

How Women Made the News. A Case-Study of *Femeia* Magazine in Communist Romania under Ceaușescu

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Abstract. *In the Romanian communist regime, women's status and emancipation were recurrent themes. Women's representation in official propaganda was mainly conceived as the cultural component of the Party's policies of social engineering, promoting the communist ideal of womanhood, which was both heavily burdened with multiple tasks that were necessary to the state, and shifted the aspects it emphasized and nuanced as the needs of the state changed. These needs had to be balanced with the P.C.R.'s ideological commitment to gender equality, according to which women have to be presented as equal citizens. However, between women's issues that needed addressing, sexist attitudes and prejudices within the Party leadership and rank-and-file, and the demands the State made on women, their citizenship ended up being heavily gendered. As we see both in the pages of Femeia magazine and in official speeches, despite its egalitarian pretense, the Party was dominated by a set of assumptions about womanhood, about women's roles at home and in the workforce, and about motherhood as essential to being a woman. In this paper, I analyze Femeia from 1965 until 1978 in order to see if the main party policies did indeed make it through the magazine pages and how the communist propaganda proposed new and "improved" models of women as the Party's agenda changed.*

Keywords: gender roles, mass-media, propaganda, communism.

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Introduction

This paper will present an overview of the images of women and womanhood in communist media in Romania. *Femeia* magazine was chosen for the study, as it was the only magazine printed under communism that was specifically targeted to women. The magazines first numbers are dated in 1876, and it is still printed nowadays. The period we are studying dates between 1965 until 1988, during which period the magazine discourse was strongly influenced by the communist party censure and directions.

The successive incarnations of the Romanian Communist Party had been pushing for improvements in the situation of women, for both ideological and practical reasons. In 1946 Parliamentary elections, the universal, direct, equal and secret vote for any citizen above 21 was established. The same year marked the beginning of the Party's attempt to involve women in mass-politics, with the formation of the Democratic Federation of Romanian Women.

Post-war Romania was a mostly agrarian country, with a poor and largely illiterate population. The Party plan for industrialization required the mass-participation of women in order to meet labor force needs. Thus, women's participation in wage labor increased dramatically. These changes in the labor force required mass-education campaigns and urbanization, and so women (especially rural women) had access to formal education on a mass scale and were moved to cities.

Party gender quotas guaranteed the involvement of women in the state structures and legislature, but due to the centralized nature of party power in the Romanian Communist Party, and the totalitarian character of the state, women in official positions had very little real power. Another important issue was that labor was heavily gendered and so every step of women's advancement was tied to its usefulness to the State. For this reason, feminist struggles deemed non-essential to the State were ignored (e.g. sharing domestic work with men) or treated with outright hostility (e.g. sexual liberation).

Reproductive rights were also an issue in Romania. Abortion on demand was legalized once again in the USSR after Stalin's death in 1955, which pressured most Eastern Bloc countries to also legalize it (Romania followed suit in 1957). Family policies and positions on gender issues in Communist Romania were consistent for the most part with those in the Soviet Union, though Romanian communism never had anything resembling the Marxian feminism and liberalism of the Old Bolsheviks.

This reliance on soviet experiences and soviet policies led to an attempt to reverse the declining birth-rate, inconsistent with the Party's objectives on population, through a ban on abortion in most circumstances, as well as an array of measures involving the monitoring of women and pro-natality propaganda. Together with the criminalization of homosexuality and adultery, and the increasing difficulty to obtain a divorce, these new measures reinforced traditional patriarchal roles for women, rolling back previous advances. These measures had a precedent in similar pro-natalist legislation in the Soviet Union in the mid-30's.

Theoretical framework

We will discuss Romanian propaganda, but for a wider comprehension of the historical context, of the ideological Party line, and of the status of women, we must first understand the parallels between Communist Romania and the USSR, and the political and ideological influence that the latter had on the former. The story of Romanian communism starts with the formation of the URSS, in 1922, and the Communist International, in 1919. As the local communist movement was fairly weak, due to the low number of industrial workers and party cadres, the illegal status of the Party and the arrests and general police harassment that worker's movements faced, as well as other factors, the Romanian Communist Party depended heavily on the support and guidance of the Soviet Union. This subordination was furthered by the fact that the Romanian representatives in the Communist International were made up of exiles in the USSR (the so-called 'Muscovite Wing') (Cioroianu, 2005).

After the end of the Second World War (1939-1945), Romania undergoes a regime change, and communism is established under the dictatorship of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, lasting from 1946 to 1965. After the death of Gheorghiu Dej, the country will be ruled by Nicolae Ceaușescu, from 1967 until the fall of the communist regime in 1989. This period of time will be the object the analysis, as Ceaușescu's politics had a greater impact on women's status.

Women's issues during communism in Romania were heavily influenced by the previous soviet experiences. In the USSR, we can distinguish between two periods with regard to gender issues: the very liberal period that spanned across the 1920s and into the early 30s, and the conservative turn after 1936 Family Code. "The conventions observed by respectable society before the [October] revolution was dismissed as "petty-bourgeois philistinism," and the younger generation in particular made a point of its sexual liberation and disrespect for the institution of marriage" (Fitzpatrick, 2000: 142). As far as gender roles were concerned, being a housewife was seen as shameful and degrading towards women. From Kollontai to Lenin, most of the Old Bolsheviks aggressively opposed the idea that women could lead fulfilling lives as homemakers, insisting that the new order had to help

socialize housework and bring it into the public sphere – unlike their Western feminist counterparts who would insist on equal distribution of housework between partners (Goldman, 1993).

By the mid-30s however, the Soviet state shifted towards a firmly pro-family and pro-natalist stance: abortion was outlawed in 1936, divorce was made more difficult and costly, financial rewards were given to mothers of many children (over 6), with women who had given birth to and raised over 10 children being awarded the title of “Mother Heroine”. This was part of the general more conservative “retreat of the Revolution” that characterized the Stalinist-turn of the Soviet Union, but is also brought on by state concerns that the demographic targets of the regime were not being met and by the general situation that followed the Russian Civil War (high levels of population dislocation, destruction of industries, etc.).

What is also interesting to note in the Soviet debates on abortion is how vastly different they were from Western European and American debates. At no point do the rights of the fetus or the sanctity of life come into question, nor the issue of a woman’s control over her own body. This was part of the peculiar view that women would not, by themselves, choose abortion, except when forced by dire circumstances or their spouses. This presented a contradictory image of the woman: an independent and strong worker, but at the same time with no agency of her own within the household. Also, in the anti-abortion law of 1936 the harshest punishments were directed towards the doctor performing the operation and the husband, who was supposed to have pressured his wife into abortion. (Attwood, 1999).

All the state approaches regarding women issues were disseminated not only through party meetings or television programs, but mostly through printed media – through propaganda. Sproule (1994) defines propaganda as organized mass persuasion with covert intent and poor or nonexistent reasoning: “Propaganda represents the work of large organizations or groups to win over the public for special interests through a massive orchestration of attractive conclusions packaged to conceal both their persuasive purpose and lack of sound supporting reasons”. Pratkanis and Turner (1996) defined the function of propaganda as “attempts to move a recipient to a predetermined point of view by using simple images and slogans that truncate thought by playing on prejudices and emotions”. The purpose of propaganda is to successfully convey an ideological message to an audience, in order to meet a specific objective.

Propaganda is a form of communication that attempts to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist. According to (Jowett, 2005), public opinion and behavioral change can be affected by propaganda. Propaganda, in the most neutral sense, means to disseminate or promote particular ideas. The propagandist tries to control information flow in two major ways: (a) controlling the media as a source of information distribution and (b) presenting distorted

information from what appears to be a credible source. In this general sense, Romanian communist media outlets, such as *Femeia*, serve as excellent examples, as they have the very clear goal of controlling public opinion and behavior in accordance with the very specific objectives of Party planning. The monopoly over media sources, as well as the very selective use of information sources together with the interweaving of Party directives with normal magazine content, also adheres to this theoretical model.

Another form of propaganda, which we think applies to that used by Romanian communists, is “bureaucratic propaganda”, which, according to Altheide and Johnson (1980), consists in scientifically gathered and objective information from influential groups with the purpose of maintaining the legitimacy of the organizations and their activities. The information in the official reports is often contrived, distorted, or falsely interpreted, in order to fit the objective of the propaganda.

Another concept that will be used in the analysis is stereotype – a preconceived and oversimplified idea of something. By introducing a well-crafted stereotype and consistently communicating it in every available medium, propaganda outlets manage to eventually overcome the natural diversity of public opinion. For example, in the *Femeia* magazine, women are always portrayed as wanting children. The common stereotype will replace individual reality even when it grossly deviates from it, and people will not complain, because the stereotype is so convenient, so much easier to use than an objective opinion based on the facts. (Moore, 2010)

The main analysis framework will use the differentiation between the two forms of communication: facilitative and informative. (Jowett, 2005) The first takes the form of financial aid, radio newscasts, press releases, books, pamphlets, periodicals, cultural programs, exhibits, films, seminars, language classes, reference services, and personal social contacts; these are designed to create a positive attitude toward a potential propagandist. This is where the magazine propaganda fits, by creating both a network of propagandists (the magazine staff and writers) that have the established roles of creating the material, as well as providing the channel of dissemination (the magazine itself), which frames the propaganda in such a way that it legitimizes the propagandists.

Informative communication, on the other hand, occurs when ideas are shared, something is explained, or instruction takes place. The flow of information is controlled and public opinion is managed by shaping perceptions through strategies of informative communication. In looking at the very broad range of practices, performances and texts that have been described, discussed and (frequently) condemned as propaganda, it is useful to list the key strategies: lying, the withholding of information, strategic selectivity, exaggeration; explicit or covert affective appeals to desire or to fear, exerting persuasive force outside the terms of any logical argument (Szanto, 1978). The articles in *Femeia* magazine that fall into this

category are overtly ideological articles, pertaining to Party matters, politics and socialist ideology, as well as more subtle pieces of propaganda, interwoven into discussions about work, lifestyle, family, fashion, inspirational stories, etc.

Case study

Femeia magazine was one of the main propaganda magazines in the communist Romania, with a long history of printing. The magazine even survived communism, and it can still be found for sale.

Sample: The present study covers a preliminary overview on a small data sample, namely the years 1970, 1971, 1973, 1975, 1978. This sample was chosen for the preliminary analysis in order to provide us a first glance of the 1970s, chosen randomly. The full study will cover 20 years of the monthly *Femeia* magazine, from 1970-1989.

Procedure:

- All the magazine numbers from 1970 until 1989 were scanned. Given the poor quality of the papers, quotes were extracted from each magazine using a codebook.
- The main themes for the present paper were: *building socialism, equality, gender roles, prejudice against women.*

Definition of categories:

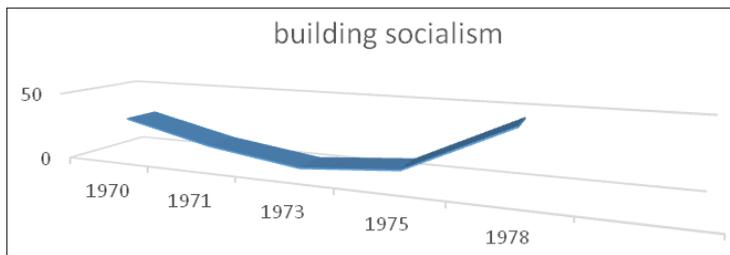
- Building socialism: fragments on the connection between women and the construction of the ideal communist society;
- Equality: fragments that imply that gender equality had been reached;
- Gender roles: fragments that define femininity and masculinity;
- Prejudice against women: overt sexism;

Using the following model of propaganda regarding to the control information flow we have both events covered: (a) controlling the media as a source of information distribution and (b) presenting distorted information from what appears to be a credible source. All the communist media was censored by the communist party and owned by the State, and the information was distorted (ex. the annual economic reports). Therefore the analyzed magazine issues can be correctly identified as propaganda.

Women were portrayed as mothers, workers and wives. Once established, the stereotype can be supported by symbols which stand for it, evocative graphical symbols which can transcend language and sum up whole sets of values or abstract ideas, easily recognizable visual patterns, such as those used in photos, artwork, caricatures, or narrative patterns, used to frame stories, anecdotes, descriptions, etc. In the case of *Femeia*, these symbolic shortcuts were used in order to implant the stereotypical image of women onto the audience.

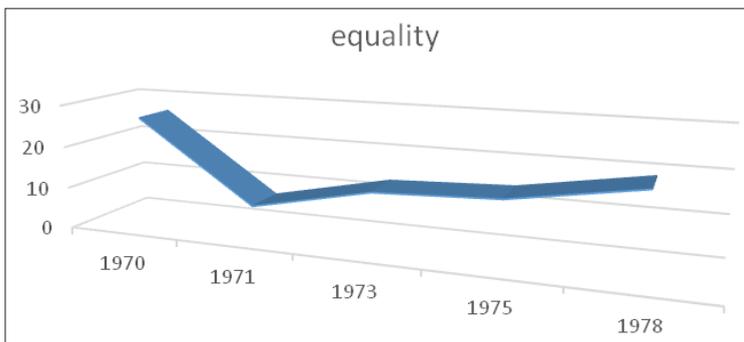
Discussion

As we will see in the following graphs, there is a shift in discourse after 1973, on all four measured categories. Historically this coincides with Ceausescu's speech at the Plenary of the Central Committee of P.C.R. (June 18-19, 1973), a speech that addressed all the themes of women's issues. The speech's goal was to encourage women's participation in politics and other fields, and it constitutes the template for the official attitude towards women's issues. Its tone may seem somewhat paradoxical, but its contradictions were due partially to the manner in which the Communist Party addressed gender problems. It had to pretend that gender equality had been achieved and at the same time devote policies specifically towards women in order to make reality "catch up" to the ideological discourse.



Graph 1: "Building socialism", transformations across the years

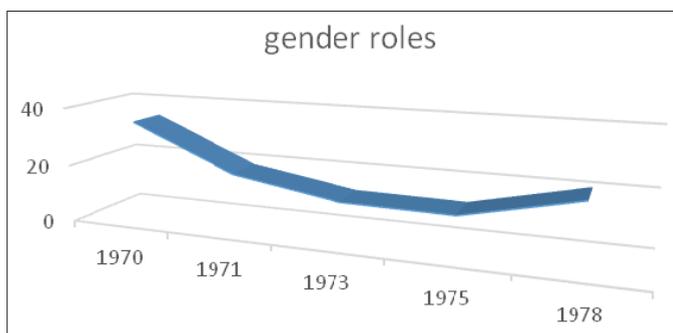
In Ceausescu's speech, building socialism is tied to the then recent pronatalist policies and reproduction. Ceausescu emphasizes that there is also the problem of the "important role that the woman has in society, in giving life, raising and educating children, young generation, in preserving the very youth of our socialist nation" (Ceausescu, 1973: 651). Till the end of his speech, he comes back to this issue which he calls "a fundamental problem", of "national relevance": "developing the nation, maintaining a normal balance between generations, warranting the youth



Graph 2: "Equality" transformation across the years

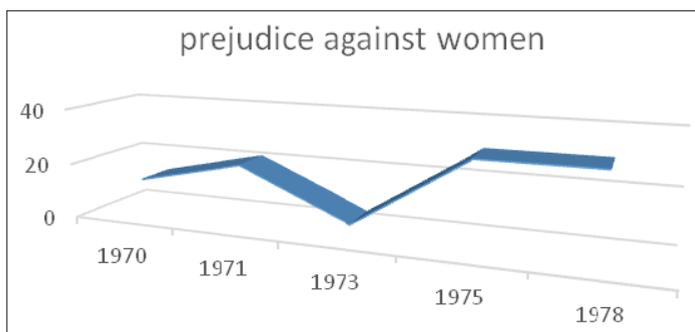
of the entire society” (Ceausescu, 1973: 652). Due to this postulation of motherhood as a socialist duty, the references to building socialism increase as the pronatalist measures become harsher.

“If we speak about creating conditions for a full equality between the sexes, that means that we have to treat all people not as women and men, but in their quality as party members, of citizens, that we judge exclusively by the work they do”. And then “the problem of jobs should be regarded as a general problem, not a special one of women”. (Ceaușescu, 1973: 648). This potential official interpretation of equality as a sort of “workers’ equality” could help explain the increase in its frequency after 1971, which would coincide with the second wave of industrialization which ended in the late ‘70s.



Graph 3: “Gender roles” by years

The discourse on gender roles has smaller fluctuations after 1971. We can hypothesize that this happens because gender roles aren’t seriously criticized anywhere in the communist discourse. For instance, Ceausescu’s speech addressed gender roles like this: “We have to admit that there are certain fields of activity in which men are preferable. Instead of keeping men in easy jobs, we should direct



Graph 4: “Prejudice against women” by year

them to harder work, where more physical effort is required. Alternatively, we have to establish conditions for women to occupy those jobs where, physically speaking, the requirements are not so high" (Ceausescu, 1973: 649).

Even though we would expect to have similar fluctuation as the previous graph (Gender roles by years), prejudice seems at the first glance to have been shaped differently. This outcome is due to the very low number of mentions of prejudice in the magazine. This can be attributed to an ideological avoidance of admitting the existence of overt sexism in the communist society.

Conclusion

The analysis of *Femeia* magazine reveals its clear purpose as a means of propaganda specifically targeting women. Its full control by the Communist Party, its adherence to the official doctrine, to the Party platform changes, to the objectives of Party planning, as well as to Ceausescu's personal directives, aptly qualify it as such. The preliminary analysis also points to there being very little tension in the editorial decisions of the magazine. It follows the Party line at every point, without any deviations that could have arisen by writers adhering to soviet precedents or the Party's own official ideology, when these contradicted the directives of the five-year plan. Furthermore, little effort is made towards the emancipation of women in ways that are viewed as inessential for State planning. This is all the truer for advancements in gender equality that are contrary to the Party and Ceausescu's views.

As I have shown in the previous sections, the magazine adheres to all the characteristics of propaganda models, and uses all the typical strategies of propaganda. It provides with the channel and content necessary to frame communist propaganda into a form that could elicit positive attitudes from the readers (facilitative), and welds this propagandistic message together with other editorial content that supports it (informative). Thus, it takes up stereotypical views of womanhood, and weaves them together with ideological ideal images and the necessities of State planning, in order to create in the minds of the audience an image of women, of their problems and of their place in society, that is in full accordance with Party requirements. This new image could then be redeployed as a new stereotypical form that can be encapsulated in the narrative and visual patterns of the magazine articles. In this way, the Ceausescu-era worker-mother-wife model of womanhood could be constructed in the media and disseminated among the public.

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