

Women, Political Participation and Electoral Quotas in Romania

Introduction

The role of women in Romanian politics has only slightly changed with the arrival of the post-communist era. While during communist times women were encouraged and sometimes even coerced into party membership, their involvement in politics was mere role-playing. All decisions were made by the all-male top echelon of the Communist Party. Since the fall of communism in 1989, women's participation in Romanian politics has been both numerically and substantively insignificant. Even though within Romania's young democracy the loci of decision-making have become more diversified, they are still dominated by men.

Before 1990, communist ideology advocated the equality of women and men and several laws guaranteeing the equality of the sexes were passed at the time. However, during the 1950s and 1960s, women led organizations with little influence or political clout. In fact, "in politics the proportion of women in any organization varied inversely with its real power"¹. At the same time, women made up 23% of the communist party membership and 17% of the membership in the Grand National Assembly.

Later, the regime of Nicolae Ceausescu made the advancement of women in politics and in professional positions a top priority. Ceausescu's wife became part of the party leadership and by 1979 25% of the party's Central Committee and 20% of the Political Executive Committee were women, while the percentage of women in the General Assembly jumped from 14.3% to 32.5%.

Quotas for the advancement of women were aggressively pursued at the political level and in every other professional area. "Unfortunately, these quotas were unrealistic, and many women were promoted before they were experienced enough to do well in their posts"². Many times, women in leadership roles were mere "figureheads, while men wielded the real power"³. The National Organization of Women was completely subservient to the Communist Party and could not object to its policies, however detrimental to women they were.

Thus, by the end of the communist era, the woman decision-maker or woman politician was perceived by most Romanians as a travesty, a symbol of unrealistic policies and an object of communist propaganda. These perceptions may in part explain the hiatus of women's participation in public life that immediately followed the downfall of communism.

During the early 1990s, only few women were involved in politics. Two of them, Ana Blandiana and Doina Cornea, former anti-communist dissidents, became prominent members of large opposition parties. Other well educated women held jobs in the cabinet, but never at the rank of minister or secretary of state. Several women occupied the position of spokespersons of the cabinet, the prime minister or the president. Overall, during electoral campaigns in 1990 and 1992, political parties paid little attention to

¹ Fischer, Mary Ellen and Doina Pasca Harsanyi "From Tradition and Ideology to Elections and Competition—The Changing Status of Women in Romanian Politics" in *Women in the Politics of Post-communist Eastern Europe*, Marilyn Rueschemeyer ed., M.E, Sharpe Inc, London England, 1994 p 204

² Idem p 207

³ Idem 208

women's issues. Party platforms only mentioned women in the context of family and in other traditionally assigned roles: educators and health care providers.

By 1992, it was obvious that women had all but disappeared from Romanian politics. Interestingly, feminism and the promotion of women's interests or leadership were equated in the collective national psyche with the much hated communist ideology.

Conversely, any initiative that was meant to promote women in leadership positions was associated with a return to the 'old days' or the 'old ways' of a much hated regime. More than that, women were not convinced that their participation in public life was important for their well-being. In fact, the communist period had proven that the participation of women in politics had not improved women's lives, on the contrary. Ceausescu's regime had implemented some of its most draconian policies: banning abortion and reproductive rights, at the time when large numbers of women were supposedly participating in politics and decision-making. The power of women to positively impact the lives of other women through political participation was something Romanian society had not experienced. Women preferred thus to focus on those areas of their lives where they knew for sure they could make a difference: the family and their profession.

These trends persisted through the 1990s, with women taking the back seat in politics and decision-making at all levels: national, regional and local. Only in the early 2000s did some women gain prominence on the national political stage, becoming ministers or presidential advisors. Compared to the early 1990s, the number of women legislators increased by the year 2000, but the overall percentage stagnated in the single digits. For sure, women's under-representation can be attributed to collective attitudes and political behavior inherent in the nation's political culture and informed by attitudes formed during communist times. Another factor that has helped perpetrate this problem has to do with institutional design: starting with the constitution and ending with the national electoral system. When it comes to promoting and protecting women's political rights, Romanian institutions, along with attitudes within the civil society can be qualified as antiquated and severely deficient.

The Electoral System

Starting with 1990, Romania's elections were based on a closed-list, proportional representation system that was replaced in 2008 by a single-constituency system similar to Italy's between 1948 and 1992. This system is rather complicated and is not strictly first-past-the-post: pluralities do not determine the victor. A candidate needs a majority of votes to win a constituency. Where such majority is not achieved, seats are distributed among those parties that have surpassed the 5% electoral threshold mandated by the law, or have won at least three constituencies for the Senate or six constituencies for the Chamber of Deputies. The redistribution of these remaining seats is made by proportional representation. Each party is assigned a number of seats proportional to the percentage of constituencies won. In order to accomplish this rather complicated seat distribution feat, it is necessary to employ both the Hare quota (for single constituencies) and the D'Hondt rule.

The switch from the proportional representation to the single-constituency system was brought about by a national referendum and was intended to increase the public exposure and accountability of individual legislators. While the degree to which these

individual responsibility goals were actually met by the change in the electoral system is still being debated, the impact on the election of Romanian women in the national legislative was clearly quite minimal. The percentage of women elected to the Senate in 2008 was lower than in 2004 and stayed in the single digits. For the Chamber of Deputies the percentage was in the lower double digits and barely changed between the two elections.

Usually, women tend to fare better in first-past-the-post systems than in proportional representation systems. Thus, to some observers who were hoping that the single-constituency system could have improved the chances of women candidates, these results were quite disappointing. A caveat here is that the Romanian electoral system is not purely a first-past-the-post system and thus the continued under-representation of women should not come as a surprise. Parties maintained total control over choosing candidates for both the constituencies and the proportional representation lists. Thus, party listing habits of the old electoral system were effortlessly transplanted to the new one and women's representation was once more thwarted from the get go.

Gender Equality Legislation

Gender equality was not one of the top priorities of Romanian politicians after 1989. One reason certainly had to do with the low visibility of women in public life. Another reason was the futility of such legislation during communist times. In fact, it may well be expected that many Romanians regarded such laws with disdain, as experience taught them that gender equality was only a propagandistic tool of the communist regime, lacking any meaning or significance. Thus, gender equality became a topic of public awareness only in the mid to late 1990s and did not generate much interest or debate.

In 1997, the Romanian Parliament decided to create a sub-committee for the equality of opportunity between genders. Soon after its creation, however, the sub-committee ceased any activity. It was reactivated in the year 2000, with a membership of five legislators: three men and two women. Since 2004 the sub-committee has been headed by a woman: Cristina Pocora (PDL). The subcommittee, along with members of regional and national non-governmental organizations helped draft the "Law for Equality of Opportunity among Men and Women", Law 202, which was passed in 2002.

This document outlawed gender-based discrimination and incriminated domestic violence and it emphasized equal access to education, health services, cultural activities, as well as the principle of equal pay for equal work. The law is very vague, however, when it comes to promoting women's role in public decision-making. Chapter four, articles 21 and 22, emphasize the need for "equal participation" of women and men in decision-making, be it within local, regional or national institutions, non-governmental institutions or political parties.

The law encourages these institutions to promote equal participation, but does not specify how this process should occur, nor does it reinforce this requirement through incentives or any concrete measures. Thus, the text of the law is merely an acknowledgement of a problem that should be corrected, but no tools are provided for improving the situation. There is no surprise thus that, given the tentative language and the lack of concrete incentives for the advancement of women, the passing of the law did

not translate into an increase in the number of women participating in the political or decision-making process.

Electoral Quotas for Women

The Romanian legislation does not provide for electoral quotas, or electoral parity. However some political parties, especially on the left of the political spectrum have come up with such quotas on their own accord and have widely publicized them.

Starting with the year 2001 the Social Democratic Party of Romania (PSDR, later PSD) initiated a national campaign publicizing the party's concern for a fair representation of women in politics and announced that it would introduce of 25% quota for women on its electoral lists. At that time, presumably due to a sense of electoral competition for the female vote, the Democratic Party (PD) announced a similar measure, but increased the quota to 30%. Unfortunately, these declarations were tentative at best—none of them translated into concrete actions. Although the overall number of female party members slightly increased, women did not become more visible on electoral lists, or they were not assigned eligible spots on those lists.

A second attempt at implementing a party quota came in 2004, when the Social Democratic Party announced that 25% of the spots on its electoral lists for the national parliament would be reserved for women. PSD regarded women and young people as underrepresented in Romanian political life, thus it was going to try and improve the situation of these disadvantaged groups by creating specific quotas. The party did not make good on this promise. When internal elections were held, young people and women were not treated any differently than more experienced party members, many of them incumbents. In fact, all candidates had to go through the internal election process, with no special concern showed for the advancement of women candidates. Even though more women ran for a spot on the official electoral lists than in previous years, most of them did not gather enough votes from their colleagues in order to be placed on eligible spots on the party's official electoral lists. Thus, although PSD's internal elections were democratic, they did not change the status of women politicians, as initially declared, and the 25% quota was not respected, nor enforced. No eligible spots were set aside on the official electoral lists that would have helped meet this quota. As a result, out of 220 women who participated in PSD's internal elections, only 26 were included on official party lists in eligible positions, alongside 151 men. This inefficient quota system was widely perceived as one of PSD's electoral maneuvers, sadly reminiscent of communist propaganda.

Women in the Parliament and Ministerial Cabinet

As stated earlier, the percentage of women represented in the Romanian legislature increased starting with the mid 1990s, but is still mostly in the single digits, especially in the Senate.

The number of women in the lower house, the Chamber of Deputies (Camera Deputatilor) has increased from 4% in the early 1990s to 11% in 2008. In 1992, the party with most women in the Chamber of Deputies was PSDR, followed by the National Liberal Party (PNL) and the Greater Romania Party (PRM). In 1996 most women members of the lower chamber were PRM members, followed by PSDR and PSDR. In

2000 33% of women in the Chamber of Deputies were PDSR members, followed by PRM and PD with 22% each. These numbers show that most women elected in the lower chamber were members of leftist parties (PSDR, PDSR and PD). Surprisingly enough, however, an extreme right party, PRM also promoted women, both in their party's leadership structure and as candidates for parliament.

In the upper house, the Senate, the percentage of women elected to office stayed in the single digits, albeit it increased from 1% in 1990 to 9% in 2004, and then decreased again to 6% in 2008.

Women very rarely headed any legislative committees. In the 1996-2000 legislature, out of fourteen committees in the Chamber of Deputies, only the committee on human rights was headed by a woman. Three others had women VPs: the committees on health, family services and culture and the arts—all areas where women's traditional roles are re-emphasized. In the Senate, none of the sixteen committees was headed by a woman.

Table 1. Women in the Romanian Parliament

Year	Chamber of Deputies				Senate			
	Number		%		Number		%	
	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M
1990	15	324	5	95	2	128	1	99
1992	13	326	4	96	3	140	2	98
1996	25	315	7	93	2	141	1	99
2000	38	317	11	89	9	131	7	93
2004	38	292	10	90	15	125	9	91
2008	38	296	11	89	8	129	6	94

Women are underrepresented at the executive level of government as well. In the 1990s, no woman was appointed to the ministerial cabinet. Starting with the year 2000, women appointed to head a ministry were typically in charge of the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of the Family and Social Protection, or the Ministry of Youth, all ministries corresponding to professional categories traditionally associated with women. Two women also headed the Ministry of Justice and the Ministries of Tourism and the Environment. Several women served in lower ranking posts within the cabinet, mostly as secretaries of state (vice-ministers), typically in the Health Ministry and the Education Ministry.

Table 2. Women and Men in the Ministerial Cabinet 1990-2009

Cabinet	Women	Men
Roman I	0	36
Roman II	0	28
Stolojan	0	21
Vacaroiu	0	22
Ciorbea	0	26
Vasile	0	33
Isarescu	2	22
Nastase	8	50
Tariceanu	4	39
Boc	4	30

Women in Local/ Regional Politics

Although data about the involvement of women in local/ regional politics is only available for the 1996-2008 time frame, we have every reason to believe that this data is symbolic for the post-communist era. Women are as under-represented at the local level as they are at the national level.

During the 1996-2000 time frame, there were 81 women mayors, 3% of all mayors elected to office in Romania. 2434 women served as regional advisors (*consilieri locali*), 6% of the total number of regional advisors. 94 were county advisors (*consilieri judeteni*), 5% of the total number. In the year 2004, the number of women elected to mayoral seats increased to 114. So did the number of women regional advisors, which increased to 4634 that is 11.5% of the total. For county advisors, the number increased to 213, that is 15.4% of the total. Although not spectacular, this increase sends a positive signal, indicating an ascending trend in women's participation in local/ regional politics.

Women as Party Leaders

In the post-communist era, the Civic Alliance was the only party that was headed by a woman, Ana Blandiana, a very well known anti-communist dissident. However, the Civic Alliance did not win enough votes to pass the parliamentary threshold in the 1990s and no longer functions as a political party.

Today, some of Romania's largest parties include a small percentage of women in their top leadership structure, averaging around 10% of the total number of party leaders. Out of twenty vice presidents of the Liberal Democratic Party and seventeen vice presidents of the Social Democratic Party, only four are women. The Liberal Party has a slightly higher proportion of women VPs, two out of eleven.

A survey of the organization of the top echelons of Romania's largest political parties in fact reveals that women are mostly responsible with secretarial positions, act as media liaisons and chair party committees geared towards "family and social issues" and are very rarely included in de facto decision-making at top party levels.

Women in the European Parliament

Romania's participation in European Parliament elections has brought about at least a glimmer of hope about women's political participation. Twelve of thirty-three, 36% of Romanian MEPs are women. This percentage is slightly higher than the overall average percentage of women MEPs: 35%. The number of Romanian women MEPs elected in 2009 is higher than the number elected in 2007. This achievement has in part to do with the willingness of Romanian parties to place women on eligible positions on their electoral lists. From this point of view, it is clear that Romanian parties were more willing to promote women for EP elections than for local or national elections. The reasons for this electoral strategy on behalf of Romanian parties are not quite clear and for sure deserve further research. Some possible explanations might have to do with incumbency or with "face" issues. The fact that Romania is new at the European electoral game and that incumbency did not play a major role here can explain why women were granted more access to eligible spots on party lists. Another explanation may have to do with a commonly shared perception of the EU as a modernizing influence in Romanian society, an entity that promotes gender equality. This may have motivated Romanian politicians to see the election of women MEPs as a 'face saving' move⁴.

Table 3. 2009 European Parliament Elections

Party and Total # of Candidates	Women Candidates	Men Candidates	Women Elected*	Men Elected**
Liberal Democratic Party (15)	2	13	2	8
Social Democratic Party /Conservative Party(15)	6	11	5	6
National Liberal Party (15)	4	11	4	1
Hungarian Democratic Union (6)	1	5	0	3

* One woman, Elena Basescu, was elected as an independent.

** Three men elected on behalf of minor parties, not shown here.

Initiatives by NGOs

Numerous Romanian NGOs promote and seek to protect women's rights. Of the NGOs surveyed for this study⁵, only four listed the representation of women in politics as a priority. The rest focused on a plethora of issues: programs preventing domestic or other types of abuse, matters of professional discrimination, reproductive rights, the legalization of prostitution and strategies for the advancement of business women.

Most of the NGOs surveyed were funded by Western European and North American foundations and by European Union grants. These groups pursued programs

⁴ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/parliament/archive/elections2009/pdf/RO%20Elus.pdf>

⁵ For a list of NGOs surveyed in this study, access www.anes.ro

designed by international sponsors for the entire Balkan or East-European region, none of which focused on problems specific to the Romanian society. International donors were mainly concerned with social issues: human trafficking, domestic violence or employment discrimination and not with the representation of women in politics, nor with women's civic awareness and participation.

This approach may strike one as quite perplexing and counterproductive, as it tries to alleviate the symptoms of gender discrimination, without curing the disease. The fact that women are barely represented in local or national decision-making bodies often translates in inadequate legislation which in turn fosters or leaves unpunished misogynistic attitudes by employers or even violent behavior by domestic partners or co-workers.

NGOs willing to educate women about their civic rights, especially the right to run for office, would certainly help increase the number of women interested in politics and would help reduce other social ills derived from the political marginalization of women. Such grass-roots level initiatives would encourage women to think more about gender-based decision-making, to participate in elections or to focus more on women's issues when they make electoral choices.

Concluding Remarks

The present study offers a glimpse into the shortcomings of the Romanian political and institutional system when it comes to the representation of women in politics. As shown above, women continue to be drastically under-represented in the Romanian legislative, the executive and at the local and regional level of decision-making. One major cause for this phenomenon has to do with a mentality inherited from communist times that sees the advancement of women in public life as reminiscent of communist propaganda. In fact, after 1989, some leftist parties have promoted the idea of party list quotas for women while trying to attract female voters, but forgot all about quotas when it came to choosing between female candidates and male incumbents.

The root of the problem thus lies with the hypocrisy of politicians, an antiquated political culture and also with Romanian women's lack of self empowerment. The sooner more women will understand that they need to run for office in order for the number of elected women to increase, the more likely it is that other manifestations of misogynist behavior and intolerance in Romanian society will dwindle.

November, 2009

© *Dr. Anca Turcu*
University of Central Florida
ancaturcu@yahoo.com