



IS CZECH AND SLOVAK DIPLOMACY KEEPING WOMEN OUT?

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January 2025

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**Co-funded by
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Introduction

This article addresses the current challenges that have their origin in the social and political climate and are the root cause of the low representation of women in the Slovak and Czech diplomatic environment, despite repeated initiatives, European political agendas and other efforts, which have failed to improve this disbalance. Highlighting the urgency of the situation, the SHEcurity Index 2022 ranked the Czech Republic and Slovakia among the ten worst-performing countries globally in terms of female representation in ambassadorial positions¹. In Slovakia, male diplomats make up as much as 84.3% of the entire diplomatic service, while in the Czech Republic, this figure reaches 86%, both significantly exceeding the European average of 75%². This decline indicates that progress in women's representation in diplomacy has stagnated or even reversed in recent years, while there are many reasons why we should strive to change this trend³.

¹ SHEcurity, SHEcurity Report 2022 (October 2022), https://shecurity.info/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Report_Shecurity_2022_FINAL.pdf.

² Onderčo, Michal. "Prečo je nedostatok žien v diplomacii problém?" Denník N, accessed December 19, 2024. <https://dennikn.sk/4188252/preco-je-nedostatok-zien-v-diplomacii-problem/>.

³United Nations Development Programme. "Breaking Barriers: Empowering Women in Diplomacy for a More Inclusive Future." UNDP Bosnia and Herzegovina, accessed December 19, 2024. <https://www.undp.org/bosnia-herzegovina/blog/breaking-barriers-empowering-women-diplomacy-more-inclusive-future>.

Why Women Are the Key to Transforming Diplomacy and Building Lasting Peace

First and foremost, the civil and diplomatic services should reflect the **whole spectrum of society**, including women and other groups such as minorities. Apart from the legitimate right of these groups to participate in public affairs, their representation brings enriching insights and perspectives that can make a significant contribution to improving the quality of public services.³ Confronting the different life experiences that women bring to the field can significantly enrich policymaking and the foreign policy agenda, thereby **enhancing its effectiveness and relevance**. **Women's participation** in difficult negotiations not only improves dialogue and **increases the chances of successful outcomes**, but also, as recent research⁴ shows, **makes agreements up to 64% more likely to be successfully concluded**, implemented, and sustained, enhancing the prospects for long-term peace settlements in conflict regions.

Stereotypes and Gender Inequality: Invisible Barriers to Women in Diplomacy

Meanwhile, the stereotyping of women in diplomacy persists. Female diplomats often recount experiences at official events where they were indirectly excluded from discussions with male colleagues and instead encouraged to converse with other women diplomats or diplomats' spouses. Male diplomats often exclude

⁴ Council on Foreign Relations. "Women's Participation in Peace Processes." Council on Foreign Relations, accessed December 19, 2024. <https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/>.

women from **informal networking opportunities**, such as social gatherings or activities like golf, which serve to strengthen male bonds and reinforce their professional positions. This exclusion **deprives women of valuable opportunities** to build relationships and expand their networks.

Both the Slovak and Czech Ministries of Foreign Affairs, as a working environment for women in diplomatic positions abroad, **formally provides equal rights** in terms of financial benefits, training, and housing fees. However, women still face **significant challenges** related to work-life balance, maternity leave, childcare, and the status of accompanying partners. Although Slovakia lifted the ban requiring pregnant diplomats to return home in 2016, **financial support remains minimal**, covering only the cost of a return ticket, while other expenses must be borne by the woman herself. Additionally, the **profession's demanding nature**, including frequent social obligations and the need for high flexibility, presents further challenges for women diplomats. This issue is closely tied to the lack of adequate family policy measures aimed at creating an environment that enables women to be more actively engaged in their work.⁵

The low level of women's representation is not only apparent in the diplomatic service but also extends to foreign policy, particularly in media appearances, expert discussions, conferences, and public debates. This problem is visible at various high-level conferences, including prominent events in Central and Eastern Europe, where male-dominated panels and limited gender diversity have drawn criticism. In response, initiatives such as AMO's database of female experts and projects aimed at amplifying women's voices have emerged, including Globsec's CEE HER project and the establishment of the Women Leaders Council in 2024,

⁵ Dopita, Tomáš, Kočí, Kateřina, and Čmolíková Cozlová, Klára. Uvnitř diplomacie: Jak na genderovou nerovnost v zahraniční službě. Prague: Academia, 2021. <https://books.google.be/books?id=uvUOEAAAQBAJ>

which strives to integrate women's perspectives into key discussions and events.⁶

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Therefore, this article will focus in more detail on two specific factors that contribute significantly to the low representation of women in Czech and Slovak diplomacy: **gender inequality** and **political prioritization**. These issues not only reflect deep-rooted structural problems, but also highlight systemic obstacles that require targeted efforts to ensure greater inclusion and equality within the diplomatic environment.

Gender inequality

First aspect that determines the representation of women in diplomatic positions is gender inequality, which manifests cross-sectionally in all segments of society and is reflected in the professional promotion of women to high positions. It is necessary to point out that the Czech Republic and Slovakia rank at the bottom of the EIGE gender equality index, with **Slovakia in 24th** place and the **Czechia in 25th** out of the 27 EU member states. Gender inequality remains a long-term and significant issue, and while some progress can be observed, its pace is much slower compared to other member states such as Malta or Bulgaria, which are achieving exponential improvements in gender equality. This contrast highlights

⁶ CEE Her. "CEE Her: Central and Eastern European Women in Leadership." Accessed December 19, 2024. <https://www.ceeher.org>.

⁷ GLOBSEC. GLOBSEC Establishes Women Leaders Council to Amplify Female Voices. June 2024. <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/GLOBSEC%20Establishes%20Women%20Leaders%20Council%20to%20Amplify%20Female%20Voices.pdf>.

⁸ Asociace pro mezinárodní otázky (AMO). "On-line databáze expertek na zahraniční, evropskou a bezpečnostní politiku je tu!" AMO.cz, accessed December 19, 2024. <https://www.amo.cz/cs/zeny-v-ceske-zahranicni-evropske-a-bezpecnostni-politice/on-line-databaze-expertek-na-zahranicni-evropskou-a-bezpecnostni-politiku-je-tu/>.

the **growing gap** between the Czech Republic and Slovakia and other EU countries making notable strides in this area.

The lack of gender equality is also reflected in the **political landscape**. In Slovakia, while women have served in **high political offices**, these were rather short-term cases.⁹ In the case of the Czech Republic, this problem is all the more pronounced, as in its modern democratic history, a woman has **never held any of the highest political posts**¹⁰. It is this type of executive function that has a direct impact on the profile and shape of diplomacy, frameworks and strategies that the Office can pursue in the context of gender equality.

The advancement of feminist diplomacy often coincides with women holding top political roles. **Tanja Fajon** in Slovenia and **Annalena Baerbock** in Germany emphasized elements of feminist diplomacy upon assuming leadership of their foreign affairs departments. Similarly, Canada progressed in this area under **Chrystia Freeland** as Foreign Minister and **Marie-Claude Bibeau** in International Cooperation. Sweden was a pioneer, with Minister of foreign affairs, **Margot Wallström** introducing feminist diplomacy. In Libya, **Najla Elmangoush** prioritized it as the country's first female Foreign Minister. Additionally, countries like Luxembourg and France have advanced feminist diplomacy through the leadership and influence of women in senior ministerial positions.¹¹ Putting women in high political office is a step that not only brings symbolic value and inspiration but also opens the door to real change. Some women politicians are

⁹ Among the high-ranking female political leaders in Slovakia were Zuzana Čaputová, who served as President of Slovakia from 15 June 2019 to 15 June 2024, and Iveta Radičová, who held the position of Prime Minister of Slovakia from 8 July 2010 to 4 April 2012.

¹⁰ These are the positions of Minister of Foreign Affairs, President and Prime Minister. An exception in this sense is Markéta Pekarová Adamová, who has been in the position of Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies since 2021.

¹¹ LSE IDEAS. "Is Feminist Foreign Policy Driving Progress for Women's Representation in Diplomacy?" Medium, accessed December 19, 2024. <https://lseideas.medium.com/is-feminist-foreign-policy-driving-progress-for-womens-representation-in-diplomacy-7075eb7d366b>.

then able to use this opportunity to turn their role into concrete actions and measures that have an impact on wider society. These two processes - women's representation in top politics and their ability to initiate real change - can run in parallel, but their interconnection is the ideal outcome. This 'upgrade' from presence to influence shows how important it is not only to get women into office, but also to provide the conditions for them to fully develop their skills and translate equality into practical action.

Political prioritization

Secondly, to achieve meaningful progress in advancing gender equality in diplomacy, it is essential to establish a consensus between bureaucratic and political actors, ensuring equal commitment from both sides to implement substantial changes. Policies in this area must be the result of **political negotiations** agreed upon at the **highest levels**. Political support is vital to transform policy analyses, action plans, and strategies into actionable frameworks by providing the necessary resources and seriousness to these initiatives. A positive example of political commitment can be seen in France, where President **Emmanuel Macron**, an outspoken advocate for gender equality, established a separate department within his diplomatic office dedicated to internalizing these principles¹².

Slovakia and Czechia also have an opportunity to strengthen their commitments to gender equality in foreign policy and development aid. According to the FFP 2023 Index, Slovakia ranks 41st, and the Czech Republic 38th out of 48 OECD

¹² Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères. "Stratégie Internationale de la France pour l'Égalité Entre les Femmes et les Hommes." Accessed December 19, 2024. <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/politique-etrangere-de-la-france/diplomatie-feministe/strategie-internationale-de-la-france-pour-l-egalite-entre-les-femmes-et-les/>.

countries, reflecting weak commitment to feminist foreign policy principles. Additionally, only 20% of Slovakia's development projects in 2021 targeted women and girls, significantly below the OECD average of 40%, while 60% of Czech projects failed to address gender equality, according to the Czech Development Agency. However, Slovak and Czech Ministries of Foreign Affairs have taken encouraging steps toward addressing gender disparities in diplomacy. Initiatives such as Slovakia's Women in Diplomacy programme and the Czech Republic's Women in the Diplomatic World salon mark a positive beginning. These programmes provide a platform to elevate the visibility of women in diplomacy and foster dialogue about their contributions. However, to ensure meaningful progress toward gender parity, these efforts require stronger political backing, clearly defined goals, and prioritization at the highest levels of government. These early steps demonstrate that progress is possible, and with continued dedication, Slovakia and Czechia are well-positioned to become regional leaders in gender equality in diplomacy and beyond.

Steps Forward: Political Prioritization for Gender Equality in Diplomacy

Given these challenges, several recommendations are essential for improving the situation. First, there must be a focus on developing measurable **and time-bound objectives** at the political level, ensuring their implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Second, a platform or communication tool should be created to **raise public awareness** about the challenges faced by women in diplomacy and the low representation of women in this field. Finally, political leaders must **prioritize gender equality**, integrating it into their **programmes** and agendas. This includes allocating sufficient funding, particularly in humanitarian aid, in alignment with OECD best practices.