

## РОЗДІЛ 2. ПОЛІТИЧНІ ІНСТИТУТИ ТА ПРОЦЕСИ

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**From representation to leadership:  
the gender gap in EU parliaments**

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*This study examines the disparity between women's numerical representation in EU parliaments and their access to leadership positions. Despite significant progress in electing women to national legislatures, with the EU average reaching 33% female MPs and Nordic countries approaching 46%, women remain substantially underrepresented in key decision-making roles such as parliamentary speakers, committee chairs, and faction leaders. This phenomenon, conceptualized as the «internal glass ceiling,» represents a distinct barrier to substantive gender equality in political institutions that persists even when numerical representation appears adequate. The aim of this research is to analyze leadership positions across 27 EU member state parliaments using quantitative comparative methodology. A novel «Leadership Ratio» metric was developed to measure the relationship between overall female representation and leadership position attainment, calculated as the ratio of average leadership representation to overall parliamentary representation. Data were collected from IPU Parline database, EIGE Gender Statistics Database, and international reports for the period 2021–2025. The results reveal that only 8 of 27 parliaments (30%) have female speakers, while women hold approximately 25% of committee chairs on average—significantly below their share of parliamentary seats. Committee chairmanships in high-prestige areas such as finance, defence, and foreign affairs remain predominantly male-dominated across most member states. The analysis identifies the «Nordic paradox» where countries with the highest female representation show stagnating or declining leadership shares, challenging assumptions that numerical gains automatically translate into power-sharing. These findings demonstrate that achieving gender parity in parliamentary membership is necessary but insufficient for equality in power distribution, highlighting the need for targeted mechanisms addressing internal parliamentary advancement. The results carry particular relevance for Ukraine as an EU candidate country implementing European gender equality standards.*

**Key words:** women's leadership, parliament, gender political representation, gender quotas, elections, glass ceiling, European Union.

**Introduction.** Ukraine's path toward European Union membership requires comprehensive adaptation of European standards across multiple policy domains, including gender equality. The EU *acquis communautaire* encompasses extensive provisions for equal representation of women and men in political decision-making, making the European experience directly relevant to Ukrainian institutional reform. Ukraine has already taken significant steps in this direction: the 2019 amendments to electoral legislation established a 40% gender quota for party lists. However, no parliamentary elections have yet been conducted under these new rules, and observers widely anticipate a substantial increase in women's numerical representation following the next elections. Yet the European experience analyzed in this study suggests that such anticipated gains, while important, may prove insufficient. The challenge of ensuring women's access to parliamentary leadership positions – not merely seats – requires attention from the outset.

The European Union has achieved notable progress in women's parliamentary representation. Since the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the percentage of women in EU national parlia-

ments has more than doubled, reaching an average of approximately 33% by 2025 [6]. Several member states approach or exceed gender parity in their legislative chambers, with Finland and Sweden leading at 46% female MPs. This quantitative advancement represents a significant democratic transformation that has reshaped the composition of European legislatures.

Yet numerical presence in parliament does not automatically translate into political influence. The theoretical foundation for understanding this distinction rests on Pitkin's [10] fundamental differentiation between descriptive and substantive representation. Descriptive representation refers to the demographic mirroring of constituencies by elected officials, while substantive representation concerns the active advancement of group interests through political action. Phillips [9] cautioned that expecting automatic policy impact from women's presence alone constitutes a "shot in the dark" – simply having women in office does not guarantee feminist policy outcomes or equal influence over decision-making.

Parliamentary leadership positions – speakers, deputy speakers, committee chairs, and faction lead-

ers – represent critical nodes of institutional power. These roles confer agenda-setting authority, procedural control, and enhanced visibility that significantly amplify individual parliamentarians' influence. Research demonstrates that women legislators often face horizontal segregation, disproportionately assigned to committees dealing with “soft” issues such as education, health, and family affairs rather than powerful committees like finance, defence, or foreign affairs [7]. This gendered sorting marginalizes women's influence on high-priority policies and perpetuates traditional divisions of political labor. The phenomenon extends beyond committee assignments to faction leadership, where women remain substantially underrepresented despite often constituting significant portions of party parliamentary groups. Faction leaders wield considerable power over legislative strategy, voting discipline, and resource allocation, making their gender composition a crucial indicator of substantive influence. Similarly, parliamentary bureau positions – speakers and deputy speakers – carry both symbolic weight as the public face of democratic institutions and practical authority over procedural matters, debate scheduling, and institutional management.

Despite extensive research on gender quotas and women's electoral success, systematic comparative analysis of women's access to leadership positions within EU parliaments remains underdeveloped. This gap is particularly significant for countries seeking to learn from European experience. Understanding whether EU mechanisms successfully translate numerical representation into substantive power is essential for designing effective gender equality policies.

**Aim and objectives.** The aim of this research is to analyze the gap between women's numerical representation in EU parliaments and their access to leadership positions, assessing the effectiveness of European gender equality mechanisms. The specific objectives are: first, to map the current distribution of women in key parliamentary leadership positions across all 27 EU member states; second, to develop and apply a quantitative metric (Leadership Ratio) for assessing the relationship between overall female representation and leadership position attainment; third, to identify patterns and anomalies in women's access to parliamentary power; and fourth, to draw conclusions regarding the effectiveness of existing gender equality mechanisms and their implications for countries adapting European standards.

**Results.** The analysis reveals substantial variation in women's parliamentary representation across the 27 EU member states. At the upper end of the spectrum, Finland and Sweden lead with 46% women MPs, followed by Denmark and Spain at 44%, and Belgium at 41%. At the lower end, Cyprus and Hungary share the lowest representation at 14–15%, with Greece and Romania at approxi-

mately 22%. The average across all EU member states stands at approximately 33%, though this figure masks significant cross-national disparities ranging from 14% to 46%.

Among the 27 EU parliaments examined, eight (30%) are currently led by a woman speaker or president [12]. These include Germany, France, Spain, Slovenia, Czech Republic, Latvia, Bulgaria, and Cyprus.

Notably, the presence of a female speaker does not correlate straightforwardly with overall representation levels. Cyprus demonstrates that having a female speaker can coexist with the EU's lowest female MP share (14.3%). Conversely, the three Nordic EU members with the highest overall representation – Finland, Sweden, and Denmark (44–46%) – all have male speakers. This pattern suggests that speakership elections may be influenced by factors distinct from overall gender composition, including party dynamics and individual political trajectories.

Committee chairmanships present the most consistent evidence of an internal glass ceiling. These positions carry substantial agenda-setting power and policy influence, as most legislation is shaped at the committee stage. Yet women remain underrepresented as committee chairs across nearly all EU parliaments examined, with an EU average of approximately 25% [4; 12]. Country-level variations are substantial, ranging from single digits to over 35% in leading countries.

A particularly concerning pattern emerges regarding high-prestige committees dealing with finance, defence, and foreign affairs, which remain predominantly male-led across EU member states [4; 12]. This horizontal segregation persists even in countries with strong gender equality traditions, and progress can reverse quickly when political coalitions change. This suggests that gains in leadership representation remain achievements. This horizontal segregation undermines the breadth of substantive representation women can achieve.

Parliamentary faction or group leadership reveals the starkest gender gaps [12]. Several countries have zero or very few women leading parliamentary factions, even where overall female representation exceeds 25–30%. This pattern suggests that internal party dynamics and informal selection processes create barriers independent of overall representation levels.

The Leadership Ratio metric – calculated as the ratio of average leadership representation to overall parliamentary representation – reveals that the majority of EU member states have ratios below 1.0, indicating systematic underrepresentation of women in leadership positions relative to their overall parliamentary numbers. Only a few countries achieve near-parity or exceed it, while many show significant gaps (ratios below 0.65) between overall representation and leadership access.

A counterintuitive finding concerns the Nordic EU member states – Finland, Sweden, and Denmark – traditionally celebrated as global leaders in gender equality. Despite having the EU’s highest percentages of women MPs (44–46%) [6; 11], all three countries currently have male speakers [12]. Their Leadership Ratios remain below the EU average, suggesting that achieving high overall representation does not automatically translate into proportional leadership positions.

In contrast, Baltic states present a more favorable picture. Lithuania and Latvia demonstrate Leadership Ratios approaching or exceeding parity, indicating that women’s access to leadership positions matches or exceeds their overall parliamentary presence. This pattern may reflect the relatively recent establishment of democratic institutions in these countries, potentially creating less entrenched informal hierarchies compared to longer-established Western European parliaments. Central and Eastern European member states show considerable variation: while some countries like Poland and Hungary exhibit substantial gaps between representation and leadership, others demonstrate more balanced distributions. Southern European parliaments generally fall in the middle range, with gradual improvements in recent years but persistent gaps in high-prestige positions.

This pattern aligns with broader scholarship on the “Nordic paradox” in gender equality – the observation that high levels of formal equality may coexist with persistent informal barriers [5]. The data suggest that achieving critical mass in parliamentary membership does not automatically dismantle internal advancement barriers, supporting Childs and Krook’s [1] emphasis on “critical actors” and institutional context over numerical thresholds alone.

Table 1

**Women in parliamentary leadership positions, EU-27 (2025)**

Position	% Women	Gap (pp)
Speakers	30%	-3
Deputy Speakers	~35%	+2
Committee Chairs	~25%	-8
Faction Leaders	~22%	-11

*Note: pp = percentage points. Gap calculated relative to average % women MPs (33%). Source: Author’s calculations based on data from EIGE Gender Statistics Database [12] and IPU Parline [11].*

**Discussion.** The findings reinforce a core insight from representation theory: increasing women’s descriptive representation does not automatically deliver substantive influence over agendas and resources. Following Pitkin’s [10] distinction between “standing for” and “acting for,” the Leadership Ratio helps make visible where women’s presence in

plenary numbers is not matched by access to posts that shape parliamentary business, information flows, and bargaining outcomes.

The results qualify simple “critical mass” expectations derived from Dahlerup’s [2] influential work. The original hypothesis suggested that when women reach approximately 30% of a legislative body, they would achieve sufficient presence to effect meaningful policy change. However, our data reveal a more complex picture: very low levels of women MPs correlate with weak leadership access, but high representation does not guarantee proportional leadership. This finding aligns with scholarship emphasizing “critical actors” and institutional context over headcounts alone: selection rules, parties’ internal incentives, and informal networks shape who advances once inside parliament [1; 3].

The horizontal segregation observed in committee assignments represents a particularly stubborn barrier that operates through both formal and informal mechanisms. Women’s systematic exclusion from chairing high-prestige committees – particularly those dealing with finance, budget, defense, and foreign affairs – limits their influence on the most consequential policy areas and reinforces gendered assumptions about appropriate domains for women’s political engagement. Across the EU-27, women disproportionately chair committees focused on social affairs, health, education, culture, and gender equality itself, while “hard” policy domains remain predominantly male-led. This pattern persists regardless of overall representation levels: even in Nordic parliaments where women constitute over 40% of members, defense and finance committees rarely have female chairs. The implications extend beyond symbolic representation. Committee chairs control agendas, manage debates, negotiate with government ministers, and serve as spokespersons on crucial issues. Exclusion from these strategic positions means that women legislators, regardless of their numbers, remain peripheral to core parliamentary functions. The data demonstrate that this pattern persists even in countries with strong gender equality traditions, and that progress can reverse quickly when political coalitions change. This suggests that gains in leadership representation remain fragile without institutional safeguards.

The evidence indicates that candidate quotas – the primary institutional tool used across Europe – address entry but leave intact the internal allocation of power. Electoral quotas successfully increase the number of women elected, but they do not regulate how leadership positions are distributed within institutions. Once women enter parliament, they encounter a second set of barriers governed by party hierarchies, seniority norms, and informal selection processes that quotas do not reach. This points to the need for targeted measures—sometimes described as “quotas within quotas” – that govern leadership distribution

across committee chairs, bureau posts, and faction leadership [8; 4].

The faction leadership findings reveal particularly important dynamics regarding party-level barriers. Parties may nominate women candidates to comply with electoral quotas while maintaining male-dominated internal hierarchies. This disconnect between external representation and internal power distribution deserves greater attention in both research and policy design.

The persistence of the internal glass ceiling across diverse political systems – from Nordic social democracies to Southern European parliamentary regimes to post-communist democracies – suggests that the phenomenon reflects deep-seated patterns rather than context-specific anomalies. Neither high overall representation nor recent democratic transitions automatically produce equitable leadership distribution. This cross-national consistency strengthens the case for deliberate intervention targeting internal parliamentary structures.

Several policy mechanisms merit consideration. First, extending quota requirements to internal leadership positions – mandating gender balance among committee chairs, deputy speakers, and bureau members – would directly address the gap between electoral access and power distribution. Such provisions exist in some national contexts and could be adapted more broadly. Second, transparency measures requiring parliaments to publish gender-disaggregated data on leadership positions, speaking time, and committee assignments would enable monitoring and accountability. Third, party-level interventions – since factions control many leadership selections – could include requirements for gender-balanced nominations to committee chairs and leadership bodies. Fourth, mentorship and professional development programs specifically targeting women legislators' advancement into leadership roles could help counteract informal networks that currently favor male advancement.

For countries adapting European gender equality mechanisms, these findings suggest that electoral quotas represent only the first step. The challenge of ensuring that increased representation translates into substantive power requires attention from the outset, before patterns of internal exclusion become entrenched. Proactive measures might include requirements for gender balance in committee chair distribution, rotation of leadership positions, transparent selection criteria, and regular monitoring of leadership composition. The Nordic experience demonstrates that complacency can emerge precisely when numerical goals appear achieved, potentially allowing leadership gaps to persist or widen.

**Conclusions.** This comparative analysis of 27 EU member state parliaments reveals that achieving high percentages of women MPs is necessary but insufficient for gender equality in parliamentary power

structures. The concept of the “internal glass ceiling” captures a systematic pattern whereby women's advancement to leadership positions lags behind their overall numerical representation.

Three principal findings emerge from this research. First, symbolic breakthroughs can occur without structural change. The case of Cyprus and several other countries demonstrates that electing a female speaker does not necessarily transform broader patterns of gender inequality within parliamentary institutions. Second, the Nordic paradox operates within parliamentary leadership. Countries with the highest overall female representation do not automatically achieve proportional leadership representation; indeed, some Nordic countries show declining leadership shares even as their overall representation remains high. Third, electoral quotas address entry barriers but not internal advancement barriers. The European experience demonstrates that well-designed quotas can effectively increase women's parliamentary numbers, but additional mechanisms are required to ensure equal access to leadership positions.

For Ukraine as an EU candidate country, these findings carry particular significance. The 2019 electoral legislation establishing a 40% gender quota for party lists has not yet been tested due to the postponement of elections under martial law. When parliamentary elections eventually occur, Ukraine may experience substantial increases in women's numerical representation. The critical question, informed by this study's EU-wide findings, is whether such numerical gains will translate into proportional access to leadership positions. The Nordic paradox documented here provides a cautionary tale: countries with the highest female representation often demonstrate stagnating or declining leadership access. Future research should examine Ukraine's Verkhovna Rada through the Leadership Ratio lens, assessing whether its institutional dynamics facilitate or impede women's advancement to strategic positions. Preliminary observations suggest that newer democratic institutions may present fewer entrenched barriers than long-established European parliaments, but systematic analysis is needed to test this hypothesis. Learning from both the successes and limitations of European experience can help design comprehensive approaches to gender equality that address not only electoral access but also internal parliamentary advancement mechanisms.

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## Від представництва до лідерства: гендерний розрив в парламентах ЄС

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Дослідження присвячене аналізу розриву між кількісним представництвом жінок у парламентах ЄС та їхнім доступом до керівних посад. Незважаючи на значний прогрес в обранні жінок до національних законодавчих органів, де середній показник по ЄС досяг 33%, а в скандинавських країнах наближається до 46%, жінки залишаються суттєво недопредставленими на ключових посадах: спікери парламентів, голови комітетів та лідери фракцій. Це явище, концептуалізоване як «внутрішня скляна стеля», являє собою окремий бар'єр для досягнення гендерної рівності в політичних інститутах навіть за умов адекватного кількісного представництва. Мета дослідження – проаналізувати розподіл керівних посад у парламентах 27 держав-членів ЄС. Розроблено новий показник «коефіцієнт лідерства» для вимірювання співвідношення між загальним представництвом жінок та їхнім доступом до керівних посад. Дані зібрано з баз даних IPU Parline, EIGE Gender Statistics Database та міжнародних звітів за період 2021–2025 років. Результати показують, що лише 8 з 27 парламентів (30%) мають жінок-спікерів, тоді як жінки обіймають приблизно 25% посад голів комітетів – значно менше їхньої частки депутатських мандатів. Посади голів престижних комітетів (фінанси, оборона, закордонні справи) залишаються переважно чоловічими. Аналіз виявляє «нордичний парадокс»: країни з найвищим представництвом жінок демонструють стагнацію або зниження частки жінок на керівних посадах. Висновки свідчать, що досягнення гендерного паритету серед депутатів є необхідною, але недостатньою умовою для рівності у розподілі влади. Результати є актуальними для України як країни-кандидата в ЄС, що впроваджує європейські стандарти гендерної рівності.

**Ключові слова:** жіноче лідерство, парламент, гендерне політичне представництво, гендерні квоти, вибори, скляна стеля, Європейський Союз.

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