

UNEQUAL DEMOCRACIES

MONTENEGRO: WHO DOES (NOT) HAVE A SEAT IN PARLIAMENT?

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Parliament is predominantly composed of members with university degrees, thereby excluding the majority of citizens without higher education and reinforcing structural inequalities in political participation, making educational disparity a defining characteristic of its composition.



Members largely come from higher-income, service-oriented professions, marginalizing lower-income groups and weakening advocacy for their interests, which shows occupational and income bias in the Parliament.



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WHY DOES EQUAL REPRESENTATION IN PARLIAMENT MATTER?

In theory, parliaments in democracy perform several key functions. They deliberate, legislate, oversee, or at least provide checks and balances on the executive, and represent society. Although the extent of a parliament's authority can vary depending on the specific system design, each parliament fulfills a representative function. However, the criteria for this representation differ. Hanna Pitkin outlines four aspects of representation that we can use to understand these criteria: formalistic representation, which involves the authorization and accountability of representatives; symbolic representation, which reflects the emotional and symbolic connection between the representative and the represented; descriptive representation, based on the premise that representatives should resemble those they represent and substantive representation, focusing on whether the representative genuinely advocates for and advances the interests of the represented (Pitkin, 1967).

While formalistic representation is often the focus of practitioners as it is seen as a key ingredient of functional democracy, the other dimensions of representation should not be neglected as they enable proper performance of the representative function. Among them, descriptive representation which is strongly connected to substantive representation is rather important and the focus of this research brief.

Descriptive representation refers to the idea that elected officials should physically or demographically 'resemble' the constituents they represent. This concept is built on the premise that representatives who share similar characteristics with their constituents – such as gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic background, or other identifying traits – are more likely to understand and advocate effectively for the interests and needs of those constituents. Descriptive representation emphasizes that the composition of legislative bodies should mirror the demographic makeup of the population. According to this premise, a parliament should be a 'micro-cosmos' of society (Heywood, 2019). The reason is that the representatives who share similar backgrounds or experiences with their constituents may find it easier to communicate and connect with them on a deeper level. This shared understanding can lead to more effective advocacy as representatives are more likely to be aware of the specific needs and issues faced by their constituents. When people see themselves reflected in their government, it can enhance the legitimacy of the political system and increase trust in its institutions. There is an assumption

that descriptive representatives will have similar policy preferences to those they represent, leading to advocacy for policies that directly benefit their demographic group. While this is often the case, it's not a guaranteed outcome, as individual representatives may have diverse views and priorities.

Beyond actual legislative behavior, descriptive representation holds symbolic value. It sends a message that members of diverse groups can and do have a role in political leadership, which can inspire participation and engagement from under-represented groups.

While the descriptive representation does not directly translate into advocating constituents' interests and could contribute to oversimplifying the complex nature of identity, the lack of it can also indicate deeper systemic discrimination that prevents people from equally participating in decision-making. A lack of diversity in parliamentary representation often reflects historical and ongoing structural barriers that certain groups face. These can include discriminatory laws, socio-economic barriers, limited access to education, or systemic biases in the political process itself, such as electoral systems that disadvantage certain groups. These barriers prevent marginalized communities from participating fully in political processes. The composition of a parliament often mirrors societal attitudes and norms. If certain groups are consistently under-represented, it may indicate that there are prevailing societal biases against these groups, which can manifest in stereotypes, social exclusion, or direct discrimination. This lack of representation reinforces and perpetuates these norms by signaling that certain groups do not belong in leadership roles. When certain groups are not adequately represented, their specific needs and issues are likely to be overlooked or inadequately addressed in policymaking. This can lead to a vicious cycle where these groups continue to experience disadvantage, further entrenching economic and social inequalities.

Under the concept known as the "politics of presence" (Phillips, 1995), debates have revolved around the question of which groups should be ensured representation in parliament to ensure their voices are adequately heard and democratic equality is upheld. While proponents of descriptive representation acknowledge limitations to achieving an exact demographic reflection in parliament, they emphasize the significance of parliament's composition in addressing societal concerns and upholding democratic principles.

THE CURRENT PARLIAMENT – A FRESH START?

The Montenegrin Parliament is unicameral and consists of 81 members. This analysis examines the current composition of the Parliament,¹ which was elected in the June 2023 elections.²

According to the Constitution and Montenegrin electoral law,³ a person is eligible to vote or be elected as a member of a Parliament if s/he meets four criteria: s/he must be at least

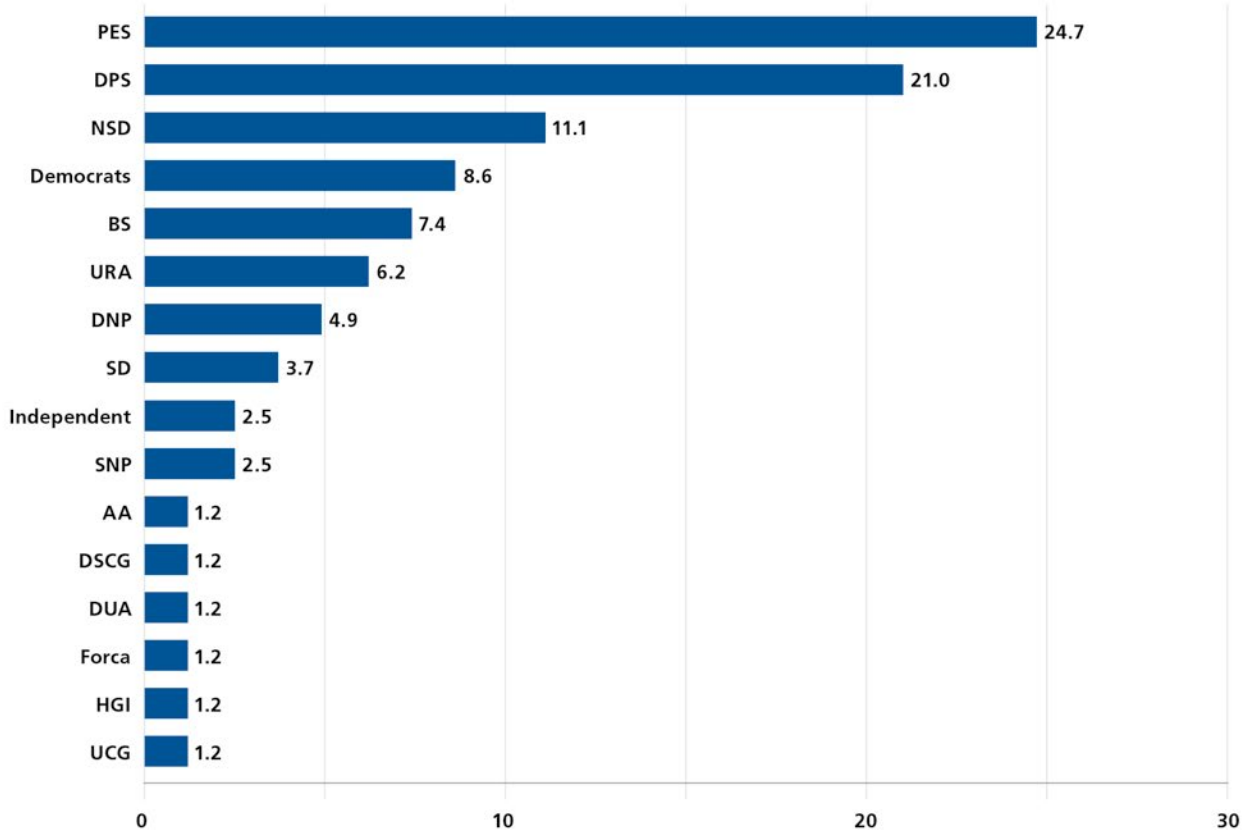
18 years old, legally competent, a citizen, and have resided in the country for at least two years. Voting is not mandatory. The electoral system employs a closed-list proportional representation (List PR) method, with the entire country serving as a single electoral district. The lists are closed, not allowing voters to rearrange the sequence of the candidates according to their preferences.

Mandates are allocated using the modified D'Hondt method, with a general threshold of 3% for party list participation in mandate distribution. Special thresholds apply to ethnic minority parties: if no ethnic minority party meets the general threshold, those receiving at least 0.7% of votes (0.35% for Croat parties) are grouped as a single list and may collec-

- 1 It is 28th Montenegrin Parliament
- 2 Cut point – April 15th 2024
- 3 Law on electing members of the parliament and local parliaments, available at: https://dik.co.me/images/DIK-media/legislativa/zakoni/Zakon_o_izboru_odbornika_i_poslanika.pdf

Figure 1

Composition of 28th Montenegrin parliament



tively receive up to three mandates. This mechanism is available to party lists representing ethnic groups that account for 1.5 to 15% of the population. While most major parties include ethnic minority representatives, Roma and Egyptian communities, which comprise a similar population percentage as Croats, are not included in the 0.35% threshold, resulting in no dedicated Roma or Egyptian ethnic parties in the Parliament of Montenegro.

The current Montenegrin Parliament is relatively 'new', with a majority of its members – 61.7% – not having served in the previous term. This can be explained by a major generational change that occurred after the 2020 Parliamentary elections, when the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) which controlled the Government for over thirty years lost the election and a completely new party – Movement Europe Now (PES) won most of the seats. The data shows that most members (77.8%) first joined Parliament after the significant political changes in 2020, indicating that these reforms marked a substantial transformation in the composition of Parliament as well. When examining gender disaggregation, female MPs tend to have less parliamentary experience. Only 27.3% of female MPs served in the previous parliament, compared to 42.4% of male MPs. This disparity may also suggest that female MPs are more easily replaced than their male counterparts.

The political landscape in Montenegro (presented in Figure 1) is characterized by significant ideological diversity and complexity, primarily influenced by the state's historical and statehood-related cleavages. This makes traditional political party classifications challenging to apply. The dominant political cleavage in Montenegro revolves around issues of statehood and national identity. This cleavage creates a political environment where parties often exhibit ideological inconsistencies. Economically, most Montenegrin parties lean towards left or center-left positions, with a pronounced emphasis on social benefits and welfare. Currently the largest party in Montenegro, PES is considered populist. Its economic strategy heavily utilizes pension and health insurance funds to increase net salaries, reflecting a focus on direct financial benefits to voters. As a successor to the former Communist Party, DPS is formally categorized as a center-left party. However, it has championed privatization and attracted foreign investment, while in power. SD and SDP are social democratic parties, while Democrats and SNP align more closely with right wing conservative principles, focusing on traditional values and national interests. The political scene also includes several ethnic-based parties which represent the interests of various ethnic groups within Montenegro such as AA, DSCG, DUA, FORCA, and HGI. URA is declared as a green party. NSD and DNP can also be considered as ethnic parties, but radical right ones.

A considerable segment of the Parliament comprises individuals from the political class, with 48.1% of members being career politicians and 14.8% having previously held political office. This trend indicates a cycle of reproduction within this group, where individuals transition from political roles to parliamentary positions, potentially perpetuating entrenched power dynamics and limiting the diversity of perspectives within the legislative body.

DOMINANCE OF MIDDLE-AGED MEN AND MISSING WOMEN

This study analyzes the age composition of the current Parliament, comparing it to the data from the 2011 Census.⁴ The age distribution reveals that the Parliament is predominantly composed of middle-aged members. Young people, both male and female, are significantly underrepresented. To accurately reflect the population, the Parliament would need an additional nine men and seven women under the age of 30.

Similarly, older individuals are also underrepresented. To achieve complete representation, the Parliament would require an additional fourteen seniors, consisting of five men and nine women. Furthermore, there is a notable absence of middle-aged women (aged 45–59), with the Parliament theoretically needing nine more women in this age group to achieve balanced representation.

Gender quotas were first introduced in 2011 but were initially ineffective as they did not mandate specific positions for female candidates on the electoral lists. Gender quotas used to require that each candidate list includes at least 30% of candidates from each gender. Additionally, to ensure compliance, at least one in every four candidates on the list was supposed to be from the least represented gender. This stipulation was essential for the electoral commission to validate the candidate list. Finally, a person of less represented sex could only be replaced by a person of the same sex should she decide to resign or lose her seat differently. In July 2025, the Electoral law was amended to increase gender quota to at least 40% of candidates and that at least one in three subsequent candidates on electoral list from “less represented gender.”

Looking at the census data, there should ideally be 41 women in Montenegrin Parliament. Currently, there are only 22, which means that 19 women (24 pp) are missing for the Parliament to be fully representative.

⁴ While the new Census was taken in 2023, the data is still not available.

Table 1

Age composition of the Parliament compared to ideal composition calculated based on census

Age group	28 th Parliament			Ideal representativeness*			Under representativeness (-) Over representativeness (+)		
	mandates	M	F	Ideal distribution	Ideal M	Ideal F	Total	M	F
Younger than 30	2	0	2	18	9	9	-16	-9	-7
30–44	47	33	14	22	11	11	+25	+22	+3
45–59	27	23	4	22	11	11	+5	+12	-7
60+	5	3	2	19	8	11	-14	-5	-9

* Calculated based on age distribution recorded in the last available Census data from 2011 (<https://www.monstat.org/cg/page.php?id=534&pageid=322>)

Table 2

Women in Montenegrin Parliament

Total MPs	81
No of women	22
% of women	27.2%

A “DIPLOMA DEMOCRACY”

Every member of Parliament possesses a university degree, with the majority holding bachelor’s degrees or equivalent qualifications, while 16% have attained master’s degrees. Additionally, one in ten members holds a PhD. Interestingly, while women, on average, exhibit higher levels of educational attainment, there is a notable gender disparity in the attainment of PhDs, with more men holding these advanced degrees.

The comparison with population data reveals a significant discrepancy disadvantaging less educated individuals. Specifically, 88.02% of the adult Montenegrin population, who have not attained a university degree, are entirely unrepresented in Parliament. This stark contrast highlights a critical gap in the political representation of a substantial portion of the population, emphasizing the need for more inclusive policies that ensure all educational backgrounds are represented in the legislative process.

There could be several reasons why individuals without university degrees are underrepresented in the Montenegrin parliament. Firstly, there is a strong societal prejudice against those lacking higher education, especially in roles considered “intellectual”. This bias often manifests in the public ridicule and mockery of individuals without university degrees who assume prominent positions. Such societal attitudes discourage those without higher education from pursuing political careers, fearing public disparagement. Secondly there is widespread skepticism about the authenticity of some educational qualifications. There are numerous instances where diplomas are believed to have been purchased, particularly when they are obtained later in life and in a relatively short period. Such accusations have been directed at prominent politicians, including MPs, who are suspected of having “bought” their diplomas, likely due to the social pressure to appear educated and qualified for their positions.

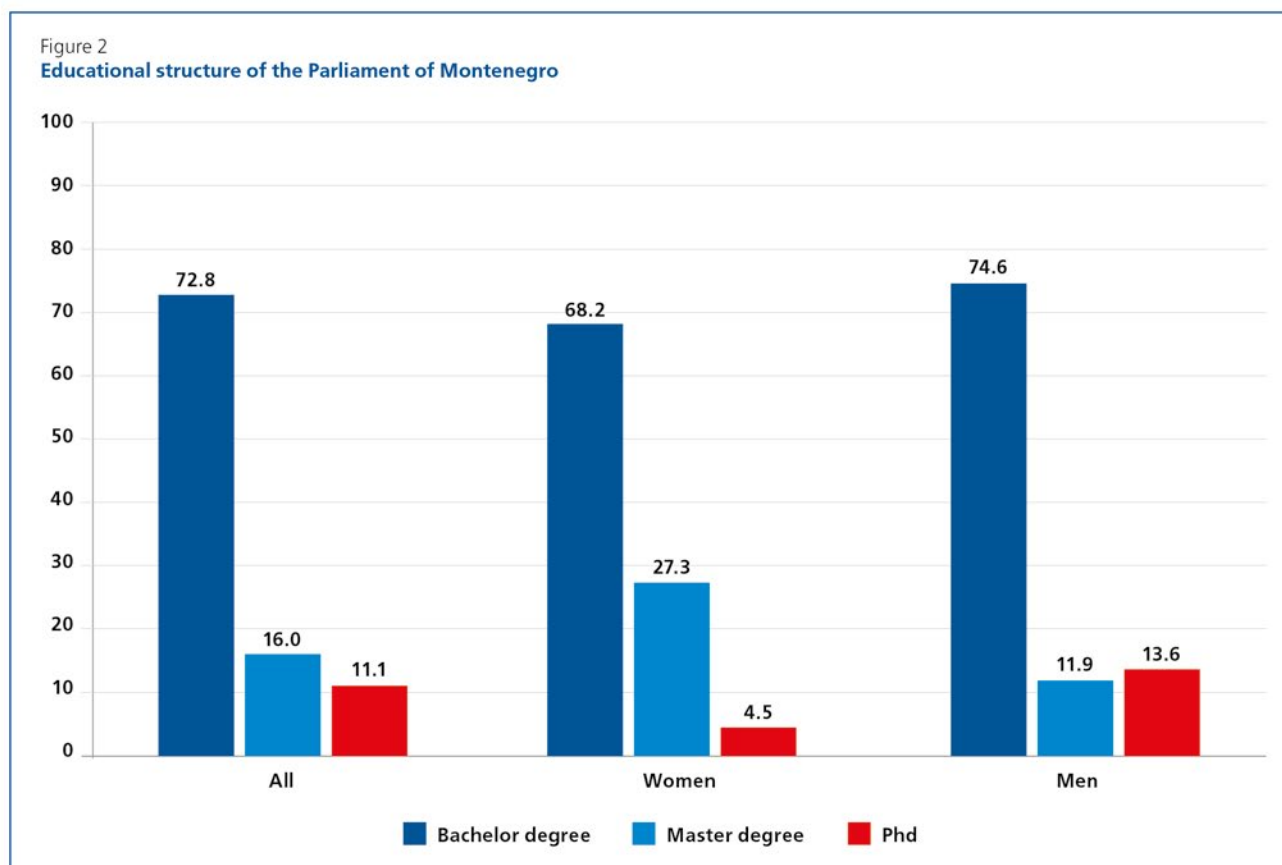


Table 3
Educational structure of the Parliament of Montenegro – comparison with population data

ISCED	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Country composition	8	14	0	44	0	5	9	1	0
Male	2	6	0	24	0	3	4	0	0
Female	6	8	0	20	0	2	5	1	0
Parliament composition	0	0	0	0	0	0	59	13	9
Male	0	0	0	0	0	0	44	7	8
Female	0	0	0	0	0	0	15	6	1
Difference	-8	-14	0	-44	0	-5	+50	+12	+9
Male	-2	-6	0	-24	0	-3	+40	+7	+8
Female	-6	-8	0	-20	0	-2	+10	+5	+1

Internal party preferences could also play a role. Political parties tend to favor candidates with higher education credentials, as they are perceived to "look better" on party lists and are seen as more credible representatives. It could also be that people with higher education are often more inclined to join political parties, seeking stable employment opportunities that such affiliations can provide, especially in the public sector.

Finally, the electoral system in Montenegro that includes only national level representation based on closed party lists can favor better educated candidates.

Reducing political representation to a narrow spectrum of educational attainment overlooks the diverse experiences, perspectives, and expertise that individuals from varied educational backgrounds can bring to governance. Such a system excludes the majority of the population without university degrees from meaningful participation in decision-making processes, perpetuating inequalities and limiting the effectiveness of parliamentary deliberations. By prioritizing educational credentials over other forms of knowledge and lived experiences, this approach reinforces elitism and marginalizes voices that may offer valuable insights and solutions to complex societal issues. Inclusive representation necessitates recognition of the multifaceted nature of expertise and a commitment to amplifying diverse voices within the political sphere. This trend, often termed "diploma-democracy," has been documented by other scholars (Best, 2007; Bovens & Wille, 2017), underscoring its prevalence and impact on democratic governance structures.

ELITIST PARLIAMENT

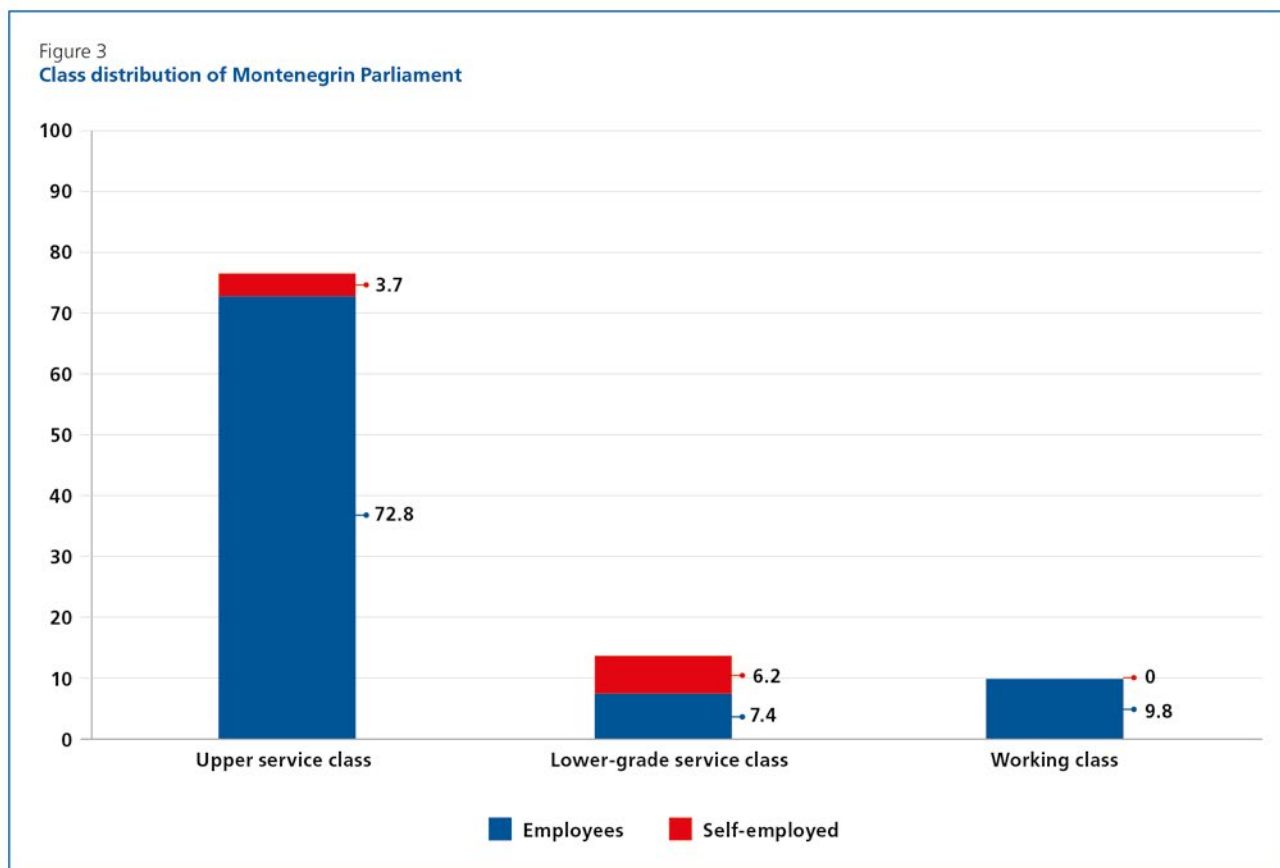
The Montenegrin Parliament exhibits a notable imbalance, with an overwhelming presence of individuals coming from the higher-income upper echelons of service-oriented occupations, constituting a remarkable 78.3% of its composition. Employing the Oesch scheme, which delineates 16 class groups, reveals a pronounced prevalence of individuals engaged in administrative or interpersonal vocations within the parliamentary body.

Additionally, a mere 9.9% of Parliament members had prior experience as self-employed individuals, among which 6 men and 2 women. These individuals typically operated in fields such as accounting or law or were small business owners.

The literature extensively deliberates on the consequences of the underrepresentation of lower-income and occupational groups, highlighting their diminished influence on policy

Table 4
Class scheme with 16 occupational classes according to Oesch (Oesch, 2006)

	EMPLOYEES			SELF-EMPLOYED	
	Administrative work logic	Interpersonal work logic	Technical work logic	Independent work logic	
Upper service class	9 Higher-grade managers accountants, senior ministry officials, advertising professionals 45.7%	13 Sociocultural experts secondary school teachers, physicians, university teachers 25.9%	5 Technical experts engineers, IT experts 1.2%	2 Independent professions lawyers, practicing physicians, independent consultants 3.7%	1 Large employers managers, business owners, farmers –
Lower-grade service class	10 Lower-grade managers skilled administrative staff, skilled commercial professions 3.7%	14 Sociocultural professions social workers, elementary school teachers 3.7%	6 Technical semi-professions skilled workers in engineering professions, medical technicians –	3 Small business owners with employees 6.2%	
Working class	11 Skilled clerks skilled secretaries, warehouse clerks 7.4%	15 Skilled service providers salespersons, preschool teachers, practical nurses 1.2%	7 Skilled crafts workers electricians, building electricians –	4 Small business owners without employees –	
	12 Routine office clerks call-centre agents 1.2%	16 Routine service providers bartenders, cleaning professions, security professions –	8 Routine skilled workers machinery operators, freight professions –		



formulation and advocacy for their interests. However, in the Montenegrin context, where the traditional economic left-right division is not as pronounced, this phenomenon assumes a dual nature. On one hand, it could come from the absence of such ideological division, while on the other, it might also serve as its own cause— since something that lacks presence cannot feasibly be represented.

CONCLUSION

The current composition of the Montenegrin Parliament reflects a noticeable imbalance towards specific demographic, educational, and occupational profiles, giving rise to significant concerns regarding the representativeness of this legislative body.

Gender representation in the Parliament remains skewed, with women significantly underrepresented. Despite the introduction of gender quotas in 2011, aimed at promoting greater gender balance, the current Parliament falls short of achieving true gender parity. The absence of adequate representation for women not only perpetuates gender inequalities in political participation but also limits the scope of perspectives and experiences brought to parliamentary deliberations and decision-making processes.

Moreover, age representation in Parliament reveals a notable imbalance, particularly in the underrepresentation of both the youngest and oldest individuals. Middle-aged (30-60) members dominate the parliamentary landscape, while young people and seniors are significantly underrepresented. This disparity not only undermines intergenerational equity in political representation but also limits the ability of Parliament to address the diverse needs and concerns of different age groups within society.

In terms of social composition, the Parliament predominantly features individuals with university degrees indicating a significant emphasis on academic qualifications. However, this inclination towards higher education creates a significant representation gap for the majority of the population without university degrees, amounting to 88.02% of Montenegro's populace, thereby fostering a "diploma-democracy" where university-educated elites wield disproportionate influence. For the comparison, at the same time, there were 8.3% of people without a university degree in Spain, 5.9% in Poland (2019), 20.3% in Germany (2021) and 11.9% in Croatia (2020).

Furthermore, the Parliament exhibits a pronounced overrepresentation of individuals from higher-income service-oriented occupations. This imbalance not only marginalizes lower-income and occupational groups but also undermines their ability to advocate for their interests effectively, as evidenced by the insufficient presence of self-employed individuals in Parliament.

Comparatively, Montenegro's parliamentary landscape, while reflecting broader European trends in some respects, such as

the emphasis on academic qualifications, also presents unique challenges. The absence of a prominent left-right economic divide complicates the representation dynamic, with the lack of such a division both reflective of and contributing to the homogeneity observed in Parliament.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To achieve a more representative parliament, several key recommendations should be considered.

With the mandatory representation of women on electoral lists now increased to 40%, the priority should shift to ensuring full implementation of this requirement, without exceptions, at both the national and local levels. This will help make gender parity not merely an aspirational goal but an enforceable standard, contributing directly to the achievement of national sustainable development objective. In addition, addressing gender discrimination and hate speech against women in politics is crucial. This can be done by imposing stricter penalties and enforcement measures, creating a more inclusive and respectful political environment. By taking decisive action, we can encourage more women to participate in politics without fear of discrimination or hostility.

Furthermore, it is important to enhance the monitoring mechanisms for state funding allocated to support women's representation in politics. Ensuring that these resources are used effectively and transparently will help achieve the intended outcomes. Supporting campaigns and initiatives that promote the representation of both young and older individuals in parliament is also vital. This includes funding outreach programs, mentorship opportunities, and advocacy efforts that highlight the importance of intergenerational dialogue and collaboration in policymaking. Empowerment programs are another critical component. Implementing comprehensive education and empowerment initiatives can equip individuals from diverse backgrounds with the skills, knowledge, and resources necessary to engage effectively in politics. Promoting civic education, leadership training, and mentorship programs will empower marginalized groups and enhance their participation in the political process.

Lastly, amending electoral laws to grant reduced census rights to people of Roma and Egyptian ethnicities is essential. This amendment would ensure their equal participation and representation in the political process, addressing historical exclusions and fostering a more inclusive parliamentary system. By taking these steps, we can work towards a more representative and equitable parliament.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AA	Albanska alternativa (Albanian Alternative)
BS	Bošnjačka stranka (Bosniak's Party)
Demokrate	Demokratska Crna Gora (Democratic Montenegro)
DNP	Demokratska narodna partija (Democratic People's party)
DPS	Demokratska partija socijalista (Democratic Party of Socialists)
DSCG	Demokratski savez u Crnoj Gori (Democratic Alliance in Montenegro)
DUA	Demokratska unija Albanaca (Democratic Union of Albanians)
HGI	Hrvatska građanska inicijativa (Croatian Civic Initiative)
MP	Member of the parliament
SD	Nova srpska demokratija (New Serbian Democracy)
PES	Pokret Evropa sad (Movement Europe Now)
SD	Socijaldemokrate (Socialdemocrats)
SNP	Socijalistička narodna partija (Socialist People's Party)
UCG	Ujedinjena Crna Gora (United Montenegro)
URA	Ujedinjena reformska akcija (United Reform Action)

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