

Democracy in Post-Communist Romania

by Nicole Gardner

Abstract

The democratic system of government offers many benefits to the citizens living within states that utilize democracy: free and fair elections, equal opportunity, freedoms including speech and the press, as well as a multitude of other rights. However, the transition toward democracy in countries that have previously been under the reign of communism has proven difficult. In various eastern European countries, democracy has been implemented in hopes of bettering the state; in many cases, the result of the conversion has not drastically improved the lives of the citizens, specifically women, as scholars and government officials alike had hoped. This essay will examine the hesitance of the Eastern European Bloc to accept the and embrace the new and unfamiliar ideals that democracy has brought. Specifically, the objective of this essay is to consider the understanding of gender issues in post-communist Romania, and examine the effects of democracy on women's rights.

Among the more powerful nations across the world, there is very little debate that communism is a failure as a governmental system. In fact, communism is often seen as one of the most corrupt forms of government. An increasing amount of the world's developed countries would agree that democracy is a considerably better system. Thus, the aim of many globally-leading countries is to introduce democracy to developing nations across the world (Pinkney). Communism as a theory appears decent, but when acted out, many injustices occur. Under communism, women's lives were made difficult by the patriarchal standards of the regime. Therefore, by establishing democracy in countries that have previously been controlled by communism, it was widely believed that gender equality would have significantly improved. However, democracy's impact on gender relations in these countries has not been substantial; in fact, in some cases, the opposite effect is being seen.

Romania is an Eastern European country that was controlled for many years by the Russian Empire in the Communist Eastern Bloc (Gibianskii). Even after the Bloc dissolved, the Communist party still held command over the country, in the form of the Romanian Communist Party, and had significantly more supporters than any other party at the time. However, as Romania was settling in its new independence, western nations began to infiltrate the country in attempts to establish a democratic reign, in regards that "western proximity should promote democratization by facilitating the diffusion of western values and political institutions to ex-communist countries" (Pop-Eleches). The first step toward democracy was to abolish the then-current political system of appointing officials through self-appointment, power-grabbing, and quota-filling, and instead implement a system of fair and free elections. External parties intended for the electoral structure to improve the status of women within the government. The belief was that if women were able not only to vote, but were also able to run for office, that more women would be elected into power. However, in practice, the hypothesis has been proven wrong.

Under communism in Romania, women were only allowed in the political process to convince onlookers throughout the world that gender equality was important to communists. A quota was set in place under the communist regime that required a certain percentage, around 30%, of the government had to be made up of women (Curseu and Boros). The women were chosen not

based on their level of political knowledge, but rather were oftentimes handpicked from the countryside, where education was lacked the most (Bachman). Moreover, it was considered better if women were uneducated so that men would still be the ruling power. Therefore, most women took no interest in politics. “Different organizational forms that aimed at increasing women’s participation in public and political life [were] often parallel organizational structures, and the work of men and women was often disconnected” (Curseu and Boros). Even as government officials, women were not taken seriously and therefore mostly remained uninvolved. Under democracy, women have yet less power. Although in the institution of democracy, women are not a mere statistic, as they tend to be under communism, “[Some researchers] have found democracy to be either insignificant or, in some instances, negatively related to women’s representation. The negative coefficient suggests that there are fewer women legislatures in democracies than in authoritarian regimes” (Beer, 214). The quota system, however flawed, did invite women into the political scene.

Democracy, in abolishing the quota system altogether, intended to provide women equal opportunity on the political scene, but resulted in the opposite effect. The majority of women in Romania still believe that politics is a man’s concern, and because they are not required to participate, many do not. Because women have hardly ever held important roles of power in Romania, it has been difficult to establish a system in which women are able to gain status. Much of the struggle with involving women in political positions can be traced back to the double-burden that women experienced during the communist regime.

Under communism, women were encouraged to lead a life within the home, meaning that they were in charge of raising children, cooking meals, and keeping the house clean, similar to lifestyles seen all around the world at every point in history. However, under the communist regime, women were urged to participate in the workplace as well, in order to increase the percentage of employed women so foreign countries could see that statistically, gender equality was not a major issue. Not only was it a manipulation of facts by the communist regime to understate the gender equality issues within the workforce, but unfortunately the dynamic between work and home life for women was even more complicated; “as regards employment, ‘equal rights’ often meant the now-familiar ‘double burden’ on women” (Oprica). Women were essentially expected to work two full-time jobs on their own. This overextension led to fewer women obtaining educations and less time spent on fixing the true gender issues in Romania, beginning with employment inclusion and family roles.

Throughout the democratization of Romania, women’s roles have slightly shifted; however, the change has not been toward women’s emancipation from the harsh communist reign. As the communist regime collapsed, a resurgence of nationalistic movements could be seen. Romanians, in crisis from transitioning to democracy, an entirely new and unknown political and economic system, have tried to hold on to various aspects of their previous national identity, including the glorification of motherhood. “Popular nationalist propaganda glorified women's role as the mothers of future citizens and encouraged women to return to their “traditional” place within the domestic domain” (LaFont). Motherhood and home duties that were already exceedingly glorified had taken precedent over women in the workforce. “The woman as a mother was highly valued at the expense of the career woman” (Mitu and Serbenescu). Nationalism threatens women by concealing the situation of gender inequality as well as promoting a conservative examination of the role of women. Nationalists believe that women should “go home” and procreate, in order to continue population growth for the country, ignoring the realities of an aging population whose care also falls in the

hands of women (LaFont). Despite the strain these domestic duties place on women, any services provided to aid in the care of elderly people are underdeveloped. “As a result, there are major inadequacies in the organization of the social service system: too few public services, insufficient budget funds, insufficient collaboration between public and private services, and frequently overlapping services” (Bodogai). The reinitiation of stereotypical gender roles in the lives of Romanian women has become a new source of workplace inequalities, and could potentially be seen as cause for protests. Contrarily, however, women’s movements have yet to gain popularity in Romania.

There are various factors that determine the status of women’s rights movements in Romania and other Eastern European post-communist countries. The majority of these countries have been held under an oppressive rule for decades and have forgotten how to fight for independence (Bodo). After the Eastern Bloc collapsed, the countries within the regime were left on their own to realize a new economic and political setting, with help from the world’s leaders in democracy. However, the path toward social and gender equality and political freedom has been more difficult than perceived. Men had the opportunity to further their educations past the level of basic grade school without the burden of raising a family at the same time. Women in the communist society of Romania overworked themselves to survive; there was no time or motivation to start a women’s rights movement. Further, in the communist setting, because women were required to work outside the home and yet take care of all the needs within the home as well, they were unable to attend school. As a result, women had no opportunity to obtain the levels of education that were available to men. Because of the unequal opportunities for men and women in education, females now fill a higher percent of low- and entry-level jobs, while males hold positions of higher rank, such as managers, professionals, and technical workers (Ferber and Raabe). Transitioning into a system in which the education and work between home and in the workforce is more evenly distributed has not been easy, nor has it been without skepticism.

The majority of Romanian people have been and are still skeptical about the idea of equality (LaFont). Communist theory, by implementing quota systems and theoretical practices, boasted gender equality; however, results show that in reality, man and woman were nowhere near equal within the regime (Calin). When introduced to democracy, many Romanians feared that they were on the verge of experiencing the type of faux-equality that they had faced previously (Bodo, 27). This fear led to an entire culture becoming inhibited in their acceptance of the democratic system. Not only was the Romanian populace concerned about repeating past traumas, they were ultimately apprehensive of democratic theory itself, the concept being completely foreign to the country. Democracies typically progress faster than communist societies, and promote many ideas that are foreign to Romanians, such as “modernization”, “the nuclear family”, and feminism (Gheaus, 194). Contextually, modernization is the promotion of “economic liberalism sustained by a minimal state” (Gheaus, 194). Modernizing Romania would include the creation of a middle class which would pave a path for a political advancement of increasingly liberating ideals, hopefully resulting in the establishment of an economically successful class of women. However, the burden in attempting to develop this idea would fall upon the lowest class of post-communist Romania, making the decision to execute such a grandiose scheme difficult (Gheaus). Implementing democracy would create a competitive consumer market, lowering employment and diminishing social services, all of which the lower class would be the most heavily affected. Another hesitation Romanians face is the encouragement of the nuclear family, which is virtually a foreign concept in Romania. Typically,

generations of Romanian families will live together under the same roof, which helps with the distribution of responsibilities. By urging the “nuclear” style of family living, Western influences fail to realize the importance of the traditional family standards and uprooting the lives of people who have only known that way of living.

Perhaps the most significant form of development that westerners are trying to introduce to Romania is feminism. In the past, feminism has been rejected due to the communist party’s agenda, which aimed to sell the idea of gender equality without actually having to enforce it. “There was a national organization of women, but it was not for women. It was a branch of the Party that took care of the needs of women. That means that women could never set their own agenda. The party set the agenda for women” (Ghodsee). Thus, feminism was looked at as a movement not to simply help empower women, but to bring men down as they did so (Oprica). The biggest hesitance toward accepting feminism in Romania is the fact that men would lose their superiority and have to start considering women’s issues as well as their own at the local and state levels. This resistance by men exemplifies why feminism needs to take root in Romania. Women can only be emancipated from the cycle of discrimination if they are educated enough and willing to fight for it.

Democracy has not been able to create the level of liberation for women that the western implementers of the system had hoped it would. However, there are considerations as to why that may be: lack of education and lack of time given. As democracy has opened up better opportunities for women to become educated, the time must be given to for the system to fall into place. Although results have not shown much progress in Romanian society, it has only been approximately twenty years since the transition started taking place. It is difficult to understand the effects of democracy yet, and so, as the governmental system becomes more widely accepted, we may be able to decipher whether the institution of democracy has improved the gender inequality situation in Romania.

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