

The Impact of Electoral Gender Quota on Women's Representation Trend in Parliaments of Western Balkan Countries

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Abstract: *Although women began to exercise their right to vote many years ago, women's representation in the national parliaments remains an issue to be addressed by many countries. The right to be elected is guaranteed through national and international legislation. In addition, Western Balkan countries have introduced an electoral gender quota aiming to ensure gender balance in national parliaments. This article aims to identify the trend of women's representation in parliaments of Western Balkan countries and the impact of electoral gender quota thereon. Relevant legislation, scientific articles and official statistical data on women's representation in the parliaments of these countries have been analysed and compared. The results demonstrate that the trend of women's representation in the parliaments of all Western Balkan countries has marked an increase due to quota introduction. Moreover, Kosovo, Albania and North Macedonia went beyond the electoral gender quota in the last elections.*

Keywords: *electoral gender quota, right to be elected Women, parliamentary elections, Western Balkan*

Introduction

Retrospective insight into the history of women's efforts to gain the right to vote and to be a candidate for a member of parliament (MP) shows the importance of the right to vote enjoyed by women today and the necessity to introduce gender quotas.

Thus, women's commitment to gaining their political rights dates back to the nineteenth century (Paxton et al. 2006). They were very active through women's movements and protests, as a result of which many were imprisoned and killed (Amorosa 2019). In 1888, educated women from the United States of America (USA) and Europe organised the first International Council of Women (Platiner 1995–1996). From the 1830s to 1920, nineteen (19) countries recognised the right to vote for women, the first being New Zealand in 1893 (Schaeffer 2020). Women living in the USA and Great Britain fought for more than 80 years for the right to vote and only managed to gain this right between 1918–1920 (Benedek 2012). However, this right was restricted in different countries based on age, colour, level of election and other factors. In 1893, New Zealand allowed women to vote in national elections (Schaeffer 2020). In 1918, Great Britain, known as the 'homeland of feminism', protected fashionable women for over 30 years for their suffrage (Benedek 2012), and South Africa recognised the right to vote for black women only in 1993, 60 years later after white women (Schaeffer 2020). Regarding Switzerland, women were granted the right to vote at the national level in 1971, while some cantons had already allowed them to vote at the local level since 1959 (Tobler 2018). Women in Appenzell Innerrhoden, the smallest canton in Switzerland, were not granted the right to vote at the local and canton level until the early 1990s (Stephens 2015). Finland was the first European country to guarantee the right to vote for Finnish women in 1906, followed by Norway in 1913, Denmark and Iceland in 1915, the UK and Germany in 1918, France in 1944 and Greece in 1952 (Miller 2020; France 24 2014). Haug (2015) stated that the inclusion of women in political life has been a challenging fight.

Thanks to these movements, women's political rights are guaranteed at the international level (Coomaraswamy 2002), specifically by the Convention on the Political Rights of Women (United Nations 1953), whose articles 1 to 3 aim to codify women's political rights within the spirit of Article 21 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948), which ensures the right to run for public office including a seat in the national parliament. This convention facilitated the political life of women (Procopio 2005) by requiring states to take temporary measures – namely, to introduce gender quotas for women's representation in the legislative institutions. Similarly, Article 25 of the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (United Nations 1966) stipulates that every citizen has the right 'to vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections. Such political rights are also granted by the regional legislation such as Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (Council of Europe 1950). Another regional legal act for European citizens that ensures the right to vote and to stand as a candidate for the European Parliament election and the local elections in the EU member states is the European Charter for Fundamental Human Rights (European Union 2012, Articles 39 and 40). The American Con-

vention on Human Rights (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights 1969, Article 23) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (Union of Africa 1981; Skovsholm 1999) ensure the observance of the right to vote and to be elected in the USA and Africa respectively.

As concerns women from the Western Balkan countries (Kosovo, Serbia, Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina), many researchers describe the challenges faced in their patriarchal societies (Cvetanoska 2021; Spehar 2018; Huma 2017; Bianca 2013; Sousa 2005; Ramet 1999). Cvetanoska (2022) argues that corruption impacts women's access to politics in North Macedonia and Kosovo. She based her arguments on the hypothesis of Sundström and Wängnerud (2016) that 'corruption is a direct obstacle for women's political representation when male-dominated networks influence political parties' candidate selection'. Women's access to politics in the Western Balkan countries is also affected by financial challenges (Cvetanoska 2021: 251). Momčinović (2020) states that the women striving for political rights in the Western Balkan countries face many challenges although it is part of the state agenda. Indeed, much study has been done on women's representation in politics and the gender quota in Western Balkan countries (Nacevska & Lokar 2017; Nacevska 2014; Björkdahl & Selimovic, 2015; Björkdahl 2012; Garunja 2021; Rashkova & Zankina 2017).

Indeed, all these efforts have contributed significantly to the introduction of gender quotas aimed at improving women's representation in politics. As elaborated below, these gender quotas have increased the level of women's representation in politics and decision making, but there is a lot of research that argues the lack of implementation of these quotas and non-effectiveness. So, their effectiveness or impact has been the subject of extensive research and debate. The present research aims to analyse the impact of the gender quotas on the women's representation of Western Balkan countries in national parliaments with a focus on women's descriptive representation in these countries over the last thirty years (from 1991 to 2023). To achieve this purpose, the following research questions were addressed:

- Does the legislation of the Western Balkan countries stipulate an electoral gender quota for parliamentary elections?
- What is the percentage of women's representation in the parliaments of the Western Balkan countries from 1991 to 2023?
- Did electoral gender quotas increase women's numerical representation?

Answers to these questions assist in testing the hypotheses of the present research:

Hypothesis 1: The trend of women's representation in the parliaments of Western Balkan countries marks an incredible increase as a result of the electoral gender quota introduced by the legislation of these countries.

Hypothesis 2: The electoral gender quotas had a significant impact on women's descriptive representation in the national parliaments of the Western Balkan countries due to the reserved seats and sanctions for the non-compliance with candidate list quotas.

The methodology used to test this hypothesis and address the research questions of the present research is elaborated below.

Methodology

Three research methods applied for the present research are textual analysis, comparative approach and survey data. To test the hypothesis, primary and secondary sources were used, such as books, scientific articles, reports, newspapers, and legislation on the gender quotas, and women's rights to vote and run for a political mandate in Western Balkan countries. The trend of women's representation in the parliaments of these countries from 1991 to 2022 was determined and compared between countries of the Western Balkans. As for the survey data, surveys conducted by various organisations and official data from the institutions of Western Balkan countries were used.

Literature review

Aim and types of the electoral gender quotas

Gender quotas have become a global marvel aimed at increasing the representation of women in political and decision-making positions. There are more than 130 countries around the world that have adopted the gender quotas (Kim & Fallon 2023; O'Brien & Rickne 2016). Scholars have identified several reasons for the adoption of gender quotas (Krook 2006). These include the need to rectify historical gender imbalances in political representation, promote gender diversity, improve democratic legitimacy and reassure women's representation in politics (Krook 2006, 2007; O'Brien & Rickne 2016; Adriaanse & Schofield 2014). Studies often cite international agreements – such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (United Nations 1979) along with Recommendation 23 (UN Women 1997) on electoral gender quotas as a temporary measure – as influencing the global adoption of electoral gender quotas, along with other measures mentioned above (Cook 2012; Figueroa 2017; Simmons 2009; Abdullahi 1987–1988), including in the Western Balkan countries (Browne 2017). Bush (2011) associates the adoption of electoral gender quotas with pressure from the international community, particularly through their post-conflict peace missions and financial incentives, especially for developing countries reliant on foreign aid.

The adoption and implementation of the electoral gender quotas have taken different forms and there are three types: i) candidate quotas or legislative quota mandating that a certain proportion of candidates must be female; reserved seats allocating a specific number or percentage of seats for women; and iii) voluntary party quotas through which parties set aside a portion of their candidate list for women candidates (Kim & Fallon 2023; Walsh 2020; Davidson-Schmich 2006). Kim and Fallon (2023) categorise them as *weak* or *robust* quotas based on two important factors: threshold or percentage of women to be elected and enforcement mechanisms. According to them, quotas with a minimum 10% de facto threshold are deemed robust quotas, while those below 10% are considered weak quotas (Kim & Fallon 2023). Researchers confirmed that quotas' effectiveness is measured by their de facto threshold, which are ranged from 5% to 50%, and it shows that higher thresholds typically bring more significant gains in representation (Kim & Fallon 2023, Rosen 2017; Schwindt-Bayer 2009). Regarding the second factor, Kim and Fallon (2023) argue that an enforcement mechanism not only enhances fairness but also improves the efficacy of the electoral gender quotas, thereby leading to enhanced women's descriptive representation in politics. Thus, quotas lacking enforcement measures are not as effective as quotas that have enforcement mechanisms, such as reserved quotas and candidate quotas with placement mandates and/or sanctions. The enforcement mechanism increases women's descriptive representation in national parliaments, meaning there is an increase in the numerical representation of women in national parliaments.

The women's descriptive representation and the electoral gender quotas

In fact, there is a lot of research dealing with gender quotas' impact on women's representation by focusing on the descriptive and substantive representation (Kim & Fallon 2023, Clayton 2021; Alexander 2012, Krook 2006, 2007; Franceschet et al. 2008; Xydias 2008). Scholars conceptualised descriptive women's representation as an increase in the elected women's numbers in national parliaments (Franceschet et al. 2009). While substantive women's representation is difficult to conceptualise, researchers define it as the capacities of women to change policies, impact and promote women's interest (Dahlerup & Freidenvall 2010). Regardless of such difficulty, Walsh (2020) states that the idea behind the introduction of gender quotas was to enhance both descriptive and substantive women's representation, based on the presumption that descriptive representation inevitably fosters substantive representation. According to them, more women get elected to national parliaments, and, while in national parliaments, women can push for more policies relevant to women's issues. For this linkage between descriptive and substantive women's representation,

Nayar (2022) concludes that globally, increased female representation in national parliaments through quotas leads to heightened advocacy for policies addressing women's issues, while Whash (2020) argues that gender quotas are solely intended to increase descriptive representation. However, the impact of electoral gender quotas on descriptive women's representation depends on the types of quotas, resulting in varying numerical impacts across countries (Dahlerup & Freidenvall 2010; Rosen 2017).

Thus, through cross-national research, Rosen (2017) argued that voluntary party quotas show considerably greater effectiveness in developed countries, whereas reserved seat quotas exhibit significance solely in the least developed nations. Of course, the impact of reserved seat quotas is influenced by the quota levels mandated (Dahlerup & Freidenvall 2010). The threshold of reserved seats depends on the legislation of the countries. Through its analysis, Meier (2009: 1) argued that 'there are as many formulas for reserved seats as there are cases'. Of course, the descriptive women's representation or the numbers of women elected as members of parliament (MP) depend on formulas or thresholds of reserved seats as well as sanctions for non-compliance with candidate lists. As for the candidate quotas, it applies across all the countries regardless of the development level (Rosen 2017). However, Rosen (2017) concluded that their positive impact relies on three factors: i) requiring placement mandates alongside such quotas to ensure women secure viable positions, ii) imposing substantial sanctions for non-compliance to enforce adherence and iii) establishing a minimum mandated threshold of at least 30%.

Drawing on insights from Rosen (2017) and other scholars, it's evident that the positive impact of electoral gender quotas hinges on three key factors: requiring placement mandates, imposing substantial sanctions for non-compliance and setting a minimum threshold of at least 30%. It's notable that approximately 130 countries have implemented electoral gender quotas through legislation. The Western Balkan countries are no exception, as all these nations apply such quotas. The section below elaborates on the legislation of the Western Balkan countries relating to the introduction of electoral gender quotas, aiming to identify the types of quotas introduced, present statistical data on number of women elected as MPs in their national parliaments between 1991 and 2022, as well as the level of women's descriptive representation.

These international legal instruments have influenced the legislation of almost all the countries in the world (Cook 2012; Figueroa 2017; Simmons 2009; Abdullahi 1987–1988), including the Western Balkan countries (Browne 2017). Half of the countries worldwide, including those in the Western Balkans, implement electoral gender quotas, as mandated by their legislation, to promote gender equality in political life and align with the international standards set by the Convention on the Political Rights of Women (United Nations 1953 as cited by Dahlerup 2007). The section below elaborates on the legislation of the

Western Balkan countries that relates to women's political rights such as the right to vote and to be elected as a member of parliament (MP), as well as the electoral gender quotas for ensuring gender equality in political institutions such as the national parliaments of these countries.

Adoption of electoral gender quotas by the Western Balkan countries

Guaranteeing women's political rights through constitutional provisions in the Western Balkan countries not only provides higher legal security for women but also proves that their society has advanced into a more democratic society on par with Western values (Nathan 1986). The constitutions of the Western Balkan countries, as their highest legal acts, guarantee the right to run for an MP mandate to every citizen. Constitutions of four Western Balkan countries explicitly guarantee the right to vote and the right to be elected as MP. The Constitution of the Republic of Albanian (Parliament of Albania 1998: Art. 45: para.: 1), the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo (Parliament of Kosovo 2008a: Art. 45), the Constitution of Serbia (Parliament of Serbia 2006: Art. 52) and the Constitution of Montenegro (Parliament of Montenegro 2013: Art. 45; Uljarevic & Muk 2011: 393) expressly guarantee the right to elect and the right to be elected. On the other hand, the Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia (Parliament of the Republic of North Macedonia 2019: Art. 22; Popovska 2022) and the Constitution of the Federation of the Bosnia and Herzegovina (Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2003: Art. 2, para. 1; Kadribašić et al. 2020; Belloni 2004) indirectly stipulates the right to stand for MP.

These constitutional provisions of the Western Balkan countries are implemented by their respective laws on national elections and gender equality. These laws introduce the electoral gender quotas as a means for increasing the number of women in politics (Cvetanoska 2022) and ensuring equality in the societies of Western Balkans countries. The two sections that follow are focused on the text analysis of the laws on gender equality and laws on elections of the Western Balkan countries.

Legislation on gender equality in the Western Balkan countries and percentage of quota

Western Balkan countries have approved legislation on gender equality. The Law on Gender Equality in Serbia (Parliament of Serbia 2009: Art. 36–37) guarantees the right of women to vote and to run for national elections and stipulates gender equality on the list of candidates running for an MP mandate by making it mandatory for political parties to prepare a list following gender-based criteria.

According to this, article lists of candidates are considered incomplete when there is noncompliance with the gender quota. A similar provision is included in the Law on Gender Equality in Albania (Parliament of Albania 2008), which states that ‘A representation of not less than 30% of each sex in the candidates’ list presented by the political parties for the proportional system for the general Assembly elections is ensured.’ It also imposes sanctions for political parties that violate the provisions of this article by blocking up to one-tenth of the state funds for the electoral campaign until such a violation is rectified.

The Law on Gender Equality in Montenegro (Parliament of Montenegro 2007: Art. 27) does not define the quota. Instead, it enacts special measures to remove existing obstacles that objectively lead to an unequal representation of men and women. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Law on Gender Equality (Parliament of Bosnia-Herzegovina 2009: Arts. 2–20) stipulates ‘equal representation of women and men when one of the sexes is represented with at least 40%’ (Kadribašić et al. 2020).

The Law on Gender Equality in North Macedonia (Parliament of North Macedonia 2012: Art. 16) regulates very broadly the quota system for women’s representation in politics. The Law on Gender Equality in the Republic of Kosovo (Parliament of Kosovo 2015: Art. 14) is different in that it stipulates equal gender representation at the legislative level with a minimum of fifty percent (50%) of both genders.

Table 1: Gender quotas according to the gender equality legislation of the Western Balkan countries

Country	Quota
Republic of Kosovo	50%
Bosnia-Herzegovina	40%
Albania	30%
Montenegro	No specific % but obliges political parties to ensure equality
North Macedonia	No specific % but obliges political parties to ensure equality
Serbia	No specific % but obliges political parties to ensure equality

Sources: The table was prepared by the author based on the laws on gender equality in each Western Balkan country

Electoral gender quotas according to the legislation of Western Balkan countries

As part of the gender quotas guaranteed under the legislation on gender equality, mandatory electoral gender quotas are stipulated under the laws on national elections of each Western Balkan country (Nacevska 2014). As stated above,

there are three types of electoral gender quotas: a) reserved seats, b) legal candidate quotas and c) political party quotas (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2009; Dahlerup 2007). In terms of Western Balkan countries, their legislation on national elections includes two types of quotas as mandatory for political parties – the candidate list quota and reserved seats quota.

The Law on General Elections in Kosovo (Parliament of Kosovo 2008b: Art. 27) states that

In each Political Entity's candidate list, at least thirty (30%) percent shall be male and at least thirty (30%) percent shall be female, with one candidate from each gender included at least once in each group of three candidates, counting from the first candidate in the list.

Article 111 of the same law states that

If, after the allocation of seats... the candidates of the minority gender within a Political Entity have not been allocated at least 30% of the total seats for that Political Entity, the last elected candidate of the majority gender will be replaced by the next candidate of the opposite gender on the reordered candidate list until the total number of seats allocated to the minority gender is at least 30%.

Kosovo introduced this electoral gender quota in 2000 (Szeląg 2021: 136). Fines for non-compliance with this quota are regulated by the regulation of the Central Election Commission (Parliament of Kosovo 2008b: Art. 126). Moreover, it should be emphasised that Kosovo introduced this electoral quota in 2000 through regulation of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (Szeląg 2021: 36), and after Kosovo declared independence, these provisions were passed to the Law on General Election, which means that electoral gender quotas are introduced as results of such international mission pressure or influence. In addition, the types of quotas introduced by Kosovo can be classified as robust quotas, as defined by Kim and Fallon (2023), due to the threshold for women to be included in candidate lists and reserved seats for women in parliament, as well as the sanctions imposed by legislation in case of non-compliance with the threshold.

The Law on Election of Councillors and Members of Parliament in Montenegro (Parliament of Montenegro 2011: Art. 39a) mandates that at least 30% of candidates on the candidate list shall be from the underrepresented sex. Montenegro introduced the electoral gender quota as mandatory in 2011 (Dinc & Hadzic 2018). There were attempts to oblige political parties to respect the gender quota during elections but such obligations were included in the legislation and were hence not complied with by the political parties. There have been attempts to compel political parties to adhere to the electoral gender quota during

elections, aiming to require by their statutes the inclusion of women in their candidate list. However, this obligation was envisioned as a legal requirement for political parties in the above-mentioned law. Furthermore, Article 39a of this law imposes sanctions for the failure to respect this obligation – specifically, the non-publication of such a candidate list by the Election Committee. With a threshold set at 30% and an enforcement mechanism for non-compliance, Montenegro’s approach aligns with the definition of *robust quotas* outlined by Kim and Fallon (2023). However, the legislation does not include provisions for reserved seats for women to become MP.

North Macedonia introduced an electoral gender quota of 30% in 2002 (Dahlerup & Freidenvall 2010), which later increased through legislation revisions. Currently, the Electoral Code of North Macedonia (Parliament of North Macedonia 2018: Art. 64) stipulates that at least 40% of the candidates shall be from the underrepresented gender. Placement order for women to be included in the candidate list is required as well. According to this Code, it can be concluded that North Macedonia implemented quotas that meet the criteria for *robust quotas* as outlined by Kim and Fallon (2023), as its code sets out the threshold factor and also sanctions for non-compliance with the requirement of electoral gender quotas.

In 1998, Bosnia and Herzegovina became the first country among the Western Balkan countries to introduce quotas by the Provisional Election Commission (Rashkova & Zankina 2017: 398), which was later introduced in the country’s legislation (Björkdahl 2012). It can be stated that the introduction of the electoral gender quota in this country is also a result of international community presence after the war ended. The Law on Election of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2001: Art. 4, para. 1S9) states that

The minority gender candidates shall be distributed on the candidate’s list in the following manner: at least one (1) minority gender candidate amongst the first two (2) candidates, two (2) minority gender candidates amongst the first five (5) candidates, and three (3) minority gender candidates amongst the first eight (8) candidates et seq. The number of minority gender candidates shall be at least equal to the total number of candidates on the list, divided by three (3) rounded up to the closest integer.

So, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina required placement order as well for women to be included in the candidate list. In addition, the same article of this law sanctions the failure to respect this quota by granting the Central Election Commission of BIH the authority to certify only the number of candidates that fulfil the requirements for the gender quota. Considering the threshold for women to be included in the candidate list and provisions on sanctions

for not respecting it, their electoral gender quotas can be qualified as *robust quotas*. However, it should be emphasised that the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina did not introduce reserved seats.

Similar to North Macedonia, Serbia introduced the electoral gender quota in 2004 (Nacevska & Lokar 2017: 298) and revised it in 2022. The Law on Elections for Members of Parliament in Serbia (Parliament of Serbia 2022: Art. 73) states that

There must be at least 40% of members of the underrepresented gender on the electoral list, so that among every five candidates in the list according to their order (the first five places, the next five places, and so on until the end) there must be three members of one and two members of the other gender.

So, this candidate quota is followed by the placement order and sanctioned through Article 78 of this law, which penalises political parties for non-compliance by authorising the Republic Electoral Commission to reject the candidate list and refrain from publishing it. The electoral gender quotas outlined in the legislation of Serbia can also be classified as *robust quotas* (Kim & Fallon 2023). However, this law does not establish a quota for reserved seats to ensure women's representation in the Serbian national parliament.

Albania introduced the electoral gender quota in 2008 (Garunja 2021: 5). The Electoral Code of Albania (Parliament of Albania 2015: Art. 4) sets both candidate quotas and reserved seat quotas to at least 30% for the underrepresented gender, ensuring representation for women respectively (Albanian Central Election Commission 2020). The same laws provide for sanctions if the political parties do not respect the gender quota in their candidate lists. The candidate list is not supported by the placement order but Article 175 of this code provides for sanctions if political parties fail to respect the gender quota in their candidate lists, leading to the rejection of the candidate list by the Central Election Commission (Parliament of Albania 2021c). Finally, it should be stated that the types of quotas introduced in Albania also qualify as *robust quotas* (Kim & Fallon 2023).

As Cvetanoska (2022) stated, it is important to check if these electoral gender quotas are implemented in practice, especially in terms of ensuring that the women of the Western Balkan countries have effective access to national parliaments in a male-dominated society. The section below presents the percentage and trend of women's representation in the parliaments of Western Balkan countries over the last thirty years. This analysis is based on the statistical data published by the state institutions of the Western Balkans and statistical reports published by international organisations on the percentage of women's representation in national parliaments.

Table 2a: The electoral gender quota for MPs under the legislation of the Western Balkan countries

Country	Quota according to the Law/Code on Elections
Republic of Kosovo	Every third candidate in the list is a woman or 30%
Bosnia-Herzegovina	Every third candidate in the list is a woman or 30%
Albania	Every third candidate in the list is a woman or 30%
Montenegro	Every third candidate in the list is a woman or 30%
North Macedonia	At least equal to the total number of candidates on the list, divided by three (3) or 40%
Serbia	Every five candidates in the list must be three members of one and two members of the other gender or 40%

Source: Author. Based on the laws/codes on elections of the Western Balkan countries

Table 2b: The electoral gender quota for MPs under the parliamentary election legislation of the Western Balkan countries

Country	Quota according to the parliamentary election laws		Sanctions for non-compliance are foreseen by law	Placement order foreseen by law
	Candidate quotas	Reserved quotas		
Republic of Kosovo	30%	yes	Yes	yes
Bosnia-Herzegovina	40%	No	Yes	yes
Albania	30%	Yes	yes	no
Montenegro	30%	No	Yes	Yes
North Macedonia	40%	Yes	Yes	yes
Serbia	40%	No	yes	yes

Source: Author. Based on the laws/codes on elections of the Western Balkan countries

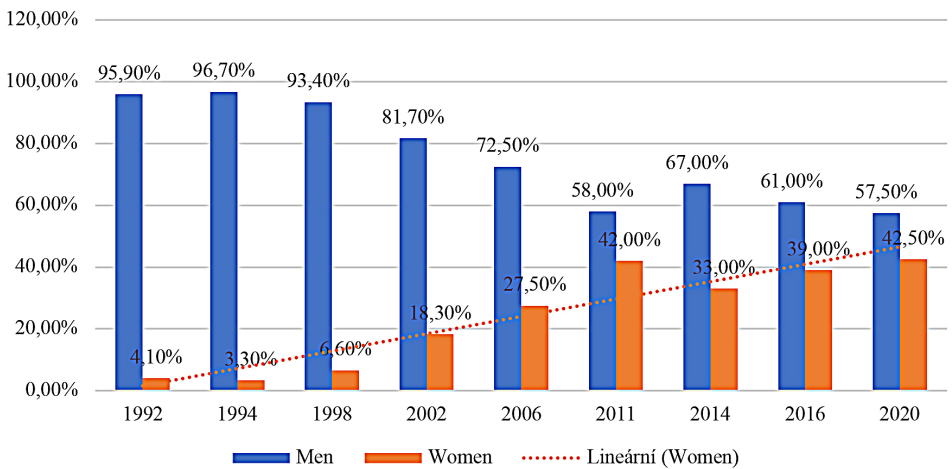
Empirical Analysis and Discussion

Women's representation in parliaments of the Western Balkan countries from 1991 to 2023

To check if the electoral gender quota stipulated under the legislation of the Western Balkan countries has become a reality, it is necessary to present and analyse statistical data on the percentage of women's representation in the parliaments of Western Balkan countries before and after the introduction of the electoral gender quota. This analysis also shows the trend of women's represen-

tation in the parliaments of these countries throughout the last thirty years, i.e. from 1991 to 2023. This period covers the period of the former Yugoslavia when some of the Western Balkan countries had different institutional setups from now (Jones 1994; Haug 2015). Kosovo was one of the federal units of former Yugoslavia but it did not have the same prerogative as other federal units. In addition, Serbia and Montenegro functioned as a Union for some years. Despite this institutional background, Figures 1 to 6 present very clearly the percentage of women elected as MPs in the national parliaments of the Western Balkan countries over the last thirty years.

Figure 1: The percentage of women MPs in North Macedonia's parliament

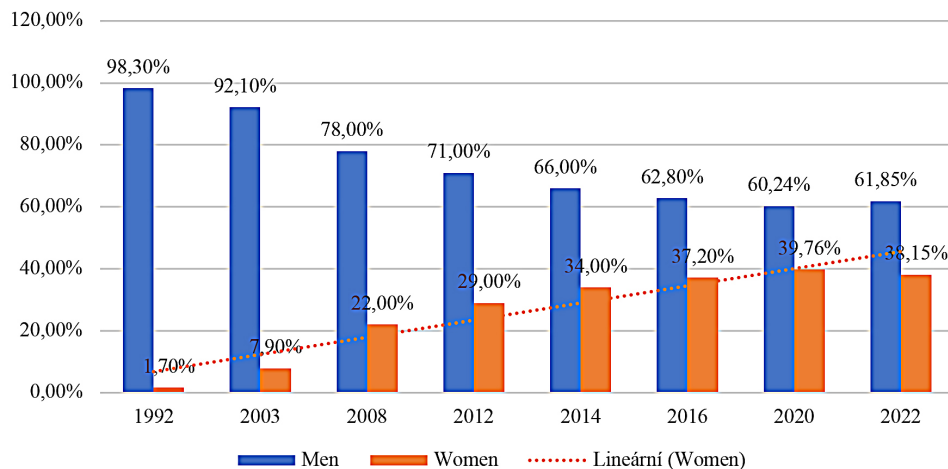


Source: Authors. Based on data published by the Inter-Parliamentary Union 2004, 2006, 2020a; Organisation of Security and Co-operation in Europe 2020; Parliament of North Macedonia 2011; Parliament of North Macedonia 2021

Figure 1 shows that the percentage of women elected as MPs in the parliament of North Macedonia has increased constantly from 1992 to 2020, with an overall growth of 38.4%. Before the introduction of the electoral gender quota by North Macedonia, this percentage was very low – 4.10% in 1992, 3.30% in 1994 and 6.60% in 1998. Following the introduction of the electoral gender quota, this percentage increased consistently from 18.30% in 2002 up to 42.50% in 2020, exceeding the mandatory electoral gender quota of 40%.

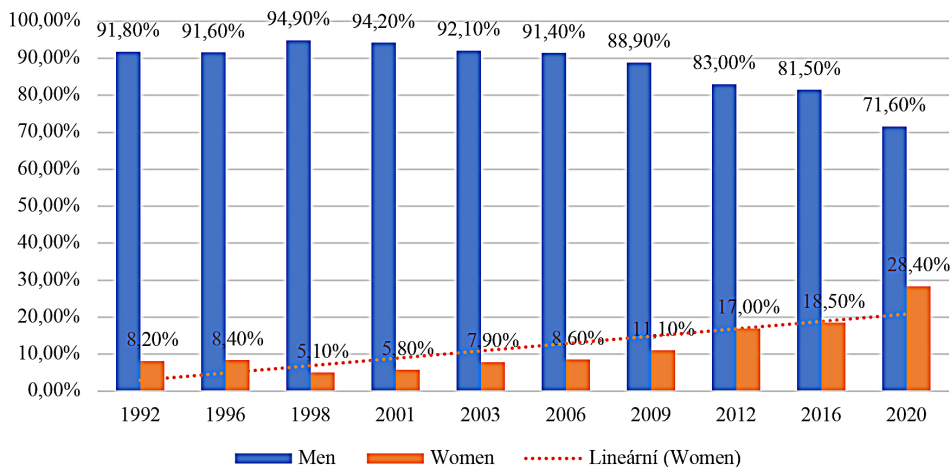
Figure 2 shows that the percentage of women elected as MPs in the parliament of Serbia increased during the research period (1992–2022) by 36.45%. Before the introduction of the electoral gender quota by Serbia, this percentage was very low – 1.70% in 1992 and 7.90% in 2003. Following the introduction of the electoral gender quota in 2004, this percentage increased constantly: 22.00% in 2008, 29% in 2012, 34% in 2014, 37.20% in 2016 and 39.76% in 2022.

Figure 2: The percentage of women MPs in Serbia's Parliament



Source: Authors. Based on data published by the parliament of Serbia in 2022, 2020, 2016, 2014, 2012, and I know politics 2012; Parliamentary Union 2004, 2007, 2022

Figure 3: The percentage of Women MPs in Montenegro's Parliament



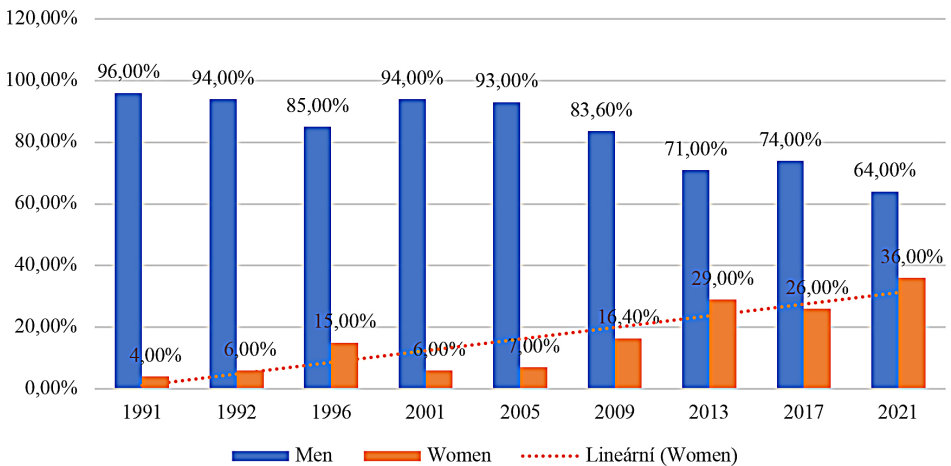
Source: Authors. Based on the data published by the Inter-Parliamentary Union 2004, 2006, 2009, 2020b; Parliament of Montenegro 2021; Brnović 2016; Council of Europe 2001; UNDP 2012

Figure 3 shows that the percentage of women elected as MPs in the parliament of Montenegro increased during the research period (1992–2020) by 20.2%. Before the introduction of the electoral gender quota by Montenegro, this percentage was very low – 8.20% in 1992, 8.40% in 1996, 5.10% in 1998,

5.80% in 2001, 7.90% in 2003, 8.60% in 2006 and 11.10% in 2009, while following the introduction of the electoral gender quota in 2011, this percentage increased consistently, i.e. 17.00% in 2012, 18.50% in 2016 and 28.40 % in 2020.

Figure 4 shows that the percentage of women elected as MPs in the parliament of Albania increased by 32% from 1991 to 2021. Before the introduction of the electoral gender quota by Albania, this percentage was very low, ranging from 4% in 1991 to 7% in 2005. Following the introduction of the electoral gender quota in 2008, this percentage increased constantly – 16.40% in 2009, 29% in 2013, 26% in 2017 and 36% in 2021. In the last election, the percentage of women MPs in the parliament of Albania exceeded the electoral gender quota of 30%.

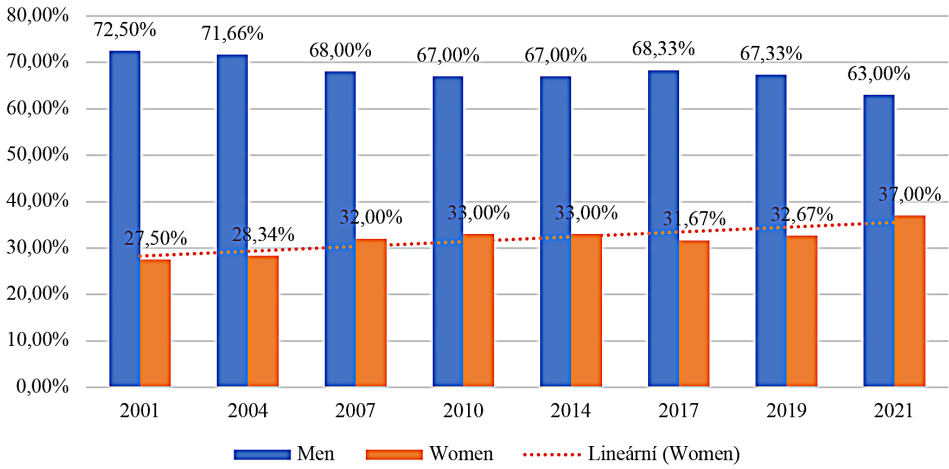
Figure 4: The percentage of women MPs in Albania’s parliament



Source: Authors. Based on data by the Parliament of Albania 2021a, Parliament of Albania 2021b; Central Election Commission 2021; ACER and ASET 2009: 11; Inter-Parliamentary Union 2004, 2005; Institute of Political Studies 2020

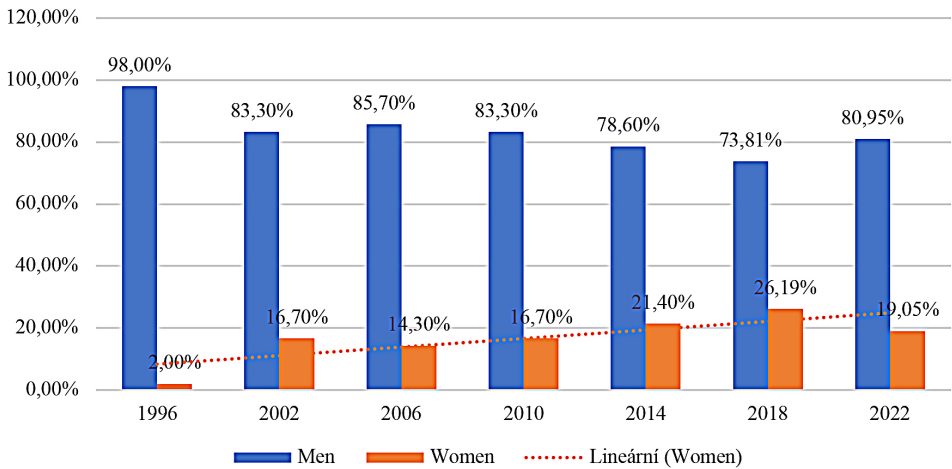
Figure 5 shows that the percentage of women elected as MPs in the parliament of Kosovo increased by 9.5% from 2001 to 2021. It was impossible to find data on women’s representation in the parliament of Kosovo before the war. The global organisation dealing with data collection on women’s representation in national parliaments (Inter-Parliamentary Union, IDEA) does not publish data for Kosovo’s parliament. However, Figure 5 proves that the percentage of women’s representation in Kosovo’s parliament not only increased constantly but was also higher than in the other countries since the introduction of the electoral gender quota in 2000: 27.50% in 2001, 28.34% in 2004, 32% in 2007, 33% in 2010, 33% in 2014, 31.67% in 2017, 32.5% in 2019 and 37% in 2021.

Figure 5: The percentage of women MPs in Kosovo's parliament



Source: Authors. Based on the data published by the Assembly of Kosovo 2022a and 2022b; Peci et al. 2015; Infokus 2017; GazetaMetro 2019

Figure 6: The percentage of women MPs in Bosnia and Herzegovina's parliament



Source: Authors. Based on the data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union 2004, 2006, 2010, 2018, 2023, and World Bank 2014

Figure 6 shows that the percentage of women elected as MPs in the parliament (House of Representatives) of Bosnia and Herzegovina increased by 17.05% from 1996 to 2022. Before the introduction of the electoral gender quota in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the percentage of women's representation was very low, i.e. 2% in 1996. However, it increased constantly following the introduction of the electoral gender quota in 1998 – 16.70% in 2002, 14.30% in 2006, 16.7% in 2010, 21.4% in 2014, 26.19% in 2018 and 19.05% in 2022.

Women's representation trends in Western Balkan parliaments and the electoral gender quota

Figures 1–6 show that the trend of women's representation in the parliaments of the Western Balkan countries has generally witnessed an increase during the last thirty years (1991–2023). In the last election held in 2022, Bosnia and Herzegovina made an exception to this trend, experiencing a decrease from 26.19% in 2018 to 19.05% (see Figure 6). On the other hand, the percentage of women MPs in Kosovo, Albania and North Macedonia increased beyond their electoral gender quota (see Figures 2–5). In the case of Kosovo, it should be noted that the percentage of women MPs has surpassed the quotas stipulated by the Law on General Elections but has not reached the gender quota of 50% as outlined in the Law on Gender Equality (2015). Finally, it is also important to emphasise that the percentage of women MPs in countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro is below the electoral gender quota, even though the trend has shown an increase, which is positive nevertheless. The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is an exception as the percentage of their women MPs decreased by 7.14% from 2008 to 2022 (Figure 6).

Regarding the question of whether the electoral gender quota introduced by the Western Balkan countries had an impact on this trend, the answer is certainly yes. The comparison of the statistical data before and after the introduction of electoral gender quotas as presented above proves it. Before the introduction of electoral gender quotas, the percentage of women's representation in the national parliaments of these countries was as follows: i) 1.7%–7.9% in Serbia, ii) 2% in Bosnia and Herzegovina, iii) 4.1% and 3.3% in North Macedonia, iv) 4%–7% in Albania and v) 8.2%–11.1% in Montenegro. Kosovo introduced the electoral gender quota in 2000, but there are no data available before this year due to the country's position before the war. After the introduction of the electoral gender quota, the percentage of women's representation increased as follows: i) in Bosnia and Herzegovina from 16.7% to 19.05% (slight decrease from 26.19% in 2018); ii) in Kosovo from 27.5% to 37%; iii) in Albania from 16.4% to 36%; iv) in North Macedonia from 18.4% to 42.5%; v) in Montenegro from 17% to 28.4%; and vi) in Serbia from 22% to 38.15%.

So, without electoral gender quotas, the increase of women's representation in the parliaments of these developing countries with a long tradition of patriarchal society would never have happened, especially to such a significant extent. Huma (2017) and Björkdahl and Selimovic (2015) consider the introduction of a quota system as the main contributor to the increase of women's representation in the parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Other scholars confirm the same for Serbia, North Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro (Nacevska & Lokar 2017; Dragoti et al. 2011; and Spehar 2018). Cvetanoska (2022) argued that 'the introduction of quotas may empower women to get involved in politics... but... when quotas are not implemented as intended in the law, their positive impact will be limited at best'. Based on the data presented above (Figures 1 to 6), the electoral gender quotas in Kosovo, Albania and North Macedonia not only implemented quotas as intended by the law but exceeded it. In this case, the positive impact was not limited.

Unfortunately, the other three countries – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia – did not implement electoral gender quotas as intended by legislation, and their positive impact was limited. Indeed, these three countries challenge the theory of Bayer-Schwindt (2009). According to him, to maximise the effectiveness of the electoral gender quota and enhance women's representation in politics, the election legislation should foresee specific quotas for women in the candidate lists and impose sanctions on political parties for non-compliance with these electoral gender quotas. However, this appears to be insufficient in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia, where their election legislation includes provisions for candidate gender quotas and sanctions for non-compliance. Consequently, these countries should mandate adherence to such quotas even in the composition of their parliaments, mirroring the approach taken by other countries in the region that have implemented and demonstrated positive results. Perhaps these results stem from the electoral gender quota, which must also be respected during the distribution of seats for MPs. So, the electoral legislation of these countries does not require reserved quotas, while the legislation of North Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo does.

Even though this article only demonstrates the impact of quotas on women's descriptive representation, it already signifies a significant positive development for women in these developing countries with long-standing patriarchal traditions. Of course, in the long run, they will also influence the substantive representation of women in the parliaments of these nations. Overall, the information presented in this article confirms the argument of Haughes et al. (2019) that 'the electoral gender quota has transformed the composition of national parliaments worldwide during the last fifty years', including the parliaments of the Western Balkan countries.

Conclusions

The Western Balkan countries have established a legal basis for women's political rights in line with international standards. Their constitutions guarantee such rights, while their laws on gender equality and parliamentary elections ensure the implementation of such rights. The legislation on gender equality encourages women's representation in the political life of these countries. In this regard, the Law on Gender Equality of Kosovo (Parliament of Kosovo 2015) is the most advanced because it obliges institutions to implement a gender quota of 50%. With regards to the electoral gender quota, the election codes of North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Serbia stipulate that 40% of MPs in their parliaments should be women. This is the highest quota among the election codes of the Western Balkan countries. The rest of these countries provide for a lower electoral gender quota (30%). The legislation on parliamentary elections in all these countries includes sanctions for non-compliance with the requirement to respect candidate gender quotas and/or reserved gender quotas. All these countries apply candidate gender quotas, and only three of them also apply reserved gender quotas – Kosovo, Albania and North Macedonia – which have exceeded the quota in terms of the number of women elected as MPs in their national parliaments.

Indeed, all types of electoral gender quotas aim to ensure equality between men and women in the parliaments of the Western Balkan countries and to increase women's representation in the institutional structures. Based on the data presented above, it can be concluded that the electoral quotas introduced by the Western Balkan countries have contributed positively on women's representation in their parliaments. The trend of women's representation in the parliaments of the Western Balkan countries marked an increase during the last thirty years. In agreement with Cvetanoska (2022) and based on the statistical data, it can be concluded that these electoral quotas were most effective in the case of North Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo because the percentage of women MPs in their parliaments increased beyond the set quota. Serbia amended the law on election last year, increasing the electoral quota up to 40%, which has not yet been achieved. While the percentage of women elected as MPs in national parliaments of Montenegro and Bosnia Herzegovina is below the percentage of the electoral gender quota as required under their legislation. However, the trend is positive in the case of Montenegro.

The results of this research demonstrate the impact of quotas in terms of women's descriptive representation. However, overcoming the issue of representation involves more than just meeting quotas; it entails reflecting women's inclusion in more tangible issues concerning gender, social issues and those of greater overall interest in political, economic and general development matters. Substantive representation of women in the national parliaments of the Western Balkan countries also remains a topic for further research.

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