FIRST WOMEN IN PARLIAMENTS AND GOVERNMENTS IN CENTRAL EUROPE

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Abstract

The study focuses on the first women MPs and ministers in Central Europe. Before the First World War, the women's suffrage movement had also emerged here, but had not yet achieved any great success. The real turning point for women's representation came with the First World War. In 1918 and 1919, women throughout the region were granted the right to vote and to elect representatives at parliamentary level. In Austria, and in part of Czechoslovakia, it was mainly women from the Social Democratic movement who played a decisive role. In these two countries, the proportions were similar in the early years. Women elected to the first Polish parliament were more mixed. Most of them came from the Polish independence movement and generally had intellectual family backgrounds. By contrast, the majority of the Austrian Social Democrat women MPs were indeed from working-class backgrounds. In the conservative Hungary between the two world wars, there were also women members of parliament, but in very limited numbers. This was probably related to the particularities of the system and society of the time. Finally, the study also deals with women in government (ministers, state secretaries). Here again, it was mainly women from the left who played a pioneering role.

Keywords

constitution-making, electoral law, government, parliament, women suffrage

The end of the First World War was a key moment for the social and legal emancipation of women in Europe. The prolonged economic and social changes during the war, the mobilisation and then the awakening of women's labour force led to the extension of suffrage to women in many European countries. However, the fact that this process was not entirely self-evident is demonstrated by the example of the large states (above all France and Italy) which, despite these factors, only took this major step after the Second World War. In this respect, therefore, Central Europe was ahead of Western and Southern Europe. Yet the Nordic countries were the first to take action.

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A brief history and first results of the women's suffrage struggle

The idea of women having the right to vote was probably first mooted in the Anglo-Saxon world. It is well known that the whole of 19th century British history was dominated by the struggle for the extension of suffrage, which eventually led to the introduction of universal suffrage. However, this struggle initially focused only on equal opportunities for men to vote. In Britain, the struggle for women's suffrage officially began in 1865, when a committee was formed in Manchester to fight for it, which sought to achieve its aims through various petitions. As early as 1869, they succeeded in securing for tax-paying women at least the right to vote in local elections. But after that, progress slowed down, frustrating the movement and in some cases leading to militant actions. However, British women had not won the right to vote at parliamentary level before 1918. However, New Zealand women activists were more successful, winning the vote as early as 1893. Here, too, they fought mainly through petitions. In the first parliamentary elections in which women were allowed to vote, 84% of local women took up their right to do so. (Kurešová, 2022)
In the US, the idea of extending suffrage to women was first mooted in 1848 within the abolitionist movement to free black slaves. In the following decades, social organisations were formed to fight for this (Women's Suffrage, 2023). The state of Wyoming's accession to the US in 1890 was a major step forward, as its constitution already recognised women's suffrage. But the other states did not follow suit. It was not until 1918 that the law was extended, when 12 states recognised women's participation. At federal level, the 19th Amendment to the Constitution guaranteeing women's suffrage was adopted in 1920. (Kurešová, 2022)
The first country in Europe to introduce women's suffrage was Finland, an autonomous part of the Tsarist Russian Empire. It happened in the revolutionary year of 1906. In the following year's elections, women won a tenth of the seats. This was probably also linked to the mass participation of Finnish women in the general strike against Tsarism in 1905, which won them the recognition of Finnish men. In Norway, women were allowed to vote for the first time at the local level in 1910 and to participate in parliamentary elections in 1913. In Denmark and Iceland, women were granted the right to vote in parliament in 1915. In each case, the extension of the right was preceded by a decade-long struggle, supported by many local men. (Schmidt, 2022)

The situation in Central Europe

Before 1918, women did not have the right to vote in any Central European state or empire. However, the various women's rights and feminist movements tried to put the issue on the agenda here too. In the Austrian part of the dualist state, universal suffrage was introduced in 1907, but only for men. The law on the elections to the Imperial Council (Reichsrat or central parliament) in Vienna explicitly excluded participation in the elections for the women, but the law on the elections to the Czech Provincial Assembly (Landtag, Snem) was not explicitly formulated in this way. This was also used by the Czech opposition political forces in 1912. (Musilová, 2022)

In 1908, however, two Czech parties and a committee – after much persuasion from women's organisations – agreed to allow women to stand as candidates on their behalf, at least at the provincial level. The Social Democrats and the Czech State Law Party were the first to prove open. The third female candidate entered the fray on behalf of the Women's Electoral Commission. However, in 1908 neither attempt was successful. The turning point came only in 1912 in electoral district in Central Bohemia (Mladá Boleslav – Nymburk). Here the almost all Czech parties had agreed to support women candidates, in a traditionally oppositional and Czech patriotic constituency. (Holá, 2022)

The woman who won the first legislative mandate in Central Europe was partly able to get her candidacy thanks to a legal loophole. However, the elected deputy was unable to exercise her mandate because the King's representative in the Czech Kingdom, František Thun, did not issue her with the necessary certificate of election. (Musilová, 2022)

The Czech writer Božena Viková-Kunětická, born Novotná (1862–1934), who was a member of the nationalist and liberal Young Czech Party (officially the National Liberal Party), won a seat in the 1912 Czech Provincial Assembly elections, but the then Czech regional governor apponted by ruler refused to grant her permission to take her seat, and she was unable to exercise her rights as a member of parliament. This loophole was due to the fact that the Czech Provincial Assembly Election Regulations of 1861 did not explicitly prohibit women from standing. Indeed, at the time of its adoption, probably no one had even considered such a bold possibility. (Holá, 2022; Musilová, 2022)

Božena Viková-Kunětická was an unusual and rather divisive personality. She was relatively popular as a writer, but her romantic and then slightly realistic prose was not particularly original. Her middle name was her writer (pen) name. Her husband was a civil servant and she herself was originally a teacher. She was not really a feminist and women's rights activist, but instead developed her own set of values. In her view, there was no separate women's issue, only the right to life and the right to one's own feelings. True freedom could only be acquired through motherhood, which she understood not only as a right but also as an obligation to the nation. She also held rather nationalist and the anti-clerical views of the Young Czechs were close to her. Her anti-Germanism was complemented by strong anti-Semitism. This combination was not rare among the radical nationalist Czech politicians before 1918. (Holá, 2022)

In general, she was reserved towards the more open and realistic views of the founding head of state, President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk. Nevertheless, she participated in the work of the Provisional Revolutionary National Assembly which adopted the 1920 Czechoslovak Constitution. She then tried twice (1920, 1925) to obtain a senatorial mandate, but she was unsuccessful. She was only able to hold this honourable post for a month, when she replaced a departing senator as deputy, but only for a month. (Holá, 2022)

Paralelly with Czech lands, in 1908 the Austrian Galicia was the first place inside the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy where a woman was nominated as a candidate for the provincial elections for the Chamber of Deputies. In this province, women had already had the right to vote in local elections in accordance with the wealth census since 1868 (Fedorowicz, 2014). The situation at provincial level in 1908 was somewhat similar to that in the nearby Czech Kingdom in 1912. The representatives of the women's rights movement in Lviv exploited a loophole in electoral law, because the provincial electoral legislation of the 1860s did not explicitly exclude women from the electoral process.

Their candidate was the famous painter and feminist activist Maria Dulębianka (1858–1919), who was active not only in Polish territory but also in the international women's rights movement. She came from a family of renowned and wealthy artists and intellectuals. She studied abroad and became very close to the famous Polish poet Maria Konopnicka (1842–1910), who was also active in the women's rights movement (Maria Konopnicka, 2023). Dulębianka eventually received 511 votes, which were later challenged and annulled. Some sections of the contemporary press considered the whole action as a provocation. The painter remained active in public life, helping the city's leaders in the First World War and then in the social field. Like many other women's rights activists, she was active in the Red Cross Movement, and in 1919 she accompanied its representatives to the sites of the Polish-Ukrainian conflict to monitor the treatment of interned Poles by the Ukrainians. In the meantime, she contracted typhus and died at the end of the year. Her memory is still preserved in Lviv and she received several high state honours in Poland between the two world wars. (Dzimira-Zarzycka, 2023)

In Hungary, the partial emancipation of women has been slow to take off (Szabó, 2021). The first to open up some space for women, who were among the largest taxpayers in the area, was the 1886 Act XXII on Municipalities, which allowed them to send their male proxy to the representative body. However, the Parliamentary Elections Acts (1874, 1913, 1918) did not grant women the right to vote. It was first recognised only in the 1918 Electoral People's Act after the civic democratic revolution. The right to vote in the National Assembly was granted to all literate persons aged 24 or over, provided they had been Hungarian citizens for at least six years. Women could also exercise directly the right to vote in municipal and local elections. In practice, however, the first time that women were allowed to vote en masse was during the Soviet Republic, namely in the workers' and soldiers' council elections held in April 1919. (Szapor, 2007)

Although the regulations of the bourgeois democratic period, together with the provisions of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, were repealed in the autumn of 1919 by the counter-revolutionary period, women were not completely disenfranchised. The electoral decree of the István Friedrich civic government set the age of women's suffrage at 24, like that of men, but women were also required to be able to read and write (Szapor, 2007). In the Miklós Horthy conservative era, the regulations were tightened considerably, as the new provisions read as follows (Article 2 of the Act of 1925 on the election of Members of Parliament). Women graduates of universities and colleges were granted the right to vote without these restrictions. Women with their own property or earnings also enjoyed various facilities, as did mothers with several children. From 1926 onwards, women could also become members of the Upper House under certain conditions. (Gáspár, 2007)

The first Central European women MPs after the First World War

The social composition of the first Central European parlamentarian women is an interesting picture. Božena Viková-Kunětická was not the only woman member of the Provisional Czechoslovak Revolutionary National Assembly, which was formed at the end of 1918. Until August 1919, it included Alice Masaryková (1879–1966), one of the daughters of the founder of the Czechoslovak state, President Masaryk. She helped her father during

the First World War and was imprisoned in Austria for her efforts. In fact, almost all the main Czech political parties delegated a woman to this constitutional body, which was intended to be temporary but eventually became the main constitutional organ.

The Provisional or Revolutionary National Assembly was formed from the National Committee that led the turnaround of 28 October 1918, which resulted in the declaration and establishment of the first Czechoslovak Republic in the evening. The original composition of the National Committee was based on the results of the last Austrian Imperial Council elections in the Czech lands. In other words, the Czech political parties first divided the seats on the committee among themselves according to the key based on the results of that election, and then delegated their trusted politicians to the committee. Subsequent members were co-opted into the body, which then acquired a relatively representative composition, but not one legitimised by the elections. There were also German parties in Bohemia and Moravia, and Hungarian political groups in Slovakia, but they had, of course, rejected the birth of the new Czechoslovak state and therefore did not participate in the work of the National Committee, to which they were not invited by the Czechoslovaks. For this reason, the later Provisional National Assembly also drafted the constitution without the participation of Hungarian and German minority representatives. This fact resulted in an important democratic and legitimacy deficit in the democratic constitution from 1920. (Petráš, 2009)

The Czech and Slovak politicians remained in this provisional form until the adoption of the new constitution and the first free elections. As a result, the assembly thus created lasted for almost a year and a half, and was only replaced in 1920 by a duly elected bicameral National Assembly.

The writer Viková-Kunětická was nominated to the National Committee by the right-wing Czech National Democrats. This was a small but influential party with a long history, which has grown out of the liberal-nationalist Young Czech Party. Alice Masaryková did not have such a strong party background, nor did her father, who at the time represented only a small Czech Realist Party in the Imperial Council in Vienna. (Holá, 2022)

Perhaps for this reason, or perhaps out of necessity, she took a seat in the Slovak Club, which brought together Slovak representatives regardless of party affiliation, even though she had no particular Slovak connections apart from her paternal grandfather's origins. (On her mother's side, she was of American descent.). She was not the only politician of Czech origin in the Slovak Club. Alice Masaryková later joined the Czechoslovak Social Democratic Party, but did not want to stay in party politics in the long term. After Masaryk resigned her seat was taken by the first Slovak woman in parliament, Irena Kaňová (1893–1963), who represented the Czechoslovak Social Democratic Workers' Party. Kaňová was the daughter of a shoemaker and was one of the youngest members of parliament. She later joined the Communist Party, organized strikes and was a member of the Slovak Anti-Fascist Resistance during World War II. (Musilová, 2022)

After her father was elected head of state, Alice Masaryková increasingly saw herself as the 'first lady' instead of her ailing and then deceased mother. She never started a family of her own. She was also active in the organisation and leadership of the Czechoslovak Red Cross and was involved in the founding of other social organisations. The emancipation of women was always important to her. Her informal political influence was not entirely

insignificant, as she was the one who was constantly at the side of the father of the ageing head of state. (Haag, 2024)

Between 1918 and 1920, four women MPs were elected for the two major parties that played a decisive role in the constitution-making. Ludmila Zatloukalová-Coufalová (1886–1960) and Anna Chlebounová, née Burešová (1875–1946) represented the Republican Agrarian Party, which later participated in the every interwar Czechoslovak government.

Anna Chlebounová, née Burešová was more active and therefore more important in the Czech politics. Because of her folksy dress and conscious image-building, she would eventually go down in history as the first Member of Czechoslovak Parliament to wear a headscarf. She came from a peasant family that did not care for her education, although it was precisely what she wanted. Fortunately for her, her husband, who was for a time the village mayor, supported her public ambitions and allowed her to develop. She was also active in the fields of publicist and short fiction. After the turnaround, she was the first woman to speak at the Congress of the Agrarian Party. She was not only delegated to the Provisional National Assembly in 1918, but also won seats in 1920 and 1925. After 1929 she was the only female senator in Czechoslovakia. She was not only active on social issues, but also took part in the preparation of the land reform. As a village woman, she repeatedly criticised the Catholic People's Party and the Catholic Church itself. Both agrarian women MPs also tried to set up a separate women's club in the House of Representatives, but other women politicians disagreed with this plan, arguing that women should not have been separated from men from the start. (Kačmarčík, 2022)

The Social Democrats have also nominated two women to the Provisional National Assembly. Little is known about Františka Kolaříková (1868–?) (Národní shromáždění československé 1918–1920, 2024). But not so about Božena Ecksteinová-Hniličková (1871–1930), who joined the Social Democratic Workers' Party as a printing worker as early as 1900, where she proved to be a good organiser and an even better agitator. During the First World War she was already working for the party's economic and supply organisations. After the dissolution of the Provisional National Assembly, she remained active in politics, representing her party as a senator from 1920 to 1929. Afterwards, however, she was forced to retire from politics because of a serious illness and died soon after. In 1920, however, she still played an important role in the internal split within the Social Democratic Party, when the left wing of the party formed a Communist Party. She remained an old social democrat and successfully tried to save and rebuild the party's press and its subscribers and printing press. (Encyklopedie ČSSD, 2013)

Very interesting personalities were delegated to the Provisional National Assembly by the Czechoslovak National Socialists. The socialists with a true nationalist (but not Nazi) sentiment formed the Czech Social Party between 1918 and 1920. One of their most active representatives was Františka Zeminová (1882–1962), who held a seat in parliament until 1948, with an interruption during the Second World War. She was a record holder among women politicians of the time. She was already active in the trade union and in feminist movements at the turn of the century. She organised mainly among working women. For a long time, she did not have the legitimacy of membership of the National Socialist Party, but she was known to be close to this grouping. In 1901, she helped found the Provincial Association of Working Women and was one of its trustees at the age

of 19 years. In 1905, together with another famous Czech women's rights activist, Ferdinanda Plamínková, she founded the Women's Suffrage Committee. In 1908 she also helped found an important women's newspaper. Otherwise, in her civilian life, she was an accountant for a publishing house. In 1918, she was supported mainly by Václav Klofáč, an important Czech politician and later Foreign Minister of Czechoslovakia, who supported her election to the National Assembly. After 1920, she won a seat in her own right, as an important politician in her party. In Czechoslovakia between the two world wars, she was the only woman to hold the position of vice-president of a party. She was one of the most radical and progressive of all women politicians. Little is known about her activities during the Second World War, but she eventually avoided arrest. After the end of the war, she became active again and opposed the Communist Party's takeover. In 1950, when she was 68 years old, she was put on trial and sentenced to 20 years imprisonment in the trial of her party colleague Milada Horáková, who was later executed. In the jail cellar, she behaved courageously and disobediently, organised a hunger strike and was also put in solitary confinement. She was released by presidential amnesty only in 1960 and died two years later. (Hejzlarová, 2022)

Luisa Landová-Štychová, née Vorlíčková (1885–1969), a member of the National Constituent Assembly for the Czech Social Party, also had an interesting and eventful career. Born into a family that ran a grocery store, she later worked as a correspondent in a jewellery shop in Vienna. It was there that she met her husband, Jaroslav Štych (1881–1941), with whom she joined the anarchist movement and later became a member of the Anarcho-Communist Association. They were also interested in astronomy and later founded the still popular observatory on Petřín Hill in Prague. Before the First World War she held anti-militarist and pacifist views and was active in the anarcho-feminist movement. She was a keen lecturer on marriage, family and free love. Although she lived in a family with children, she saw the family as a pillar of 'capitalism, militarism and clericalism' for a time. In 1913, she and her husband founded the atheist Socialist Monists' Association, which worked closely with social democrats. Later they were active in the Socialist Abstainers' Association. It was their interest in astronomy, however, that was most stable. However, they failed to found their own Czech anarcho-communist party and lived under police surveillance during the years of the First World War. The Czech anarchists merged with the radical national socialists at the end of the war, and Luisa Landová-Štychová was elected to the Provisional National Assembly as one of the women representatives of the Czech Social Party. In 1920, she was also elected to the now duly elected National Assembly, where she sought reform of family law and social dignity for women. She was also concerned about the institution of civil marriage and divorce. She also campaigned for the repeal of the ban on abortion, which angered conservative circles. In 1923, after voting against a law to protect the republic, which was a serious restriction on rights, she was expelled from the Czechoslovak Socialist Party. She tried for a while to found her own independent party, but without success, and finally joined the Czechoslovak Communist Party in 1925, together with other independent left-wing members. She remained a member of this party until her death. However, she remained a member of parliament until 1929. The Church was a favourite target of her speeches. Several attempts were made to strip her of her immunity, but they never succeeded. After 1945, she was no longer very active politically

and was mainly concerned with the promotion of Marxist science and astronomy, which had always been close to her heart. She saw in this science, moreover, a possible means of fighting the Vatican. She died in 1969 in her country house. (Baštanová, 2022)

In the first, revolutionary parliament (1918–1920), the women deputies dealt with various issues. Public opinion and politics, as it were, directed them towards issues of motherhood, social problems and the fight against alcoholism. They have not yet been given a place in the Constitutional Committee pf Parliament. In the first regular parliamentary elections in Czechoslovakia in 1920, ten women were elected to parliament. The overwhelming majority of them belonged to the various socialist parties. Although they were often active in politics, they had not yet reached the leading positions in the Chamber. In the leadership of the factions of some of the socialist parties the situation was somewhat better. (Musilová, 2022)

The fate, social background and background of Austrian women entering politics after the First World War was very similar to that of their Czechoslovak counterparts. Their proportion was also similar, i.e. they never exceeded 5 % of the 170 members of the Austrian Constituent Assembly, which met in the early spring of 1919. Perhaps the only peculiarity to be mentioned is that many of them were active in politics in the Vienna City Council before their election. Meanwhile, several of them (three of them) came from the Czech, Moravian and Silesian regions of the disintegrated Habsburg Empire. Most of them, however, came from Vienna.

The dominant Social Democrats were represented by Anna Boschek (1874–1857), Emmy Freundlich (1878–1948), Adelheid Popp (1868–1939), Gabriele Proft (1879–1971), Amalie Seidel (1876–1952), Therese Schlesinger (1863–1938) and Maria Tusch (1868–1939). The vast majority of them came from working-class and artisanal families, only the eldest Schlesinger (née Eckstein) had bourgeois ties. True, her brother Gustav Eckstein was among the leading theorists of Austro-Marxism. At first, liberal ideas were not far from her mind. But she was most interested in women's rights and women's issues in general. She remained a member of the Austrian legislature after the constitution was adopted. In the 1930s she was forced to retire, and her Jewish background forced her to emigrate in 1938 to France, where she died the day before her 77th birthday. (Parlamentsdirektion, 2019)

Emmy Freundlich (1878–1948) was born into a family of liberal politicians who were also mayors of her hometown Ústí nad Labem. She came into contact with the labour movement through her love affair with the socialist journalist Leo Freundlich, whom her family did not like. She also began to publish in the party press, and later became active in various child welfare and women's associations. After the First World War, she was elected to the Vienna City Council (like her fellow party members and MPs Anna Boschek and Adelheid Popp). She remained a member of parliament until the authoritarian turn of 1934. For a time she was under police surveillance and eventually emigrated to London to escape the Nazis. There she was active in Austrian émigré organisations. The Second World War saw her become a staff member of the newly established Economic and Social Council of the UN, which also meant she was posted to New York. As a result, she died in the USA. (Parlamentsdirektion, 2019)

Anna Boschek (1874–1957) was born into a working-class family in Vienna and began her career as a factory worker, before joining the Austrian Social Democratic Workers' Party,

where she was one of the first women to become a member of the leadership. Immediately after the First World War, she was elected to the Vienna City Council and from there to the Constituent Assembly in early 1919. After 1945 she ceased to hold public office, but remained active in the party. (Parlamentsdirektion, 2019)

Adelheid Popp (1869–1939) had a similar background and an almost identical career. She came into contact with the social democratic workers' movement through her sister, and later became active in training associations for women workers and edited a newspaper for them. Her husband was also one of the leading activists of the Social Democratic Party, and at one time its leader in Lower Austria. She also became a member of the Vienna City Council and later of the National Assembly and National Council, where she remained until 1934. After that she lived in retirement and died before the Second World War. (Parlamentsdirektion, 2019)

Amalie Seidel (1876–1952) came from a family of artisans and was herself a servant for a time. She later worked in a textile factory and took part in strikes, and was one of the first women to organise a workers' strike. In time she became one of the leaders of the women's organisation of the Social Democrats. From 1919 to 1923, she sat on the Vienna Municipal Council and, from March 1919, on the Constituent Assembly. She then became a member of the National Council until 1934. She was mainly concerned with youth and health issues. After 1934, she apparently retired from politics, but illegal meetings of women's movements took place in her apartment. Her second husband committed suicide during the Nazi period, and she herself was briefly arrested after the assassination attempt on Hitler. After the war, she stopped being political. (Parlamentsdirektion, 2019)

Maria Tusch (1868–1939), from a family of servants in rural Carinthia, was also a factory worker for a time. She also joined the Social Democratic Party, where she subsequently held various provincial positions in Carinthia. She was elected to the Constituent National Assembly as a candidate of her party, and was a member of the National Council until 1934. (Parlamentsdirektion, 2019)

Born in Opava in Silesia, Gabriele Proft (1879–1971) was one of the most left-wing politicians of Austrian social democracy. During the First World War, she was also in contact with the German and Russian radical left. She also sat in the Austrian legislature from 1919 until 1934. She was later involved in the resistance, especially during the Nazi regime. For this she was interned and for a time imprisoned. She remained active after 1945 and again sat on the reconstituted National Council from 1945 to 1953. (Parlamentsdirektion, 2019)

The other main Austrian parties also had women representatives in the Constituent Assembly, but their numbers were far below those of the Social Democrats. Among them, however, was the first woman to head a parliamentary chamber (Federal Council). Olga Rudel-Zeynek (1871–1948) was born into a family of strongly Catholic clerks in Olomouc in Moravia. After graduating from civil school, she also completed the school of nursing. Her father was later knighted and became Olga von Zeynek. Her husband was a military officer. As a result, they lived in different cities of the Monarchy. After the First World War she became active in Catholic women's organisations. In 1919 she took part in the constitutional election campaign for the National Assembly, but did not win a seat. In May 1919, however, she was elected as a member of the provincial assembly of Styria. In 1920 she was elected to the National Council, the lower house of parliament, where

she was the only bourgeois (Christian Socialist) female member between 1923 and 1927. In 1927 she was no longer a candidate, but Styria delegated her to the Federal Council. She remained there until 1934 and twice held the position of Speaker (1927–1928 and 1930). In the authoritarian regime she was only active on the charitable side, and retired from major politics. (Parlamentsdirektion, 2019)

The only Christian Socialist member of the Constituent Assembly in 1919 was Hildegard Burjan (1883–1933), who came from a liberal family living on the German-Polish ethnic border. Her Catholic faith was strengthened by a serious illness, and she was very active in charitable work. In 1919 she founded the charitable organisation Caritas Socialis, which is still active today. It was then that she came to the attention of the Christian Socialist Party leadership, which put her on the list of candidates for the Constituent Assembly. In 1919, she won a seat, but she did not intend to stay in parliament for long. In 1920, she retired from high politics. Her short time in parliament was not without success, however, and she initiated a series of measures that were important for working and single women. To this day, she is the only member of the Austrian parliament to have been beatified by the Catholic Church in 2011. (Parlamentsdirektion, 2019)

Lotte Furreg (1873–1961), born Charlotte Mestien to a Protestant family in Moravia, was in August 1919 elected to the Austrian Constituent Assembly in the name of the German nationalist movement. Charlotte Mestien spent there only a relatively short period. She then became a member of the first National Council. She was active in the leading organs of her party until 1925, after which she left it, but remained active in the German nationalist press as a journalist. The organisations of which she was a member later welcomed Austria's accession to Nazi Germany, but she herself was by then retired and passive in view of her age. She died in a Vienna nursing home at an advanced age. (Parlamentsdirektion, 2019)

The Federal Council, established under the new constitution in 1920, had a total of three women members. Born in Leipzig, Marie Bock (1881–1959) was a Social Democrat (Ariadne, 2019). Princess Franziska von Starhemberg (1875–1943), a Catholic aristocrat, was born into a count's family. Her maiden name being Franziska von Larisch-Mönnich. She sat in parliament for more than ten years, representing the Christian Socialist Party. She remained active in the women's branch of the Patriotic Front after the 1934 events, but after the Nazis came to power she was retired (Ariadne, 2019). Berta Pichl (1880–1966), who was originally a teacher, represented the Christian Social Party in the Federal Council until 1934. (Ariadne, 2019)

Hella Postranecky-Altmann (1903–1995) was the youngest among the first Austrian women MPs. She was also always active in the women's movement. Originally a social democrat, she later became a communist. She was also active illegally under Nazism. She left the Communist Party in 1968 in protest against the Warsaw Pact's invasion of Czechoslovakia. (Ariadne, 2019)

The lives and political careers of the women members of the Polish Constituent Sejm (1919–1922) were not dissimilar to those of their Czechoslovak and Austrian counterparts. Most of them had come from the independence and social movements before the First World War. Their composition was characterised by intensive political pluralism. Almost all of them came from middle-class or intellectual families. Many of them had higher education and even academic degrees. Their candidacy was made possible by the electoral decree

issued by the provisional head of state, General Józef Piłsudski, on 28 November 1918. It extended active and passive democratic suffrage to women.

Before the war, Polish women from different regions were not in the same position. Their legal position was clearly the worst in the Russian Empire, paradoxically 'thanks' to the provisions of the Code Napoleon. The famous French Code Civil, which remained in force in the so-called Congress Poland (Vienna) after the expulsion of the French soldiers, was rather conservative in its treatment of women. No wonder that the Polish women's movements always (i.e. before and after the First World War) vehemently attacked this legal norm as a seriously discriminatory and undignified law. The problem was that, for many Polish male patriots in Russia, this code represented a symbol of the Polish territories' separateness. Women, however, were not impressed, and at a congress of the Women's Equality League in 1908, they publicly burned a copy of it (Fedorowicz, 2014). Polish women living in the Second German Reich and in Austrian Galicia were better off, although they were not fully equal to men.

In 1919, the unicameral Constituent Sejm had a total of eight women MPs. The youngest was 33, the oldest was 52 years old. Almost all the parties had women candidates on their lists, but not all of them were elected. The fact that in previous decades, and particularly during the years of the First World War, Polish women had played an important role in the independence movement, especially in its educational and welfare components, helped to reinforce the emancipation trend. Despite this, their representation in the legislature was not high, as the Sejm had 442 members after its successive enlargements.

The first woman to enter the Polish parliament was the youngest. Maria Moczydłowska (1886–1969) was elected to the legislature as a member of the National People's Union. This party was supported by the Catholic clergy. She sought to ensure that women politicians were cross-party politicians. In 1920, she introduced an act project for a total ban on alcohol (prohibition), which failed to pass for lack of only one vote. Otherwise, prohibitionism was a feature of many of her women colleagues. (Teler, 2019)

Gabriela Balicka (1867–1962) remained in the legislature for the longest time, serving there for 16 years. Born into a noble family, she obtained a doctorate in natural sciences in Geneva and worked as a researcher in Munich. She later taught in Warsaw. Her husband was a writer and politician. In the Sejm, she belonged to one of the popular nationalist groups.

The only declarated representative of the Polish socialist movement in the first Sejm was Zofia Moraczewska (1873–1958), the wife of former socialist Prime Minister Jędrzej Moraczewski. Before her political career, she worked as teacher. During the First World War she was president of the Galician and Silesian Women's League. She campaigned a lot against discrimination against women in the civil service and challenged the rules of the citizenship law which discriminated against women. She voted against her party's position in the 1921 constitution, after which she suspended her political activities for a time. Between 1928 and 1933 she worked in a women's organisation which supported the authoritarian regime of Józef Piłsudski, who had carried out the 1926 coup d'état. (Kruszyńska, 2019)

The opposite attitude was shown by Irena Kosmowska (1879–1945), who also belonged to the left-wing of the parliamentary People's Party, but who will be discussed later as the first

woman member of the government in the Central European region. Kosmowska's left-wing People's Party colleague was Jadwiga Dziubińska (1874–1937), who studied biology, history, literature and pedagogy and later ran a school for village youth. She also came from an intellectual family. During the First World War she made great efforts to help imprisoned Poles in Russia, and after the war she concentrated on repatriation issues. She did not stay in politics permanently, however, but returned to her cultural and educational activities. (Teler, 2019)

Only Zofia Sokolnicka (1878–1927) represented the National Democratic Party, the leading force of the Polish bourgeois and nationalist right in the legislature. She had joined the Polish National League in Russia as early as 1903 and was particularly concerned with the education of Polish youth. She was a delegate to the Council of State Defence in Warsaw during the Polish-Soviet War and later supported the referendum in Upper Silesia. She rejected the coup d'état of Piłsudski. (Teler, 2019)

The Polish Workers' Party, which represented the non-Marxist working class with nationalist and solidarist resentiment, was represented by two women deputies. Anna Piasecka (1882–1980), who never once spoke in the Sejm, came from a noble family. She later transferred to the centrist People's Party, but did not remain in the legislature for long. Franciszka Wilczowiakowa (1880–1963) from Western Polish terrirories was also involved in the work of the Constitutional Affairs Committee. In 1922 she was not re-elected and retired from politics (Teler, 2019). By then, her party had already been torn apart by serious internal divisions between the left-wing and the nationalists. Later, the party was also divided by its attitude to the 1926 coup d'état. This slowly set it on the bumpy road to irrelevance.

Among the women who sat in the Constituent Sejm, it is difficult to determine which ideological party family was in the majority. Perhaps the majority were those belonging to the national right and the left of the People's Party, representing the Polish peasant and agrarian movement. Only one woman represented the socialist camp. Most of them were educated, some of them came from well-off intellectual and middle-class families, and before the World War they had already been active in various segments of the Polish national movement. Among their popular parliamentary issues were the fight against discrimination and alcoholism. However, the big political issues (left-right opposition, the extent of nationalism, the 1926 events) divided them, as they did their male colleagues.

Women's entry into parliamentary politics was most difficult in Hungary, probably due to the strong conservative and partly anti-democratic public mood after the colaps of 1919 revolutions. Between 1920 and 1944, only five women sat in the Hungarian parliament for longer or shorter periods, which is well below the proportions in other countries, but women's political emancipation eventually made its way here too. (Palasik, 2007)

The one-chamber National Assembly elected in early 1920, which also served as the constitutional body, already had a woman member (Szabó, 2021). It was this body that adopted the Act I of 1920 on the Provisional Head of Hungarian State, which went far beyond the settlement of the position of Head of State.

Born in Košice, Margit Slachta (1884–1974) was not elected to the legislature during the general elections in regular time, but in the additional elections held in Budapest on 25–26 March 1920. The then 36-year-old politician came from the Christian feminist movement. Slachta, who was socially very sensitive, was no longer completely unknown

in Hungarian public life. In revolutionary 1918, she joined the Christian Socialist People's Party and led its women's branch, the Christian Women's Camp. She herself was a missionary sister and a member of the Social Missionary Society, a church organisation that stood between secular and monastic life. In 1920, she was elected to the legislature as a member of the Christian National Association. Slachta was, however, a member of parliament for only two years before the Second World War. In 1922, she was unable to retain her seat because she was refused permission by the head of the Missionary Society to stand again. Until then, however, she had been very active in parliament. During her term of office she made 28 speeches on 67 subjects (Palasik, 2007). (Sometimes she also supported the problematic projects, e.g. in the sphere of penal law.). For the first time she was the only one woman in the 164-member body, which later grew to 219. Her position was therefore not easy and she had little to rely on. But Slachta was never afraid to stand up for a cause on her own. A politician who had worked to save the Jews during the Second World War, she was re-elected to the National Assembly in 1945. In early 1946 she was the only one who dared to defend the institution of the legitim monarchy. During the communist dictatorship, she was forced to emigrate and eventually died abroad (in the USA). In 1969, however, he was awarded the World's Truth Medal in Jerusalem. (M. Balázs, 2017)

The second woman member of Hungarian parliament was the social democrat Anna Kéthly (1889–1976), who was elected to the legislature in the 1922 ordinary elections (Palasik, 2007). She went on to successfully contest several elections and, after a brief interruption during the Hungarian Fascist regime, served as a Member of Parliament until the full communist takeover and the merger of the Communists and Social Democrats. Her years in parliament thus spanned the period 1922–1948, during ten of which she was the only woman member of the 245-seat National Assembly. However, her future political prospects were sealed by her opposition to the merger of the two left-wing parties, for which she was imprisoned in the 1950s. After 1956, she preferred to emigrate from the country. Both Hungarian MPs were characterised by their courageous stand on important issues and their courageous politics. The other women to the Hungarian Parliament became only later and their role was very limited. (Magyar Életrajzi Lexikon: Kéthly Anna, 2024)

In addition to Slachta and Kethly, Mária Fülöpné Orosdy (née Mária Herzog) (1871–1957) (OSZK, 2022), Lilla Melczer (1890–1965) (Magyar Nemzeti Névtér, 2024) and finally Ákosné Toperczer (née Róza Hagara) (1881–?) (Magyar Katolikus Lexikon: Róza Hagara, 2024) spent more or less longer periods in the Hungarian legislature between the two world wars. They all stood for the Christian Nationalist parties, but Mrs Fülöp Orosdy, for example, defeated the official government candidate. Most of them had influential husbands or were wealthy widows. For three terms, however, only Lilla Melczer was an MP.

The first women in Central European governments

Although the first female MPs have already appeared in parliaments, they have found it harder to get into government. Perhaps the world's first woman minister was Alexandra Kollontaj (neé Domontovich) (1872–1952), who headed the Ministry of People's Welfare in the Vladimir Lenin leaded Council of People's Commissars after the Bolshevik Revolution. Although she held her post in Soviet Russia, Kollontaj also had East-Central European roots.

Her father was a Tsarist general of Ukrainian origin and her mother was from Finland. Interestingly, Kollontaj became world famous not because of this assignment, but because she was the first properly appointed and accredited female diplomatic head of mission in world history. (Magyar, 1989)

Irena Kosmowska (1879–1945) was the first Polish woman to hold a government post in Central Europe. A young activist of middle-class and intellectual origins, she initially studied history and literature at the University of Lviv and then sought to organise schools and courses for young and poor peasant girls. She also published extensively in left-wing and peasant newspapers. During the First World War she was imprisoned in a Russian prison, but her family managed to get her out. In 1918 she joined the Polish People's Party, which defended peasant interests. That November, she became deputy head of government for social security and welfare in Ignacy Daszyński's left-wing independence government, which then recognised Józef Piłsudski's leadership. Between 1919 and 1930, she was a member of Sejm and she was active in the work of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. In 1930, she was again imprisoned for her criticism of Piłsudski, who had carried out a coup d'état. She was involved in various human and civil rights initiatives and later in the organisation of Red Aid actions in Poland. During the Second World War, she was actively involved in the patriotic resistance, for which she was arrested by the Gestapo. (Michalska, 1988)

In other Central European countries, women have not yet gained such positions in government. True, in Poland it was only a short period, because no other women followed Kosmowska. Even in Czechoslovakia, the most modern state in the region, this only happened in the years after the Second World War. Ludmila Jankovcová née Stračovská (1897–1990) was originally a member of the Social Democratic Party, but after the 1948 unification she became a member of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. After graduating from a commercial college and obtaining a degree in engineering, she worked as a secondary school teacher. During the years of Second World War, she together with her husband were involved in the anti-German resistance, for which her husband was executed. Her wife was elected to the Czechoslovak Constituent Assembly in 1946 and sat in the Czechoslovak legislature until 1963. In 1947, she became the first woman to hold the post of Minister of Industry. From 1948 to 1954, she was head of the Ministry of Food, and from 1954 to 1963 she was Deputy Prime Minister. In 1968, she also supported reforms and opposed the entry of Warsaw Pact troops, for which she was expelled from the Communist Party. She was one of the original signatories of the Charta '77. (Vláda ČR, 2024)

The first female minister in Hungary also came from the left. Anna Ratkó (after her husband Károlyné Bíró) (1903–1981) was born into a working-class family with many children, and later became a machine and textile worker. She was actively involved in trade union life and became a member of the Communist Party of Hungary in 1927. From 1942 she joined illegal communist actions. From 1945 onwards, she became openly political in the MKP. In April 1945 she was elected to the Provisional National Assembly by delegation. In 1948 she became Minister of National Welfare and then, through reorganization, Minister of Health. She became particularly famous for the strict birth control law that bears her name. The law banned abortion. At the same time, a child tax was introduced. Her ministerial career lasted until 1953. She remained a member of the Communist Party leadership for a while, and later served as secretary of the National Council of Trade Unions and President of the Union of Textile Workers. (Magyar Életrajzi Lexikon: Anna Ratkó, 2024)

The first female member of the Austrian government also came from the radical left. However, the communist Hella Postranecky (1903–1995) was only deputy state secretary for welfare in Karl Renner's provisional coalition government in 1945. She had originally started her political career in the Social Democratic Party and only joined the Communists during the Second World War. She later held various party posts, but resigned in 1968 in protest against the Soviet crushing of the Prague Spring. (Gadzinski a Indjein, 2015)
But it was a long wait for another Austrian woman in government. Grete Rehor (1910–1987) was born into a family of nurses and clerks. For a time she worked as a textile worker and she did not become active in the Social Democrats, but in the Christian women's movement. She later became a member of the Austrian People's Party, and through this she was given the social program in 1966, becoming Austria's first federal minister until 1970. (Parlamentsdirektion, 2019)
The second Austrian minister, however, entered the government as a Social Democrat candidate, albeit much later. Franziska Fast (1925–2003) first represented her party in Vienna's municipal bodies and then in 1983 was given the social portfolio in one of the governments of Social Democrat Chancellor Bruno Kreiski.

Summary

Not surprisingly, the vast majority of the first female professional politicians and MPs in Central Europe were strong personalities. This was also related to the fact that pioneers usually have to fight very hard for their success, which usually makes them tough. However, it was also the backbone they had, which often acted as a support throughout their careers. Before the First World War, the various women's rights and peace movements often complemented each other. These were often dominated by educated middle-class women with a strong intellectual background. In the years before the war, however, it was the social democratic or socialist movement that had already allowed women to assert themselves more seriously (at least in comparison with the others). This is not to say that other ideological and political movements had not tried to do so, but the proportions that the socialist movement, which was open to modernity, had been able to achieve were not yet very far behind other groups. Their ideological limitations, their organisational weakness or even their small size may have played a role in this. However, the emancipatory attitude of the social democratic movement should not be underestimated. In many ways, it was the party that pioneered modernity at the time.
At the same time, the other major political forces of the time should not be completely underestimated. This applies in particular to the mass organisations representing Christian social ideology, which, despite their conservatism in values, also recognised the importance of the general women's question and the emancipation movement. It is true that here they have partly helped themselves, because they have instinctively but correctly recognised the potential of the new women voters. These groups were also traditionally strong in the charitable and philanthropic fields. In their case, it was often the women activists in charitable organisations who represented the base which they were able to mobilise in the early 1920s in the field of big politics.

There were also quite similarities between most Central European countries in terms of the proportion of women MEPs. In the early 1920s, perhaps only Hungary, led by Admiral Miklós Horthy, stood out, where a very conservative, nationalist and in many respects restorationist regime was being installed. But even this regime could not completely ignore the issue of women's emancipation and, in a limited number of women, it was able to produce its first female representative, Margit Slachta.

Among the other countries, the most striking similarity is between Austria and Czechoslovakia, at least in terms of the significant predominance of left-wing women and the social (essentially working-class and other plebeian) background of a significant proportion of them. The Polish case is somewhat more complicated, because here the socialist predominance was not so marked. Women MPs with left-wing sentiments were often elected under the colours of the left-wing People's Party. But the balance between the ideological camps was perhaps most striking here. This was not, however, a triumph of modernity, but rather a reflection of the complexity of Polish development, the complex social nature of Polish society and its often backwardness. Even if it was the first Polish women MPs who were among the most qualified women politicians in the region. But this is not surprising, since most of them came from middle-class or even higher social groups. Although they were relatively homogeneous socially, the same cannot be said of them ideologically. The years after the First World War, however, did mark a breakthrough in the political emancipation of women and in the general social and political status of women. In this process, women did not wait for male politicians, but took an active part in liberating themselves. At that time, several women politicians entered politics who went on to be key players in the public life of their countries for many years, and not only in the field of women's rights and emancipation. They were also martyrs of the anti-German independence and anti-Soviet democratic liberation struggles. In so doing, they hopefully made the cause of political emancipation of women irreversible.

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