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Women in Politics during the Romanian Transition

Emanuela Simona Gârboni*

**West University of Timișoara, bld. V. Pârvan, 4, 300223, Timișoara, România
bVrije Universiteit Brussel, Pleinlaan 5, 1050, Brussel, Belgium*

Abstract

The main purpose of this study is to analyze how the transformations emerged from the transition process from a non-democratic political regime to a democratic one, influenced Romanian women's political participation as representatives. In the attempt to understand the impact of the political transition on women's participation to the decision making process, first of all, I will make an incursion in the previous period, of the totalitarian regime. I will continue identifying and analyzing the structural factors that influenced women's participation in politics during the transition period, and I will conclude with a critical look to the form taken by women's political representation, from transition towards a consolidated democracy.

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1. Introduction

I chose to write about women as representatives and the concern of this research is to emphasize women's access to politics because this is an elite position, in which they could intervene in public life to advance gender equality throughout politics and policies, and could change the laws to their benefit. The variables that I consider relevant in explaining women's presence or absence in politics, can be classified in two major categories: internal and external factors. The internal factors category, in its turn, can be divided in two main subcategories: the social factors (including culture, religion and traditions) and the structural factors - such as: political regime, party system and electoral system - belonging to the institutional and legislative sphere. Moreover, another important variable is the education, which I consider to be a "border factor", between social and structural factors, because the formal education is mainly provided by the state and it is institutionalized, therefore represents a structural factor, and the

* E-mail address: emagarboni@yahoo.com

informal education is provided by society and family, and therefore has the characteristics of a social factor. The external factors are represented by the historical and geopolitical contexts - among the most determinant actors being the European Union (EU), especially due to the changes occurred during the negotiation process, the transnational NGOs and UN's influence. The factors I have chosen to discuss regarding the internal level are three structural factors, specifically the electoral system, gender equality legislation and the electoral quotas for women. Considering the external level, I will emphasize EU's influence, because I consider it as having an undeniable positive impact on the improvement of women's status under many aspects. A detailed analysis of all the factors of influence identified and listed above needs the space of a wider research, therefore, in the limited space of this study, certain factors will be inevitably explored in more depth than others. As I have already announced my intention to discuss the political aspects of the transition, the analysis of the economic factors of influence will not be comprised in this study, even if some necessary references will be made. Regarding the level of representation, I will refer to the women in the National Parliament (NP), the Government and the European Parliament (EP), therefore at national and supranational levels. Although the analysis of women's situation in politics at regional level is also important, this does not frame in this study's objectives and space. I will sustain my analysis with the help of certain empirical data: number and percentage of women in the NP, Government and the EP. I consider also important for the understanding of my approach and study's findings to delimit the period to which I will refer as "transition to democracy", as the period between the fall of the dictatorship and the accession to the EU, while the period after the accession can be (still) considered as the democratic consolidation phase[†]. I chose the transition because this kind of changing periods are generally offering a multitude of possibilities for the societies that are undergoing them. Despite this, in the East and Central European post-communist societies, in this period, which can be called of "post-communism - pre-democracy", women were living their opportunity of autonomy and self affirmation, mostly without neither having its conscience, more as "victims" than competitors. In brief, identifying the key factors and their interrelation, I hope that I can obtain a framework to explain the discreet levels of women in politics in a period when everything in the society changed and could have been negotiated, and therefore it could have provided such an amplex of chances of improvement for women.

2. Romanian women in politics during the communist period

During the Communist period women were involved in politics, accounting for one third of the parliamentary seats in the 1980s. Female percentage in the Parliament rose to 35% in 1985 and kept on until 1989, and at the same time, women represented 17% of the Grand National Assembly membership and 23% of the membership in the Communist Party. Unfortunately, the "high percentage" of women in politics (comparing with the transition and current figures) was not necessarily positive, being just a quantitative value. Actually, women's percentage in a political or administrative structure was inversely proportional with the importance and power of that structure (Fischer and Pasca Harsanyi in Rueschemeyer ed., 1994, p. 204). For example, in the 1980s, as the Grand National Assembly was losing power and the Central Committee of the Communist Party has been the place where the most important decisions were taken, the percentage of women in the Grand National Assembly was higher than the one in the Central Committee (Fischer in Wolchik and Meyer, eds. 1985). Although women were present in politics, being encouraged and sometimes even coerced into party membership, their involvement in politics was in most cases role-playing and all decisions were made by the men in the top positions of the Communist Party (Turcu, 2009). Therefore, as the advancement of women in politics and in other professional areas was imposed by the communist regime[‡], sometimes women were promoted without having the necessary experience for certain posts. In

[†] According to Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan (1996), democracy is consolidated when it becomes the "only game in town". In other words, political democratization criteria are: the rule of law, a well defined constitutional system, the respect of fundamental rights and freedoms, representative government based on free and contested elections and a functional civil society which can have a significant impact on political decision making.

[‡] *Hotărârea Comitetului Central al Partidului Comunist Român din 18–19 iunie 1973, cu privire la creșterea rolului femeii în viața economică, politică și socială a țării* and *Hotărârea Comitetului Central al Partidului Comunist Român din 1977 cu privire la activitatea organelor și organizațiilor de partid în înfăptuirea politicii de cadre a partidului*. Available at: www.indaco.ro. Access date: 29.10.2013.

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