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GUEST EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION TO THE TOPIC OF THE ISSUE

Issues of political representation are a core focus of gender and politics research. US political theorist Hanna Pitkin is considered the key source for research on political representation. In 1967, Pitkin published *The Concept of Representation*, a study that will influence generations of political representation researchers. According to Pitkin, there are four dimensions of representation: 1) formalistic, 2) descriptive, 3) symbolic, and 4) substantive. This classification is important to understand to appreciate the path the representation theory has taken over the past decades. Each representation dimension provides a different approach to examining representation. Most notable in light of subsequent feminist scholarship is Pitkin's dismissal of descriptive representation (Childs and Lovenduski 2013). She rejects its key assumption of a link between characteristics and action and believes that a focus on descriptive representation leads to focusing on the characteristics at the expense of attention to the actions of representatives.

Besides Pitkin's non-gendered contribution, another book by the British political scientist Anne Phillips, The Politics of Presence (1995), has been central to our debate. Phillips provides a ground-breaking contribution to the widespread and controversial debate about how disadvantaged groups, including women, should be represented in politics. Building upon Pitkin and Phillips, most feminist work on the topic focuses on theoretical debates and empirical research around descriptive and substantive representation of women, making an important point that gender-balanced numerical representation (descriptive representation) is linked to but conceptually dif-

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ferent from gender-sensitive political processes and outcomes (substantive representation). A whole 'politics of presence' literature will emerge and complement Phillips' work.

Over the last four decades, different approaches have been taken to define and empirically operationalize the concepts of 'standing for,' 'acting for,' 'women's interests,' and 'women's issues', some being very narrow and feminist, others very broad, incl. non-feminist definitions. Among others, researchers have examined (Childs and Lovenduski 2013):

- which women are represented,
- who acts in the interests of women,
- where the representation of women takes place,
- and how it is done – in addition to evaluating the quality of representation.

Substantive representation, "acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them" (Pitkin 1967), started to be investigated, especially during the last three decades. First, research evolved around studying the relations that could be empirically established between women's descriptive representation in certain institutions, generally in legislatures, and the representation of women's interests. Researchers and especially practitioners believed in the so-called 'critical mass theory': by achieving a critical mass of women members of parliament, women's interest will – more or less automatically – enter the political agenda. Nevertheless, in the early stages of development, researchers questioned the conclusion that the numerical presence of women in decision-making positions would guarantee the representation of women's interests. Women's descriptive representation in formal institutions started to be seen as one of the many ways to achieve substantive representation of women (Childs and Krook 2008). 'Critical actors,' 'critical acts,' and 'representative claims' are at the center of the debate, going beyond the traditional view that women politicians are best equipped to represent the interests of women. The focus is not on a critical mass of women politicians but on critical actors, women and men, who do not have to be elected politicians. The constructivist turn freed representation from the sole focus on electoral politics (Saward 2006). Therefore, representing women is multifaceted and might be represented by diverse actors inside

and outside parliament. Extra-parliamentary arenas, like governmental women's public policy agencies and women's (civil society) movements, are recognized as effective avenues for representing women's interests. Women's movements formulate women's interests and lobby or work together with the state to represent women.

While there has been a sharp entry of gender studies into academia, with a strong focus on feminist theory and humanities, political and social sciences overall in South-East Europe (SEE) have only slowly opened up to gender and politics research. Even though there are fantastic gender and politics researchers in SEE, some of them are part of this thematic issue, this is still a minority voice, especially in the political science communities. It might sound as strongly generalized as it is, but a significant portion of political science research and teaching in the post-Yugoslav space and neighboring countries is still gender-blind, and women's political representation studies are still rare and exceptional. Symbolically, there is not a single edited volume or regional research project on the topic of women's political representation in the region. The minimal presence of researchers from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia at the 2022 European Conference on Politics and Gender in Ljubljana, the first ECPG in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe is another symbolic indicator that gender and politics research is only in its early development phase in this part of the world.

To fill this gap and to promote regional cooperation and collaborative approaches, the Gender and Politics Research Network in South-East Europe (GenPolSEE) was established in November 2022. More than 30 researchers from the region came together at the founding meeting, co-initiated by Adriana Zaharijević, Lilijana Čičkarčić, and myself, and hosted by the Institute of Social Science (Belgrade) and the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory of the University of Belgrade. GenPolSEE is today an informal, board-based feminist network of researchers interested in a) strengthening peer-to-peer learning and exchange among gender and politics researchers in the region; b) promoting contemporary feminist research methodologies among scholars from the region and strengthening links with international experts, networks and platforms; and c) conducting empirical research aimed at supporting change, innovation, and transformation, and promoting research from the

region internationally. The thematic research focus of the GenPolSEE network revolves around the following issues: a) gender and representation: institutions, critical actors, arenas of representation, women's and social movements, masculinities and intersectionality; b) gender and backlash: anti-gender movements, backlash on women's and LGBTI rights, right-wing politics; and c) gender and public policy: gender equality legislation, inclusive policy-making, accountability mechanisms, gender mainstreaming, gender-sensitive parliaments, and gender-responsive budgeting.

Following up on the set-up of GenPolSEE, a call for papers for a thematic issue of *Genero* was issued. Authors from all around the world were invited to submit papers related to

a) global theoretical discussions and
b) empirical research from South-East Europe.

Concretely, with this call, we were looking for original research and review articles/state-of-art discussion linked to at least one of the following research questions:

1. *Critical actors:* Who acts in the representation of women?
2. *Sites of representation:* Where does the representation of women occur?
3. *Interests, issues, preferences:* What does representation of women articulate?
4. *Process vs. outcome:* How is representation of women expressed?

As a result, six articles were selected for this thematic issue.

In the first 'state of the art' article, titled "Women's Good Political Representation," two leading European gender and politics scholars, Karen Celis and Sarah Childs, broadly map out the major contours of the politics and gender literature over the last three decades, and re-state the case for women's group representation as made in their monograph *Feminist Democratic Representation* (2020). With most of the world's parliaments remaining unequal regarding the numbers of women and men elected representatives, Celis and Childs still contend that women's presence within political institutions is necessary, even as it can never be sufficient to deliver women's good political representation. The authors urge politics and gender scholars to engage with recent work on democratic design, believing that ending women's poverty of representation requires a re-designing of democracy with a feminist com-

mitment at its very heart. In a fascinating way, the article also presents an overview of key literature and the latest theoretical debates.

The next five articles are empirical and focus exclusively on the countries from SEE. Marsela Dauti and Geldona Metaj demonstrate in the second article how women's representation in local councils in Albania has increased in the last ten years and how this has led to new challenges, like the absence of political power and the potential misuse by political leaders. Based on their research and practical work, they discuss the next steps for advancing women's political representation in local councils. Dauti and Metaj fill a substantial gap, where women's representation research predominantly focuses on formal institutions on the national level, ignoring sub-national politics and its specificities.

In the third article, Tajma Kapić offers a fascinating piece on the intersection of women's political representation and post-conflict consociationalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina. To understand how the interaction between the institutions of the state and the position of women are perceived, the article focuses on the narratives based on interviewing different categories of elite actors and their perceptions of the impact of the Dayton Peace Agreement on the political system in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the role of women within this system. Kapić analyses interlocutors' perceptions about the root causes for the fragmentation of the country's political system and the variation in the numbers of women represented at different levels of government in Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially at the level of cantons.

Anja Vojvodić, in the fourth article titled "The Limits of Presence: Constraints on Women's Political Representation in Serbia and Montenegro," looks into the connection between the presence of elected women, empowerment of women, and the creation of space for activism, advocacy, and subsequently higher levels of substantive representation. Vojvodić argues that women politicians in both countries, despite being present to a greater extent descriptively, face considerable constraints to their political activism within institutions such as parliament, thus limiting the effects they can have in terms of substantive "output" or women-friendly legislation.

In the fifth article, Nina Đorđević aims to contribute to the research on the substantive representation of women in Serbia by looking into the parliamentary debates in the Serbian parliament and exploring which MPs

(men or women) act in the interests of women and which interests are represented. The main findings from the research indicate that men MPs tend to advocate for the interests of women more than women MPs. However, women are more likely to speak on the topic when participating in the debates. Furthermore, it can be observed that the traditional interests of women dominate the discourse on the substantive representation of women, mainly revolving around the category of family and childcare.

The sixth and last article of this thematic issue is on Bosnia and Herzegovina. Zlatiborka Popov Momčinović looks into the role of women activists and parliamentarians as important actors. The analysis examines the claims and sites of representation, how various initiatives are undertaken, and with what success. In her analysis, Popov Momčinović sheds light on violence against women, political representation, women's social rights, mainly related to motherhood, and the status of marginalized groups and peacebuilding, demonstrating success but also remaining barriers.

These six articles represent a symbolic intersection of women's political representation research in SEE and demonstrate a significant need for further work. Without aiming to offer a comprehensive list of open research questions, I will allow myself to propose some topics for consideration for further research. First, the articles in this thematic issue also confirm a necessity to address women's political representation from a broader viewpoint than just studying representation from a Western-established liberal democracy angle. Autocratic tendencies, anti-gender mobilization, consociationalism in some of the SEE countries (Gavrić 2023), the deadlock of European integration and reduced impact of integration conditionality, and post-socialist heritage are just some of the factors that need to be taken into account when applying existing research approaches. Second, women's representation research in SEE needs further work on descriptive representation, which needs to go beyond simple counting. Topics like intra-party democracy, gender quota design and effectiveness, women's representation on the regional and local level, and 'gender-sensitive parliaments' approaches are just some specific angles that can be taken. Third, we need more research work on the substantive representation of women, aiming not just to observe what men and women MPs do but to examine how gender equality interests are being transformed into policies and institutional actions. Additionally, it is crucial

to explore the roles played by women NGOs, international organizations, governmental institutional mechanisms for gender equality, and other stakeholders. Two ongoing GenPolSEE-related research projects, one led by Adriana Zaharijević and Roman Kuhar, on anti-gender mobilization in the post-Yugoslav space, and the second one, led by Lilijana Čičkarić, Marsela Dauti and Milica Antić-Gaber, on women's political representation in SEE, will hopefully fill some of those gaps and inspire further work, which in the long run will lead to more gender-responsive political science departments in the region.

Finally, allow me to express a few lines of gratitude. It makes me very proud that *this Genero* topic of the issue on "Political Representation of Women: Global Theory and Empirical Reality from South-East Europe" will be remembered as the first collaborative product of the GenPolSEE Network. Specifically, I remain deeply grateful to Katarina Lončarević, the editor-in-chief of *Genero* and member of GenPolSEE. This thematic issue would not have been possible without her guidance, patience, and support. I would also like to thank all our peer reviewers for their time, expertise, careful reading, insightful questions, and cogent recommendations. A symbolic thank you also goes to the Heinrich Böll Stiftung, its Global Unit for Feminism and Gender Democracy, but also to its offices in Belgrade, Sarajevo, and Tirana for their support to the GenPolSEE network, among others, enabling us to meet in person in November 2022. Finally, my work as the *Genero* guest editor for this thematic issue is part of my cumulative PhD studies at Leipzig University, Germany. I am grateful to my PhD mentor, Professor Solveig Richter, for her continuous support.

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