

The Condition of Women in Romania during the Communist Period

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„Comunistii oferind că în primul rând femeile este munitor, apoi ea trebuie să fie activă în viața politică și în sfârșit ea trebuie să aibă o familie... Noi suntem bolnavi și obseși de egalitate. Noi dorim ca fetele să fie femei în primul rând și apoi să realizeze alte activități”.

Realitatea pe care o surprinde Războiul Kalmucilor, membrul a grupului „Progras Mălbești” este prezintă în toate statele comuniste, inclusiv în România, cu anumite specificități.

Regimul comunist a proclamat chiar de la începuturile libertatea, egalitatea și emanciparea femeilor ca obiectiv principal al realizării unei societăți socialiste. Cu un mare, în toate actele oficiale, de la hotărâri de partid la Constituție era proclamată egalitatea masculină a sexelor, revendicată mai degrabă pentru femei decât de către femei.

În evoluția condiției femeii române se pot distinge două perioade: perioada anilor 1945-1965 când la conducerea partidului comunist se afla Gheorghiu-Dej și perioada 1965-1989 când partidul și țara se aflau sub conducerea lui Ceaușescu. În prima fază statutul femeii în România nu se discuta de cel existent în celelalte țări comuniste. Obiectivul regimului este îmbunătățirea condițiilor de viață ale femeii în toate regiunile țării, atât din punct de vedere ideologic, cât și din punct de vedere economic, fiind promovată tipul „femeii omului”.

Începuturile regimului Ceaușescu în 1965 s-a făcut într-un moment în care atât din punct de vedere economic, cât și din punct de vedere al unei liberizări față de regimul anterior, condiția femeii părea să fie favorizată, mai cu seamă că de la începutul lui Eder și-a asumat și pe seșia sa, Elton Ceaușescu, în aparițiile publice, ceea ce a fost interpretat ca un semn de normalizare și din punct de vedere al realizării scopurilor.

Urmițarea sa, în 1966, avea să aducă pentru femeile din România o schimbare dramatică în sens negativ. În anul acesta s-a introdus interdicția reproducției și acceptată a avorturilor. Interzicerea avorturilor în numele sănătății naționale, într-o societate în care nici un fel de cultură a planificării familiei a avut pentru români un caracter până atunci, prin conștientizarea socială și politică.

Cu un mare, emanciparea femeii în România comunistă cu și egalitatea ei cu bărbatul nu numai că era falsă din punct de vedere al statutului și intereselor fundamentale feminine, dar ea s-a tradus prin obligații și responsabilități suplimentare, fără schimbări esențiale în condiția umană a femeii române.

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“The Communists claimed that a woman is in the first place a worker, then she ought to be active in the political life and only in the third place she should consider having a family... We are sick and tired of equality! We want to be women in the first place and then to join other activities”¹. The reality emphasized by Rut Kolinska, member of “The Prague mothers” group was present in all the former communist countries, as well as in Romania, but with certain particularities.

At the time when Communism was imposed in Romania (1945-1948), Romanian society was rural in a proportion as high as 75%. The Romanian peasant mentality had a special consideration towards the woman, in her capacity of being the essential factor of the family, which was considered a fundamental institution of the Romanian society. Because of this mentality, it was impossible to imagine that Romanian women could be tempted to engage in work considered to be suitable for men only (mining, constructions, metallurgy, etc.) and the presence of women in political life was not only refused, but also would have been thought to be very negative. During the period between the two World Wars in Romania, women did not even have the right to vote and their participation in political life was judged to bring serious harm to their family life.

The communist regime proclaimed right from its establishment that liberty, gender equality and the emancipation of women were one of the main targets in the development of the new socialist society. Therefore, mechanical gender equality was emphasized in each and every official documents, from Party decisions to the Constitution. This fact was claimed for women rather than by women. As far back as in the 1950s, this kind of gender equality in the economy was considered a conquest and settled fact in the mobilizing speeches of the Party: it was symbolized by the presence of female heroes working in areas which had been typically masculine up to that time: from working in mines underground, or in industrial, chemical and metallurgical operations, to professions in areas such as surgery and experimental sciences. At the same time divorce had become legal and marriage had lost its religious and holy character. Divorce was almost irresponsibly easy to get, and was very frequent as the social mobility typical in that period became more and more generalized.

In the evolution of the Romanian women’s condition during the communist regime there were two periods: the first lasted through 1945-1965, when the leader of the Romanian Communist Party was Gh. Gheorghiu-Dej and the second between 1965-1989 when the

Party was led by the “ruling family”, the Ceausescus. In the first stage, women’s status in Romania was not essentially different from the women’s condition in the other communist countries. Society’s goal was women’s participation in supporting the new regime, both for ideological motives and for economical reasons ².

The type of woman cultivated in that period was that of the “woman commissioner”, whose image was ostentatiously shown on every wall, first in the Soviet Union, then in Romania also ³. Women were presented in their capacity of kolkhoz presidents, weavers working at thirty-four looms weaving at the same time, the woman builder, the woman metallurgist, etc. In the new realities, the woman was especially exemplary when she harshly usurped male traditional roles from mining to political decision. The policy promoted by the Communist Party was that of political subordination to the big “family of the Party” of many intimate matters, especially the erotic universe and the traditional family. The Romanian realities of the 1950s unfortunately offered a very vivid example of the “woman commissioner”: many were lonely, devoted “body and soul” to the party, obstinately wearing a costume more like a man’s suit than a woman’s outfit. One of these emblematic figures is Ana Pauker, the State’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs between 1948/1952, who was a former member of the Comintern, imposed at the helm of the state by Stalin, at the time that Romania was occupied by the Soviet troops ⁴.

The new status of the woman came as a shock for the Romanian mentality of those years, because an attempt was made to set up a model – in the place of the traditional family – of a political family ruled exclusively by public values and by the norms of class struggle. Romanian society strongly reacted against these threats and women held the essential role in this resistance. They took upon themselves the difficult task of playing the traditional role of mother and wife to which they added the social masculine role. Under the circumstances of the alimentary scarcity of the 1950s in Romania the “emancipated woman”, equal in her rights with the man, had an extra right, namely the right to work twice as much. The content of the socialist emancipation of women practically consisted in their double servitude: as workers in the state economy and as strugglers for the survival of their families.

Gender equality proclaimed by the regime as well as special measures such as free day-care for children and maternity leaves were used to assist women in their double gender roles, rather than to reorganize gender responsibilities between men and women. This is why many Eastern Europeans women refer to previous state policies as “false equality” and “forced emancipation” ⁵.

The significant difference concerning women’s condition in Romania between the two phases underlined above was the degree of female participation in the governing structures. During the first period, with the exception of Ana Pauker, women had not been promoted to the state or to the party’s higher institutions. In 1960, only 17% of women were party members, although the proportion of women in the population was as high as 51%. The explanation of this fact lies in the reticence of women in joining the party, as well as in the same reticence manifested by the regime, lead by Gh. Gheorghiu-Dej, towards the promotion of women in public positions ⁶.

The establishment of Ceausescu’s regime in 1965 took place at a time when, from both the economical point of view and that of a certain liberalization in comparison with the former

society, the situation in Romania seemed somehow better. This suggested the idea that the women would eventually have better status, especially because, right from the beginning, the new leader was accompanied in his public appearances by his wife, Elena Ceausescu. Gh. Gheorghiu-Dej was a widower and thus, the presence of a woman beside the head of the State appeared to be a symbol of innovation in the Romanian political scene.

Elena Ceausescu's presence beside her husband was interpreted as a sign of normalization in the problems concerning couples (that is, a rehabilitation of normal family relations and values). But the next year, 1966, was to bring a dramatic change for the Romanian women with the unexpectedly and repressive prohibition of abortion. Abortion was forbidden in the name of nation's health. In a society where there was no knowledge of family planning this caused a heavy wound, whose political and social consequences are felt up to the present. If in the first years after its promulgation (1967-1970), the 1966 decree against abortion seemed to have reached its goal to increase the birth rate in Romania, in the following years "upper-class" women (so far as we can speak of something like an upper-class in a communist society) managed to obtain abortions in the case of undesired pregnancies in safe medical conditions, while the less fortunate ones, who where the majority, had to resort to empirical and often dangerous and unsanitary methods. This fact resulted in thousands of tragedies consisting in either loss of life or imprisonment. Under the ruling of the anti-abortion decree, Romanian women were subjected to a brutal violation of both their control over their intimacy and their private life, a fact whose effects last until today. Considering conditions at present, we might look to those events to explain in part the current explosion of prostitution, rape, permissiveness and appeal of pornography ⁷.

An entire repressive machinery (police, prosecution, informers) rushed upon married couples as a consequence of the 1966 law. In addition to that, women, already greatly harassed by the state's attempts to ensure obedience, were often accused by their own sexual partners of being entirely responsible for their unwanted pregnancies.

From another point of view, the increase of the birth rate during the first few years after the Decree's promulgation had serious consequences leading to the deepening of the Romanian communist regime's crisis of the 1980s. The generation of "The Decree's little kids" – as they were called – was growing up and becoming adult in a society that was totally incapable of ensuring the necessary education and social development for them. Therefore, they became totally dissociated from communism and communist ideas and later on, in 1989, they constituted an important segment of the population who stepped out on the streets of the main cities of Romania, shouting slogans like "Down with communism!", "Down with Ceausescu!"

On the other hand, the history of this Decree is symbolizes and allows us to measure the cynicism and the grotesque manner of ruling during the communist regime imposed by Ceausescu in Romania. Simultaneously, with the degradation of women's status caused by the Decree, Romania was confronting the phenomenon of ostentatious promotion of women in political and social life, promotion that had nothing to do with retrieving traditional family values. The target was to legitimate the political ascent of the leader's wife, Elena Ceausescu, who became virtually the second highest Romanian official. In addition to her membership in the Bureau of the Party's Political Executive Committee (she joined

the Bucharest Municipal Party Committee in 1968, was elected a full Central Committee member in 1972 and became an Executive Committee member in June 1973), Elena Ceausescu was a member of the Grand National Assembly and, as a trained chemist, she became Chairwoman of the National Council of Science and Technology. Although her academic credentials appear to be somewhat obscure, the Romanian press has constantly referred to her as Academician-Doctor-Engineer – for, among other things, she was also a member of the Technical Sciences section of the Romanian Academy. In 1980 her ministerial status was raised and the president’s “revolutionary companion” became one of the first three First Deputy Prime Ministers in the Romanian government. Far more important was the fact that, in 1979, she became chairwoman of the Central Committee’s Commission for State and Party Cadres, a position from which she was able to watch over the security of what was known in Romania as the “Ceausescu Dynasty”. Romania’s first family had a direct impact on the social structure of the Party. At the Central Committee plenum that elected Elena Ceausescu to membership on the Executive Committee, her husband emphasized the role played by women in the Romanian society and economy, adding that the structure of the Party had not hitherto satisfactorily reflected the proportion of women in the society (about 51%) and their contribution to political life. At the time, women accounted for nearly 24% of the Party membership, a figure that rose to 32% a few years later. Representation in the Central Committee (full and candidate members) grew from 4% to 25%. By mid-1984 there were three women (Elena Ceausescu, Lina Ciobanu, Alexandrina Gainusa) on the Party’s Political Executive Committee (PEC) with full membership status, but only Elena Ceausescu was a member of the Permanent Bureau. Three other women (Suzana Gadea, Ana Muresan and Elena Nae) were alternate members of the PEC. In 1964, out of 49 ministers or executives with ministerial ranks, there were only 4 women. These promotions did not necessarily reflect an improvement in the social status of women in Romania ⁸.

The fact that more and more women advanced in politics was linked to the figure that was supposed to illustrate the gender equality promoted by the Party. Imposing of such of a system generated a diffuse, negative reaction in the community. The involvement of women in both political and social life in such a high percent took place in the most disastrous years of the communist regime as regards the living standards in Romania. Public opinion held the Ceausescu couple responsible for this situation. Elena Ceausescu especially was blamed and her evilness was also linked to her being a woman. Therefore, on the background of a traditional reluctance towards recognizing the political virtues of women, Elena Ceausescu’s image aroused reactions of hatred which, intentionally or unintentionally, were projected onto the image of the active political woman. This reaction materialized in a moment when Romanian women began to refuse to fill political posts, especially in lower structures of the Party, posts which they considered to require very hard work.

Women were the ones that experienced in the most direct manner the consequences of the lack of subsistence products after 1980. Household tasks became more and more of a burden for women, procuring food supplies was one of the most difficult tasks to accomplish. The solidarity of the family, under the circumstances, became feebler day by day. The woman was more and more employed in activities outside her home. It is interesting to notice that women spent much more time outside their homes not only because of the

need of having an income, absolutely vital for the support of the family, but also because Romanian society became very boring and colorless. National television had only one program that was on the air for only a few hours a day and was really stodgy; stores were empty, and so forth. Thus the working place became the only place where a woman was able to meet people, to discuss different matters, to show her new clothes. Therefore, the working place was a socializing place, rather than a place for earning money ⁹.

In the background of those developments, the political participation of women, promoted by the communist regime was felt to be more an obligation, which tripled the woman's responsibilities, than a freely exercised right of citizenship. Thus, the emancipation of women in communist Romania as well as their social and political equality with men proved not only to be false problems from the point of view of women's social status and fundamental interests, but they also meant that women had to shoulder additional obligations and responsibilities without any important changes in their human condition.

NOTES

- ¹ Einhorn B., *Cinderella goes to market. Citizenship, gender and women's movements in East central Europe*, London-New York 1998, p. 148.
- ² Aivazova S., *La liberté et l'égalité des femmes dans les pays socialistes d'Europe de l'Est 1960-1980*, in: *Encyclopédie politique et historique des femmes*, Paris 1997.
- ³ Petre Z., *Promovarea femeii sau despre destructurarea sexului feminin*, in: *Miturile comunismului românesc*, vol.I, Bucuresti 1995, p. 23.
- ⁴ Ibidem, p. 21.
- ⁵ Einhorn B., op. cit., p. 173-175.
- ⁶ Fischer M.E., Pasca Karsányi D., *From tradition and ideology to elections. The changing status in Romanian politics*, New York 1994.
- ⁷ Petre Z., op. cit., p. 33-34.
- ⁸ Shafir M., *Romania. Politics, economics and society*, Boulder, Colorado 1985, p. 76-78.
- ⁹ Pasca Karsányi D., *Women in Romania*, in: *Gender Politics and Post/Communism*, New York-London 1993, p. 45.



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