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ABSTRACT

This article presents empirical findings on two questions: what are the 'political stepping stones' on the way to the prime ministerial post? Are there any differences between female and male prime ministers on their way to the chief executive? These questions are primarily linked to the literature on women's recruitment in top political offices. The data for this analysis stem from unique biographical records of 76 prime ministers in those 10 member states of the European Union where women have been in prime ministerial positions from 1979 to 2015. Consistent with theoretical expectations, the empirical findings show that there is indeed a gender difference in the pathways to the prime ministerial post. Female prime ministers are predominantly recruited in centre-right parties. They have more political experience in parliament and cabinet than their male counterparts, but a shorter duration in office once becoming prime minister.

1. Introduction

Prime ministers are major political players in parliamentary democracies. Although there is considerable knowledge on the role, function, and performance of prime ministers (Helms, 2005; Jones, 1991; Peters, Rhodes, & Wright, 2000; Rose & Suleiman, 1980; Strangio, 't Hart, & Walter, 2013; Weller, 1985), hardly anything is known about their pathways to power from a comparative viewpoint (see Müller & Philipp, 1991 and Musella, 2015 for exceptions). The paucity of research is most surprising since prime ministers are the most important members of cabinet governments. They are the architects and agenda setters of policies and the drivers of cabinet decision-making. Furthermore, they are usually well known in public and expected to exercise public leadership in the interests of the citizens (Strangio et al., 2013, p. 1; Weller, 1985, p. 1).

In this article, we want to tackle the political careers of prime ministers from a 'gender' perspective. The literature provides evidence that women who want to achieve high political offices face a different structure of opportunities and constraints than men. Gendered distributions of political posts can depend on several factors, such as regime institutional arrangements (Bego, 2014; Jalalzai, 2013); different institutional selection procedures

(Kunovich & Paxton, 2005; O'Brien, 2012); previous women's appointments (Jalalzai, 2013; Krook & O'Brien, 2012); ideological orientation of parties (Claveria, 2014) as well as party strategies (Kostadinova & Mikulska, 2015; Murray, Krook, & Opello, 2012) and the electoral performance of the own party (O'Brien, 2015). Moreover, some have argued that societal cultural attitudes towards gender equality (Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Reynolds, 1999) and own previous personal political experiences (Heath, Schwindt-Bayer, & Taylor-Robinson, 2005) can affect women's chances of recruitment. Overall, the literature indicates that there seems to be a clear gender bias in the recruitment of leading politicians (Arriola & Johnson, 2014; Jacob, Scherpereel, & Adams, 2014).

These studies usually account for differences in the level of representation between women and men. Others have focused on the paths women follow to reach apical political positions. Overall, research on political careers of female politicians in national parliaments and cabinets is well-established (Davis, 1997; Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor-Robinson, 2016; Genovese & Thompson, 1993; Lovenduski & Norris, 1993; Matland & Montgomery, 2003; Reynolds, 1999; Siaroff, 2000). Furthermore, some scholars have dealt with the socio-demographic and political profiles of female chief executives (Hoogensen & Solheim, 2006; Jalalzai, 2004; Jensen, 2008; Skard, 2014). Yet, a systematic comparison of women and men's routes to prime ministerial position is still lacking in the literature, although the literature has pointed out that – to detect gendered routes to power – 'the ideal scenario would [… be] to compare women's and men's [… careers]' (Tremblay & Stockemer, 2013, p. 524). Our article claims to fill this gap by answering two questions: what are the 'political stepping stones' on the way to the prime ministerial post? Are there any differences between female and male prime ministers on their way to office? Thereby, the analysis will focus on prime ministers in the member states of the European Union (EU) from 1979 to 2015.

Firstly, we review the theoretical debates on the recruitment of women in politics and specify our expectations. Secondly, the case selection is introduced. Thirdly, we introduce the empirical findings on the career patterns of both female and male prime ministers under comparative perspective. Finally, we discuss the empirical results and provide suggestions for further research.

2. Gender and political recruitment

Research on female and male politicians' profiles and careers focuses on four topics: competences and skills; party affiliation; prestige of political positions; and tenure in political offices. In these fields, substantial differences between women and men have been highlighted.

Regarding the first point, the literature underlines the challenges that female leaders have to cope with when it comes to achieve their political positions. Bloksgaard (2011) has for instance argued that traditional values foster the vision of power wielding in public sphere as a typical male activity. This would create 'gender-segregated' societies, where women are seen as more 'appropriated' for the private sphere and for 'caring' activities. Furthermore, it is argued that women will need to have extended political experience if they want to reach leadership positions (Murray, 2010; Sczesny, Bosak, Neff, & Schyns, 2004). Even female career politicians would be subjected to such gender stereotypes

(Sykes, 2013). Jalalzai and Krook (2010, p. 19) claim that 'politics is still largely viewed as a "man's world".'

Focusing on female candidates for parliamentary seats, scholars have shown that women need higher average profiles to overcome barriers to entry (Milyo & Schosberg, 2000). Matland (2003, p. 326) has pointed out that in Eastern Europe party gatekeepers have been interested in candidates with high education levels and socio-economic status. Moreover, previous experience in political institutions and in the party seems to be an asset. However, he has pointed out that 'the bar was set higher for possible female candidates' and that, 'to be considered a man's equal, women had to be more than a man's equal.' Bego (2014) has indeed observed that in Central–Eastern Europe female enrolment in tertiary education significantly increases women's chances to be appointed in ministerial positions. Similarly, according to Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson (2009), women may have to show higher educational and professional credentials than men to reach the same ministerial offices (see also Fischer, Dowding, & Dumont, 2012). Moreover, O'Brien, Mendez, Peterson, & Shin (2015, p. 713) state that, even if the number of female party leaders is increasing, women remain less likely than men to be selected for high political positions. In order to become party leaders, women would play a more demanding 'game.' To reach the same positions of men, they have to be 'extraordinary politicians' (O'Brien, 2015, p. 1023). Schwindt-Bayer (2011) has noticed that female leaders are guided by the same motivations of their male counterparts, and the differences in their paths to power may ensue from the stricter set of formal and informal rules that women has to comply with. With regard to European political executives (prime ministers and presidents), Jalalzai (2014, pp. 578, 582) has argued that women have to follow 'limited routes to power' and that 'professional backgrounds prove important to securing posts.' Nearly a quarter of women achieved power through activism in political movements. However, they had 'the added burden of amassing formal experience' (Jalalzai, 2014, p. 586).

Thus, our first hypothesis states that

H$_1$: *women prime ministers who have entered prime ministerial office have achieved higher qualifications than men.*

Secondly, it has been argued that leftist ideologies and leftist voters are more 'sensitive' to the issue of gender equality. On the contrary, conservative parties would be keen to preserve a traditional view of female roles in the society (Rule, 1987). Christmans-Best and Kjær (2007, p. 103) even claim that the success of a left-wing party is 'the strongest predictor of women's level of inclusion in a political life.' In fact, left-wing parties promote more women for parliamentary seats (Caul, 1999; Wängnerud, 2009) and for cabinet positions (Claveria, 2014; Reynolds, 1999).

Assuming that this also holds true for chief executives, we expect that

H$_2$: *the ratio of prime ministers affiliated to centre-left parties has been higher among women than among men.*

Third, research on women's parliamentary experiences has shown that female MPs are usually appointed to stereotypically 'feminine' and less prestigious parliamentary committees (Barnes, 2014; Heath et al., 2005; Pansardi & Vercesi, 2016). Furthermore, women hold fewer ministerial posts and, if they do so, they are found in less important positions, such

as in the ministries of Youth, Family, and Education (Davis, 1997; Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor-Robinson, 2005, 2009; Krook & O'Brien, 2012; Sykes, 2009; cf. Tremblay & Stockemer, 2013).

Accordingly, we hypothesize that

H₃: *women prime ministers who have entered prime ministerial office have hold lower prestige ministerial portfolios more than men.*

Finally, empirical research shows that the tenure of women in top political positions is more precarious than men's. Looking at mayors in Italy, Gagliarducci and Peserman (2008) have proved that the likelihood of early terminations in office is higher among female mayors. In a comparative study of West European ministers between 1945 and 2011, Bright, Döring, and Little (2015) have concluded that women ministers have a lower rate of survival than their male counterparts. Moreover, women are subjected to stricter evaluations when they reach leadership positions, which traditionally are in the men's hands (e.g. Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992). For instance, O'Brien (2015, p. 1035) has shown that the tenure of female party leaders is more dependent then men's on the electoral performances of their own party organizations. Women would have greater chances to stay in office as long as the party performs well. Furthermore, '"winning women" may stay in the post precisely because they have overcome especially high barriers to entry and/or rehabilitated poorly performing parties.' However, on the other hand, higher evaluation standards produce for women 'a greater likelihood of leaving the post when their parties lose seat share.' This makes women's tenure more precarious, all else being equal.

Extending the argument to prime ministers, we assume that

H₄: *women prime ministers have stayed in office for shorter periods than men.*

In the following, we will systematically compare female and male prime ministers with regard to socio-demographic backgrounds and political expertise; party affiliations; types of ministerial portfolios held prior to entering office; and duration in office as prime minister. If prime ministerial careers in Europe have indeed been gendered, we shall identify differences between female and male prime ministers in their personal profiles, their political experience, and their career length.

3. Case selection and women's representation

Our data are based on biographical records of 76 prime ministers who have led one or more governments for a minimum of 1 month in 10 member states of the EU from 1979 to 2015.[1] Data for all female and male prime ministers were collected until 31 December 2015. The selection of cases is limited to the EU member countries that have been governed by female and male prime ministers (Croatia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Latvia, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and United Kingdom). Thus, we deal with the *total population* of prime ministers in all ten countries, starting with the appointment of the first woman prime minister in 1979.[2]

The focus on the EU member states allows us to deal with a region that, in spite of the disproportionally lower representation of women in executive posts, has outperformed other world regions with respect to female representation in top political positions (Jalalzai, 2014, p. 278). Moreover, these countries are all democratic countries that grant

substantial decision-making power to the prime minister. These countries also have a fairly homogeneous culture and a good socio-economic performance (UNDP, 2015). This reduces the variation of possible configurational effects that regional factors might have on women's political recruitment (e.g. Krook, 2010). Furthermore, our regional 'medium-N' focus (N = 10) has the potential to avoid the idiosyncratic pitfalls of single case studies. Our findings are therefore only valid for the ten European member states under consideration. It may well be that the pathways to political executives of female and male prime ministers might follow different patterns in other regions and countries. Yet, our approach might lead to a broader comparative assessment of gendered pathways to top executive power.

Our analysis starts in 1979, after the first female Prime Minister, Margret Thatcher, has been appointed within European member countries. Prime ministers from Central–Eastern Europe are included since 1990/1991. We have only included prime ministers from those Central–Eastern European countries that score five or higher on the Polity IV democracy scale (Marshall, Gurr, & Jaggers, 2014). Therefore, prime ministers from Croatia are considered only from 2000 onwards (see Appendix). The data are taken from a larger original database on the 'political capital' and the 'power structures' of prime ministers in European democracies since 1945 (N = 324).[3]

On the basis of this definition we have identified 63 male and 13 female prime ministers in European countries from 1979 to 2015. Among the latter, seven come from Central–Eastern countries. Half of the remaining female prime ministers from Western Europe come from Nordic countries, which indicates that the 'Scandinavian effect' of female representation in parliaments and cabinets might also hold true for prime ministerial posts (Putnam, 1976, p. 33; Siaroff, 2000, p. 199).[4]

Overall, Table 1 shows that women in European member states are clearly underrepresented in prime ministerial positions (17 per cent, i.e. 13 out of 76 of all prime ministers). Furthermore, there is no difference between Western Europe and Central–Eastern countries with regard to their representation in prime minister's posts. In both areas, women have held 17 per cent of the total positions. However, the number of women prime ministers has increased substantially over the past ten years (see Appendix). While only three women prime ministers have been in office between 1980 and 1993

Table 1. Prime ministers by gender and country (1979–2015).

Country	Women	Men	All
Denmark	1 (20%)	4 (80%)	5
Finland	2 (22.2%)	7 (77.8%)	9
France	1 (7.7%)	12 (92.3%)	13
Germany	1 (33.3%)	2 (66.7%)	3
United Kingdom	1 (20%)	4 (80%)	5
Sub-total Western Europe	*6 (17.1%)*	*29 (82.9%)*	*35*
Croatia	1 (25%)	3 (75%)	4
Latvia	1 (8.3%)	11 (91.7%)	12
Poland	3 (23.1%)	10 (76.9%)	13
Slovakia	1 (20%)	4 (80%)	5
Slovenia	1 (14.3%)	6 (85.7%)	7
Sub-total Central–Eastern Europe	*7 (17.1%)*	*34 (82.9%)*	*41*
Total	13 (17.1%)	63 (82.9%)	76

Source: Databank *Political Careers and Political Power of Prime Ministers in Europe (1945–2015)*, Center for the Study of Democracy, Leuphana University Lüneburg, own calculations.

(Thatcher in the United Kingdom, Cresson in France, and Suchocka in Poland) the number increased up to ten female prime ministers between 2002 and 2015 (Jäätteenmäki in Finland, Merkel in Germany, Kosor in Crotia, Kiviniemi in Finland, Radičová in Slovakia, Thorning-Schmidt in Denmark, Bratušek in Slovenia, Straujuma in Latvia, and Kopacz and Szydło in Poland). In particular, there has been a pronounced increase of eight female prime ministers since 2009. Among them, six have been appointed in Central–Eastern European countries. The data also show that the number of female prime ministers in each country is rather low (only seldom above one). Obviously, women share substantial difficulties in accessing top political executive posts across Europe.[5]

4. Prime ministers' careers by gender differences: four dimensions of analysis

The aim of this section is to identify similarities and differences in career patterns between women and men in chief executive offices across member states of the EU. Thereby, we shall focus on the comparative analysis of the socio-demographic background and political experiences; party affiliations; types of ministerial portfolios; and the duration of female and male prime ministers in office.

4.1. Socio-demographic backgrounds and political expertise

An initial examination of the socio-demographic background of female and male prime ministers allows to see that there is no gender bias in the age of prime ministers when entering office. They are predominantly recruited as senior politicians (average age among women 51 and among male 48 years). Second, we also find that both women and men prime ministers share a fairly high educational background: 97 per cent of

Table 2. Occupation of prime ministers in ten EU countries by gender (1979–2015) (in percentages).

	Women (N = 13)	Men (N = 63)
First occupation		
University teacher, lecturer, professor, or equivalent	23	31.7
Civil servant	15.4	11.1
Full-time politician	15.4	11.1
Cadre/engineer/technician	15.4	3.2
Legal profession (lawyer/judge)	7.7	9.5
Journalist/media/artist	7.7	4.8
Political consultant	–	6.3
Teacher	–	6.3
Blue collar employee	–	4.8
Industry/business	–	4.8
Capital market/banking	–	3.2
Full-time union official	–	1.6
Other	15.4	1.6
Occupation when entering office as prime minister for the first time		
Full-time politician	92.3	90.4
Industry/business	7.7	1.6
Civil servant	–	3.2
University teacher, lecturer, professor, or equivalent	–	3.2
Political consultant	–	1.6

Source: see Table 1.
Note: Where not specified, the information is to be meant 'prior to becoming prime minister.'

men and 100 per cent of women obtained a university degree before becoming prime ministers. Third, the majority of female (23 per cent) and male (32 per cent) prime ministers started their careers as university teachers. The second largest group of both female and male prime ministers came from diverse occupations in the political and public sector (e.g. civil servants and legal profession). Only with regard to qualified technicians we find a clear difference between female (15 per cent) and male prime ministers (3 per cent). Finally, the data also show that about 90 per cent of all prime ministers (female and male) in European member countries have been full-time politicians before entering the chief executive for the first time (Table 2).

Regarding the political expertise of prime ministers, scholars have argued that a 'normal' career is defined as having served in parliament, in cabinet and as national party leader before entering office as chief executive (Blondel, 1980, pp. 137–138; Rose, 2001, p. 72). Taking this definition into account, the data in Table 3 show some marginal differences between female and male prime ministers: nearly all women prime ministers (92 per cent) have held a seat in national parliament (compared to only 83 per cent among men). Furthermore, female prime ministers have more political experience as cabinet minister than men (63 per cent among women and 54 per cent among men). Yet, the difference is not as obvious regarding their experience as party leaders: 54 per cent of female and 56 per cent of male prime ministers have been head of their national party organization.

One way for assessing the degree of professionalization is to evaluate the number of political posts that women and men held before entering the prime minister's office (Bakema & Secker, 1988). Following this approach our analysis focuses on all three major political positions that prime ministers usually hold before entering office (member of parliament, cabinet member, and party leader). In a nutshell, we argue that prime ministers who have held all three positions have gained *high* political expertise; those prime ministers who have held two of these positions (irrespective of the type) are considered as having *medium* political expertise. Yet, those prime ministers who held only one position are defined as politicians with *low* political expertise. Finally, those who have not covered any of the three positions before getting into the executive office are perceived as having no political expertise. Thus, we measure the level of professionalization as the degree of accumulated political expertise in different political positions.

The degree of political expertise among women and men prime ministers is summarized in an 'index of professionalization,' whereby *high/medium* political expertise is defined as 'professional' and *low/none* political expertise as 'unprofessional' (see Figure 1).

Overall, Figure 1 shows that two thirds of all female and male prime ministers are professionals according to our definition. There is no single female prime minister and only

Table 3. Number of prime ministers in political offices in ten EU countries by gender (1979–2015).

Political office	Women ($N = 13$)	Men ($N = 63$)
Member of parliament	12 (92.3%)	52 (82.5%)
Member of cabinet	9 (62.9%)	34 (54%)
National party head	7 (53.8%)	35 (55.6%)

Source: see Table 1.
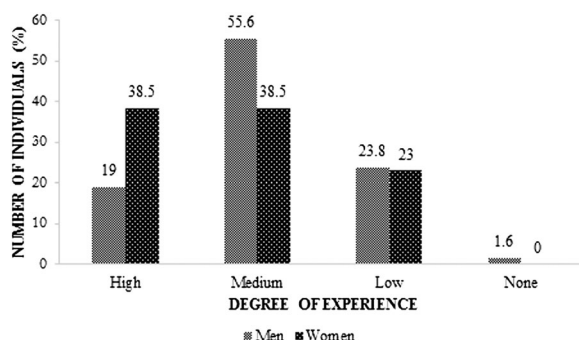Note: All the information is to be meant 'prior to becoming prime minister.'

Figure 1. Level of professionalization among prime ministers in ten EU countries by gender (1979–2015). Source: see Table 1.

one male prime minister in the EU countries without any political expertise in one of the three major political posts. However, the distribution of women is clearly more skewed towards high levels of professionalization. Thus, we can observe that about 39 per cent of women in chief executive positions have held all three political positions during their political career while this is true for only 19 per cent of their male counterparts.

Yet, looking only at the numbers of political positions ignores an important aspect of the professionalization, which is the time that a prime minister spends in any of these political positions. It is well known that a longer duration in office leads to a deeper knowledge of the respective political arena. Hence, the duration of women and men in political offices before becoming prime minister stands as a further indicator of professionalization. We assume that the longer the duration in parliament and cabinet, the higher the degree of professionalization.

The data in Figure 2 clearly indicate that the duration of female prime ministers in both institutions is higher than among their male counterparts. On average, the parliamentary experience of women is 115 months that is 19 months longer than among male prime ministers. Furthermore, women held ministerial positions nearly 1 year longer than men (48 years and 37 months, respectively).

4.2. Party affiliation, ministerial portfolios, and duration in office

Between 1979 and 2015**,** nearly all prime ministers held a party affiliation at the time when gaining their first premiership. According to our data, one-third of all male prime ministers have been members of a centre-left party, whereas 63 per cent have been affiliated with centre-right parties.[6] Among the female prime ministers, 85 per cent have been members of liberal, Christian democratic, conservative, or right-wing and nationalist parties.[7] More precisely, female prime ministers such as Suchocka and Kopacz in Poland, Jäättenmäki and Kiviniemi in Finland, and Bratušek in Slovenia were appointed as members of liberal parties. Three women prime ministers (Thatcher in the United Kingdom, Radičová in Slovakia, and Straujuma in Latvia) came to power as member of the conservative party. Moreover, Kosor in Croatia and Szydło in Poland entered office while they were affiliated to a right-wing and nationalist party. One female prime minister (Merkel in
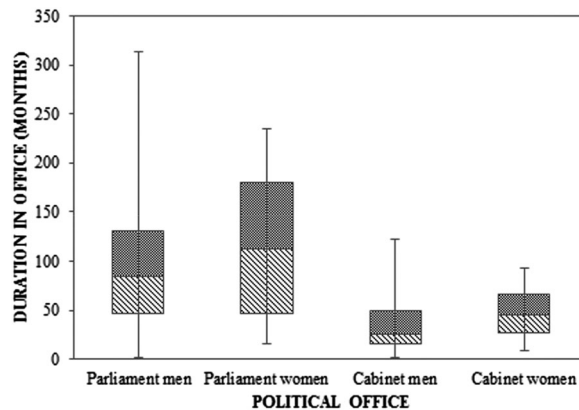
Figure 2. Distribution of female and male prime ministers by duration in parliament and in cabinet before entering office in ten EU countries (1979–2015). *Mean:* Parliament men 96.1; Parliament women 115.2; Cabinet men 36.7; Cabinet women 47.8. *Median:* parliament men 85; parliament women 113; cabinet men 26; cabinet women 45. Source: see Table 1.
Notes: Only individuals with the relevant experience included. An incompatibility between parliamentary seats and ministerial posts exists in Croatia, France, Slovakia, and Slovenia. In Latvia there is no incompatibility, but an MP has the right to give up the mandate during the term as member of government. S/he may renew the mandate once s/he resigns as member of government.

Germany) has been member of a Christian democratic party. Finally, only two female prime ministers (Cresson in France and Thorning-Schmidt in Denmark) have been members of the centre-left and the social-democratic parties.

Secondly, our data confirm previous research on portfolio allocation among women cabinet members that has stressed the disproportional underrepresentation of women in high-prestige ministries. In our analysis, we follow Krook and O'Brien's (2012) classification of portfolios by policy areas. This 'classification has the merit of being built upon established literature on societal gender divides and portfolios rankings as well as of being suitable for comparative research' (Pansardi & Vercesi, 2016). Moreover, we agree that access to financial resources and visibility define the 'prestige' of ministerial portfolios (Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor-Robinson, 2005).

The data in Table 4 show that all female prime ministers had cabinet experiences albeit only in low- or medium-prestige ministerial departments. Yet, none of them held high-prestige portfolios before entering office. Among their male counterparts 62 per cent served as cabinet minister in high-prestigious portfolios.

The range of ministerial portfolios held by women prime ministers before entering office shows a large variation: Agriculture (Cresson and Straujuma); Education and Science (Thatcher); Environment and Safety of Nuclear Reactors (Merkel); European Affairs (Cresson); Family/Veterans/Inter-Generational Solidarity (Kosor); Foreign Trade/ Tourism/Industrial Redeployment/International Development (Cresson and Kiviniemi); Health (Kopacz); Justice (Jäätteenmäki); Labour (Radičová); Public Administration/Local Government (Kiviniemi); Women/Youth (Merkel).

Finally, our data show that the degree of professionalization is not linked to the overall duration as prime minister: women stayed shorter in office than their male colleagues (34

Table 4. Portfolios and duration of prime ministers in ten EU countries, by gender (1979–2015).

	Women	Men
Type of portfolio held (only cabinet members)		
High-prestige portfolio (*N*, per cent)	–	14 (41.2)
Medium/low-prestige portfolio (*N*, per cent)	9 (100)	13 (38.2)
Both (*N*, per cent)	–	7 (20.6)
Experience in office		
Total duration as prime minister (months)	34.5	45.9

Source: see Table 1 .

Notes: Where relevant, all the information is to be meant 'prior to becoming prime minister.'

High-prestige portfolios comprise Finance/Treasury; Economy; Foreign Affairs; Defense; and Interior. Medium/low-prestige portfolios comprise all the others (see Krook & O'Brien, 2012, p. 846).

The calculation of the total duration as prime minister includes only concluded terms in office. We define a new term in office when there is a change of prime minister; a change of cabinet party composition; a general election; and/or a cabinet resignation followed by a new formal investiture.

compared to 46 months, respectively). These are fairly low figures given the fact that legislative terms in European countries usually last between 48 and 60 months. Yet, if the longevity of prime ministers in office 'provides something like a proxy for effectiveness' (Baylis, 2007, p. 84) or an 'ability to develop and implement policies' (Müller & Philipp, 1991, p. 149), then we find women prime ministers to face more obstacles in this respect.

5. Discussion

This article presents seven major empirical findings: *first*, the absolute number of female prime ministers is higher in Central–Eastern Europe than in Western Europe. *Second*, we find more female prime ministers in semi-presidential than in parliamentary systems (22.5 and 14.8 per cent, respectively). These results support Jalalzai's (2008, 2014) view who claims that the fairly large proportion of women prime ministers in Central–Eastern Europe is not due to more gender equality in Eastern societies, but dependent upon the existence of a dual executive structure in these new democracies. Another possible explanation for this phenomenon is the rise of new parties and party systems which has modified the configurations of the former political systems in Central–Eastern Europe and thereby created new opportunities for women to be selected for the chief executive (van Biezen & Rashkova, 2014; Galligan, Clavero, & Calloni, 2007; Kostadinova & Mikulska, 2015). Moreover, Jalalzai's (2014) has argued that regime transitions foster temporary executives and that the instability of political executives provides an opportunity structure for women to reach apical political posts (see also Montecinos, in press). Thus,

> temporary appointments are […] an important route to office for women since they are able to bypass traditional mechanisms. […] In fact, women aiding in times of electoral transformation may be viewed positively precisely because they are women and, as such, not seen as tainted with their own political ambitions. (Jalalzai & Krook, 2010, p. 15)

The career path of former Polish female Prime Minister Hanna Suchocka is a good case in point. During the transition phase from communism to democracy, Poland implemented a semi-presidential system. At the same time the party system was extremely volatile, the parliament was highly fragmented and cabinets were short-lived. When, in 1992, a further government formation process went into gridlock, party

leaders decided to rely on Suchocka, who had a long standing parliamentary performance (Jensen, 2008).

Our findings also support Beckwith's (2015) view that a successful political career of female prime ministers in Western Europe is related to favourable conditions within their own political party. More precisely, she argues that women meet higher chances to become party leaders and then prime ministers when an intra-party crisis occurs. The consequent removal of incumbent male party leaders seems to be a necessary condition to open access to women for top leadership positions. This situation usually occurs after critical events within their own political party, such as scandals or electoral failures. We therefore find a higher opportunity for women to become prime ministers after an intra-party crisis because

> junior men, with less experience and cabinet credentials, will remain in the potential eligibility pool; [… but they] will anticipate that the party will not do well […] following a scandal or electoral defeat and hence will wait for a better opportunity. (Beckwith, 2015, p. 726f)

The cases of Thatcher and Merkel's rise to the premiership within their own party are consistent with this argument.[8]

Third, the socio-demographic background of male and female prime ministers is fairly similar. All women and nearly all men started their careers with a higher education. Later on, both groups gathered substantial life experience before entering office, with an average age of about 50 years. Furthermore, the majority of all women and men prime ministers started working in academia or in political administration. Finally, and most importantly, more than 90 per cent of all female and male prime ministers were full-time politicians when entering the chief executive for the first time. These findings clearly show that European prime ministers are part of a 'special group' (Müller & Philipp, 1991, p. 151) from the 'upper class' (Blondel & Müller-Rommel, 2007, p. 822) with an own elite configuration in terms of social and occupational backgrounds (Dogan, 2003; Phillips, 1995). We can therefore conclude that women do not need to have a different social status or be part of a different social class in order to become prime minister.

Fourth, we found substantial differences among the level of political expertise between female and male prime ministers. Our data confirm that women prime ministers have clearly stockpiled more experience in parliament and cabinet before entering office than their male counterparts. This indicates that women need more credentials than men to reach the same political posts. However, we have also observed that – compared to their male colleagues – fewer female prime ministers have been party leaders before entering the chief executive. This is consistent with O'Brien's (2015, p. 693) interpretation that there is a 'men's traditional dominance as party leaders.' Moreover, our findings reiterate Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson's (2009, p. 695) observation that women (in cabinet) 'tend to have fewer party credentials than men, suggesting that experience and connections in other areas are more useful for them in securing […] appointments.'

Fifth, the analysis has also shown remarkable differences regarding the party affiliation of female and male prime ministers. Most unexpectedly we found a very high ratio of women prime ministers from centre-right parties. This is particularly true for Central–Eastern Europe where all female prime ministers have been recruited within this party family. Bego (2014) explains this by the less developed inter-party ideological differences

in Central and Eastern Europe. Our results also support Wiliarty's (2008) general view on the recruitment patterns of the centre-right parties. Based on the German case, she argues that the internal structures of European centre-right parties are more favourable to the promotion of women to top political positions. In other words we cannot confirm the argument that left-wing parties tend to promote more women to political positions (Siaroff, 2000). Rather, it seems as if centre-left parties are more likely to select women for lower prestige political offices than for top executive positions.

Sixth, all women prime ministers in Europe have gained ministerial experiences in medium- or low-prestige portfolios while most of their male counterparts held high prestigious cabinet posts prior to becoming prime minister. In the literature, we find no convincing explanations for this phenomenon. Following Müller and Philipp (1991), the recruitment pattern of female prime ministers is an 'uncommon path' to power while Jacob et al. (2014), have observed a relation between 'symbolic portfolios' and female representation in cabinet. According to authors such as Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson (2009), Krook and O'Brien (2012), and O'Brien et al. (2015), this tendency might rapidly change over the next years. They expect a higher representation of female ministers in prestigious cabinet portfolios because of the increasing presence of women in the top party, parliamentary and cabinet positions. However, – as our data show – we find (at least until now) no empirical evidence for this prediction.

Seventh, a high level of professionalization is not associated with a long duration of female prime ministers. This finding supports O'Brien's (2015) view that women are subjected to a stricter evaluation once they occupy top positions which might then lead to an 'early loss' of their prime ministerial post. Another argument for the lower duration of professional female *vis-à-vis* male prime ministers is linked to the party-internal decision-making processes. Following Beckwith (2015), we can argue that those women who get the prime minister's post as a replacement for their male counterpart might be pushed by the party to leave the office once a political crisis is solved and politics go back to 'normality.' A case in point is Prime Minister Édith Cresson who was selected in 1991 by President Mitterand to attract female voters. Yet, a year later, after her decreasing reputation among mass public and her defeat as candidate of the French Socialist Party during local elections, Mitterand forced her to resign (Jensen, 2008, p. 49f).

6. Conclusions

This study has analysed the political careers of female and male prime ministers in 10 member states of the EU over a period of 35 years. In sum, we can draw 3 major conclusions: first, female prime ministers have ruled in only 10 out of 28 members' states of the EU. This finding demonstrates that not even half of all EU member states have accepted women in prime ministerial positions. This assessment is somewhat surprising in light of the often discussed increasing 'emancipative values' in Western societies and its impact on the increasing participation of women in politics (Alexander & Welzel, 2015; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). Second, although the number of female prime ministers is increasing, little empirical research is available on the gendered dynamics of political careers for the prime ministerial position, particularly under comparative perspective. Third, prime ministerial careers are indeed gendered in terms of the degree of their professionalization. Our data suggest that once entering the 'prime ministerial game,' women

have to follow a 'harder road' to the chief executive. Women need to have higher political qualifications before entering and maintaining the prime ministerial office. In addition, we argue that the remarkable underrepresentation of women in top executive positions in EU countries is probably still a consequence of demand-side rather than supply-side factors (Norris & Lovenduski, 1995). Currently, the majority of prime ministerial positions are still in the hands of men. Thus, the gendered nature of the pathway to the political executive might still be indicative of an 'unfriendly' gate-keeping role of male-dominated party politics.

Future research on this issue should be more comprehensive. First of all, we need systematic cross-national data on the political careers of all prime ministers in all parliamentary and semi-presidential systems across the world. Second, these data should be collected on a longitudinal basis. Third, complementary to these quantitative data we need in-depth qualitative studies in order to identify and explain country specific recruitment patterns of prime ministers. Finally, we need to link these empirical findings to theoretical concepts in the field of elite recruitment and elite circulation in order to predict the stability and instability of prime ministers in democratic regimes.

Notes

1. Caretaker governments are excluded from the analysis. Four women led caretaker cabinets in current EU member states in the period considered: De Lourdes Pintasilgo in Portugal (1979–1980); Reneta Indzhova in Bulgaria (1994–1995); Irena Degutienė in Lithuania (1999); Vassiliki Thanou-Christophilou in Greece (2015).
2. This has both remarkable epistemological and methodological implications. In his discussion of not-repeatable data, Jackman (2009, p. xxxi) has pointed out that recollecting cross-national data for defined populations cannot yield to different information, but rather to the same dataset (safe for coding or other types of errors). Thus, 'there is no uncertainty due to variation in repeated sampling from a population: the data available for analysis exhaust the population of substantive interest' (emphasis in the original). The logic of common statistical significance tests barely holds in these cases. In fact, statistical tests tell whether variations within a (random) sample are likely to be due to chance. If not, we have enough evidence to reject such scenario and expect that similar variations are systematic and likely to be found in different (randomly) generated samples drawn from the same population (e.g., Blaikie, 2010; Garson, 1976; Pennings, Keman, & Kleinnijenhuis, 1999; Sirkin, 2006; Stevens, 2009). Significance tests can be technically calculated even for not-repeatable data. However, since the assumptions are violated, 'the […] use of statistical tests renders meaningless significance levels' (Pennings et al., 1999, pp. 81–82, 162). One could rebut that a population is anything but 'one of many possible data sets that could have been generated if "history were to be replayed many times over".' Yet, this argumentation does not hold, since the 'sampling mechanism' of the history we observe is inherently unknown (Jackman, 2009, p. xxxii). For all these reasons, our data and our goal do not allow (at least without contradicting their assumptions) the use of significance tests. We do not thus provide inferential findings, but descriptive statistics.
3. These data have been collected by the authors and are available upon request.
4. Our dataset comprises both parliamentary (Denmark, Germany, Latvia, Slovakia up to 1998, and United Kingdom) and semi-presidential systems (Croatia, Finland, France, Poland, Slovakia since 1998, Slovenia) (Elgie, 2011). Institutionally 'weak' women prime ministers, opposed to 'dominant' female prime ministers, have been appointed in two semi-presidential systems: France and Poland (Jalalzai, 2014, p. 589).

5. With regard to presidencies, in the countries of our dataset, only one woman – Vīķe-Freiberga in Latvia (1999–2007) – was selected head of state in parliamentary systems. In semi-presidential countries, two female presidents were elected: Halonen in Finland (2000–2012) and Grabar-Kitarović in Croatia (2015–).

6. One male Prime Minister, Ivars Godmanis from Latvia, entered office as member of the Popular Front of Latvia, a movement created to lead Latvia out of the transition from the Soviet Union.

7. We counted communist, social-democratic and green parties as centre-left parties. On the other hand, we included in centre-right parties liberal, agrarian, Christian democratic, conservative, and right-wing and nationalist parties.

8. While writing this article, a new case confirmed the interpretation. In July 2016, Theresa May became the new prime minister of the United Kingdom after becoming leader of the Conservative. This contest followed the resignation of the former leader and Prime Minister David Cameron due to the defeat in the 'Brexit' referendum and the crisis within the conservative party including the withdrawal of men from the competition for the prime minister's position. See 'Theresa May to Become New PM' (2016).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix. List of prime ministers

Country	Name of PM	Sex	Period in Office
Croatia	Račan, Ivica	Male	2000–2003
Croatia	Sanader, Ivo	Male	2003–2009
Croatia	**Kosor, Jadranka**	**Female**	**2009–2011**
Croatia	Milanović, Zoran	Male	2011–2016
Denmark	Schlüter, Poul	Male	1982–1993
Denmark	Rasmussen, Poul N.	Male	1993–2001
Denmark	Rasmussen, Anders F.	Male	2001–2009
Denmark	Rasmussen, Lars L.	Male	2009–2011, 2015–
Denmark	**Thorning-Schmidt, Helle**	**Female**	**2011–2015**
Finland	Holkeri, Harri	Male	1987–1991
Finland	Aho, Esko	Male	1991–1995
Finland	Lipponen, Paavo	Male	1995–2003
Finland	**Jäätteenmäki, Annelli**	**Female**	**2003**
Finland	Vanhanen, Matti	Male	2003–2010
Finland	**Kiviniemi, Mari**	**Female**	**2010–2011**
Finland	Katainen, Jyrki	Male	2011–2014
Finland	Stubb, Alexander	Male	2014–2015
Finland	Sipilä, Juha	Male	2015–
France	Mauroy, Pierre	Male	1981–1984
France	Fabius, Laurent	Male	1984–1986[a]
France	Rocard, Michel	Male	1988–1991
France	**Cresson, Édith**	**Female**	**1991–1992**
France	Bérégovoy, Pierre	Male	1992–1993
France	Balladur, Édouard	Male	1993–1995
France	Juppé, Alain	Male	1995–1997

Appendix. Continued.

Country	Name of PM	Sex	Period in Office
France	Jospin, Lionel	Male	1997–2002
France	Raffarin, Jean-Pierre	Male	2002–2005
France	Villepin, Dominique de	Male	2005–2007
France	Fillon, François	Male	2007–2012
France	Ayrault, Jean-Marc	Male	2012–2014
France	Valls, Manuel	Male	2014–
Germany	Kohl, Helmut	Male	1982–1998
Germany	Schröder, Gerhard	Male	1998–2005
Germany	**Merkel, Angela**	**Female**	**2005–**
Latvia	Godmanis, Ivars	Male	1990–1993, 2007–2009
Latvia	Birkavs, Valdis	Male	1993–1994
Latvia	Gailis, Māris	Male	1994–1995
Latvia	Šķēle, Andris	Male	1997
Latvia	Krasts, Guntars	Male	1997–1998
Latvia	Krištopans, Vilis	Male	1998–1999
Latvia	Bērziņš, Andris	Male	2000–2002
Latvia	Repše, Einars	Male	2002–2004
Latvia	Emsis, Indulis	Male	2004
Latvia	Kalvītis, Aigars	Male	2004–2007
Latvia	Dombrovskis, Valdis	Male	2009–2014
Latvia	**Straujuma, Laimdota**	**Female**	**2014–2016**
Poland	Olszewski, Jan	Male	1991–1992
Poland	**Suchocka, Hanna**	**Female**	**1992–1993**
Poland	Pawlak, Waldemar	Male	1993–1995
Poland	Oleksy, Józef	Male	1995–1996
Poland	Cimoszewicz, Włodzimiers	Male	1996–1997
Poland	Buzek, Jerzy	Male	1997–2001
Poland	Miller, Leszek	Male	2001–2004
Poland	Belka, Marek	Male	2004–2005
Poland	Marcinkiewicz, Kazimierz	Male	2005–2006
Poland	Kaczyński, Jarosław	Male	2006–2007
Poland	Tusk, Donald	Male	2007–2014
Poland	**Kopacz, Ewa**	**Female**	**2014–2015**
Poland	**Szydło, Beata**	**Female**	**2015–**
Slovakia	Mečiar, Vladimir	Male	1992–1994, 1994–1998
Slovakia	Moravčík, Jozef	Male	1994
Slovakia	Dzurinda, Mikuláš	Male	1998–2006
Slovakia	Fico, Robert	Male	2006–2010, 2012–
Slovakia	**Radičová, Iveta**	**Female**	**2010–2012**
Slovenia	Drnovšek, Janez	Male	1992–1996
Slovenia	Bajuk, Andrej	Male	2000
Slovenia	Rop, Anton	Male	2002–2004
Slovenia	Janša, Janez	Male	2004–2008
Slovenia	Pahor, Bohrut	Male	2008–2012
Slovenia	**Bratušuk, Alenka**	**Female**	**2013–2014**
Slovenia	Cerar, Miro	Male	2014–
United Kingdom	**Thatcher, Margaret**	**Female**	**1979–1980**
United Kingdom	Major, John	Male	1990–1997
United Kingdom	Blair, Tony	Male	1997–2007
United Kingdom	Brown, Gordon	Male	2007–2010
United Kingdom	Cameron, David	Male	2010–2016

Note: Female prime ministers in bold.
[a]Jacques Chirac was prime minister of France between 1986 and 1988. However, he is not included in the sample since he became prime minister for the first time before 1979.