



“Political Party Quotas in the Croatian Social Democratic Party”

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Introduction

Before the break-up of Communist Yugoslavia, Croatian women had the benefit of equal rights under the law. Although quotas ensured women were represented in State and Republic legislatures, and despite being represented in parliaments, unions and even the various organs of the Communist Party, women in the former Yugoslavia enjoyed very little real political power, which was vested in the few – male – elite members of the party.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, immense structural change took place across Europe, ending the Cold War and uniting the West and the East. At the same time, this event led to the demise of the ‘glorious’ heritage of Yugoslav Socialism and exposed all of the shortcomings associated with party monopolies and state-run economies. As political elites lost their positions, ordinary Croatian people had reasonable expectations that their own lives would benefit with the advent of democracy. Despite the existence of a vibrant women’s movement in the former Yugoslavia, the fall of Communism also witnessed a decline in women’s political participation. This decline is in part a result of the patriarchal processes established by the wartime nationalist groups but is largely seen as a backlash to the Communist legacy of a highly proclaimed, although rarely implemented, equality – a backlash experienced in much of Eastern Europe.

As a multi-party system emerged in Croatia, social democrats looked at the examples of social democratic parties of the more privileged stable democracies, which set highly desirable goals. Croatian social democrats carefully studied other parties’ patterns and structures and, of course, assessed the time required to attain certain standards. One important aspect of political party reform examined was that of gender quotas and women’s participation in politics, which is the focus of this case study.

The Social Democratic Party of Croatia

Social democratic parties in the ‘post-nineties democracies’ have their roots in different sources. Some are the offspring of the traditional social-democratic parties and movements that existed before 1990 (for example, those in Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary and Slovenia). Others emerged out of the so-called alliances of citizens (Socijalistički savez), even the trade union traditions. Many social democratic parties of Eastern

Europe, and the most likely to survive, are the products of former communist parties that successfully reformed into social democratic parties.

Today's Social Democratic Party (SDP) of Croatia was created in 1994 after a merger of the relatively large Croatian League of Communists – Democratic Party for Change (SKH-SDP) and a smaller social democratic party, the Social Democratic Party of Croatia (SDH). The new party's programme and statute was to be adopted at the party's convention in 1994 which would provide real opportunities to shape the future of the party.

The beginning of the Social Democratic Women's Forum

In autumn 1994, a group of women started talking about establishing a women's organization within the party, a suggestion that, in general, met with disapproval mostly from male members of the party. One activist commented that 'we had our women' and that the SDP did not need a women's organization. Interestingly, male and female party activists reacted in a similar way.

Nevertheless, a 'critical mass' of support developed and the SDP Women's Forum (SDWF) was founded in Zagreb, Croatia, on 8 January 1995. As an internal organization of the SDP, it had to comply with the party statute, although it had its own Statute that created parallel structures. The latter called for gender representation of at least 40 percent for both sexes; a formulation developed following consultations with Slovenian colleagues. The SDWF proposed quota was the first attempt in any reformed party in the 'post-nineties democracies' to recommend internal party quotas (soon after this proposal, the Social Democratic Party of Croatia introduced gender quotas in the party's statute at the Convention in 1996).

The SDWF Statute clearly stated that women who share the same values may become members of the SDWF on equal terms without having to become party members. Of course, there is a danger that a forum, which includes women who are not members of the SDP, can develop policies which deviate from, or are opposed to, the party's general orientation. On the contrary, however, the SDWF has created space for many women experts and activists to engage. It has been one of the bridges to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that have contributed to the establishment of a true civil society within a prosperous state based on the rule of law, democracy and respect for human rights.

The growth of the SDWF

What has the Women's Forum done over the past ten years to ensure that the quota system is not only 'proclaimed' but truly implemented? Initially, the strategy was to form branch offices in any place where there was a party branch, at the municipality, city or county levels. Within two to four years (after 1995) almost 100 SDWF branches were established across the country. The SDP had some 400 branch offices at the time.

Some of the most important topics and issues dealt with by the SDWF during this first phase were unemployment, healthcare, representation in decision-making bodies and the strengthening of social democracy.

The next phase saw closer cooperation with civil society and a number of NGOs that came into being after 1990, ranging from genuinely feminist groups to those that focussed only on the provision of humanitarian aid. Of course, during this phase, questions concerning women war victims and reconciliation were of the utmost importance.

One of the next priorities was to provide education and training for women in any possible field, ranging from empowerment in general to media presentation and debate skills. Of particular value was the series of seminars entitled 'Women Can Do It',

following the example set by Norwegian political parties. During this third phase, numerous women were motivated to become candidates in the local and parliamentary elections.

SDWF understood that external cooperation and training should not happen at the expense of also focusing on the internal structures of the SDP and women's representation within the party. Between 1995 and 1999, there were six vice-presidents of the SDP, of which two were women. The total representation of women on the party's governing executive committee – the Main Board – stood at 52 percent. The SDP's respectable record of women's representation within the party was partly responsible for the party's admission into the Socialist International in 1999. Representatives of the SDWF engaged in very intensive exchanges of views at different meetings and conferences with their colleagues from Southeast Europe, the countries of the European Union (EU) and worldwide through the SIW.

Women in Parliament

The strategy of capacity building and increasing the representation of women within the SDP was essential for the SDWF in order to influence the national agenda and implement gender-related policies once the SDP formed government in 2000. As the leading party in the new coalition government, the SDP was largely responsible for the 34 percent women's representation in Parliament. Between 2000 and 2003, an enormous step forward in legislation was achieved.

Strategies and legislation introduced included a new family law, a law on Gender Equality, legislation preventing domestic violence, a national policy on gender equality, and a law on employment with various measures favouring unemployed women. Moreover, huge steps were taken on regional and local levels, especially in areas of women representation in decision-making bodies at those levels. In addition, the SDWF was keen to provide support for the foundation of local gender equality committees at the town and county levels, stressing that these local-level bodies would be very hard to get rid of if there was a change of government

The next phase was marked by the loss of parliamentary elections (in 2003) when the SDP became the major opposition party. Maintaining the high standards associated with the 40 percent gender quota for all bodies of the party on all levels, at its ninth convention, on 8 May 2004, the SDP adopted a new Statute and a new Declaration. Although the new Statute does not make explicit reference to external quotas for candidate lists, delegates demonstrated a high level of commitment for the principle of equality within the party, voting for a woman deputy chair (there were three candidates, two of whom were men). Two of the three vice-chairs are women, and both vice-chairs of the SDP's Main Board are women. The representation of women on the Main Board stands at 53 percent, the highest level ever.

The Challenges to Implementing Quotas

The introduction and implementation of quotas at all levels will depend on many factors, including overcoming traditional, patriarchal values. There are, however, disadvantages and challenges even to the quotas which are in place now. One significant shortcoming of the current quotas within the SDP is that absence of sanctions. If the party leadership fails to meet its statutory obligations, there are no mechanisms to sanction or punish individuals.

In addition, the percentage of women party members is far less than 40 percent, and hence the question of positive discrimination arises and jeopardises the commitment to putting women on candidate lists and placing them in winnable positions. Although the SDWF has been successful at ensuring the placement of women on candidate lists (although not always in satisfactory positions), the lack of a formal quota for candidate's

lists for local and parliamentary elections is a barrier to guaranteeing women's political representation.

The relationship between the SDWF and the SDP is delicate at times. Although the Forum has no independent sources of income, the SDP has never, to date, turned down requests for funding. The party is not, however, obliged to provide resources to the SDWF. The successes and strengths of the SDWF is a double-edged sword. Although support among party members for increased women's participation is strong, getting more women in positions at all levels of the party sometimes means displacing men who have held positions in the party for years. During the first 10 years of the SDWF women have not only remained partners with their male colleagues in the SDP but many have also become rivals.

Conclusion

The successes of the SDWF have also been the successes of the SDP. Without the perseverance of the SDWF, particularly on the issue of quotas, the number of women representing the SDP in parliament and local assemblies in Croatia would be much lower. Certainly, the number of women holding decision-making positions within the party would also be reduced. At every election, SDWF will continue to press for greater women's participation and representation. Thankfully, the fierce battles of the 1960s and 1970s when women were the only group insisting on equality are over. True equality requires partnerships, which include men and the SDWF will nurture those partnerships.