

Molecular characterization of red clover genotypes utilizing microsatellite markers

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ABSTRACT

Genetic resources of red clover (*Trifolium pratense* L.) are the basis for the improvement of this important forage legume. The objective of this study was microsatellite characterization of the accessions from the collection of the Institute of Field and Vegetable Crops in Novi Sad, Serbia. Molecular evaluation of 46 red clover genotypes was performed by applying the set of 14 primer pairs of microsatellite markers. These primer pairs amplified a total of 187 alleles, with an average of 13.36 alleles per *locus* and average polymorphism information content (PIC) value was 0.306. The minimum values of Dice genetic distances based on polymorphism of microsatellite markers were found among genotypes NCPGRU2 and NCPGRU5 (0.311) and the highest values of genetic distances were determined for a couple of genotypes Violeta and BGR2 (0.933). The average genetic distance between all pairs of genotypes amounted 0.587. The results of the principal coordinate analysis (PCoA) were consistent with the results obtained on the basis of cluster analysis, except that the PCoA allocated another four genotypes. There was no relationship between groups of genotypes formed by the use of cluster analyses and PCoA with their geographical origin. Analysis of molecular variance of 46 red clover genotypes by the status and ploidy level was significant, but it also suggested a weak genetic differentiation of groups formed on the basis of those characteristics. Observed groups of genotypes, according to the cluster analyses and PCoA of microsatellite data, could be used in future breeding programs for the selection of germplasm.

Key words: AMOVA, cluster analysis, genetic diversity, microsatellite markers, PCoA analysis, *Trifolium pratense*.

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Received: 1 August 2016.

Accepted: 30 November 2016.

doi:10.4067/S0718-58392017000100005.

INTRODUCTION

Red clover (*Trifolium pratense* L.) belongs to the *Fabaceae* family, the genus *Trifolium*. This genus comprises more than 250 species with about 10% of them being important in agriculture (Kiran et al., 2010). Red clover, as one of the most extensive species of *Trifolium* genus, can be found in nature or as a cultivated crop in pure stands or in grass-legume mixtures. Traditionally, benefits of growing red clover include also N fixation and soil improvement through legume-*Rhizobium* symbioses (Yates et al., 2014). High protein content and excellent yielding potential, with some varieties that can have higher fodder yields than alfalfa (Drobna and Jancovic, 2006), make red clover considerably used in silage production for livestock farming. Yield and protein content are the most valuable traits that were developed and upgraded in breeding programs, as well as persistence and resistance to various biotic and abiotic stress factors (Repkova et al., 2006). Genetic diversity at crop level in conjunction with biodiversity gains due to agronomic practices ensures achieving crop yield and quality, taking into account biotic and abiotic stress factors that are inevitably present in crop production (Finckh, 2008).

Therefore, for the further improvement of red clover and other economically important *Trifolium* sp. varieties, genetic resources are still having special importance.

Originally, red clover is a diploid species, with the default number of seven chromosomes ($2n = 2x = 14$). Today it is grown commercially diploid and tetraploid cultivars of red clover (Zuk-Golaszewska et al., 2010). Although the most common method for obtaining tetraploids in red clover is colchicine doubling, there are also other methods that could be used for inducing polyploidy, like N_2O and sexual polyploidization through unreduced gametes. The induced tetraploid forms could exceed their diploid counterparts in many traits like increased disease resistance, persistence, winter hardiness and forage DM yield (Sattler et al., 2016).

Red clover as allogamous species is characterized with homomorphic gametophytic self-incompatibility (GSI) system (Riday and Krohn, 2010). Accordingly, red clover populations are heterogeneous and consist of heterozygous genotypes. As a result, there are high levels of genetic variation within and between populations (Tucak et al., 2009). Besides, perennial, outcrossing species in relation to annual self-pollinators have higher genetic diversity and less differentiation among populations (Tanhuanpaa and Manninen, 2012).



Analysis of intra-group and inter-group genetic variability is of fundamental importance for plant breeding and germplasm conservation. This is particularly important for cross-pollinating species such as red clover, in which inbreeding depression can be manifested. Development and breeding of new varieties of red clover and similar forage legumes such as alfalfa is a very slow and long process (Tucak et al., 2009). In addition, it is still insufficiently studied genetic variability of both natural populations and local populations of forage species, such as red clover, in which is a fairly widespread use of local populations (Kouame and Quesenberry, 1993; Dias et al., 2008).

The neutral DNA markers have proven useful in detecting diversity of genetic resources because they allow more precise identification of the individuals independently of the influence of environmental factors. Today there are a significant number of techniques based on the variability of DNA sequences which complement the researches of allozyme methods (Pagnotta et al., 2005). Compared with phenotypic markers, DNA marker technology based on scientific explorations in molecular biology or biotechnology can be of great use for improvement or development of new cultivars and molecular plant breeding (He et al., 2014).

Simple Sequence Repeats (SSR) or microsatellite markers are the arrays of DNA sequences, consisting of tandemly repeating mono-, di-, tri-, tetra-, penta-, and hexanucleotide motifs, and they are flanked by unique sequences (Xu et al., 2013). These markers are based on PCR-polymerase chain reaction, there are many of them, they are codominant, highly reproducible (He et al., 2009) and also among the most preferred types of molecular markers for their ubiquitous distribution (Zhao et al., 2011). SSRs have been widely used in the analysis of genetic diversity (Zhang et al., 2012).

Red clover genotypes that are presented in a collection of the Institute of Field and Vegetable Crops in Novi Sad so far were differentiated using morphological UPOV descriptors and weren't completely characterized by the use of microsatellite markers. In this respect, the objectives of this study were to: i) accomplish SSR molecular analysis of varieties and populations of red clover; ii) assess genetic similarities and relationships of red clover genotypes on the basis of microsatellites allelic diversity; iii) classify genotypes according to the results of SSR molecular analysis. Screening germplasm of 46 red clover accessions at the molecular level could be useful for management of the collection and for efficient exploitation of genetic resources in future red clover breeding programs.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Plant material

The plant material that has been used for this research consisted of 46 varieties and populations of red clover (Table 1). The entire plant material is part of the collection

Table 1. Names, origin, status and ploidy level of the genotypes of red clover.

Designation	Genotype/ accession	Origin	Status	Level of ploidy
1	NCPGRU2	Ukraine	Population	2n
2	NCPGRU3	Ukraine	Population	2n
3	NCPGRU4	Ukraine	Population	2n
4	NCPGRU5	Ukraine	Population	2n
5	Violeta	Bolivia	Cultivar	2n
6	Nessonas	Greece	Cultivar	2n
7	Mercury	Belgium	Cultivar	2n
8	Lemmon	Belgium	Cultivar	2n
9	SA1	Australia	Population	2n
10	SA3	Australia	Population	2n
11	SA4	Australia	Population	2n
12	BGR1	Romania	Population	2n
13	BGR2	Romania	Population	2n
14	BGR3	Romania	Population	2n
15	Diana	Hungary	Cultivar	2n
16	Dicar	France	Cultivar	4n
17	Nemaro	Germany	Cultivar	4n
18	Una	Serbia	Cultivar	2n
19	Avala	Serbia	Cultivar	2n
20	Marina	Serbia	Cultivar	2n
21	Amos	Denmark	Cultivar	4n
22	NS-Mlava	Serbia	Cultivar	2n
23	Italia centrale	Italy	Population	2n
24	Bolognino	Italy	Population	2n
25	Marino	Germany	Cultivar	2n
26	Renova	Switzerland	Cultivar	2n
27	Titus	Germany	Cultivar	4n
28	Rotra	Belgium	Cultivar	4n
29	Kora	Sweden	Cultivar	2n
30	Vivi	Sweden	Cultivar	4n
31	Lucrum	Germany	Cultivar	2n
32	Noe	France	Cultivar	2n
33	Violetta	Belgium	Cultivar	2n
34	Britta	Sweden	Cultivar	2n
35	Krano	Denmark	Cultivar	2n
36	Triton	Germany	Cultivar	4n
37	Lutea	Germany	Cultivar	2n
38	Bjorn	Sweden	Cultivar	2n
39	Bradlo	Slovakia	Population	2n
40	Cortanovci	Serbia	Population	2n
41	89 E-0	Bulgaria	Population	2n
42	91 E-44	Bulgaria	Population	2n
43	91 E-63	Bulgaria	Population	2n
44	Sofia52	Bulgaria	Population	2n
45	Fertody	Hungary	Cultivar	2n
46	Quiñequeli	Chile	Cultivar	2n

of the Institute of Field and Vegetable Crops in Novi Sad. The analyzed genotypes of red clover were chosen so that they are genetically divergent and consisted of diploid and tetraploid genotypes originating from 17 different countries of the world, as well as local varieties and populations.

DNA extraction and PCR allele detection

The experiment consisted of 46 plants, each coming from 46 genotypes, and genomic DNA isolation was performed from the leaves according to the protocol of Rogers and Bandich (1988). Molecular characterization of 46 red clover genotypes was done on the basis of selected set of 14 microsatellite markers. List of tested microsatellite *loci*, their positions on chromosomes, primer sequences, and repetitive motifs are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Microsatellite markers, chromosomes on which they are located, their primer sequences and motif repeats.

Microsatellite markers	Linkage group	Sequences of left and right primers (5'-3' direction)	Motif
RCS0035	1	CATTGTAGGTTATGTTTATCAGG CCCAAAGCCTACAAGGAAAG	(AC) ₁₈
RCS0453	2	TCGCCACAAGGTCTCTTTTT CGCTCTCTCTCTGCTTCA	(AAG) ₁₅
RCS2860	2	GAAACAAAGCTGTGAAAGGG GAGAATCTTGAGTGTGTGAAGGTT	(AAT) ₂₁
RCS0078	2	ATCCCCCAATTTCCATCTC TGCCCTGAAACCAAAAATGT	(AG) ₃₂
RCS0894	3	CCTCATCATCAAATTCATTCTCA AGCCAGAACCAGAACCTGAA	(AAG) ₇₀
RCS1667	3	CAGCAATCCAACGTTTCTGA ATCATCACCAGCTTCAGCAC	(AAC) ₁₅
RCS1729	4	ATGGCTTCTTCTTCCACCT TCGACTGGGAAATCGATAGG	(AAG) ₁₉
RCS2728	4	GTCCATGAAGGCCGAAAATA CAGAGGACCAGGAGGTGAAG	(AAC) ₂₄
RCS1225	5	TGCAAACCTCCGCTTTATGC CTCGCTGAAGGAGGAAACAG	(ATC) ₁₅
RCS3681	5	AAAGCAGTGAAGAAAATGGA CCCTTCATCAATGGCTTTCT	(ATC) ₁₅
RCS0252	6	GGTAGTTTCTGACTTTCCCGTGT TACAAAAGGGACCTGCTGCT	(ATC) ₁₅
RCS0031	6	CCTCCTTGCAATCTTTTC AAAACCTCGTTCCGAGAGAGTG	(AAAG) ₁₉
RCS0685	7	TGTTGCTACAAGGCCAAAGA AGCACTTTCGAACACAGCAA	(GGT) ₂₁
RCS0793	7	CGCAATCTTCTTCTCATTTCA TTCAACATGCAGGCTAAGAAA	(AAG) ₂₀

PCR was accomplished in the reaction mixture that contained 10 μ l volumes with approximately 25-50 ng of template DNA, 1 \times PCR buffer (50 mM KCl, 10 mM Tris-HCl pH 8.3), 1.5 mM MgCl₂, 0.15 mM of each primer, 0.25 mM dNTPs and 0.3 U Taq polymerase (Applied Biosystems). Thermal cycling conditions involved a denaturation step at 94 °C for 3 min, then 45 cycles at 94 °C for 1 min, 1 min at 55 °C, 2 min at 72 °C and a final extension step of 72 °C for 7 min. Two markers that were labeled by different ABI-dyes were simultaneously analyzed for fragment detection. The 36 cm capillary arrays were used for separation of samples which contained 0.5-1 μ L PCR products of each marker, 1 μ L internal size standard and 9 μ L Hi-Di formamide. GeneScan/Genotyper software package of Applied Biosystems was used for detection of alleles.

Statistical analysis

In order to characterize the SSR genetic diversity of red clover germplasm, the number of alleles, allele frequency, fragments size range and polymorphism information content (PIC) values were determined using PowerMarker software (Liu and Muse, 2005). Basic indicators of microsatellite genetic variability in red clover are presented in Table 3. Analysis of microsatellites data served to construct Dice genetic distance matrix (Dice, 1945), by the use of NTSYS software (Rohlf, 2009). Dice genetic distance matrix was further used as the basis for the analysis of the main coordinates (Principal Coordinate Analysis [PCoA]; synonymous with Multidimensional scaling [MDS]) and

Table 3. Parameters of genetic diversity for 14 microsatellite loci of red clover.

Locus	Sample size	Number of alleles	Frequency of alleles	Fragment size range (bp)	Pic
RCS0031	46	22	0.092	139-188	0.169
RCS0035	46	7	0.317	184-196	0.434
RCS0078	46	35	0.062	161-229	0.116
RCS0252	46	5	0.249	171-182	0.371
RCS0453	46	14	0.144	190-220	0.243
RCS0685	46	4	0.383	196-208	0.466
RCS0793	46	16	0.172	198-268	0.284
RCS0894	46	14	0.121	128-185	0.216
RCS1225	46	18	0.144	221-275	0.246
RCS1667	46	6	0.391	255-270	0.482
RCS1729	46	13	0.219	236-276	0.339
RCS2728	46	11	0.258	218-247	0.382
RCS2860	46	15	0.100	105-158	0.180
RCS3681	46	7	0.228	152-170	0.352
Average		13.36	0.206		0.306

PIC: Polymorphism information content.

grouping of red clover genotypes, based on a set of selected microsatellite markers. Unweighted Pair Group Method with Arithmetic Mean (UPGMA) tree was constructed using MEGA software (Tamura et al., 2007). Analysis of molecular variance (AMOVA) was also performed, and by the use of its results the intra-population and inter-population diversity of red clover genotypes were estimated, on the basis of status (cultivar/population) and ploidy (2n or 4n). AMOVA was carried out using ARLEQUIN program (Excoffier and Lischer, 2010).

RESULTS

Genetic variability of microsatellites profiles

Fourteen primer pairs amplified a total of 187 alleles, with an average of 13.36 alleles per locus. The highest number of alleles had a marker RCS0078, while the lowest number of alleles was presented for the marker RCS0685. A third of the total number of loci had eight or more alleles. Allele frequencies for 14 microsatellite loci were in the range of 0.062 (RCS0078) to 0.391 (RCS1667). In analyzed red clover genotypes dominantly were present moderately frequent alleles (with frequencies from 0.05 to 0.50), while rare alleles with frequencies less than 0.05, as well as frequent alleles with frequencies exceeding 0.50 were not represented. The amplified DNA fragments were in different ranges for different SSR markers, wherein the least value range was for the marker RCS0252 (11 bp) and the highest was for the RCS0793 marker (70 bp). The Polymorphism Information Content (PIC) value is an indicator of the power of the specific markers to detect polymorphism in the population (Botstein et al., 1980). The highest PIC value (0.48) was present for the RCS1667 marker, and the lowest (0.12) was characteristic for the marker RCS0078. Markers with dinucleotide repeat motifs on average had higher polymorphism (0.43) then the markers with trinucleotide motifs (0.32), and RCS0031 marker with a tetranucleotide motif (0.17).

Cluster analysis

Genetic distance for 46 red clover genotypes was evaluated based on polymorphism of microsatellite markers and Dice distance matrix was constructed (Figure 1). The minimum values of genetic distances were found among genotypes NCPGRU2 and NCPGRU5 (0.311). The highest values of genetic distances were determined for a pair of genotypes Violeta and BGR2 (0.933). The average distance between all pairs of genotypes amounted 0.587.

The cluster analysis of microsatellites data arranged red clover genotypes in the two groups (Figure 2). The first cluster contains following genotypes: NCPGRU2, NCPGRU5, NCPGRU3, Diana, Britta, Avala, Fertody, SA4, BGR3, NS-Mlava, Mercury, Vivi, Titus, Triton, Lutea, Bradlo, Sofia52, 89 E-0, Amos, Krano, Italia centrale, SA3, BGR1, Bolognino, Kora, Bjorn, Lemmon, Noe, Marina, Renova, Rotra, BGR2, Nemaro, Lucrum. The second cluster comprises genotypes SA1, Marino, Violetta, Quiñequeli, Cortanovci, 91 E-63, Nessonas, Una, 91 E-44, NCPGRU4, Violeta, Dicar.

Grouping of genotypes by the use of microsatellite markers was not in accordance with their geographical origin.

Principal Coordinate Analysis (PCoA)

Figure 3 refers to the PCoA of 46 red clover genotypes based on microsatellite markers and it shows that the first and second axis explained 19.3% of the total genetic

variability of the original data set. The grouping of genotypes based on microsatellites, reveals the following genotypes which are genetically different in their molecular data in relation to the majority of genotypes that were clustered around the axis of the central part of PCoA graphics: Čortanovci, 91 E-63, NCPGRU4, Violeta, Nessonas, Una, 91 E-44, Violetta, Marino. The results of PCoA analysis were consistent with the results obtained on the basis of cluster analysis, except that the PCoA allocated another four genotypes (Noe, Lemmon, BGR2, Italia centrale). There was no relationship between (PCoA) grouping of genotypes and their geographical origin, as with the cluster analysis.

Analysis of molecular variance (AMOVA)

AMOVA was used to test genetic variation among and within three groups: the first group consisted of 18 diploid populations, the second group was comprised of 21 diploid varieties, and the third group consisted of seven tetraploid varieties. Applying AMOVA analysis based on microsatellite markers of 46 red clover genotypes that were grouped based on type (variety or population) and ploidy level ($2n$ or $4n$) (Table 4), showed significant ($p < 0.05$) intergroup differentiation. However, the variance between groups was much lower in regard to variations within analyzed groups, pointing to weak intergroup differentiation. AMOVA also

Figure 1. Distance matrix of the 46 red clover genotypes calculated using the Dice coefficient of similarity based on microsatellite markers.

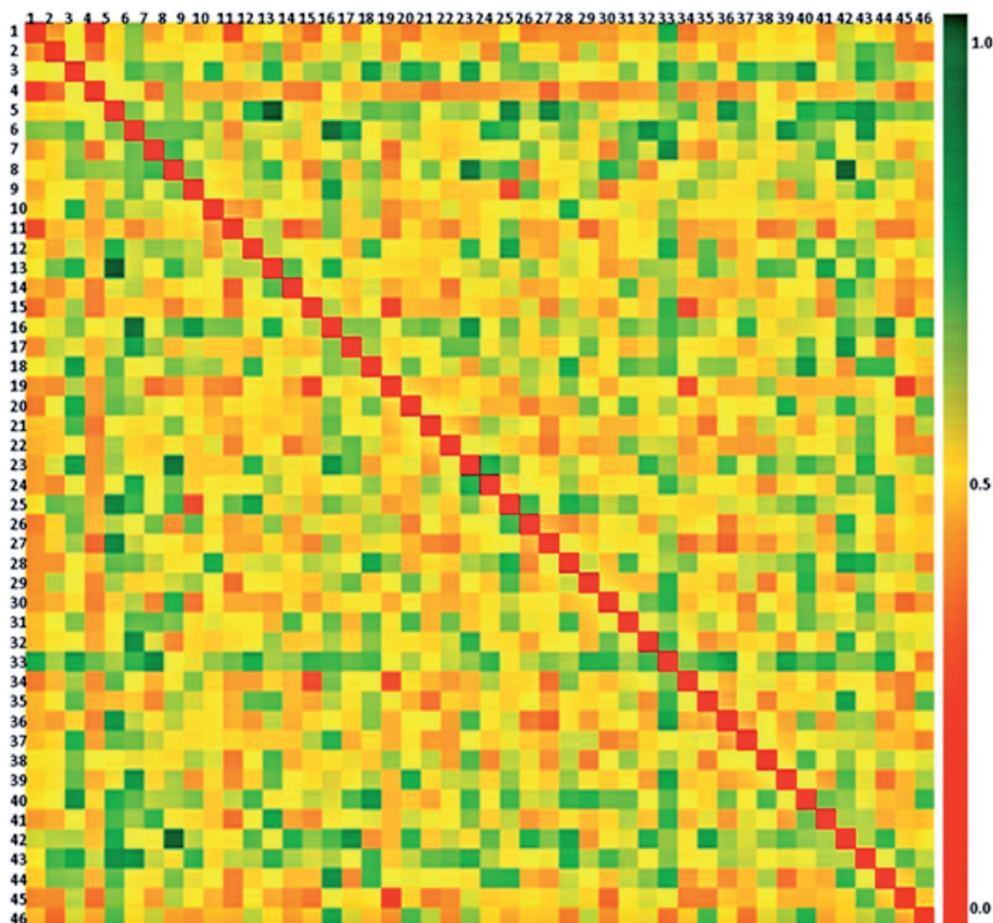
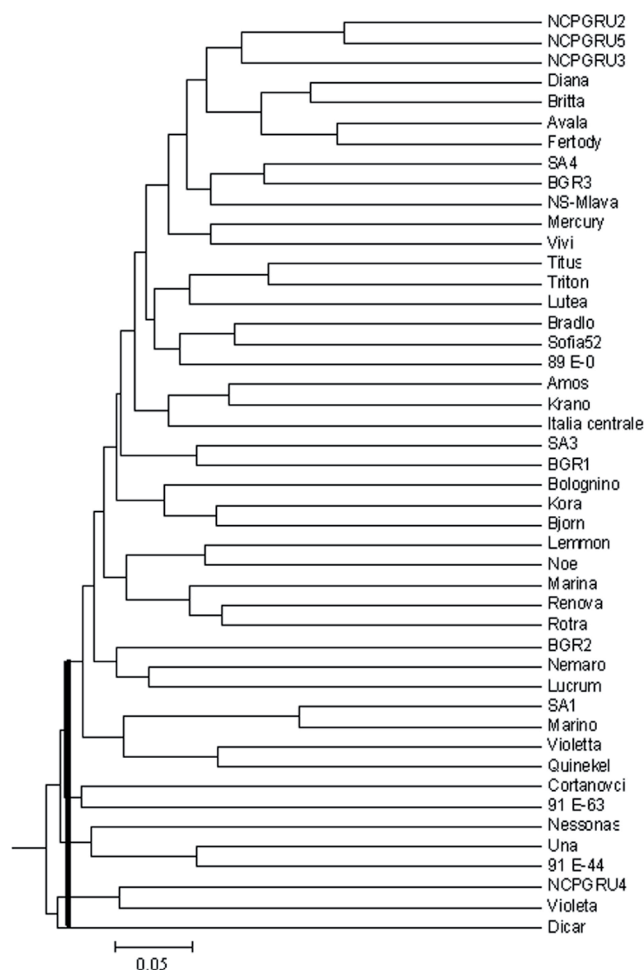


Figure 2. Pair group method with arithmetic (UPGMA) dendrogram for 46 red clover genotypes based on Dice distance matrices of simple sequence repeats (SSR) data.



served for determining the index of genetic differentiation (Φ_{ST}), which is a standardized inter-group genetic distance of the two geographic groups, and represents an indication of the correlation of genes of different individuals in a population (Chen and Nelson, 2005). Values of Φ_{ST} index according to Hartl and Clark (2007) are defined as follows: differentiation may be little ($\Phi_{ST} < 0.05$), moderate ($0.05 < \Phi_{ST} < 0.15$), great ($0.15 < \Phi_{ST} < 0.25$) and very great ($\Phi_{ST} > 0.25$). It can be observed that the genetic distance, expressed as Φ_{ST} index between groups defined on the basis of type and ploidy of 46 red clover genotypes, was low (0.01236), and pointed to a weak genetic differentiation between these three groups.

DISCUSSION

An average number of alleles per *locus* in this study (13) was a significant indicator of the genetic diversity of investigated red clover genotypes, and it was higher than in the research studies of other authors who have also used SSRs in red clover. Sato et al. (2005) and Dugar and Popov (2013) showed that the average number of alleles per SSR

Figure 3. Principal coordinate analysis (PCoA) of 46 genotypes based on 14 simple sequence repeats (SSR) markers.

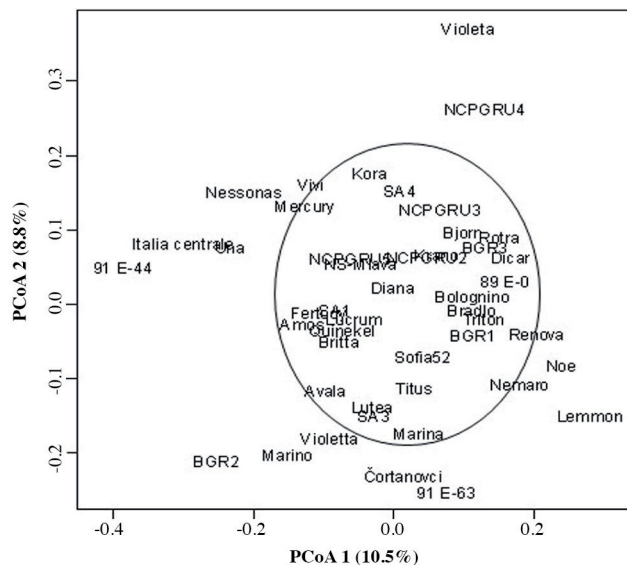


Table 4. Analysis of molecular variance based on 14 simple sequence repeats (SSRs) of red clover genotypes grouped according to the type and ploidy.

Source of variation	df	Sum of squares	Variance components	% Total variance	$\Phi_{ST}^{\#}$	$P^{\#}$
Among groups	2	0.729	0.00388	1.24	0.01236	0.04692
Within groups	43	13.319	0.30975	98.76		
Total	45	14.048	0.3236			

[#]Calculated on the basis of the 1000 permutations.

$p < 0.05$ - significant

df: Degrees of freedom; Φ_{ST} : index of genetic differentiation.

locus in the red clover was 9. Dias et al. (2008) reported that the average number of SSR alleles in red clover was 9 in three population and 11 for 56 individuals, which represented 56 populations. Berzina et al. (2008) found that the average number of alleles for seven analyzed cultivars was lowest in Aria variety (11.3), and the highest in 'Priekuli' (19.2). Vymyslicky et al. (2012) reported that the number of alleles per *locus* in red clover ranged from 3 to 8, with an average of 4.4. Gupta et al. (2016) determined the lowest value of the average number of alleles per *locus* in the red clover, which amounted 3.18. PIC values determined in this study were somewhat lower when compared to the results of other authors. PIC values established by Sato et al. (2005) for the same SSRs that were used in this study were within the range of 0.54 to 0.83. PIC values determined in the work of Dias et al. (2008) were in the range of 0.64 to 0.85 for the three populations and in the range of 0.70-0.91 for 56 individuals of red clover. Gupta et al. (2016) reported SSR PIC values range from 0.301 to 0.719 for red clover genotypes, and Vymyslicky et al. (2012) found SSR PIC values to be in the range of 0.4 to 0.86.

AMOVA was used for the purpose of detailed consideration of genetic variability and differentiation of the studied 46 red clover genotypes.

The high within-population variability and high heterogeneity and heterozygosity of red clover are expected because of cross pollination of this species and its extraordinarily high level of gametophytic self-incompatibility (Rosso and Pagano, 2005).

Greater within-group variability in relation to among-group also was found by other authors. Dias et al. (2008) tested five clusters obtained on the basis of morphological characteristics of 56 individuals in relation to the SSR data and found that within-group variability was 98.1%, while the among-group variation was 1.9%. In the same research by the application of AMOVA in three populations of red clover, it was also found that the within-group variability was higher (83.6%) and among-group much lower (16.4%). Dugar and Popov (2013) have studied 15 Ukrainian red clover cultivars and found that the among-group genetic variability of SSR markers was low and that it amounted only 6.9% of the total variability. Gupta et al. (2016) analyzed a core collection of red clover which was established by (Kouame and Quesenberry, 1993), and dismantling of the genetic variance using AMOVA showed that most of the genetic diversity was contained within the population (91%), while 9% of genetic variation is accounted for among-group variability. Berzina et al. (2008) were studying seven diploid red clover cultivars based on six SSRs and found that inter-group variation represented only 2% of the total genetic polymorphism, as well as that Φ_{ST} values (0.006 to 0.043), indicated a low genetic differentiation between varieties.

CONCLUSIONS

Considering our molecular results, it can be concluded that the application of 14 microsatellite markers on the selected set of 46 red clover genotypes in these research, detected a significant genetic variability, which is the basic precondition for the creation of new and improvement of existing varieties. In this respect, based on microsatellite markers, we observed two groups of genotypes, specifically 16 genotypes which were separated in relation to the larger number of the remaining 30 genotypes, which in addition to data on agronomically important qualitative and quantitative traits could be used in future breeding programs for the initial selection of germplasm.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was conducted as a part of the project TR31024 (“Increasing market significance of forage crops by breeding and optimizing seed production technology”) that was funded by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia. The authors of this paper would like to sincerely thank the Department of Genetics of Biology Research Center in Tripoli.

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