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International Women's Day 2011: Ukraine's female majority still under-represented in politics and big business

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Women's Day, Men's Year

Beyond the holiday: women form a clear majority in modern Ukraine but remain under-represented in politics

Kristina Wilfore

As experts ponder how to transform Ukraine into a modern European country, issues of economic reform, curbing corruption, enhancing freedom of the press and improved international relations get most of the attention. But the question of women's political participation is hardly ever mentioned, aside from a few snickers over the attention grabbing antics of bare chested FEMEN protesters. This does not mean that Ukraine has gender issues which need addressing. During the last year, I have been privileged to meet women from across the country who are professional, educated, active, creative and successful in small business, education, science and other spheres, but who unfortunately continue to play a backseat role in the country's political life.

Majority of Ukrainians, minority of politicians

While women make up 54% of the Ukrainian population, they account for only 8% of Ukrainian parliamentarians, well below the global average of 18% and far below the 30% target to which Ukraine agreed 15 years ago when it ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Furthermore, no woman currently serves as an oblast

governor or cabinet minister, and few were recruited as candidates in the recent local elections. In short, Ukraine's record on women's inclusion in politics is bordering on the indefensible. It appears that Ukraine's political leaders do not understand the contributions women can make to the country's development and how the lack of commitment to gender equity works against Ukraine's desire to present a modern, European face to the world. Neither the country's Orange or Blue camps have provided any meaningful leadership on gender issues, while the country's current political leadership has made a few unfortunate public remarks which suggest that they do not take gender inequities, or even women, seriously. Meanwhile, although the previous Ukrainian government was led by a woman, she was widely viewed as an aberration and represents a missed opportunity to elevate gender issues in the public consciousness.

Voters turned off by gender inequality

Ukrainian political parties across the political spectrum should take note: recent public opinion research, including focus groups conducted by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) reveal that the Ukrainian population is less and less willing to accept discrimination and gender stereotyping. Politicians ignore this shift in voters' views at their peril. NDI's focus groups found that Ukrainian citizens generally think women have the potential to change Ukrainian politics for the better. Voters believe that widely held stereotypes about women's roles can and should be tackled — includ-



ing by breaking through the 'gentlemen's club' ethos of the country's national political arena. A national survey timed with last autumn's local elections and conducted by the non-partisan Ukrainian Women's Fund, found that voters support the idea of increasing the number of women in local governing bodies by a ratio of two to one. Voters believe the major obstacles to greater female participation are resistance from men and time pressures created by the burden of domestic chores.

Poltava leads the way

A three pronged strategy is needed to increase the role of women in politics: this strategy should seek to strengthen the commitment of political parties to support women candidates and seek women's votes; form a meaningful women's caucus within the Verkhovna Rada to ensure that gender considerations are taken more seriously during debates on pensions, the labour code, education and healthcare; and develop a nonpartisan network of women

councilors at the local level throughout the country. There are reasons to believe in the potential of women in Ukrainian politics, especially outside the cynical and politically divisive climate of the capital. The experience of Poltava is a good case in point, showing how gender can be tackled by savvy politicians and voters willing to see the advantages of bringing women into decision making bodies. Poltava's city council includes 30% women, the highest percentage in Ukraine. Forums about the value of women in politics helped set the agenda in the autumn 2010 local elections, particularly in the race for city mayor, with each candidate making it a priority to include women in his administration. The eventual victor, Mayor Oleksandr Mamay, has brought a new leadership style and approach to governing. He nominated a woman from outside his own party as first secretary because she was the most qualified for the job and her gender was seen as a bonus rather than a handicap. This doesn't mean that city council meetings will be



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"brightened with more pretty faces," as one leading Ukrainian politician memorably described the contribution of women to government in 2010. It means that in tackling the problems facing Poltava and other Ukrainian cities, policymakers will benefit from more diverse voices — whether the subject is road construction, restoration of housing, children's access to high quality health care, or a clean, safe environment.

Underpaid, underrepresented

In Ukraine, the collapse of the Soviet Union put an end to externally imposed gender balances in employment and politics. Unfortunately, in throwing off Soviet attitudes, many Ukrainians embraced the notion that women are first and foremost mothers, wives and homemakers. This attitude deters women from politics as well as business. A recent United Nations Development Programme gender analysis of Ukraine shows that women are well represented among the country's small and medium sized businesses, while in big business — on which much of Ukraine's economy is based — they are hardly represented at all. Ukraine's labour legislation technically prohibits discrimination, but in reality women's opportunities for career growth are limited; on average they still receive smaller salaries and mostly occupy low wage jobs. In Ukraine today, women's salaries average only 74% of men's. And even women with advanced degrees are less likely than men with the same education to occupy leading positions in businesses. As Ukraine enters its 20th year of independence, now is the perfect opportunity to address the barriers to women's advancement at a time when the country so clearly needs their ideas and energy. To really "switch on Ukraine" — the Euro 2012 soccer championship slogan — the country must overcome traditional stereotypes about women. It needs to make a genuine commitment to tap fully into the talents of all of its citizens.

Role models for Ukraine's silent female majority Ukrainian women gaining ground in grassroots politics

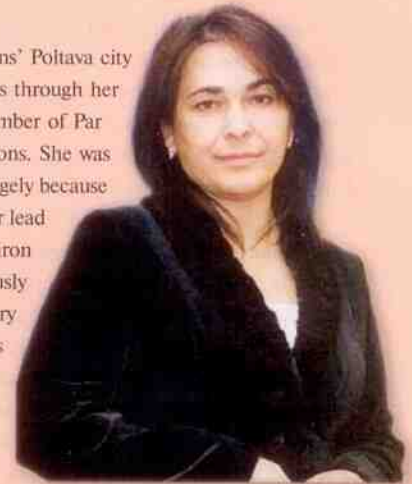
Zinayida Galchynska (BYUT)

Zinayida Galchynska, 65, ran in one of Zaporizhzhya's single mandate constituencies in the October 2010 local elections. She won her race by mobilizing a team of volunteers to go door-to-door and to speak directly with voters. She is a civic leader who gained the support of constituents through her work providing rehabilitation and treatment to cancer patients. Galchynska, a breast cancer survivor, made a promise to herself to step into a political office to improve health policies as an elected official. During the next five years she will be representing her constituents in the city council, helping with health issues and social protection for the disabled.



Oksana Derkach (Party of Regions)

Oksana Derkach, 45, is the deputy head of the Party of Regions' Poltava city organization. She knows the ins and outs of Ukrainian politics through her work in the Poltava's governor's office, as an advisor to a Member of Parliament, and as the regional coordinator for the Party of Regions. She was appointed Secretary of the Poltava city council by the mayor largely because of her skilful work as a mediator among political opponents, her leadership and ability to focus on issues in a highly polarized environment. A Ukrainian language teacher by training, Oksana previously worked in education which brought her in contact with the everyday problems of many Poltava households. Like many of NDI's trainees Oksana is a proven leader. She is currently working hard on educating her colleagues in the party — many of whom were elected as local councillors — on how to better represent their constituents' interests.



Tetyana Sadovska (Front of Change)

When new Radekhiv local council member Tetyana Sadovska returned to her small home town after graduating from law school she didn't expect to stay for more than a couple of years, much less join the city council. Tetyana, who is a little over 20, first gained perspective on her town's problems during her time as a civic and youth activist. As a new mother, she was motivated to run for office to make Radekhiv a better place for her child. A lawyer by training, Sadovska is well versed in the city council's rules and regulations. She says she works closely with both new and more experienced city councillors of all political affiliations, in the belief that they are all seeking to help people live better lives.

Iryna Balybina (Strong Ukraine)

First-time candidate Iryna Balybina was elected to the Poltavaska oblast council in the October 2010 local elections. Before turning to politics, Iryna conducted research on the region's history and worked in education and youth development. She is a respected and well-known member of the Poltava community and a passionate patriot of her home town. Although she already had a successful career as a publisher, Iryna, 44, says she entered the rough and tumble world of Ukrainian politics in the hope of using a political position to advance the policies that her city needs. In NDI's training for women local elected officials, Iryna asserted that "female candidates need to be developed and supported by their parties. In return, women are ready to invest their intelligence, experience and energy to change this country for better."

