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The EU Enlargement Impact upon Women's Political Participation

1. The EU policy in the area of women's balanced participation in wielding political power

The year 2004 abounded with significant events in the area European integration processes. We witnessed the largest round of enlargement in the European Union's history so far: the Community adopted as many as ten new Member States. Moreover, the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe was signed and its ratification procedure started. These radical changes should be seen as an important turnaround in the way the EU operates. Along with having faced new, appreciable challenges as regards enlargement of its membership up to twenty-five States, at the same time it has to find ways to fit in the process of globalisation and strive for better legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens.

Questions that arise in the context of the subject of this article are as follows: is the principle of gender parity, provided for in the Constitution Treaty, going to be implemented effectively? Is involvement for the sake of better consideration of issues of gender parity in politics going to translate into implementation of instruments which are necessary to operate in this area? The present debate seems the right opportunity to raise a number of questions having pivotal importance for further development of the EU parity policy.

Although equal status between women and men has been one of the fundamental principles in the EU and although women have accounted for more than a half of Europe's population, their presence at senior decision-making positions in politics still remains at sub-par levels. Women as Prime Ministers, Heads of State or appointed to the EU key decision-making bodies have been relatively few.

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In order to improve situation in this respect, policy for enhanced female political participation was launched in mid-Nineties. A fact that needs emphasising is that actions promoting women's enhanced involvement in decision-making processes have formed part of comprehensive and complex activities in the context of propagation the so-called gender parity.

These issues, always present in the EC/EU policies, have evolved considerably since the early days and were paid attention to at different stages of the Community policies development. It is therefore fit to distinguish most important stages of their evolution, related with adoption of solutions typical of particular periods.

At an early stage of European integration development the EC women-related policy was mainly based upon the principle of parity in the field of employment, thus reflecting basic areas of interest and powers of the European Communities. This principle was included in Article 119 of the Treaty of Rome as well as in directives adopted later on and in the European Court's of Justice jurisdiction. Whilst this sort of legal and administrative attitude to the issue of parity was an essential, key element of the policy of equal opportunities, in fact it proved insufficient. In its focus upon official rights of women as employees it overlooked basic reasons of inequalities persisting between women and men, including discrimination in broadly understood public sphere (and in particular in the field of political decision-making).

In late Eighties the EC policy oriented at women's issue gradually evolved towards a next stage, undergoing changes aligned to evolution of general formula of European integration, expressed in provisions of the Single European Act. The field of employment, by that time practically the only one taken into account, was gradually supplemented by a number of regulations regarding social issues (such as parental rights, children care, rights of handicapped persons, etc.) Furthermore, this stage was the first one to feature application, to gradually higher and higher degree, of the principle of positive discrimination, in which emphasis was moved from the principle of equal treatment "*to provision of conditions in which a likelihood of equal effects being achieved increases*".¹ This was manifested, among other things, in adoption of appropriate assumptions and implementation of subsequent Community Action Programmes for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, in creation of dedicated institutional infrastructure (on both the Community and national level) or, last but not least,

¹ T.Rees, *Mainstreaming Equality in the European Union: Education, Training, and Labour Market Policies*, Routledge, New York 1998, p.34. More on the same subject – see: S.Mazey, *The Development of EU Equality Policies: Bureaucratic Expansion on Behalf of Women?*, "Public Administration", vol. 73/1995 and E.Ellis, *Recent Developments in European Community Gender Equality Law*, "Common Market Law Review", vol. 35/1998.

in jurisdiction of the Court of Justice, giving Members States the right to apply positive discrimination.

The third, present stage was initiated by the establishment of the European Union. The attitude it brought was qualitatively new. As in the case of both precedent stages, it relates to evolution of processes of integration which have aimed, at present, to cover not only economy, but to extend to much broader areas of social and political life as well. The European Union, established in 1992, managed to formulate a new policy in this field. It was not casual that the Community legal acts directly regarding the issue of female balanced participation in political power (and going as far as relating thereto in their names) began to appear only at that time.² This way the EU women-oriented policy evolved considerably: from just economic and social dimension to political one.

The basic underlying assumption of that new attitude is that it has been necessary to balance women's participation in broadly-understood decision-making processes, including proper representation in political power. This is an essential requirement – not only in order to ensure and safeguard genuine rights of women as specific social group, but for proper functioning of modern State democratic system as the whole, and especially of representation-based democracy structures. In other words, one can hardly speak about all the fundamental principles of democracy being respected, unless a half of society finds adequate political representation. In practical terms this translated into a need to break through a "glass ceiling" which formed a structural barriers before women who attempted to achieve higher levels in any body of authority. At the same time, this attitude moved the essence of debate from the problem of quantitative demands resulting in systems of quota and affirmative actions, towards postulates for qualitative changes to be made, involving cultural transformations and new ways in which the very essence of democracy and the way it works are understood.

Along with creating valuable political climate promoting higher female participation in political decision-making bodies, activities undertaken by the European Union include a number of specific actions and initiatives, mainly implemented in the form of recommendations addressed to Member States, regarding adoption of appropriate measures, policies, guidelines, etc. This resulted in development of a policy, for the needs of which a broad set of legal and institutional instruments was created, with an emphasised aim of ensuring gender parity, including in the field of power wielding.

The effect of the EC/EU efforts aiming at attainment of more balanced women's participation in wielding political power is seen in a new attitude

² Council Recommendation of 2 December 1996 on the balanced participation of women and men in the decision-making process, "Official Journal", no. L 319, 10.12.1996.

emerging as regards female political participation. This way, this formerly under-appreciated issue has been raised to one of the most important questions in the context of gender parity. This new attitude manifested itself in propagation of two extremely important principles: parity-based democracy³ and gender mainstreaming.⁴

Introduction of parity democracy principles (which in fact means guaranteeing to women, in both official and real terms, full political participation, at a level par with that enjoyed by men) was meant to provide one of remedies to emergence in Europe, in the Nineties, of a so-called democracy deficit. The principle of gender mainstreaming, on the other hand, means a policy of intensified social and cultural consideration of gender dimension in any area of life, resulting in its inclusion into the main stream of public, *i.e.* political, social and economic life. In practice this comes down to this principle being really paid attention to in (which needs emphasising) all the EU policies and activities, rather than just in those directly related with the issue of gender parity.

The Community bodies and institutions have undertaken a great deal of effort in order to inspire and promote larger women's participation in political decision-making. Thus we have witnessed numerous actions through which issues of gender parity were effectively brought to the forum of social and political debate in many Member States, in particular those (such as Greece, France, Portugal or Italy), where female representation has traditionally been insignificant. Moreover, thanks to those institutions it was easier to collect information, build knowledge and exchange best-practice experiences in the area of women's participation in the scale of Europe as the whole.

³ Among foreign literature regarding parity-based democracy – see *e.g.*: E.Vogel-Polsky, *Parity Democracy - Law and Europe* in: *Gender Policies in the European Union*, ed. M.Rossilli, Peter Lang Publishing, New York-Oxford 2000 and M.L.Krook, *Promoting gender balanced decision-making in the European Union: International and transnational strategies for parity democracy*, Paper presented at the European Community Studies Association International Conference, Madison, 31 May - 2 June, 2001. In Polish literature, see: E.Malinowska, *Feminizm europejski, demokracja parytetowa a polski ruch kobiet. Socjologiczna analiza walki o równouprawnienie płci* (*European feminism, parity democracy and Polish women's movement. Sociological analysis of efforts for gender equality*), Łódź University Publishing, Łódź 2000, as well as *Grupa specjalistów w zakresie równości i demokracji. Końcowy Raport z działalności* (*Expert Team in the area of gender equality and democracy. Final Report on the team activities*), Report from the Managing Committee for Equality between Women and Men, "Biuletyn", no. 1/1996, the Council of Europe Centre for Information and Documentation at Warsaw University Centre for Europe.

⁴ Literature regarding the issue of mainstreaming is rich – see, *e.g.*: E.Hafner-Burton, M.A.Pollack, *Mainstreaming Gender in the European Union*, "Journal of European Public Policy", no. 3/2000; T.Rees, *Mainstreaming Equality in the European Union: Education, Training, and Labour Market Policies*, Routledge, New York 1998; U.Liebert, *Europeanising gender mainstreaming: constraints and opportunities in the multilevel euro-polity*, "Feminist Legal Studies", no. 10/2002.

To give an example, only in 1998 the European Union funded as many as sixteen international action plans which included such projects as supporting a European network of female politicians active at different levels, development of dedicated advisory programmes and databases or organising conferences and seminars. Although results of those actions were different from one country or institution to another, a list of projects undertaken alone is sufficient to prove the point that the EU has really become fully aware of it being necessary to reach for active, or, in some cases, even invasive measures in order to achieve a better balance in representation of both sexes in decision-making processes.

A convincing example of real involvement of the EU bodies in this context is found in two electoral campaigns to the European Parliament – in 1994 and 1999 respectively, funded by the European Commission and organised in co-operation with international women's organisations which aimed at having women's representation in the European Parliament increased. While the real scope of competences of that body is not impressive when compared to national legislative bodies, it has nevertheless always played an important role in promotion of the Community equality policy. Apart from raising the actual number of female members of the Parliament, the most significant effect of those campaigns was in that they initiated broad social movements, stimulated public opinion and mobilised organisations representing women as well as European institutions to seek more effective methods of overcoming barriers that hinder women from more intensive participation in political life.

A large number of such undertakings, coupled with a range of other actions, initiatives or programmes, underpinned emergence of various mechanisms and structures at Member States' level. Pressures exerted by the European Union and citizen-society organisations (associations, women's groups, political parties, etc.) upon national governments as well as influence of various acts of *acquis communautaire*, resulted in adoption of new regulations and solutions. This happened in different forms in different Member States: in some of them changes were made in electoral law (or even in their Constitutions, in certain cases), in other ones effects were visible in application of more effective methods of achieving a better balance as regards women's participation in decision-making processes.

2. The impact of the EU enlargement upon female participation in political life

Considering the impact of the enlargement upon the issues in question here in general terms, one has to admit that the accession of ten new Member States to the European Union in 2004 failed to stimulate women's political participation. This is in sharp contrast to the situation experienced following the

previous round of enlargement, in 1995, when the EU had adopted three new Member States, namely Austria, Finland and Sweden, reputed (especially in the case of two latter ones) for considerable political activity of women. The recent enlargement, instead, revealed a big distance between the new and the old Member States in terms of women's participation in bodies responsible for political decision-making. It is also peculiar that the ten new Member States have not only featured smaller percentage of women in this type of bodies, but their measures aiming at raising female participation in politics occur underdeveloped and insufficient as well. Such measures have mainly been as follows:

- various types of awareness-raising campaigns and training courses,
- development of appropriate structures and institutional mechanisms,
- adoption of legislation concerning women's political participation (quota/parity legislation).

The presence and proper operation of such mechanisms clearly influences female quantitative representation in political life. In the newly-adopted Member States, however, they have been inadequate, as revealed by the fact that not even one of the ten has legislation regulating a level of female participation in political decision-making bodies in place. Worse still, quota systems are only applied by few left-wing parties. Thus, universally adopted and working solutions aiming at stronger political participation of women are plainly lacking.

Table 1. Participation of women in legislative central-level authorities in 10 newly-adopted EU Member States (%)

Member States	Percentage of women in national Parliament	
	lower Chamber	superior Chamber
Lithuania	22.0	*
Latvia	21.0	*
Poland	20.2	23.0
Estonia	18.8	*
Czech Republic	17.0	12.3
Slovakia	16.7	*
Cyprus	16.1	*
Slovenia	12.2	*
Malta	9.2	*
Hungary	9.1	*
Total	16.2	x

Source: *Women in Parliaments: World Classification*, Inter-Parliamentary Union,
<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>, 28.02.2005.

In newly-adopted Member States, including Poland, a number of women in decision-making positions in politics is significantly lower than in the EU old

Member States (as illustrated in tables 1 and 2). Percentages of female members of national parliaments reveal a serious disproportion between the old fifteen and the new ten.

Table 2. Participation of women in legislative central-level authorities in the EU “old” Member States (%)

Member States	Percentage of women in national Parliament	
	lower Chamber	superior Chamber
Sweden	45.3	*
Finland	37.5	*
Denmark	36.9	*
Netherlands	36.7	29.3
Spain	36.0	23.2
Belgium	34.7	38.0
Austria	33.9	27.4
Germany	32.8	18.8
Luxembourg	23.3	*
Portugal	19.5	*
United Kingdom	18.1	17.8
Greece	14.0	*
Ireland	13.3	16.7
France	12.2	16.9
Italy	11.5	8.1
Total	27.0	x

Source: *Women in Parliaments: World Classification*, Inter-Parliamentary Union,
<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>, 28.02.2005.

As can be seen in the above-presented data, percentage of women's participation in legislative authorities (lower chambers of parliaments) in February 2005 amounted, in new Member States, to 16.2% while in the old fifteen it was at 27%. Furthermore, differences are striking in as important category as a so-called critical mass⁵, the attainment of which is very important

⁵ More on the same subject – see: J.Squires, M.Wickham-Jones, op.cit., p.118; D.T.Studlar, I.McAllister, *Does a Critical Mass Exist: a Comparative Analysis of Women's Legislative Representation since 1950*, “European Journal of Political Research”, vol. 41(2)/2002; D.Dahlerup, *From a Small to a Large Minority: Theory of Critical Mass*, “Scandinavian Political Studies”, no. 4/1988; *Handbook on National Machinery to Promote Gender Equality and Action Plans, Guidelines for establishing and implementing National Machinery to promote equality, with examples of good practice*, EG (2001) 7, Council of Europe, Strasbourg 2001, p.21.

for general significance of female representation in politics. According to the critical mass theory, usually set at c. 30 per cent, as a minority group achieves the level, qualitative changes in interactions between groups occur. It is at that level of representation at the minimum, that a minority fraction of a group starts to really influence the majority, transforming its norms, values or institutional system. Therefore, achievement by women of at least that level of participation in decision-making bodies is extremely important and affects both a kind and quality of decision-making processes taking place.

Radical disproportion between the old and the new group of the EU Member States is evident as one analyses women's representation in national parliaments in the context of the critical mass category. None of ten new entrants can boast a level over the thirty-per-cent critical mass, while more than a half of the group of fifteen have exceeded that level. (Lithuania, being the best of the new Member States in this respect, has female representation in its national parliament at the level of 22%, while in Sweden, the old group's leader, the same index is at 45.3%.) Reasons for concern are even more obvious as one considers that there are countries within the group of the new entrants, in which women's share in lower chambers of Parliaments is below 10%! There is not a single country among the EU's old fifteen to have female parliamentary representation below that threshold, while such a woeful ratio has been recorded in two newly-adopted Member States, namely Malta and Hungary.

One should point out, however, that the problem is experienced in bodies of enlarged European Union as well. The same 30 per cent level has not been achieved by female representation in the European Commission, where just seven women are found among 25 Commissioners, including two from the newly-adopted countries. (see: table 3) At present, women have accounted for 28% of composition of the European Commission, which has also been chaired by a man – José Manuel Barroso. By the way, no woman was ever entrusted that position since the establishment of the European Communities.

Table 3. Women in the European Commission (2004-2009)

First name, real name	Member State
Margot Wallström	Sweden
Mariann Fisher Böel	Denmark
Viviane Reding	Luxembourg
Benita Ferrero-Waldner	Austria
Neelie Kroes-Smit	Netherlands
Dalia Grybauskaitė	Lithuania
Danuta Hübner	Poland

Source - based on: *Women and men in decision-making - database*, <http://www.europa.eu.int>

Considering participation of women in the European Parliament of the present 6th parliamentary term (see: table 4), it has to be reminded that elections to the EP in June 2004 were the first in which citizens of the new Member States took part. In effect, 30.32% of the EP members are women. However, disproportion between old and new Member States is evident again, 36% being respective percentage for the old fifteen and below 24% being the one for the new entrants.

Table 4. Women in the European Parliament 6th term (2004-2009)

"Old" Member States	Percentage of women	"New" Member States	Percentage of women
1. Sweden	57.9%		
2. Luxembourg	50.0%		
3. Netherlands	44.5%		
4. France	43.6%		
		5. Slovenia	42.9%
6. Austria	38.8%		
7. Ireland	38.5%		
		8. Lithuania	38.5%
9. Denmark	37.5%		
10. Finland	35.7%		
		11. Slovakia	35.7%
		12. Estonia	33.3%
		13. Hungary	33.3%
14. Spain	33.3%		
15. Belgium	31.8%		
16. Germany	31.3%		
17. Greece	29.1%		
18. Portugal	25.0%		
19. United Kingdom	24.4%		
		20. Latvia	22.2%
		21. Czech Republic	20.8%
22. Italy	19.2%		
		23. Poland	13.0%
		24. Cyprus	0%
		25. Malta	0%
Total	36.04%	Total	23.9%
An average for the whole EU: 30.32%			

Source: *Women in regional parliamentary assemblies*, Inter-Parliamentary Union,
<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/regions.htm>

What is also surprising is that there are countries among the latter ten (Cyprus and Malta) which have not even one female member in the European Parliament. Poland's score (an unimpressive 13%), compared to the total EU percentage is not optimistic either, giving our country one of the last places. An obvious conclusion as one analyses the composition of the EP's first parliamentary term which represents all 25 countries, is that resolute efforts to raise female participation in politics are urgently needed.

If there's one common denominator for both old and new Member States, it is found in the fact – which brings no glory, either – that in none of them the position of the Prime Minister is at present held by a woman. In only three out of 25 Member States of the enlarged European Union women have held the position of the Head of State: in the old fifteen women are Presidents in Ireland and Finland, while in the new entrants Latvia is the only one to have a woman as the President.

Table 5. Women as Heads of State in EU Member States

Presidents		
State	first name, real name	Period
Ireland	Mary McAleese	since November 1997
Latvia	Varia Vike-Freiberga	since June 1999
Finland	Tarja Halonen	since March 2000

Source: basing on *Worldwide Guide to Women in Leadership*,
<http://www.guide2womenleaders.com./index.htm>

3. Enlarged European Union and women's participation in politics

The policy of support for parity between women and men has a special place in activities of the European Union and its Member States as a follow-up to actions undertaken by the European Communities over the recent half Century. Such policy, basing upon the fundamental principle of equal treatment of representatives of both sexes, brought a considerable improvement of women's status in many areas of social, economic and political life. Nowadays we have also witnessed an on-going transformation which is certainly going to positively influence women's position in the future. It has to be added, however, that no entire implementation of the principle of parity between sexes has been achieved in the EU yet, which makes further actions in this respect necessary, in order to solve problems experienced by women as regards their participation in public life in general and their (still limited) participation in political power in

particular. One also has to remember that any further development of the EU policy in this field has to be conceived and treated in the broadest sense, as manifestation of endeavours for truly democratic society to emerge.

The issue of gender parity, including, in particular, access to political power, has to be regarded as one of key areas in the context of effective implementation, by the enlarged European Union and its Member States, of its mission in democracy improving, achieving better legitimacy for the EU and stimulating social involvement in citizen awareness in social and political spheres. Considering this, the EU gender parity promotion policy has to operate in a multi-channelled way, mainly through intensified legal actions, both on the treaty level and within the whole body of *acquis communautaire*. It is also necessary to undertake various specific actions, including in the field of positive discrimination, implementation of gender mainstreaming principles and parity democracy and to raise sheer quantitative participation of women in decision-making processes, including, especially, in the area of political power.

This way the involvement, proclaimed by the European Union, for the sake of democracy development and its adaptation to requirements of modern day will be supported with real evidence and its efforts to find legitimacy will prove more successful. Assumptions to be put into practice by the enlarged EU and its Member States should follow the credo expressed by the European Commission: "*Parity between women and men has been a factor which is necessary for sustained development and a symbol of how mature a society has really become. Principles of democracy call for true equality of men and women and the very equality ensures that democracy can be preserved*".⁶

Also, after many years of inquiry efforts, relationship was discerned between economic development and social welfare on the one hand and social position of women on the other. In other words, women should be treated as members of society having equal rights not only because it's fair but because it is of advantage as well. Broad debate regarding the equal status of sexes, taking place with considerable involvement of public opinion has resulted in an evident growth of social awareness in this area and especially with respect to the need of more balanced participation of women and men in bodies of authority or – in a wider context – in decision-making circles.

Although the principle of gender parity has been one of the fundamental elements of the EC and its Member States' political and legal deal since the very outset of the European Communities, effects actually achieved in this area still seem inadequate. It is obvious, at the present stage of development of the European integration, that – unfortunately – existing regulations and standards

⁶ *Incorporating equal opportunities for women and men into all Community policies and activities*, COM (96) 67 final, 21.02 1996.

fail to cover either all forms of discrimination of women or all the areas in which principles of gender parity or gender mainstreaming should be applied. Most efforts on the part of the Community legislation have focused upon ensuring full equality to women, but only officially and mainly as regards their employment-related and social rights. This way the sphere of female participation in public life, and in particular in wielding political power was largely left aside. The EU legislator (in line with its limited scope of competence, by the way) leaves the latter areas to Member State-level regulations. However, solutions adopted at the latter level bring very different effects. Therefore, the need to extend Community norms in that area was recently regarded as necessary and highlighted priority of the EU policy.

While it cannot be declared yet that the problem of well-balanced participation of women and men in decision-making processes is treated at the same level of priority in all the EU Member States or in all the Community institutions, the issue is nevertheless no longer overlooked or ignored. In fact, social partners and actors of political life increasingly appreciate and admit the need to implement parity policy as an indispensable step in the process of democracy improving. Hardly anybody asks, whether women should participate in making important decisions, any longer, such questions being replaced by a more specific consideration how to actually achieve this.

The problem of female under-representation in decision-making processes has been structural and multi-faceted one. Accordingly, it should be treated comprehensively, with all its aspects taken into account, both from the point of view of political and social mechanisms and in categories of the need to raise social awareness with a view to change conservative attitudes or behaviours. It can be concluded, as one looks at variety of actions and measures undertaken in this area by the enlarged European Union and its Member States, that adoption of comprehensive, but at the same time uniform and common strategy for achievement of gender parity (as expressed, for example, in the Council Recommendation [EU] from 1996) would be the most effective solution in this field.⁷

Moreover, it has to be remembered that the process of ensuring gender parity has to be gradual. Any significant progress can only be achieved here in long-term perspective, as evidenced by attainments of countries featuring long traditions of full equality, such as Sweden or Finland. In those countries detailed systems ensuring and promoting women's adequate participation in decision-making processes have been developed and prepared many years ago, in times when other European countries were far behind in that area.

⁷ *Council Recommendation of 2 December 1996 on the balanced participation of women..., op.cit.*

For parity policy to be run effectively, appropriate organisational and institutional structures have to be in place and work properly, basing on legal solutions which promote true equality between women and men (while they may be different depending on a given country's political culture). Also necessary is a set of practical solutions, such as gathering and processing of reliable, comparable statistical data and ratios as well as adequate financial resources. In addition, regular monitoring is needed as well, similar to one provided for when Peking Action Platform was implemented. Another need regards an exchange of experiences among countries, social organisations and the EU institutions, indispensable in the context of building knowledge on female issues and, in some cases, directly leading to changes being made in legislation. Finally, specific actions have to be undertaken in the area of positive discrimination, resulting, among other things, in increasing numbers of women in decision-making positions in structures of authority both at Member States' level and in the Community bodies (a good example to be mentioned in this respect being found in the European Commission activities).

Effects of the recent enlargement put an emphasis upon importance of all those issues. As argued above, accession of new Member States not only did nor improve the situation in the area in question, but aggravated it in some aspects. This should be seen as an impulse to become even more resolute about undertaking the above-mentioned actions and initiatives, with the aim to provide women in the enlarged European Union with participation in political decision-making they deserve.