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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Petrescu, C. (2014). A Genderless Protest: Women Confronting Romanian Communism. *Annals of the University of Bucharest / Political science series*, *16*(2), 79-101. https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-411792

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Mitglied der
Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

A GENDERLESS PROTEST
WOMEN CONFRONTING ROMANIAN COMMUNISM*

CRISTINA PETRESCU

***Abstract*:** Far from accomplishing its utopian plans of transforming society, communism did not turn gender equality into a reality either. This paper moves beyond the common-place approaches that simply underline the failures of this political system and presumes that women experienced communism in very diverse and often ambiguous ways, for public and private roles conflicted more often than not. From among the few individuals who dared to articulate critical thoughts on Romanian communism prior to its collapse of 1989, the present paper recuperates the experience of three women. Members of the urban educated elite, they believed nonetheless in different values and pursued different strategies of expressing discontent with the regime. These female critics of the communist system went beyond personal or group interests, but among the issues of public concern they raised none belonged to a feminist agenda. Yet, these women acted as if gender equality was a reality in Ceauşescu's Romania: they considered themselves the equal partners of like-minded men, while their male peers accepted them as such, for equalitarian perceptions of genders shaped the public roles assumed by non-conformist Romanian intellectuals. The example of these three women does not prove that communism succeeded in redefining the status of women, but it illustrates how the urban educated social group experienced gender relations then. No feminists in thinking, these three women were so in their behavior. Their criticism of Ceauşescu's communism was genderless, but it nonetheless strengthened the idea that women are no less than men.

***Keywords*:** communism; social change; feminism; gender roles; political dissent; cultural/intellectual resistance; ethno-cultural diversity.

The fundamental reorganization of the relationships between genders was an intrinsic part of the wider homogenizing plan of erasing societal differences, which communist regimes tried to implement in postwar East-Central Europe (ECE). Although any generalization inevitably discards the richness of case studies, one could consider that two conflicting tendencies marked women's experiences in the Soviet bloc: (1) the rather radical project of constructing

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* This study represents a revised version of the text presented by the author at the International Conference "Women in Popular Resistance and Political Opposition in Poland, 1944-1989: A Comparative Perspective," organized by the Institute for National Remembrance, Warsaw, 7-8 April 2011, under the title "Women Confronting Romanian Communism: Retreat into Professional Niches vs. Acts of Open Dissent."

gender equality "from above," which was not limited just to ideological discourses, but envisaged new legal and institutional frames as well; and (2) the social and cultural persistence of a conservative perception on gender roles, which continued to manifest in spite of this imposed egalitarian project. At the same time, fundamental differences separated the experiences of women living under communism and those of their peers on the other side of the Iron Curtain. While women in the free "capitalist" world were campaigning for eliminating any gender discrimination, women in the communist world rather willingly accepted the limited emancipation offered "from above," by regimes that otherwise did little to shake fundamentally the features of patriarchal society. Acting "from below," as civil society groups, the former triggered not only the adoption of adequate legislation to promote and support gender equality, but also the gradual but profound transformation of the traditional patterns of conceiving genders in western democratic societies. Such a transformation of gender roles occurred to some extent in the communist societies too, but as a side effect of the application and misapplication of official policies envisaging the emancipation of women. To the extent women in ECE engaged in protesting against the communist regimes, they did not tackle issues of gender. Moreover, it was argued that in many countries, among which Poland is better researched, they apparently assumed only supporting and even subordinating roles in these pre-1989 networks of resistance. More precisely, women were either unaware of, or simply accepted, the male domination for the sake of fighting first the common enemy, the communist system.[1] Indeed, the achievement of gender equality gained momentum in the region only after 1989, as part of the larger and rather vague goal of "returning to Europe."

Taking genders not as naturally God-given, but as culturally constructed identities that organize the male-female difference in a society, this paper focuses on the author's native Romania, a country where research on the communist period did not tackle often questions about women and their specific experiences.[2] A first part of the paper highlights similarities and dissimilarities in the way the pre-1989 regime treated women in this country as compared to others in the Soviet bloc, while the second discusses the way women reacted to

[1] Hardly noticed before 1989, the activity of these courageous women became known due to western researchers with a feminist agenda, whose questions revealed the role of these women played in supporting the male-dominated networks of opposing communism (Penn 2005).

[2] Yet, Gail Kligman illustrated how changes imposed by communist modernization led to the redefinition of social norms and gender roles in her field research on a traditional rural community from the region of Maramureş. Her conclusion is that, although gender roles remained unbalanced, the communist regime induced nonetheless significant changes, so that men came to represent the workers of the modern state, while women the preservation of the tradition (Kligman 1988). See also her study on the tragic effects of the forced birthrate policy upon the daily lives of both women and men (Kligman 1998).

the local variant of communism. Accordingly, the paper begins by emphasizing the gap between the official discourses promoting full equality and the limited effects of various policies meant to emancipate women. In particular, Romania is internationally known to this day for the harsh legislation regarding the criminalization of abortion, which claimed many casualties in late communism. However, gender roles in this country became more balanced in the postwar period than ever before, especially in urban and educated milieus. This evolution originated in the modernization process initiated in the nineteenth century, but communism accelerated it. Yet, it was not the institutionalization of egalitarianism, but rather the failure of the communist welfare system in Romania that caused a change in gender roles. Although the regime emancipated women through work, this offered them not full equality, but only financial independence. It was the deep crisis of the 1980s that pushed men and women to collaborate in order to overcome problems ranging from child care to food procurement, so that male dominance in family relations diminished substantially. After this short overview of the effects of communism upon gender relations, the second part illustrates how Romanian women expressed their discontent with the system. For this purpose, the author focuses on three prominent public personalities representing three different strategies of confronting the pre-1989 regime. These three female representatives were though not typical for the women experiencing communism; they were typical for the tiny majority of individuals that tried to formulate publicly an anti-regime criticism. All of these women tackled issues of common interest, but none specific to a feminist agenda. Their criticism did not emerge from a specific female experience, but from the consciousness of representing all (or at least most) citizens, whom they believed to represent when articulating discontent with a regime that promised yet utterly failed to build a fairer society. Through oppositional or non-conformist activities, they acted as if men and women were indeed equal, not due to the achievements triggered by communism, but perhaps in spite of these.

Women under Romanian Communism

Conventional knowledge regarding Romanian communism, as illustrated by western as well as domestic studies, maintains that this variant of national communism was indeed out-of-the-ordinary to a higher degree than any other in ECE. Accordingly, it has become really common place to argue that the Romanian communist regime was the most repressive in the Soviet bloc, and thus the opposition to the regime the weakest. At the same time, Romania was considered the most insubordinate member of the Warsaw Treaty Organization. Nicolae Ceauşescu went as far as to condemn in a public speech the Soviet-led

invasion of 1968 in Czechoslovakia, while simultaneously reestablishing relations between his country and western states. The alleged independence from Moscow did not result in the liberalization of internal policies though. On the contrary, Romanian communism evolved into the most nationalistic variant of national communism, which increasingly legitimized itself by developing an ideology that blended Marxism-Leninism with xenophobic nationalism. Moreover, the Bucharest regime turned by the 1980s into the most dogmatic Soviet satellite, unable to reform itself in order to cope with the simultaneous challenges of the world economic competition and the domestic supply. Although Romanian communism envisaged a profound modernization of the country, understood in terms of extended industrialization accompanied by sustained urbanization, its ultimate result was not economic growth, but economic failure. Thus, it could no longer maintain the communist-style welfare system on which other regimes in ECE could still capitalize politically. Instead, the most pompous cult of personality flourished under Ceauşescu, at a time when Romanians endured economic shortages without parallel in the region (except for Albania). In spite of this disastrous turn, only a handful of dissidents protested against these official policies, while no stable network of opposition was ever established. Thus, communism collapsed in this country only after it was already gone in Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria. What is more, its unexpected downfall has left the Romanians puzzled to this day with regard to the outbreak, unfolding and outcome of their violent revolution, which took the lives of more than one thousand people.[3]

Beyond this short overview of Romanian communism, what was though exceptional in the way this regime treated women? As in other countries, in Romania too a significant gap existed between official discourses stating the full equality of women with men and the policies meant to support this gender equality. Yet, as elsewhere, communism produced a profound transformation of the social role played by women in public, as well as in private domains. One important difference originated in the fact that Romanian women practically entered politics only under communism, unlike in Central European countries, where women were granted the right to vote after WWI. In Romania, the Constitution of 1938 specifically enfranchised women exactly at the time when the feeble interwar democracy collapsed to be replaced by the royal dictatorship of King Charles II.[4] Thus, Romanian women voted for the first time only after

[3] Although outdated, the best analysis considering both fundamental processes that shaped Romanian communism, i.e., nation-building and modernization, is Jowitt (1971). Along the same lines is Gilberg (1990). The instrumentalization of nationalism as a cover up for political and economic inertia is discussed in Shafir (1985). On nationalism under Ceauşescu, see also Verdery (1991). For the collapse of Romanian communism, see Siani-Davies (2005) and Petrescu (2010).

[4] The electoral reform of 1918 introduced for the first time in Romania universal male suffrage. The constitution of 1923 mentioned in Art. 6 only that a special organic law

WWII, in the last multiparty electoral competition of 1946, which the communist authorities – already in control of the executive – falsified in order to report their victory.[5] Ironically enough, these elections marked in national history not the beginning of legal gender equality, but that of a non-democratic regime that totally deprived voting from substance.[6] However, the Romanian communists, like those in all the other countries in the region, strove to involve women in politics up to the highest level, marking indeed a radical turn as compared to the interwar period. The imposed quotas of representation, which were similar to those implemented as part of western positive discrimination policies, aimed at reproducing in party structures at all levels the social, ethnic and gender proportions in Romanian society. Consequently, the number of women in all party echelons up to the highest level constantly grew, especially under Ceaușescu. By the Fourteenth Congress of the RCP in 1989, there were approx. 40% women among the members of the Central Committee (CC).[7] At the same time, the criteria for promoting these women into politics were as doubtful as those applied to men: not genuine merits, but allegiance to the party counted. All in all, the communist practice of associating women to political decisions remained yet another "form without substance," as long as only males entered the Politburo. The limited results of such policy in changing attitudes towards politics became apparent after the collapse of communism, when in conditions of liberty, the number of women in politics dropped dramatically. It is also very telling that up to this day, the successor parties of the neo-

would stipulate women's political rights. The electoral law of 1926 made no mentioning to women's right to vote though. It was the non-democratic Constitution of 1938 that made the first explicit mentioning of women's rights to vote and to be elected, while establishing a Romanian corporatist state, where the right to vote was granted only to the literate people, which automatically excluded many from the electoral process, more women than men. For a short overview of Romanian women's road to enfranchisement, see Bordeianu (2010).

5 The elections of 1946 unfolded under the reestablished democratic Constitution of 1923, as well as new electoral legislation. However, the result of these election that marked women's enfranchisement was falsified, according to post-communist research (Țârău 2005).

6 It is common knowledge that communist elections were only faked competitions, practically with only one-party running, although in some countries there were formally several political organizations. In Romania, there was since 1948 only the Romanian Workers' Party (RWP), which was renamed the Romanian Communist Party (RCP) in 1965. From 1977, one could choose between two candidates though, but both represented the RCP.

7 The final results of the implementation of this quota system in the promotion of women to top politics could be roughly evaluated on the basis of the last "elections" in the party. After the Fourteenth Congress of the RCP in November 1989, the CC had 24% women among the full members and 40% among the candidate members. The Political Executive Committee (the Politburo under Ceaușescu) had 10% women among its full members and 8% among its candidate members (Olteanu, Gheonea & Gheonea 2003).

communist National Salvation Front, which grouped the largest number of former communist apparatchiks, promoted women in leading positions to a much higher degree than the so-called historical parties which were reestablished after 1989.[8]

Otherwise, as elsewhere in the Soviet bloc, the need of the communist state to increase the working force triggered a substantial change in gender relations, which is reflected in the well-known propaganda images portraying women doing male jobs (such driving tractors), a double symbol of communist modernization and women's emancipation. Of course, economic reasons much more than propaganda pushed women to transform themselves from housewives subsidized by their husbands into workers contributing with a second income to the family budget. Nevertheless, in time of one generation, women gained financial independence and affirmed themselves as self-supporting individuals. That represented a significant basis for renegotiating roles within the family, as well as for achieving a higher social status.[9] Yet, the domination of men was maintained in a more insidious way. Drawing mostly upon research on Romania, Katherine Verdery makes interesting theoretical observations on the reconfiguration of male and female difference under what she called "socialist paternalism." This regime bounded all nuclear families together in the "socialist nation," an extended family with the party as head, which Verdery defines as a "zadruga-state." Thus, despite the homogenization of the gender roles within nuclear families, the nation-wide family of the zadruga-state remained gendered, as the party itself, its structures, as well as the labor division were essentially masculine.[10] Along the same lines of the argument, Vladimir Pasti analyzes on the basis of empirical data the pre-1989 gender balance on three levels: individual, group and societal. He illustrates that men continued to occupy under communism the leading positions in all working places, from universities to factories, even where the largest majority of employees were

[8] For comparison, in present day Romania, women that entered the parliament after the latest elections of 2012 represent only 11.7% (13.3% in the Chamber of Deputes and 7.4% in the Senate); which is a percentage well below the European average of 27%. Yet, for the first time ever, the office of chairman of the Chamber of Deputies was held by a woman between 2008 and 2012. Representation of women in the government is 18.5%, also below the European average of 27% (European Commission 2013). No quota or enforcing mechanism exists in Romania, but only voluntary party quotas. A study on women's political representation in post-communist Romania recommended a 30% quota (Ghebrea, Tătărâm & Crețoiu 2005, 90).

[9] Particularly interesting is Maria Bucur-Deckard's field work in the county of Hunedoara on the experiences of three generations of women under communism, which illustrates that the performance of paid work did not represent a simple necessity dictated by financial reasons, but a crucial element in reshaping women's identity as equal members of society (Bucur-Deckard 2011).

[10] This argument was formulated in an article on the wider communist project of erasing all social and cultural differences, from gender to national identities (Verdery 1994, 225-255).

women. Moreover, men dominated those economic branches that were considered ideologically more important, such as heavy industry branches like metallurgy, energy management, machine building, while women worked mostly in less strategic branches of the so-called light industry, which produced textiles, consumer goods and foodstuff. In other words, one might say that the emblematic image of the working-class alliance, portraying a man as worker and a woman as peasant, did not reflect an alleged working division, but embodied the gender hierarchy that survived in the communist economy in spite of the egalitarian propaganda.[11]

Under communism it was education that, besides the performance of paid work and the subsequent financial independence, heavily contributed to the consolidation of the social status among women. The fully subsidized education for every child basically balanced the accentuated gender inequality in literacy that still existed before the communist takeover. Women entered in large numbers in the schooling system and many followed it up to university level. Unbalanced opportunities in accessing the educational system still existed along the urban-rural division, but not between genders. Moreover, women had the chance to follow basically any career and enter even in those domains hitherto considered "masculine," such as engineering. Thus, the communist project aiming at emancipating women changed the perception of gender roles much more consistently among urban educated social strata than in the rest of society: the career women with financial independence turned the model of the educated housewife obsolete in such milieus. Although this metamorphosis represented also a response to material hardships (one family could obviously survive better with two salaries than one), it marked above all the institutionalization a new standard of social achievement among women, who attended a university not only to find a better husband, as usual in the interwar period, but also to become a professional in the respective domain.

Beyond the sphere of work relations though, the Romanian communist regime failed to adequately assist through legislation and services the full emancipation of women, who had to cope with three roles: professional, wife and mother. Laws for supporting pregnancy and child birth or for protecting women from domestic violence were far behind the standards in non-communist states. Moreover, unlike in other communist countries, the state-established

[11] In the same vein as Verdery, Pasti also argues that, while the financial autonomy and the managerial experience gained by some women might be considered one of the "good" communist legacies, this regime transformed the traditional patriarchate characteristic to the private sphere into a public one controlled by the paternalist state himself. According to him, the communist policies envisaging full gender equality had limited effects because on the one hand, these were silently resisted by Romanians, who regarded them just as communist policies, and on the other hand, the state himself acted in a patriarchal manner, directing women to economic branches considered hierarchically inferior from the communist perspective (Pasti 2003, 99-112).

institutions for child care were insufficient in urban areas and quasi-non-existent in rural areas, so couples had to tackle privately such problems.[12] Moreover, the shortages in the 1980s required supplementary and tremendous efforts for food procurement. These involved the joint endeavors of the extended family, comprising the grandparents or other older relatives, but when this was not possible, it was up to the couple to muddle through. Such unmatched situation in the Soviet bloc could not be coped with only by further enslaving women. Thus, it challenged by default the traditional dichotomy oppressing husband vs. oppressed wife and contributed to the renegotiation of family roles. In other words, it pushed men more than any communist egalitarian propaganda into actively participating in household duties. This did not make the contrast between the lazy husband and the overburdened wife totally irrelevant in communist Romania, but it further leveled the gender roles in the family. This change was more profound in urban and educated milieus, where individuals themselves were anyway willing to break with patriarchal hierarchies and adjust gender relations to standards closer to their time. As Jill Massino illustrates, marital roles in Romania were renegotiated under communism and more gender equality in the private sphere resulted not from the application of the communist tenets, but rather from their misapplication.[13]

Finally, one could not find a better symbol for the exceptionality of Romanian communism in regard to women's social role than the application of the anti-abortion legislation, issued under Ceauşescu's rule. Following the Soviet model, abortion became legal after the communist takeover to be then criminalized by Decree 770 of 1966. This measure resulted in the sudden increase of births and the implicit emergence of a generation several times more numerous than the previous ones. The children born in the following years were

[12] Mihaela Miroiu maintains that communism, which considered only class identities as socially relevant, promoted a kind of "negative feminism," which envisaged that gender as well as ethnic or religious antagonisms would be overcome only when the equalitarian society free of private property would be instituted. Otherwise, she argues, communism succeeded only in "emancipating women through work," turning them into slaves at two masters: the husband and the communist state. Thus, while in public domains the inequalities were reduced, in the private domain, these were maintained through inadequate legislation that offered child support only to fathers while it allowed maternal leave only for mothers, failed to criminalize domestic violence and treated women as breeding animals, as one could infer from the harsh anti-abortion legislation (Miroiu 2004, 185-213).

[13] Combining the analysis of socialist propaganda and legislation with oral history interviews, Jill Massino demonstrates that the reshaping of the dichotomy oppressing husband vs. oppressed wife was the aggregate result of two rather antagonistic tendencies: the state promotion of egalitarian family models and the misapplication of socialist theory. After forthy-five years of communism, she argues, more balanced marital roles were established because the pressures for women's participation in the labor force occurred while the state was incapable to provide adequate childcare and improve the standard of living (Massino 2010, 34-60).

nicknamed "decreței" (children of the decree). It is interesting to note that this name was initially pejorative, but turned glorious after the revolution of 1989, which was carried out due to the active involvement and ultimate sacrifice of representatives of this generation, who had reached maturity in the meantime. In spite of the anti-abortion decree, the birth rate failed to further grow; thus, supplementary measures ranging from radicalizing the abortion legislation to eliminating the contraceptives from pharmacies were gradually introduced. Moreover, the medical control of women in order to detect any pregnancy in an early stage or the supervision of physicians in order to prevent any illegal abortion added new dimensions to the intrusion of the communist state into private existences. Nowhere else the surveillance of individuals by a communist regime reached so intimate spheres as in Ceauşescu's Romania.[14] In reaction, underground networks of trans-gender solidarity developed in order to counterbalance the effects of this policy. However, the results of such policy of forcing the birthrate were indeed tragic. According to official records only, around ten thousand women died because of abortions made in improper conditions, but their real number might have been even higher.[15]

In view of the issues discussed in the following part, it is worth underlining that, if one analyzes this policy on the basis of the currently accepted standards regarding human rights in general and women's rights in particular, one cannot characterize it but criminal. From such methodologically fallacious perspective, one could then barely understand why nobody, in particular no dissident woman, revolted against the anti-abortion legislation. A careful researcher must obviously contextualize and take into account that in Romania of the 1980s nobody regarded this issue in terms of denied rights, not even as a matter of public concern, but as a private one, which should have been solved accordingly. Romanians, men and women alike, lacked the understanding of individual rights as developed gradually in the western advanced democracies. Although some Romanian dissidents inspired themselves from the human rights protests in Central European countries, the

[14] The cinematic narrative *Patru luni, 3 săptămâni şi 2 zile*, directed by Cristian Mungiu and internationally known after receiving Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 2007, represents a terrifying account of the problems encountered by Romanian women seeking for an abortion in the 1980s.

[15] The above-mentioned movie suggested that abortion was generally considered the problem of women, while men declined any responsibility. Yet, this unparalleled intrusion of into private existences also created networks of resistance and solidarity among men and women, who many times assumed serious risks to help each other solve the abortion illegally (Kligman 1998). A recent account tried to develop the research on Ceauşescu's policy of forced natality by focussing on issues such as the anti-abortion legislation, the contraceptive education and the social benefits in support of child birth in Romania as compared to Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Yugoslavia, Poland, Hungary, as well as postwar France (Doboş, Jinga & Soare 2010).

reflection upon rights remained alien to political thinking in this country. In short, without contextualization, one can hardly make justice to the few courageous Romanian women who – at a time when only a handful of people dared to engage in such acts – openly criticized communism and its policies, except that of forced natality.

Women against Romanian Communism

As aforementioned, one of the features that distinguishes Romanian communism from others in the Soviet bloc was the weakness of protest. In the last decade before 1989, everyday routines were seriously disturbed by shortages, while the average living standard was heavily affected by the decision of returning the national debt at all costs. Yet, those who dared to formulate a public criticism of the communist regime or at least of its various policies were so few that up to this day Romanians ask themselves who had started the revolution of 1989. This is not to say that the forty-five years of communism were endured in silence in this country. However, a larger proportion of the population than in other Soviet satellites separated between private and public arenas, regarded them as opposite rather then complementary, thus placed personal interests above societal interests and sought individual ways of muddling through the hardships of daily existence rather than publicly express discontent.[16] As Jowitt argues, it was dissimulation, "an adaptive response to a regime that … attempts to penetrate most areas within the society," which guided Romanians' behavior and actions under communism. Based on "fear and avoidance," dissimulation is the stance that "takes the form, not so much of political opposition, but of a strong anti-political privatism in which family and personal interests are emphasized at the expense of regime and societal interests." (Jowitt 1992, 80).

Looking retrospectively at the Romanian societal resistance against communism, one can notice that, contrary to developments in Central Europe, the most significant reaction emerged not prior to the collapse of the regime, but in response to the communist takeover. In the aftermath of WWII, several groups of armed individuals withdrew in various mountain areas in the hope of organizing a national movement of resistance. Practically crushed by the secret police by the early 1960s, this type of resistance had no significant societal impact and remained up to 1989 virtually unknown to the largest majority of the Romanians (Deletant 1999, 225-234). Yet, in post-communism it became one of the most researched topics of the recent past, as it could document the

[16] For an analysis of the protests against the Romanian communist regime, see Petrescu (2013a).

Romanian's alleged opposition to the defunct system. It was labeled the "resistance in the mountains" and aside the Romanian Gulag it became the post-1989 hallmark of Romanian communism. From the perspective of the present paper, it is worth mentioning that research on this type of resistance produced an emblematic female hero: the peasant woman Elisabeta Rizea. Although involved only in the subordinate role of supporting with food some male individuals hidden in the Făgăraş Mountains near-by her native village of Nucşoara, she rightfully emerged as the very symbol of anti-communism due to her out-of-the-ordinary behavior after the arrest and imprisonment. Although beaten until left crippled for life, she did not betray to the secret police any of those engaged in the armed resistance.[17] Of course, Rizea's status as leading hero of the anti-communist resistance is partially explained by the obvious shortage of such heroes in a country where the organizers of memory had to emphasize the omnipotence of the Securitate in order to excuse the poverty of protests.[18] However, it also reflects the readiness of the educated social segment which was involved in this activity to accept women as leading heroes of the nation and value extraordinary deeds regardless of gender.[19] In short, it adds another illustration of the argument that gender roles must have been balanced to some extent during communism, at least among the educated strata.

Leaving aside this example – illustrative not so much for the women's resistance under communism as for the changes in gender roles that occurred during this period – this paper further focuses on three women that manifested themselves against the regime during what might be called a second, post-Helsinki wave of resistance and dissent. Although Romanians had gradually consented to communist rule, mostly because the RCP succeeded during the 1960s in legitimizing itself through its policy of displaying a degree of autonomy from the Soviet Union, this tacit consent gradually vanished, mainly because of the increasing failures of communist-type of welfare system. Consequently, a second wave of dissent opened in 1977 with a short-lived human rights movement on the model of Charter 77 and a miners' strike in the Jiu Valley. Yet, except for these two collective protests, until the second major

[17] Rizea appeared in the early 1990s in the frame of the television documentary series *Memorialul Durerii*, which featured former political prisoners and survivors of the "resistance in the mountains," making such stories of suffering public for the first time (Hossu Longin 2007). See also Nicolau & Nițu (1991) and Liiceanu (2003).

[18] The post-communist Romanian anti-communism, which dominated the public debates on the recent past, is an expression of a cultural and societal syndrome generated by a diffuse feeling of guilt for the pre-1989 passivity in comparison to other former communist countries (Petrescu & Petrescu 2010).

[19] Rizea features aside Iuliu Maniu, the leader of the National Peasant Party who died in the Sighet prison, on the opening page of the album dedicated by the Association of the Former Political Prisoners in Romania to the monuments which commemorate the victims of communism (AFDPR 2004, 5).

strike in Braşov in 1987, only a few isolated individuals made their criticism of the regime public. Frustration was widespread, especially because of the profound economic crisis, but not openly expressed. After workers' revolt of 1987, a larger number of Romanian intellectuals turned dissidents and tried to organize networks of opposition, but their actions remained limited in scope and amplitude in comparison to those in Central Europe. By 1989, most Romanian intellectuals who refrained from openly supporting the communist party practiced the so-called "resistance through culture." This label, coined after 1989, reminded one the "resistance in the mountains," but it actually referred to a form of tacit refusal to endorse the nationalist cultural policy of the regime and not to a form of dissent. After Ceauşescu's so-called Theses of July of 1971 – that asked for the elimination of any foreign, i.e., western, cultural influences and the tightening of control over the production of literary and artistic works – the adoption of such a non-conformist position had its perilous results, such as professional marginalization. However, it was a tolerated stance as compared to open dissent.[20] Yet, in a country with so few open critics of the regime, even this form of disapproving Ceauşescu's policies mattered: the stake of the "resistance through culture" was to create a genuine art or literature, not ephemeral works at the order of the party (Petrescu 2014).

The three women presented in this paper represent three different strategies of expressing the discontent with the Romanian communist regime. Thus, the reaction of the Romanian authorities and the treatment received from the secret police in each of these cases were not similar. These women stood in defense of diverse values and liberties, but their level of education place all in the category of intellectuals. Given their critical stance, one could not take them as typical for this rather heterogeneous group of educated individuals, ranging from court poets to dissidents. They were nonetheless representative for the more restrictive group of non-conformist intellectuals, ranging from open critics of the regime to above-mentioned "resisters through culture." Were they also typical Romanian women muddling through daily hardships? On the one hand, yes, since all had to cope with the same problems and experience the same adversities as all the other women during late Romanian communism. This personal experience is reflected in their criticism. On the other hand, no, since as compared to the others they made a huge step forward from personal matters and engaged in defending issues of common interest. All abandoned the strategy of dissimulation and the anti-political privatism so specific to the Romanian society as a whole, and made the courageous step of expressing publicly the discontent with the policies of the communist regime that the others did not dare to formulate but in private. Yet, none tackled directly issues that might be

[20] For a critical analysis of this so-called strategy of resistance, which based itself on the idea of converting the professional capital into a civic capital, see Macrea-Toma (2009).

considered specific to a feminist agenda: these women's criticism of Romanian communism was genderless.

The first case is that of Doina Cornea (b. 1929), a lecturer in French Literature at the University of Cluj. By the collapse of communism, she emerged as one of the most important public dissidents in Ceauşescu's Romania. Internationally known due to the efforts of the emigration, she was equally known in the country due to western broadcasting agencies. Cornea began her dissident career in 1982 by sending an open letter to the Radio Free Europe (RFE), in which she criticized the educational policies of the regime. This public stance led immediately to her early forced retirement from the university, which in fact left her more time to dedicate to the defense of the Romanian cultural traditions and the Christian moral virtues, which she considered fundamental for the education of the young generation. Thus, she disseminated works reflecting these values through samizdat.[21] Her dissident activity intensified after the working-class rebellion of 1987, when she spread manifestos in support of the right to revolt, emerging as one of the few Romanian intellectuals who expressed their solidarity with the protesters. This attitude triggered the harsh response of the secret police: after a short arrest with repeated interrogations, Cornea was put under strict surveillance in order to isolate her from all possible contacts.[22]

However, she radicalized her position after this event up to the point of formulating an extensive program of reforms and thus imposing herself as one of the most important dissident intellectuals in communist Romania.[23] She

[21] Like other dissidents in Central Europe, Cornea considered the moral rebirth of the nation as an imperative goal that could have been achieved only by speaking the truth. However, her position was not secular, but religious, and originated in her allegiance to the repressed Greek-Catholic Church in Transylvania. Also, she considered that the reform of the educational system implied the return to the humanities-centered interwar model and the reintroduction of the pre-communist literary canon. Driven by such ideas on education, she managed to publish by herself six issues of a samizdat journal, which included works by censored Romanian authors (Cornea 1990).

[22] Illustrative for Cornea's isolation as dissident due to the strict surveillance of the secret police and her implicit limitation in conveying any message to the public is the way in which she managed to send a letter to the conference organized by Solidarity in 1988 in Krakow, to which she had been invited by Lech Wałęsa, but not allowed to go. Her text, written on a cigarette paper and hidden in the head of a handcrafted doll, was smuggled out of Romania by the Belgian journalist Josy Dubié, whom she met in Cluj, first by chance. He not only assumed the trouble of carrying the message across the border, but also managed to double-cross the police in order to interview later Cornea for his highly critical documentary of Ceauşescu's communism, entitled *Red Disaster* (Cornea 2002).

[23] Her program went beyond the usual Gorbachev-like reforms meant to restore "socialism with human face" and asked for the separation of party and state, even for the independence of the legislative, executive and judiciary; the guarantee of basic rights, such as the liberty of speech and association; the introduction of market criteria in order to reform the inefficient economy (Cornea 1991).

remained mostly know for her contribution in raising the international awareness about Ceauşescu's project of demolishing Romanian villages in order to transform them into so-called agricultural centers. Considering the village as the repository of national traditions, Cornea authored open letters of protest against this alleged program of systematization, managed to grant interviews to western press correspondents by double crossing the Securitate agents and succeeded in coagulating significant western support for the preservation of the Romanian rural areas.[24] Perhaps her most revolutionary position was the endorsement of a collective letter that asked for Ceauşescu's non-election at the congress scheduled for November 1989, which was signed by dissidents and non-dissidents across the country. In short, Cornea was among those few Romanian intellectual dissidents that raised issues outside those related to the sphere of cultural policies, which were in her immediate interest. At the same time, she was also among the even fewer that genuinely tried to organize a cross-class alliance against Romanian communism.[25] She appeared in 1988 in the documentary *Red Disaster*, which many western televisions broadcast, as a small and fragile old lady confronting alone the ruthless dictator and quickly became an iconic image for the equally fragile yet courageous anti-communist Romanian dissent.[26] In December 1989, Cornea emerged as a leading public figure and continued for some time to play a significant role as public intellectual.[27] One might even say that her gender was not a liability, but an asset in her fight against communism.[28]

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[24] To have an idea about the size of these collective protests, Cornea's letter against the demolition of villages was finally endorsed by 28 persons and represented one of the most supported open letters. More than this open letter though, the above-mentioned documentary *Red Disaster* raised the awareness of the western public about the aberrant and arbitrary measures taken by Ceauşescu and triggered the establishment of *Operation Villages Roumains*. This was a civil-society network originating in Belgium, but active also in France and other western countries, which effectively stopped these demolitions by encouraging western rural communities to adopt a village in Romania (Hermant 2002).

[25] Cornea was also known as a defender of the workers, not only because of her public position after the revolt in Braşov in 1987, but also because of her collaboration with, and support to, a group of workers that tried to organize an independent trade union following the Polish model (Cornea 2009).

[26] The Mother Theresa looking-like woman, who was standing alone against Ceauşescu's oppressive regime, touched the western viewers. Although her words were not intelligible, she seemed to embody the nation's redemption from a miserable and humiliating existence. In short, her image enhanced the message of the documentary and contributed to the international grassroots solidarity with Romania (Dubié 2002).

[27] In the aftermath of the revolution, she was co-opted together with several other dissidents in the first post-communist form of political organization, the National Salvation Front. When this turned to be dominated by neo-communists interested only in seizing power, she withdrew in order to support the emerging political opposition and the reestablishment of civil society. Against the political domination of the neo-communists, Cornea also

The second case discussed in this paper is that of Herta Müller (b. 1953), who represents the antithetical position in comparison with Cornea in more ways than one. As recent recipient of the Nobel Prize for literature, she is today an internationally known writer who needs less presentation than the barely forgotten formerly leading Romanian dissident presented above. Yet, Müller was considered at the time she was living in her native Romania only a marginal author, above all because she expressed herself in a minority language, the German. As she underlined herself, she was not a dissident like Cornea, a person who publicly criticized the regime and made this critical position known to an audience larger than the circle of friends and family. Yet Müller stood, as writer and intellectual, in defense of the freedom of speech. As compared to the Romanian intellectuals that "resisted through culture," she did not want to accept the limits of expression imposed by the regime, but tried to expand them through her own work, stirring in this way the attention of the secret police upon her. Inspired from her native milieu of German-dominated villages in Romania's Banat region, Müller's writings uncovered the world of deceit hidden under a combination of pompous traditions and alleged progress, and obliquely criticized the effects of communist rule upon these rural areas. Unlike Cornea, who regarded the village as the still idyllic repository of national traditions, Müller considered it as profoundly affected by the type of modernization that the communist authorities implemented, with the active help of the villagers themselves though.[29] For the postwar decay of the German villages that she depicted conflicted to the conventional image promoted by the regime, which claimed to have brought only prosperity and development in the countryside, the secret police put her under surveillance. Although Müller was neither an open critic nor an author whose works were accessible to the Romanian readership, she was nonetheless considered harmful to Romania's international image because of her ability to publish the uncensored version of her debut work in the Federal Republic of Germany. Moreover, she was potentially more problematic than the isolated dissidents because of her membership in an informal non-conformist literary circle, founded by young writers from the German minority, known as Aktionsgruppe Banat (Petrescu 2013b). Unlike many intellectuals from the Romanian majority, who tried to resist the ideological pressures of the regime by avoiding any uncomfortable

acted by supporting the preservation of that part of collective memory that was banned under communism, in particular that related to the Romanian Gulag.

[28] The Report of Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania opened the list of the Romanian freedom fighters with her name (CPADCR 2007).

[29] Her prose criticized, on the one hand, the disorder provoked by the communist regime in the German rural communities of the Banat, and on the other, it illustrated the conservative thinking and xenophobic views of the Germans living in these villages (Müller 1982; Müller 1984). Thus, her inconvenient observations on this small universe disturbed not only the communist authorities, but also her fellow ethnic Germans.

topic, those united in this group wanted, just like Müller, to expand the limits of literary freedom by tackling inconvenient truths about the communist realities.[30] Müller was the only female in this group, which she considered fundamental in shaping her identity as writer, as well as in strengthening her capacity to endure the traumatizing experiences of encountering almost daily the secret police.[31] Although her criticism was conveyed through books in German that few people inside Romania could read, she suffered not only because of professional marginalization, but also because of the merciless treatment by the Securitate. Müller's ethnic origin allowed the nationalist Romanian secret police to place her under the special category of German fascists, although she was actually criticizing the incapacity of her native community to deal with their Nazi past. Constant surveillance, harsh interrogations and repeated harassment became routines of her daily existence in Ceauşescu's Romania until she was forced to immigrate.[32] This experience never let her free and pushed her not only to offer public support to Romanian dissidents after her establishment in West Germany, but also to bear witness incessantly.[33] Ultimately, one might say, it was this kind of experience that made Müller's message as writer important to a world-wide audience and brought her international recognition.

Finally, poet Ana Blandiana (b. 1942) represents an intermediary position between the two cases discussed above: neither public critic of the regime nor repeatedly harassed by the secret police for non-conformist stances, she nevertheless imposed herself as the leading Bucharest-based intellectual authoring verses with hidden meanings. At a time when interest in poetry was declining everywhere else, in communist countries this genre allowed the authors to insert encrypted messages alluding to taboo issues, such as the wrongdoings of the regime or the dissatisfaction of the population, which could

[30] Richard Wagner, co-founding member of Aktionsgruppe Banat, later Müller's husband, formulated the agenda of this group which aimed at critically assessing societal problems in the following way: "We are the first generation of writers born under the sign of socialism. (…) As compared to those who are older, we could perceive the current reality in a less prejudiced and a more complex way. (…) The education of our fathers had created false schemes of thinking, which hamper an objective perspective" (*apud* Totok 2001, 14).

[31] "Fortunately I made some friends in the city, a handful of young writers from the Aktionsgruppe Banat. Without them I wouldn't have read or written any books at all. More importantly: these friends were absolutely essential. Had it not been for them, I would not have been able to stand the repression" (Müller 2009c).

[32] After reading her secret police file, Müller authored a book-length comment upon the universe of treason and treachery that stemmed out of the pages authored by those who informed on her, as well as from the notes of the secret police employees (Müller 2009a).

[33] Müller's prose reflects the experiences underwent by a person submitted to such surveillance, convey the sense of anxiety and the struggle for maintaining a mental balance when one's private life is continuously invaded by the secret police to the extent that the encounters with its officers become part of everyday life routines (Müller 2009b; Müller 2010).

not have been conveyed openly through prose. Such literary strategy would have been meaningless in a democratic country respecting the liberty of expression. Wherever a unique party controlled the circulation of information, the very publication of such poems after misleading the censors represented a gesture that defied the regime. When retroactively detected, the author was punished accordingly.[34] Blandiana, just like Müller, was a writer that refrained from writing in accordance with party directives, and what is more, crossed the thin line of tolerated non-conformism. Thus, she was twice banned from publication. Unlike Müller, she avoided an open disagreement with the official views and perhaps thus the secret police did not treat her equally harsh. Yet, her verses that only hinted at the grim realities of everyday life under Romanian communism instead of praising the great achievements of the regime had a much greater impact among the reading public.[35] When she was banned from publication in 1984 because of publishing such verses, these circulated in hand-written copies across Romania.[36] The spontaneous dissemination of Blandiana's poetries through such rudimentary methods represented a form of self-publishing though, for in Ceauşescu's Romania the registration of all typewriting machines to the police effectively annihilated any initiative of producing alternative publications on a larger scale.[37]

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[34] It is important to note that censorship was officially abolished under Ceauşescu, while in accordance with the decisions of the Plenum of the CC of the RCP of 28-29 June 1977 the responsibility for the political-ideological content of the messages conveyed to the public relied on each publishing house and each periodical, as well as the radio and the television companies. Thus, each such institution established a special editorial council that acted as a censor, besides the already habitual self-censorship practiced by each author.

[35] Blandiana succeeded in publishing several such poems in the literary student magazine *Amfiteatru*, a publication with a more limited public and thus a more flexible publishing policy. Perhaps the best known is the poem *Totul* (Everything) of 1984, which enlisted banal items from everyday life (leaves, cats, bumblebees, words or tears) together with items that reminded everyone of the combination between recurring problems (lines for food, disrupted public transportation, black market products) and official propaganda (flags, portraits, discourses) that were so typical of Ceauşescuism. The reference to "the boys on Calea Victoriei," who all readers understood to be the Securitate agents guarding Ceauşescu's daily route to the party headquarters, attracted her banning from further publication. For the argument of this paper, it is worth mentioning that one of Blandiana's poems, entitled *Cruciada Copiilor* (Children's crusade), alluded to the interdiction of abortion, when speaking about "an unborn people, condemned to be born though."

[36] This author remembers to have read the poem *Eu cred* (I think) in a handwritten copy. This poem criticizing the lack of dissent in Ceauşescu's Romania contained a memorable reference to the Romanians as a "vegetal people," which quietly awaits the leaves to fall. Just like plants, Romanians were incapable of revolting against an adverse fate, as the closing verses of this pessimistic poem suggested: "Who had ever seen / A revolting tree?"

[37] A decree adopted by the State Council on 28 March 1983 regulated the use of copying and typewriting machines. Accordingly, every person and institution that possessed typewriters must have handled to the militia station, at the beginning of each year, sample

Allowed to publish again after some years of interdiction, she had authored in 1988 a volume of poetries for children. Inspired by her own tomcat, she imagined this cat in postures that reminded everyone of Ceauşescu's so-called working visits and his cult of personality.[38] After the withdrawal of this volume and Blandiana's second blacklisting, several Bucharest-based intellectuals, whom others later joined, protested against party interference in cultural matters and marked the first collective protest reuniting prominent Romanian personalities in a gesture of solidarity. Although this open letter of April 1989 did not represent a radical criticism of the regime – in other communist countries it would have gone unnoticed at that time – Romanians regarded this as a signal that the time was ripe for the revolt of the passive "vegetal people," to which Blandiana's banned poetries referred to. It was after this moment that more and more intellectuals dared to speak out against Ceauşescu's regime, benefiting from the support of the Romanian emigration via western broadcasting agencies, which disseminated their messages among Romanians (Petrescu 2013, 331-348). Due to the continuous attention of these agencies, Blandiana emerged aside Cornea as a major figure among those who contested in some way Ceauşescu's rule.[39] After 1989, both engaged in supporting the political opposition to the neo-communist party that dominated the early post-communist politics, due to its ability to win the first two rounds of free elections. Moreover, Blandiana involved herself actively in reestablishing civil society and organizing the memory of the recent past. Her most important achievement in this respect is the foundation of the first and to this day the only museum of communism in Romania, the Sighet Memorial.[40]

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writings, which could have been used to trace the origin of a text in a similar way as personal imprints. This measure made extremely problematic the making of samizdat publications or manifestos in communist Romania.

38 This tomcat called Arpagic (in English scallion) has become known in the Romanian literature as a symbol for the literature of hidden meanings created under communism. Blandiana depicted this tomcat as a superstar who was acclaimed by everyone, welcomed with bread and salt, and greeted with pomp everywhere; who praised or admonished those surrounding him; and whom everyone willingly and even gratefully obeyed. Such images created through words resembled very much the familiar scenes, broadcasted practically every day on TV or illustrated in newspapers, which showed Ceauşescu inspecting factories, working sites or agricultural farms, and delivering recommendations about how things should be further handled that all individuals felt compelled to follow, although many where meaningless or even absurd (Blandiana 1988).

39 Besides, Blandiana became known in the West as a leading Romanian critical intellectual due to the publication of her protest letter, which she addressed in March 1989 to Ceauşecu. This was published together with a translation of her poem about tomcat Arpagic under the title "The most famous tomcat in town" in Blandiana (1989, 34-35).

40 The Sighet Memorial is symbolically organized in the former prison where most of the prominent interwar politicians found their death after enduring an extermination imprisonment regime. Dedicated to the "victims of communism and to the resistance," this permanent exhibition illustrates the terror orchestrated by the Romanian communist

Briefly put, Blandiana best capitalized the sympathy for her pre-1989 non-conformist position and turned it into a post-1989 asset, which not only allowed her to play a major role in the transition to democracy, but also assured her a prominent position in the male-dominated public sphere.

Comparative Conclusions

What could one infer from these particular stories of experiencing Romanian communism? As mentioned, they were neither typical women nor typical intellectuals in Ceauşescu's Romania. They were only typical for tiny minority of intellectuals that did not consent to the party policies and thus tried to react to these arbitrary, unjust and harmful decisions. When analyzing their strategies of confronting Romanian communism, one could hardly make a difference between them and any other men who withstand this regime. As shown, these women acted in solidarity with men who had similar views, received support from these men and cooperated with them in anti-regime actions from positions of equal partnership. What is more, their actions were no less valued than those of men, for at that time their gender was less important than their courage to confront the regime. All three articulated more or less openly critical thoughts on Ceauşescu's policies. As intellectuals, they were interested especially in the freedom of speech (although some went far beyond this issue). None attacked the regime from a feminist position, i.e., claiming the full gender equality that the regime so obviously failed to accomplish it. However, their disinterest in feminist issues does not represent an exception in the Soviet bloc. Much had been said about the fact that women behind the Iron Curtain missed the development of feminist movements in western countries, so they hardly benefited from such liberating experiences while communism was still in power. At the same time, the women who lived under these regimes felt that instead of crying out loud about their continuous discrimination under the cover of gender equality discourses, they should first state publicly that communism failed in all of its claims of building a fairer society. To these arguments it might be added that a criticism from a feminist position would have been perhaps less effective against states that could after all claim to have contributed to the emancipation of women.

Yet, one might indeed wonder today why the women above so quietly accepted such contemptuous measures as Ceauşescu's anti-abortion legislation, which ultimately illustrated that the pre-1989 regime in Romania regarded women as breeding animals. As already pointed out, one should refrain from

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regime, pays the due respect to those innocent individuals who lost their lives between 1945 and 1989 and celebrates the few anti-communist heroes in this country.

applying standards that are taken for granted today, after twenty five years of efforts to recuperate developments that occurred in the West while the East was isolated because of communism. The feminist agenda articulated in western democracies had been expressed in terms of human and civil rights. These represented though rather alien issues in the political thinking of ECE even during the short interwar democratic experiment. Post-Helsinki dissent had made a huge step forward in this respect when adopting the language of individual rights in their anti-regime protests. Dissidents in Romania too learned this language and criticized the communist system for violating basic rights guaranteed by a phony constitution. Yet, an issue such as abortion was never regarded in terms of women's rights and thus a matter of common interest, but as a private problem, that all couples had to face in their own way and not solve publicly. Retrospectively, this view might seem provincial and even primitive, but it corresponds to the context in which these women confronted Romanian communism. Their thinking epitomized the long-lasting tension between modernity and traditionalism, which defined the intellectual elites not only in Romania, but also in the rest of ECE ever since these countries began adapting western models to local realities. In short, the three non-conformist female intellectuals presented above illustrate that pre-modern views prevailed when dealing with issues regarded as private, although gender equality was accepted when assuming roles in the public sphere.

Could one presume though that in Romania, a country conventionally regarded as less modern than others in the region, women could have been more emancipated and thus acted as full partners of men, when the Polish women remained in subordinate roles in those networks of resistance against communism? In the latter case, the opposition included a sizeable part of the population from all social groups, so gender inequalities specific to the Polish society as a whole were spontaneously reproduced within the dissident minority. In Romania too, the society remained in its profound strata patriarchal even after forty-five years of communism. However, women played subordinate roles only in the "resistance in the mountains" after the communist takeover, although men dominated numerically not only this type of societal resistance, but also the dissent in late communism. Nevertheless, a woman emerged in post-communism as the stellar figure of this male-dominated societal resistance. Obviously, such choice tells much more about the post-1989 gender relations among the members of the educated strata, who assumed the task of preserving the memory of communism, than about the gender relations among the Romanians who tried to defy the postwar political settlement. The three women discussed in this paper – just as the rest of dissent under Ceauşescu – must be associated only with a certain segment of the society, the urban educated strata. Members of this social group assumed a much higher degree of gender equality than the rest of the Romanian society. This trend had its origins in the

nineteenth century and emerged together with the modern Romanian state, but it developed timidly until communism, which reinforced it by default, wherever it already existed. Women who dared to criticize Romanian communism seemed more emancipated and independent than those acting in larger networks of societal opposition in countries such as Poland only because they acted within the confines of the urban educated strata. These women did not necessarily take for granted gender equality, but they significantly contributed to the otherwise slow process of making gender equality a reality in Romania.

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