

**Women's role
and their participation
in public life
of the Visegrad Countries**

Edited by

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Prof. Tadeusz Wallas

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Participation of V4 Women in the European Parliament and its institutions

Introduction

According to the ‘mirror theory’, a representative organ should reflect the variation in society. Parliament should be a mirror image of the society. As women make up half the population of society, therefore they ought to have their own political representation in Parliament – both national and European. The analysis of women’s representation and their role in EU institutions requires caution and an awareness of the fact that this representation and its role is, to some extent, a derivative of the character (as well as the type of elections) of particular EU institutions. For instance, the representation of women in the European Council or the Council of the European Union will be directly connected with women’s representation in national governments.

The aim of this paper is to focus on the participation of women from Visegrad countries (V4) in the European Parliament (EP), being the only directly elected EU institution. The level of V4 women’s representation will also be shown from the historical perspective. This research method will be useful in finding comparable reasons for the lower V4 female representation in the EP in comparison with other EU Member States.

Voting rights for women were established in the early 20th century, however, in the 19th century the demands for giving women electoral rights had already been proposed (Mill, 1995, p. 18).

Table 1

Women’s voting rights in Europe

Finland 1906	Poland, Hungary, Austria, Germany 1918	Portugal, Spain 1931
Norway 1913	Netherlands, Luxembourg, Belgium 1919	France 1944
Denmark 1915	Czechoslovakia 1920	Italy 1946
Island 1916	Sweden 1921	Greece 1952
Estonia, Lithuania, Russia 1917	United Kingdom 1928	Switzerland 1971

Source: Szpunar, 2009, p. 203.

Voting rights for women in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia were introduced quite early, in comparison with other European states. They resulted from the positive

evaluation of the social and professional role of women during WWI. In fact, as Poland had no independence between the end of the 18th century and 1918, both women's social role and their fight for suffrage were peculiar (Fuszara, 2012, p. 143). The struggle for independence was a common national experience, despite the division into male and female roles. Polish women took part in this struggle and when in 1918 Poland regained independence, women acquired the right to vote on the same terms as men (Fuszara, 2013, p. 131). Nevertheless, in the first parliamentary elections in Poland the level of female deputies in both chambers of Parliament was significantly low.

Table 2

Participation of women in the lower chamber of Polish parliament (Sejm)

Sejm's term of office							
Women	1991–1993	1993–1997	1997–2001	2001–2005	2005–2007	2007–2011	2011–2015
%	9.3	12.8	13.0	12.8	20.0	20.2	24.3
Total number	43	60	15	92	93	93	112

Source: The author's concept on the basis of Polish Parliament's data.

However, after the collapse of the *ancien regime* in Poland in 1989, since the 1991 parliamentary elections women's representation in the lower chamber of parliament has seemed to demonstrate an upwards trend (Table 2). The growing number of female representatives results from the fact that women are more and more interested in politics and want to be a part of the parliament, directly influencing the decision-making process. Women stopped recognising politics as a domain of 'dirty business' and started to get involved in the arena of politics (Dukaczewska-Nałęcz, 2001, p. 227). Finally, voters are beginning to accept the place of women in parliament by giving them their voice in suffrage. As far as prominent positions in Parliament are concerned, two women have been the Marshal of Sejm (speaker of the lower chamber) and one has been the Marshal of the Senate (speaker of the upper chamber).

The European Parliament

The European Union (UE) is a unique organisation, the representative organ of which – the European Parliament (EP) – is elected in universal elections. It was established in 1951 under the Treaty of Paris as the General Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community. The Rome Treaties, establishing the European Economic Community and the European Community of Atomic Energy, continued the idea of a representative body by creating the Assembly of the European Communities. In 1962, members changed the name from the Assembly to the European Parliament. The new name was officially recognised by the European Single Act in 1986 (Barcz, Górka, Wyrozumska, 2011, p. 129). At the beginning, the members of the Assembly were ap-

pointed by national parliaments, since 1979 they have been elected in direct elections in accordance with the national law of Member States.

In July 1976, the European Council adopted the Act concerning the election of the representatives of the Assembly by direct universal suffrage (*Act 1976*). The first universal elections to the European Parliament (EP) were to be held in 1978. Finally, they were moved to 7–10 June, 1979, due to the difficulties in adjusting the British law on the House of Commons to the British law on elections to the EP. Other difficulties were caused by determining the number of seats for particular Member States. In June 1978, the European Council found it impossible to keep the original date of the first direct elections scheduled for 1978. It was also unsuccessful in fixing a single day for conducting elections that would be the same in each member state (Dydak, 2003, p. 16).

According to Article 8 of the Act, the electoral procedure is regulated by national law unless a universal electoral procedure is in force. The Council Decision (*Council Decision*) of 2002 (amending this Act) upholds this position. In these areas which are not covered by general law-making in the Act, Member States have the power to pass the appropriate bill. As the electoral system to the EP has not been the subject of universal legislation, therefore Member States are free to choose voting techniques if they meet constitutional standards. The European Parliament was indeed entitled to draft a uniform electoral procedure in all Member States, or principles common to them, however, a uniform procedure has not been established yet. This has resulted in the fact that the elections are held in every member state in accordance with its respective national electoral law.

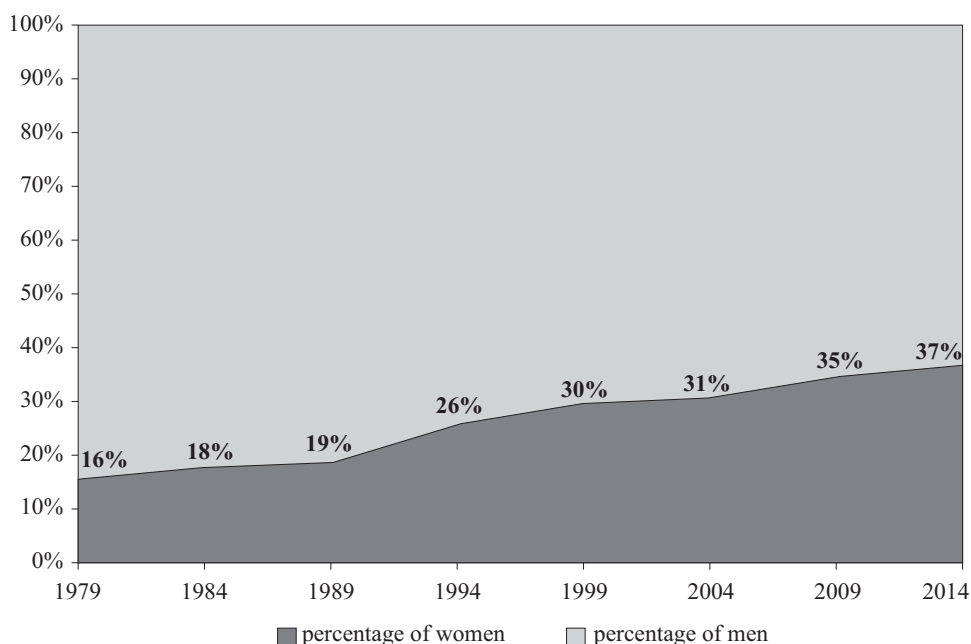
Nevertheless, the Council Decision of 2002 introduced a few common rules, according to which in all Member States the members of the EP (MEPs) are elected in proportional elections (Article 1). The Decision confirms that the electoral procedure in each Member State falls under respective national laws, albeit stipulating that national legislation may not infringe the proportional electoral system (Barcz, Górka, Wyrozumska, 2011, p. 118). In 1998, the EP adopted the Act on common electoral rules, such as the principle of proportionality, many constituencies in one country, an optional electoral threshold not higher than 5%, the principle of preferential voting, and the incompatibility of the mandate of a deputy to the EP with the mandate to the national parliament (Tosiek, Wicha, 2007, p. 16–17).

In 2011, an attempt to change the electoral law was undertaken. The report of the Constitutional Issues Commission was not accepted, as it was too controversial. However, it contained a number of changes which were used primarily for preventing the disturbing trend of low and still declining electoral turnout (Kuźelewska, 2013, p. 384–385). This report proposed electing 25 MEPs in an additional constituency covering the whole territory of the EU. It also suggested the introduction of transnational lists of candidates in the constituency of the EU supplied by European political parties (at a maintained gender balance). The changes were also to encompass the elimination of the minimum electoral threshold. EU citizenship was to be strengthened by emphasising in Article 1 that “MEPs are elected as representatives of the Union [...]” This can be understood as a tribute to the federal structure of the EU.

The concentration of the analysis on the European Parliament is justified not only by the nature of the elections to this institution, but also by its role. Establishing direct

elections to the EP resulted in significant changes in the institutional structure of the European Community as the EP began to be recognised as a directly legitimated body (Pawłowski, 2007, p. 335). The first direct elections to the EP gave rise to the process of strengthening its position (Piekutowska, 2015, p. 58). Today, the EP plays an important role as a co-legislator, with important supervisory and budgetary responsibilities. Furthermore, this institution has also been associated with the pressure to extend the EU remit in relation to gender, for instance, supporting the development of policy against sexual harassment (Walby, 2004, p. 15). Although the Maastricht Treaty did not expand

Chart 1. Women's representation in the European Parliament; 1979–2014
(by opening sessions)



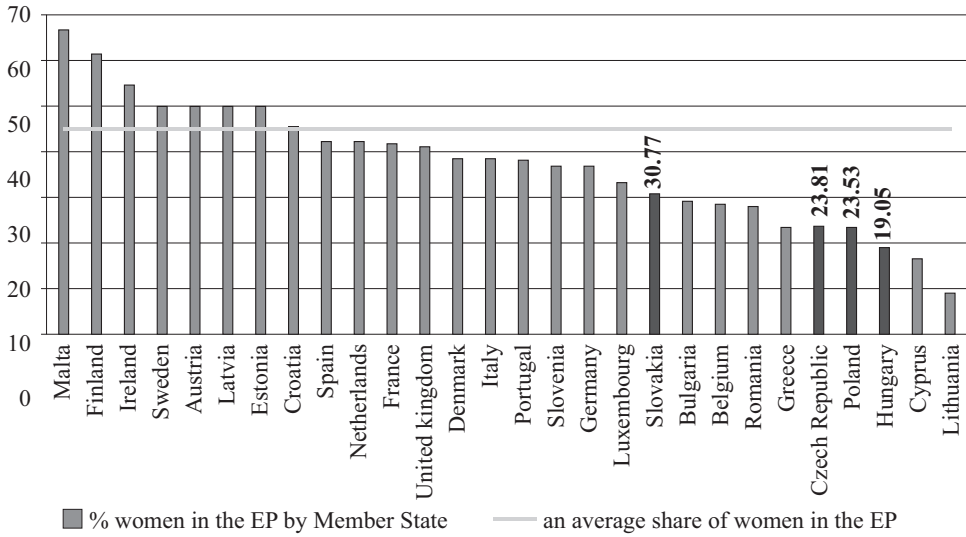
Source: *Rozkład kobiet i mężczyzn*, Parlament Europejski, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/pl/gender-balance.html>, 26.10.2015.

the EU competence for equal opportunities policy, it provided for a major expansion of the power of the EP, which had long acted as one of the primary advocates of a more forceful EU policy on women's issues (Pollack, Hafner-Burton, 2000, p. 436).

Women's representation in the EP changed between 1979 and 2014.

The first direct elections to the EP resulted in a modest share of women (16%). However, there has been a constant rise in the rate of women's representation in the EP. In the latest – the eighth parliamentary term of office – out of 751 MEPs, 277 are women (37% of all MEPs). A little less than 10% of them come from the Visegrad Group. There are 25 women from V4 in the European Parliament. This fulfils one out of two conditions for building a political group. Does this mean that the V4 women share common problems and goals?

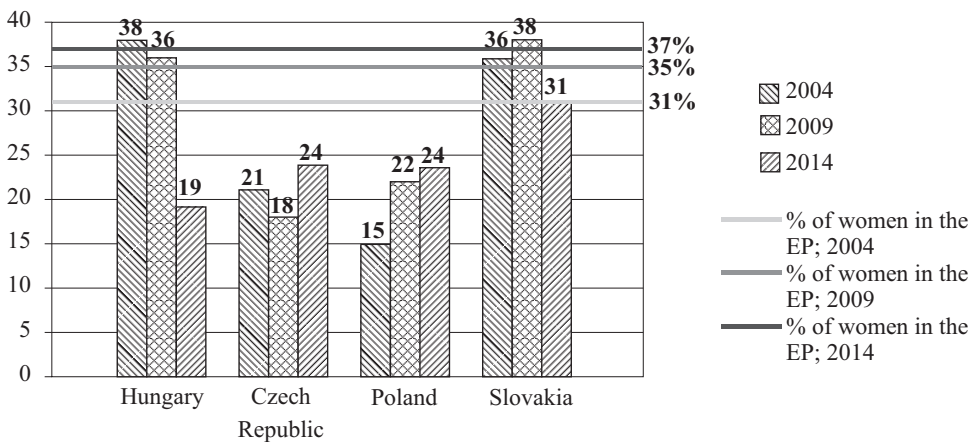
Chart 2. Representation of women in the European Parliament by Member State; 2015



Source: The author’s calculations based on the EP data: European Parliament, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/map.html>, 21.10.2015.

As far as the representation of women in the EP is concerned, according to the data presented in Chart 2, there are a few common features for V4 countries. Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia have more male than female MEPs. The rate of women’s representation from all V4 countries is lower than the average female participation in the EP (37%).

Chart 3. Representation of V4 women in the European Parliament 6th, 7th & 8th parliamentary term

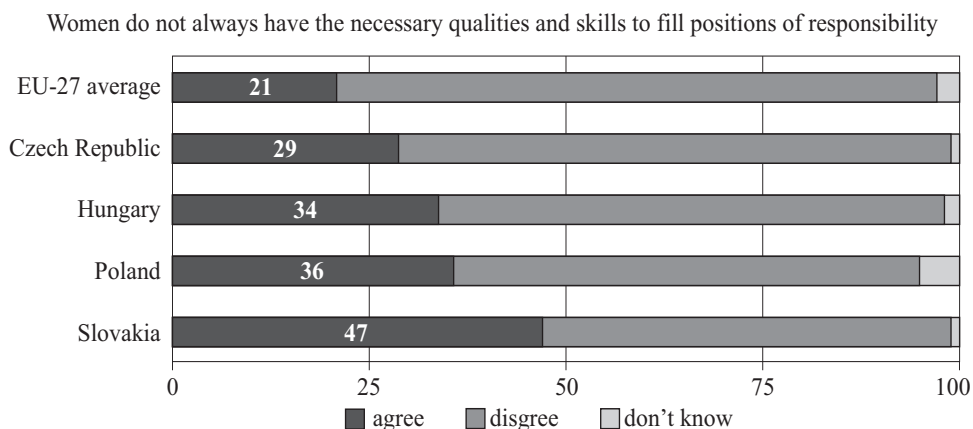


Source: The author’s calculations based on the EP data: European Parliament, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/map.html>, 26.10.2015; *Rozkład kobiet i mężczyzn*, Parlament Europejski, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/pl/gender-balance.html>, 26.10.2015.

As can be observed, the participation of women from V4 countries changed between the first election to the EP (2004) and the latest one (in 2014). The level of participation of Hungarian women is decreasing, while in Poland's case it is continuously growing. In Hungary and Slovakia the rate of women's representation in the EP in 2004 and 2009 was higher than average for all Member States (31% in the 6th parliamentary term and 35% in the 7th parliamentary term). Notwithstanding, in the 8th parliamentary term, none of the V4 countries reached the average level of 37% of women's representation.

The low rate of V4 women's representation in the EP reflects the attitude of public opinion towards the conviction that women do not have the appropriate qualifications to hold positions which require high responsibility. According to a Eurobarometer survey, 47% of Slovaks, 36% of Poles, 34% of Hungarians and 29% of Czechs agreed with this statement (Chart 4).

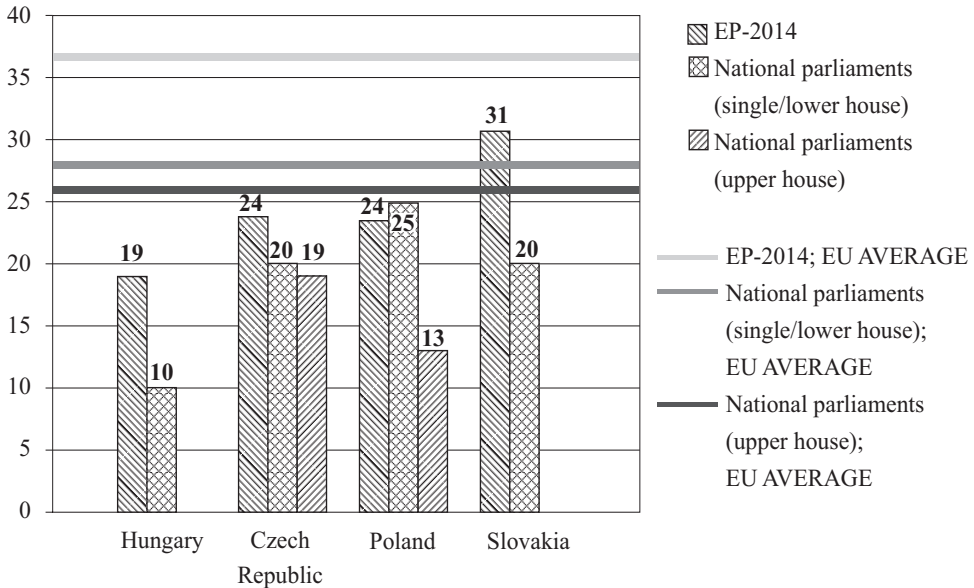
Chart 4. Public opinion in V4 countries on women's predisposition to hold positions that require responsibility



Source: Special Eurobarometer 376, *Women in decision making position*, Wave EB76.1 Annex: Tables, p. 92.

As a result, the presence of V4 women in politics is low not only at the level of EU institutions, but also in national parliaments (Chart 5).

Generally, women are disadvantaged in national political representation. On average, they occupy 21% of seats in national parliaments (*Human*, 2014, p. 40). The representation of V4 women in national parliaments is lower than the EU average. Hence, we can indicate common challenges for all V4 countries with regards to the search for measures taken to improve gender balance not only at the level of EU institutions, but also at the level of national parliaments. What is more, with the exception of Poland, women's representation in the EP is higher than women's representation in national parliaments. It means that women from V4 countries have greater chances of being elected in the elections to the European Parliament than in the elections to national parliaments.

Chart 5. Presence of women in the parliaments of Visegrad Group countries (2015*)

* Data collected between 29/07/2015-06/08/2015.

Source: EC data: National Parliaments, http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/gender-decision-making/database/politics/national-parliaments/index_en.htm.

The analysis of participation of V4 women in the EP requires not only the examination of quantitative data but also of qualitative data. The question is, what role can women from V4 countries play in the EP? We seek the answer to this by analysing the participation of V4 women in parliamentary committees. There are twenty one parliamentary committees and two sub-committees in the European Parliament. The representation of women in the committees is varied (Chart 6).

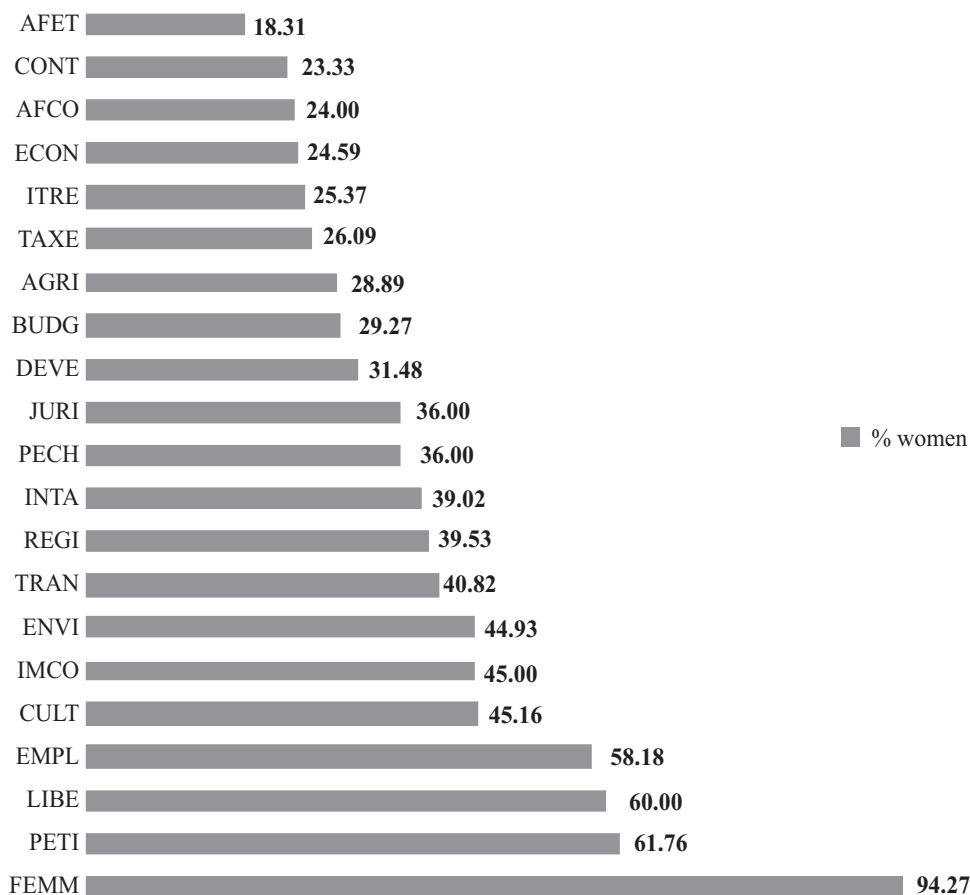
There are only four committees in which the rate of women's participation is higher in comparison with men. These are the following:

- 1) Women's Right and Gender Equality committee (FEMM),
- 2) Petitions committee (PETI),
- 3) Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs committee (LIBE),
- 4) Employment and Social Affairs committee (EMPL).

The highest rate of V4 women's participation is in the above mentioned committees (with the exception of the Petitions committee). On the other hand, there are four committees in which the representation of women is lower than 25%:

- Foreign Affairs committee (AFET),
- Budgetary Control committee (CONT),
- Constitutional Affairs committee (AFCO),
- Economic and Monetary Affairs committee (ECON).

Women from V4 countries are present in most of the committees, with the only exception of the Budgets committee (BUDG), Fisheries committee (PECH) and International Trade committee (INTA).

Chart 6. Women in parliamentary committees, the EP – 8th parliamentary term

Source: The author's calculations based on EP data: European Parliament Committees, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/parliamentary-committees.html>, 26.10.2015.

The representation of V4 women differs in particular committees. The biggest representation is in the Women's Right and Gender Equality committee (FEMM) – 6 women from V4 including the Vice-chair – Jana Žitňanská from Slovakia. There are four V4 women in the Internal Market and Consumer Protection committee (IMCO) and there are three V4 women in the Employment and Social Affairs committee (EMPL), including the Vice-chair Danuta Jazłowiecka from Poland. There are also three V4 women in the Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs committee (LIBE) with the Vice-chair Kinga Gál (from Hungary).

Importantly, V4 women are also present and play an important role as chairs or vice-chairs in those committees in which women's participation is low in general. In the Foreign Affairs Committee there is one member from Poland. In the Budgetary Control Committee (where women's representation is at the level of 23%) there is also one woman from V4 (Martina Dlabajová from the Czech Republic; she is a Vice-chair). There are more female chairs from V4 countries, such as the Constitutional Affairs

committee with Danuta Hübner from Poland (women's participation lower than 25%). She is also the only V4 woman in the Economic and Monetary Affairs committee.

Concluding remarks

In the 8th parliamentary term of the EP there are 277 women (out of 751 deputies). Out of 277 female MEPs, 25 come from the Visegrad Group countries. As far as the representation of V4 women is concerned, this brief analysis allows us to indicate a few features that are common for V4 countries. Firstly, we can observe a lower than an average rate of women's participation in the national parliaments. Secondly, there is a lower than average women's representation in the EP. Thirdly, there are comparable public opinions concerning women's predispositions to hold positions requiring high political responsibility. Finally, there is much the same history on granting women voting rights.

The same challenges for V4 countries concern searching for measures taken to improve gender balance not only at the level of EU institutions but also at the level of national parliaments.

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