REPRESENTING GENDER IN COMMUNIST AND POSTCOMMUNIST ROMANIA

Roxana-Elisabeta MARINESCU
The Bucharest University of Economic Studies
roxana.marinescu@rei.ase.ro

Abstract:
This article examines various representations of gender in communist and postcommunist Romania, with a focus on how women and men were both led towards and sometimes forced into gender roles better suited to the state policies of the respective contexts rather than to their own interests. Over the years, the state and/or party(ies) public agenda, from women's liberation through gender equality to equal opportunities, has met real Romanian women's and men's needs to different extents and with variable success.

Keywords:
Gender roles, representation, power discourse, private and public spheres, equal opportunities

1. Introduction

Political theories regarding equal rights of men and women, as transposed in practice in communist and postcommunist Romania, enforced specific gender roles and created certain types of representations in the public consciousness, which did not necessarily follow the natural development of society. Obviously, the communist imposition of gender equality policies via the workers party (later on to become the communist party) came on a general trend in the Eastern bloc, which claimed equal rights for women as part of a propagandistic agenda to denounce the preceding so-called bourgeois oppression of women, as well as the oppression supposedly conducted in Western societies at the time.

BDD-A26082 © 2017 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:03:45 UTC)

This came on the seeds planted in the period between the world wars by Romanian feminists[1], fighting for women's rights within a larger European movement. Their fight culminated with obtaining the right to vote for Romanian women in 1938, but, as two dictatorial regimes followed, this recognition of women as citizens in the public sphere did not mean much up until 1990.

Equal opportunities policies came to be known in the Romanian postcommunist society via Western theories regarding gender, together with the notion of partnerships between men and women, in order to allow them a better work-life balance. This article will discuss to what extent these ideas were familiar to Romanian society in the period immediately after the fall of communism and how much they reflected the gender needs of the time, as well as the extent to which political representation followed these theories and validated them.

2. State intervention and control over gender roles. Private lives under scrutiny

2.1. From emancipation to equality and state control

In communism, the state/ party closely followed a Marxist interpretation of women's emancipation, which supposed a better representation of women on the labour market, together with transforming their private labour into a public service, all due to industrialization, for as Friederich Engels had remarked

"*The emancipation of woman will only be possible when woman can take part in production on a large, social scale, and domestic work no longer claims anything but an insignificant amount of her time. And only now has that become possible through modern large-scale industry, which does not merely permit of the employment of female labor over a wide*

[1] Suffice it to name just a few: Sofia Nădejde, Adela Xenopol, Ella Negruzzi, Calypso Corneliu Botez, Alexandrina Cantacuzino, Elena Bogdanovici, etc. (cf. Ș. Mihăilescu, 2002 and 2006).

BDD-A26082 © 2017 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:03:45 UTC)

range, but positively demands it, while it also tends towards ending private domestic labor by changing it more and more into a public industry."[2]

In this Marxist understanding, a forced liberation from patriarchal and capitalist exploitation in the home and simultaneous forced engagement on the labour market were desired, needed and expected. However, this did not suppose a reversed *emancipation* of men in the private sphere, and in its absence, the emancipation of women could not be possible – feminists spoke constantly of *the double burden* that women had to assume, i.e. being on the labour market together with men, while continuing their roles as primary (or more often than not exclusive) carers in the homes.

Gender roles were on the one hand dissolved into one big category, *the new man* (!), in its three dimensional capacity as party member, citizen and labourer. It is thus a triple role that people were expected to play in communist Romania, but a non-sexualized and gender-neutre one - a political role, a civic one and a proletarian one:

"*If we are to talk about creating conditions for full equality between sexes, that means we should treat all people not as men and women, but in their quality as party members, as citizens, judged exclusively by the work they contribute with.*"[3]

On the other hand, women were assigned an additional dimension, which referred to their role in the private sphere – *mothers* – a role brought into the lime light of the public sphere – *mothers of the nation*: "*The greatest honour for women is to give birth, to give life and raise children. Nothing can be dearer for a woman than to be a mother*."[4]

The same situation can be encountered in postcommunism, when liberal interpretations of gender representation prevail. According to these liberal theories, emancipation of women in the public sphere and public

[2] Cf. F. Engels, *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, 1884, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/ch09.htm, accessed on 21 April 2017.
[3] N. Ceaușescu, 1973, p. 648, my translation.
[4] *Ibidem*, p. 650, my translation.

BDD-A26082 © 2017 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:03:45 UTC)

representation are supposed to happen on their own, as long as legislation that guarantees equality is in place. However, such theories fail to consider equal opportunities, as women continue to feel the social pressure to fulfill both productive and reproductive roles, while men are still very little involved in equal partnerships in private life.

2.2. Women: productive and reproductive roles

In communist Romania, the productive and reproductive roles of women had to be assumed simultaneously, with an emphasis on the former at the beginning of the period, and with a clear focus on the latter starting with 1966. This is the moment when the infamous Decree 770 was passed, regulating an aspect of private life and transferring it into the public sphere – women were not simply mothers, but *mothers of the nation*, they became responsible for the *future of the country*.

Control over reproduction and sexuality was done in communist Romania through a network of laws, decrees, norms and instructions, implemented through a complex system of checks, controls and sanctions. Decree 770/1966, with subsequent modifications in 1974 and 1985, proposed by Nicolae Ceaușescu, was the main political instrument through which women were obliged to give birth to at least four (later, to five children) by the age of 45 in order to benefit from the only legal contraception method available at the time, which was abortion.

In parallel, a vast system of supervision and control was implemented, by involving the state police, the prosecutor's office and communist party leaders. Women who had suffered illegal abortions were submitted to long interrogations by prosecutors and the militia in hospitals before allowing them to be examined by a doctor. They were asked the names of the doctors or midwives who had performed the illegal abortion and whether their husbands/ partners had known about it in order to prosecute and imprison them as accomplices. In this situation, most women preferred to keep silent and thus medical intervention was postponed until it was too late. The death of women was labeled in hospital documents as

BDD-A26082 © 2017 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:03:45 UTC)

"*due to woman's fault*"[5] . The discussion on control of reproduction has to be placed in the general context of Romanian society of the time: shortages of all sorts, lack of minimal decent living conditions (of basic food, medicines, heating, electricity or hot water), of problems in the health, education, transportation systems, etc.

The main immediate effects of this state policy of direct intervention on women's bodies and in both genders' private lives were a steep increase in the number of unwanted children, many of them abandoned in maternities or in state institutions. Other consequences included growth of maternal and infant mortality, or growth of the birth of children with physical and psychological disabilities. Moreover, incidents of depression, nervous breakdowns, sexual issues and women's social isolation were frequent. All these determined effects of pronatalist policies in society as a whole. All in all, we can officially count as many as 10,000 women affected by the decree (of course, unofficially, there were more affected people). The situation is best summarised by researcher Gail Klingman:

"*Decree 770 was the cause of physical and emotional suffering of so many women during their reproductive life. The effects of the incrimination of abortion were felt by their partners, by their families, as well. For the majority of citizens, modern contraceptive methods were not generally available. Consequently sexual intimacy was tarnished by the fear and the anxiety of the risk that any contact could result in pregnancy. Against propaganda representations of the paternalist state, who was supposedly taking care of the wellbeing of its citizens, the over praised optimal conditions to develop healthy and numerous families were simply not there for most Romanians.*"[6]

At the same time, it is important to bring forward the effects of pronatalist policies (1966-1989) in postcommunist Romania. Up until the present time, also due to the direct intervention of the Romanian Orthodox

[5] C. Doboș, 2015, pp. 171-200.
[6] G. Kligman, 2000, p. 223, my translation.

BDD-A26082 © 2017 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:03:45 UTC)

Church, health and sexual education have been forbidded in public schools and abortion has continued to be the main contraceptive method throughout the 1990's, well after becoming legal. Other important effects are a great number of institutionalized children, adoptions or even commodification of children. There are secondary effects of these communist pronatalist policies, among which the change in marriage patterns or a great number of mature single women, as the generation born in the maximum boom period – immediately after Decree 770 became effective – reached adulthood. There will be further effects in the near future, to be seen in the expected collapse of the state pensions system and of the public health system catering for this huge generation. In postcommunism we are witnessing a continuation of the same kind of power discourse, supported by the Romanian Orthodox Church, political parties and a significant part of the civil society. As it was recently claimed by an important Orthodox cleric, each young family should have three children – one for the mother, one for the father and one for the church and country[7]. We can thus notice a continuum of the power discourse related to women during communism, with variations from that of emancipation and equality to one of state control over private aspects of their lives:

"*Talking about the excessive regulation of women's condition and gender roles in public and private spheres, Romanian communism starts with an ideology of emancipation, equality and feminine activism and ends with a maternalistic-conservative ideology, encouraged by nationalistic communism.*"[8]

Moreover, the power discourse regarding gender in postcommunist Romania follows somewhat naturally the communist one: if women were represented in both their productive and reproductive roles (as labourer and

[7] Mediafax, 2017, *Marşul pentru viaţă*, http://www.mediafax.ro/social/galerie-foto-video-marsul-pentru-viata-2017-in-capitala-si-sute-de-orase-din-romania-si-republica-moldova-nu-s-ar-prabusi-romania-daca-toate-tinerele-familii-ar-avea-macar-cate-trei-copii-16208166, accessed on 21 April 2017.
[8] M. Miroiu, 2004, pp. 195-213, my translation.

BDD-A26082 © 2017 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:03:45 UTC)

mother of the nation) in communism, the same representations seem to prevail in postcommunism, although these roles now include a more clearly gendered persona.

3. Political representation

If we look into aspects of political representation, a few questions are raised, and probably the most important one is why women should be represented politically by other women, why they can't simply be represented by men. After all, why should gender take precedence over other categories, such as class, ethnicity, (dis)ability or sexual orientation? Who do women parliamentarians represent and how? Connected to this is the issue of accountability – how can the other women check whether their vision, rights, wishes are promoted? How can this representation be assessed and – if/ when necessary - sanctioned?

As we have departed from the well-established system of political representation derived by Hanna F. Pitkin in 1967[9], as nowadays representation transcends the nation or the state, discursive representation[10] could permit a gender neutral type of representation, based on discourses and debates rather than on real people. Thus, a feminist discourse could be supported irrespective of gender within a transnational framework of deliberative democracy.

However, the most largely accepted representational mechanism is the one supposing representation by a member of the group. Thus, women are best represented by other women, the main arguments being numerical (they represent 51% of the population) and of legitimacy (they know women's issues best and therefore can speak for and should take part in

[9] Pitkin's model of political representation (1967) includes formalistic representation (with its two tools: authorization, for example, through elections, and accountability), symbolic representation (a representative standing for the one(s) they represent), descriptive representation (similarity of the representative and the represented) and substantive representation (actions taken by the representative as an agent of the ones they represent).
[10] The concept was proposed by J. Dryzek and S Niemeyer, 2008, pp. 481-493.

BDD-A26082 © 2017 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:03:45 UTC)

decision-making processes regarding them). Although claiming that there will be a moment in the future in which this type of representation will no longer be necessary, Jane Mansbridge discusses the various contexts in which disadvantaged groups (including women) would want to be represented by someone who belongs to their group, and their respective functions:

"(1) adequate communication in contexts of mistrust, (2) innovative thinking in contexts of uncrystallized, not fully articulated, interests, ... (3) creating a social meaning of 'ability to rule' for members of a group in historical contexts where the ability has been seriously questioned and (4) increasing the polity's de facto legitimacy in contexts of past discrimination."[11]

This is valid in the case of Romania especially regarding (1), where the question of trust is particularly sensitive: most women elected or appointed in different political positions were generally mistrusted by the larger public. This came as a consequence of their links to the former communist regime, or to links to different other male politicians (either as family members or with sentimental or work relations, or members of a larger interest group, sometimes with corruption accusations). One could claim men politicians are also mistrusted, however the general orientation of Romanian contemporary society makes women more vulnerable in this respect.

It is interesting in this context to look at the findings of Tudorina Mihai, who in her PhD thesis enumerates some reasons invoked by Romanian MP's on why there should be more women in the Romanian Parliament (only 11% at the moment of writing her thesis, in 2017)[12]. These reasons are: the need to build a more democratic and inclusive society; the need to promote virtues and qualities considered feminine: responsibility, cooperation, communication, (maternal) care; necessity to provide valuable

[11] J. Mansbridge, 1999, p. 628.
[12] T. Mihai, 2017, pp. 156-179.

BDD-A26082 © 2017 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:03:45 UTC)

role models (with examples of counter-models among some women MP's); solving specific women's issues; bringing qualities and values traditionally considered feminine to the Parliament: calmness, caring, beauty. Other types of arguments brought by Romanian MP's in favour of a larger presence of women in Parliament are ideological (social-democrat), legal and constitutional (as affirmative action measures are included in some laws, as well as in the Constitution), and economic (to valorize the human resource for the economic development of the country).

Discussing formal representation, we need to say that although in Romania women's vote was included in the Constitution in 1938, this was made irrelevant by the two dictatorial regimes that followed (Charles II and the subsequent communist regime). In what concerns numerical representation of women in Parliament for instance, we need to discuss some of the possible causes leading to its steep decrease: from 34% women in Marea Adunare Națională, to just 4% in the Romanian Parliament immediately after the Revolution and to 19% in the current Parliament. As Pamela Paxton and Sheri Kunovici observed, there are three types of possible explanations:

"Social-cultural explanations focus on the pool of available women, political explanations focus on the openness of the political system to women, and ideological explanations focus on the general impressions of women in politics and how viable women are as candidates and leaders."[13]

In other words, we need to look at the availability of women candidates, at the general openness of the system to women in politics and at how well they perform (or are perceived to perform). In postcommunist Romania, there are issues with all three factors, but not necessarily due to women's inability to succeed in politics, but rather to a bad candidacy selection system and the general status of Romanian politicians at large. We could add to this, an insufficient translation (or bad interpretation) of European instruments and mechanisms in the Romanian Constitution and its

[13] P. Paxton, S. Kunovici, 2003, p. 88.

BDD-A26082 © 2017 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:03:45 UTC)

national laws.[14] It has been shown that there are three factors making it difficult for women to break the glass ceiling and accede to the highest political spheres: unequal distribution of resources, culture and organization of political parties and electoral laws and institutions.[15] In Romania this is true even in the case of political parties with women at the top – an illustration is the National Liberal Party: suffice it to say that in January 2016 they proposed a gender quota of 30% for women in eligible places on electoral lists and in the subsequent elections (June 2016) they did not respect their own proposal.

Moreover, an explanation for the absence of more women in Parliament could be found in the dual mechanism of rejection/ acceptance of the communist heritage in terms of gender equality and of the European vision for the future. In postcommunist Romania, as Enikö Magyari-Vincze observed, the public agenda regarding equal opportunities between men and women is structured on two major mechanisms:

"*On the one hand, we are noticing the de-legitimation of the idea of equality between men and women due to its reduction to the memories from communist practice, and on the other hand, the acceptance of an equal opportunities policy legislation as part of the desiderata pertaining to accession to the European Union. Both generate superficial reflections and reactions caught in the trap of the two extremes, namely rejection and unconditional acceptance*."[16]

As in contemporary society boundaries between formal and informal political representation are more and more blurred, we should look into informal women's representation - mostly made through a number of

[14] Ionela Băluță observes that, although the Romanian Constitution (2003) mentions the obligation to respect equal opportunities between men and women in power structures, and these provisions are to be found in *The Law of Equal Opportunities between Men and Women* (adopted under the pressure of the EU in 2002), these were not followed by subsequent provisions in the political parties laws or electoral laws, to the effect of promoting a better representation of women (2013, pp. 43-51).
[15] Bereni et all, 2014, pp 213-275.
[16] E. Magyari-Vincze, 2002, my translation.

BDD-A26082 © 2017 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:03:45 UTC)

NGO's - and to the extent to which this type of representation has been following real women's needs. Laura Grünberg claims that at least in the 1990's and early 2000's they focused more on normative needs imposed by the West in the process of *civilizing the East*. Sometimes these needs coincided with real needs of Romanian women (such as domestic violence and violence against women), while others (sustainable development or gender capacity building), although not enough understood initially, when "translated" well into the Romanian agenda, proved to be beneficial[17].

4. Conclusion

Thus, if in communism gender representation was mainly used to enhance the state and party power and to legitimate a power discourse which oppressed both genders while claiming their emancipation, in postcommunist Romania we have been witnessing a more fragmented type of representation, with rather timid attempts at grass root movements. The propagandistic power discourse underlying women's equality with men prevalent in communism is continued in postcommunist Romania, when gender as a category is either tentatively effaced (as a consequence of the desire of the society to depart from its communist past) or emphasized (under the influence of the West).

One solution for a better gender representation in both private and public spheres would be, in my opinion, openly embracing feminism, as this would give both genders the theoretical framework allowing them a balanced structured action plan benefitting both equally. However, as Mihaela Miroiu sadly observed as early as 2006 (and her remarks are still valid today), Romanian feminism, although on the right path, still has a long way to go:

"*We are practicing in Romania a sort of shy, marginal feminism, a feminism disguised under other names, so as not to disturb too much the local conservatives and misogynists. To this, we can add a "room-service"*

[17] Cf. L. Grünberg, 2008, p. 71.

BDD-A26082 © 2017 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:03:45 UTC)

type feminism in the last five years, which came via copy-paste with the 'acquis communautaire'. The latter type is sort of groundless, penniless, and chanceless in leaving windows full of laws and institutions for the real world of applied public policies."[18]

Bibliography

BĂLUȚĂ, Ionela, 2013, *Reprezentarea politică a femeilor: alegerile parlamentare din 2012,* in *Sfera politicii*, vol XXI, nr. 2 (174), mar.-apr. 2013, pp. 43-51.

BERENI, Laure; CHAUVIN, Sébastien; JAUNAIT, Alexandre; REVILLARD, Anne, 2014, *Manuel aux études sur le genre*, Bruxelles: De Boeck.

BOCANCEA, Silvia, *Statutul femeii în România comunistă. Politici publice și viață privată*, Iași: Institutul European, pp. 51-82.

CEAUȘESCU, Nicolae, 1973, *Cuvântare cu privire la rolul femeii în viața politică, economică și socială a țării.* Plenara CC al PCR, 18-19 iunie 1973, în: *România pe drumul construirii societății socialiste multilateral dezvoltate*, vol 8, ian.–iulie 1973, pp. 646-654.

http://www.cnsas.ro/documente/istoria_comunism/volume/1973%20-%20Romania%20pe%20drumul%20construirii%20-%20vol.%2008.pdf, accessed on 21 Aprilie 2017.

COSMA, Ghizela; MAGYARI-VINCZE, Enikö; PECICAN, Ovidiu (eds.), 2002, *Prezențe feminine. Studii despre femei în România,* Cluj: Ed. Fundației Desire.

DOBOȘ, Corina, 2015, „«Decesul s-a produs din cauza femeii…» Fragmente din universul medico-juridic al pronatalismului ceaușist", in: Hurubean, Alina (coord.), 2015, *Statutul femeii în România comunistă. Politici publice și viață privată,* Iași: Institutul European, pp. 171-200.

[18] M. Miroiu, 2006, pp. 218-219, my translation.

BDD-A26082 © 2017 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:03:45 UTC)

DOBOȘ, Corina (coord.); SOARE, Florin S.; JINGA, Luciana M., 2010, *Politica pronatalistă a regimului Ceaușescu.* Vol I. *O perspectivă comparativă,* Iași: Polirom.

DOBOȘ, Corina (coord.); SOARE, Florin S.; JINGA, Luciana M., 2011, *Politica pronatalistă a regimului Ceaușescu.* Vol II. *Institutii si practici*, Iași: Polirom.

Engels, Frederick, 1884, *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/ch09.htm, accessed on 21 April 2017.

DRYZEK, John; NIEMEYER, Simon, 2008, *Discoursive Representation*, in *American Political Science Review*, 102 (4), pp. 481-493.

GRÜNBERG, Laura, 2008, *BiONGrafie. AnA – istoria trăită a unui ONG de femei*, Iași: Polirom.

KLIGMAN, Gail, 2000, *The Politics of Duplicity: Controlling Reproduction in Ceaușescu's Romania - Politica duplicității. Controlul reproducerii în România lui Ceaușescu*, Bucharest: Humanitas.

ILINCA, Alina; BEJENARU, Liviu Marius, 2015, „Gen, revoluție și război. O analiză comparativă asupra emancipării femeii în Uniunea Sovietică și România comunistă", in: BOCANCEA, Silvia, 2015, *Statutul femeii în România comunistă. Politici publice și viață privată*, Iași: Institutul European, pp. 51-82.

MANSBRIDGE, Jane, 1999, „Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent,'Yes'", in: *The Journal of Politics*, 61, pp. 628-657.

MASSINO, Jill, 2004, „Anonimatul femeii în estetica României ceaușiste", in: CIUPALĂ, Alin, 2004, *Despre femei și istoria lor în România*, Bucharest: Universitatea din București.

MAGYARI-VINCZE, Enikö, 2002, *Diferența care contează: diversitatea social-culturală prin lentila antropologiei feministe*, Cluj: Ed. Fundației Desire.

BDD-A26082 © 2017 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:03:45 UTC)

MIHAI, Tudorina, 2017, *Reprezentarea politică a femeilor din România în contextul europenizării [Women's Political Representation in Romania in the Context of Europeanization]*, PhD thesis, SNSPA.

MIHĂILESCU, Ștefania, 2002, *Din istoria feminismului românesc. Studiu și antologie de texte. 1838-1929,* Iași: Polirom.

MIHĂILESCU, Ștefania, 2006, *Din istoria feminismului românesc. Studiu și antologie de texte. 1929-1948,* Iași: Polirom.

MIROIU, Mihaela, 2004, *Drumul către autonomie. Teorii politice feministe*, Iași: Polirom.

MIROIU, Mihaela, 2006, *Nepreţuitele femei,* Iași: Polirom.

Marșul pentru Viață, 25 March 2017, http://www.mediafax.ro/social/galerie-foto-video-marsul-pentru-viata-2017-in-capitala-si-sute-de-orase-din-romania-si-republica-moldova-nu-s-ar-prabusi-romania-daca-toate-tinerele-familii-ar-avea-macar-cate-trei-copii-16208166, accessed on 21 April 2017.

PAXTON, Pamela; KUNOVICI, Sheri, 2003, „Women's Political Representation: the Importance of Ideology", in: *Social Forces*, vol. 82 (1), September 2003, pp. 87-113.

PITKIN, Hanna Fenichel, 1967, *The Concept of Representation*, Berkely, Los Angeles, London: Berkley University Press.

BDD-A26082 © 2017 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:03:45 UTC)