

## *Women in politics and the attitudes of the public*

Petra Rakušanová

Low rate of representation of women in politics is closely connected with the status of women, who are regarded rather as a social group than as individuals. At the same time, their social status is lower than that of men. Perception of citizenship as defined by French theoretician Chantal Mouffe in her theory of radical democracy is in direct contrast to this construct. According to Mouffe, citizenship should be perceived as a form of political identity, which is fully compliant with the principles of freedom and equality (Mouffe in Seidman, 1995).

There are two different approaches to the assessment of women's political participation. Conservative approach puts strong emphasis on the power of political identity, perceiving it as stronger than gender identity. Majority of right-wing political parties, which are generally less active and flexible than the left-wing parties in taking measures for eliminating inequalities between men and women, identify with this attitude. On the contrary, liberal approach stresses the possibility of distinct political culture of women.

We can establish that present situation in the Czech Republic to a certain extent copies theoretical approaches to participation of women in politics. Apart from the already mentioned left-wing Czechoslovak Democratic Party (ČSSD), a party, which has been in the long term represented in Parliament and during the last two election periods in also in the Government, only several smaller liberal political entities acknowledge equality of men and women (Humanistic Alliance, Green Party, Hope, Route of Change). These, however, have not obtained the 5 % of votes necessary for admission to the Chamber of Deputies. No political party has executed in practice the parity system of candidate nomination (man - woman or woman – man alternating). Ann Phillips, a British political scientist, points out the contradiction between the formal principle of equality of all people embedded in most constitutional systems and the everyday, primarily political reality.

Besides nomination of women on ballot lists, issues of abortion and legalization of soft drugs also serve as indicators of liberally conservative polarization. Whereas conservative parties –

primarily Christian Democratic Union (KDU-ČSL) and a part of Civil Democratic Party (ODS) advocate ban on abortions, including criminalization of doctors violating this law, and strict prosecution of the so called soft drug users, left-wing parties (ČSSD as well as KSČM) are rather liberal. Freedom Union (US-DEU) advocates strictly liberal attitude in both of the issues and their minister has also proposed the already mentioned liberalization of drug policy.

Since men have a predominant role in current political discourse, women's denial of politics can be regarded as denial of masculine political style rather than denial of politics as such. This may explain why in the Czech Republic the issue of equal opportunities of men and women had not been regarded as a political theme for a long time. In the last parliamentary elections (June 2002) only ČSSD included the issue of equality between men and women in their programme. For this reason, we will concentrate in this work not only on description of women's participation in politics of the Czech Republic and its potential changes, but also on the changes of public perception of women's participation in politics.

### *Quotas*

One of the methods of increasing number of women in politics is introducing quota system. This system is not new in our country – already before 1989, following the model of Soviet Union, quotas ensuring participation of thirty percent of women were introduced. Quotas were legally embedded and they also formed a part of the political program of the governing Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. It should be noted, however, that they were not accomplished completely. In the Soviet Union, quotas for the Federal council and State Duma amounted to 33 %. Unlike in GDR, where similar quotas ensured places for representatives of women organizations, in Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (ČSSR), more emphasis was put on representing interests of working and farming women. In this respect, the communist approach, concentrated on presenting woman as a mother and a worker, is still rooted in minds of majority of Czech men and women. At the same time, double use of quotas occurred – women were nominated not only as representatives of women, but also as delegates of working class.

After 1989, when these formal rules were banished, the number of women in Parliament decreased significantly. As regards quota of individual parties, ČSSD is the only parliamentary political party that accepted quota for participation of women in party authorities and on ballots (1/5). As Hejnová mentions, regulations for nomination of women changed at the party congress in 1999 – whereas until then, only women from Social Democratic Women (SDŽ) could be nominated, the change has allowed nomination of any member of the party, without regard to their membership in SDŽ. Thus the nomination process became more open (Hejnová in Marksová-Tominová 2002). However, from the point of view of allocating party posts it is clear that these quotas are still not fully assigned.

According to British political scientist Phillips “it is crucial and necessary to change social arguments constantly representing women in subordinate role in order to change gender structures of elected bodies; and whether you perceive politics as a representation of interests or needs (or both), approaching gender equality is one of the elementary conditions of political agenda transformation“ (Phillips 1995: 82). As regards political discussion about quotas, Czech women politicians usually take a negative stand towards them, primarily because of formal quotas.

Negative reminiscences connected with quotas in the communist times present one of the reasons. A second reason may be insufficiently developed political culture and another reason is the fact that women politicians present themselves in the media primarily in the role of a politician, not in the role of a woman. Moreover, they also stress the fact that they have no connection to feminist activists. This attitude, however, cannot be understood as anti-feminist, but rather as an act of rational choice – an effort to do well in the predominantly masculine environment – to be more of a man than their masculine counterparts. Lately, however, changes have occurred in this field, primarily in minor parties.

Here we may note that one of the models common in Scandinavia does not apply in the Czech Republic – the wider the leadership of the party, the larger the representation of women (Raaum in Bergqvist 1999, Skjeie in Karam et al. 1998). Only 10 % of women at the most are

represented in wider leadership of all the scrutinized parties (for example executive board, republic committee or republic conference).

Some political parties do realize the lack of women members in the party, both in the leadership and in the party in general. Establishing an organization within the structure of the party is a common solution. Only ČSSD has such an organization, however, all scrutinized parties have similar structures for their young members.

Social democratic women (SDŽ) present themselves as an interest group within the ČSSD. They aim their programme at women and family, solving problems concerning women's position in ČSSD and their representation in its bodies. SDŽ also has a regional organization structure that copies the party structure. SDŽ are involved in international structures - Socialist International of Women (SIW). Jana Volfová, the chairman of SDŽ, is one of the main initiators of the so-called shadow government of women and a former ČSSD representative. On March 19, 2002, she was also appointed a chairman of the newly established Government Council for Equal Opportunities (the office is not paid).

In March 2000, several social democratic women established the so-called shadow government of women. Though it had a proclaimed support to the government, it was generally regarded rather as a practical joke. This not wholly successful project of Czech women politicians was nevertheless completely unique in confronting the absolute majority of Czech women politicians, who present themselves primarily as politicians without any special interest in feminine political issues and who stress in the media, that they have no connections to feminist activities. In this way, they try to legitimise their political existence.

#### *Women in politics on the central level - parliament, government*

Women encounter a number of problems when trying to break into high politics. In this respect, the low number of women in political parties (26 – 52 % members of political parties are women) doesn't seem to be the main problem. It is rather the fact that women still don't reach crucial posts in the party hierarchy and therefore they have a small share in selecting the candidates.

Generally we can say that whereas in the years 1996 - 2002 both the proportion of women among candidates to lower chamber of Czech Parliament (on the whole by 6 percent) and the proportion of women among the elected deputies (by 2,5 percent) increased, there is a continuous decrease in the proportion of the candidates and the elected (a decrease by 6 percent). This fact can be explained in several ways. First of all, it is the effect of proportional electoral system, which is generally regarded as less permeable than the majority system (Sartori 2001).

Norris also points out that participation of women in politics is higher, when there are less electoral districts with more mandates. The proportion of elected in one district thus increases and at the same time women have a bigger chance to get to the elected posts. ČSSD is the only parliamentary party reflecting gender when constituting list of candidates for parliamentary elections. However, even this party falls behind the goals they have set for themselves in this domain.

Second, whereas the number of women on political party ballot lists increases, the increase is higher in parties that do not get into Parliament, than in the Parliamentary parties. This fact is also documented by our analysis of other political parties in the 2002 elections – in nine from the total of fourteen electoral districts the number of women on ballot lists of non-parliamentary parties is higher than on ballots of parliamentary parties. However, even in parliamentary parties, namely right-wing political parties, the decrease of elected women candidates is visible – for example in Freedom Union and Civil democratic party between the 1998 elections and 2002 elections the decrease was 3 %, respectively by 0,95 %. The fact that women on ballot lists of political parties are assigned worse places than men can serve as a third reason.

Although the informal abolishment of quotas was followed by a decrease in the total number of women MPs, the situation is getting better and we can notice an increasing trend in the Chamber of Deputies (lower chamber of the Czech Parliament). It has to be ascribed primarily to election success of left-wing political parties that nominate women to elective posts more frequently than the right-wing parties. In this election period 22 women (ČSSD 10, KSČM 12) represent the left-wing parties in parliament and 12 women (ODS 8, Coalition 4) the right-wing parties. Situation

in the Senate, which was established in 1998, is far worse. In the long term, women constitute only 11 – 12 % of members.

If we look at the results according to individual regions, we notice that in the Czech Republic the argument of Norris about higher success of women in larger election districts does not apply fully. The element of the size of election district is secondary. As a primary element we regard centralization of political party (first of all proportion of the central party on the nomination process), distinct regional political culture, regional political climate, position of the political party in the region.

Women deputies and senators are also regarded by their masculine counterparts as less professional and they are “often identified with humanitarian spheres, such as social politics, health service, education, culture and regional issues” (Seidlová 2001). They fill posts in both chambers in less prestigious parliamentary committees covering “humanitarian sector”.

The lowest representation of women can be seen in the government. A distinct trend of excluding women from their share in power is visible. A change in political system hasn't brought any significant changes in this aspect (in the last two communist governments there was only one woman on the federal level – Minister of labour and social affairs, for half a year). In six governments in the period from 1990 until today there were only 5 women ministers. Altogether twice a woman held the position of Minister of Health, twice the position of Minister of justice and once the position of Minister of Education and Minister of Trade and Tourism.

#### *Attitudes of the public to women in politics*

Principle of equal status of citizens is presently one of the cornerstones of constitution systems, as it was in the period of “real” socialism. However, theory and practise have always differed. On the theoretical level, women have had civil and political rights, right for equal salary, education and their status in the family have been secured. From the analysis of the actual situation, however, it is clear that relation between men and women is still unequal, namely in all the

mentioned fields. For the requirements of this work we will limit ourselves only to the political level.

In 1987 a survey „Opinions of the citizens on deepening of equal status of women in Czechoslovakia and on education to marriage and parenthood“ (Kobylková et al. 1987) of the Institute for public opinion research (ÚVVM) scrutinized participation of women in public and political life. As it follows from this survey, 30 % of respondents regarded women as socially equal (more frequently men and respondents from Slovak Republic - SSR than women and respondents from Czech Republic - ČSR). Around 22 % of respondents believed that women had a possibility to make use of their potential (more frequently women and respondents from ČSR than men and respondents from SSR).

Another significant group consisted of respondents who believed that women wanted to be engaged socially and contribute to the society (13 % identically in both categories). Again, women and respondents from ČSR maintained this position more frequently than men and respondents from SSR. On the contrary, only one tenth of respondents regarded ambitions of women as the main reason. The highest number of respondents considered involvement of women in social and political life to be appropriate, namely women, members of civil and political organizations and younger citizens more frequently than men, non-organized and citizens over 60 years of age. Respondents believed that activity of women in this field mostly contributed to the society (58 %), rather than women themselves (38 %) or upbringing of their children (18 %).

This situation reflected very well the actual participation of women in politics, which was, at least on the central level, very low. Quotas, which secured minimal participation of 30 % of women in parliament, were predominantly allocated among representatives of women workers and farmers rather than among members of women's organizations, as it was the case in the neighbouring GDR. Thus, during the 1980's there existed a significant gap in education between women and men in the posts of MPs. While in 1986 there were 40 % of men with university education in the parliament, there were only 7 % of university educated women. During the whole period under survey there was only one woman minister on the federal level – Minister of Labour and Social

Affairs – approximately for a third of the term of office of the government. Since 1968, when the federative system was established, there was only one woman in the government, the Minister of Postal Service and Telecommunications in the years 1969-1971. There was no woman in the Czech government from 1969 until 1990.

How did the change of the regime as well as the change of political climate influence public opinion on the involvement of women in politics. In the survey of the Institute for Public Opinion Research (hereafter IVVM) 77 % of respondents regarded participation of women in politics favourably (Kalnická 1997). It also follows from the data that the support increased continually in the period from 1991 to 1997. Women, respondents in the age group of 45-59, people in non-manual professions and with higher education regard participation of women in politics more frequently as positive. Women enjoyed higher support in communities with 2 to 5 thousand inhabitants and in Central and Southern Bohemia. Only 20 % of respondents considered involvement of women in political life as sufficient. In the group of respondents who regarded participation of women in politics as insufficient, we find mostly women (69 %), respondents in age category of 45 to 59 years of age (69 %), people with university education (71 %), respondents from Central Bohemia (68 %) and from communities with 2 to 5 thousand inhabitants (74 %).

In a following IVVM survey respondents were asked about women in social and public life they most respected (Weinholdová 1998). In the first place, they named politicians (39 %), personalities from cultural sphere (12 %) and wives of politicians (4 %). Most frequently they mentioned Petra Buzková, vice chairman of ČSSD and Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Republic, and Minister of Justice Vlasta Parkanová. People with high-school education and university education respect mostly politicians. Women with high standard of living were most interested in the wives of politicians. Respondents were also asked about features and qualities they assigned to women politicians. They mentioned assertiveness, courage to break through (14 %); proficiency (14 %), publicly beneficial activities, social feeling (13 %) and intelligence, good manners, and education (10 %). On the contrary, they didn't have much respect for the wives of politicians, which they explained by their inadequate behaviour (25 %); immodesty (17 %);



arousing antipathies (10 %) and desire for possession (9 %). Respondents with lower education and low standard of living were most critical in their assessment.

### *Conclusion*

One of the possible solutions of this situation can be establishing quotas for women within the parties. First of all, however, women should be more active – they should decide more frequently to participate in public life, not only on the local level but also on the national level. Another prerequisite of a higher number of women in politics is a change of attitude among the electorate – voters, both men and women, can make it obvious that they would not accept a political party with no women candidates assigned to the first places on ballot lists. By fulfilling the foregoing conditions, a potential for change of political parties will be created – women will participate more frequently in the operation of their parties and together with the pressure exerted by electorate they will gain better places on ballot lists and thus will have a better chance of being elected.

Civil association Guard She-Dog is one of the first attempts. It has introduced in our country a method of mentoring, which is already being used successfully by businesswomen and women scientists. Guard She-Dogs represent political mentoring within the project "2008 hours for a woman president", which plans to nominate a woman for president in the year 2008 (the project presupposes a change in the form of presidential election – from the existing indirect to direct election). Women from the ranks of academics, politicians and high public administration officials should become instructors. The project starts up in Prague as well as in Brno. Politicians from the ranks of non-parliamentary political parties, such as Civil Democratic Alliance (ODA) or Hope (Naděje) are contacted in first place (there are also several women presidents among them).

At the same time, the project pursues another goal: establishment of new politics – building up environment of mutual trust and cooperation across the political spectrum, establishing social networks, and last but not least application of alternative approaches and policies in the fields such as safety, education or culture. One of the methods of specific support should be mutual

media support – presentation of opinions (even the contrary ones) of other women politicians to improve their publicity. Potential candidates not only for the post of president, but also for deputies or ministers should be trained by their colleagues and experts in the fields such as lobbying or media contacts. Thus it is an attempt to establish favourable environment for a deeper, structural change.

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