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POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS IN SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 5

INTRODUCTION 10

METHODOLOGY 11

PART I. STATUS OF WOMEN IN SEE: OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES AND CONSTRAINTS 12

- Positive factors 12
- Challenges and constraints 14

RECOMMENDATIONS (PART I) 21

PART II. THE 'HIDDEN VIOLENCE': ADDRESSING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS IN SEE 23

- Psychological violence: hidden abuse is pervasive and insidious 24
- Social media and internet-based attacks drive gender-based harrassment 28
- Economic violence: women in politics are at a disadvantage 31
- Women subjected to degrading comments, sexist jokes and harassment in the political sphere (sexual violence) 34
- Physical force used as retaliation against female politicians (physical violence) 38
- Consequences of violence against women in politics 41

RECOMMENDATIONS (PART II) 42

CONCLUSION 44

REFERENCES 45

ABOUT THE AUTHOR, ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 46

ABOUT FEPS AND PARTNERS 47

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Violence against women in politics (VAW-P) in the Balkans is widespread but often discreet. This 'hidden violence' uses subtle and sophisticated tools to control or restrict women's participation in politics. Some of these tactics include gaslighting, withholding information and using gender-based disinformation in smear campaigns. As many as four in 10 women respondents reported experiencing some form of VAW-P. Half of the research participants claimed to be witness to some form of VAW-P, including psychological/verbal, economic, sexual, physical and/or online violence.

Breakthroughs in representation, policy and legislation exist throughout Southeastern Europe; however, on the whole, progress is uneven. Patriarchal structures are the norm in political leadership across the countries studied. These result in many cultural barriers, ranging from unequal distribution of family obligations to lack of professional opportunity and discounting women's capabilities as leaders.

In politics, women tend to be siloed, silenced or attributed 'traditional' women's portfolios. Representation at local levels is especially low. These harmful stereotypes and norms contribute to essentialist visions of women's leadership which limit the complexity of leadership to unidimensional stereotypes. Interviewees felt that it is essential to transform the role of media away from its current reinforcement of harmful stereotypes toward increasing public awareness and confidence in women leaders through increased and gender-neutral coverage.

Findings suggest nuanced contexts, in which common generalisations about gender need to be re-evaluated. For example, interviewees identified numerous positive qualities associated with women's leadership (honest, loyal, tireless, etc). While this might initially appear to be a net gain for empowerment, in fact, many of these traits reflect the ongoing existence of problematic essentialist understandings of femininity. Similarly, feedback on gender quotas was similarly nuanced: while recognising their general potential for good, research participants were swift to note both conceptual and practical shortcomings.

Psychological forms of violence were reported across the region including verbal abuse, blackmailing and intimidation. Participants identified potential causes as a backlash to women's rising influence and negative perceptions of women who take on leadership roles. Violence and harassment in online spaces are also widespread, especially for high-profile women leaders. The assault on women's characters and integrity in these public roles takes a lasting toll on their well-being and undermines public respect for women in politics.

Economic coercion and unequal access to financial resources is another form of hidden violence. Women interviewed describe fear of losing a job or position, economic dependence on their job or on men in power, or smaller chances of promotion. Some describe a feeling of helplessness in the face of this form of coercion.

Sexual harassment and violence against women interviewed included a broad range of gender-based insults, commenting on the physical appearances of women, unwanted touching, inappropriate forms of communication, including messages and calls, nonverbal communication, and sexist jokes. These acts, like many other forms of violence experienced across the study, too often go unpunished despite being prohibited by law. Women in politics also experience physical violence, including reported cases of physical assault and squeezing.

The consequences of violence against women in politics in the SEE region range from impacting women's health, their work, their families to, ultimately, their ability to participate in political processes. Overcoming VAW-P must include dedicated work from a number of actors to transform the institutional, socio-cultural and individual factors that increase the prevalence of violence and to buttress those that promote equality. Although action must be tailored to each country's context, the following recommendations are useful to consider for the region as a whole.

Type of violence	Recommendations
Psychological abuse	• Ensure that VAW-P (violence against women in politics) and/or GBV (gender-based violence) laws provide adequate coverage of these forms of harm. • Train police and judges with regard to these forms of harm, including appropriate police investigation techniques and gender-sensitive justice practices. • Help women leaders learn about subtle and discreet forms of harm, to recognise the signs of gaslighting and to learn to document cases to enable redress. • Ensure that these forms of harm are encoded in political party and media codes of conduct and that the measures are upheld and respected.
Social media and internet-based abuse	• Learn about effective counter-speech strategies, as well as other effective responses to social media-based abuse. • Empower women leaders to document cases of online abuse. • Enshrine the right to block abusive accounts for women in politics, based on the fact that gender-based attacks are a human rights violation and not part of freedom of speech. • Promote good digital hygiene practices among targeted groups to reduce risk. • Work with civil-society actors to engage in collaborative bystander intervention strategies online. • Educate political women on new privacy and moderation standards.

Type of violence	Recommendations
Economic violence	• Promote gender-sensitive campaign finance reform. • Support women's capacity to undertake autonomous political fundraising initiatives. • Monitor and report on political parties' respect for existing gender finance provisions. • Highlight good practices within the region in promoting women's access to political resources.
Sexual harassment	• Ensure that existing legal provisions on GBV cover GBV in political spaces and recognise that GBV in politics is an aggravating factor of harm. • Introduce policy reform, up to and including standalone laws and protocols covering sexual violence in politics. • Maintain a zero-tolerance policy for sexual violence, including everything from sexual humour and stereotypes to assault and rape, within all election- and political-related codes of conduct. • Ensure that law enforcement and justice actors are educated in sexual violence in politics and equipped to deal with it in an appropriate and sensitive manner. • Ensure access to assistance and services for victims of sexual violence in politics.
Physical attacks	• Ensure that law enforcement and justice actors are versed in the aggravated impacts of physical assaults in the political space. • Ensure that women in politics potentially targeted with personal harm have access to security resources as needed, including for their homes and families. • Maintain a zero-tolerance policy for any actor that promotes, encourages or engages in physical attacks or threats of attacks against political women.
Mediating harmful consequences	• Develop and promote networks with resources for survivors of VAW-P, including community support networks and self-care resources.

Influencing factor	Recommendations
Positive popular perception of women's leadership qualities	• Civil society awareness campaigns emphasise positive contributions of women in politics, drawing on impact studies, statistics, and testimonies, especially at the local level. • Awareness campaigns avoid and denounce essentialist depictions of women in politics, whether the narrative is positive or negative. • Women candidates are trained to recognise and call out essentialist depictions (whether positive or negative) and resist drawing on essentialist stereotypes in campaign rhetoric.
Quotas can marginalise women or make them dependent on male leaders	• Examine quota design at the country level to identify disempowering factors and propose quota formula revisions towards more empowering models. • Draw on regional examples for progressive reform and improvements of quota laws. • Introduce complementary laws, such as political finance (Albania), to reduce dependence on male party members. • Promote complementary channels to reduce dependence for women candidates, such as supporting independent fundraising by women candidates.
Poor implementation and misuse of quotas	• Review enforcement mechanisms at the country level and propose reform. • Promote civil society watchdogs to monitor quota implementation and report on misuse. • Advocate for strict quota implementation action from electoral management bodies (EMBs) and other responsible parties. • Draw on regional examples (Albania) for progressive reform and improvements of quota laws.
Low representation at local levels of government	• Build networks and use in-person outreach to promote awareness and the importance of women's participation at local levels. • Introduce mentoring programmes for women considering entering politics and/or for young women. • Develop available resources to facilitate the work of women in local politics, including orientation to the office and how-to guides for policy processes. • Promote awareness of the positive contributions of local-level elected women in civic education campaigns.

Influencing factor	Recommendations
Elected women face limits on their power in office	• Identify blockage points and conduct consultations on how to overcome specific barriers with stakeholders. • Create co-ordinated advocacy goals with firm targets based on increasing women's substantive influence. Use indicators such as 'Women hold 50% of non-traditionally female ministerial portfolios' or 'Women chair committees controlling at least 50% of national budget spending', etc. • Provide resources, such as enhanced and targeted parliamentary research services, to assist women in making an impact. • Promote positive messaging highlighting women's contributions to leadership in non-traditional roles (eg defence or economy portfolios, etc).
Media bias	• 'Name and shame' media groups that regularly promote harmful stereotypes, and/or offer 'report cards' to highlight media groups that offer more balanced, gender-neutral coverage. • Organise constructive civil society counter-speech campaigns to counter negative messaging online. • Offer media training to women candidates to enhance skills in speaking to the press and developing a public persona. • Institute media codes of conduct around elections and hold media responsible for violating any hate speech, harmful stereotypes or other protected-identity-based abuse.
Harmful stereotypes and norms	• Work with multi-sectoral allies to deconstruct and counter harmful norms in different sectors. • Focus programmes on youth leadership, especially work with boys. • See recommendations above regarding messaging, counter-speech, etc.
Multiple marginalisation	• Identify salient identity groups in each context as an adapted framework of analysis. • Ensure that all gender policies and strategies undergo a review to assess impacts from an intersectional lens.

Introduction

Gender equality is central to EU membership (Romania) and accession treaties (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo, Montenegro, and Serbia). Nonetheless, women in political life in SEE face many obstacles, including gender-based discrimination and stifling traditional gender roles. Women are politically under-represented in all SEE countries, and in all decision-making bodies. Gender norms that associate men with belonging in the public sphere and women with belonging in the private, domestic sphere of the family and home persist in SEE, as in many parts of the world. Such norms include perceptions that a woman's role should be restricted to the home and caretaking, that politics is not relevant to the daily lives and needs of women, and that women are incapable and ineffective leaders.

"Marital status should not be important in the assembly. I'm not someone's wife. I am my own person."
Kosovo, woman interviewee

Despite gender equality entering the public agenda across SEE nearly two decades ago, significant changes to public consciousness have yet to occur. Awareness about gender-based discrimination in politics and the general public is very low in SEE counties. NDI's findings show that problems of gender inequality, gender-based discrimination or VAW-P are not widely discussed or understood.

In particular, the issue of violence against women in politics (VAW-P) is undermining women's participation across the region and creating a chilling effect on women considering political careers. While all forms of VAW-P exist across the region, so-called 'hidden forms' are the most destructive. These actions undermine women's leadership at all turns, mocking and degrading them in public, shaming them, and excluding, gaslighting and silencing.

This Policy Study found a low level of awareness among politicians about sexual harassment and the problems of gender discrimination, harmful 'jokes', and verbal violence. Politicians from BiH, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia believe that VAW-P is a 'normalised occurrence'. Participants from Albania and Kosovo believe that gender-based violence (GBV) against women in the politics of their country is not perceived as a 'normalised occurrence'.

This Policy Study includes two central sections: 'Part I. Status of women in SEE: opportunities, challenges and constraints'; and 'Part II. The 'hidden violence': addressing violence against women in politics in SEE'. Following a description of the methodology used, Part I explains the challenges and constraints faced by women in the region, looking at common features, as well as some of the distinct issues faced in the countries studied. Part II takes a deeper look at VAW-P, which is one of the least studied threats to women in public and political life across the region.

Methodology

Within this research, 'women in politics' is defined as all women involved in political activities, including those elected at the local or national levels; members and candidates of political parties; government officials at the local, national and international levels; civil servants; ministers; ambassadors and other positions in the diplomatic corps (United Nations Human Rights Council 2018).

To better understand the issue of VAW-P and its impact on women's participation in public and political life, NDI conducted a qualitative study with female politicians who have experienced and/or are familiar with gender-based forms of violence (economic, online, physical, psychological, sexual and verbal violence).

The aim of this research is to provide a foundation for the development of comprehensive activities, policies and programmes to prevent all forms of VAW-P. In this research, six SEE countries were examined: Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia.

An online questionnaire was sent to 72 targeted participants. The research also used a qualitative method designed by Valicon (the firm contracted for the research) for online interviews. In this method, called the Simulation Technique of Group Dynamics (STGD), the opinion of one respondent is conveyed as an argument to another respondent to use as a prompt for discussion. The same 72 participants were reached for STGD interviews. This format was used to simulate focus group discussions, given the sensitive nature of the topics and out of health and safety considerations for participants and facilitators, as research was conducted amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The data collection and analysis was performed by Valicon. The research was conducted between 1 July 2020 and 30 September 2020.

Selection and inclusion criteria for the research participation involved women and men who are active members of political parties and women and men who have political responsibilities at any level of government – in total, 60 women and 12 men. A total of 72 in-depth interviews were conducted in Albania, BiH, Montenegro, Kosovo, Romania and Serbia (12 STGD in-depth interviews per country).

A limitation of this research is the size of the research sample. While 72 in-depth interviews were conducted, the findings cannot account for the entire population of SEE. An additional limitation is the instrument of measurement itself. Findings are based on the subjective responses and assessments of the research participants. Overall, however, the results of this study can provide some thematic and overarching conclusions.

Part I. Status of women in SEE: opportunities, challenges and constraints

Positive factors

Positive popular perception of women's leadership qualities

Women's success in politics depends on popular support rooted in perceptions of their leadership qualities. This is a delicate subject – while negative bias and stereotypes are clearly harmful to women's empowerment, essentialist perceptions of feminine qualities (e.g., 'nurturing,' 'gentle,' 'caring' etc.) can be equally repressive.

While the study sample size was too small to draw general conclusions, this research nonetheless found many positive indications about the perception of women as leaders.

Research participants cited advantages they perceived to women's leadership in politics. Most participants perceived women in politics as trustworthy and resilient to temptations of corruption. Other positive perceptions of women's leadership qualities cited include being respectful of rules, thoughtful and deliberative in decision-making, cautious and prudent in evaluating risks, and generally upstanding in maintaining the dignity of their office, their position, and their role in the family. Other qualities suggested by participants included perceptions that women are assertive, ethical, good negotiators and organised.

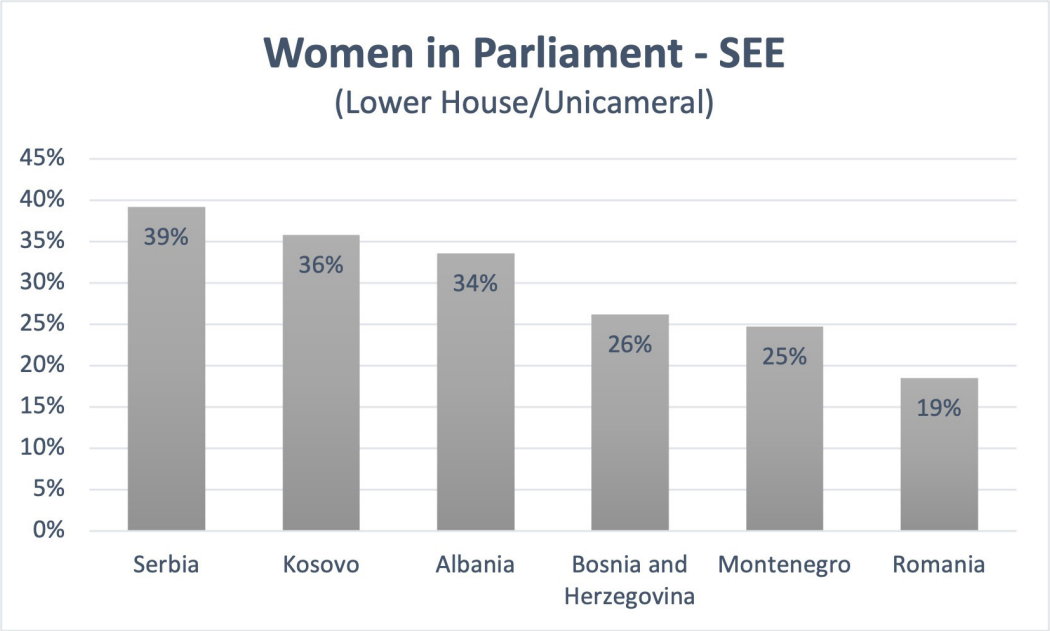
Perceptions of Women Leaders in SEE

Interviews described women leaders as:

- Assertive
- Reliable
- Loyal
- Respectful and empathetic
- Having strong negotiation and conflict-management skills
- Tolerant and patient
- Productive
- More transparent and respectful of ethics

Gender quotas

Gender quotas for political party candidate lists in elections are in place across the six SEE countries studied, though to varying extents of implementation and practice. Thirty percent of the less represented gender is required in Albania, Montenegro and Romania. Forty percent is required in BiH, Kosovo and Serbia. Sixty-five percent of research participants supported the introduction of gender quotas for women. Participants noted that mandatory positions provide an opportunity for women to participate in politics in greater numbers and influence political parties to hire more women. They can also shift the quality and substance of policy development by ensuring women provide their perspectives. However, participants also perceived negative effects of quotas, such as minimising the importance of women in politics and preventing women from having real power and making decisions independently.

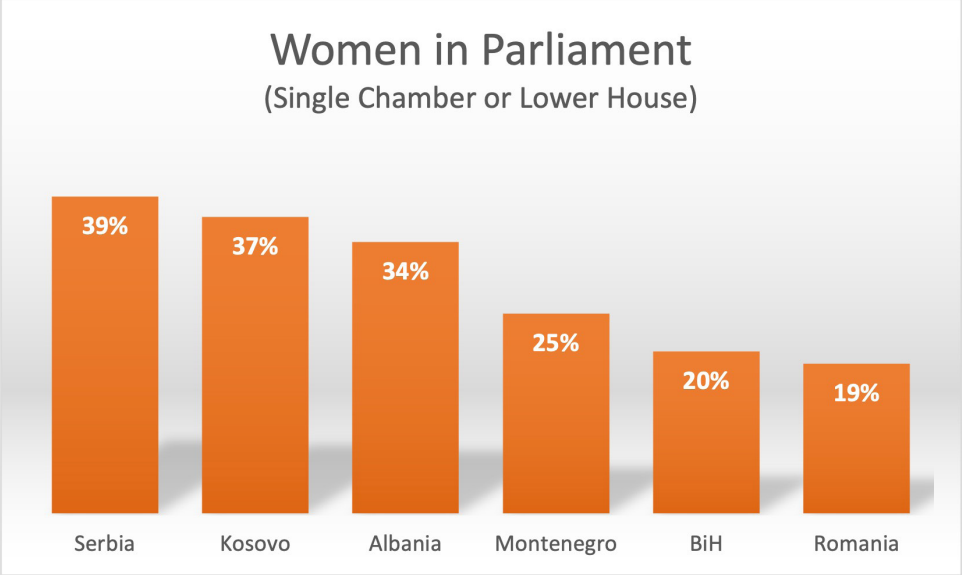


"When we talk about gender representation, we are not talking about that minority representation, but we are talking about 50% of the population that is not represented at all, and their needs are not articulated in an adequate way. No matter how hard some men try to provide support, they really can't quite understand these problems."

Bosnia and Herzegovina, woman interviewee

While gender quotas can be an efficient mechanism, they have varying success, and flawed implementation can inhibit their ability to bolster women's numerical, effective and sustained political leadership and empowerment. The Kvinna till Kvinna report 'Women's Rights in Western Balkans'[1] shows that many inconsistencies and misuse of quota systems appeared during the period 2016-2020, from replacing female candidates who were elected with their male party colleagues to only partial implementation of quotas.

1 https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/womens-rights-in-western-balkans-2020



Regional breakthroughs

Progress of women in politics in the region in recent years is uneven and slow. However, there are important (if isolated) breakthroughs throughout the region. For example, at the time of writing, women held a near equal number of ministerial positions in Albania and Serbia. Kosovo recently elected the highest number ever of women to the Assembly. Of the 44 women that were elected, 33 were elected directly without relying on the quota (van Uitregt 2021). In Albania, progressive legal reform has addressed shortcomings in the quota rules and complementary campaign finance regulations have been introduced.[2]

Challenges and constraints

Inequality in local participation

Women remain under-represented in democratic processes, both as decision-makers and in democratic policymaking. There was a virtual consensus among participants that women's representation was insufficient in their countries and that more women should be engaging in the political sphere.

Despite some improvements in women's participation at the national level across the six SEE countries studied, the gap between men's and women's participation is most visible at the local level. In the November 2020 local elections in BiH, for example, of 425 candidates for mayors, 29 were women, and only four were ultimately elected.

2 Source: Westminster Foundation for Democracy.

Albania

In Albania, one woman must be included in the first three places on parliamentary election lists. A 50 percent gender quota for lists of municipal councillors was introduced into Albanian law in 2015, which facilitated women holding 44 percent of council positions. To enforce the gender quota, Albania issues penalties for non-compliance, which includes monetary fines and the ability to refuse political party lists.

According to the 2020 Gender Equality Index, women hold 45 percent of ministerial positions in Albania, which is higher than the 28 percent average in EU member states. Women also hold 36 percent of positions in Albania's regional assemblies, in comparison to the EU member states average of 28 percent (Ministry of Health and Social Protection 2020).

Bosnia and Herzegovina

In 1997, a gender quota was introduced in BiH. However, gender disparity remains within all levels of government. A woman has never held a position within the three-member Presidency of BiH. Only one woman has been elected out of 11 presidents of the Federation of BiH. Men also have dominated as prime ministers in all 10 cantons in BiH. Women hold 15 of 96 cantonal minister positions. Women hold most of these positions in 'classic women's areas', such as education, health, and social policy.

While BiH meets its gender quota of women on electoral lists, the number of women elected to government remains low. Women are still under-represented in all higher-level positions (Gačanica et al 2020).

Kosovo

In Kosovo, the Law on General Elections requires a minimum gender quota of 30 percent on party lists.

Women remain under-represented within political parties. Among the Kosovar political parties, there is only one female party leader. However, more women were directly elected by the popular vote to parliament in October 2019 than ever before (ibid).

Montenegro

In Montenegro, the Law on Election of Councilors and Representatives stipulates that every fourth person on the election list must be a woman. Furthermore, if a female candidate resigns, the replacement must also be a woman.

The Women's Political Network launched an initiative to have 40 percent of women on each electoral list and was supported by all political parties. However, almost all the political parties violated this agreement.

In Montenegro, women are under-represented in positions of political power, and they do not have the same influence as men in regard to laws, policies and reforms that shape socio-economic development. According to the 2019 Gender Equality Index, there are still concerns that men hold positions with the most decision-making power, and women hold positions in more 'soft' portfolios, like socio-cultural issues (Komar 2019).

Approximately 24.7 percent of members of the National Parliament are women (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2021).

Romania

Romania has a bicameral parliament that has implemented voluntary party quotas. Furthermore, Romanian law stipulates that 30 percent of women must be on electoral lists. In the Chamber of Deputies, 72 of 329 (22 percent) seats are held by women (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2021) .

The women research participants in Romania do not agree with gender quotas and mandatory positions. According to the participants, women who are not well-suited to certain political

positions can do more harm than good. While gender quotas are a 'necessary evil' in society, they can also become restrictive once a certain degree of democratisation has been achieved.

Serbia

Serbia adopted a gender quota of 40 percent for candidates on electoral lists in 2020. Aiming to increase female representation in politics, Serbia's parliament amended two laws: the Law on the Election of Members of Parliament and the Law on Local Elections.

Media bias

The media, including newspapers, magazines, television, radio, internet and mobile phone communications, is a key factor in shaping the perception of the image of a politician. The media influences the attitudes, behaviour and worldviews of both the general population and politicians themselves. Research participants described the impact this can have on women in politics. Media, as they saw it, could play an ameliorating role by increasing coverage of women in politics and decision-making, increasing the public confidence of women in politics, condemning VAW-P, and promoting democratic values of inclusion and representation. They also emphasised that media outlets can, and currently do, promote negative norms and stereotypes by providing insufficient coverage of women in politics, reinforcing sexist presentations and objectification of women in politics, trivialising the role of women in politics, or by focusing on tabloid and sensationalist reporting.

"A journalist will ask [women politicians] something from the private sphere, something they would never ask a man, like 'do you go to the market?'."
Montenegro, woman interviewee

Albania

According to research participants in Albania, the media plays a significant role in creating and establishing the public image of female politicians.

The media has the capacity to promote certain behaviours, beliefs and ways of thinking to the public. The media can also disseminate information and share opinions on the work of male and female politicians.

Research participants noted that the media often promotes unsuitable role models and incorrect behaviours, including undermining and psychologically, verbally and sexually harassing female politicians.

Research participants in Albania stated that men dominate within the country's media. Participants also said that a biased media has a negative impact on society.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Research participants in BiH noted that the media lacks gender awareness and sensitivity. BiH media often encourages and affirms a brave, combative and 'macho' male persona.

When reporting on the activities and characters of women in politics, the media can be aggressive, uninformed and vicious. Furthermore, the media does not provide women with sufficient visibility.

However, research participants stated that the media in BiH is more political-party-biased than gender-biased. In this context, all political figures, regardless of gender, are subjected to negative treatment by the media.

Kosovo

Although the media plays an important role in shaping the values of society, research participants in Kosovo asserted that the media often uses their platform to report on sensationalist or superficial information that negatively impacts female politicians. Reports on women focus on their scandals, rather than their values. The media also perpetuates stereotypes to create distorted pictures of the realities of female politicians.

In Kosovo, research participants noted that the media only speaks about female politicians during election campaigns. Even then, female politicians are spoken about in a superficial manner, instead of detailing their political potential and potential contributions. Men hold leadership positions within government and are more visible in the media.

Montenegro

In Montenegro, research participants stated that the media is politically biased and tends to report on sensationalist events, such as outbursts by politicians.

The media in Montenegro is interested in reporting on violence only when it occurs, but does not relay preventative measures.

According to research participants, the media does not contribute to the visibility of women in politics. Leaders of political parties, who are mostly men, are given the most media attention. When women are discussed in the media, they are degraded, objectified and sexualised. The political activities of women are reduced to their physical appearances and private matters, while their actions, qualities, political merits and community contributions are overlooked.

Romania

In Romania, research participants stated that the country's media consists largely of tabloid and sensationalist journalism. Participants also noted that the Romanian public takes an interest in scandals and superficiality.

Compared to men, women in politics are more heavily scrutinised and criticised by the media.

According to research participants, the media is a powerful force that can positively or negatively impact society.

Serbia

Research participants in Serbia asserted that the media is the most powerful weapon of VAW-P. Discussions on equality, gender and violence are moderated by and reduced to closed circles of like-minded people. According to research participants, these topics are not of importance to the Serbian media, as they will not 'sell the news'. Instead, the media focuses on superficial topics, specifically the physical appearances of female politicians.

Harmful gender stereotypes and norms

Research participants stated that gender barriers act as a hindrance for female participation in politics. Participants unanimously felt that patriarchy remains the dominant social system within their country. Many participants reported that the notion that politics is not a job for women still permeates the political sphere in SEE and, in turn, influences public opinion. Research participants cited a number of other challenges to female participation: family obligations or lack of support from the family; use of the family in political attacks and smear campaigns; obstruction by colleagues; lack of opportunities for advancement; minimisation of the importance and influence of women in politics; disregard of female politicians; and discriminatory representation of female politicians in the media (focusing on their physical appearances or family circumstances, rather than substantive issues). Seventy-nine percent of research participants considered that women in politics sacrifice more than men.

"It is much easier for men to leave home, engage in politics, participate in conferences and workshops. Their family obligations never violate or make it difficult for them to commit to and pursue a political career. You have never heard a man say, 'I will not accept this invitation or either one because I have to raise a child.'"

Romania, woman interviewee

In addition, research participants noted that women are often siloed within the public sphere. Women tend to be put into more 'passive' roles as party members or advocates. Furthermore, research participants described that women tend to be represented in public spheres that align with what is traditionally considered 'women's issues': education, health and human rights. By contrast, men tend to hold positions that deal with finance, the security sector, foreign affairs, etc. Research participants described these challenges as common, and in general, female participants stated that they could cope with them.

"Women do not want to be perceived as 'un-good' mothers, as women who do not have happy families. Their moral code in this aspect is the first thing to be attacked, because the people who cause the attacks know very well that this is the weakest place for women."

Kosovo, woman interviewee

Albania

According to research participants, patriarchy has deep roots in Albanian culture and politics. Patriarchal values are more prominent in rural areas. In urban areas, there is a greater push for breaking taboos and achieving women's economic resilience, independence and participation in political activities.

Research participants noted that political participation is considered a 'male activity' in Albanian society. Although women are more educated, they are perceived as incapable of sufficiently tackling political challenges. When women engage in politics, research participants said that some are assertive and combative, while the majority bow to their male colleagues.

Research participants stated that educational institutions and the media should participate in breaking the taboo of 'women in politics'. Participants suggested the incorporation of

an educational curriculum to empower women or urging the media to promote and report on successful women in leadership.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

In BiH, research participants expressed that the patriarchal views and values are less prominent and extreme. A woman would not be challenged if she wanted to participate in politics. However, she would be asked 'whether she was accomplished as a wife and mother' and, instead, be judged on this criterion.

Participants asserted that women in BiH are the greatest proponents and supporters of upholding patriarchal values.

Patriarchal views are promoted within educational institutions. The curriculum is based on traditional values where men are assigned the role of the breadwinner and hero, while women are assigned the role of mother, wife or witch. According to BiH research participants, religious instruction in primary education also contributes to the promotion of patriarchal views.

In BiH, women do not hold positions as party presidents, except in the case of the Peasant Party, or in cases of parties appointing directors of public companies.

Kosovo

As stated by the research participants, Kosovo is a highly patriarchal society. While there has been progress in the last decade to combat gender stereotypes, some girls and women do not have the freedom of choice regarding economic stability, schooling and independence.

Research participants stressed that men hold all key positions of power in the Kosovar government.*

However, patriarchal views and values are changing. Women are becoming braver in their political roles and slowly bringing pro-European changes to Kosovo. According to the research participants, women engaged in political activities are at the beginning of a challenging path. To empower women, break taboos, stereotypes and patriarchal ideologies, research participants said that change needs to start in educational institutions and within families.

** Note: this research was conducted before Vjosa Osmani was elected President of Kosovo in April 2021.*

Montenegro

In Montenegro, participants noted that citizens (including young people), media, and religious and educational institutions still promote and adhere to traditional and patriarchal values, which promote gender stereotypes and traditional roles for women and men.

Patriarchy contributes to the systematic discrimination of women engaging in politics. While there is female representation in the political sphere, women do not hold leadership positions. However, research participants mentioned that a woman, Dr Draginja Vuksanovic, ran for president in Montenegro.

Romania

Romania is a member of the EU, where gender equality is an important criterion for admission. However, research participants stated that patriarchy has only been eradicated 'on paper', and patriarchal values are still prevalent in Romanian society.

Participants asserted that Romania culturally supports patriarchal values and views. The role of a 'housewife, caretaker and mother' is first ascribed to a woman before she can take on the role of a 'politician or successful manager.'

Women have limited access to job opportunities because men perform the most 'important' jobs and reach job-related agreements in informal circumstances. Furthermore, leadership positions are often reserved for men.

Research participants stated that the media and educational, political and religious institutions could contribute to changing existing social patterns. However, these institutions do not pay sufficient attention to issues of gender equality.

Serbia

Research participants concluded that Serbia has moved away from patriarchal views and values. However, the most 'important functions' are still performed by men.

In addition, participants noted that many women in Serbian society uphold and ascribe to patriarchal views, despite progress made towards gender equality in politics and gender-based discrimination.

To combat these patriarchal patterns, participants stated that change must begin with education, and then through the media and political action, particularly as each institution (education, health, media and politics) currently promotes a patriarchal model.

Segregation of responsibilities

The research suggests that women's political forums, associations and/or networks in the region have limited significance in strengthening the position of women. Although various parties have created structures like this as part of their declared support of women's political participation, interviewees felt they are not having the desired impact. Specifically, women's political portfolios tend to be restricted to stereotypical 'women's topics' such as gender equality, health and family, humanitarian actions and social issues. Men continue to dominate topics perceived as 'more important' such as defence, the economy and foreign policy. In light of this, intraparty forums and associations struggle for influence. They often lack any budget or resources for elevating their positions.

Overlooking multiple marginalisations

Intersectionality is a neglected component of political participation in SEE countries. Women from ethnic minority groups and LGBTQI+ communities face additional barriers to meaningful political participation, decision-making and leadership. For example, a study on Albania by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy finds regional and ethnic divisions impacting women's political participation: 'The conservative Gheg culture of Northern Albania has long been more difficult for women to take on non-traditional roles than the more progressive southern Tosks. Similarly, women's leadership is reportedly more accepted in urban and peripheral areas compared to rural areas.'

Recommendations (Part I)

Influencing factor	Recommendations
Positive popular perception of women's leadership qualities	• Emphasise positive contributions of women in politics, drawing on impact studies, statistics and testimonies, especially at the local level, through civil society awareness campaigns. • Avoid and denounce essentialist depictions of women in politics, whether the narrative is positive or negative. • Train women candidates to recognise and call out essentialist depictions (whether positive or negative) and resist drawing on essentialist stereotypes in campaign rhetoric.
Quotas that can marginalise women or make them dependent on male leaders	• Examine quota design at the country level to identify disempowering factors and propose quota formula revisions towards more empowering models. • Draw on regional examples for progressive reform and improvements of quota laws. • Introduce complementary laws, such as political finance legislation in Albania, to reduce dependence on male party members. • Promote complementary channels to reduce the dependency of women candidates, such as supporting independent fundraising by women candidates.
Poor implementation and misuse of quotas	• Build networks and use in-person outreach to promote awareness and the importance of women's participation at local levels. • Introduce mentoring programmes for women considering entering politics. • Develop available resources to facilitate the work of women in local politics, including orientation to the office and how-to guides for policy processes. • Promote awareness of the positive contributions of local-level elected women in civic education campaigns.
Elected women face limits on their power in office	• Identify blockage points and conduct consultations on how to overcome specific barriers with stakeholders. • Create co-ordinated advocacy goals with firm targets based on increasing women's substantive influence. Use indicators such as 'Women hold 50% of non-traditionally female ministerial portfolios' or 'Women chair committees controlling at least 50% of national budget spending', etc. • Provide resources, such as enhanced and targeted parliamentary research services, to assist women in making an impact. • Promote positive messaging highlighting women's contributions to leadership in non-traditional roles (eg defence or economy portfolios, etc).

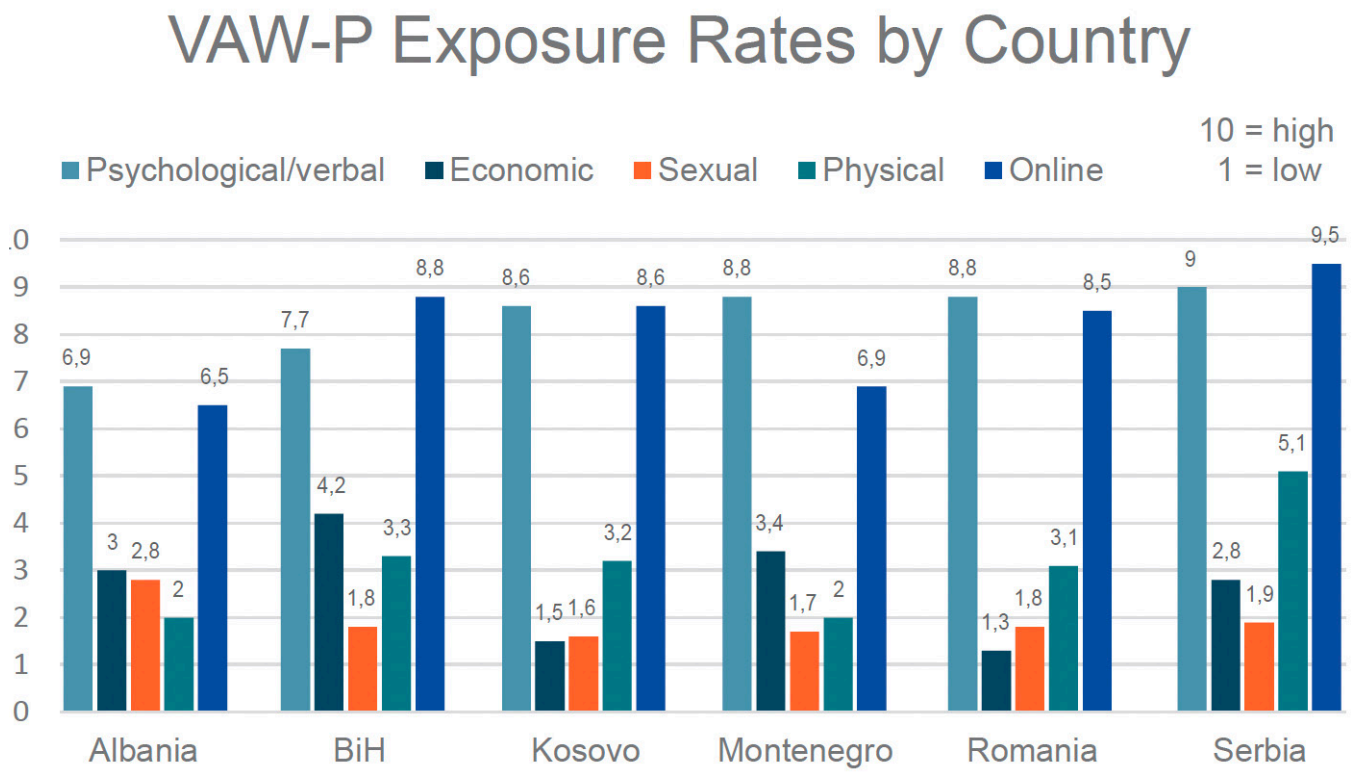
Influencing factor	Recommendations
Media bias	• 'Name and shame' media groups that regularly promote harmful stereotypes, and/or offer 'report cards' to highlight media groups that offer more balanced, gender-neutral coverage. • Organise constructive civil society counter-speech campaigns to counter negative messaging online. • Offer media training to women candidates to enhance skills in speaking to the press and developing a public persona. • Institute media codes of conduct around elections and hold media responsible for committing any hate speech, harmful stereotypes or other protected-identity-based abuse.
Harmful stereotypes and norms	• Work with multi-sectoral allies to deconstruct and counter harmful norms in different sectors. • Focus programmes on youth leadership, especially work with boys. • See recommendations above regarding messaging, counter-speech, etc.
Multiple marginalisation	• Identify salient identity groups in each context as an adapted framework of analysis. • Ensure that all gender policies and strategies undergo a review to assess impacts from an intersectional lens.

Part II. The 'hidden violence': addressing violence against women in politics in SEE

Violence against women in politics in SEE is widespread but often discreet. This 'hidden violence' uses subtle and sophisticated tools to control or restrict women's participation in politics. Across the region, NDI has documented tactics like gaslighting, marginalising, using gender-based disinformation in smear campaigns, and withholding information as the means of inhibiting women's exercise of their political rights. VAW-P in the Balkans occurs in both public and private spaces, including in political parties and parliament. Unlike other forms of electoral or political violence usually carried out by political opponents, in these cases perpetrators may include a woman's family members and friends. Media outlets contribute to VAW-P in SEE by promoting harmful stereotypes and promoting degrading images of political women through their reporting.

Sixty-eight percent of research participants stated that VAW-P in their country is widespread and 56 percent considered it to be a normal phenomenon. As many as four in 10 women respondents reported experiencing some form of VAW-P. Half of the research participants claimed to be witnesses to some form of VAW-P. BiH and Serbia are the case studies where the highest percentage of participants reported experiencing some form of VAW-P. Anecdotal observation suggests there are more women in politics in these countries who have publicly questioned established patriarchal norms, and therefore have become targets and experienced higher levels of violence. This research found that young women with less experience in politics and those who are perceived as a threat to men's positions experienced VAW-P more than their colleagues.

VAW-P, as examined by this research, manifested in five primary forms: psychological/verbal; economic; sexual; physical; and online violence. Asked to assess how often they were exposed to some form of violence in politics (whether they were direct victims or directly observed violence perpetrated against others), research participants stated that they were frequently exposed to violence, especially to psychological abuse and online violence. Economic violence was most prevalent among politicians in Kosovo, BiH and Montenegro. Other forms of violence were noted as individual sporadic incidents, but ones that attract significantly more attention from the political community, the media and the general public.



Psychological violence: 'hidden abuse' is pervasive and insidious

Definition: **Psychological violence in politics involves hostile behaviour and abuse intended to cause fear, emotional harm, and/or damage to a woman's reputation and social status.**

A commonly recognised form of psychological VAW-P is verbal abuse, which can involve insulting, shouting at and swearing at female politicians. However, psychological violence in the Balkans is characterised as 'hidden abuse', such as denying, harassing, ignoring, intimidating, isolating, threatening, marginalising and underestimating women in politics. Such violence can range from subtle comments related to women's competencies or physical appearance to a wide spectrum of behaviours, such as the psychological phenomenon of gaslighting, withholding information, conducting smear campaigns, shaming, blackmailing, labelling women as aggressive, emotional, or hysterical, minimising the importance of women's opinions or initiatives, excluding women from decision-making, interrupting or speaking over women, ascribing guilt and shame, or even blaming women for banal problems, and linking a woman's success with an influential man.

In SEE countries, psychological and verbal violence against women in politics was identified as the most widespread form of violence and directed towards women in all positions. Participants reported that failure to recognise the forms and acts of psychological violence was particularly worrying, as it results in a lack of public condemnation.

Patriarchal norms create space for sexist jokes and comments and other forms of psychological violence. Participants also noted that one motive of violence appears to be when others run out of substantive arguments against a proposal or position. Women noted fear of losing their jobs, low self-esteem, preference for taking the path of least resistance, and acceptance of these forms of behaviour among themselves. Ultimately, this type of violence is often normalised across SEE.

"When they have nothing else to say in the discussion, they start to attack you as a woman to discredit your work or ideas."

Bosnia and Herzegovina, woman interviewee

Representation of violence against women in politics
(red = high, yellow = medium, green = low)

	Albania	BiH	Montenegro	Kosovo	Romania	Serbia
In the politics of my country, violence against women occurs						
I have witnessed violence against women in my country's politics						
I have survived gender-based violence in politics						
In the political party to which I belong, violence against women is being conducted						

Apart from Albania, where the reported experiences of psychological and verbal violence were described at a moderate level, all other SEE countries reported high levels. Psychological violence often targets different groups of women, such as those who are not married and women who have no children in Montenegro, or young women in Bulgaria, Kosovo and Serbia. In Bulgaria, acts of psychological violence are oriented towards intimidation in the form of gendered disinformation, such as fabricating stories about a woman politician or her family or proclaiming women politicians as traitors of the state.

Albania

Exposure level: high level of exposure.

Most common acts of violence: giving orders; pressuring and blackmailing women; disabling freedom of speech and independent decision-making; excluding women from decision-making; gender-based insults and inappropriate jokes; and deeming female reactions as emotional or hysterical.

Victims of violence: all women in public and leadership positions.

Perpetrators of violence: men; women; the media; social media; political leaders; political parties; and non-party colleagues.

Motive of violence: control and domination over women; exploiting women and their positions to achieve personal goals; lack of respect for women; minimising the importance of women and their work; the perception that women are less valuable and cannot engage efficiently in politics.

External factors contributing to violence: patriarchal views and patterns; women's economic dependence; low self-esteem among women; and women's desire to not be perceived as weak, sensitive or spoiled.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Exposure level: high level of exposure.

Most common acts of violence: intimidation, exclusion and lack of independent decision-making; minimising women's opinions; gender-based insults; and inappropriate nonverbal communication.

Victims of violence: women in all positions of government, specifically independent and/or young women.

Perpetrators of violence: men; women who are jealous or in competition with other female politicians; the media; social media; political leaders; political parties; and workers.

Motive of violence: domination or envy/jealousy.

External factors contributing to violence: patriarchal values and the acceptance of male dominance; furthermore, women who are politically ambitious, inexperienced, and/or question male authorities are often targeted.

Kosovo

Exposure level: high level of exposure.

Most common acts of violence: intimidation, exclusion and lack of independent decision-making; minimising women's opinions; gender-based insults; and inappropriate nonverbal communication.

Victims of violence: women in all positions of government, specifically independent and/or young women.

Perpetrators of violence: men; women who are jealous or in competition with other female politicians; the media; social media; political leaders; political parties; and workers.

Motive of violence: domination or envy/jealousy.

External factors contributing to violence: patriarchal values and the acceptance of male dominance; furthermore, women who are politically ambitious, inexperienced, and/or question male authorities are often targeted.

Montenegro

Exposure level: high level of exposure.

Most common acts of violence: intimidation; harassment; excluding women from decision-making; ignoring women; gender-based insults and jokes; deeming female reactions as emotional or hysterical; and linking a woman's success to a man.

Victims of violence: women in all political positions; specifically those who are outspoken and think outside of the box, question male authorities, do not have children and/or are not married.

Perpetrators of violence: men; women; the media; social media; political leaders; political workers; and legal institutions.

Motive of violence: domination and humiliation of women in politics.

External factors contributing to violence: patriarchal views; lack of understanding on issues of gender inequality and gender-based violence.

Romania

Exposure level: high level of exposure.

Most common acts of violence: limited independence in decision-making; hostile behaviour towards ambitious women; blackmailing; underestimating or intimidating women; gender-based insults; and asserting that women are emotional, hysterical or sensitive.

Victims of violence: women in all political positions are exposed to psychological and verbal forms of violence. More specifically, victims are often women who are outspoken and question male authorities, think outside of the box, have low self-esteem, and/or are young.

Perpetrators of violence: men; women; the media; social media; political leaders; and colleagues.

Motive of violence: control and domination.

External factors contributing to violence: negative perception of politics; the lack of punishment or condemnation of violent behaviour; sensationalist reporting by the media; and social and cultural discrimination.

Impact of violence: women fearing secondary victimisation and reported low self-esteem and ambition.

Serbia

Exposure level: high level of exposure.

Most common acts of violence: women are underestimated, excluded, blackmailed, intimidated, ignored, denied the opportunity to speak, insulted, and have a lack of independence in decision-making.

Victims of violence: women in all political positions, specifically those who are in leadership positions, have low self-esteem, and/or are young.

Perpetrators of violence: men; women; the media; social media; political leaders; and colleagues.

Motive of violence: to dominate and overpower women.

External factors contributing to violence: patriarchal views; the lack of punishment of violent behaviour; and the accepted perception of ambitious or successful women as threats.

Social media and internet-based attacks drive gender-based harassment

Definition: **Internet violence is a general term for any communication activity with cyber-technology, which can be considered harmful to both the targeted individual and the consumers of digital technology and participants in online discourse.**

Online violence includes inciting group hatred, attacks on privacy, harassment, stalking, insults, unscrupulous access to harmful content, and the spread of violent and offensive comments. As identified in NDI's 'Tweets That Chill' report on the unique phenomenon of online VAW-P, 'This activity can be anonymous, borderless, sustained, and permanent. The perception of impunity emboldens perpetrators and raises women's sense of insecurity and violation.'

> "Most personal experience relates to [online] violence because it allows perpetrators to cover up and do so without consequences and behind hidden profiles."
> Albania, woman interviewee

Research reflected different levels of online VAW-P in SEE countries. Participants from Montenegro and Albania reported moderate exposure, while findings for BiH, Kosovo, Romania and Serbia suggested a higher level of exposure to internet violence. Women who are public figures, including government officials, are the main victims of internet violence. Perpetrators were often from the media, and particularly tabloid media, and the general public. Participants from Kosovo and Romania stated that society's general indication of what does and does not constitute violence is very much reflected in the discussion on VAW-P. For example, many research participants considered online physical threats and blatant harassment as examples of online violence, while rude comments about appearance may not be.

> "The deputy minister, who appeared on TV every day, was turned into a meme."
> Albania, woman interviewee

For all SEE countries, sanctions are weak or do not exist for these forms of online VAW-P. Public publicity, and particular public profiles on social media, appears to create space for this type of violence against women in politics. Echoing NDI's prior research on online VAW-P, five participants believed that internet violence prevents or restricts women from engaging in politics and affects their private lives as well as their public image. Participants stated that motives for internet violence are to discourage women from engaging in politics, to weaken a woman's power, and to minimise women's influence.

> "I have wanted to leave social networks 1,000 times so far, because I do not want to suffer that kind of frustration or aggression."
> Serbia, woman interviewee

Albania

Exposure level: moderate level of exposure.

Most common acts of violence: attack on privacy; violation of privacy; exposure to inappropriate family content; harassment; stalking; insult; dissemination of violent and offensive comments; publishing of private images; editing inappropriate images; threats; memes; mockery.

Victims of violence: women at all levels of government; women in public positions; women who are publicly exposed; women who stand out for their political affiliation or pleasing appearance; successful women; popular women.

Perpetrators of violence: media in general; tabloid media; citizens; men; women; party colleagues; and non-partisan colleagues. Whoever forwards such news is an accomplice.

Motive of violence: degradation of women at the gender level; marginalisation of a woman's influence if she holds important positions or initiates a valid project; jealousy; unconsciousness of doing anything wrong; a tabloid culture of living.

External factors contributing to violence: opportunity to inspect and deal with the private lives of public figures; possibility of anonymous publications/inappropriate forms of behaviour under the veil of anonymity; impossibility or difficulty of sanctioning these forms of violence.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Exposure level: high level of exposure.

Most common acts of violence: attacks on privacy; violation of privacy; exposure to inappropriate family content; harassment; stalking; insult; dissemination of violent and offensive comments; publishing of private images; editing inappropriate images; threats.

Victims of violence: women at all levels of government; women in public positions; women who are publicly exposed; women who stand out for their political affiliation or pleasing appearance; successful women; popular women.

Perpetrators of violence: media in general; tabloid media; citizens; men; women; party colleagues; and non-partisan colleagues. Whoever forwards such news is an accomplice.

Motive of violence: degradation of women at the gender level; marginalisation of a woman's influence if she holds important positions or initiates valid projects; jealousy; bad intentions; unawareness of doing anything wrong; tabloid culture of life.

External factors contributing to violence: tabloid culture; opportunity to inspect and deal with the private lives of public figures; possibility of anonymous publications/inappropriate forms of behaviour under the veil of anonymity; impossibility or difficulty of sanctioning these forms of violence.

Internal factors contributing to violence: public exposure through more social media; publishing private pictures, comments, etc.

Kosovo

Exposure level: high level of exposure.

Most common acts of violence: attacks on privacy; violation of privacy; exposure to inappropriate family content; harassment; stalking; insult; dissemination of violent and offensive comments; publishing of private pictures; editing inappropriate images; threats; mockery.

Victims of violence: women at all levels of government; women in public positions; women who are publicly exposed; women who stand out for their political affiliation or pleasing

appearance; successful women; popular women; strong women.

Perpetrators of violence: media in general; tabloid media; citizens; men; women; party colleagues; and non-partisan colleagues. Whoever forwards such news is an accomplice.

Motive of violence: intimidation of women; discouraging women from engaging in politics; degradation of women at the gender level; marginalisation of women's influence; jealousy; bad intentions; unconsciousness of doing anything wrong; a tabloid culture of living.

External factors contributing to violence: society's general indication of what is and what is not violence; tabloid culture of life; the opportunity to inspect and deal with the private lives of public figures; the possibility of anonymous publications/inappropriate forms of behaviour under the guise of anonymity; impossibility or difficulty of sanctioning these forms of violence.

Internal factors contributing to violence: public exposure; presence on social networks in an inappropriate and provocative way (pictures, posts, etc.); public exposure through more social media, publishing private pictures, comments, etc.

Montenegro

Exposure level: moderate level of exposure.

Most common acts of violence: incitement of group hatred; privacy attacks; harassment; stalking; insult; dissemination of violent and offensive comments; publishing of private images; editing inappropriate images and content; threats.

Victims of violence: women at all levels of government; women in public positions; women who are publicly exposed; women who stand out for their political affiliation or pleasing appearance; successful women; popular women.

Perpetrators of violence: media in general; tabloid media; citizens; men; women; party colleagues; and non-partisan colleagues. Whoever forwards such news is an accomplice.

Motive of violence: degradation of women at the gender level; marginalisation of women's influence; jealousy; bad intentions; unconsciousness of doing anything wrong; a tabloid culture of living.

External factors contributing to violence: tabloid culture of living; opportunity to inspect and deal with the private lives of public figures; possibility of anonymous publications/inappropriate forms of behaviour under the veil of anonymity; impossibility or difficulty of sanctioning these forms of violence.

Internal factors contributing to violence: public exposure through more social media; publishing private pictures, comments, etc.

Romania

Exposure level: high level of exposure.

Most common acts of violence: attacks on privacy; violation of privacy; exposure to inappropriate family content; harassment; stalking; insult; dissemination of violent and offensive comments; publishing of private pictures; editing inappropriate images; threats; mockery.

Victims of violence: women at all levels of government; women in public positions; women who are publicly exposed; women who stand out for their political affiliation or pleasing appearance; successful women; popular women; and provocative women.

Perpetrators of violence: media in general; tabloid media; citizens; men; women; party colleagues; and non-partisan colleagues. Whoever forwards such news is an accomplice.

Motive of violence: intimidation of women; discouraging women from engaging in politics; degradation of women at the gender level; weakening of a woman's power; marginalisation of women's influence; bad intentions; unconsciousness of doing anything wrong; a tabloid culture of living.

External factors contributing to violence: society's general indication of what is and what is not violence; tabloid culture of life; opportunity to inspect and deal with the private lives of public figures; possibility of anonymous publications/inappropriate forms of behaviour under the veil of anonymity; impossibility or difficulty of sanctioning these forms of violence.

Internal factors contributing to violence: public exposure; presence on social networks in inappropriate and provocative ways (pictures, posts, etc); public exposure through more social media, publishing private pictures, comments, etc.

Serbia

Exposure level: high level of exposure.

Most common acts of violence: attacks on privacy; violation of privacy; exposure to inappropriate family content; harassment; stalking; insult; dissemination of violent and offensive comments; publishing of private images; editing inappropriate images and content; threats; mockery.

Victims of violence: women at all levels of government; women in public positions; women who are publicly exposed; women who stand out for their political action or pleasing appearance; successful women; popular women.

Perpetrators of violence: media in general; tabloid media; citizens; men; women; party colleagues; and non-partisan colleagues. Whoever forwards such news is an accomplice.

Economic violence: women in politics are at a disadvantage

Definition: Economic violence includes the systematic denial of resources to women for election activities or restricting women's access to resources that are available to men.

This includes coercive behaviour that controls women's access to economic resources, thus depriving them of the tools necessary for active political action, professional development, or routine political activity that belong to them by law or are otherwise available to their male colleagues. While less visible, it strongly impacts women in politics, either in a direct way or contributing to vulnerability to other forms of violence. Research participants cited, for example, fear of losing a job or position, economic dependence on their job or on men in power, or smaller chances for promotion. Participants also noted that male colleagues have disproportionate control of budgets, clubs, commissions and ministries. Other forms of economic violence include the disproportionate financial support given to men's projects, a lack of paid positions or poorly paid positions for women in politics, restricted or no access to money within the political parties for women, a lack of women participating in financial decision-making, and a lack of funding for women's political campaigns.

"There was an internal agreement, which should have been respected by all parties. A certain amount of money, now I don't know if it was 3% of the total amount from the budget that the party receives, goes to the women's forum, no one respected that, and internally everyone agreed."

Montenegro, woman interviewee

Respondents reported that perpetrators of economic violence were generally male politicians, political party leaders, and political workers at all levels. As with other types, external factors contributing to economic violence were primarily patriarchal norms and poor enforcement of existing laws. Both result in economic power resting primarily in the hands of men and non-recognition of forms and acts of economic violence.

Respondents reported economic VAW-P less frequently. Those from BiH and Montenegro recognised intimidation via targeting women (with their political position/existence) to enforce obedience to the party, while others noticed that political parties rarely or never fund women's projects. Participants vocalised a 'helplessness to change anything' (BiH), which leads to low or non-existing reporting of economic violence against women in politics.

Albania

Exposure level: low level of exposure with sporadic incidents.

Most common acts of violence: men solely controlling ministries, clubs and commissions that bring money; men manage and control budgets; financial support of projects in which the holders are men; enabling men to manage money/budgets independently; women have restricted or no access at all money within the political parties to which they belong; non-financing of women's political campaigns.

Victims of violence: women in all positions without exception.

Perpetrators of violence: men in the party; and party leaders.

Motive of violence: control; domination; exploiting a woman's voice or position to achieve the personal goals of the leader or political party to which the woman belongs; minimising the importance of a woman and the products of her work.

External factors contributing to violence: patriarchy; unconscious gender bias.

Internal factors contributing to violence: gender ignorance; non-recognition of forms and acts of economic violence; struggle for equal economic conditions within political parties.

Bosnia and Herzogovina

Exposure level: low level of exposure.

Most common acts of violence: women do not have access to the party's money or budgets; women do not participate in deciding how to distribute/spend party budgets; blackmailing a woman to be obedient and follow party ideology; women in campaigns have little or no financial assistance; women do not join clubs or commissions that bring in money; women do not hold (additional) political functions that bring in money; political parties rarely or never fund women's projects.

Victims of violence: women in all positions without exception.

Perpetrators of violence: men; some women; leaders; decision-makers; political workers at all levels; party colleagues.

Motive of violence: the desire for economic power combined with cultural, ideological and social inherited patriarchy which dictates that 'man is the bearer/bearer of money'; failure to recognise forms and acts of economic violence.

External factors contributing to violence: patriarchy; domination; retaining power/money in the hands of men; laws that are not enforced.

Internal factors contributing to violence: economic dependence/blackmail; gender unconsciousness; non-recognition of forms and acts of economic violence; helplessness to change anything.

Kosovo

Exposure level: low level of exposure with sporadic incidents.

Most common acts of violence: women do not have access to positions that bring in money; women do not participate in deciding how to distribute/spend party money or budgets; women in campaigns have little or no financial aid/men have significantly more financial aid in campaigns than women; women do not have the opportunity to participate in commissions and clubs that bring money.

Victims of violence: women in all positions without exception.

Perpetrators of violence: men; some women; leaders; decision-makers; political workers at all levels; and party colleagues.

Motive of violence: power; domination.

External factors contributing to violence: patriarchy.

Internal factors contributing to violence: non-recognition by women of forms and acts of economic violence; gender unconsciousness; acceptance of patriarchy (unreservedly).

Montenegro

Exposure level: low level of exposure.

Most common acts of violence: blackmail of a woman in order to make her be obedient and follow party ideology; women do not have access to positions that bring in money; women do not participate in deciding how to distribute/spend party money or budgets; political parties rarely or never fund women's projects.

Victims of violence: women in all positions without exception.

Perpetrators of violence: men; some women; leaders; decision-makers; political workers at all levels; party colleagues.

Motive of violence: power.

External factors contributing to violence: cultural, ideological, and social patriarchy; non-recognition of forms and acts of economic violence; gender unconsciousness.

Internal factors contributing to violence: unconscious gender bias; submissiveness towards men; non-questioning of patriarchal patterns; leaving the responsibility to others.

Romania

Exposure level: low level of exposure with sporadic incidents.

Most common acts of violence: women do not have access to party's money or budgets; women do not participate in decisions about how to distribute/spend party money or budgets.

Victims of violence: women in all positions without exception.

Perpetrators of violence: men; leaders; and decision-makers.

Motive of violence: power; domination.

External factors contributing to violence: patriarchy; habituation.

Internal factors contributing to violence: general gender ignorance; failure to recognise forms and acts of violence.

Serbia

Exposure level: low level of exposure with sporadic incidents.

Most common acts of violence: women do not have access to party money or budgets; women do not participate in deciding how to distribute/spend party money or budgets; women do not join clubs or commissions that bring in money; women do not hold (additional) political functions that bring in money; political parties rarely or never fund women's projects.

Victims of violence: women in all positions without exception.

Perpetrators of violence: men; leaders; and decision-makers.

Motive of violence: power.

External factors contributing to violence: society's habituation to patriarchal values, ideology and culture.

Internal factors contributing to violence: gender ignorance; non-recognition of forms and acts of economic violence (which is not recognised and cannot be suppressed).

Women subjected to degrading comments, sexist jokes, and harassment in the political sphere (sexual violence)

Definition: Sexual violence includes any sexual act or attempt to carry out or obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or attempts to sexually exploit a person by force or coercion.

Sexual violence includes harassment, such as unwanted sexual comments, sexual exploitation, rape, threats of violence, forced sexual services for promotion, unwanted touching, and inappropriate jokes. Forms of sexual violence observed in SEE countries included inappropriate or unwanted comments, gender-based insults, comments on the physical appearances of women, unwanted touching, inappropriate forms of verbal and non-verbal communication, inappropriate messages and calls, and sexist jokes.

"Everyone said they voted for her because such an ass should be sent to the European parliament."
Romania, woman interviewee

While sexual and gender-based harassment are prohibited by gender equality laws and anti-discrimination laws, these are rarely effectively enforced in the political sphere in SEE. Few participants witnessed timely condemnation of this behaviour when it occurred in political spaces, which perpetuates this type of violence.

> "Specifically, the vice-president of the then parliament of Montenegro simply told me that in case I want to get a job, we should do some (sexual) things, etc."
> Montenegro, woman interviewee

Women in politics expressed fear of speaking out about sexual violence, afraid of being perceived as helpless, violence being minimised or disbelieved when reported ('she deserved it/she asked for it'), undermining their credibility, or potentially limiting opportunities for advancement. Women respondents did not agree on a unifying definition of what was acceptable, citing blurry boundaries about how a woman could 'allow' herself to be approached in the workplace.

Research participants stated that external factors contributing to sexual violence include public ignorance of the issue and poor implementation of legal solutions or internal party codes of conduct and procedures for sanctioning inappropriate forms of behaviour.

Albania

Exposure level: low level of exposure with sporadic incidents.

Most common acts of violence: inappropriate and degrading comments; gender-based insults; denying women the power to act and make decisions independently; prejudice based on physical appearance; creating fake stories to publicly degrade women; sexist double standards; and sexual harassment.

Victims of violence: young and inexperienced women.

Perpetrators of violence: men; some women; political leaders; and colleagues.

Motive of violence: domination; demonstration of power; degrading women.

External factors contributing to violence: public ignorance; lack of legal solutions; lack of internal codes of conduct and procedures for sanctioning inappropriate forms of behaviour.

Internal factors contributing to violence: fear of being viewed as helpless; fear of exposure to secondary victimisation and public condemnation; fear of losing or being excluded from opportunities.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Exposure level: low level of exposure with sporadic incidents.

Most common acts of violence: gender-based insults; degrading and sexist comments; prejudice based on physical appearance; creating fake stories to publicly shame women; double moral standards; sexual harassment; inappropriate non-verbal communication; and sexist jokes.

Victims of violence: young, inexperienced, and/or unprotected women.

Perpetrators of violence: political leaders and colleagues.

Motive of violence: degrading women; a demonstration of power; the belief that certain behaviours are permitted.

External factors contributing to violence: public ignorance; lack of legal solutions; lack of internal codes of conduct and procedures for sanctioning inappropriate forms of behaviour; and a lack of clear and timely condemnation of inappropriate forms of behaviour.

Internal factors contributing to violence: fear of being viewed as helpless; fear of exposure to secondary victimisation and public condemnation; fear of losing or being excluded from opportunities and/or advancement; and fear of losing credibility.

Kosovo

Exposure level: low level of exposure with sporadic incidents.

Most common acts of violence: complimenting; gender-based insults; degrading and sexist comments; commenting on physical appearance; lying or creating fake stories to publicly shame women; sexual harassment; and inappropriate non-verbal communication.

Victims of violence: young, inexperienced, and/or unprotected women.

Perpetrators of violence: political leaders and colleagues.

Motive of violence: degrading women; demonstration of power; the belief that certain behaviours are permitted.

External factors contributing to violence: public ignorance; lack of legal solutions; lack of internal codes of conduct and procedures for sanctioning inappropriate forms of behaviour; and a lack of clear and timely condemnation of inappropriate forms of behaviour.

Internal factors contributing to violence: fear of exposure to secondary victimisation and public condemnation, losing credibility; fear of losing opportunities to advance in the workplace.

Montenegro

Exposure level: low level of exposure with sporadic incidents.

Most common acts of violence: gender-based insults; degrading and sexist comments; prejudice based on physical appearance; creating fake stories to publicly shame women; double moral standards; sexual harassment; inappropriate non-verbal communication; and sexist jokes.

Victims of violence: young, inexperienced, and unprotected women.

Perpetrators of violence: Political leaders and colleagues.

Motive of violence: Degrading women and a demonstration of power.

External factors contributing to violence: public ignorance; lack of clear and timely condemnation of inappropriate forms of behaviour.

Internal factors contributing to violence: fear of being viewed as helpless/powerless; fear of exposure to secondary victimisation; fear of losing credibility; fear of losing opportunities; and ill-defined workplace boundaries.

Romania

Exposure level: low level of exposure with sporadic incidents.

Most common acts of violence: blackmailing; gender-based insults; degrading and sexist comments; prejudice based on physical appearance; lying or creating fake stories to

publicly shame women; double moral standards; sexual harassment.

Victims of violence: young and inexperienced women.

Perpetrators of violence: political leaders and colleagues.

Motive of violence: degrading women and a demonstration of power.

External factors contributing to violence: societal ignorance; lack of concrete laws to condemn such behaviour.

Internal factors contributing to violence: fear of being viewed as helpless/powerless; fear of exposure to secondary victimisation and public condemnation; fear of losing credibility; fear of losing opportunities to advance in the workplace.

Serbia

Exposure level: low level of exposure with sporadic incidents.

Most common acts of violence: blackmailing; gender-based insults; degrading and sexist comments; lying or creating fake stories to publicly shame women; double standards; sexual harassment; inappropriate nonverbal communication; and sexist jokes.

Victims of violence: young, inexperienced, and unprotected women.

Perpetrators of violence: political leaders and colleagues.

Motive of violence: a demonstration of power; degrading women; and bullying.

External factors contributing to violence: societal ignorance; lack of concrete laws that condemn such behaviour; lack of clear and timely condemnation of inappropriate forms of behaviour.

Internal factors contributing to violence: fear of being viewed as helpless/powerless; fear of exposure to secondary victimisation and condemnation; and fear of losing credibility.

Physical force used as retaliation against female politicians (physical violence)

Definition: **Physical violence includes any violent act that results in bodily harm. It is the intentional use of physical force with the potential to cause physical harm.**

Physical violence in politics includes using force as retaliation, such as slapping, pulling, pushing, inflicting bodily injury, assault with a weapon, and similar instances. Acts of physical violence reported by women in politics in SEE include hitting, pushing, throwing objects, and threats.

"People think slapping someone on the butt is a great thing, interesting and funny. Or hug around the waist, but if you don't want to and oppose, he will tell you that you are hysterical."
BiH, woman interviewee

Most participants stated that SEE countries reported low exposure to this type of violence in politics. Serbia reported the highest level of physical violence. In all countries, higher levels of physical violence were associated with tensions due to conflict situations.

"'All Marinikas[3] should be killed, first by sniper and then by artillery', was specifically announced the threat of rape and murder a few months ago. And then he publicly told me that I should be torn apart first, cut my hair bald, sprinkled with tar and feathers and raped, and then throw to dogs. And then his followers started calling me Joe, alluding to British delegate Joe Cox, who had been stabbed in the middle of the street the year before."
Serbia, woman interviewee

Respondents from BiH and Serbia reported instances of abduction, slapping, mobile-phone theft and hair pulling as physical violence against women in politics. Women participating in local politics, women in less powerful positions and women present in areas of conflict are most likely to experience physical forms of violence. According to the research participants, an additional external factor in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the perception of rule of law, where public perception tends to be that most male political officials are above the law.

3 Marinika Tepić is a prominent woman politician in Serbia. The interviewee is referring to the practice of referring to the brave woman politicians in Serbia who 'dare' to stand up to those in power as 'Marinikas'.

Albania

Exposure level: low level of exposure with sporadic incidents.

Most common acts of violence: shooting; hitting objects; hitting the table with their hands; threats of bodily injury; pushing; and squeezing.

Victims of violence: men and women in local politics; and women in less-powerful positions.

Perpetrators of violence: society in general

Motive of violence: escalation of tensions due to conflict situations.

Factors contributing to violence: the unwillingness and/or inability to talk and negotiate without physical violence.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Exposure level: low level of exposure.

Most common acts of violence: shooting; hitting objects; hitting the table with their hands; threats of bodily injury; pushing; squeezing; physical assault; abductions; and fighting.

Victims of violence: men and women in local and national politics; and women in less powerful positions.

Perpetrators of violence: members of society, including men and women.

Motive of violence: escalation of tensions due to conflict situations.

Factors contributing to violence: the unwillingness and/or inability to talk and negotiate without physical violence.
Exposure level: low level of exposure.

Most common acts of violence: shooting; threats of bodily injury; pushing; squeezing; physical assault; and fighting.

Victims of violence: men and women, specifically those in less-powerful positions.

Perpetrators of violence: members of society; men; some women; party activists.

Motive of violence: escalation of tensions due to conflict situations.

Factors contributing to violence: the unwillingness and/or inability to talk and negotiate without physical violence.

Kosovo

Exposure level: low level of exposure with sporadic incidents.

Most common acts of violence: shooting; pushing; squeezing; and physical assault.

Victims of violence: men and women who are in the presence of men.

Perpetrators of violence: members of society; men; women; and party activists.

Motive of violence: escalation of tensions due to conflict situations.

Factors contributing to violence: the unwillingness and/or inability to talk and negotiate without physical violence.

Montenegro

Exposure level: low level of exposure.

Most common acts of violence: shooting; beatings; threats of bodily injury; physical threats; pushing; squeezing; physical assault; and fighting.

Victims of violence: men; women in local politics; and women in less-powerful positions.

Perpetrators of violence: members of society; men; women; party activists; colleagues.

Motive of violence: escalation of tensions due to conflict situations.

Factors contributing to violence: the unwillingness and/or inability to talk and negotiate without physical violence.

Serbia

Exposure level: moderate level of exposure.

Most common acts of violence: shooting; hitting; hitting objects; hitting the table with their hands; threats of bodily injury; physical threats; pushing; squeezing; physical assault; slapping; mobile-phone theft; and hair pulling.

Victims of violence: men and women.

Perpetrators of violence: members of society; men; women; party activists; and colleagues.

Motive of violence: escalation of tensions due to conflict situations.

Factors contributing to violence: the unwillingness and/or inability to talk and negotiate without physical violence.

Consequences of violence against women in politics

VAW-P is a significant social problem with serious consequences that affect all aspects of a woman's life. The findings of this research indicate that VAW-P has an impact beyond its primary targets: it also seeks to send a message to society that women as a group should not participate in politics. Intimidating one woman to stop her political activities can discourage other women from engaging in politics, both undermining their rights and reinforcing women's political exclusion more broadly. A lack of condemnation or response to VAW-P can have wide-ranging repercussions, including reinforcing hostile environments where women do not feel safe reporting violence they face. NDI's research showed that women subjected to violence fear secondary victimisation, blaming, and endangering their image of fearlessness and strength. These dynamics and impunity for perpetrators further diminishes space for adequate response to VAW-P, and few institutional or systemic avenues for recourse and support exist.

Participants described short- and long-term physical and psychological consequences of experiencing VAW-P. Health consequences mentioned by participants included headaches, sleep disorders, panic attacks, depression, anxiety, rumination, fear, and low self-esteem. In terms of impact on their work, women politicians reported taking frequent sick leave, noted reduced work performance and increased pressure, and passed up opportunities. Women reported accepting patterns of violent behaviour, political apathy, and ultimately leaving their political parties or their positions in political and public life. Women also noted reduced credibility within their families; saw their family members suffer from physical and psychological ailments; witnessed the victimisation of children, partners, and extended family; and experienced divorce. Within society, VAW-P directly and indirectly perpetuates the idea that politics are 'men's business' or that 'women are incapable of politics'. It demotivates women who would potentially join public and political life and drives those that are currently participating away from public life entirely. Further, it is a threat to democracy and the core principles of representation and inclusion.

VAW-P in the Balkans: the impacts on women			
Families	**Health**	**Political participation**	**Work**
• reduced credibility within their families • family members suffer from physical and psychological ailments • victimisation of children, partners, and extended family • divorce	• headaches • sleep disorders • panic attacks • depression • anxiety • rumination • fear • low self-esteem	• accepting patterns of violent behavior • political apathy • leaving their political parties or their positions in political and public life	• compelled to take frequent sick leave • reduced work performance • increased pressure • passed up opportunities

Recommendations (Part II)

Type of violence	Recommendations
Psychological abuse	• Ensure that VAW (violence against wom and/or GBV laws provide adequate coverage of these forms of harm. • Train police and judges about these forms of harm, including appropriate police investigation techniques and gender-sensitive justice practices. • Help women leaders learn about subtle and discreet forms of harm, to recognise the signs of gaslighting and to learn to document cases to enable redress. • Ensure that these forms of harm are codified in political party and media codes of conduct and that the measures are upheld and respected.
Social media and internet-based abuse	• Educate about effective counter-speech strategies, as well as other effective responses to social media-based abuse. • Empower women leaders to document cases of online abuse. • Enshrine the right to block abusive accounts for women in politics, based on the fact that gender-based attacks are a human rights violation and not part of freedom of speech. • Promote good digital hygiene practices among targeted groups to reduce risk. • Work with civil society actors to engage in collaborative bystander intervention strategies online. • Educate political women on the new privacy and moderation standards agreed upon under the UN Generation Equality Forum pledge.
Economic violence	• Promote gender-sensitive campaign finance reform. • Support women's capacity to undertake autonomous political fundraising initiatives. • Monitor and report on political parties' respect for existing gender finance provisions. • Highlight good practices within the region in promoting women's access to political resources.

Type of violence	Recommendations
Sexual harassment	• Ensure that existing legal provisions on GBV cover GBV in political spaces and recognise that GBV in politics is an aggravating factor of harm. • Introduce policy reform, up to and including standalone laws and protocols covering sexual violence in politics. • Maintain a zero-tolerance policy for sexual violence, including everything from sexual humour and stereotypes to assault and rape within all election and political-related codes of conduct. • Ensure that law enforcement and justice actors are educated in sexual violence in politics and equipped to deal with it in an appropriate and sensitive manner. • Ensure access to assistance and services for victims of sexual violence in politics.
Physical attacks	• EEnsure that law enforcement and justice actors are versed in the aggravated impacts of physical assaults in the political space. • Ensure that women in politics potentially targeted with personal harm have access to security resources as needed, including for their homes and families. • Maintain a zero-tolerance policy for any actor that promotes, encourages or engages in physical attacks or threats of attacks against political women.
Mediating harmful consequences	• Develop and promote networks with resources for survivors of VAW-P, including community support networks and self-care resources.

Conclusion

Political violence doesn't always make front-page news. Treacherous forms of hidden violence against women in politics in the SEE region consistently undermine women's abilities to advance as political and public leaders. These often silent acts of violence take a physical and emotional toll on women leaders and their families. They contribute to marginalisation and cycles of exclusion. These discreet yet damaging acts are expressions of patriarchal systems that undervalue women's contributions and create structural barriers to growth. While explicit misogyny is rarely a driver in these cases, pervasive stereotypes reinforce essentialist views of women that are often tied to traditional roles and gender norms. These stereotypes pigeon-hole women's identities, overlooking important complexities and creating normative expectations for women's performance in office. These essentialist norms are insidious because they can lay a foundation for backlash if and when women leaders fail to adhere to gendered expectations.

Avenues for addressing the problem of VAW-P exist across multiple fields. Legal frameworks are largely in place; however, implementation remains a challenge. This requires a concerted effort among advocates to demand equal justice. Justice actors may require sensitisation. Victims often need support to know their rights and to take their cases to court. In the many instances where acts of VAW-P are not codified, different approaches are required. Much of the VAW-P in the region is rooted in cultural stereotypes and norms. Addressing these underlying factors requires deeper change, including working with the media on its depiction of women.

The experience of gender-based violence is never an isolated one. This research demonstrates that the experience of VAW-P shares many similarities across the region. Recognising these common challenges and working together in solidarity to overcome them is a critical step in achieving political gender equality.

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