

FROGEE POLICY BRIEF 3

Insights from Russia

March, 2021

Women in politics: why are they under-represented?

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Status quo and the dynamics of female representation in
Russian politics

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Abstract

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Women are generally under-represented in political offices worldwide, and their under-representation becomes larger in more senior positions. In this brief I review some recent academic literature in economics and political science on the likely causes of women's under-representation. Broadly speaking, the literature has divided such causes into "supply-side" and "demand-side" factors: the former include women's potentially lower willingness to run for political office, whereas the latter include voters' and party leaders' prejudices against women in politics. Understanding the underlying causes of women's under-representation in political institutions is crucial in order to design the most effective policies to address the existing gender gaps. In concluding I summarize some of the policies that have been proposed or used to empower women in politics and review the evidence on their effectiveness when available.

Status quo and the dynamics of female representation in Russian politics

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This policy brief addresses the problem of women's underrepresentation in Russian political bodies. We start with laying out the scope of this problem in today's Russia on federal, regional and municipal levels. Next, the dynamics of female representation in politics is traced back to Russia as part of the Soviet state, when it reached its peak. The highest levels of women's representation could only be seen in the lowest levels of political bodies and positions with the least real power, with some notable exceptions, both in contemporary and communist Russia. When assessed globally, today's Russia lags behind 80% of countries in women's political empowerment based on the World Economic Forum (WEF) report, despite considerable success in the areas of women's education and health. We review the literature on the correlates of this phenomenon specific to Russia and conclude with a list of possible policies and practices to close the gap in women's political empowerment.



Women in politics: why are they under-represented?

Women are generally under-represented in political offices worldwide, and their under-representation becomes larger in more senior positions. Of the four dimensions considered in the World Economic Forum's Gender Equality Index (namely, Economic Opportunity and Participation, Educational Attainment, Health and Survival and Political Empowerment), the dimension called Political Empowerment, which measures the extent to which women are represented in political office, records the poorest performance, with only 25% of an hypothetical 100% gap having been closed to date.

Importantly, although there is large variation across countries, gender inequality in political empowerment is documented in every region worldwide, including in those countries that are most socially and economically advanced. Sweden, for instance, while having a good record of women's representation in most institutions (women currently represent 47.5% of the Parliament members, 54.5% of the ministers, and about 43% of the municipal councillors), has never had a woman as Prime minister, and only one third of its mayors are female. Countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia have only closed 15% of an hypothetical 100% gender gap in political empowerment, according to the World Economic Forum, by far their worst performance among the four sub-indexes that compose the overall Gender Equality Index.

Given the persistent under-representation of women in political institutions, where important decisions that shape societies are taken,

economists and political scientists, among others, are increasingly interested in understanding the causes of the gender gap in political representation. In this brief I summarize some of the recent academic literature on this question, and I review some policies that may help closing the gender gaps in political representation.

Table 1. World Economic Forum Gender Equality Index. Regional Performance in 2020, by Sub-index

	Overall	Econ. Participation and Opportunity	Educational Attainment	Health and Survival	Political Empowerment
Western Europe	0.767	0.693	0.993	0.972	0.409
North America	0.729	0.756	1.000	0.975	0.184
Latin America and the Caribbean	0.721	0.642	0.996	0.979	0.269
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	0.715	0.732	0.998	0.979	0.150
East Asia and the Pacific	0.685	0.663	0.976	0.943	0.159
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.680	0.666	0.872	0.972	0.211
South Asia	0.661	0.365	0.943	0.947	0.387
Middle East and North Africa	0.611	0.425	0.950	0.969	0.102
Global	0.685	0.582	0.957	0.958	0.241

Note: The Global Gender Equality Index tracks countries' progress towards reaching gender equality in educational and health attainment as well as in economic and political life. The overall score is an unweighted average of these four sub-dimensions. A score of 1 corresponds to perfect equality; by contrast, the closer to 0 the score, the larger the gender gap in the respective dimension. The regional average for Eastern Europe and Central Asia is calculated based on the individual scores of the 26 countries. This Table is the authors' own rendering of data taken from the World



Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2020 (WEF, 2019 p.22).

Why are women under-represented in political office?

Broadly speaking, three main reasons are most often explored, namely women's unwillingness to become politicians, voters' bias, and parties' bias. Below I provide an overview of some of the work that has addressed each of these three factors.

Gender gaps in political ambition

Large-scale surveys have documented that women who, based on their professional and economic credentials, are potential political candidates, report lower ambition to occupy executive offices than comparable men (Fox and Lawless, 2004). The main reasons for the gender gap in ambition appear to be that (a) women are less encouraged to run for office than men and (b) women are less likely to believe that they are qualified for office than men.

Women's tendency to shy away from competition (Niederle and Vesterlund, 2007) may also play a role, since the political selection process is likely perceived as highly competitive. As Preece and Stoddard (2015) find by using two experiments, priming individuals to consider the competitive nature of politics lowers women's interest in running for political office, whereas it has no effect on the interest of men.

Women's willingness to advance in their political career can also be influenced by family and relational considerations. Recent work from Folke and Rickne (2020) shows that in Sweden female politicians who are promoted to mayor (i.e. the highest office in municipal politics) experience a

significant increase in the likelihood of divorcing their partner, whereas this is not the case for men. If women face higher costs for their career achievements, as the evidence in Folke and Rickne (2020) suggests, they may be discouraged from pursuing such objectives.

While there is evidence that women may on average be less willing to advance to top positions than men, it is not clear how quantitatively relevant this factor is to account for the lack of women in power. The introduction of gender quotas in candidate lists in different countries worldwide can be informative in this sense. If women's under-representation in electoral lists is mostly due to the lack of qualified female politicians, some electoral lists (in most cases representing specific political parties) may not be able to run due to the introduction of a quota, and the average "quality" of lists, measured by some relevant (to voters) characteristics of their members, would decrease. The literature finds no evidence of either of these two responses to quotas (see Baltrunaite et al., 2014, Besley et al., 2017, Bagues and Campa, 2020). On the contrary, in Italy (Baltrunaite et al., 2014) and Sweden (Besley et al., 2017) quotas appear to have improved the "quality" of the elected politicians.

Voters' bias

Krook (2018) observes that the existing work in political science regarding the importance of voters' bias in explaining women's underrepresentation in politics leads to ambivalent conclusions. Results in the most recent economics literature confirm this assessment. Barbanchon and Sauvagnat (2019) compare votes received by the same female

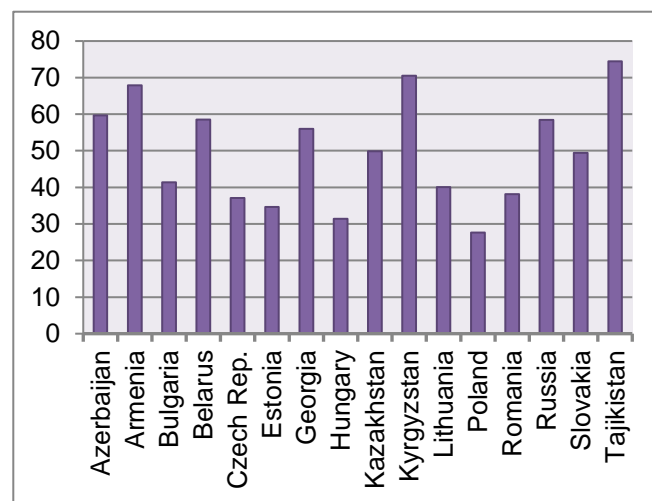


candidate in French parliamentary elections across different polling stations within an electoral district and find that votes for women are lower in municipalities with more traditional gender-role attitudes. They interpret this pattern as evidence of voters' discrimination and conclude that voters' bias matters quantitatively in explaining women's under-representation among politicians. Conversely, Bagues and Campa (2020) find no evidence of voters bias against women, based on voters' reaction to the introduction of a gender quota for electoral lists in Spain. Specifically, they study how the quota impacts the electoral performance of lists that were more affected by the quota – i.e. that were forced to increase their share of female candidates by a larger extent, due to their lower level of feminization pre-quota. They do not find evidence that such lists have worsened their relative electoral performance due to the quota. Put differently, there is no evidence that voters lower their electoral support of a list when its share of female candidates increases for exogenous reasons.

Survey data on voters' attitudes can also help in gauging the extent to which voters discriminate against women. Based on data from the latest wave of the World Value Survey (WVS, 2017-2020), in Western Europe typically less than 20% of survey respondents express agreement with the statement "Men make better political leaders than women do" (e.g. 5% in Sweden, 9% in Denmark and Germany, 12% in Finland and France, 19% in Italy; only in Greece the share of agreement is higher than 20%, at 26%). As shown in Figure 1, these percentages are substantially higher in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.).

Figure 1. Share of survey respondents who report to "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" with the

statement "Men make better political leaders than women do".



Notes: Data are based on the latest wave of the World Value Survey, 2017-2020. The countries selected were either part of the former Soviet Union or under direct Soviet influence before 1990.

It bears noting, however, that answers to the WVS are not always informative about the extent to which voters' bias prevails in a country. Where the percentage of respondents who think that men make better political leaders than women is close to or above 50%, as e.g. in Armenia, Georgia or Russia, voters' bias is likely to be an important factor. However, in countries with lower levels of agreement, such as for instance Poland, drawing conclusions is harder, since the WVS does not measure the share of respondents who think that women make better political leaders than men do.

Parties' bias

Party leaders, who often are key players in the selection of politicians, may prefer to promote male rather than female candidates. If they are aware of voters' bias against women, preferring male candidates is consistent with a votes-maximizing strategy. However, party leaders may also act as gate-keepers and hold women back even in absence of voters' bias. Esteve-Volart and Bagues (2012) find evidence of an



agency problem between voters and parties by looking at Spanish elections. While parties tend to nominate women in worse positions on the ballot, there is no evidence that women attract fewer votes than men; moreover, when the competition is stiffer, women's position on the ballot improves. These two facts lead the authors to conclude that the disadvantage women face can likely be attributed to parties' rather than voters' bias.

When considering all these factors, it is also important to note that the systematic under-representation of women in political institutions is likely self-reinforcing, due to gendered group dynamics. In the laboratory, women in male-majority teams appear significantly less likely to put their name forward as team-leaders than women in female-majority teams; they anticipate, correctly, lower support from team members (see Born et al., 2019). Female mayors in Italy are significantly more likely to be removed by their municipal councils than their comparable male colleagues; importantly, this is especially true when the share of male councillors is particularly large (Gagliarducci and Paserman, 2011). These studies suggest that, since the political arena has been historically male-dominated, gendered group dynamics can create vicious cycles of women's under-representation.

Which policies can be used to increase women's representation in political institutions?

Different policies can be considered to address the various factors accounting for women's under-representation in politics. In an attempt to address the "supply side" aspect of women's

under-representation, various non-profit organizations have offered training programs aimed at providing women with knowledge, skills and networks to build political careers (see, for instance, NDI 2013). While reviewing the existing literature on these programs is beyond the scope of this brief, to the best of my knowledge there is little to no research-based evidence on the quantitative impact of training on women's advancements in politics. Non-profit organizations, political parties and researchers may fruitfully collaborate to implement and systematically test training programs.

Gender quotas are the most commonly used policy intervention, especially those regulating the composition of candidate lists, and they have been extensively studied; overall the literature suggests that quotas are more or less effective in empowering women depending on their design and the context where they are used (see Campa and Hauser, 2020 for a more comprehensive review of the economics literature on gender quotas and related policy implications). Given the nuances in the functioning of quotas, countries or regions that consider their adoption should consult with experts who know the ins and outs of such policies and combine their expertise with local knowledge of the relevant context.

The structure and distribution of power within parties is likely crucial for improving women's political representation. Some scholars have devoted attention to the role of women's organizations within parties. Theoretically such organizations should favour the creation of networks and offer mentorship services, which are likely crucial to climb the career ladder in politics. In Sweden, a coalition of women from



both the right and the left is credited for having pressed the Social Democrats' into adopting their internal zipper quota by threatening to form a feminist party (see Besley et al., 2017). Women's wings within political parties could play a similar role. Kantola (2018) notes that women's organizations seem to be currently deemed as outdated, at least in European parties; Childs and Kittilson (2016), on the other hand, find that their presence does not seem to harm women's promotion to executive roles within parties, a concern that has been associated with the existence of such organizations. In countries with public funding of political parties, specific funds could be directed to women's organizations within parties.

Folke and Rickne (2020) also note that, since women in top jobs appear to face more relational and family constraints than men, policies that improve the distribution of economic roles within couples could help address the under-representation of women in positions of political power; their observation underlines the crucial role of gender-role attitudes in affecting women's empowerment in any area of society. How can these attitudes change? An increasing amount of research is being devoted to answer this question. Campa and Serafinelli (2019), for instance, show that a politico-economic regime that puts emphasis on women's inclusion in the labor market can change some of these attitudes. More research from different contexts and on specific policies will hopefully provide more guidance for policy makers on this important aspect, but the message from the existing research is that gender-role attitudes can be changed, and therefore policy-makers should devote attention to

interventions that can influence the formation of such attitudes.

In many Western democracies the rate of progress in women's access to top political positions has proven especially slow. This history of Western democracies and the existence of the self-reinforcing mechanisms described above can serve as a lesson for countries in transitions, where new political organizations and institutions are emerging. In absence of specific policies that address women's under-representation at lower levels very early on, it would likely take a very long time before gender gaps are closed at higher levels of the political hierarchy.

In concluding, I observe that constant monitoring of the gender gaps in political institutions is important, even in presence of clear upward trends, since progress is rarely linear and therefore needs continuous nurturing.

Status quo and the dynamics of female representation in Russian politics

Absolute numerical gender equality in politics signifies that women are represented in political bodies proportionately to their share in the reference group (country, region, etc.). Contemporary Russia is far from reaching absolute gender equality both at the federal and regional levels. The most up-to-date status quo of female representation in Russian politics was carefully described in a report by Hoare and Muravyeva (2020).



In the current State Duma elected in 2016 only 15.8% of 450 deputies are women (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2021), which is the highest share ever in Post-Soviet Russia. The authors of the report attribute this increase to the return of the mixed electoral system prior to the 2016 elections, as almost 50% of female-deputies won in single member constituencies. Half of Duma chairpersons are women, but leading posts are occupied entirely by men. Women lead five out of 26 (19%) Duma's committees. Overall, female deputies lack independence as the overwhelming majority of them belong to one party, United Russia, and have little to no political experience.

In the Federation Council (the upper chamber of Parliament) the share of women's representation is similar – 17.1% of 170 senators (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2021), though regional representatives are not elected, but appointed by legislative bodies of constituent entities of Russia. “In a number of subjects both senators are women: Nenets Autonomous District, Primorsky Krai and Republic of Tyva. The majority of subjects of federation with female representation are either republics or areas with predominantly minority ethnic population and big industrial cities” (Hoare and Muravyeva, 2020). It should be mentioned that since 2011 the Federation Council is led by the long-standing Chairwomen Valentina Matvienko. Matvienko represents St. Petersburg, which is the only city besides Moscow that has gender parity (one male and one female representative) in this institution.

Gender parity on the regional level of politics is on average slightly higher than on the federal level in Russia. The share of women in regional representative bodies is 18.5%. The highest

proportion of female representatives is in the regions (oblasti), autonomous regions and autonomous districts, where it amounts to 25% on average. Northern republics also stand out in terms of having the highest women's representation among other republics.

Women are more fairly represented at the lowest – municipal – level of Russian politics. Nearly 31% of municipal deputies are female. In 2019, the share of female mayors was only 8% across Russian cities with more than 150,000 inhabitants, and 20% in the largest industrial cities, however all but one were elected indirectly by the respective local representative body. The only female mayor elected directly, Sardana Avksentieva, the so called “people's mayor” of Yakutsk, a port city in eastern Siberia, resigned in 2021 supposedly due to health problems, but there are indications that her resignation was involuntary (Meduza, 2021).

Russia's dynamics vs. international comparisons

The current lack of gender parity in political representation in Russia could be considered somewhat surprising given that the Soviet state pioneered by adopting a constitution that gave women the right to vote and to hold elective office over a century ago, in 1918. “New laws granted women equal rights to education, made it easier to secure a divorce than anywhere else in the world, legalized abortion, established equal pay for women performing work identical with men, cast marriage as a civil rather than a religious union...” (Nechemias, 1996 p. 16). But the equality *de jure* has not been translated into equality *de facto*, even if numerically some



progress towards gender parity in politics in Russia had been made during the Soviet period.

The percentage of women in the USSR Supreme Soviet (the highest legislative body) rose from 16.5 in 1937 to 32.5 in 1979 and around 50% of regional and municipal deputies were female from 1982 to 1987 (Kochkina, 2003). However, these numbers were the result of decorative elections and appeared as a consequence of informal quotas on women's representation; they did not reflect the real balance of power, which was consolidated primarily by the Communist Party Politburo and the Soviet Ministers. From 1919 to 1991, among 157 all-time members of the Politburo only 3 (1.9%) were women; of all the Ministers of the Soviet period only 0.5% were women (3 out of over 1,000 Kochkina, 2003).

Kryshtanovskaya, a scholar of the Russian elites, who coined the term *imitational representation* for women's participation in politics during the Soviet period, looked at the numbers of women's representation, their position in the political hierarchy and rotation in Russian Parliament since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Though women's political representation has dropped dramatically in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, then somewhat increased without reaching the level of the late USSR, Kryshtanovskaya concluded that the actual role of women in Russian politics has improved based on the above-mentioned criteria (Kryshtanovskaya, 2019).

National gender equality in political representation or political empowerment for cross-country comparisons is measured by WEF using three indicators constructed as ratios of

female to male: (1) share in parliament, (2) share in ministerial positions and (3) years as head of state over the last 50 years. As mentioned above, Russia performs poorly with respect to the first indicator. Moreover, in 2019 women held only 12.9% of ministerial positions (WEF, 2019). Together with an absence of a female head of state over the last 50 years, all three indicators put Russia in 122nd place among 153 countries evaluated in terms of gender parity in political empowerment.

The WEF Global Gender Gap Index is also instrumental in indicating whether women have resources for political participation by providing subindices of health and survival, educational attainment and economic participation and opportunity. "Russian women are, on average, more educated than men and live longer but seldom achieve positions of leadership" (WEF, 2019). Moreover, Russia performs better than the global average in women's economic participation and opportunity. This raises the question of what barriers for achieving gender parity in political representation exist in Russia.

Barriers for achieving gender parity in political representation in Russia

According to the latest available World Values Survey (WVS), the majority of the adult population in Russia considers that men make better political leaders than women. In 2017, a remarkable 51% of women agreed with this statement, while 45% disagreed; these percentages were even higher among men (65% agreed, only 31% disagreed; WVS, 2017-2020).

According to Salmenniemi (2005), institutional politics is associated in Russia with personal



qualities regarded as masculine, and civil activity with personal qualities regarded as feminine. There is some evidence indicating that during the transition period in Russia in the 1990s, simultaneously with the decrease in parliamentary representation, women established a number of civic organizations (Sperling, 1999). Salmenniemi notes that the gendered structure of the socio-political domain in Russia implies gendered civic duties: women are expected to provide care both in public (paid and unpaid) and in private, while men should be engaged in institutional politics and paid work (2005). Another possible explanation of the low representation of women in politics in contemporary Russia is the closely intertwined political and economic power, which supports male dominance in formal politics, leaving insufficient material resources to carry out effective political campaigns to women (Salmenniemi, 2005).

Nowacki (2003) studied the variation in female representation in regional assemblies in Russia. Women's representation turned out to be much better in regions that are quite distant from Russia's two capitals, Moscow and St. Petersburg, than in the central regions. The electoral system, district size, the level of support for political reforms, as well as the dominant religion were also found to correlate with women's access to regional parliaments. At the same time, an earlier study based on the 1995 and 1998 elections to regional parliaments in Russia failed to find an association between electoral systems and female representation in regional assemblies under the conditions of the early phase of party system formation (Golosov, 2001). Recent study of

Russian regional legislative elections held in 1999-2011 confirmed that the 2002-2003 electoral reform, by introducing proportional representation into regional elections, had a positive effect on female share of deputies together with electoral authoritarianism and the increased electoral prospects of the party United Russia; but these effects were offset by the decreased competitiveness in districts with majority representation (Golosov, 2014).

Conclusion

If anything could be learnt from the history of women's representation in Russian politics in the 20th century, it is that one particular measure, like gender quotas in legislative bodies, would not be sufficient to improve the current state of affairs, given the Soviet legacy to create a simulacrum. A raft of measures is needed, combined with evaluation criteria more sophisticated than the existing instruments used for international comparisons.

Hoare and Muravyeva (2020) summarized the best practices and policies from the member states of the Council of Europe that could help Russia move towards greater gender parity in political representation. First of all, in terms of the election process, political parties could be encouraged to introduce an internal gender quota systems for candidate selection. Also, based on experiences from other countries, financial incentives seem to play an effective role, thus binding additional incentives for the parties like reduced registration fees with some kind of promotion of female candidates is one of the examples.



There is also a range of measures that could be implemented in terms of gender sensitivity fine-tuning of legislation and policies. This covers, for example, using gender expertise methodology to remove gender bias in laws, gender equality trainings for public officials or establishing a specific body or agency to confront discrimination against women and to promote equal opportunities.

Another area for improvement is the working conditions in political institutions. This could be addressed on the one hand by adopting “zero tolerance” policies against sexual harassment and violence, and on the other hand by ensuring flexible working arrangements for both women and men elected to office who have family obligations.

Training and mentoring is crucial to encourage women to enter politics. Such training should include topics from basic information on political and electoral systems to political communication, fundraising and community mobilization. The role played by cross-party women’s caucuses at national, regional and local levels is equally important, since they can serve as a source of mentoring support for women in political bodies.

Last, but not least, is the media-related block of measures. Training could be provided to female politicians to help them succeed with media campaigns and to help them deal with the media in case of problems with the sexist or misogynistic behavior towards women. A different type of training could also be provided to media specialists to promote an unbiased view of women in general, and women in politics in particular. On a more formal level, national

regulatory and self-regulatory mechanisms aimed at ensuring fair media coverage of female and male political candidates could be established.

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Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank Chrystyna Holynska, Michał Myck and Monika Oczkowska for useful comments, and Kajetan Trzciński for careful proof-reading.

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