

Women, Ethnicity, and Peacebuilding: A Case Study of the Councils of National Minorities in Serbia

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Abstract

Councils of National Minorities (NMCs), connected with the concept of non-territorial autonomy, have been recognized in research as a safeguard of minority rights, offering potential solutions to ethnic tensions. NMCs could be important actors in countries such as Serbia where tensions over the Kosovo issue are still present. Despite various studies on NMCs in Serbia, the specific role of women in these councils and their contribution to peace-making has not been a primary focus. This 2024 research in Serbia examines the involvement of women from NMCs in challenging male/state-centric discourses on women as peacemakers through inductive thematic analysis of interviews with female NMCs' representatives. The focus of the analysis is on intersections of nation and gender, the impact of women in NMCs on reducing tensions and fostering peace, and the gendered nature of these processes. This study contributes to understanding the role of women from NMCs in peacebuilding using non-territorial frameworks.

Keywords: national minorities; women; peacebuilding; national councils; Serbia

1. Introduction

The topic of women's involvement in peacebuilding processes within the security literature emerged in the 1980s through the contributions of feminist security theorists (Buzan and Hansen 2009). Their studies revealed that women were less inclined to allocate budgets to military actions and resource exploitation but more inclined toward humanitarian efforts compared to men. Feminist theorists critiqued militarism, emphasizing that the concept of masculinity and femininity is socially constructed through a complex political history, stating, "a boy is not born to be a soldier; he becomes a soldier" (Buzan and Hansen 2009, 139). They argued that women are not treated as a distinct reference point in security matters, meaning they are not specifically recognized as those under threats requiring adequate protection. Research indicated that women, children, and the elderly are the most vulnerable groups in conflicts, with states often dismissing rape in war as an anticipated consequence of armed conflicts (Buzan and Hansen 2009, 140). Furthermore, the conventional narratives of security are rooted in state sovereignty and power, often upheld by political elites who shape perceptions of threats and security (Campbell 1992), as well the roles that men and women play in war and peace – that is, in maintaining security. These narratives are framing women as guardians of the nation and peaceful mothers advocating for pacifism, while men are usually warriors and the ones who make strategic decisions about the state sovereignty.

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Although feminist security theories question these male-dominated, state-focused views on security and peace, there is a gap in research that would deal with peacebuilding issues from a non-territorial perspective.

This research contributes to the understanding of how women from national minorities can play a role in peacebuilding using non-territorial mechanisms for political participation, specifically participation in the work of National Minority Councils (NMCs) in Serbia. NMCs have been identified in studies as effective tools for protecting the rights of national minorities and offering solutions to ethnic conflicts, acting as mechanisms for conflict resolution in deeply divided societies (Nimni 2007; Vizi, Dobos and Shikova 2021; see Prina [2020] on potentially negative consequences of NTA regimes). The main goal of this article is to determine what type of participation NMCs allow in the process of peacebuilding for women from national minority communities in Serbia. The main thesis is that the conflicted recent past of Serbia will have an impact on the reproduction of the male/state centric narratives on peace. This article therefore focuses on male/state-centric narratives on peace, of which the most significant element for this research is the patriarchal matrix on women as peacemakers and mothers of the nation. The analysis presented here is based on data collected in empirical research with women NMCs' representatives in 2024. The main research question observed through inductive thematic analysis of eight semi-structured online interviews with women NMCs' representatives is: How do women representatives in Serbia's NMCs navigate and challenge male/state-centric peace discourses, and what observable impacts do these challenges have on NMCs' actions regarding the role of women in peacebuilding?

By concentrating on the specific roles of women within NMCs in Serbia, the article situates its analysis within a specific context of one of the South-East European countries that has not been thoroughly explored. The focus on women from national minorities adds a layer of complexity to the understanding of gender and peacebuilding, as these groups may face different dynamics and challenges compared to the majority population due to the intersection of their identity variables (gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status etc.). Intersectionality serves as a theoretical lens, providing a comprehensive analytical framework to examine these interconnected dynamics. Overall, the novelty lies in bridging the gap between gender studies, peace studies, and minority rights within the specific socio-political context of Serbia. This can enrich the broader discourse on peacebuilding and security from a distinctly gendered and minority-inclusive perspective (since women from national minorities are minorities-within-minorities).

The following, second chapter of this article presents a theoretical review of the research subject, organized into four subchapters focusing on the political participation of women in Serbia, the concept of non-territorial autonomy, the work of councils of national minorities in Serbia, and the interconnectedness of women and the nation. The third chapter offers a detailed description of the methodology. The main findings of the analysis are presented in the fourth chapter of the article. The article concludes with discussion of the results, together with the references used and an appendix containing a guide for interviews.

2. Theoretical Review

2.1. *Women in Politics in Serbia: Quota System*

Reliable data on the political participation of women from minority groups in Serbia are lacking, as existing research does not track their political involvement in relation to ethnicity. The Freedom House Report (2022) states that ethnic minorities have “a muted voice in politics”. This issue is common across Eastern Europe, where data on the political representation of national minorities, especially women, are either unavailable or inadequate (Ekman, Gherghina, and Podolian 2016). Political participation in the region is often low, attributed to apathy, institutional distrust, and passive citizenship (Kostadinova and Power 2007). However, recent studies (Tereshchenko 2010; Jacobsson 2015) highlight a dynamic civil society, distinct from Western models, with non-

traditional activism shaping the political landscape. The legacy of authoritarianism, as well as corruption and governance issues, continues to hinder conventional political engagement (Ekman, Gherghina, and Podolian 2016). The political involvement of ethnic minorities is shaped by unique historical, social, and economic factors, complicating their participation with additional layers of marginalization and specific obstacles. Therefore, understanding the political participation of ethnic minorities in South-Eastern Europe requires considering both traditional and unconventional forms of engagement, historical legacies, and the challenges faced by women from these groups.

Since the early 1990s, gender quotas have been widely adopted, including in South-Eastern Europe, to increase women's political representation. While the primary aim is to boost the number of women in politics, quotas also impact substantive and symbolic representation. Descriptive representation refers to the number of women in office, which quotas have significantly increased, especially in countries with low female political participation (Franceschet, Krook, and Piscopo 2009). However, increasing women's numbers alone doesn't ensure they will represent women's interests effectively, which is where substantive representation comes in. This focuses on whether women in office enact policies that support gender equality and women's rights.

Quotas also carry symbolic significance by challenging gender norms and altering public perceptions of women's leadership. In countries with newly increased female representation, the symbolic impact can be particularly powerful, encouraging other women to engage politically (Franceschet, Krook, and Piscopo 2009). The intersectionality of women's identities – such as class, ethnicity, and religion – further shapes how quotas impact both descriptive and substantive representation. Women from diverse backgrounds may advocate for distinct issues, influencing public opinion and political behavior.

While the increase in women's political representation enhances democratic legitimacy, the effectiveness of quotas in driving substantive change depends on factors like political experience, support systems, and the socio-political context. Quotas alone do not guarantee that women will enact beneficial policies for women or marginalized groups; they must be paired with broader reforms to empower women in politics. In this sense, quotas are part of a larger process of political and social transformation. Research on electoral gender quotas (Dahlerup 2007) shows that these systems often promote equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcome. Quotas can also increase competition for political office by disrupting the traditional male-dominated political environment.

In Serbia, the early 2000s marked the introduction of gender quotas to address women's political participation, driven by political instability and entrenched societal inequalities (Mršević 2005). At the time, women held only about 11% of seats in the national parliament and 6-7% in local assemblies, with no gender quotas in electoral laws. The 2002 Law on Local Elections¹ established a 30% gender quota, requiring the underrepresented sex to be placed throughout candidate lists (Article 40) – primarily aimed at promoting peace in conflict-affected municipalities in southern Serbia (Mršević 2005). By 2004, the quota was extended nationwide through amendments to the Law on Elections of Representatives of the Republic of Serbia², mandating at least 30% representation of the underrepresented sex on candidate lists, with corrective measures for non-compliance (Article 40a).

However, Mršević (2005) noted that political parties often reluctantly met quota requirements, placing women in unelectable positions or choosing candidates with male party ties. Enforcement gaps, such as the lack of regulations preventing the replacement of elected women with men post-election, further weakened the system. Misconceptions and backlash emerged, with some accusing quotas of being externally imposed to undermine Serbia's political system. Women elected under the quota system faced challenges, often being labeled “quota women” and seen as intruders by male colleagues. Media portrayals frequently undermined their legitimacy, and tensions arose with the women's movement, which accused these women politicians of not sufficiently representing women's interests.

Next to this, data collected in 2022 from experts working in the field of national minorities in Serbia (Čeriman 2023) highlight a gap between legal provisions and practical outcomes in women's participation in NMCs. Although the legal framework requires that every third candidate on the electoral list for NMC membership must be a woman, the selection process often results in female candidates either opting out or being pressured to withdraw from active involvement. These women are frequently replaced by the next individual on the list, typically a man. Notable exceptions to this trend are the Hungarian and Slovak NMCs, where women hold prominent leadership roles. The Hungarian NMC has achieved near gender parity, with women serving in key positions such as vice-president and leading various boards, including the Board for Information/Media. Similarly, the Slovak NMC is led by a woman, reflecting a more balanced representation within its structure (Čeriman 2023). However, even when there is minority political participation at the local level, a gender-sensitive understanding of it is lacking (Gačanica, Gjoshi, and Vrbaški 2020), and female NMCs' members, despite holding leadership positions, often lack sufficient knowledge about gender equality and gender analysis of the NMC's activities (Čeriman 2023).

2.2. Non-Territorial Autonomy (NTA) as a Concept

Given the numerous barriers faced by women from national minorities in Serbia, NMCs could serve as effective channels for women's political participation and for highlighting intersectional national minority issues. NMCs, associated with the concept of NTA, have been identified in research as a means of safeguarding the rights of minorities and migrants, offering a potential template for addressing ethnic tensions in Eastern Europe and beyond (Smith and Semenishyn 2016; Vizi, Toth and Dobos 2017). The concept of non-territorial autonomy, present in scientific thought since the late 19th century but experiencing a resurgence in social and political sciences in the last two decades (Andeva 2013), involves allocating power to diverse communities to make decisions in policy sectors related to cultural identity, such as education, language, media, and the preservation of cultural history. NTA implies self-government without challenging the sovereignty of the state (Čeriman and Pavlović 2020; Vizi 2021). It is considered a potential remedy for the shortcomings of territorial autonomy, which can escalate tensions and fuel nationalistic sentiments and calls for separate statehood. Decentralization of powers, inherent in NTA models and based on the principle of subsidiarity, is seen as a component of good governance that improves the chances for minorities to exert authority over matters affecting them. The principle of subsidiarity dictates that decisions should be taken at the lowest level consistent with effective action within a political system, limiting the realm of governmental control while enhancing internal self-determination (Macken-Walsh 2011).

Francesco Palermo (2015, 29) highlights the primary challenge in overcoming the conventional views of autonomy, which are deeply rooted in the Westphalian nation-state discourse. In this traditional perspective, autonomy is often viewed as a territorial possession contested by different groups. The solution, according to Palermo, is not to completely remove territorial ties from group identity claims, but to integrate these claims within a democratic and pluralistic framework. This approach promotes dialogue and the consensual delegation of power, whether through territorial means, non-territorial methods, or a combination of both. This has been a particular challenge in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans.

Börries Kuzmany (2024) identifies three distinct approaches to diversity accommodation in European history: granting national rights to individual citizens, establishing autonomous territorial units where minorities form local majorities, and the creation of collective bodies for cultural self-governance, known as non-territorial autonomy. This third approach involves a group of individuals having collective rights as a unified entity. It is based on an individual's affiliation with a particular group, rather than their place of residence, and is therefore referred to as non-territorial autonomy. This model was often applied in situations where populations were so integrated that drawing clear territorial boundaries between national groups was nearly impossible. The latter

approach, central to Kuzmany's work, allows cultural groups to manage their affairs – such as education and arts – based on personal affiliation rather than geographical location. This modern concept, rooted in the principle of equality, contrasts with earlier frameworks where legal status depended on ethnicity or religion. According to Kuzmany and Germane (2023), the origins of NTA can be traced to the mid-19th century in the Habsburg and Russian Empires. The Russian Empire, grappling with centralism and emerging nationalism, viewed NTA as a mechanism for minority inclusion, though often subordinated to imperial objectives. Between the 1848 revolution and the onset of the Second World War, non-territorial autonomy proved to be a highly adaptable instrument. It successfully adjusted to shifting political and ideological conditions while consistently preserving two fundamental parameters: the national group as a legal entity and the self-administration of specific areas of responsibility. The dissolution of empires after World War I marked a turning point for NTA, according to Kuzmany (2021). While initially envisioned for multinational state restructuring, it evolved into a minority protection tool during the interwar years. NTA sought to address minority rights without resorting to territorial separation, offering a model where ethnic groups could maintain cultural and political autonomy within the larger state framework. In the context of the Habsburg legacy, this was seen as a solution to the challenges of managing diverse populations, where territorial autonomy was either not feasible or was too divisive. Kuzmany suggests that NTA served as a practical mechanism for creating more inclusive governance structures that could accommodate minority groups while fostering political stability. However, the practical applications of NTA were complex. In some cases, it was viewed as a tool for minority protection, while in others, it was associated with attempts at power-sharing between different groups. The interwar period saw various countries in Central and Eastern Europe attempt to implement NTA systems, often influenced by the political and cultural contexts of the time. The effectiveness of these arrangements varied, and Kuzmany states that NTA is not a universal solution but a flexible model for managing diversity. Its effectiveness depends on specific historical and social contexts, making it a valuable lens for understanding past and present approaches to cultural pluralism.

2.3. National Councils of National Minorities in Serbia

The complex dynamics of ethnic tensions and the aftermath of the Yugoslav conflict make Serbia a key case for studying the (de)construction of male- and state-centric discourses on women's roles in peacebuilding, especially within NMCs. Serbia's political landscape, shaped by its post-socialist transition and a persistent non-democratic political culture, complicates democratic consolidation. The issue of Kosovo's independence remains central, intertwined with post-conflict political tensions from the Yugoslav war, including debates over accountability for war crimes committed by the Serbian army and politicians between 1991 and 1995. The NATO intervention in 1999 and the ongoing low-intensity conflict in Kosovo have fueled nationalist discourses, which continue to dominate Serbian politics.

A small number of institutions and individuals in Serbia openly accept the International Criminal Court's findings on war crimes from the 1990s. A 2000 survey revealed that 81% of Serbs considered Serbs the primary victims of the war (Duhaček 2002, 205). While most acknowledge the importance of facing the truth about the events of the 1990s, 47% believe it is vital to prove that Serbs are not responsible for the war crimes attributed to them (Duhaček 2002, 205). Public opinion is divided, with some arguing that the narrative of Serbia's responsibility for war crimes is fueled by an anti-Serbian, Western-centric foreign policy and dominant militaristic state values. Others contend that social and political progress is impossible without acknowledging political responsibility. This aligns with a feminist perspective critical of the state as a patriarchal system, which, although tacitly, perpetuates the structural disadvantages women face (Hansen 2010). Political responsibility involves an effort to resist patriarchal structures by emphasizing how women's experiences and involvement can contribute to the successful implementation of the project of political

responsibility. This critique calls for visibility of women in addressing the social, political, and economic structures that sustain patriarchy and war, while highlighting practices that silence women's voices.

Mainstreaming minority issues in Serbia faces multiple challenges, including weak public institutions, a lack of democratic traditions, an underutilized legal framework on minority rights, and institutional tendencies to undermine minority concerns. Additionally, there are selective and ineffective communication channels between the government and national minority representatives, party influence, and poor coordination among institutions at various levels of government to address the needs of national minorities.

The Republic of Serbia's legal framework for NMCs outlines various rights specifically designed for national minorities. However, the recognition of gender equality within the political sphere is limited within this framework. Article 72 of the Law on NMCs addresses gender equality by stating that, on the list for the election of NMCs' members, for every three candidates, at least one must be from the less-represented gender (Law on the National Councils of National Minorities 2009)³. Despite this, the legislative framework lacks additional gender-specific elements in the selection of NMCs' staff from electoral lists. As NMCs exercise public powers, they propose members of administrative and supervisory boards in educational and cultural institutions. The Bill on Gender Equality, in Article 47, requires authorized proposers to take general and special measures to ensure balanced representation of men and women during the formation of permanent and temporary work bodies (Bill on Gender Equality 2021)⁴. This implies that NMCs can manage male and female representation in bodies under their jurisdiction. However, the legislative framework does not specifically address gender elements in the functioning of NMCs in Serbia, and there appear to be no visible barriers to gender inclusivity in the scope of NMCs' work. Similar considerations apply to the participation of women in activities related to specific topics such as peacebuilding and reducing ethnic tensions, since NMCs in Serbia primarily focus on cultural, educational, and linguistic rights, and their mandate does not extend to addressing issues of international politics or peacekeeping. This limitation presents a challenge in directly linking the work of NMCs to peacebuilding, especially given a relatively low position of women in the political hierarchy. However, we argue that peacebuilding, in a broader sense, is not confined to formal peacekeeping efforts. It also encompasses processes of social cohesion, reconciliation, and fostering mutual understanding within societies, which are highly relevant to the work of NMCs, particularly in post-conflict settings like Serbia. Given the history of conflict between minority groups and the majority population, the importance of peacebuilding within these communities is undeniable. The transition Serbia has undergone has led to the nationalization of society, with national identity emerging as a core principle of the social structure. This shift has been instrumental in shaping both majority and minority identities since the 1990s. As a result, it is not surprising that women from ethnic minorities strongly identify with their national background. They are either nationally marked or perceive their environment as such, often assuming the role of guardians of their national boundaries. They tend to prioritize their national identity over their gender identity. In addition to this role, these women are pivotal in educating their communities, whether as mothers, teachers, or journalists, transmitting cultural values and potentially preserving national identity. This study focuses on the educational aspect of their work, examining how cultural preservation and inter-generational knowledge transfer are linked to inter-ethnic relations and peacebuilding efforts in the activities of the NMCs, especially since in areas where NMCs operate – such as culture, language, and media – women make up the majority in Serbia. This study explores how women from ethnic minorities within NMCs influence activities in these areas to contribute to peacebuilding processes.

While the operation of NMCs in Serbia, as well as fulfilment of collective rights of national minorities have been the subject of various research (see Lendak-Kabok [2021, 2020] and Lendák-Kabók, Popov and Lendák [2020] for studies of educational issues; Čeriman and Pavlović [2020] on NTA approach to the Kosovo issue; Korhecz [2019, 2020], Beretka [2020] and Đorđević-Vidojković [2020] for studies on the establishment and functioning of the NMCs in Serbia etc.), the specific

contribution of women within these councils to peacebuilding, especially in the complex context of ongoing post-conflict and conflict dynamics among different national groups, has yet to be explored.

2.4. Women and the Nation

The literature on gender and nationalism reveals that national identity is deeply intertwined with gendered constructions of men and women's roles. These gendered constructions vary across different nationalist contexts, but they consistently reinforce the idea that men and women have distinct, prescribed roles within the nation-state. Despite being marginalized in mainstream nationalist discourse, feminist scholars have continued to argue that nationalism cannot be understood without considering the gender dynamics at play. Nationalism often valorizes specific forms of masculinity, such as the "noble warrior" defending the nation, which links male identity to violence (Thomson 2019). Men are encouraged to prove their manhood through military involvement, reinforcing misogynistic violence and ethnic conflict. Women's roles in national identity formation are often reduced to passive or symbolic functions, such as biological reproducers, yet women have also organized in response to nationalist violence through feminist movements and peace activism that challenge nationalist ideologies. However, there is a risk of romanticizing women as inherently peaceful, ignoring the fact that women can also be complicit in nationalist violence (Thomson 2019). Despite different contributions, women are often depicted as secondary to men in nationalist narratives, reinforcing traditional, patriarchal notions of femininity. Thomson (2019), however, argues that the role of gender in nationalism extends far beyond traditional understandings of women as biological and symbolic reproducers of the nation. Thomson emphasizes that gender is a socially constructed force shaping roles, identities, and narratives. This includes the ways masculinity and femininity interact to sustain national narratives and the ways gender intersects with other social categories, such as race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality, to construct and reinforce national identities. These intersections highlight how nationalism operates not in isolation but through the layering of various forms of identity and power dynamics. Thomson further argues that understanding these dynamics requires moving beyond single-axis frameworks to explore the interconnectedness of gender with other markers of identity, offering a more nuanced and comprehensive perspective on how nationalisms are constructed and maintained.

Furthermore, feminist security theory also critically examines the interconnections between women, security, peace, and war. Jean Bethke Elshtain (1990) has remarked that the concept of peace is inherently uncertain because it cannot exist without the context of war. This binary of war and peace often relies on degraded representations of femininity and rejects the lack of harmony and order in social and political life. Feminist security theories question the conventional narratives of security rooted in state sovereignty and power, often upheld by political elites who shape perceptions of threats and security (Campbell 1992). According to Laura Shepherd (Shepherd 2008), security discussions often prioritize international concerns by identifying so-called objective threats, thus perpetuating the myth of the state, and supporting specific power structures and identity assertions. As a result, the discussions and policies surrounding gender security are constrained by those of state security (McLeod 2013). The state thus violently delineates who belongs within the national community, creating divisions between "us" and "the other". Therefore, exploring women's roles in peacebuilding beyond traditional territorial and sovereignty frameworks could offer deeper insights into these issues.

3. Methodology

Serbia's history, marked by ethnic diversity, is reflected in the presence of 24 national minorities, organized into 23 national councils and one union of Jewish municipalities. The selection of national councils for this study was influenced by the modern history of Serbia, particularly those

minorities that directly experienced ethnic conflict. The sample therefore includes the Albanian, Croat, and Bosniak national minority councils, affected by the Yugoslav War and the Kosovo conflict, along with the Hungarian national minority council, representing the largest national minority in Serbia concentrated in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina. The research received approval from the ethics board at the author’s university.

Data for the research were gathered through interviews conducted with representatives from these four national councils of national minorities in Serbia during March 2024. Interviewees were recruited through convenience sampling, using email invitations to the selected NMCs and personal networks of the author-researcher. The emails were initially sent to the general contact email of the Council visible on their website. In that first email, contact was established with information about the research’s purpose, the person conducting it (affiliation and academic title), and the solely scientific purpose of the research, followed by a request to forward the email to Council representatives who would participate in the research via a one-hour online interview. In situations when the Councils’ contact person would not respond to this initial email, the author-researcher would obtain the contact information of the Council representatives through her own network of contacts, to whom she would then send an email with the same information and a request for participation in the research. Upon receiving contacts of potential participants or their tentative agreement to participate (when a direct email was sent to council representatives), the author-researcher directly arranged the interview times, providing additional information about the confidentiality and anonymity of the data to be collected in this manner. All interviewees signed a written consent for participation in the research and for the audio recording of the interviews. All interviews were conducted in an online format. The interviews were conducted in Bosniac-Croatian-Serbian languages, audio-recorded, and later transcribed with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. The audio recordings were destroyed shortly after.

The study focuses on women in the position of councilors, examining gender equality principles across the vertical axis of council structures. The sample is diverse in terms of age, place of residence, occupation, and educational background of the interviewees (Table 1 below).

The main interview themes covered socio-demographic information, work history related to collective rights of national minorities, views on the relationship between nation and gender in present-day Serbia, perspectives on the role of women from NMCs in mitigating ethnic conflicts and contributing to peacebuilding, and the elements defining these processes as gendered. The interviewees also shared their interpretations of the concept of women as peacemakers. The final section of the interview sought recommendations from the participants to enhance the work of

Table 1. Structure of the sample^a

Interviewee	Age	Education
A1	34	BA
A2	40	BA
B1	51	BA
B2	43	BA
C1	50	BA
C2	45	BA
H1	42	BA
H2	62	BA

^aDue to the small number of women in the examined National Councils of National Minorities in Serbia only some of the demographic data is given in order to preserve their anonymity.

NMCs ([Appendix I: Interview Guide](#)). It is important to emphasize that the interview guide included the main topics of conversation, which were further explored in individual interviews by asking follow-up questions depending on the data obtained during the conversations with the interviewees. All questions from the guide were posed to all interviewees, with some questions further explored with follow-up questions in individual interviews to obtain clarifications that contribute to a better understanding of the subject matter of this research. The interviews lasted on average about 60 minutes.

The collected data underwent reflexive inductive thematic analysis following the method proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach allowed the author to derive meaning from the responses effectively. Initially, in the first step of the analysis the author read all the interviews, and an inductive coding process was employed to identify themes corresponding to the research question. This analysis considered cultural sensitivity and contextual knowledge because it included discourses specific to linguistic and cultural areas that are being researched. The author thoroughly examined all the responses, categorizing sentences into sub-themes and subsequently into broader themes. In the second phase of the analysis, the author compared coded themes and interpretations (notes) across interviews to identify similarities and variations in the narratives. In the final part of the analysis, a constant comparative method was performed by comparing the interviews with each other and interpreting the presence of a discourse on the male-state-centric understanding of peace expressed through the patriarchal matrix of women guardians of peace and the nation. In the absence of the elements of the patriarchal matrix, different narratives of the interviewees were interpreted using the meaning that respondents themselves give to their actions and attitudes. The author, along with another researcher, after each phase of the analysis verified the consistency of the coded parts of the text (interview transcripts and notes with interpretations of themes) using randomly selected codes. In all selected cases, the interpretation of the meaning matched between the two researchers. Intersectionality served as a theoretical lens throughout the analysis. I applied the definition of intersectional analysis formulated by Winker and Degele (2011). According to these authors, intersectionality encompasses three interacting social constructions: systems of interactions between social structures that generate inequality, particularly power relations; symbolic representations; and identity constructions that are context-specific, thematically oriented, and closely tied to social practice (Winker and Degele 2011, 58). In this article, I examine how, within a specific social context, namely, the NMCs in Serbia, and through their peacebuilding activities, narratives about the roles of women from national minorities are constructed and articulated from their own perspectives.

4. Analysis and Results

Every interviewee in this study expressed a motivation to engage in political life through NMCs, driven primarily by the belief that their involvement would enhance the status of the minority national groups to which they belong. All of them are involved in a wide range of activities, including developing strategies, creating programs, drafting legal documents, and proposing projects. However, it is significant that in all these activities, the interviewed representatives of national minorities do not particularly emphasize the non-territorial characteristics of the NMCs. Most interviewees, like the interviewee from the Croatian council, believe that the territorial position is important, whether it is the territoriality of the national minority within the majority community or the territoriality that connects the national minority with the country of origin:

All these efforts help improve the integration of the national minorities in Serbia, strengthen ties with their kin states, and ultimately, ease ethnic tensions between the people and the nations. (Croatian representative, 50 y.o.)

For example, the territoriality is especially pointed out in interviews with representatives of the Hungarian national minority, who often emphasize the importance of grouping of this minority community within one area and that is Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, which, according to their opinion, enables easier cooperation and actions of the Hungarian national minority within Serbia. Albanian representatives' narratives distinctively integrate terminology tied to ongoing ethnic conflicts in Serbia, with a particular focus on the contentious issue of Kosovo's independence in Serbo-Albanian relations, thereby further advancing the argument on territoriality within peacebuilding processes. This involvement stems from beliefs the Serbian state continues to impose on Albanians in the municipalities of Preševo, Bujanovac, and Medveđa. Ongoing motivation of this interviewee is driven by a commitment to the fundamental rights of her community – human rights of Albanians, concerning their freedom and equality in Serbia. This interviewee argues that there is no justification for Albanians in Serbia to receive different treatment from other minorities in the region. In contrast to the other national minorities in the sample, national conflicts are not just a part of recent history for the Albanian community in Serbia; rather, it remains a current and pressing issue. The “poor state of Albanian education in Serbian municipalities, characterized by poor school conditions, a lack of resources available in Albanian, underdeveloped cultural initiatives, preservation of national identity, and the insufficient use of the Albanian language and script”, are additional challenges that also strengthen commitment of this interviewee. Her engagement is driven by a desire to enhance the quality of life for residents in mentioned municipalities, particularly for the Albanian community, which she views as one of the most marginalized minorities in Serbia.

The way communities are treated reflects the level of democracy and the nature of the state system in which they live. (Albanian representative, 34 y.o.)

Our interviewees believe that respecting the rights and freedoms of all minorities, in a multicultural society, is crucial to achieving genuine democracy. Therefore, our interviewees, such as a representative of the Albanian community, feel “it is their responsibility (of the political representatives) to act as advocates for those who are less heard, to alter the current circumstances, and to help forge a more just and equitable society for everyone” (Albanian representative, 34 y.o.).

Many of the interviewees express the belief that their political participation can contribute to the reduction of ethnic tensions in Serbia and peacebuilding. They see the councils' activities, which promote diversity as a societal value, as crucial, as well as initiatives that allow citizens to understand the specificities and needs of national minorities. These activities include “celebrating national holidays, promoting literature, art, and music, preserving traditions through various events that attract representatives from the majority and other groups in Serbia, organizing round tables on topics relevant to the national minority, and conducting media promotions for all these activities” (Bosniak representative, 51 y.o.).

Representatives of other minorities in the sample also tend to emphasize values such as *equality*, *non-discrimination*, and *the empowerment of minorities* as motivations for their engagement. This perspective is rooted in criticism directed towards the exclusion of various marginalized groups, not based on gender but rather on other grounds, in the first place national identity. Interviews with all interviewees revealed that their sense of national belonging is stronger than their sense of gender belonging. This position may be partially influenced by the context of the interview itself, as the women were interviewed primarily as members of the NMCs to which they belong, and thus primarily as members of a minority community. However, interviewees rarely highlight the gender dimension of their or councils' activities.

Analysis reveals that the women within the NMCs face prejudices on an individual level. Younger women, such as the Albanian representative, note that they have frequently encountered age-related prejudices in political life. It seems that emphasizing the national aspect of their activities in the interviews serves as a symbolic link to collective actions within the NMCs. Women

from minority communities face the same difficulties in political life as women from the majority population (Bosniak representative, 51 y.o.). From the perspective of this interviewee, it means that without affirmative measures, which include quotas for women's political participation and mandates like those for NMCs' electoral lists, women would not have the opportunity to participate in NMCs' activities. Still, their political representation, especially in decision-making positions, remains unequal to that of men. According to our interviewees, while significant progress has been made in the national-level representation of women in Serbia, women, especially those from national minorities, remain underrepresented in political and public life. This underrepresentation is evident not only in their numbers within NMCs' bodies and leadership positions but also in their limited opportunities to participate in decision-making processes, make substantial contributions, and integrate gender perspectives into NMCs' activities.

Despite women having led the Bosniak National Council for two terms, their role in diminishing ethnic tensions has not been prominent (Bosniak representative, 51 y.o.).

I do not see that importance is attached to the participation of women from national minorities in the political processes concerning the reduction of ethnic tensions in Serbia. (Bosniak representative, 51 y.o.)

The challenges this interviewee encountered during her engagement with the Bosniak National Council, according to her opinion, are predominantly related to the mainstream politics which very often determined directions of work and decisions within the NMCs. According to her opinion, electoral years often disrupt the continuity of projects initiated in previous periods, with new goals overshadowing strategic plans vital for the Bosniak community. Although women's participation in the Bosniak Council provides a platform to voice women's ideas and national concerns, it does not ensure a significant impact on crucial NMCs' decisions or events:

Women are present in the professional services and working bodies of the Council, while the officials and those who shape the Council's politics are men. (Bosniak representative, 43 y.o.)

From my personal experience so far, I can say that little attention is paid to the activities of women and girls who are involved in politics and belong to certain minority nationalities. In addition to the quota guaranteed by the electoral list, it is sometimes expressed only as a number, which must necessarily be decided only to fulfill the legal obligation which is the quota representation, and not evaluated by the activity and work of the candidate. (Albanian representative, 34 y.o.)

Tamas Korhecz (2019) asserts that the competition within NMCs for seats is not merely about competing programs but revolves around the representation of minorities and control over the budget and institutions of NMCs. This, in turn, is linked to male power dynamics. Korhecz suggests: "In this way, NMCs risk becoming, instead of institutions which enable minorities to decide on cultural politics independently from central state authorities, tools of ruling minority elites continually barring those minority members who do not affiliate with the dominant minority organization from representation" (Korhecz 2019, 129). This raises concerns about whether NMCs can effectively achieve their goals, such as promoting inter-ethnic democracy, ensuring transparency, and addressing intersectional issues for meaningful participation and representation of affected individuals. Internal pluralism remains a persistent challenge when representing the diverse interests of minority-within-minority groups.⁵

While there are women in leadership roles in national councils, it appears that female NMCs' members may not wield sufficient influence in decision-making processes. Previous research also indicates that women's participation in peacebuilding issues and their perspectives on the topic are often overlooked by other political actors (Hansen and Olsson 2004, 408). Donna Pankhurst (2007)

has characterized the exclusion of women from post-war peace processes as a “gender-based peace”, where those in power determine a peace that either marginalizes women’s needs or actively restricts or abolishes their rights. This underscores a historical pattern of marginalizing women in peacebuilding processes. The analysis of the interviews suggests that women are often permitted to advocate for peace but are not given the authority to make decisions regarding peace.

When asked about the gendered aspects of women’s political participation in peacebuilding processes, the interviewees often drew comparisons between the roles and actions of men and women, underscoring characteristics typically associated with women. One Croatian representative highlighted traits such as women’s consistency, persistence, fairness, and sense of justice, along with their emotional intelligence and refined intuition, which she believed enabled women to act in the best interest of society, in contrast to men:

Namely women’s ability to be consistent and persistent in achieving their plans, their fairness and sense of justice, tolerance and appreciation, their emotions and refined intuition to know when the moment is for certain actions for the benefit of society. As mothers, their willingness to do the best for their children is also reflected in their efforts to do the best they can for their fellow Croatians in the Republic of Serbia. Men are not known for patience and fine communication, economy, and friendliness, as women are able to do. (Croatian representative, 50 y.o.)

While these responses reflect the values attributed to women within the context of peacebuilding, they also reveal the persistent influence of patriarchal norms in shaping political roles. The framing of women’s roles in terms of their “peaceful nature” and maternal instincts closely aligns with the patriarchal matrix in which nation and gender are tightly intertwined. This narrative often portrays women as guardians of national continuity – either by protecting the community from the horrors of war or by ensuring the demographic survival of the national group through reproduction. This framing aligns with historical narratives dating back to the 1990s, when the Yugoslav civil war reinforced gendered constructions of the nation, positioning women as central to the reproductive functions of national survival (Drezgić 2010). Such representations are not unique to the interviewees in this study, as they echo broader societal narratives in which women are valued for their nurturing, familial, and maternal roles, all of which are seen as essential to the preservation of the national community.

The interview analysis reveals that many of the women interviewed still see the relationship between nation and gender as one heavily shaped by patriarchal ideologies. As one Bosniak representative noted, this relationship is often “under the veil of patriarchy,” suggesting that even as political roles evolve, gendered expectations continue to underpin women’s participation in politics. However, this patriarchal narrative was notably absent in the interviews with representatives from the Albanian national minority, indicating that the intersection of gender and nation is not universally experienced in the same way, and that different minority groups may resist or reframe these traditional gendered roles within peacebuilding processes. This shift points to the complex and varied ways in which gendered participation in nation-building and peacebuilding is negotiated across different social and political contexts, challenging the assumption of a singular, universal experience of gendered nationalism.

Although Albanian representatives also think that in relation to the activities of men in the NMCs:

Women have greater stability, correctness, and responsibility, especially when they are completely independent in their political activities and do not seek approval from men, and often such women are famous during their work or activities as disobedient. (Albanian representative, 34 y.o.)

Albanian interviewees testified about frequent cases when women involved in political activities must ensure that decisions they make are in line with the politics advocated by the political entity to

which they belong, even in cases when they disagree with the majority decision of that entity. To the question of the researcher what happens in such cases when women decide according to her own judgment, rather than as a member of that entity, our interviewees answer that those are cases when women who are independent in decision-making become known as “disobedient” or “uncontrolled”. That happens, they say, because of the prevailing attitude that these women are part of political processes thanks to the political elite, mostly men, and therefore they should always make decisions according to the directives “from above”, and not on their own.

When I say “disobedient” or “uncontrolled” women, I mean those women and girls who have the courage to be truly themselves, those who believe in their own work and their own values as individuals. The more independent women and girls are in decision-making, the better our society will be overall, because women and girls have shown to be a stabilizing factor for peace and stability in society only when they are equal to men in all spheres of life, including decision-making. It’s time for the promotion of gender equality not to be done with phrases or words but with concrete examples. (Albanian representative, 34 y.o.)

According to our interviewees, women and girls who are part of the decision-making in the NMCs also experience political pressure, and this is noticed in cases when discussing very important issues, as is the case with financial planning issues. In such cases, “experts” are usually presented to them as men, while the voting is done according to the agreement “from above”. Speaking from their experience, our interviewees emphasize that there are rare situations for a woman or girl involved in NMCs to make a completely different and independent decision. Such girls and women are few in political life, but our interviewees think that it is still encouraging that there are such women and girls, because they are strong, determined to overcome these challenges and struggles.

The Albanian representative connects disobedience with the outcome of women’s economic independence, translating it into actions in the political sphere and decisions:

Economic independence and professional development will remain one of the main factors that will have a serious and great impact on the undertaking of political activities related to the process of building and promoting gender equality, which is also expressed in independent decision-making and their implementation in practice. (...) I believe that independence in decision-making will bring strong and useful women for society and the community. (Albanian representative, 34 y.o.)

This narrative is liberated from the constraints and pressures of the socially prescribed role of women. This interviewee envisions a solution to the challenges of gender inequality in decision-making by focusing on the education and employment of young women, guiding them toward autonomy:

How we raise and educate young girls is of great importance. We must teach them to love themselves first and to be respected as such. Education and employment, or financial independence, will be a very important element for their independence in decision-making. At no point should men influence their decision-making; it should be the result of their own work and the freedom to assess things according to their own convictions. (Albanian representative, 34 y.o.)

This statement reveals a nuanced understanding of women’s empowerment and independence, particularly within the context of decision-making. The interviewee emphasizes the significance of self-love and respect, suggesting that the foundation for women’s autonomy starts with internal recognition of their worth. By highlighting the importance of education and financial independence, the quote aligns with broader feminist discourses that assert economic autonomy as crucial for women’s agency, not just in personal decisions, but also in broader social and

political contexts. The notion that “at no point should men influence their decision-making” introduces a powerful call for gender equality in decision-making processes. This point suggests a critique of traditional patriarchal structures where women’s choices are often overshadowed or directly influenced by male figures, whether in the family, workplace, or political spheres. In advocating for women’s freedom to make decisions based on their own convictions, the interviewee pushes for a shift away from these gendered power dynamics. However, this statement also implicitly draws attention to the systemic barriers that limit women’s independence, particularly in contexts where financial dependency and lack of access to education may restrict women’s autonomy. The interviewee’s framing suggests that overcoming these barriers – through education, employment, and the pursuit of financial independence – is central to achieving true gender equality. In this light, the statement advocates for structural changes that allow women to engage in decision-making processes on an equal footing with men, free from external influence or control.

Analyzing this within the broader context of gender and nationalism, the emphasis on women’s independence could be seen as part of a larger push to redefine traditional gender roles that have often been intertwined with national identity. Historically, women have been depicted as symbolic reproducers of the nation, with their roles as mothers and caregivers often taking precedence over their individual rights and agency. The interviewee’s comments challenge this narrative by positioning women as active, autonomous decision-makers, capable of shaping their own destinies independent of male authority. This shift is crucial not only for gender equality but also for a more inclusive and dynamic vision of national identity, one in which women are not just passive bearers of cultural and national values, but active participants in their construction.

It is important to emphasize that this interviewee relied more heavily than others on the narrative strategy of minority burden (Maran 2013), which she also observed in her relations with other national communities, as she explained:

Of course, from my personal experience, due to the political activities I have had and still have in the Council, I can say that women from other councils, perhaps due to their affiliation, language, culture, etc., are more active than the Albanian women. (...) This is because the political circumstances between the Albanian and Serbian communities have hindered our advancements in society, which cannot be denied. (Albanian representative, 34 y.o.)

She also described her own experience with prejudices within her council:

And often, due to my youth, I encountered prejudices in such situations when a woman so young could represent the Council at an important meeting. I had many such personal situations up to now... and it leaves the impression that in a society like ours, due to age, appearance, or external looks, belonging, etc., you can experience prejudices to such an extent that your work may not be appreciated, unfortunately. (Albanian representative, 34 y.o.)

This suggests that she was more aware of the intersection of her identities, particularly when compared to the other interviewees (all of whom were delegated by their respective councils, making it impossible for the researcher to influence their selection). These intersecting identities influenced her experiences and shaped her activities within the council, particularly in the peace-building processes. The intersectionality of her gender, age, and ethnic identity revealed how these dimensions of her identity interact with broader political and social structures, contributing to both the challenges and strategies she used in engaging with her council’s work. Her reflections offer valuable insights into how minority women navigate internal and external expectations in political and social spheres, particularly in contexts of ethnic conflict and peacebuilding.

This perspective is similarly reflected in a conversation with a member of the Bosniak Council. When asked about the gendered dimension of women’s activities within the council, she responds:

I am not sure this aspect exists in the description of the role of women in the Bosniak Council. (...) Our political action is focused on implementing the decisions made. (Bosniak representative, 43 y.o.)

When asked how this could be changed, she emphasizes the importance of creating a network of women from various national minorities and the majority population to foster a collective strength for more effective action:

Creating women's communities and connecting them into a network of women from other national minorities and the majority population, which would be systematically planned in terms of developing and implementing activities that promote all five areas of the council's work. Within these activities, addressing institutional and individual sources of prejudice and discrimination in the contexts and situations where participants in these activities learn, work, and live. (Bosniak representative, 43 y.o.)

This statement reveals a recognition of the importance of interconnection and collaboration among women from different backgrounds to address challenges related to prejudice and discrimination. It suggests a strategic vision for the empowerment of women within the context of the council, emphasizing systemic planning and collective efforts to foster inclusion and equality in order to change current power structures. Such a solution aligns with insights from other research, which emphasize that the success of the quota system, beyond merely increasing the representation of women in politics, requires establishing connections with feminist movements (Franceschet, Krook, and Piscopo 2009). This networking strengthens women's voices and enhances their actual influence on decision-making processes.

Such perspective is not present in the narratives of other interviewees. Other interviewees view their activities through a lens of feminine nature, emphasizing maternal tenderness and care for others. The Hungarian representative believes that such qualities are inherent to female nature. Such a perspective directs their actions in the peacebuilding processes, making them less engaged in transforming the patriarchal matrix regarding the intersection of nation and gender. Their gendered activities within the councils are further hindered by both internal and external barriers in the functioning of the NMCs in Serbia.

5. Discussion of the Results

This article aimed to understand how women representatives in Serbia's NMCs navigate and challenge male/state-centric peace discourses, and what observable impacts these challenges have on NMCs' actions regarding the role of women in peacebuilding. Starting from a theoretical perspective, the men/state-centered discourse is put into practice by conceptualizing women as guardians of the nation and peaceful mothers striving for pacifism. Data for this study were gathered through eight online semi-structured interviews with representatives from four national councils of national minorities in Serbia, conducted during January and February 2024.

The interviewees emphasize the crucial role of NMCs in cultural identity sectors, particularly education, language, and the preservation of cultural history for minorities. However, they highlight limited opportunities for women's active participation in peacebuilding processes due to the andro-centric and state-centric nature of peace politics. Although their narratives reference universal values and human rights as the foundation for peacebuilding, the perspectives of most interviewees often reinforce gender stereotypes, treating male experiences as normative. The analysis reveals that women with such attitudes rarely challenge the male-state-centric discourse on peace. Instead, they frequently reproduce patriarchal narratives, portraying women as peacemakers and maternal guardians of the nation. Traits like stability, a peaceful disposition, and constructiveness are viewed as inherently feminine and shape women's political engagement,

as perceived by these interviewees. Furthermore, their experiences, particularly their lack of real power within NMCs' structures, significantly influence both their attitudes toward the issues examined and their subsequent actions.

Only representatives of the Albanian national minority and one Bosniak representative in this study question the male-state-centric discourse on peace. Female disobedience, economic independence, and autonomy in decision-making processes are identified as key elements that deconstruct such discourses. According to them, disobedience is labeled as such because it is perceived as inappropriate behavior for women within the political system, particularly within the NMCs. This means that even when women – national minority representatives challenge the male/state centric discourses on peace they emphasize that their actions do not actually change the main direction of the NMCs' work and activities in which decisions are made “from above” – that is, under the influence of mainstream political currents in Serbia. In this way, it is shown that plurality, intersectionality, and autonomy conceived as the basic elements of the NMCs' existence and actions, face numerous difficulties towards full realization in practice.

A critical issue here lies in crafting a constitution that incorporates NTA while minimizing the risk of a return to armed conflict, which could erode the state's foundational role as the source of NTA's institutional authority. The feminist critique on this issue centers on the idea of the ‘unencumbered self,’ prevalent in the ideal of the autonomous self in ethics and politics (Benhabib 1992). This critique argues that the autonomy ideal stems from an abstract male universalism, disregarding the realities of human life, particularly the situations of women. From a feminist perspective, advocating for autonomy as an ideal seems absurd because individuals are always situated in various contexts and life situations where dependency on others is crucial. Personal identity's narrative structure underscores that decision-making results from interactions with the social context. Feminist perspectives emphasize the embodied and embedded nature of human experiences, challenging the abstract notion of personal autonomy. Instead, the subject is seen as constituted in concrete relations of gender and community, always dependent on a body, culture, and life world.

The feminist concept of autonomy becomes a compelling argument for non-territorial autonomy, rooted in belonging to ethnic, cultural, religious, or social groups, considering that every individual is situated within a specific culture and life world. However, the feminist criticism of abstract autonomy reveals a paradox within the concepts of territorial and non-territorial autonomy. It demonstrates that participation in a community can sometimes limit individual freedom, particularly when certain groups and cultures restrict women's rights. Nonetheless, feminist concepts suggest that individual emancipation can occur from within a community or a particular cultural, religious, or social group. This involves working within the community to respect women's rights and autonomy, ensuring the political autonomy of all participants in the non-territorial autonomy framework. This perspective is shared by some of the interviewees in this study who demonstrate the greatest commitment to changing narratives that constrain women's roles in peacebuilding processes. They emphasize the importance of networking with other women, including those from different national groups, whether minority or majority, as well as prioritizing the education of young girls to empower them and foster their autonomy in action and life, enabling them to rethink and challenge the structures that sustain global hierarchies of power.

This is also crucial for understanding the intersectional axes of oppression and the complex positionality of minority women politicians, which shape their experiences, attitudes, and subsequent actions. This research indicates that women who exhibit greater reflexivity regarding the complexity of their positionality demonstrate increased agency in challenging traditional conceptions of women's roles in peacebuilding processes.

Peterson (1992) argues that the feminist reflection on peace building must examine how structural violence is naturalized and depoliticized, exposing the historically contingent nature of these structures. The gender division of labor and its impact on women's lives, devaluing domestic

work and pushing them into poverty and violence, is seen as part of the broader issue of peacebuilding. Such concerns are often sidelined by those prioritizing the power and instrumental rationality of nation-states. Tickner (1992) stresses that feminist peacebuilding concepts should address the need for global economic restructuring and highlight the connection between women's everyday experiences and security, and arguably peace and war. The peacebuilding process, according to Tickner, involves criticizing the state and seeking recognition of the consequences of local structural violence. A normative and transformative vision that focuses on inequality and emancipation is advocated, with Sarah Brown (1998) emphasizing the identification and explanation of social stratification at the global relations level. Tickner (Tickner 1992) argues that lasting peace requires placing social and gender justice at the forefront, as political, economic, and ecological relations characterized by domination and subordination are incompatible with genuine security. Abandoning exclusionary civic ideals centered on the citizen/warrior patriot can contribute to shaping a less militarized national identity, fostering inclusive relationships with the 'Other', and recognizing the diverse experiences shaped by intersecting axes of oppression.

However, while ethnic minority parties have demonstrated significant influence in domestic policies of various countries, boosting political participation, preventing conflicts, managing interethnic relations, and sustaining democracy (Ishiyama 2011; Chandra 2017), this research suggests that women's participation in NMCs is primarily addressed through quotas – i.e., numerical representation of women and not their effective participation, due to the political climate that is masculine in nature. In this way, the research confirms the findings of previous studies, which indicate that political representation is not sufficient for women's effective participation in political life and that it is necessary to create conditions for their active, unrestricted participation in deliberative processes (Lončar 2023), which would also enable the questioning of discourses on gender role of women in political processes, such as peacemaking. Although conducted on a small sample of female political representatives in the NMCs in Serbia, this study identified elements that are significant for the analysis of disobedient democracy politics at the micro level. In this sense, the findings of this research contribute to the identification of mechanisms that represent an obstacle to the development of political disobedience of women at the micro level of a society, within the NMCs' work. In order to verify the findings of this research, in subsequent studies it would be useful to verify the results through examination in the NMCs who have no experience of national conflicts in the recent past, and also to contrast the views of women representatives of national minorities in the NMCs with the views of their male colleagues, which would be particularly significant in terms of examination of the effects of women's disobedience in political life.

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Notes

- 1 "Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia" No. 33 of 13 June 2002 [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-EL\(2005\)027-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-EL(2005)027-e) (accessed on October 30, 2024)
- 2 [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-EL\(2005\)026-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-EL(2005)026-e) accessed on October 30, 2024.
- 3 ZoNSNM-1-eng.pdf (parlament.gov.rs) (Accessed January 10, 2024)
- 4 Serbia: Law on Gender Equality | Refworld (Accessed January 10, 2024)
- 5 The term 'minority within a minority' refers to individuals or groups within a minority group, such as women, gays and lesbians, or poor minority members who are considered weak in terms of their political power over most other minority group members (Okin, 1999).

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Appendix I: Interview Guide

Thank you for participating in this research.

Please respond to the questions as thoroughly and illustratively as possible, using examples of activities or reflections on the role of Councils of national minorities in peacebuilding in Serbia and the region. I am particularly interested in your perspective as a woman in the Council you belong to, and your thoughts on how women contribute to reducing ethnic tensions and social distance between different minority communities and the majority population in Serbia through their participation in the work of Councils. Before we begin, is there anything you would like to clarify regarding your participation in the research?

1. To begin, please tell me what is your highest level of education and your age?
2. What is your role in the Council, how long have you been a member?
3. What motivated you to get involved in the Council's work?
4. Which activities of the Council do you recognize as most significant for reducing ethnic tensions in Serbia and why?
5. In which of these activities have you participated? Please describe these activities and your contribution. You may include all types of activities, whether they are organized by the Council itself or by others – participation by invitation.
6. How would you assess the level of cooperation between the national minority to which you belong and the majority population in Serbia? Please illustrate with examples if such examples exist.
7. With which national minority do you have the best cooperation and exchange of experiences? Please illustrate with examples if such examples exist.
8. What do you think is the importance of the participation of women from national minorities in political processes aimed at reducing ethnic tensions in Serbia and the region?
9. What is the role of women from the Councils of National Minorities in reducing ethnic distance in Serbia? How do you see your role in this? And what about the role of women from other Councils?
10. What elements of the activities of women from the Councils of National Minorities define the peacebuilding process as gendered – as distinctly female experience? How does this differ from the activities of men from the Councils?
11. How would you assess the relations between nationality and gender in contemporary Serbia?
12. Thank you for your time! Is there anything else you would like to add that you consider relevant to the topic we are discussing, and that I haven't asked about?