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An Alternative Approach to the Advancement of Women Political Participation in Non-Democratic Post- Soviet Regimes

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Executive summary

This policy brief is designed as the first in a series of interventions that suggest alternative direction in existing approaches to the advancement of women's political participation (WPP) in Kazakhstan. The objective of this policy brief is to recommend a change of focus in the current UN Women's strategy aimed at promoting WPP in Kazakhstan. This paper draws on field research in Kazakhstan that involved interviews with 40 women politicians on their experience of political recruitment, women's leadership training and their access to public decision making. It contends that the UN Women existing policy in increasing WPP in Kazakhstan is limited in the way that it is based on a perception of institutional barriers towards greater women's political representation and lacks first-hand evidence of women's central and local level politicians. The policy brief recommends UN Women Multi Country Office to re-consider the "quota" solution to the problem of WPP by focusing on capacity building measures (primarily targeting women) and enhancing cooperation with the local level authorities. Both proposed initiatives can be integrated with already ongoing activities in the regions.

Introduction

Kazakhstan is a post-Soviet country with a strong presidential regime. President Nazarbayev has been in power since independence in 1991. The Constitution gives extensive power to the president and government. Based on the Freedom House ranking Kazakhstan is described as "not free", with restricted political and civil rights, collective as well as individual¹. The party system is weak with a ruling party headed by the president and even the opposition is made up of pro-presidential parties. The legislative branch is composed by a bicameral parliament, the senate and the Majilis. The Senate consists of deputies elected for six-year terms: two people from each of the 14 provinces, 2 from cities of national importance (Astana and Almaty) and 15 senators directly appointed by the president. The Majilis consists of 107 members elected for five-year terms: 98 seats are allocated among the political parties which surpassed a 7% threshold and 9 seats are given to the representatives of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan led by the president.²

In the 2007 elections, when a proportional representation (PR) closed-list electoral system was introduced, all seats were taken by the ruling party, Nur Otan. Seven parties took part in the 2012 elections and two parties joined the Nur Otan, in Majilis: AkZhol, a pro-business party, and one of the country's two Communist parties, the Communist People's Party. The same parties were returned to the Majilis after the 2016 elections. The local government is also dominated by the members of the ruling party. The Majilis holds primary legislative authority, however in practice the parliament initiates far

¹Freedom House, 2016. Freedom in the World 2016, Kazakhstan country report.

²The 'Peoples Assembly' ensures ethnic representation. Constitutional Law on Elections, 28 September 1995

fewer legislative acts than either the government or the president. Therefore, the parliament's role is mostly limited to approving rather than promoting legislation.

Women's representation in the Kazakh parliament has increased without the introduction of legal quotas. In the 2012 elections women's representation reached 27% and remains at the same level in the 2016 Majilis - higher than the global average at 23%³. However, in the Senate women's representation has decreased twice in recent years. Currently there are only 3 (6%) women out of 47 senators: two of them were appointed directly by the president and one was elected by the local representative body. Women representatives at the local level are 22.2% on average⁴; however, the difference across the regions is very wide - from 0 to 35%.

The primary international actor working on gender issues in Kazakhstan is UN Women which has been implementing programmes since 1999. In Kazakhstan the work of UN Women is based on the international legal treaties that Kazakhstan has signed, including the CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action. UN Women's Strategic Plan (2014-17) directs the organisation's work into six priority areas, one of which promotes women's leadership and participation in decision-making. In this strategic area UN Women focus on the institutional factors that influence women's political participation. They provide gender expertise, capacity-building and policy support to advance women's political empowerment. This includes capacity building training for women political candidates, cooperation with political parties, governments and civil society, as well as advocacy for legislative access for women to political spheres.⁵The approach is tailored to the political, institutional and social contexts of specific countries.

UN Women activities in the area of WPP in Kazakhstan

UN Women's actions are based on an analysis that sees primary impediments to women's political participation in Kazakhstan in the electoral system and in the reluctance of political institutions to involve women. This logic assumes that, although in democratic contexts a closed-list proportional electoral system tends to result in women's higher representation, in a non-democratic context it works as a barrier to establishing a direct link between the voter and the individual candidate. It implies that since women candidates are less visible, the chances of being elected in greater numbers decrease⁶. Therefore, to overcome the shortcoming of the electoral system and make it work for equal political representation assertive measures are considered as the most appropriate.

UN Women's strategy is based on the idea of gender equality primarily understood in terms of providing equal opportunities rather than ensuring equal outcomes⁷. As a

³IPU, 2016. Women in National Parliaments: Situation as per 1st of December – 23%, available at <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>

⁴The Concept of Family and Gender Policy in Kazakhstan till 2030 (presidential order №384, 6 December 2016, para 1.2

⁵UN Women, 2016. Women's leadership and political participation, available at <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation>

⁶UN Women, 2014. Women political participation in Kazakhstan: needs assessment and mapping of stakeholders. Report of the mission, April 2014

⁷The Russian and Kazakh translation of the “women empowerment” notion which is widely used in conjunction of “gender equality” is literally means “extending opportunities for women”

result, UN Women Multi Country Office policy on women's political participation has two major limitations.

Firstly, it focuses on advocacy for legislative and institutional measures⁸. More specifically, it advocates for the introduction of gender quotas, but without taking into consideration patterns, meanings and experiences shaping women's participation in Kazakhstan's politics.

Secondly, emphasis on legislative measures means that UN Women focuses on central government actors responsible for legislation initiation. On the other hand, local government and local political institutions, a significant level of political activity in Kazakhstan, are outside of UN Women's focus.

Women and the Kazakhstan's political system

These findings are based on interviews with 40 women political representatives from both the Majilis and local government institutions conducted between March and November 2016 in selected regions of Kazakhstan. Interviewees were asked about their experience of the political recruitment process, their views on their role as politicians and their experience of programmes to promote women's political participation. The results can be summarised as follows:

- In the majority of cases (90% of the respondents) women had been reluctant to participate in formal politics. When responding to questions on their motivations and intentions to become politicians and elected representatives, women reported having no interest in having political ambitions prior to running for elections. This was true of female politicians both at the local level and national parliamentary level.
- Women did not have to assert themselves as candidates for political offices. When describing their pathway towards the representative bodies, interviewees emphasized that they had been asked to run for elections by senior members of the political party or government structure.
- The attitude of women politicians towards their political office varied according to whether they were involved in national or local politics and also according to their professional background. A common theme was that the women interviewed did not see any personal advantage in participating in politics, either in terms of gaining immediate advantage through political office or in terms of enhancing their career subsequently. This view was more common among women who had been selected for the national parliament. For example, women who had been engaged in civil society organisations reported that, once they had become political representatives, they experienced a sharp drop of trust from the population both personally and towards their organisations. To the contrary, women who had a long-term engagement with party politics were more favourable to being political representatives, as were some women with a business background.

⁸CEDAW Committee, 2014. Concluding observations on the combined third and fourth periodic reports of Kazakhstan, 10 March 2014, Temporary special measures, para 15

- None of the women interviewed mentioned training on political leadership as factor which helped them to be visible to the local decision makers, thus facilitating their selection.

Negative views expressed by women politicians about their engagement with the political system is partially explained by the fact that, historically, there has not been a route for women to government office in Kazakhstan. While a number of men are selected from the elected members of the Majilis to take up high-level government or presidential administration posts, only one woman has ever been selected in this way and that was the President's daughter. There is also no evidence that women in political office have been able to advance policies of benefit to women. To the contrary women who had been active on issues related to women's status and welfare prior to becoming elected representatives experience a loss of influence and credibility on these topics.

Conclusion and recommendations

The views of women political representative who participated in this research suggest that the introduction of gender quotas for parliament, or local government bodies will not advance women's capacity to engage in high-level political decision.

When women become political representatives they face major, and in some cases insurmountable, barriers in exerting influence on policymaking.

They struggle to achieve the level of political office necessary to be involved in significant decision making or to put them in positions of responsibility for policy development and implementation. In this context, women's reluctance to enter politics appears to rely on a realistic assessment of the value political office holds for them and not only to be a function of traditional gender relations, although this undoubtedly plays a part.

Based on this analysis and within the confines of UN Women's strategic goals, this policy brief recommends that UN Women:

- Put more emphasis on the capacity building toolkit in the arsenal of UN Women strategies on WPP, rather than focusing on legislative measures;
- Enhance cooperation with the authorities at the regional level, such as local governments, party offices, national machinery focal points. This is crucial since the political career of women MPs starts with their involvement in politics at the region level. Significant improvement could be achieved by targeting this area given the inconsistencies in women's representation at local level;
- Consider the possibility of using existing training on women's political leadership as entry point and to set up cooperation with the government for the implementation of existing gender equality legislative framework.