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*Ana Vuković**

Institute of Social Sciences, Belgrade

LEADERSHIP AS A FEMALE POLITICAL CHARACTERISTIC IN SERBIA**

Abstract

The common notion in our literature about female political leadership insists on patriarchal prejudices as the root cause of the underrepresentation of women in political institutions. This paper points out the dialectical interweaving of this cause with another often underestimated cause: worse political leadership characteristics among certain members of the (female) political (sub)elite. The issue is the dialectical connection of these two causes, with the effect of a feedback loop of negative synergy: the weaker presence of women in political institutions leads to fewer opportunities for gaining political experience and a more limited pool for staff recruitment, which is why some female politicians have weaker characteristics needed for political leadership; on the other hand, this handicap of theirs strengthens patriarchal prejudices against women and further strengthens the reduced presence of women in political institutions.

* E-mail address: avukovic@idn.org.rs; ORCID: 0000-0002-9089-4049.

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This paper aims not to criticize the political electoral system but to point out the controversies of female leadership as a 'specific' political pattern.

Keywords: personnel policy, lack of competence, electoral quotas, intra-party competition, political representativeness

INTRODUCTION

In foreign literature, the concept of gendered types of leadership and different leadership styles, that is, male and female types of leadership, has been developed. Thus, it is considered that female leadership is characterized by: 1. emphasized care for other people, 2. interest in topics related to family, children, women, and vulnerable groups in general; 3. relying on one's own (personal) experience, etc. (Blankenship and Robson, 1995; Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001).

When it comes to Serbia, female leadership has been researched primarily in the economy (Dramićanin, Mihajlov and Pavlović, 2020; Purić, 2013; Čabrilo, Hristić and Savić-Šikoparija, 2011), and in politics only through small, more preliminary, survey research (Pajvančić-Cizelj and Baćanović 2015). The approach to female political leadership in Serbia in this paper includes the analysis of data (primarily unpublished) from our three earlier empirical studies (see Vuković, 2009; 2014, 2019a), the creation of a series of comparative historical data, as a framework for comparative-historical consideration, as well as the analysis of adverse public reaction to some characteristic examples of (failed) female political involvement. The data was obtained in two surveys, and the sample consisted of 20 women who were actively politically engaged and held or held high political positions. A semi-structured in-depth interview was used, and the data were mainly obtained through the snowball method and the author's research contact. Part of the data that will be analyzed is based on the third survey on the attitudes of women in the general population; the sample consisted of 188 women of different ages and levels of education and was obtained based on the author's survey and part of the questionnaire on the position of women in Serbia.

Although the representation of women through the quota of 40% is high and sufficient for broad political engagement of women, traditionalism and patriarchal prejudices cannot be the only factor that prevents women from holding higher political positions. Just like personal

identity in private life, the political pattern of behavior (as well as the one that includes leadership characteristics) contains values that are part of the general culture and should be equally represented by both male and female politicians). The reasons for underrepresentation are not only part of the refusal to accept women as equals in politics but must be sought in each example as a woman's decision that she may not want to hold a high public office because she does not consider it a political priority.

This paper aims not to criticize the political electoral system but to point out the controversies of female leadership as a political pattern that does not differ much from the male one but should be the result of adopting the characteristics of the general and political culture in society. The main goal of this article is to point out the complexity of the causes that lead to the underrepresentation of women in Serbian politics, as well as insufficiently developed female political leadership in Serbia. Although foreign literature often insists primarily on patriarchal prejudices as a critical explanation for the underrepresentation of women in politics (Eagly and Carli, 2003) – without (self-)critically taking into account the factors of personal performance of female politicians, the dominance of this approach in domestic literature makes the reflection of some of the critical problems of female political leadership in Serbia impossible, as well as the possibility of effectively overcoming them.

EXAMPLES OF UNSUCCESSFUL FEMALE POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN SERBIA

Although they are still far from equal representation, women in Serbia – seen from a broader perspective – have achieved significant success in securing greater political representation in the legislature and the executive (Table 1 and Table 2). Before 1944, there were no women in the assembly and the government; during the socialist era, there were between 10% and 20% of women in the assembly (Table 1) and between 5% and 10% in the government (Table 2). Today, in parliament, 36% of women MPs, 38% of ministers are in government, and the prime minister is a woman (as of 2017). There are also women as the head of the National Bank of Serbia and the head of the Constitutional Court of Serbia, and in the last 15 years, three-quarters of the time (12 years in total), the head of the National Assembly was held by women.¹

¹ From 2008–2012 the President of the Assembly was Slavica Đukić-Dejanović, and from 2014–2020. Maja Gojković. The first president of the Assembly of Serbia was

Table 1: Representation of women in the Parliament of Serbia (Yugoslavia) 1963–2023. (in %)

<i>year</i>	1963.	1967.	1969.	1974.	1978.	1982.	1986.	
<i>Share of women</i>	19.6	10.7	7.9	13.6	17.2	19.8	19.8	
	1991.	1993.	1994.	1997.	2001.	2007.	2012.	2023.
	1.6	5.6	8.8	5.6	12.8	20.8	33.6	36.4

Sources: Mirčev, 1983: 494; SG 1990: 29; Vuković 2009: 16; for 1963–1978.

The data refer to the percentage of women in the Assembly of SFRY from 1982 to 1986 and the percentage of women in the socio-political council of Serbia.

Gender quotas made a decisive contribution to increasing the representation of women in the legislature. Since 2004, the representation of one-third of women on candidate lists has been mandatory. However, the party's list holder did not have to follow the order of candidates when filling the obtained seats in the assembly, so the share of women in the parliament was around 20%. Since 2011, however, the order has not been changed, and since 2020, the representation of women on candidate lists has been raised to 40% (Marković, 2020: 140–141; Škundrić, 2020: 285–286).

In the world, according to the share of women in parliament, Serbia is currently in 46th place out of some 190 countries – ahead of Britain (34.6%), Italy (32.3%), Croatia (31.8%), Canada (30.7%), Latvia (29.0%), USA (28.8%), Estonia (28.7%), Lithuania (28.4%), Poland (28.3%), Czech Republic (26.0%), Bulgaria (24.2%), Greece (23.0%), Slovakia (22.0%), Romania (19.1%), Cyprus (14.3%) or Hungary (14.1%) (IPU 2023). According to the assessment of the American agency Bloomberg (Bloomberg), according to the sex composition of the government (45.8% 2020–2022), Serbia was among the ten countries in the world with the best balance in terms of equality among sexes (Dimitrijević 2020). Also, Serbia was the first country outside the European Union to introduce monitoring of gender equality in 2016 using the Gender Equality Index of the European Institute for Gender Equality, which was praised by

Nataša Micić (2003–2004), and the first woman to preside over a parliamentary session was Milka Minić (at the session of the Great Anti-Fascist People's Liberation Assembly, November 12, 1944). Zlatija Đukić-Veljović was the first woman to hold the position of Speaker of the National Assembly (1982–1984), and Perka Vitorović was the first woman Speaker of the People's Serbian Parliament. 1963–1965); Vuković, 2009: 16.

the head of the EU delegation in Serbia, Sam Fabrizi, saying that this is an essential step towards harmonizing Serbian politics with European standards (Dimitrijević, 2020)².

Table 2: Representation of women in Serbian governments 1805–2023.

<i>Year</i>	<i>number of female ministers</i>	<i>representation (in %)</i>
1805–1944.	0	0.0
1944–45.	1	8.3
1945–48.	2	9.0
1948–51.	3	9.4
1951–53.	2	11.1
1953.	2	7.4
1953–58.	2	11.1
1958–63.	3	12.0
1963–65.	1	7.1
1965–67.	1	7.1
1967–69.	2	11.1
1969–74.	1	5.9
1974–78.	1	3.2
1978–82.	2	6.1
1982–86.	3	7.7
1986–89.	2	6.1
1989–91.	1	5.8
1991.	1	3.8
1991–93.	2	7.1
1993–94.	0	0.0
1994–98.	3	8.6
1998–2000.	6	16.7
2000–1.	6	20.0
2001–3.	4	14.8

² The first woman minister in the government of Serbia was Mitra Mitrović Đilas (minister 1944–1949 and 1951–1953), and in the governments, in socialist era, there were also: Spasenija Cana Babović (1945–1963), Milka Minić (1948–1951, 1953–1958), Bosa Cvetić (1953, 1958–1963), Mileva Planojević (1958–1963), Katarina Patrnogić (1963–1967), Marija Križnar (1967–1969), Katarina Milosavljević (1967–1969), Zora Protić–Sučić (1969–1974), Olga Nikolić (1974–1978), Živana Olbina (1978–1986), Marija Todorović (1978–1986), Milka Šćepanović (1982–1986), Ljubica Bujanić (1986–1989), Koviljka Romanić (1986–1989), and Sojka Đorđević (1989–1991); c. Vuković 2009,17–18.

2003–4.	4	15.4
2004–7.	2	10.5
2007–8.	4	16.0
2008–12.	5	18.5
2012–13.	4	23.5
2013–14.	1	5.5
2014–16.	4	21.0
2016–17.	5	25.0
2017–20.	5	23.8
2020–22.	11	45.8
2022–23.	11	37.9

Sources: Ljušić *et al.*, 2005; Vuković 2009, 16–17; current data from the media.

What, however, leaves a wrong impression on the public and compromises the idea of electoral quotas – as an opportunity to present women to voters as equally competent in politics, at least as much as men (Vuković 2019b) – is the poor public representation of some female politicians. Here, we will cite some examples that show that our female politicians are still far from, as is considered for women, being able to introduce new forms of communication into politics, as well as improving language and behavior in parliament (Blankenship and Robson 1995; Gurirab and Cayetano 2010).

Mirjana Marinković-Lepić, the Speaker of the House of Representatives of the FBiH, displayed similar numerological incompetence in our nearest neighborhood. She read the Roman numerals in the names of the amendments: XL as “iks el”, XXV as “iks iks ve” (literary pronunciation of letters in Serbian), C as “ce”, etc. – like clothing size labels (see the clip in Agencies 2023).

Dušica Stojković, SNS deputy in the Serbian Parliament (2014–2020), caused similar disbelief in the public – when it comes to exceptionally unskillfully reading from paper. She gave the impression that she could not complete a sentence without making a mistake – thus demonstrating the absence of minimal rhetorical abilities (see video in SBN, 2018). It was similar to Gorjana Marinković, a parliamentarian elected on the SNS list (as a representative of the Socialist Movement, convocation 2014–2016). Amid the government’s campaign to discipline the media, she appeared at a press conference in the Parliament, condemning the opposition Kurir “as a tabloid”. However, on the logical question of the journalist - what is the difference between the pro-government and

opposition tabloids? She was baffled, demonstrating her limited ability to communicate with journalists (see the video in N1 2015). Because of this, she was exposed to an avalanche of criticism and ridicule, and in the end, the Prime Minister himself had to defend her (B92 2015).

The problem with these and similar compromising performances is that they served as a reason for an attack on the system of electoral quotas in the conservative part of the public. The question was asked: "Can you imagine that in any democratic system, and during any democratic elections, a person like Gorjana Marinković could be elected as a deputy?" Her political incompetence is so apparent and so frightening that it is hard to imagine that she could, in a democratic contest, defeat any opponent. Gorjana found herself in parliament thanks to the "quota system". That system produces such absurd consequences that everyone can see how bad it is. Do you think Washington or London have "pink quotas"? Do you believe that Washington or London allow people in their parliament who know absolutely nothing about politics, the national interest, the functioning of the state?" (Antonić 2015).

But the problem is not the quota system but the non-transparent and undemocratic personnel policy conducted in most of our parties (Manojlović, 2016). As a rule, the party leader has the final say in determining the composition of the government and the list of deputies. Since there is no real intra-party election game based on competencies, voluntaristic staffing in the first political plan often expels incompetent men and women. Women are only to a greater extent exposed to public scorn due to the inert power of patriarchal prejudices in Serbia against women in politics (Vuković 2019b; 2014; 2013; 2009; 2008).

LEADERSHIP FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF SERBIAN FEMALE POLITICIANS

Women's perception of leadership and, in general, the role of women in politics is usually seen from the answers to the following questions: what are the qualities of a good leader, what do women lack to be more successful in politics, what are the attitudes towards women in the party hierarchy, etc. (cf. Norris and Inglehart 2001). We also used this battery of questions in our research (Vuković 2009; 2014, 2019a).

First of all, when it comes to women from the general population, they note that the position of women in the political life of Serbia has slightly improved compared to the previous decade (the survey was

conducted in 2013, before the last jump in the quota representation of women) –whereby the perception of improvement in female political representativeness increases with the education of the respondents (Table 3).

Table 3: What is the position of women in politics in Serbia today compared to the one ten years ago? (answers in %)

	Primary school	Secondary school	Higher education
worse than before	17.8	15.2	8.3
same as before	46.7	43.0	45.0
better than before	35.5	41.8	46.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Author’s calculations, database.

Also, among women from the general population, a vast majority (63.3%) disagree with the statement that men are generally better as political leaders than women (25.4% agree, 11.3% undecided), and the share of the degree of disagreement also increases with education (Table 4).

Table 4: As a rule, men are better political leaders than women (answers in %)

	Primary school	Secondary school	Higher education	Total
I do not agree at all	30.2	36.6	50.0	39.5
mostly disagree	27.9	23.2	21.7	23.8
undecided	11.6	13.4	8.3	11.3
mostly agree	18.6	15.9	16.7	16.8
I completely agree	11.6	11.0	3.3	8.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Author’s calculations, database.

It is clear that women do not subscribe to the common patriarchal prejudice that “politics is not for women”. Likewise, women from the general population, regardless of education, recognize prejudice as the main reason for the insufficient involvement of women in politics (table 5) – although with education, the awareness that this is not the all-explaining reason also increases (as can be seen from the decrease in the frequency of responses, with the increase education, that it is the “most common reason”).

Table 5: Prejudice is the main reason for insufficient involvement of women in politics (answers in %)

	Primary school	Secondary school	Higher education
That's no reason at all	27.3	21.8	22.0
it is somewhat the reason	25.0	34.6	33.9
it is often the reason	22.7	23.1	32.2
that is most often the reason	25.0	20.5	11.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Author's calculations, database.

However, we could learn much more about the challenges of female political leadership in Serbia from our in-depth interviews. In the sample, we had the most female politicians with many years of political experience who were competent interlocutors in assessing the place and role of women in Serbian political culture. The respondents mainly stated that women, unlike their male political comrades, lack the *confidence* to engage in politics. From the quantitative part of our first survey of the political elite (Vuković 2009)³, it was seen that women, compared to men, relied more on individual recommendations when coming to office (Table 6). This means that they were more dependent than men on the individual, leadership voluntarism, and decisionism of personnel policy, and in that sense, more vulnerable due to the lack of democratic election procedure and insufficiency of intra-party competition based on political competence.

Table 6: Recommendation when getting a party or state office according to sex (in %)

<i>When you were appointed to a position in the party or government, did you have a recommendation beforehand?</i>	men	women
yes, individual recommendation	8.2	17.2
yes, recommendation of the political body	40.5	34.5
yes, professional recommendation	16.2	13.8
no	35.1	34.5
Total	100.0	100.0

Source: Author's calculations, database.

³ It included politicians of both sexes, one-third of the then-current convocation of deputies of the Serbian Parliament.

In the qualitative part of this research, which was based on interviews, female politicians, in the majority, expressed the belief that women have all the necessary qualities to engage in politics and for the most responsible political functions. However, as part of the internal reasons for the lack of women in politics, they cited a lack of interest and self-confidence among many women from the general population.⁴ The majority of female politicians emphasized personal qualities such as “having a vision”, “self-confidence” and “feeling for politics” as qualities of a good leader. In contrast, in terms of gender politics, they pointed to the need for women to be bolder in their political ambitions and performances (Vuković 2009).

We came to similar findings in the research conducted in 2011–2012. (part of the results published in Vuković 2014; 2019a). In in-depth interviews, “courage”, “persistence”, “determination”, “and perseverance”, as well as the ability to motivate colleagues with new and good ideas, which corresponds to the concept of specific female leadership, were highlighted as necessary qualities of successful female politicians. Also, female politicians were aware of their increased responsibility before voters for what they promised.⁵ Yet, characteristics are the answers to the question: *What qualities do women lack to be more successful in politics?*:

“Women don’t lack anything; they have those qualities; it is debatable that we are a traditional society; people are not ready to vote for a woman, and to be ready, we need a lot more education (of the electorate - A.V.), programs: it is better to invest in gender equality than in a reality show” (respondent, 45 years old, 2).

“They don’t lack anything; men lack it; women have an excess of qualities needed to engage in politics” (*Which ones?*). Responsibility, consistency, expertise, education, anger, sense of justice... Women have an excess of those qualities; maybe they should reduce them” (respondent, 51 years old).

⁴ However, the absence of self-confidence is not a characteristic of our female politicians, which can be seen from the following findings. Evaluating their own leadership capacities from 1 to 5, female politicians in 26.8% of cases gave themselves the highest rating (5), in contrast to only 7.7% of men who did so in the same survey (Pajvančić Cizelj and Baćanović 2015, 9). This lack of self-criticism is probably a reaction to a culture of self-deprecation and the underestimation of women in politics, which reigns in our society (Vuković 2009).

⁵ “You have to install trust, the voters have to know that you will fulfil what you promised them, because if you don’t fulfil it, you are gone, Serbia’s political scene also took shape, every word and every action, everything you say and promise in public is being measured” (respondent, 45 years old).

“The problem is that women in politics are still mostly decided by men” (respondent, 46 years old).

Interestingly, the essential characteristic that is required of a woman in Serbia to advance in politics is primarily obedience, and the problem was again seen in the disinterest of women from the general population in the public sphere.⁶ However, women are perceived as more idealistic in politics than men⁷, corresponding to standard conceptions of female leadership. In addition, an older and more experienced politician described the reasons why women in Serbia are not influential enough in politics:

“I think the insufficient number of women in politics and the absence of a critical mass is the key reason because you cannot say that men are more intelligent, capable, and eloquent.

Some of those qualities needed by politicians are more pronounced in women. When there is a critical mass of women in politics, it will be their weapon” (respondent, 60 years old).

This respondent correctly assessed the absence of a critical mass of women in Serbian politics as one of the key reasons for the impossibility of women’s politics. Namely, it is considered that a minority group begins to create influence only when it exceeds the 15% representation mark (Thomas 1991). That limit, at least when it comes to the Serbian parliament, had already been crossed at the time of the research, but the effects of the usual female leadership were not observed, neither then nor later.

⁶ “They (women – A.V.) lack interest in the public sphere, now it is fashionable to wear make-up, breast implants, to find husbands, to find rich football players, to find sponsors from the age of fourteen... Feminism has experienced a complete defeat, after so many years of feminism and sisterhood is powerful, women are in a worse condition than they have ever been. They are constantly on the fashion channel – fashion, grooming, make-up, marriage and that... Women have fallen back on femininity, they are less interested in politics as a constant field of female interest. I did not notice that women are in public politics, maybe only in women’s politics, there are strong professors, they introduced these subjects to faculties everywhere, maybe they found a field to excel in women’s studies, but I did not notice that they penetrated public politics” (respondent, 71 years old).

⁷ “Women enter politics idealistically, men tend to enter politics out of interest, although I also know women who entered politics out of interest. Women will less often participate in the trade of mandates (in the assembly – A.V.), I know this because I often talk with my colleagues, even when they disagree with some of the attitudes of its leaders (the party – A.V.), it’s like a bad marriage: ‘well, I’m not going to buy suitcases today, if we’re not on the same wavelength today’. Here, women are more tolerant and accommodating” (respondent, age 52).

But what must be stated when it comes to women politicians in Serbia is the almost complete absence of awareness of the problem of political incompetence as one of the key factors that leads to the discrediting and undermining of both female political leadership and the quota system (as its basic assumptions). We have noted the severe absence of registration of this problem as essential and current, without neglecting the issue of patriarchal prejudices, of course, in all our research so far. The same absence is noticeable in other, more extensive studies of the attitudes of Serbian female politicians (Subotički 2013).

The explanation is undoubtedly hidden in the constant effort of our female politicians and activists to show that women are no less capable of successful leadership than men. In this context, there is probably a fear that pointing to specific examples of lack of competence among women will weaken the argument in favor of equal abilities of women and men. That is why the topic of building the leadership competence of women in Serbian politics is constantly “pushed under the carpet”.

CONCLUSION

There is a mechanism in Serbian politics that is not sufficiently recognized in our literature, and women politicians often ignore it – precisely to the detriment of the affirmation of female political leadership and the more significant presence of women in politics.

That mechanism rests on the lack of democratic procedures in most of our parties. Leaders have a crucial role in personnel policy, so they often appoint women to political positions primarily based on the criteria of greater personal loyalty and obedience. As a rule, such a selection system is a handicap for genuinely politically competent women – they are perceived, consciously or unconsciously, as possible competitors for the leading position in the party. Therefore, the positions of ministers, and especially deputies, are often not the most capable women, but precisely political mediocrity.

In this sense, mere insistence on increasing “women’s quotas” in politics does not solve the problem of the low reputation of our female politicians. It is not particularly important whether there are 30%, 40%, or 50% of women in the parliament or government if they leave the impression that they are there only to satisfy the form, that they are just political backdrops, not very competent political actors – while the real power lies elsewhere, and the accurate decisions are made by someone else.

This article contributes to the awareness of this phenomenon and appeals to its essential overcoming.

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Ана Вуковић*

Институт друштвених наука, Београд

ЛИДЕРСТВО КАО ЖЕНСКА ПОЛИТИЧКА КАРАКТЕРИСТИКА У СРБИЈИ

Резиме

Уобичајена представа у нашој литератури о женском политичком лидерству инсистира на патријархалним предрасудама као основном узроку слабије заступљености жена у политичким институцијама. У овом раду указује се на дијалектичко преплитање овог узрока с другим узроком који се често потцењује: присутношћу лошијих карактеристика политичког лидерства код појединих припадница (женске) политичке (под)елите. У питању је дијалектичка повезаност ова два узрока, уз дејство повратне спреге негативне синергије: слабије присуство жена у политичким институцијама доводи до мање прилика за стицање политичког искуства и ограниченијег базена за кадровску регрутацију, због чега поједине политичарке имају слабије карактеристике потребне за политичко лидерство; с друге стране, овај њихов хендикеп оснажује патријархалне предрасуде према женама и даље јача редуковано присуство жена у политичким институцијама. Циљ овог рада није да се критикује политички изборни систем, већ да се укаже на контроверзе женског лидерства као 'специфичног' политичког обрасца.

Кључне речи: кадровска политика, мањак компетенција, изборне квоте, унутарстраначка конкуренција, политичка репрезентативност

* И-мејл адреса: avukovic@idn.org.rs ; ORCID: 0000-0002-9089-4049

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