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Women Running for the Office of MP under the Flexible Lists System in Latvia: the Case Studies of Milda Salnā and Berta Pīpiņa (1922–1934)

Sieviešu balotēšanās parlamenta vēlēšanās grozāmo deputātu kandidātu sarakstu sistēmā Latvijā: Mildas Salnās un Bertas Pīpiņas piemēri (1922–1934)

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women's organizations, social activists, political participation, parliamentary elections, closed lists

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Summary Adopting the close reading approach for the case studies of two female social activists and their biographies, this article is an investigation of the outcomes for women candidates under an electoral system that differed from the closed list system used in other European countries. In Latvia, a flexible lists system was in use, and the result of this was gender specific: due to the crossing out of candidates' names by electors, women were elected very rarely. The objective of the article is to examine the kind of voting tactics and affiliations that were deployed by female candidates from mixed-sex political parties in order to win popularity among non-party women's organisations and succeed in being elected to parliament. The politician Milda Salnā (1886–1970) was the only woman whose candidature was put forward for the position of Minister of Welfare in 1925. The other female politician, Berta Pīpiņa (1883–1942), is the only woman who became a Member of Parliament under the flexible lists system.

Kopsavilkums Izmantojot divu sabiedrisko darbinieču biogrāfiju tuvā lasījuma pieeju, rakstā ir pētīti sieviešu ievēlēšanas rezultāti, pastāvot vēlēšanu sistēmai, kas atšķīrās no citās Eiropas valstīs lietotās negrozāmo sarakstu sistēmas. Latvijā darbojās grozāmo sarakstu sistēma, kuras rezultāts bija dzimtes specifisks – vēlētāju svītrojumu rezultātā sievietes tika ievēlētas reti. Raksts atklāj, kādas balotēšanās taktikas un afiliācijas kandidātes no jauktu dzimumu partijām izmantoja, lai gūtu popularitāti ārpus-partiju sieviešu organizācijās un tiktu ievēlētas Saeimā. Politiķe Milda Salnā (1886–1970) bija vienīgā sieviete, kuras kandidatūru viņas partija – Latvijas Strādnieku sociāldemokrātu mazinieku partija – izvirzīja tautas labklājības ministra amatam 1925. gadā. Savukārt Berta Pīpiņa (1883–1942) 1931. gadā vienīgā kļuva par parlamenta deputāti, pastāvot grozāmo vēlēšanu kandidātu sarakstu sistēmai. Izpēte balstīta uz parlamenta vēlēšanu rezultātu statistiku, organizāciju dokumentiem un presi.

Introduction

In Western historiography an assertion persists that after World War I, when the right to vote (suffrage) had been achieved, many women abandoned political activity, while others redirected their energies to the League of Nations so as to not only promote disarmament, but also, with the help of instruments of international influence, to "secure legal equality between men and women" (Miller 1994: 219). In Poland, for example, at the beginning of the 20th century women's interest in political involvement declined (Dajnowicz 2021: 72). In this context, the question of what happened to the women's movement after their common goal – that of suffrage – had been achieved becomes important, as women's electoral rights were enshrined in national legislation by the newly independent states that emerged after World War I: Austria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czechoslovakia and others.[1] Politically active women continued their work in the form of a struggle for political power within Parliament. They discussed what it meant for women to be citizens, and on what basis they should participate in political life and influence policy-making. Female activists pursued different paths for continuing to improve the status of women: some chose to do so as members of mixed-gender political parties, others through women's organisations. The relations between both sets of women were complicated, because the women who considered that women's political goals could be attained only through same-sex women's organisations doubted the loyalty to these aims on the part of the women who were members of political parties. In the 1920s, female party members supported women's organisations as an additional arena for shaping their politics. They were active in numerous organisations, maintaining many affiliations (Hunt, Hannam 2013: 129). Without raising their profile through their work in women's organisations it was impossible to carve out a career within the structures of mixed sex political parties. In the interwar period, women began to view the idea of women's service differently than before, emphasising "the mutuality of self-fulfilment and community development, not self-sacrifice or the neglect of the self" (Colpus 2018: 199, 201). One of the goals was to train themselves to be citizens and to educate other women to be citizens, and to take part in nation-building and the formation of the new state and its politics, also by articulating specific

1 In Latvia the equality of the sexes with regard to electoral rights was prescribed by the political platform of the *Tautas Padome* – People's Council (1918), the law On the Election of the Constitutional Assembly (1919), the Constitution (1922) and the law On the Election of the Saeima (1922). For more, see: Osipova 2019; Smiltēna (2022).

women's rights and demands. In Great Britain, many women's organisations included in their names the concepts 'citizen' and 'citizenship'; the majority, however, avoided using the term 'feminist' (Innes 2004: 623–627, 636). Women's organisations interpreted and incorporated the concept of 'citizenship' into their rhetoric, turning it into a motivational factor for women to become politically involved in the women's movement (Wright 2009: 423–425). By working in social and other kinds of organisations, women were able to take part in public life and create a feminised political sphere. Gender determined and shaped the forms that women's political participation could take – women's organisations sought ways of becoming influential at local and national level (Leszczawski-Schwerk 2018: 11). Over time it became clear that women had differing political allegiances, and their motivating factors were diverse, nonetheless for a time different women's groups would come together in pursuit of the common cause (Gullace 2021: 363, Grayzel 2021: x). The tactics of the various groups differed with regard to the question of whether a separate women's party or an all-female candidate list were necessary.

Women candidate electoral results under the closed list system

In all of the parliamentary elections of the 1920s–1930s, women in Latvia made extensive use of active electoral rights, while passive electoral rights (the right to be elected to parliament) were exercised by a relatively small number of women. The departure point was the same for each of the three independent republics which had been proclaimed in the aftermath of World War I, as the Russian Empire collapsed. With the principle of closed lists in existence, one that does not permit the voter to make any changes to the list, six female MPs were elected among a total of 150 MPs in the *Latvijas Satversmes sapulce* [Constitutional Assembly of Latvia, the first elected legislative body of Latvia] (Lipša 2021: 262). Seven female MPs were working in the Lithuanian Constitutional Assembly, out of a total of 112 MPs (Birmontienė, Jurėnienė 2012: 87). In the Estonian Constitutional Assembly there were seven female MPs among a total of 120 MPs (Biin, Albi 2012: 121). The situation in Finland was markedly better due to historic reasons, because in the Finnish Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire, women received the vote in 1906, and in 1907 the Finns elected 19 women (nearly 10% of 200 MPs) into parliament (Sulkunen 2007: 29). Finland was the third country in the world, after New Zealand (1893) and Australia (1894), where women were awarded full (passive and active) suffrage (Sulkunen, Markkola 2009: 1). In 1917, 18 women had been elected to the Finnish parliament. In Germany in 1919, among a total of 423 elected

members of parliament, there were 37 women (8.7%). In the same year in Poland, conversely, female politicians constituted only 1.38% of the MPs elected (Zarnowska 2004: 58). However, an examination of Latvia's neighbouring countries shows that as regards the proportion of women elected under a closed list system, the situation was the best in Lithuania, where female MPs made up 6.25% of the composition of parliament, followed by Estonia with 5.8%, but the most meagre representation was in Latvia – 4%. Thereafter the proportion in Latvia declined to zero level because in 1922 the Latvian parliament changed the law and introduced into the new legislation the flexible list principle (Tīfentāls-Dziļleja 1923: 91–92).[2] This meant that, by crossing out candidates' names, voters in Latvia were able to not only change the order of candidates in the list they had selected, but were also able to write the name of any candidate from any other electoral list in place of those crossed out. As a result, the candidates in every list were in competition not only with candidates on other lists, but also with the other candidates on their own list. The members of the *Satversmes sapulce* (Constitutional Assembly) introduced this electoral system in order to award voters maximum freedom of choice. At the time, not a single politician could have even imagined that a democratic principle of interwar Europe would prohibit women in Latvia from becoming members of parliament. Already in the summer of 1920, the idea of a flexible list was touted in the press by the journalist Hermanis Asars, who had seen this principle in action in the local government elections that had taken place in Siberia in 1919 (Asars 1920). He was of the opinion that with the aid of a flexible list, it would be possible to evade what he called the socialist party central committee diktat to voters. Closed lists meant that the list of candidates and the order in which they were to stand were decided by the central committee of the party, rather than determined by the electorate. Asars considered that this course of action would have been acceptable if all Latvian citizens had been active members of political parties, but in 1920 this was the case for only about 1% of the population (Asars 1920). In the Constitutional Assembly, meanwhile, the idea of flexible lists was promoted by one of its members, Marģers Skujenieks, and in the course of political debates lasting about a year and a half the majority of Constitutional Assembly members came to support the introduction of the principle of flexible lists in both

2 In 1923, on making a comparison of electoral systems in Europe, Kārlis Tīfentāls came to the conclusion that in Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Germany (at that time excepting Bavaria and Lübeck) and Austria closed lists were in use. Flexible lists were being used only in Latvia and Finland. Electors in Finland, however, did not have the right to amend the content of lists; up until 1935 they had to select a list with a maximum of three candidates, however, the opportunity to change the order of candidates and write in a maximum of three other candidates in fact lost its effect during a procedure whereby votes were transformed into mandates (Tīfentāls-Dziļleja 1923; Sundberg 2002, 77).

local government and parliamentary elections. During the discussions, not a single member of the Constitutional Assembly, including the six women among them, had foreseen that this principle could influence the election of women (for the course of discussions see Lipša 2022, 46–54)

An analysis of the lists elected to the *Saeima* (the Latvian parliament consisting of 100 members) presents the following data (Skujenieks 1923, 1926, 1929, 1933; Lipša 2022): 56 women stood for election to the Constitutional Assembly, but in the 1922 elections to the First Saeima they were four times fewer: only 14 women. In the elections to the Second Saeima in 1925, there were 15 women on the lists that were elected. For the Third Saeima (in 1928) there were 43 female candidates, and for the Fourth (in 1931) – 39 candidates. The increase in the number of female candidates in the elections to the Third and Fourth Saeima was due to the existence of women-only lists: the *Latvju sieviešu apvienība* (Latvian Women's Association) list with 18 candidates in 1928 and the *Sieviešu organizācijas* (Women's Organisations) list with 20 candidates in 1931 (Lipša 2022, 258). It is significant that of the 56 female candidates who stood for election to the Constitutional Assembly, only 5 women were candidates in the 1922 elections to the First Saeima. On the other hand, now the more active Polish and Russian women in Latgale had embraced the necessity of becoming involved in policy-making (Lipša 2022, 60–61). This article will not undertake to analyse the ethnic affiliation of candidates, however, it can be pointed out that in all four elections to the Saeima, the lists that had been compiled according to the principle of ethnicity had included five women. In the elections for the First Saeima, there was one female candidate in the *Vienotais krievu saraksts* (United List of Russians) and three in the *Poļu savienība Latvijā* (Polish Union in Latvia) list. In the Third Saeima elections there was one female candidate in the *Latvijas poļu savienības poļu katoļu* (Polish Catholics from the Union of Poles in Latvia) list (she had previously been a candidate in the First Saeima elections as well), but in the Fourth Saeima elections, there was one female candidate from the *Latvijas vācu baltiešu partija* (Party of Baltic Germans of Latvia) (Lipša 2022, 326–327). It was not until 1931 and the Fourth Saeima that voters elected a woman to parliament. These were the last parliamentary elections to be held in interwar Latvia, as in 1934 Prime Minister Kārlis Ulmanis mounted a coup d'etat, as a result of which the Saeima was dissolved and all political parties were banned. In Estonia and Lithuania, meanwhile, where voters voted according to the principle of closed lists, there were female MPs in all parliaments. In Estonia, however, there was the possibility of a preferential vote. That is, the elector was able to write a plus mark against the names of candidates, though these were only taken into account if the number of preferential votes exceeded the number of votes required to obtain one MP mandate (Sikk 2010, 567–568). This meant that they had minimal

impact on election results. In Estonia during the interwar period there were six parliaments (the *Riigikogu* with 100 MPs). There were three female MPs in the first parliament, but in the second, third and fourth parliaments there was only one female MP (1%); in the fifth – two MPs (2%) and in the sixth, the bicameral parliament of 1937, women made up 8.8% of MPs (Biin, Albi 2012: 121). In the Lithuanian parliament, (the *Seimas*) of 1922 consisting of 78 MPs, five female politicians (6.4%) had been elected, but in 1926, when a total of 85 MPs were elected, there were four women (4.7%) among them. (Birmontienė, Jurėnienė 2009: 36, 39). A testament to the powerful sense of self-belief of Lithuanian female politicians is the fact that in 1926, when the Seimas of Lithuania were voting for the State President, of the four candidates vying for the post two were women. However, in 1926 there was a coup d'etat in Lithuania, as a result of which from 1927 until 1935 there were no parliamentary elections at all. (Jureniene 2008: 289). Meanwhile, not a single woman was in the Seimas elected in 1936 and consisting of only 49 MPs, because in the wake of electoral reform candidate lists could only be submitted by district councils, and only a few women had been elected to these. In Finland, the number of women in parliament (the *Diet*) reached 10% only in 1922; the lowest proportion of women was in 1930 when 11 female candidates (5.5%) were elected (Korppi-Tommola 2012: 57; Women 2022). In Germany, the proportion of female MPs did not exceed 10% in any of the interwar parliaments (Debus, Hansen 2014: 343). Meanwhile in Poland, up until 1927 women made up 2% of the total number of MPs, but after that – only 1.8% (Leszczawski-Schwerk 2018: 4, 11). Possibly if in Latvia the principle of the closed list had been in existence women might have had the same level of representation in the Saeima as they had managed to achieve in parliament in Estonia and in Lithuania.

Results of women standing for election under the flexible lists system

When evaluating the election results for the First Saeima (1922), the popular poet Aspazija[3], a female MP candidate from the *Latvijas Sociāldemokrātiskā strādnieku partija* (Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party), ascertained that in the Riga electoral district, from 45,000 social democrat voters only about 3000 made amendments to lists by crossing out names. However, it was precisely this minority that determined the ranking of elected candidates. The result was a difference of approximately 800 votes

3 Aspazija's political activism has not yet been researched. On Aspazija as a poet, see: Novikova 2006. For more on Aspazija: Zelče 2020.

between the top-ranking candidates who were elected and those candidates at the head of the list of the unelected. Aspazija came to the conclusion that 800 votes were enough, therefore, to eliminate from the list unwelcome candidates, and it turned out that all women had been accorded this status. Aspazija wrote that with this kind of electoral system women's passive suffrage "has been robbed, and it is not likely that in the future they would be able to regain it because there will always be some thousand anti-women opponents, even amongst the best [party] members" (Aspazija 1923).

After the First Saeima elections, politically active women realised that the flexible list principle put them at a disadvantage. Yet it was also a fact that in these elections only a small number of female candidates ran for election, and this could explain why no women were elected. In 1925 the voters who used their right to cross out candidates once again achieved that not a single female candidate received a mandate. The propaganda disseminated by the most politically active women's organisation LSNL (*Latvju sieviešu nacionālā līga*) – the National League of Latvian Women – at the very beginning of the election year had not helped. They had addressed as their target audience all women, and had put forward female candidates to those electoral lists who had wished to include women (Pīpiņa 1925b). The LSNL encouraged women to write into their chosen lists the names of women from other lists, and thus increase the chances of women being elected (Pīpiņa 1925b). An analysis of the Second Saeima elections clarified how many men and women had crossed out the names of candidates. By studying data from the ballot boxes allotted to male and female voters separately in the Riga electoral district, statisticians found that among those men who had amended lists, 75% had crossed out the names of women, while among women voters the prevalence was 50% (Lipša 2005: 22). In the elections to the First Saeima, 19.97% of voters made use of the opportunity to amend candidate lists, but in subsequent elections, these rights were exercised by an increasing number of voters. For the Second Saeima the percentage was 26.03%, for the Third Saeima it was 32.44%, and for the Fourth Saeima – 35.47% (Lipša 2005: 22).

Female MP candidates employed a variety of approaches for ensuring their visibility to the electorate. One group positioned itself only in tandem with a political party, for example, members of the Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party. Another group placed the emphasis on their identity as social activists, hence their standing on party lists or electoral association lists could have been perceived as short-term, with the sole aim of attaining the prestigious position of MP and without any interest in the everyday work of the political party. Female candidates used their numerous social activist affiliations as political capital in order to attract the attention of voters. Their persistent running for office in regular elections became a kind of empowerment

for political participation: their energy galvanised other women. The election years of the Saeima coincided with municipal election years, and in Riga, these usually took place in February or March, while the Saeima elections were held in October. Politically active women stood as candidates at both national and local elections, gaining political experience and building up their political reputation.

In the 1920s, the most influential women's organisations in Latvia were the LSNL and the LSPK – *Latvijas sieviešu palīdzības korpuss* – Latvian Women's Relief Corps (Pīpiņa 1928a, Albertiņa 1928). The statutes of the LSNL stipulated the advocacy of women's rights and the inclusion and consolidation of equal gender rights in legislation. In order to facilitate this, in 1923 the LSNL established a Legal Section headed by Berta Pīpiņa (Pīpiņa 1932: 29). Milda Salnā was also active in the section. The women who worked in the Legal Section decided to create a powerful united women's movement centre – the *Latvijas Sieviešu organizāciju padome* (LSOP) (Council of Women's Organisations of Latvia). A provisional council was established in 1925, but the statutes of the council were registered in 1929. The LSOP was a moderate/conservatively oriented organisation, and internationally as well it chose to work with the International Council of Women, which was similarly inclined (Lipša, Vizgunova 2020: 87–93; De Haan, Daskalova et al. 2006: 10).

Milda Salnā: in political parties and in women's citizens' (non-socialist) organisations

The social activist, politician and journalist Milda Salnā stood as a candidate in three Saeima elections (1925, 1928, 1931) and in three Riga city council elections (1922, 1925, 1931) as a representative of the *Latvijas Strādnieku sociāldemokrātu mazinieku partija* (Latvian Social Democrat Menshevik Workers' Party) and the *Progresīvā apvienība* (Progressive Union).[4]

However, Salnā did not receive sufficient support from the electorate to obtain the mandate of an MP. Her political affiliations had shifted from being a radical revolutionary Socialist in the 1905–1907 Revolution (Jēkabsons 2016), to being a member of the *Latvijas Sociāldemokrātiskā strādnieku partija* (LSDSP) – Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party or left-wing social democrat (1918–1921), and thereafter conservative socialist or Menshevik social democrat, until the party was dissolved (1921–1930). After that she worked in the Progressive Union (1930–1934), which

4 In the First Saeima elections in 1922, there was not a single woman candidate on the social democrat (Menshevik) party list, but in the 1928 elections for the Riga City Council the party did not participate at all.

Fig. 1. Passport photo of Milda Salnā. 1928. Latvian National Archive, Latvian State Historical Archive, LNA LVVA 3234-33-49969.

distanced itself from the urban labour force in favour of a rural worker and *jaunsaimnieki* (literally, 'new farmers')[5] target audience.

In June 1921, Salnā left the LSDSP and took part in the founding of the social democrat Menshevik party, because together with her spouse and MP of the First Saeima, Voldemārs Salnais, she belonged to the group of social democrats who wished to take part in the government coalition. Salnā's husband became vice Foreign Minister, but Milda Salnā herself in 1921 became a member of the board of *Latvijas Telegrāfa aģentūra* (Latvian Telegraph Agency) and until the late 1924 worked as an assistant to the LTA director. At the start of 1925, the general assembly of the Riga committee of the Latvian Social Democrat (Menshevik) Workers' Party elected her chairwoman of the Riga committee (LSSMP 1925). In one of her first speeches in her newly appointed position, Salnā underlined that the party had not done anything as regards the issue of organising women and that she wished that the Riga committee would adhere to the principle that they should be active also among that sector of society where the party did not have a determining influence. By this, she meant non-socialist women's circles. Salnā's reputation within the party was solid enough for the social democrat Mensheviks to nominate her for the position of Minister of Social Affairs in 1925, but right-wing party politicians in the government coalition rejected her candidature ([Anon.] 1925). Salnā's husband Voldemārs Salnais was

5 The *jaunsaimnieki* were newly established smallholders who had received land as a result of the Agrarian Reform Law of 1920, when land was confiscated, mostly from manorial estates, and redistributed to individuals.

appointed minister instead. In Finland, meanwhile, a year later the social democrat Miina Sillanpää became Minister of Social Welfare and Health; she was the first-ever female government minister in Europe (Sulkunen Irma 2007: 29).

Already as a member of the LSDSP, Salnā had recognised the necessity of organising women. In late 1920 she was elected chairwoman of the Women's Centre of the LSDSP ([Anon.] 1920). Meanwhile in early 1924, while still employed as assistant to the director of LTA, Salnā began to build her public profile as a social activist and broaden her electoral appeal, joining one of the most popular women's citizens' associations: the National League of Latvian Women (LSNL), where she soon became a member of the board (1925–1928). The conservative socialist Salnā hoped that through non-socialist women's organisations she would be able to encourage an interest among women to participate in politics. She explained in the press that party political agitation and propaganda were not enough to promote women's interest in politics. Salnā emphasised that "culturally edifying organisations play a much greater role in stimulating a woman's activity [in politics]" for the advocacy of the interests of women as mothers and housekeepers (Salnā 1928b).

Salnā took part in the organisation of the first women's conference in Latvia and on 26–27 September, 1925, she was a speaker. During the conference, the non-socialist women's organisations decided to establish a joint centre for the development of the women's movement. Salnā became one of the leaders of this centre, known as the *Latvijas Sieviešu organizāciju pagaidu padome* (LSOPP) – Provisional Council of Women's Organisations in Latvia. Working on the council helped female politicians and party members to attract the attention of voters because, in the run-up to each election, the council urged its members to write the names of women from other candidate lists into the list they had selected. This gave female candidates additional votes. The LSNL slogan exhorted: "Vote for women! By writing [the name of] a woman from another list into your own party list, you bolster a woman's candidature without harming your own party!" (LSNL 1925) Salnā wrote articles in the press, inviting readers to vote for the social democrat Menshevik party list. In publications and at pre-election rallies she particularly addressed female *jaunsaimnieces* (new farmers) and rural labourers, reminding them that it was her party that had initiated and succeeded in the adoption of legislation in the Saeima that gave rural workers the opportunity to buy construction timber for the building of their own dwellings at an affordable price (Salnā 1925a, 1925b). In the Second Saeima, however, Salnā did not get elected. In the Vidzeme electoral district, for example, she remained second from the bottom in her list, separated from the winner of this list by some 1000 votes.

Salnā's party members did not rate her leadership of the Riga committee as being particularly successful, and so at a meeting of the Riga branch of the social

democrat Menshevik party in February 1926 she was not re-elected chairwoman of the committee. She then put all her energy into LSOPP activities, acting as the representative of the LSNL. Within LSNL itself, meanwhile, she became the Head of Press and Propaganda (1927–1930).

Before every election, Salnā rejected the drawing up of a separate list of female candidates. Her rationale was that it was not possible to unite in a single list all the ideologically diverse women that there were. Hence Salnā encouraged female voters to vote for mixed-gender parties and to be fully cognisant that the only common duty for all women was not to vote for those party lists which had not nominated a single woman. Because to vote for a party that has stated that it does not acknowledge the necessity of women's political activism would be "tantamount to welcoming a spit in the face with gratitude" (Salnā 1925c). Moreover, if a political party declares that it does not have any women candidates to offer, then female voters should understand that a party that "up till now has not been able to bring up from within its midst a single woman who would be worthy of taking a seat in the Saeima" was not worth anything at all. Salnā urged women voters to give female candidates the opportunity to learn parliamentary work by formulating the following argument: of the 100 MPs in the Saeima, those working with full commitment were, at a maximum, only 30 men, while the others due to lack of experience did nothing but vote and evidently were still learning about working in parliament. Therefore, if voters allow men to use parliament as a school, then the same opportunity should be offered also to "at least a few women". In the run-up to the 1928 election, Salnā became more strident in her urgings to renounce a separate list of female candidates. She underscored that, first of all, women must learn to defend their interests within political parties. If they were unable to achieve that their fellow party members included them in their list of candidates for MPs, and because of this had to create their own list of female candidates, then – Salnā asks – "how do these women intend to defend their interests in the Saeima, [when] surrounded by political enemies?" (Salnā 1928a) She explained that political work was not only a matter of standing for elections and campaigning at pre-election rallies. Salnā wrote: "Politics should be practiced every day! Every day you should be alert to your economic situation, [aware of] your political rights, the independence of your cultural development." (Salnā 1931) She asserted that this was only possible to do by working together with "people inspired by the same ideology", but this could not be done by a women's party whose members held a variety of ideological views.

In 1930, the Latvian Social Democrat (Menshevik) Workers' Party was dissolved. Salnā then joined the Progressive Union, whose voters were rural labourers and *jaunsaimnieki*. At the end of the same year, however, she left the National League of

Latvian Women (LSNL) for reasons that were not disclosed (Salnā 1930). Thus Salnā abandoned social activist affiliations and participation in the organised non-socialist women's movement. After standing in the 1931 municipal and parliamentary elections, without success, Salnā started working for the weekly newspaper of her party, *Lauku Dzīve*, later *Latviešu Balss*. She was the only female editor in the Latvian political press (Oz. 1932). In 1933, when her spouse Voldemārs Salnais was Foreign Minister, Salnā carried out the duties of a foreign minister's wife, which was not a position as such but rather unpaid work.

Berta Pīpiņa: Member of the Riga City Council and the MP

Unlike Milda Salnā, pedagogue Berta Pīpiņa did not have any experience of involvement in an illegal party – the Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party. Her engagement with politics began after the bourgeois-democratic February Revolution of 1917, when she started to participate in the activities of the *Radikāldemokrātu partija* (Radical Democrat Party) and in the council of the *Latvijas Sociālistisko sieviešu izglītības biedrība* (Socialist Women's Educational Society of Latvia), whose aim was the political education of women, and whose members already then had agreed that women should take an active part in "men's parties" (Lipša 2021: 238, 242). In 1920, while the closed list system was still in use, Pīpiņa was elected to the Riga City Council, though she did not succeed in being elected to the Satversmes sapulce – Constitutional Assembly (Lipša 2021: 260, 261). After the flexible list system was adopted, Pīpiņa stood for two Saeima elections (1925, 1931)[6] and all four elections (1922, 1925, 1928 and 1931) of the Riga City Council as a representative of the *Demokrātiskā Centra partija* – Democratic Centre (DC) party. Pīpiņa was also active in the National League of Latvian Women, she was the league's chairwoman from 1925 up until the Soviet occupation in 1940. She was also chairwoman of the Provisional Council of Women's Organisations in Latvia (LSOPP) (later Council of Women's Organisations in Latvia –LSOP). Pīpiņa is the only woman in the historiography of post-1990 Republic of Latvia who has an entire entry devoted to her as a female politician of the interwar period (Pičukāne 2006; Zariņa 2019), but scholarly research of her life and work has not yet been carried out.

Pīpiņa started her political career while a married woman; her husband was the journalist Ērmanis Pīpiņš. In an interview she stated that it was precisely her spouse's

6 In 1922, the Democratic Centre and non-party (independent) allied candidates did not include any women in their list.

Fig. 2. Passport photo of Berta Pīpiņa. 1927. Latvian National Archive, Latvian State Historical Archive, LNA LVVA 3234-33-5291.

ironical attitude, even embarrassment while listening to her first public speech that was an insult to her womanly self-esteem. Pīpiņa stated to her interviewer that at the time she swore to herself that there would come a time when she would be able to speak in public so well that nobody would smirk scornfully about her any more (Astra 1933). After her husband died in 1927, the widow Pīpiņa became the co-owner of a publishing house, later its owner and manager. Pīpiņa's tactic of building up popularity through the LSNL and the LSOPP and to run in the elections from the list of the DC proved to be justified. In the elections of the Riga City Council in 1922 and 1925 Pīpiņa was not elected, nonetheless, in 1925 the party nominated her for work on the *Rīgas pilsētas valde* – Riga City Board. Pīpiņa became the first-ever female member of the Riga City Board and head of the *Sociālās apgādes nodaļa* – Department of Social Welfare, and worked there from 17 December 1925 until 31 March 1928 (Pīpiņa 1934a). It had not been easy to earn respect in masculine environment. In an interview Pīpiņa related that while she was a member of the city board, male colleagues had refused to shake hands with her, regarding her as a 'suffragette' who had stormed the male citadel, despite the fact that, in her own words: "I was surely doing work that was the most suitable of all to a woman's-mother's heart and nature – I ran the Riga city social welfare [department]" (Mednieks 1939).

In the Riga City Council elections of 1928, Pīpiņa received the support of a great many voters from other lists, and as a result, she was elected to the Riga City Council as the second most popular politician on her list, outdoing even the well-known writer Jānis Akuraters ([Anon.] 1928). This popularity had been promoted by her active work heading the provisional board of the National League of Latvian Women (LSNL)

and the Provisional Council of Women's Organisations of Latvia {LSOPP) which organised the Latvian Women's Conferences in 1925 and 1928, and also by participating in the events held by her organisations as well as being published in the newspaper *Jaunākās Ziņas* (Lipša 2022). Another contributing factor was her leadership of the Riga City Department of Social Welfare, where by dealing with visitors and seeking to assist them she became a recognised figure among the residents of the city who had sought help. During the period from 1925 until 1927, for example, the volume of social benefits handed out by Riga city increased almost three times over, from Ls 34,500 to Ls 99,700 (Zvirbule 1932, 572). A criterion testifying to the popularity of a politician was the number of *taloni* or coupons[7] given to the candidate by voters of other lists. In the Riga City Council elections of 1928, the most popular candidate in Riga was Arveds Bergs, publisher of the newspaper *Latvis*, but he was followed by Berta Pīpiņa in second place, leaving behind her Kārlis Ulmanis, the popular leader of the dominant party of the governing coalition, *Latviešu zemnieku savienība* (Latvian Farmers' Union), and numerous times Prime Minister (Vanaga 1928). While on the Riga City Council, from 21 November 1928 until 6 May 1931 Pīpiņa was a member of the Audit Committee. Pīpiņa did not stand as a candidate in the Third Saeima elections in 1928, most likely because she had been elected member of the Riga City Council. She was not elected in the 1931 Riga City Council elections, though a few months later Pīpiņa became a councilwoman when a member of her party gave up his mandate. Her candidacy at the Fourth Saeima elections in 1931, was successful, however, here too, Pīpiņa was elected with the so-called 'soft mandate'. Pīpiņa became an MP of the Fourth Saeima when her party member, General Eduards Kalniņš, declined his mandate. This was regarded by the Latvian Women's Association as an affirmation of support from the Democratic Centre party for a female candidate (LSA, 1931). In the Riga electoral district Pīpiņa received the sixth largest number of coupons (2495), ahead of both Kārlis Ulmanis, who received more than two times fewer coupons (1083), and Arveds Bergs with 1709 coupons (Skujenieks 1933: 12; Lipša 2022: 217).

Pīpiņa's popularity was promoted by her numerous affiliations: she was the chairwoman of the LSNL and the LSOP, chairwoman of the society *Valsts darbiniece* (State Employee), member of the Riga City Council and board member of the Riga City, head of the Department of Social Welfare and member of the Central Committee of the DC party. Like Milda Salnā, she promoted the idea that women's work as

7 The ballot paper was divided by horizontal and vertical lines into approximately 90 sections. Each section contained the name of a candidate. When votes were counted, the ballot paper was cut up into the separate sections and these pieces were known as *taloni* or coupons.

social activists served as political start-up capital. In 1925 Pīpiņa made known that there were women working in permanent commissions of the Riga City Board as unpaid advisers and that their work therefore "has been inspired by selfless interest – for the good of society" (Pīpiņa 1925a). She suggested that female candidates should be seen as ideological workers, as defenders of women's interests, and emphasised that support of female candidates indicated whether women voters themselves had any self-respect. At the first Latvian Women's Conference in 1925 Pīpiņa avowed that "in order for a woman's work to stand out more, the propaganda needs to be louder", but "women have always been quiet and wholehearted workers" (Pīpiņa 1925c). She elucidated that "a man does not hate a woman as such", but when competing in the workplace "the stronger pushes aside the weaker". She recommended that women should stand as candidates on party lists rather than forming a separate list comprising females only because when debating certain issues, the women on this kind of list were likely to diverge politically. On becoming a member of a political party, however, every woman should develop her own agenda which the party should then incorporate into its own programme.

All the same, in the run-up to the Third Saeima elections in 1928, Pīpiņa's attitude towards the setting up of a separate female candidate list in the Saeima elections was supportive. As far as she herself was concerned, her position was unchanged – she would stand as a candidate for her party, nonetheless she regarded the women's list as a means for educating women in politics and a way of attracting new members to the women's movement. At a meeting of representatives of women's organisations in the summer of 1928, despite the urgings of the majority of participants not to put forward a separate women's list in the forthcoming Saeima elections, Pīpiņa suggested that they reconsider. Her reasoning was that the ten years that had passed since the founding of the state was "a long enough period of time for women to stand for their cause" and that "doubts about [not] getting elected to the Saeima should not hold us back from our task" (Pīpiņa 1928c). She asserted that there was no shame for women in not being elected, rather it would be the inability "not to stand for their cause" that would be shameful. In the 1931 elections that followed, the LSOP gave its support to Pīpiņa's idea of using a women's list in order to popularise the essential importance of women's participation in politics. Women who wished to stand as candidates on the list established a *Sieviešu vēlēšanu komiteja* – Women's Electoral Committee as part of the LSOP. Its remit was to popularise the women-only list by holding meetings, giving speeches and by distributing flyers, advertisements and posters. In the elections of 1934 as well, the LSOP decided to continue its support of a separate women's list and the formation of a Women's Electoral Committee under its aegis. Berta Pīpiņa specified that those political party

female candidates who wished the organised women to give them their vote would have to agree with the election manifesto drawn up by the Women's Electoral Committee. The LSOP would demand that parties include women in their lists, but if the parties were to refuse to do that, then the electoral committee would campaign against the party in question. The LSOP envisaged as its target audience women only. The three main election slogans are a testimony to this: Women, vote for a woman; Do not cross out a woman [a woman's name], Write into your chosen list a woman from another list as well. (Pīpiņa 1934b) In this way, Pīpiņa, who herself stood for election on a party list, regarded the proposal of a female-only candidate list as a means for the political education of women. Hence, in her view, the list would have achieved its purpose even if not a single candidate were to be elected. For Pīpiņa, encouraging women to engage with politics was an important objective and she used every opportunity to popularise this among target audiences of voters.

Prior to the 1928 Saeima elections, Pīpiņa shared her reflections about women's political participation on the front page of *Jaunākās Ziņas*, the most popular newspaper in Latvia. She wrote that a voter judges a woman engaged in community service ten times more severely than a man, moreover, women's participation in politics is also held back by female voters, who do not place enough trust in "the capability of their own sex in politics" (Pīpiņa 1928b). Nonetheless, it is through their public persona in social activism that women gain the trust of voters. Women's organisations, active in all kinds of spheres of life, accustom a woman first of all to have confidence in herself and, second, to respect the aptitudes of another, more talented fellow activist. Pīpiņa's conclusion was that "we need to keep on working indefatigably, more and more," (Pīpiņa 1928). Before the Saeima elections of 1931, once more Pīpiņa explained – on the prestigious front page of *Jaunākās Ziņas* – that up until now female candidates for the Saeima had not succeeded also because the women who crossed out the names of female candidates on electoral lists "stamped on their gender [...] the mark of incapacity", as a result of which "man begins to disdain a woman's mind" (Pīpiņa 1931). As a consequence, female candidates are nominated only on the lists of the democratic non-socialist citizenry and workers' parties, while the right-wing Latvian Farmers' Union ignores them.

Conclusions

The flexible list system that, unlike in other countries, was in operation in Latvia complicated enormously the election of female candidates as MPs. The absolute minority of voters who crossed out women from candidate lists dictated that in Latvia during the interwar period, a woman was elected as MP only

once. Berta Pīpiņa was elected in 1931, when she had already accumulated substantial experience of being a candidate by running in municipal elections on a political party list and twice being elected a member of the city council. In the public arena, however, Pīpiņa identified herself less with her membership of the Democratic Centre party and more with her numerous affiliations as a social activist. Milda Salnā – member of the Latvian Social Democrat (Menshevik) Workers' Party – also gained popularity in the public sphere through her work in women's organisations. As party members, Pīpiņa and Salnā became involved with the organised women's movement and led it with the goal of, firstly, educating women voters in politics and, secondly, attracting to political activism women-potential MP candidates and drawing new members to the women's movement. To this end, the Council of Women's Organisations of Latvia (LSNL) they headed supported the nomination of women-only candidate lists.

When comparing Milda Salnā and Berta Pīpiņa on the basis of their affiliations and the results of their candidacy as part of mixed-gender party lists, it can be concluded that Pīpiņa's election to the municipal council and her work on the Riga City Board was of great significance. Through this work she gained enough of a public profile to garner more popularity in various electorates of the Saeima elections in 1931 than the well-known Prime Minister of several ministerial cabinets and member of the Latvian Farmers' Union, Kārlis Ulmanis. Pīpiņa's example was an inspiration to many women. Both Pīpiņa's and Salnā's persistence in standing as candidates in almost every Riga City Council and Saeima election became a kind of empowerment for political participation – not just for themselves only, because their energetic activity galvanised other women as well.

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