation for each gender when forming the government. However, the reform of the central public administration carried out in 2017 undermined this institutional mechanism for promoting gender equality. Article 10 of the Law on Government adopted that year states that, when drawing up the list of candidates for the government, the candidate for prime minister must take into account the legislation regarding equal opportunity for men and women based on criteria of professional qualifications and merit. Thus, the requirement for having a 40 percent quota for each gender in the formation of the government was superseded just after it had been applied to the newly formed one in 2017.

In 2017, Moldova moved from a full proportional-representation system to mixed one with half of the members of parliament to be elected in single-member constituencies and half from party lists. Since the new system did not include any provision for ensuring a minimum representation by women in the constituencies, the efficacy of the 40 percent quota was reduced by half by now applying to half of seats in parliament. Following the 2019 elections, women held 25.7 percent of seats in parliament.

In 2019, the parliament voted to reinstate a full proportional representation system. The requirements for drawing up party lists were also changed.

Party lists for parliamentary and local elections should still have at least 40 percent of each gender, but unlike in the 2016 law with at least four candidates of each gender for every ten places.<sup>18</sup> The 2021 early elections that were held under these new requirements resulted in an increase in the share of women parliamentarians to 39.6 percent.

### *Ukraine*

The first attempt to introduce a gender quota at the national level to mitigate gender imbalance in Ukraine's politics was made in 2013 with the adoption of amendments to the Law on Political Parties. Article 8 states that a political party must include in its statute that at least 30 percent of candidates on its electoral lists should be women. Parties that had at least 30 percent of their list as women and passed a 5 percent vote threshold would receive an additional 10 percent in annual state funding. The key weakness of this law, as other ones in Ukraine, was that it included no sanctions for a party if it failed to meet the mandatory requirement for this gender quota. As a result, the Central Election Commission was able to rule that it could not refuse to register a party's candidates list on the grounds of non-compliance with the gender quota. The financial incentive did not motivate parties to include more women on their list either, and it was not surprising that in the 2014 elections only 14 percent of candidates elected to the parliament were women.

Another attempt was made in 2019 when the parliament adopted an Electoral Code that introduced a gender quota of 40 percent for candidate lists in all elections. The code also mandates that there must be at least two persons of the same gender in each group of five candidates. Importantly, this time the law provides for the Central Election Commission to refuse to register a list of candidates if it is not in accordance with the new code. The 2023 parliamen-

<sup>16</sup> International IDEA, [Country Data, Republic of Moldova](#), February 9, 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Daniela Terzi-Barbarosie, [Participation of women in public and political life in the Republic of Moldova](#), Eastern Partnership Facility of the Council of Europe, May 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Platform for Gender Equality from Moldova, Alternative report on the implementation of CEDAW.



tary elections will be the first ones since the new Electoral Code came into force.

### Gender Quotas at the Local Level

The latest local elections in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine were the first in all three countries for which an obligatory gender quota applied. Developments at the local-government level therefore provide an important perspective on progress in the greater participation of women in politics in all three countries.

#### Georgia

In Georgia, the October 2021 local elections were the first to be held after gender quotas were introduced at this level in June, in the context of a deep national political crisis and of dramatic polarization of society. As noted above, parties are now legally required to have at least one in every three candidates on their candidates lists of a different gender, following the cancellation of the “one-in-two” quota, which had been in force for several years but had never applied as no local elections were held in this period.<sup>19</sup>

In 2017, a rule was also introduced to ensure that, if a woman member of a local council were to resign, she would have to be replaced by another woman. In 2021, the Constitutional Court upheld this rule, stating that it was justified as it guarantees the “effective functioning of the mandatory quota system.”

The number of women now elected at the local level shows that the quota has had a positive impact. In 2021, women won 31 percent of the list seats in local councils, a share much higher than in the 2017 elections when it was 13 percent. However, this result does not concern constituency seats. Out of 664 of these elected in 2021, only 45 are women. The situation is similar when it comes to elected mayors. Following the 2017 local elections, only one out of 64 mayors was female; today the number is three. The problem is

still at the candidate-selection stage: in 2021, women accounted for 26 of 239 of the candidates in mayoral races and for 488 of 2,769 candidates in constituency races during the local elections.<sup>20</sup>

#### Moldova

In Moldova, gender quotas were introduced at the local level only two days before the start of the electoral period of the 2019 elections, in which mayors of cities and villages and members of district, city, and village councils were voted in for a four-year term. The crucial amendment to the Electoral Code affecting local elections concerned a 40 percent quota of at least four candidates from each gender in every ten names on lists. This was supposed to tackle the issue of parties placing women candidates in non-winning positions on their lists. Nonetheless, several party lists that did not fulfill the quota were still registered for the elections. That was because District Electoral Commissions accepted lists by rounding the quota requirement down, rather than up, to the nearest whole number.<sup>21</sup>

A complaint about this was later filed with the Central Electoral Commission, which declined to issue a ruling on the matter. It is notable in this regard that at the time there were no woman in the Central Electoral Commission, while women were well represented in District Electoral Councils and dominated in Precinct Electoral Bureaus.

In 2019, women made up 45 percent of candidates for local councils and 43 percent of those for district and municipal councils, but only 27 percent of candidates for mayoralties. The elections saw a sharp increase in the representation of women in district councils to 27.1 percent from 18.5 percent in 2015. The proportion of women as members of city councils also improved to 36.5 percent from 30 percent in 2015.

19 Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, [International Election Observation Mission Georgia – Local Elections, 2 October 2021. Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions](#), Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, October 3, 2021.

20 National Democratic Institute, Limited Long Term Election Assessment 2021 Municipal Elections in Georgia Election Assessment Report September 1 - November 5, 2021, undated.

21 European Network of Elections Monitoring Organizations, [ENEMO International Election Observation Mission. General Local Elections, 20 October - Moldova 2019](#), October 22, 2019.

There was only a slight increase in the proportion of women mayors to 21.8 percent from 20.6 percent.<sup>22</sup>

### *Ukraine*

In Ukraine, the 2020 local elections were the first ones held not only after the first results of the decentralization reform but also after the adoption of the new Electoral Code in 2019, which provides for the introduction of 40 percent gender quotas. According to the Electoral Code, parties must ensure a gender ratio of two-to-three in each five positions on the candidates lists. Contrary to expectations, however, women's representation in local councils fell by 12.6 percent following the 2020 elections. This was caused by a sharp decrease in the representation of women at the level of settlement and village councils—respectively from 46.1 percent and 55.7 percent in 2015 to 37.9 percent and 41.3 percent in 2020, while the proportion of women elected as members of city councils increased from 29.2 percent to 32.6 percent. The proportion of women as village, town, and city mayors also fell from 31.4 percent in the 2015 elections to 16.6 percent in 2020.

The introduction of the gender quota at the local level had a limited impact for several reasons. The most important is the attitude of the parties. Under the proportional representation system with local representatives elected only from lists, only political parties have the right to nominate candidates, whereas in constituencies an individual could get themselves listed a candidate. The overwhelming majority of the parties nominated men as the top three candidates on their lists, which are most likely to lead election to a council seat. An analysis of 271 candidate lists of political parties registered for elections to all 22 regional councils in 2020 shows that in only 45 cases (16.6 percent) political parties nominated women at the top of their lists.<sup>23</sup> Looking at the lists of ten leading

political parties shows that, although they made up 43 percent of their lists for regional and city councils, women made up respectively 27 percent and 33 percent of the top three positions.

The second reason why the gender quota did not have the expected effect is that the Electoral Code gives parties a way to circumvent it. Candidates once registered can then refuse to run up to 18 days before the elections or can decline to submit an application for registration as a local council member up to 20 days after the declaration of the results. Thus, parties can be registered for elections based on lists in full compliance with the quota, but then they frequently oblige women to withdraw before the voting or after the results are announced. For example, 63 percent of those who did not take up their seat on Kyiv's city councils soon after the elections results were announced were women. With men making up 77.5 percent of leaders of parties' local branches, female candidates are used in this way as a tool that helps a party meet the registration requirements.

The decentralization reform has also played a significant role in undermining the positive effect of the introduction of the gender quota at the local level. It consolidated territorial communities and reduced the number of local councils, which has led to increased competition for seats and to the growing importance of financial and other resources for election campaigns. Previously, elections in small communities did not involve large-scale campaigning as candidates were mostly well known to the community and able to organize meetings with voters and disseminate information on their own without much funding. The creation of larger communities has highlighted the unequal access to resources for women and men. The issue is not only one of money—for example, for printing the candidates' programs or travelling from one village to another—but also of time which women usually lack due to their other commitments, including family ones.

22 UNDP, [Gender Profile of the 2019 Local General Elections](#), January 24, 2020.

23 Based on data from the Central Election Commission, [Gender monitoring of local elections](#), December 15, 2020.

## Mainstreaming Gender-Balanced Policies

Though there has been no “one-size-fits-all” approach in Georgia, Moldova, and Romania when it comes to mainstreaming gender-balanced policies, the establishment of new gender-equality institutions with limited functions and resources has led to limited expectations and to humble results.

### Georgia

In Georgia, the parliament adopted a Law on Gender Equality in 2010, which remains the main legislation in this field. The law provided for the establishment a Gender Equality Council, whose primary functions of the council are:

- Facilitating the parliament’s defining of the main directions of state policy in the gender field.
- Conducting gender analysis of legislation and drafting proposals for the elimination of gender inequality in the laws of the country.
- Developing and implementing a system for monitoring and assessing measures to ensure gender equality, and for developing relevant recommendations accordingly.
- Discussing the reports of the Interagency Commission on Gender Equality, Violence against Women and Domestic Violence.

A Gender Department was established in the office of the Public Defender—the ombudsperson—in 2013. It took on the activities of the Center for the Rights of Children and Women, a state body that had been operating since 2001. The department is guided by the constitution, relevant international conventions and treaties, the Law on the Public Defender, the statute of the Public Defender’s office, and legislation on gender equality. The task of the department is to oversee the protection of human rights and freedoms in this field, to promote the integration of gender-equality issues in the human-rights activities of the Public Defender, and to raise public awareness in order to strengthen gender equality.

The creation of a post of advisor to the prime minister on human rights and gender equality in 2013 was another element in the institutional structure for mainstreaming gender in public administration. When a new incumbent took over in that post in 2021, however, the title was shortened to that of advisor to prime minister on human rights, even though the portfolio still covers gender-equality issues.

There does not appear to have been any attempt to create a women’s caucus in parliament, and none of the interviewees reported having knowledge of such an effort. They also pointed to the lack of solidarity among women in the parliament.

Gender mainstreaming has also been incorporated at the local level. The establishment of gender-equality councils within local-government bodies started in 2017. Their members meet once every three months to discuss issues on the agenda of the local council’s meeting. The functions of the gender-equality councils include the analysis of legal acts adopted by municipal bodies and officials as well as the discussion of municipal development strategies, gender-sensitive budgets, and draft budgets. They also include reviewing complaints about gender discrimination, responding to these within their established competencies, and developing appropriate recommendations. All municipalities also have a mayor-appointed gender advisor, whose rights and responsibilities are the same in all municipalities. In most cases, these gender advisors perform their duties in parallel with other duties.<sup>24</sup> And, in most cases, the local gender-equality councils have no or little budget for their activities—39 percent of them are financed from the local budget with their allocation varying from €800 to €8,000.<sup>25</sup>

24 See Article 13 (12), [Law of Georgia on Gender Equality](#), Government of Georgia, March 26, 2010.

25 Public Defender of Georgia, [Assessment of Gender Policy of Local Self-Government Bodies with Special Emphasis on Women’s Economic Empowerment](#), 2020.

### *Moldova*

In Moldova, the institutional structure for mainstreaming gender is provided by the 2006 Law on Providing Equal Opportunities for Women and Men and includes the Government Commission on Gender Equality. The commission is meant to:

- Introduce a gender perspective in national policies and programs.
- Introduce gender coordinating groups in ministries and other central public authorities with competencies to ensure a proper understanding of equality between women and men in policies and programs in all fields and at all levels of decision making and implementation.
- Introduce gender units within local public authorities with competencies to monitor the implementation of programs, and to contribute to the organization of information campaigns, research, and other activities on equality between women and men carried out locally.

However, the situation has been disappointing when it comes to implementation. While the gender coordinating groups have been set up at the level of central public administration, the legal provisions continue to be ignored or unknown at that of local public administration.

There have been several attempts to launch a women's caucus in Moldova's parliament. The first steps were taken in 2015 when women parliamentarians from all parties were invited to discuss the creation of a common platform for dialogue as well as the opportunities and challenges in the establishment of a cross-party women's caucus. As a result of this meeting, the Coordination Council of the Women's Platform was established, consisting of five members, one member from each parliamentary faction.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> IPU Parline, [Women's Platform of the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova](#), Inter-Parliamentary Union, March 2015.

However, the platform was not active for a long time—until the coronavirus pandemic triggered the need for closer cooperation. In 2020, women parliamentarians initiated consultations with local elected representatives to share their experience of fighting the pandemic and of ensuring citizens' access to education and social services. Through these discussions, the women parliamentarians jointly identified the challenges faced by vulnerable groups in the context of the pandemic. Despite political differences among them, the platform has promoted new policies and developed new bills containing solutions to the problems faced by women and vulnerable groups during the pandemic.

### *Ukraine*

In Ukraine, attempts aimed at ensuring that gender equality issues are incorporated in all public policies have been made though the legal framework in the 2005 Law on Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men. In 2017, a new position of government commissioner for gender policy was created by the cabinet of ministers with the aim of ensuring systemic and coordinated work on gender issues. The main tasks of the commissioner are:

- Promoting the implementation of a unified state policy aimed at achieving equal rights and opportunities for women and men in all spheres of society.
- Coordinating the work of ministries and other central and local executive bodies to ensure equal rights and opportunities for women and men.
- Monitoring compliance by the cabinet of ministers with the principle of gender equality in the adoption of regulations.
- Participation in the representation by the prime minister and ministers in international meetings and forums.
- Cooperation and interaction with civil society on issues related to ensuring equal rights and opportunities for women and men in all spheres of life.

However, most functions of the commissioner for gender policy are of an informational and expert nature. Its responsibilities in this regard include obtaining information from officials and organizations, preparing inquiries and reports, informing the public through the media on equal rights and opportunities for women and men, initiating the creation of expert groups and convening meetings, and participating in meetings of the cabinet and others government bodies with an advisory vote. The establishment of this position—working in parallel with the government’s gender working group, which is responsible for reviewing progress in the governmental program—has not led to automatic increases in funding of government programs or in the number of measures for gender equality.

Since 2020, all executive bodies in Ukraine are obliged to create special units and appoint advisers to deal exclusively with ensuring equal rights and opportunities for women and men. One of the main tasks of the units is to analyze and assess the impact of state and regional policies on women and men as well as to organize the implementation of basic international legal instruments in gender equality. Local-government bodies can also do the same changes but are not obliged to do so.

An Equal Opportunities Caucus was established in the parliament in 2011 to promote the fight against social stereotypes in gender policy. In this cross-party body, male and female parliamentarians cooperate in creating and supporting joint bills, and they advocate gender equality and equal opportunities for women and men in work, education, politics, healthcare, and other spheres of life.

### Lessons Learned

Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine have made some progress in improving the level of women’s representation in politics but there are still factors hampering this in all three countries.

One of the key factors hampering women’s political empowerment is the composition of parties. Recruit-

ment for most parties lacks transparency, while their overwhelmingly male leadership and the importance of having internal party connections means that men are often favored over women. Besides, nepotism and high levels of corruption create barriers for the inclusion of new faces in the political parties, particularly women. As a result, few women are included in the top 10 percent of candidates on most party lists or in party leadership contests, which means their chances of being elected are greatly reduced. As one interviewee from Georgia said,

Most parties are led by men who do not want to see a strong woman—a competitor—next to them. It drives them to look for some solutions like, for example, recruiting those female candidates who are loyal and/or dependent on the political party management. It is not surprising to see the increasing number of wives, sisters, female relatives of political party members in the electoral lists.

Even after being chosen as candidates, women seeking election to decision-making positions are constrained by different factors. This includes a lack of financial support for campaigning, while elections in all three countries increasingly demand a lot of financial resources for such things as political advertising, renting office space, or printing political programs. In Ukraine, the increases in the size of the election deposit required from candidates and the introduction of election deposits at all electoral levels—both of which were included in the new electoral code in 2019—are unfavorable for the wider participation of women as candidates in local elections.

One interviewee from Ukraine argues:

Minimizing the costs of elections for women and stricter monitoring of contributions and expenses incurred by political parties should be a priority. The high deposit makes it much more difficult to access politics. It is not only about the registration fee that is equally shared among all members of a



political party's local branch, but also a deposit which should be paid by each candidate running for the position of a mayor in city with population over 90,000 citizens. The amount of costs for the campaign is another serious obstacle for women who have to compete with experienced men enjoying support from local oligarchs and visibility among voters. As the Electoral Code does not set limits on the maximum amount of costs that can be spent on campaigning, some female candidates cannot compete with big businessmen entering politics and have no chance to win.

Gender quotas remain a controversial issue in all three countries. The majority of interviewees said they supported gender quotas as an effective instrument that can make significant changes in the number of women elected at the local and national levels. As one from Georgia put it,

What I believe is important about quotas is that the issue of women's underrepresentation has been raised. The problem has been articulated. The first step to its solution has been made.

However, there are still reservations about how gender quotas work in practice. In all three countries, the quota applies only for nominating candidates. It is a common practice that parties include women candidates on their lists only for compliance with the registration requirements and then later force to step down from their seats. That makes it possible to circumvent gender quotas. To mitigate this challenge, a rule mandating the replacement of elected women by other women in case of leaving their seat early—as has been introduced in Georgia at the local-government level—could be one solution.

One of the interviewees shared her experience when she was included on a party list just so that it could comply with the quota requirement. According to the arrangement with the party, she was expected to step down immediately after being elected. She said

that most men did not take her seriously during the pre-election period as they knew that she was just a “cosmetic” candidate and that she was widely stigmatized for that. However, she refused to step down after being elected to her local council and she has become one of her country's most proactive politicians.

Growing unethical practices by parties to comply with gender quotas without undergoing any internal transformation are especially common at the local level. Most interviewees pointed out that the introduction of quotas triggered fierce public debates in their country on whether they can be an effective instrument to achieve gender equality in politics, with most opponents arguing that finding enough women motivated to enter politics at the local level would be impossible and would lead to parties nominating “cosmetic” women candidates.

***Growing unethical practices by parties to comply with gender quotas without undergoing any internal transformation are especially common at the local level.***

Most interviewees agreed that gender quotas do not ensure rapid positive change in the political environment. Their introduction has had a clear positive effect but it is not a cure for all problems. Though it might lead to quantitative changes, quotas by themselves do not guarantee any qualitative transformations in politics. Further steps on raising awareness among the public on benefits of including men and women equally in decision-making are necessary to achieve any tangible results.

The challenges women face does not decrease after they are elected. The environment of political institutions in all three countries is not gender-friendly; for example, with regard to sitting times in parliaments, meeting schedules of political parties, and lack of childcare facilities. This often deters women from considering entering political life. One interviewee

from Moldova asked if a woman will “rush to enter an absolutely new environment for her where she will be inevitably attacked for bringing a child to the parliamentary session or leaving her family without care while she is at the session?” before adding that “politics is created by men and for men.” This extends to rolling back progress toward equality. As one of the interviewees from Georgia noted, “the decision to change the quota [from one-in-two to one-in-three] was made solely by men who were scared of losing their seats.”

***The formal institutions for mainstreaming gender equality are still weak and ineffective.***

The culture of cooperation among women politicians across parties remains limited—as exemplified by the varying progress in establishing cross-party parliamentary caucuses for them in the three countries—which makes it hard for them to join forces to promote high-priority topics. The efforts to create women’s parliamentary caucuses have had shortcomings such as long or frequently postponed meetings or the use of a formalistic approach that is a real obstacle for women’s platforms to become an effective tool for cooperation. The meetings are organized just to tick a box—for example, to meet a requirement of international organizations—and there is no intention to raise and solve important questions. As a result of the fragmentation of their efforts, elected women politicians frequently cannot achieve tangible results when it comes to promoting gender equality.

The formal institutions for mainstreaming gender equality are still weak and ineffective. They are frequently criticized for their formalistic approach, mere appearance of action, insufficient financial resources to ensure the effective implementation of their activities, and lack of professional staff with the relevant expertise. One interviewee from Georgia said that “most formal institutions such as gender councils do little to contribute to any changes. Meeting from

time to time behind closed doors and doing nothing but talking is the vivid example how the Georgian government deals with gender issues.” One from Ukraine stated: “More should be done to equip officials with certain tools so they could achieve some tangible results. Currently the government commissioner for gender policy has very few mechanisms and definitely lacks resources—both financial and human—to ensure gender equality.” Most interviewees showed little, and sometimes even no, awareness of the activities of such institutions. One from Moldova further noted that “the mere fact that government changes frequently in the country does not contribute to consistency and continuity in the actions aimed at real changes in the society.”

Another challenge women face is ubiquitous sexism in the collective political mindset in the three countries that reinforces old gender roles. Evidence of this includes President Volodymyr Zelensky describing women as a tourism brand for Ukraine, the mayor of the city of Belz, Renato Ysaty, raising doubts about a woman parliamentarian’s capacity to draft laws as though “she is a pretty woman, she was sewing underwear at a garment factory for all her life,” or the statement by the Georgian opposition politician Mamuka Khazaradze a female minister that she “can cook khachapuri but knows nothing about infrastructure.” Examples like these prove again and again that the three countries are far from inculcating social attitudes in favor of gender equality.

Such statements do not only promote sexism but also reinforce deeply rooted stereotypes. The consistent perception of women as caretakers skilled in the domestic sphere and men as more competent in leadership and experienced in politics is still prevalent in all three countries. As one interviewee from Ukraine put it,

It is a common misconception that women entering politics are inexperienced whereas most men are much more skillful and advanced. I know a lot of men who were running together with me with zero

experience in politics and no one has ever blamed them for it. In a couple of months after being elected women will definitely acquire the necessary experience and this problem will be solved. However, men will never be able to emphasize issues that they do not face on a daily basis and imbalances will remain forever.

These stereotypes tend to be more deeply entrenched away from the main urban centers. As one interviewee from Moldova said,

There, women are still associated only with family and household. This fact might partially explain why there are so few women who are elected as mayors in small cities. Even though those few women may be much more efficient than men, these deeply rooted stereotypes cannot be broken out easily and quickly.

The digital age has brought new tools that can help women to achieve greater representation in politics. However, social media has also become the principal place in which psychological violence—in the form of sexist and misogynistic remarks, humiliating images, mobbing, intimidation, and threats—is perpetrated against women politicians. Numerous shaming stories relating to the private life or appearance of individuals also are used to discredit women politicians. Since most often those who spread such stories remain unpunished, women do not hurry to start their political career in such hostile conditions. The majority of interviewees said that the level of sexist hostility has risen online, making it possible for perpetrators to attack women politicians without being prosecuted.

The lack of success stories and role models among successful female politicians is another impediment to the more active involvement of women in politics. As nowadays success is measured in visibility, it is mainly national-level women politicians appearing frequently on the television screen who serve as role

models. Though they may motivate the younger generation to be more politically active, their impact is rather limited. First, because they do not constitute a critical mass and, second, because they have been in politics for a long time and still their path to success is not so clear. As soon as the number of women politicians, especially at the local level, serving as role models increases, women experience fewer threats and anxiety about entering the political environment that is absolutely unknown for them, and they tend to demonstrate more understanding what a political career requires.

***Social media has also become the principal place in which psychological violence is perpetrated against women politicians.***

Ultimately, the inclusion of women in politics is still a marginal issue in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. It is raised mainly by women whereas greater gender equality can only be achieved if women and men alike actively engage in making it reality. The engagement of men as agents of change in promoting gender equality is a key to success. That is not only in the interest of women to struggle for an inclusive society. The engagement of more men in gender-equality initiatives makes the public see that this is not a marginal issue but a necessary prerequisite for the benefit of the whole of society.

## **Conclusion**

Ongoing political reforms in Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine aim at promoting gender equality. The most tangible positive results related to these reforms are the introduction of gender quotas in all three countries, a shift to full proportional representation in the electoral system that resulted in a rapid increase in the proportion of women in parliament in Moldova, and the introduction of a rule mandating the replacement of elected women by other women in case of

leaving their seat early in Georgia at the local and national level.

Reform can also have unintended gender consequences, however. Decentralization in Ukraine was supposed to create more opportunities for marginalized groups to make their voice heard and to give more chances to women to become engaged in the political process as local elections are considered more accessible. Due to changes in tax and budget legislation in the context of decentralization, the revenues of local authorities have increased more than three-fold, which might explain why the predominantly male leadership of most political parties became so interested in getting more seats in local government bodies and why so few women were elected in 2020 as members of village and town councils as well as mayors in comparison to in 2015.

***The numerous persistent factors that hamper women’s political participation prove that the three countries still have much to do to create a level playing field for men and women in politics.***

Women politicians continue to face many gender-related challenges. Non-transparent recruitment processes within political parties, loopholes in legislation that allow to parties to circumvent gender quotas, and the weakness and ineffectiveness formal institutions intended to mainstream gender equality are key obstacles for women in their starting and developing a political career. At the societal level, much of the public still holds deep-seated gender stereotypes that act as barriers to women taking more active part in the political decision-making process. The numerous persistent factors that hamper women’s political participation prove that the three countries still have much to do to create a level playing field for men and women in politics.

There are causes for optimism, though. Despite the enduring obstacles listed above, the experience

with the latest policies aimed at making the political environment in Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine more gender-balanced still offer lessons to be learned and considered by each of three countries, as well as other in the broader region, and their external partners, while carrying out reforms in this field.

### ***Recommendations for Domestic Actors***

Parties should be encouraged to introduce internal quotas (also called soft quotas) to help women achieve equality with men in taking leading party positions. The introduction in all parties of soft quotas or intra-party procedures that guarantee equal representation of women and men will allow women to influence the decision-making process and improve their managerial, leadership, and communication skills.

Parties should also be encouraged to create “women’s wings,” either with the prospect of corresponding state funding or of a reduction in the size of their election deposits. Such bodies can promote women’s solidarity and mutual support within parties. Mentoring programs in which representatives of a party help and support women who have just joined should also become widespread.

Organizing gender audits of parties to determine the degree of gender equality in their internal processes, procedures, structures, and policies would be another effective measure. These could be carried out jointly by those public bodies in charge of gender policy and civil society organizations. Parties should then update their policies in terms of gender equality on the basis of such audits.

Manifestations of sexism in any sphere of public life—and especially in the media, advertising, and public statements of officials—should be publicly condemned. An important task is to develop and implement effective mechanisms for clearing the media space from sexist statements; for example, by the introduction of relevant norms and sanctions in legislation as well as creating independent regulators in each of the relevant sectors that will monitor and detect any violations in them.

A system of direct complaints filed by women politicians who have become victims of sexism, discrimination, and gendered disinformation should be developed in all three countries. This could follow the model of the *gender.monitor.md* online platform in Moldova, which was created “to map cases of sexism in the public sphere and cases of violence against women in elections, and in between elections.”<sup>27</sup> Such a system should be introduced in institutions including parliaments, local government councils, media companies, and parties to enable women in each of these to file complaints, with the option for the complainant to remain anonymous. In order for disciplinary measures to be taken as a result of a complaint, the burden of proof should not be on the woman claiming to be the target of sexism but on the alleged perpetrators to show that they had no such intent.

### *Recommendations for External Actors*

Any capacity building and trainings provided or funded by external actors should be accompanied by more tailor-made actions targeted at individual-level support to women politicians. As any group-level support that goes through male-dominated institutions—council, parliament, party, etc.—might have a very limited effect, women politicians should be supported independently from of their belonging to one’s group. This might include assistance in launching a successful public-relations campaign or funding the employment of assistants for novice women politicians. For instance, in previous years, some international organizations developed projects that included paying the salaries of assistants to female members of parliament in Ukraine. However, these projects were randomly implemented and they did not include local councils. A more systematic approach to such support to individual women politicians is needed.

External actors should ensure that more of the support they provide is provided to women politicians

in small cities and villages. Investing in women who are ideas-driven and drive changes at the local level is an essential stepping-stone for ensuring gender equality nationwide. More success stories of women politicians elected as mayors or local council members are important and necessary to break out entrenched stereotypes. It is vitally important to ensure women’s visibility in local elections campaigns; for example, by helping those running for local office gain media exposure by equipping them with necessary knowledge on how to debate, deliver public speeches, and use social media.

International organizations should assist in the development of effective monitoring and evaluation of women-focused institutions and formal political bodies that are engaged in mainstreaming gender equality. They should support the development of more specific indicators aimed at assessing the progress in mainstreaming gender equality to increase the effectiveness of existing institutions.

There is a need for external actors to work directly with political parties to ensure there is transparency in the nomination of candidates and their placing on electoral lists as well as to promote the introduction of internal quotas for women’s participation. They should develop a common approach to all political parties in each country to encourage and to facilitate the exchange of best practices and sharing experience between those parties that have already succeeded in mainstreaming gender equality and those that still need guidance in this regard.

External actors should devote particular attention to ensuring that civil society is fully involved in the gender audits and monitoring of formal institutions and political parties. Civil society organizations, supported by funding from external actors, should play a leading role by conducting their own appraisals of progress in the implementation of gender policies by state institutions.

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<sup>27</sup> Platform for Gender Equality, [Moldova Platform for Gender Equality](#), undated.



## Appendix. Interviewees

### *Georgia*

**Eka Beselia**, member of parliament 2008–2020.

**Maia Bitadze**, deputy mayor of Tbilisi 2017–2020, member of parliament since 2020.

**Fati Chagalidze**, head of Shuakhevi Gender Council since 2021.

**Lana Galdava**, member of parliament since 2020.

**Tamar Kordzaia**, member of parliament since 2020.

**Teona Kupunia**, deputy director, National Democratic Institute.

**Maka Meshveliani**, senior fellow for elections and political processes, National Democratic Institute.

**Manana Narimanidze**, mayor of Dusheti since 2021.

**Lia Roinishvili**, member of the Dusheti Municipal Assembly since 2021.

**Khatuna Samnidze**, member of the Tbilisi Municipal Assembly 2014–2017, member of parliament since 2020.

### *Moldova*

**Nighina Azizov**, program analyst, UN Women.

**Ana Calinici**, member of parliament since 2021.

**Natalia Davidovici**, member of parliament since 2021.

**Doina Gherman**, member of parliament since 2019.

**Victoria Ignat**, program analyst, UN Women.

**Catinca Mardarovici**, member of parliament 1998–2001, director of Political Women Club 50/50.

**Marina Morozova**, member of parliament since 2021.

**Larisa Novac**, member of parliament since 2021.

Liliana Palihovici, member of parliament 2009–2017.

**Galina Sajin**, member of parliament since 2019.

Larisa Voloh, mayor of Palanca since 2007.

### *Ukraine*

**Mariia Borovets**, member of Rivnenska District Council since 2020.

**Yulia Fedorova**, member of Belgorod-Dnistrovsk City Council since 2015, mayoral candidate in 2020.

**Oksana Grinko**, member of Mariupol City Council since 2015.

**Kateryna Konstantynova**, member of Zaporizhzhia City Council 2015–2020.

**Oleksandra Kovalchuk**, member of Odesa City Council since 2020.

**Nataliia Kovalyova**, member of Zhytomyr District Council since 2020.

**Olga Kvasnitska**, member of Odesa City Council since 2015.

**Kateryna Levchenko**, member of parliament 2006–2007, government commissioner for gender policy since 2018.

**Oksana Syroid**, member of parliament 2014–2019, deputy head of the Verkhovna Rada.

**Lesya Vasylenko**, member of parliament since 2019.

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