ROMANIAN WOMEN IN POLITICS BEFORE AND AFTER 1989

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Abstract

The present study aims to present and to draw one's attention to Romanian women's condition and place in a social field dominated by men, politics. As the title suggests, Romanian women's condition in politics is presented here by taking into consideration the major historical Romanian event that marked the end of the 20th century, the 1989 Revolution.

Politics has been considered for a long time as being part of the public sphere. The distinction, which has been made during the years all over the world, is very well known and it refers to two different spheres: the domestic sphere, which is attributed to women and the public sphere stereotypically attributed to men. This strict division of their activity had an impact on men's and women's roles. As a consequence the woman, seen as the passive element, has been the one in charge of the domestic activities and also responsible for bringing up and educating children and on the other hand, the man, seen as the active element, has been the one who takes care of the things outside the house, being the "provider".

Romania made no exception due to the fact that before becoming a communist country it was a rural one with a strong peasant culture. In order to understand Romanian women's place in politics today one needs to take a close look at the way women and women's role was considered before the communist period. Within this peasant culture one can easily notice a clear division between men's and women's roles and values which generated different patterns of behaviour.

First of all it is very important to acknowledge the fact that women were regarded merely as "trading objects", their status changed from the one of being obedient daughters in their fathers' house to the one of being submissive wives and also obedient daughters-in-law in their husbands' house. This type of obedience is seen as rooted in a religious order far beyond human judgment.

Secondly, one has to consider the existence of several social stereotypes that demand different types of behaviour for men and women. The man was considered intellectually superior and naturally suited to taking decisions; this is the reason for which his authority over his wife and children is clear and unquestionable while the ideal woman was the nurturing and loving one, always passive, obedient and enduring. As a consequence, women became accustomed to a life full of frustrations and repressions and considered their lives as long series of sacrifices; the only comfort they took being the one in the Virgin Mary's example[1]. By contrast, men were allowed to do whatever they pleased, even if this implied adultery, drunkenness and domestic violence as long as they continued to be the ones who supplied their families.

Taking into account all these it is easy to understand why Romanian women lacked the courage to stand up for their rights and to get involved in the process of taking decisions at a national level.

Nevertheless, there were women throughout history who had an influence on the political life, such as Queen Maria (1876 - 1938) and Elena Văcărescu. It is worth mentioning that they were upper-class and aristocratic women who used their education, intelligence,

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culture, talents and beauty with great success in order to influence different important decisions. Considering the period when they lived, it is true, thus, that they could exercise this type of power only through men. It is well known that society at that time did not permit women to show their power of influence that is why this type of politics was called politics "behind the scenes".

Once the Second World War ended and the communists were installed ahead of the country, women's situation seems to have changed. All the prior peasant values were declared outdated and in consequence the new ideology promoted the ides of women as being equal to men. This imposed equality did not mean equal affirmation of different values for men and women; instead it meant treating women like men.

Domestic tasks were now regarded as meaningless, because only work which was paid deserved respect. The primary thing that women had to accomplish in the peasant culture – giving birth and raising children – was done now only for the renewal of the labour force. Ceausescu stated this very clearly in a message he read in 1986 with the occasion of Women's International Day: "There is no obligation nobler, more honorable for families, for women, than that or raising and giving to the country as many children as possible"[2].

The first woman to accede to political power by herself was Ana Pauker, chief of the Communist Party between 1948 and 1953. It is well known that she was one of the most feared and detested women in Romanian history.

In the years that followed the imposed model for all Romanian women was Elena Ceauşescu the dictator's wife. A personality cult surrounded her and she was seen as having power in her own right. Because she was behind many of the bad decisions that Ceauşescu took and which had a negative effect on population she is not a popular personality within our country.

It is worth observing how her image was perceived and changed during the years that followed. Until 1971 she was regarded only as Nicolae Ceauşescu's wife, her role being that of a hostess. On 4th October 1971 *Scânteia* newspaper published an article describing the Harvest Day where Nicolae Ceauşescu was accompanied by "comrade Elena", now she was referred to as his comrade not as his wife. Staring with this year she was highly praised such as: "*the first woman of the country*" or "*comrade academician doctor engineer Elena Ceauşescu, outstanding activist of party and state eminent personage of Romanian and international science*." Although her academic credentials are not very clear she became Chairwoman of the National Council of Science and Technology as well as member of the Technical Sciences section of the Romanian Academy.

During the communist regime more and more women occupied political and leadership positions every year. Although this was nothing else than a justification and illustration of the equality preached by the regime, women in such positions had to follow orders exactly otherwise they were replaced with less recalcitrant women. Women in leading positions had to comply with the party ideal of the exemplary woman. Such positions implied being an exemplary wife, mother and the most important, being an example to follow at your workplace. It is clear that such positions were unreachable for single women, divorced women, not to mention single mothers, regardless of their training and professional capacity. Women were usually dismissed from leading positions if they got divorced.

In 1984 there were three women on the Party's Political Executive Committee, all of them with full membership status. They were Elena Ceauşescu, Lina Ciobanu and Alexandrina Găinuşă but only Elena Ceauşecsu was member of the Permanent Bureau. The fact that women advanced to such high leading positions did not necessarily meant that there was an improvement in the social condition of women in Romania.[3]

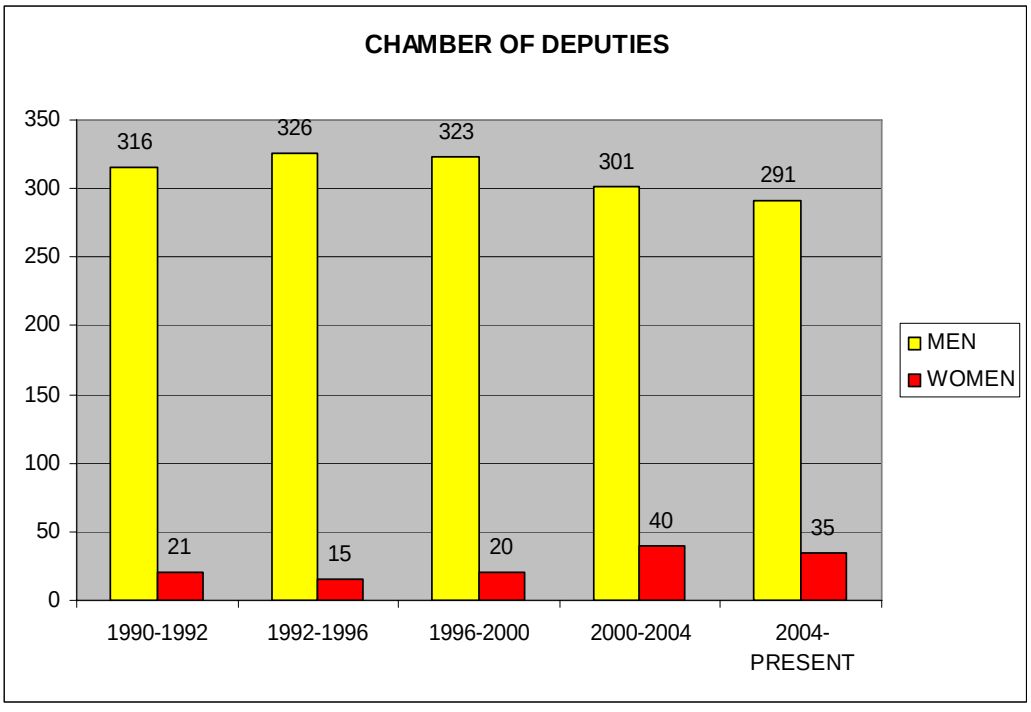
Things changed in 1989 when the Revolution marked the end of the communist regime and culminated in the assassination of the communist leaders. Now, ideas like the emancipation

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of women and that of social and political equality turned out to be a false problem as well as an additional concern and responsibility. Women's reaction regarding these issues was a different one contrary to one's expectations. They did not want to be part of the political life anymore, their main focus being again the family life.

During the first free electoral campaign in over more than fifty years, issues concerning women's needs were totally missing from the agenda of most major parties.Although the Romanian Constitution guarantees equal participation of women (about 51% of the population) after 1990 women almost disappeared from the political and public life. This could be explained by the combination of a pre-communist tradition with a reaction to the previously imposed and manipulated involvement. These things combined convinced Romanian women that their main concern for the near future should be their family. Wives of politicians at that time feared to appear in public or to make statements in order not to be compared with the Ceauşescu couple.

In order to get a clear image of the women's status on the political scene of the period that followed the 1989 Revolution one has to take a closer look at the level of representation of women in the Romanian Parliament since 1990 till the present moment. The figures provided by Fig.1. offers us the necessary data about women's level of representation in the Chamber of Deputies.

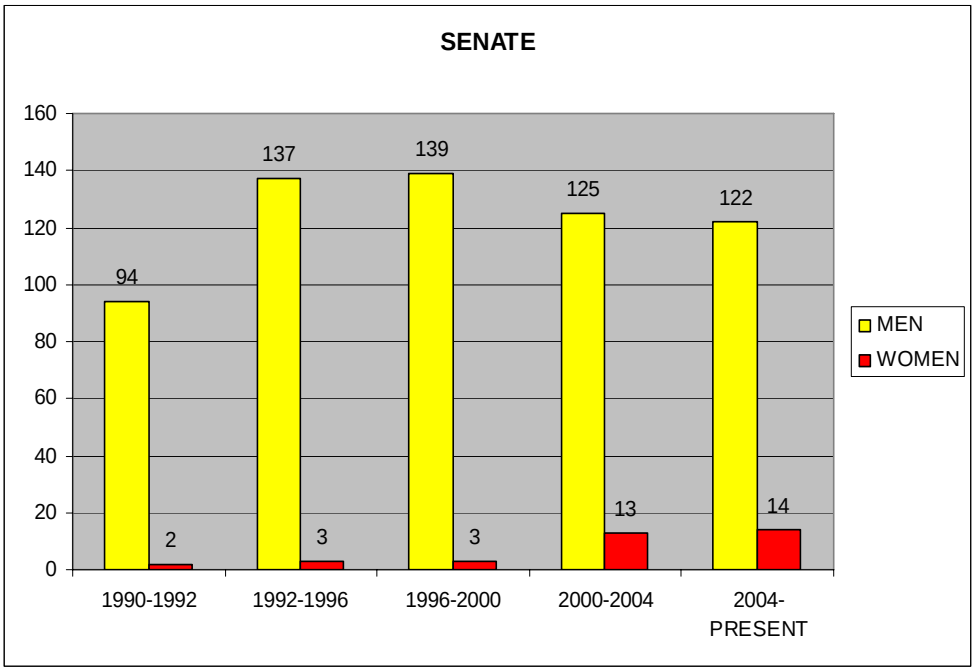


As it results from the figures presented, comparing the men's level of representation with the women's level of representation one can easily notice the huge discrepancy in number. For example, between 1992 and 1996 less than 0.5% of the members were women. A slight rise can be noticed since 2000, women representing approximately 1% of the total number of members.

The situation is even more worrying when considering the next figure which provides us with the women's level of representation in the Romanian Senate. Again, the number of women representatives in the Senate since 1990 until 2000 was practically embarrassing, two or three women out of 94, 137 and 139 men. It is even useless mentioning the percentage – under 0.5%. As in the case of the Chamber of Deputies, after 2000 a slight improvement can be

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noticed. However the situation is not at all encouraging, because the percentage of women representatives does not surpass the 1%.



At a governmental level women are even less represented. Between 1989 and 1999 the governments led by Petre Roman, Theodor Stolojan, Nicolae Văcăroiu, Victor Ciorbea and Radu Vasile had not a single woman as head of a ministry. The situation seems to improve slightly between 1999 and 2000 when the government led by Mugur Isărescu had two women as ministers.

The government led by Adrian Năstase between 2000 and 2004 had four women ministers: Minister of Justice – Rodica Stănoiu; Minister of Education and Research – Ecaterina Andronescu; Minister of Health and Family – Daniela Bartoş; Minister of European Integration – Hildegard Puwak.[4]

Between 2004 and March 2007 the government led by Călin Popescu Tăriceanu had four women ministers. However the government reformed in March this year has no women. Instead of seeing an improvement the situation is unfortunately a dramatic one.

Women are dramatically underrepresented at both local and highest levels of decision making. In 1998 only 71,000 out of 270,000 decision-makers were women. Considering the provided data, nowadays the issue of gender equality is more and more a necessity imposed to us by the European Union. In 1996 in response to international requirements, gender issues were introduced on the political agenda as a principle and a *Department for Women's Rights and Family Oriented Policies* was established in the *Ministry of Labour and Social Protection*. Furthermore in 1997 a Sub-commission for Equal Opportunities was established in the Romanian Parliament. In February 2000 an Inter-Ministerial Commission on Equal Opportunities was set up in order to ensure the co-ordination of the efforts made at national level to initiate and develop a gender approach in the Romanian legislation. No clear strategy and/or plan of action related to the activity of this body have been exposed to the public.

As compared to the beginning of the 1990s, women's political participation improved in Romania. In the early 90s, there were almost no women in Parliament, Government, and Ministries. People at large see women in politics, and they see strong women with a good

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image. In politics, as in other domains, society expects more of women and the general attitude is less sympathetic towards women than men. Asked "Why are women rejected in politics?", one of the former presidential chancellor, Adriana Săftoiu answers that women are admired or feared as long as they stand in the politicians' shadow. She also considers that by doing so women can achieve greater success than by trying their luck directly. According to her saying the woman politician lacks the courage to be woman in politics and instead she adopts a masculine and aggressive style. This thing causes the electorate to choose the male candidate at the elections, because what is allowed to the man is not allowed to the woman.[5]

The information gathered in this paper aimed at drawing one's attention toward Romanian women's status in politics. After analysing the two major periods considered, before and after the 1989 Revolution, the conclusion that emerges is that women's implication in leading positions before 1989 was higher, albeit an imposed and manipulated one. By contrast, after the 1989 Revolution the situation changed drastically with fewer women who are interested in taking a firm stand in politics.

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1. Doina Pasca Harsanyi, *Women in Romania*, in: *Gender politics and Post – Communism. Reflections from Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union*, edited by Nanette Funk and Magda Mueller, New York - London, 1993.
2. Mariana Hausleitner, *Women in Romania: Before and After the Collapse*, in: *Gender politics and Post – Communism. Reflections from Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union*, edited by Nanette Funk and Magda Mueller, New York - London, 1993.
3. *Adevărul de marţi*, 12th December 2000.
4. Dan Duda, *De ce sunt femeile respinse in politică?* article published in *Cotidianul*, 11th September 2007.
5. http://diasan.vsat.ro/pls/parlam/structura.home?leg=1990

NOTES:

[1] Doina Pasca Harsanyi, *Women in Romania*, in: *Gender politics and Post – Communism. Reflections from Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union*, edited by Nanette Funk and Magda Mueller, Routledge, 1993, p. 40

[2] Message for the women of the Socialist Republic of Romania, on the occasion of Women's International Day, 1986.

[3] Doina Pasca Harsanyi, *Women in Romania*, in: *Gender politics and Post – Communism. Reflections from Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union*, edited by Nanette Funk and Magda Mueller, New York - London, 1993, p. 45

[4] Adevărul de marţi, 12th December 2000

[5] *Femeile sunt admirate sau temute câtă vreme stau în umbra politicienilor, afirmă Adriana Săftoiu. Eşecul Monei Muscă a lăsat un loc gol pe care n-a reuşit să-l ocupe nici una dintre femeile politician din România, afirmă Adriana Săftoiu într-un articol publicat în numărul din septembrie al revistei „Le Monde diplomatique". Analizând situaţia femeilor în viaţa politică autohtonă, fostul consilier prezidenţial reaminteşte că în umbra fiecărui bărbat din politică se află o femeie, remarcând că în această postură femeile au mult mai mult succes decât dacă îşi încearcă direct şansa pe eşichier. „În percepţia publică, promovarea femeilor în politică este doar rezultatul modului lor de relaţionare cu şefii de partide", remarcă Adriana Saftoiu, care observă că „odată promovate femeile nu mai au timp - pentru a nu spune decât atât! - să ajute la promovarea altor femei". Potrivit Adrianei Săftoiu, „femeia politician nu are curaj să fie femeie în politică", dimpotrivă, adoptă stilul masculin agresiv, uneori grobian, de la formulare până la argumentaţie. Ceea ce, la alegeri, provoacă replierea electoratului în spatele candidatului bărbat: „Pentru că ceea ce îi este acceptat bărbatului nu îi este aprobat şi femeii".* (Cotidianul, 11th September 2007)

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