

CENTAR ZA DEMOKRATSKU TRANZICIJU

BRANIMO DEMOKRATIJU

FROM QUOTAS TO POWER:

WOMEN IN POLITICS, MEN AT THE HELM

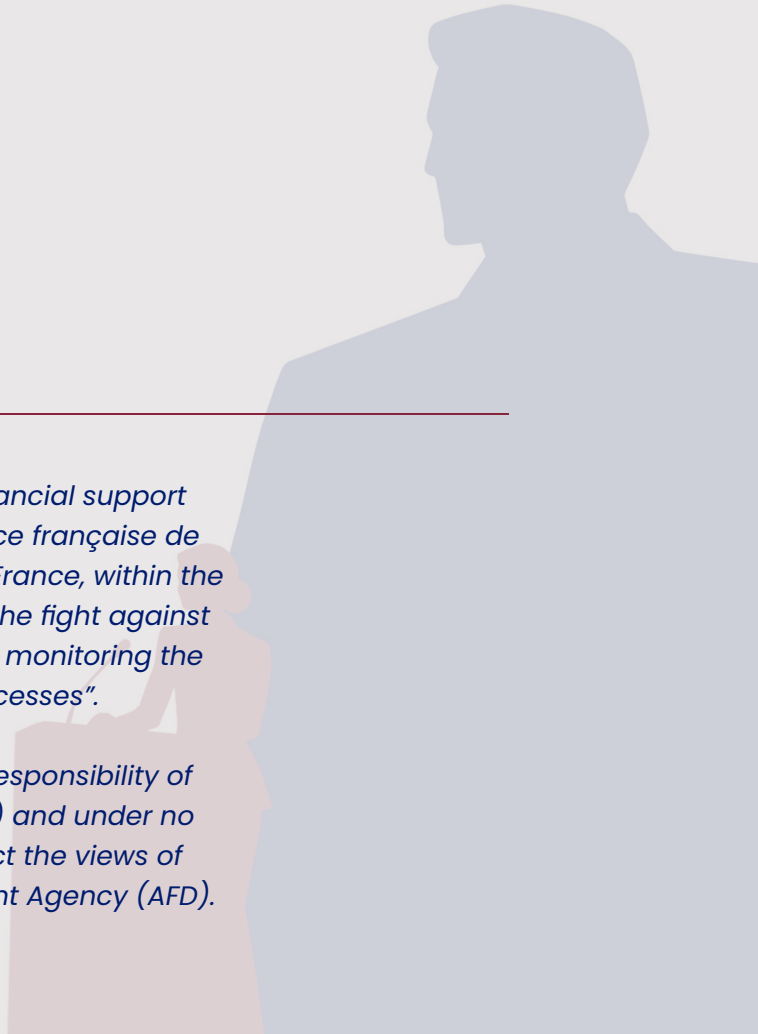
Author: **Milica Kovačević**

FROM QUOTAS TO POWER:

WOMEN IN POLITICS, MEN AT THE HELM

Author:
Milica Kovačević

Podgorica,
October 2026



The publication was produced with the financial support of the French Development Agency (Agence française de développement - AFD), through Expertise France, within the project "Improving electoral integrity and the fight against political corruption in Montenegro through monitoring the overall framework governing electoral processes".

The content of the publication is the sole responsibility of the Center for Democratic Transition (CDT) and under no circumstances can be considered to reflect the views of Expertise France or the French Development Agency (AFD).

CONTENT:

INTRODUCTION **4**

1. Moving Beyond Quotas to Genuine Political Power: Identifying the Barrier **5**

2. Formal Rules: What Changes Has Montenegro Introduced So Far? **6**

3. Beyond Formal Rules: Where Does Their Impact Fade **8**

3.1. Gender Quotas: Between Purpose and Implementation 8

3.2. Losing Representation Post-Election 10

3.3. Money for Women, Benefits for Parties? 11

3.4. The Gendered Cost of Political Engagement 13

3.5. Informal Pathways to Political Power 15

4. From Formal Equality to Genuine Political Power **17**

4.1. Reforming the Law on Political Parties: Mandating Intra-Party Democracy 17

4.2. Public Funding for Women's Organizations Must Foster Political Empowerment 18

4.3. Gender-Based Violence and Misogyny Demand an Effective Institutional Response 18

4.4. Curbing Political Patronage Requires Institutional Oversight, Not Just New Rules 19

INTRODUCTION

Montenegro has significantly strengthened legal guarantees for women's political representation in recent years, yet the question of their actual influence over political decision-making has received far less attention. A review of existing research, institutional reports, and documented political practices points to several key findings:

• **Legal safeguards mean little without consistent enforcement.** Documented cases show how electoral quotas have been circumvented or improperly applied, highlighting the need not only for stronger legislation but also for effective oversight of its implementation.

• **Public funding earmarked for women's political empowerment does not necessarily serve its intended purpose.** Audit findings raise serious questions about how funds allocated to women's party branches are spent. Clearer rules on eligible expenditures, stronger oversight, and guarantees that women's branches can independently decide how to use these resources are needed.

• **Gender-based violence is a well-documented barrier to women's political participation.** Misogyny, sexist attacks, and gender-based disinformation demand a more effective institutional response, while maintaining a clear distinction between violence and discrimination on the one hand, and legitimate political criticism on the other.

• **Without intra-party democracy, equal access to political power remains out of reach.** Decision-making is concentrated within party leaderships, where women remain significantly underrepresented. Addressing this imbalance requires reforming intra-party governance and increasing transparency in political appointments and the allocation of public resources.

1. 1. Moving Beyond Quotas to Genuine Political Power: Identifying the Barrier

Political parties in Montenegro have gradually adapted to gender quotas. Not all embraced them willingly, nor were they always strictly observed, with some parties demonstrating remarkable resourcefulness at finding loopholes. Nevertheless, after years of persistent pressure and legal interventions, we now have substantially stronger guarantees for women's representation than we had ten years ago. This undoubtedly marks real progress.

Yet confusing legal amendments with genuine changes in political power dynamics would be a misstep. Montenegro's political scene has not become a level playing field - it has merely become more difficult to exclude women altogether.

Political parties are now required to maintain specific ratios of female candidates on electoral slates, secure their ranking, and the retention of their seats. Dedicated public funds are also set aside for women's party branches. Yet, none of these mechanisms alone guarantees that women in fact participate in key decision-making, control how funds are spent, or enjoy equal opportunities for advancement. Quotas can secure a seat at the table, but unfortunately, the "head of the table" remains reserved for the same old figures.

This is by no means an argument meant to discredit quotas. On the contrary, Montenegro's experience demonstrates just how vital they were. But after spending years fighting for women's ratios on candidate slates, it is high time we raised politically uncomfortable questions: Who actually calls the shots in our parties? Who controls the budget, allocates senior positions, and dictates the rules of political promotion?

Finding the answers to these questions forces us to look past statutory frameworks and into the realm where local politics historically thrives: away from public eye, formal procedures, and institutional oversight mechanisms. It is within top party circles, informal networks of influence, and loyalty-based alliances that decisions are made regarding not only who gets a political platform, but also who gets to hold real power.

That said, we should avoid romanticizing women as inherently opposed to such system. Women are not inherently more democratic, honest, or immune to corruption than men. The core issue is that the system of political advancement is heavily reliant on affiliation with party leadership and access to resources, and thus fails to offer a level playing field.

At the same time, women who break through and gain public visibility often endure a toll that their male colleagues simply do not face. Misogyny, sexist attacks, intrusions into private life, and gender-based disinformation have become commonplace in our public discourse. Female politicians face pushback not just against their policies or stances, but against their very right to be ambitious, influential, vocal, or unapologetically challenging in their political approach.

This analysis builds on well-documented challenges: flaws in quota implementation, the spending of funds intended for women's party branches, misogyny and gender-based attacks, and the concentration of power within

party top tiers. At the same time, it raises a question that warrants deeper exploration: how informal networks, political patronage, and clientelist practices shape and constrain women's path to meaningful political influence. Political parties are not merely formal entities governed by statutes and procedural rules. They are built on informal dynamics, personal ties, and internal networks through which leverage is accumulated. In such clientelist environments, access to these informal channels becomes a vital political asset.

Unlike misogyny and gender-based attacks, which are well-documented in Montenegro, direct empirical evidence that clientelism and informal political networks systematically disadvantage women remains limited, which is why we frame this not as a definitive assertion of causality but as a hypothesis to be explored. This is not to suggest that all informal dealings are necessarily corrupt, or that women are universally excluded from them. However, we have ample reason to question the true value of statutory equality guarantees in a system where key decisions bypass formal procedures altogether.

2. Formal Rules: What Changes Has Montenegro Introduced So Far?

When it comes to formal frameworks for women's political participation, Montenegro is by no means at square one. On the contrary, recent legislative amendments have progressively moved gender representation out of the realm of party discretion and into mandatory compliance.

The most prominent step forward was made in electoral legislation. The 2025 Amendments to the Law on the Election of Councilors and Members of Parliament mandated the raising of quota for the underrepresented sex on electoral lists from 30% to at least 40%. The legislation also dictates candidate ranking, so as to prevent parties from formally meeting quotas by placing women solely at the bottom of the ballot.[1]

Representation is further safeguarded by strict mandate replacement rules, designed to curb workaround tactics deployed by political parties. Should a seat held by an underrepresented sex MP or councilor be vacated, it automatically gets reassigned to the next candidate of the same sex on that party's slate, provided one is available.[2] This provision is crucial because it extends legal protections of representation post-election, ensuring that hard-won representation levels are not eroded over the course of the parliamentary term.

Another major regulatory mechanism targets access to intra-party funding. The Law on Financing of Political Entities and Election Campaigns mandates allocating 0.05% of the current budget to fund the regular operations

1 Law on Amendments to the Law on the Election of Councillors and MPs, Official Gazette of Montenegro, No. 81/2025
2 Law on the Election of Councillors and MPs, Art. 104, provisions on filling a vacant seat with a candidate of the underrepresented sex.

of women's organizations in political entities represented in Parliament. These earmarked funds are deposited into designated sub-accounts, with mandatory financial reporting requirements.[3]

This mechanism marks a notable shift from viewing gender equality purely through female candidate percentages, acknowledging that effective political action requires dedicated financial backing. Nevertheless, we must distinguish ring-fenced funding from genuine control over its allocation. The existence of a dedicated budget line does not clarify how much weight women's branches carry in intra-party decisions, who truly sets spending priorities, or whether these funds translate into women's greater leverage over candidate selection, overall budget allocations, or strategic policy choices.

Statutory quotas could soon extend to the executive branch as well. The proposed Law on Government stipulates that at least 40% of cabinet posts be held by the underrepresented sex, along with guaranteed representation among deputy prime ministers in multi-deputy cabinets.[4] This provision has not entered into force and is currently pending before Parliament. While these mechanisms reflect meaningful progress, their actual impact will depend on consistent implementation and the way political parties choose to navigate the framework provided by the law.

[3] Law on Financing of Political Entities and Election Campaigns, Official Gazette of Montenegro, Nos. 81/2025, 101/2025 – Corrigendum, and 114/2026.
[4] Proposed Law on the Government of Montenegro, EPA 885 XXVIII, No. 00-31/26-1, Art. 8. The proposal stipulates at least 40% representation of the underrepresented sex in the Government; at the time of drafting this analysis, it remains pending before Parliament.

3. Beyond Formal Rules: Where Does Their Impact Fade

While the statutory safeguards outlined above represent an essential baseline for women's more equal political participation, their mere existence does not guarantee meaningful implementation. Montenegro's experience shows that the impact of specific affirmative action measures can be diluted right at the implementation stage - from approving candidate slates that fail to meet statutory criteria, to seat replacement procedures post-election, to the reallocation of public funds earmarked for women's political empowerment.

3.1. Gender Quotas: Between Purpose and Implementation

The introduction of gender quotas markedly elevated legal guarantees for female candidate representation in Montenegro. The initial framework from 2011 required at least 30% of candidates on electoral slates to belong to the underrepresented sex, but it failed to regulate ballot ranking. In practice, women were often clustered at the bottom of candidate lists, meaning that formal quota compliance rarely translated into an increased number of female representatives. Subsequent legislative updates in 2014 introduced a mandatory ranking rule, requiring at least one candidate of the underrepresented sex within every four-candidate block.

However, practical implementation revealed two distinct structural flaws. The first was inconsistent enforcement of legal quota standards. Our analysis of the local elections held across 14 municipalities in October 2022 revealed that municipal election commissions verified and approved 23 candidate lists that failed to comply with legal criteria concerning either the mandatory gender percentage or candidate ranking - accounting for 24% of all competing electoral slates. Rather than demanding corrections or disqualifying non-compliant submissions as required by law, municipal election commissions permitted these slates to run[5].

At the time, the law explicitly stipulated that any candidate list failing to comply with quotas or ranking rules be treated as deficient, obligating the election commission to issue a formal request for corrections and to reject any list that remained non-compliant[6]. The problem, therefore, was not a lack of clear rules, but rather a failure of enforcement.

[5] Biljana Papovic and Milica Kovacevic, How to improve the environment for women's participation in politics?, Center for Democratic Transition (CDT), Podgorica, February 2023.
[6] Law on the Election of Councillors and MPs, Article 39a, text in force at the time of the 2022 local elections.

A second issue demonstrates how drafting and interpretation can significantly alter the practical effect of a rule. Ahead of the 2023 parliamentary elections, the State Election Commission returned the candidate list "Yes, We Can for a Civic Montenegro!" to remedy deficiencies. In its conclusion dated on May 17, 2023, the State Election Commission identified among other deficiencies that "the electoral list does not feature at least one member of the underrepresented sex among every four sequential candidates" and instructed the submitter to align their slate with legal requirements.[7] In this particular case, men happened to be the underrepresented sex on the slate. Following the requested corrections, the State Election Commission formally approved the list on May 19.[8]

The "Yes We Can" case exposes an inherent paradox embedded in the design of this corrective mechanism. Originally devised to boost women's political representation, the legal provision was written using gender-neutral terminology referencing the "underrepresented sex." When applied literally, the norm protects whichever gender holds fewer spots on a given slate, even when this minority consists of men.

A comparable debate surfaced in Croatia, where judicial proceedings were brought against the political platform Možemo! (We Can!) over electoral slates that featured over 60% female candidates. While the court of first instance ruled in favor of the argument that increased female participation aligned with the underlying purpose of gender quotas, the High Misdemeanor Court ruled that the law does not favor either gender.[9] The same rationale was applied in a February 2026 ruling, which found that 'Možemo!' and 'Hoćemo pravedno' (We Want Justice) failed to comply with the gender quota, as their joint candidate list fell short of the required 40% representation of male candidates.[10]

This approach points to a broader conceptual issue in how gender quotas are structured and interpreted. Affirmative action measures were not created in a political vacuum; they were introduced to address the deep-seated, structural underrepresentation of women in governance. If a quota is framed through gender-neutral wording as a minimum threshold for the "underrepresented sex" per each individual list, and then applied strictly literally, without regard for its original intent, it can ultimately undermine its primary corrective purpose. A rule designed to advance female representation ends up capping women's participation on a given list to preserve a minimum share for men, even though men face no structural barriers in political decision-making. The key issue is therefore not merely whether a rule is gender-neutral on paper, but whether its interpretation and implementation uphold the true purpose of affirmative action: eliminating actual, rather than hypothetical, inequality.

The 2025 amendments to the Law on the Election of Councilors and MPs increased the statutory quota to at least 40% for candidates of the underrepresented sex, alongside stricter placement rules on candidate lists. However, the gender-neutral phrasing remained unrevised.

7 State Election Commission of Montenegro, Decision No. 624/5, May 17, 2023.
8 Nikola Dragas, "SDP and 'We Can' Lists Confirmed," Vijesti, May 19, 2023.
9 High Misdemeanor Court of the Republic of Croatia, Decision No. Ppž-6241/2022, December 4, 2024.
10 Municipal Misdemeanor Court in Zagreb, Judgment No. Pp-671/2026, February 23, 2026.

3.2. Losing Representation Post-Election

Gender quotas fail to achieve their end goal if their impact ends when candidate lists are finalized. To guarantee meaningful representation, its protective effect must endure through seat assignments and subsequent mandate replacements. While legal safeguards protecting seats for the underrepresented sex during mid-term vacancies have been in place since 2014, that protection did not extend to instances where a next-in-line female candidate formally declined to take up an available mandate.

The consequences of this legal loophole became apparent after the 44th Cabinet took office in 2023. Valentina Minic occupied the 16th slot on the candidate list for the "Aleksa and Dritan - Hrabro se Broji!" coalition. When four Democratic Montenegro MPs vacated their parliamentary seats to assume executive office, their seats were reassigned to Nikola Rovcanin, Albin Ceman, Momcilo Lekovic, and Dusko Stjepovic[11]. Three of these individuals - Ceman, Lekovic, and Stjepovic - were placed below Minic on the original slate.[12]

This was by no means the first time this happened. A comparable case occurred following the 2016 elections within the Social Democrats' list, where Vujica Lazovic's vacated seat was passed to Mico Orlandic despite Mubera Kurpejovic holding a higher placement on the electoral list.[13] As a result, the Social Democrats served an entire ensuing parliamentary term without a single female representative in their MP group.

In July 2024, Minic took a position as advisor to the Deputy Prime Minister, only taking up a seat in Parliament in July 2026 following the resignation of Zdenka Popovic, which party leadership categorized as a pre-arranged seat rotation.[14] Yet, this internal arrangement would not have been necessary had the law previously safeguarded gender quotas integrity in instances where a female candidate declines a mandate.

This statutory gap was addressed through legislative amendments adopted in July 2026. Article 104 was updated to specify that should a candidate of the underrepresented sex decline a mandate, the seat is to be allocated to the next eligible candidate of the underrepresented sex on the same slate.[15] This provision aims to relieve intra-party pressure on elected female councilors and MPs to step aside, as forfeiting their seats no longer frees up space for their male colleagues further down the candidate list.

Ultimately, it is worth noting that this statutory gap did not persist because the intent behind the provision was unclear. It was obvious well before the 2026 amendments that the purpose of gender quotas was to guarantee substantive female representation rather than their token presence on candidate lists. During legislative discussions in July 2026, when the Centre for Democratic Transition (CDT) recommended explicit safeguards to protect seats assigned to women if declined by female candidates, some party representatives argued that such protection was already implicit in existing law. Yet years of political practice proved the exact opposite: parties routinely exploited legislative ambiguity to circumvent the real intent behind the law.

It is therefore hard to attribute this issue to a mere misinterpretation of the law. Rather, political parties fully understood both the spirit of the norm and how to navigate around it, intentionally retaining legal ambiguities that allowed them to formally champion gender equality while maintaining control over how it plays out in practice.

11 State Election Commission, Reports on Filling Vacant Parliamentary Seats Nos. 1090/8, 1090/9, 1090/10, and 1090/11, November 16, 2023.
12 State Election Commission, *Consolidated Electoral Slate for the Election of MPs to the Parliament of Montenegro*, No. 698, May 26, 2023.
13 "Social Democrats' Maneuver: Mico Replacing a Woman," Monitor, September 1, 2017.
14 "Valentina Minic Becomes MP Replacing Zdenka Popovic, Democrats Nominate Andjela Vojinovic as Deputy Speaker," Vijesti, July 28, 2026.
15 Law on Amendments to the Law on the Election of Councilors and Members of Parliament, Official Gazette of Montenegro, No. 114/2026; Article 104, new paragraph: "If a candidate for councilor or member of parliament from the underrepresented sex submits a declaration declining a mandate, the mandate shall be awarded to the next eligible candidate of the underrepresented sex on the electoral list."

3.3. Money for Women, Benefits for Parties?

Dedicated public funding for women's party branches was instituted to complement electoral quotas by providing concrete financial backing for women's political engagement. Deposited into separate sub-accounts, these funds may be used exclusively for the operations of women's branches in accordance with their governing statutes. Furthermore, parties are mandated to submit distinct financial statements detailing how these resources are disbursed.

From the outset, however, the actual implementation exposed deep weaknesses in this funding model. A monitoring report on 2020 party finances published by MANS revealed that financial disclosures across nearly all parliamentary parties provided no clear insight into the actual utilization of funds earmarked for women's branches. For many parliamentary parties, even the existence of dedicated statutes for their women's organizations could not be verified, despite explicit legal requirements that expenditures align strictly with such statutes.[16]

Regulatory oversight mechanisms were already embedded in the system at the time. The Ministry of Finance had the power to freeze disbursements for failure to meet reporting standards, while the while the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption (ASK) and the State Audit Institution (SAI) held statutory powers to audit funds and initiate proceedings for violations of political financing rules. Yet, a gender-responsive analysis of electoral processes found that these corrective mechanisms were underutilized[17].

Recent audit reports by SAI indicate that these deficiencies persist, while also raising fundamental questions about the nature of activities funded under the guise of women's political advancement. It is particularly telling that a substantial portion of these funds is funneled into various forms of humanitarian aid. According to SAI findings, the Women's Association of the Europe Now Movement (PES) allocated €11,000 out of its total reported expenditure of €13,405 in 2023 toward humanitarian aid.[18] As for the Bosniak Party, out of €86,673 in total disbursements from the Women's Forum account, a striking €76,200 was categorized as financial aid to individuals and legal entities[19]. In the case of the SNP, €7,945 of the Women's Association's total €40,405 expenditure in 2024 was recorded as financial aid allocations[20]. Humanitarian aid effectively accounted for roughly 82% of reported spending by PES's women's branch, whereas direct financial assistance represented nearly 88% of all outflows from the Bosniak Party's Women's Forum account.

This spending pattern raises two critical questions. First, does deploying funds intended for women's political empowerment reinforce traditional gender roles, in which women are confined to charitable and social welfare initiatives while core political decision-making remains beyond their reach? Second, does distributing financial assistance through party channels create avenues for clientelist practices? While audit findings do not directly prove clientelism, they amply justify examining the criteria governing aid distribution, its recipients, and potential politization for party gain.

Another contentious practice involves redirecting women's organization funds toward general election campaigns and party operations. The SAI reported that Democratic

[16] MANS, *Money and Politics: How Parties Wre Spending Funds for Financing Women's Organizations*, Podgorica, 2021.
[17] Maja Raicevic, Anita Stjepcevic, Ana Scepanovic, Jovan Ulicevic, Sara Nikcevic, and Izabela Kordic, *Gender Perspective of the 2023 Parliamentary Elections*, NGO Women's Rights Center and NGO Spektra Association, Podgorica, 2023
[18] State Audit Institution, Audit Report on the 2023 Annual Consolidated Financial Statement of the "Europe Now" Movement, Podgorica, October 17, 2024.
[19] State Audit Institution, Audit Report on the 2023 Annual Consolidated Financial Statement of the Bosniak Party, Podgorica, October 17, 2024.
[20] State Audit Institution, Audit Report on the 2024 Annual Consolidated Financial Statement of the Socialist People's Party, Podgorica, December 24, 2025.

Montenegro allocated €126,350 out of €148,805 in Women's Forum funding - representing nearly 85% of its total 2023 spending - toward election campaign costs[21]. Although the SAI noted that that these disbursements complied with the statute of the women's branch, the audit details do not clarify whether the funded activities specifically promoted women's political engagement or else served broader party campaigning.

Audit findings further illuminate systemic shortcomings in internal accounting controls over funds earmarked for women's party branches. The governing statutes of women's organizations in certain parties lack detailed guidance on allowable expenditure categories, leaving broad room for different interpretations of permissible spending. At the same time, inadequate accounting practices and mismatches between financial statements and business records undermine audit trails. In some instances, auditors discovered that women's branch funds were diverted to cover expenses incurred by party members unaffiliated with these groups, including expenditures violating both statutory and internal rules.

These audit findings do not provide an exhaustive overview of political financing across all party women's wings, as the SAI conducts audits based on risk assessment and legal criteria, with a mandate to audit all parliamentary parties at least once every four years. Nonetheless, they demonstrate that the underlying problems extend beyond technical accounting irregularities, but have to do with the core purpose of ring-fenced public financing.

This brings to light an issue far more critical than mere financial compliance: who within the party hierarchy actually holds control over these funds? Available data fails to reveal whether female party members autonomously decide spending priorities or hold genuine control over funds statutorily designated for their political empowerment.

Even the updated legal framework has not fully resolved the issue. In its June 2026 opinion, ODIHR assessed that dedicated funding for political parties' women's organizations aligns with good international practice, but noted that its effectiveness remains questionable. Although the new law regulates reporting more clearly, it still fails to define eligible expenses with sufficient precision or to provide an effective sanctioning mechanism. ODIHR specifically points to the lack of reporting obligations regarding the status of women within parties and activities aimed at their political empowerment. It therefore recommends defining eligible expenses more strictly and strengthening monitoring, oversight, and sanctions.[22]

[21] State Audit Institution, Audit Report on the 2023 Annual Consolidated Financial Statement of Democratic Montenegro, Podgorica, October 17, 2024.
[22] OSCE/ODIHR, *Urgent Opinion on the New Law of Montenegro on Financing of Political Entities and Election Campaigns of July 2025*, Warsaw, 10 June 2026

3.4. The Gendered Cost of Political Engagement

One of the most thoroughly documented barriers to women's equal political participation in Montenegro is the prevalence of misogyny, sexism, and gender-based attacks. Available studies demonstrate that women in public life are subjected not merely to routine political and public scrutiny, but to attacks targeting their gender, appearance, sexuality, private lives, and societal roles.[23]

Previous research on violence against women in politics highlights pervasive double standards, the systematic questioning of female politicians' competence and moral integrity, as well as various forms of psychological, sexual, economic, and physical abuse.[24]

The digital space has significantly expanded the reach and severity of gendered hostility. Monitoring of social media and online platforms conducted by CDT documented various forms of online violence and gender-based disinformation aimed at female politicians in Montenegro. Threats, sexualized and misogynistic slurs, humiliating imagery, and coordinated smear campaigns allow hostile content to proliferate quickly, persist online for an extended period of time, and draw in mass audience participation.[25]

The weaponization of gendered smear campaigns against women in the public and political sphere is closely intertwined with disinformation, a phenomenon CDT continuously monitors through its Raskrinkavanje fact-checking platform. A targeted investigation into 2024 media coverage revealed more than 85 articles featuring gendered disinformation or deceptive narratives, complemented by an in-depth analysis of over 90 posts verified and flagged as false or manipulative by Raskrinkavanje over the preceding five years. The analysis reveals consistent targeting patterns deployed against women in public life: fabricating statements or misattributing quotes, manipulating photos and other contents, alleging fake scandals, taking statements out of context, and pairing false claims with derogatory, gender-tinged slurs. Such content frequently triggers waves of sexist comments, turning disinformation into a tool for broader gender-based character assassination.[26]

These targeted attacks carry consequences that extend far beyond their immediate victims. Research indicates that such hostility induces widespread insecurity, self-censorship, and a potentially deterring effect on women who are currently politically active or considering a career in politics.[27] However, empirical data remains insufficient to measure precisely how often these attacks lead directly to women withdrawing candidacies, stepping down from office, or abandoning political career paths altogether.

The inadequate response to these occurrences remains a major challenge. Previous studies emphasize severe shortcomings in legal and institutional enforcement, inconsistent sanctioning of perpetrators, and the need for political parties to assume greater ownership in preventing and addressing violence against women in politics[28].

Gender-based political attacks extend far beyond individual safety - they shape the very conditions that dictate whether women can participate in governance and access real power.

[23] Natasa Vukovic and Ivana Rascanin, Research: Violence Against Women in Politics in Montenegro, Women's Political Network/UNDP, Podgorica, 2021; Teodora Gilic, Maja Bjelic, and Milica Zrnovic, *(Un)safe in Online Space? Report on Gender-Based Disinformation and Online Violence Against Women in Politics in Montenegro*, CeMI, 2022.
[24] Natasa Vukovic and Ivana Rascanin, *Research: Violence Against Women in Politics in Montenegro*, 2021.
[25] Milica Kovacevic and Darvin Muric, *Online Actions, Offline Harms: Implications of Online Pressures – Online Silencing of Women in Montenegro*, CDT/DCAF, 2023.
[26] Jelena Jovanovic and Marko Vukajlovic, *Gender, Media and Social Networks: How Disinformation Leads to Hate and Misogyny*, CDT, Podgorica, 2025.
[27] Milica Kovacevic and Darvin Muric, *Online Actions, Offline Harms, 2023; Natasa Vukovic and Ivana Rascanin, Research: Violence Against Women in Politics in Montenegro*, 2021.
[28] Biljana Papovic and Milica Kovacevic, *How to improve the environment for women's participation in politics?*, CDT, Podgorica, 2023; DeFacto Consultancy, Violence against women in Montenegrin politics, Westminster Foundation for Democracy, 2024.

However, it is vital to maintain a clear distinction between gender-motivated hostility and legitimate political criticism directed at female officials. While growing cross-party solidarity among female leaders in condemning sexism and misogyny marks a positive shift, protecting women from misogynistic attacks must not translate into shielding them from rigorous scrutiny of their decisions, performance, political stands, governance record, or alleged abuses of power. Female politicians must remain subject to the exact same standards of public accountability as their male counterparts. Challenging a female leader is not inherently misogynistic simply because it is harsh, uncomfortable, or politically motivated. Criticism acquires a gendered dimension only when a woman is attacked or discredited on the basis of her sex, appearance, sexuality, private and family life, or through double standards that are not imposed on men.

Overusing the concept of misogyny carries counterproductive risks. If virtually every political conflict involving a woman gets framed as gendered attack, the line between routine political disagreement and genuine gender discrimination becomes blurred, downplaying the actual instances of misogyny when they do occur. Such an approach inadvertently reinforces the very paternalistic stereotype that gender equality efforts seek to dismantle: treating a woman as needing special protection from the rough-and-tumble of political life simply because of her gender.

This patriarchal framing of equality is particularly problematic in a society where traditional views of women as mothers, family guardians, and moral authorities remain strong. Appealing to motherhood, age, "womanly honor," or demands for special chivalry toward female politicians may seem supportive on the surface, but it relies on the same flawed premise as many discriminatory patterns - that women in public life merit different treatment by virtue of their sex.

3.5. Informal Pathways to Political Power

Women's actual political influence depends heavily on how political parties decide on candidate selection, the allocation of key roles, and intra-party advancement, as well as on access to party leaderships, informal networks, and resources.

This challenge is particularly acute in Montenegro due to limited intra-party democracy and the concentration of power within party leaderships. The 2024 National Integrity System Assessment conducted by MANS scored the effectiveness of internal democratic governance within political parties at a mere 25 out of 100 points. The assessment highlights that party leaders dominate decision-making processes, while internal procedures often serve merely to formally rubber-stamp decisions that have already been made.[29]

Such concentration of decision-making highlights the impact of unwritten rules and informal ties. Political influence stems not only from an individual's official position, but also from their proximity to party leadership, trust among influential actors, standing within local party branches, and the ability to mobilize members and voters. When choices are made within a relatively narrow circle, access to that inner circle becomes a prime political asset, making career prospects dependent on ties established and maintained beyond formal channels.

Montenegrin politics continues to be overwhelmingly male-dominated. No parliamentary party is currently headed by a woman, and female presence remains scarce in party leadership bodies where core decision-making power is concentrated. Studies confirm marked underrepresentation of women across the leadership structures of most political parties, revealing zero instances of balanced gender representation across all surveyed political entities.[30]

According to findings from a representative public opinion survey on violence against women in politics, the lack of party support is the most widely cited barrier to women's greater political involvement. This obstacle was identified by 51.4% of respondents, followed by gender discrimination at 44.8%, cultural and societal norms at 41.2%, and inadequate access to resources and funding at 19.5%.[31]

The qualitative findings from this study highlight a clear disconnect between women's organizational workload and their access to decision-making roles. Political practitioners describe a pattern in which women handle heavy administrative and operational workloads, yet remain largely absent from high-level decision-making posts. Similar accounts emerged from focus groups with party youth branches, where participants described practices of women executing logistics and organizational tasks, while men are routinely assigned leading ballot positions, greater media exposure, and clearer paths for advancement.[32]

This disparity becomes even more critical in light of clientelist party practices. The National Integrity System Assessment highlights that some political parties in Montenegro function on clientelism and narrow interests, while documenting issues of political patronage, partisan hiring, politically motivated appointments, and resource exploitation across the public sector and campaign finance[33]. Within this setting, political clout is frequently accumulated by serving as a gatekeeper to public jobs, political appointments, and state resources, or by guaranteeing electoral backing and institutional loyalty.

[29] MANS, *Assessment of the National Integrity System of Montenegro*, 2024.
[30] Snezana Jonica, Marija Blagojevic i Kaca Djurickovic, *80 Years of Political History of Women in Montenegro*, UNDP, 2023.
[31] DeFacto Consultancy, *Violence against Women in Montenegrin Politics*, Westminster Foundation for Democracy, februar 2024.
[32] Ibid.
[33] MANS, *Assessment of the National Integrity System of Montenegro*, 2024.

Informal political relationships are not inherently clientelist or corrupt. Trust, political experience, organizational skills, and personal networks are legitimate sources of political leverage. However, a problem arises when access to public resources and their selective distribution are weaponized as transactional political currency to build or consolidate authority.

The unequal distribution of political power within party structures raises key questions regarding gendered dimensions of clientelist systems. If access to leadership, influence over candidate selection, and resource gatekeeping serve as main currencies for advancement, we must evaluate whether female and male actors enjoy equal opportunities to build and deploy such capital. It is particularly crucial to determine whether administrative and logistical workload, predominantly carried out by women according to existing studies, is fairly valued and translated into political advancement.

4. From Formal Equality to Genuine Political Power

While Montenegro has expanded legal safeguards for women in politics in recent years, structural mechanisms governing how political power is gained, shared, and controlled remain largely unaddressed. Further progress requires reforming intra-party governance, enforcing effective oversight of public resources, and establishing a robust institutional response to discrimination and gender-based violence.

4.1. Reforming the Law on Political Parties: Mandating Intra-Party Democracy

Electoral reform initiatives failed to include a substantive overhaul of the 2004 Law on Political Parties, despite ODIHR emphasizing back in April 2025 the necessary reforms to foster intra-party democracy, equal political participation for women, inclusive governance, and party accountability.[34]

Recommendation: A comprehensive reform of the Law on Political Parties should be undertaken to establish baseline standards for intra-party democracy, including transparent procedures for selecting party leadership bodies and candidate lists, robust safeguards for member rights, and effective internal accountability mechanisms. Particular focus should be given to statutory guarantees for women's equal participation in party governance and decision-making.

Legal provisions must maintain a balance between political party autonomy and their obligation to uphold democratic standards.

[34] OSCE/ODIHR, *Opinion on the Law of Montenegro on Political Parties*, Warsaw, April 25 2025.

4.2. Public Funding for Women's Organizations Must Foster Political Empowerment

Dedicated public funding for women's party branches achieves its purpose only if these resources actively enhance their political autonomy, internal capacity, and decision-making leverage.

Recommendation: In line with ODIHR's June 2026 recommendations, legislation should define permissible spending categories for women's branch funds more precisely, while tightening financial oversight mechanisms. The ASK and SAI must provide effective oversight, while sanctions for non-compliant spending should be proportionate and aimed at responsible party officials and entities without disrupting the operational continuity of women's branches.

Political parties should amend internal charters to guarantee that women's branches autonomously set spending priorities and manage their allocated funds.

4.3. Gender-Based Violence and Misogyny Demand an Effective Institutional Response

Curbing misogyny and gender-based violence in politics requires moving beyond symbolic public statements of condemnation and occasional cross-party solidarity gestures.

Recommendation: Competent institutions should enhance capabilities to track, record, and prosecute gender-targeted threats, harassment, and other unlawful forms, including violence occurring in digital space. Consistent application of existing laws must be ensured, alongside identifying regulatory gaps that require legal or procedural updates.

Political parties should establish clear internal guidelines to prevent and sanction sexist harassment and gender-based violence, including enforcement protocols targeting their own officials and members.

Dedicated legal and institutional mechanisms are needed to address gender-based violence and harassment on social media platforms, as these currently fall outside domestic media oversight, while simultaneously safeguarding freedom of expression and legitimate political discourse

4.4. Curbing Political Patronage Requires Institutional Oversight, Not Just New Rules

Expanding legal gender equality safeguards will yield limited results as long as political patronage, non-transparent appointment practices, and discretionary resource allocations remain unmonitored by state oversight bodies.

Recommendation: Authorities must strengthen oversight regarding the legality and transparency of public sector recruitment, appointments, and resource allocations - particularly during post-election shifts of power. Relevant institutions should provide open data access to enable the tracking of political patronage patterns, including gender-disaggregated data on appointments to executive and managerial positions.

Audit and oversight disclosures alleging public resource misuse must trigger binding legal accountability proceedings rather than remaining restricted to passive reporting of irregularities.


CENTAR ZA
DEMOKRATSKU
TRANZICIJU
BRANIMO
DEMOKRATIJU