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SHAPING THE AGENDA: FEMINIST STRATEGIES OF CIVIC AND POLITICAL ACTION IN POST-COMMUNISM

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ABSTRACT

More than 20 years after the 1989 Revolution, the Romanian society continues to be patriarchal – and implicitly less democratic for women. This fact becomes more obvious if one looks towards the political sphere and at the way in which women’s interests are represented at the political decision level. In this social environment, civil society and especially the feminist movement have a particularly important role in terms of promoting women’s specific civic and political agendas.

Our paper is an exploratory investigation of the strategies of political and civic actions used by the feminist movement in Romania during the post-communist period. We will try to identify and categorize these strategies. Our aim is to explore a way of formulating a sort of typology (a methodological exploration) of the civil and political models of action used by five Romanian feminist NGOs, while trying to assess their activity. This study is one of a prospective nature, in other words, it is not an exhaustive attempt to analyze the entire specter of feminist organizations, but rather an attempt to test the methodological apparatus and to adapt the theoretical framework to the realities found in the field.

KEYWORDS

- Romanian feminist movement
- civic and political action
- civil society
- gender equality
- NGO’s

Introduction

The development of civil society and of the movements representing various interests existing in society remains a major analysis theme in political science and one of the topics that has generated a vast literature on democratization, democratic consolidation, civic and political culture and participation. The interest in such a topic has been even higher in countries with a totalitarian background, in the sense of identifying the elements that could grant substance to the institutional framework which, although indispensable, has been criticized countless times from

the perspective of generating democracies of a more formal character.¹ A special role has been granted to civil society in the above mentioned context and the latter has been regarded more often than not as being the essential binding agent between the citizen and political society, while acting as a vehicle that transmits and represents the interests of citizens, while promoting democratic consolidation. We are referring here to the civil society's capacity to aggregate and represent citizen's interests, often in a more efficient way than the official institutions of the state. Therefore, by being independent from the political society, the civil one is able to specialize and to offer better services than those provided by the state. Secondly, the civil society plays a critical role in relation to the political realm, by being a genuine vehicle for promoting a participatory political culture, particularly in terms of making use of actions involving citizen action and sanctioning governmental decisions.

Besides, it is the very nature of civil society that is characterized by diversity and, from this point of view, various groups of interests have been able to promote their claims on the formal political agenda by using a variety of instruments depending on: the nature of the issue, context, and mobilized resources to the strategies used to analyze their efficiency.

Starting from here, the Romanian feminist movement and the local civil society active in promoting gender equality represent the focus of the hereby article in which we aim to explore a way of formulating a sort of typology (a methodological exploration) of the civil and political models of action used by five Romanian feminist NGOs, while trying to assess their activity.

The paper is structured in several parts. First, we will present a short history of Romanian feminism and of the feminist movement in order to offer a brief image of the context in which we will test our methodology, while the second part of the paper will include presenting the methodology used for data collection and the challenges it raised, as well as of the theoretical framework of the analysis. We will then present the results of the research and the analysis of the identified patterns of action, followed by the conclusions of the study.

Romanian feminism is not a recent apparition on the Romanian political scene, having in fact a long tradition, one characterized by a unique set of characteristics. Feminist activism and research is as disputed and prejudiced as it is unknown to most, although this field is fundamental for democratic society, at least due to the fact that it assumes the role of representing the interests of more than half of the world's population. We won't go into further details here, as this isn't the main purpose of our research, but we believe this step to be highly important, especially from the perspective of the upcoming analysis of the patterns of action, which

1 See the 550 adjectives used to characterize and differentiate between democracies that were identified by Collier and Levitsky in D Collier, & S Levitsky, 'Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research', Working Paper Kellogg Institute, 1996, p. 3. Accessed in 25 April, 2013 at <http://kellogg.nd.edu/publications/workingpapers/WPS/230.pdf>

wouldn't be substantiated in the absence of a specific context, even if it is only of a historic nature.

There can be identified several phases of Romanian feminism:

- The first phase - it is overlapping on and in accordance with the first feminist wave² – well known mainly thanks to Stefania Mihailescu's two volumes of *On the History of Romanian Feminism*³;
- The communist period (the second phase) - the possible emancipating role of this phase is a topic that has been covered extensively in an issue of *Aspasia* magazine⁴, but we believe this phase to be best characterized by the phrase: “communist feminism is a contradiction in terms”. In this context, we should also mention the development of the state-empowered patriarchy in the public sphere and its superposition with traditional patriarchy, which continued to function in the private sphere;
- The post-communist period (the third phase) - it is characterized by three separate, and strategic we could add, courses of development:
 - o academic feminism – characterized by the emergence of feminist studies, by curricular development in line with the dimensions of feminist and gender studies, specialized publications – translations, volumes, articles, magazines, etc;
 - o activist, pragmatic feminism – developed by NGOs, in collaboration with the “system”, be it local or international. These organizations implemented non-discrimination and equal opportunities projects, some of which will be analyzed in the following pages;
 - o “Street” (activist) feminism – characterized by activism and protest activities. This dimension has become increasingly present in Romania in these past years, and it emerged especially from the left wing organizations, sometimes even anarchist, characterized by a critical attitude manifested through protests, marches, flash-mobs, etc.(for example informal groups like Biblioteca Alternativa, Claca, H.arta etc.)

We believe this evolution to be somewhat innate, natural, taking into account the structural constraints. The universalization of human and citizen rights that followed the three revolutions (the British, the American and the French) left their mark on the emancipation struggle of women. Although we are now accustomed to working with countless nuances and “subtleties”, at that time, the battle for

2 M Miroiu, ‘State Men, Market Women. The Effects of Left Conservatism on Gender Politics in Romanian Transition’, *Feminismo/s*, no. 3, 2004, pp. 207-234.

3 Ș Mihailescu, *Din istoria feminismului românesc* [From the History of Romanian Feminism], Iași: Polirom, 2002.

4 ‘Is ‘Communist Feminism’ a Contradictio in Terminis?’, *Aspasia*, vol.1, 2007.

women's rights was as acute and controversial as the battle for sexual minority rights is today, at least within Romanian society. The communist totalitarian regime ended the natural evolution of the Romanian feminist movement, a gap filled with elements that continue to weigh heavily today on the local anti-feminist discourse, of which we would like to mention the most relevant one, the myth of competence built around the Elena Ceausescu syndrome⁵.

The transition period of Romanian society meant the end of massively limited contact with the Western world that had taken place during communism, on one hand, and an effervescence of civil and political engagement, on the other. While in terms of political engagement we are talking about the establishment of a large number of political parties, when it comes to civil participation we cannot ignore the international funding targeting the local civil society (e.g. Open Society Foundation, National Endowment for Democracy, Charles Mott Foundation, Marshall Fund, etc.). Such funding represented the main vector of democratization and of democratic consolidation during the 90s and in the beginning of the 2000 decade. We were in fact in the position in which we were heading toward the unknown and what we felt with certainty was that anything to come would be better than what we had known⁶. In this general context opened to novelty and especially to the West, we saw an inflation of expressions like "civil society", "non-governmental organizations", "foundations", "transition", "democracy", "freedom", as well as the timid rebirth of the feminist movement or, should we say of the feminist movements, a process continuing to this day. From our point of view, Mihaela Miroiu's contact with the Western academic feminism marks a starting point for the Romanian movement after 1989 at least in academic and civic terms, followed by the establishing of the ANA Society of Feminist Analysis in 1993. The movement gradually grew, while remaining circumscribed to academic feminism, which was probably seen by the "founding mothers" as the best transmission vehicle in a society in which any form of affirmative policy was associated with communism and rejected from the start. Therefore, emancipative ideas seemed to sell best if they were wrapped in scientific arguments coming from credible experts, from the ranks of the academic-intellectual elite, and this is the development path followed by academic feminism. It is our opinion that this type of feminism has set the background for the later activist form of feminism, although it has been accused extensively of being elitist and broken off from social reality. Academic feminism brought about a discursive framework which offered a legitimizing tool for the women's social movement, an instrument needed in a country recently escaped from a regime which officially proposed an ideology of "emancipation", but practically was enforcing the state patriarchy. In doing so, the most efficient instruments at the time appeared to be

5 ME Fischer, 'Women in Romanian Politics: Elena Ceaușescu, Pronatalism and the Promotion of Women', in Wolchik, SL, & AG Meyer (eds.), *Women, State and Party in Eastern Europe*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1995, pp. 121 – 137; CL Olteanu, ES Gheoanea, & V Gheoanea, *Femeile în România Comunistă* [Women in Communist Romania], București: Politeia-SNSPA, 2003, pp. 42 – 55; DE Neaga, *Gen și cetățenie în România* [Gender and Citizenship in Romania], Iași: Polirom, 2013, p. 196.

6 G O'Donnell, 'Iluzii despre consolidarea democrației' [Illusions about Consolidation], in Diamond, L et al, *Cum se consolidează democrația* [Consolidating the Third Wave Democracies], Iasi: Polirom, 2004, p. 85.

the scientific ones, namely books, articles, researches, reports etc. Thus, the scholars involved in the post-communist feminist movement tried to present gender inequalities as “facts”, “figures” and “arguments” that could hardly be contested, and not just as an ethical and ideological approach. Probably starting from here we can also better understand the recent domination of a liberal feminist ideology in Romania. So, we also believe that academic feminism has substantiated civic-political feminism through the vast body of studies and analyses which it has produced and which has created the context for more critical and unconventional ways of contesting gender power relations. Furthermore, the formal and informal institutionalization of democratic norms and regulations allowed feminist NGOs to use that which we could call positive opportunities that refer to open democratic political contexts encouraging participation, even in its less conventional form, like the protest⁷.

Theoretical Framework

The paper that we propose is circumscribed to the domain of social movement and civil society studies, to that which we call democratic consolidation, to be more exact. The role of civil society and of the various protesting and claiming movements is undisputable for democracy in general. In this vein, Linz and Stepan talk about the five interconnected favoring conditions that consolidate democracy: (1) conditions for the development of a free and vigorous civil society, (2) the existence of a relatively autonomous political society – the arena in which political actors compete for the legitimate right of exerting control over public power and over the state apparatus, (3) the existence of legal legitimacy – the rule of law, the existence of a bureaucracy capable of facilitating the exertion of the state’s functions (the monopoly over legitimate physical violence, the production of public goods and services, the promotion of socially acceptable values); (5) the existence of the economic society – norms, institutions and regulations that are accepted and shaped in a socio-political manner and which mediate between state and market⁸. Linz and Stepan also argue that civil society is the arena in which relatively autonomous individuals, movements or groups with an independent organization create associations and solidarities and promote their interests⁹. Another definition based on an individualist-rationalist perspective would define civil society as being the sphere in which rational individuals enter freely and voluntarily in mutual associations in order to accomplish collective interests, while this creates association networks¹⁰.

In what concerns our research paper, we have chosen the definition proposed by Schmitter – i.e. civil society represents a set or a system of intermediary groups

7 RJ Dalton, & S Recchia, ‘The Environmental Movement and the Modes of Political Action’, *Comparative Political Studies*, September, 2003, pp. 760-765.

8 J Linz, & A Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America and Post-Communist Europe*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993, pp. 55-57.

9 O’Donnell, op. cit., p. 53.

10 A Hunter, & C Milofsky, *Pragmatic Liberalism. Constructing a Civil Society*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 13

with an independent organization that: (1) are relatively independent from public authorities and from private production and reproduction units, meaning from companies and families; (2) are capable of making decisions and of acting collectively with the purpose of defending, respectively, promoting their own interests and passions; (3) aren't trying to replace state actors or private (re)production units, nor do they accept responsibilities for the governing of the entire society; (4) agree to act according to preset civil regulations which are based on mutual respect¹¹.

The existence of a powerful civil society is directly connected with the quality of a democracy, as it generates alternate mechanisms (other than the state's) for pursuing interests, on one hand, and it facilitates the interaction between citizens and government, on the other, while making the latter more responsible. Civil society thus becomes the sphere in which shapes acquire determination by modeling of parliamentary debates, by imposing the voice of the citizens (public opinion), by educating citizens in the spirit of democracy and participation (contributes to the development of a participatory political culture), by supervising power, political society and government (it is also known as the watch dog of democracy). In the civil sphere represents the space in which citizenship receives substance, in which rights and freedoms are practiced by the autonomous organization of individuals, with the goal and purpose of pursuing common interests.

Although the role of civil society in the consolidation of democracy cannot be challenged, the concept is one that has generated countless debates over the years. One of the latter is of special interest to us: the relation between political society and civil society. Are the above mentioned distinct, competitive and opposing spheres or on the contrary? In this context, besides the distinction between civil and political society, Linz and Stepan point to the complementarity of these two realms. Therefore, the independence of civil society from political society shouldn't be interpreted in the direction of a total lack of interaction; on the contrary, it should be regarded as potentiating the manifestation of a critical attitude toward the government that would improve the representation of the interest of the citizens.

We are therefore talking about the way in which various organized groups participate to the formulation of the public agenda and/or of the formal one and, in this context, their action can have various rates of success. Are gender issues visible on the public agenda? Have they reached the attention of the government? Have public policies aimed at correcting such inequities? Has the feminist civil society managed to substantially fulfill its functions? These are questions that may obviously receive a wide range of answers, such as: there are no significant gender inequities in Romania, therefore such questions are pointless, these problems have already been solved or the feminist civil society has disgracefully failed at this task. As one could easily anticipate, an argumentative answer would choose the middle way: we have a feminist

11 PC Schmitter, 'Societatea civila intre Orient si Occident' [Civil Society East and West], in L., Diamond, Y, Chu, MF, Planter, & H, Tien, *Cum se consolideaza democratiile* [Consolidating the Third Wave Democracies], Iasi: Polirom, 2004, p. 258

civil society in Romania, one that seems to be increasingly active and visible¹², yet such issues are far from being solved and, absolutely, more could be done in this respect.

Nevertheless, we believe that certain aspects should be mentioned about the way in which this relation between the Romanian civil and political societies has been shaped over the years. Besides the formal background (legal-formal equity), which is frequently mentioned by those arguing that there aren't any gender inequities, we should also mention several official attempts to substantiate the citizenship of women: the enforcement of Law 202/2002 on the equal opportunities of men and women, the enforcement of Law 217/2003 which acknowledges the differences between men and women by aiming to counter domestic violence. We should also mention the establishment (and more recently disbandment by reorganization) of the National Agency for Equal Opportunities between Men and Women, the National Agency for Family Protection. The reorganization of these institutions, through centralization, merger and transfer under the authority of the Ministry of Labor was included in the 2010 anti-crisis plan of the Boc Government and it points to the attitude of the local political decision makers towards the multiple disadvantages faced by Romanian women, while supporting the theory of room-service political feminism (feminism served via international pressures and institutions, see Romania's joining to the European Union) formulated by Mihaela Miroiu.¹³

Meanwhile, women continue to be paid worse than men – 9% less in average, suffer because of the lacking of or poorly implemented laws on domestic violence, face the constraints of the double burden and confront with occupational discrimination, both vertically (women reach management positions harder) and horizontally (women are directed toward domains that are remunerated worse).¹⁴ From this perspective, the greatest inequity is probably related to the women's representation in Parliament, which reaches around 11% after the most recent elections from 2012, a 1% growth compared to the previous administration.

Besides the generic statements about room-service feminism that point to the fracture between the Romanian civil and political societies (which could be deemed as being a normal part of post-communist transition), a question remains open about the gender issues that have never constituted a priority on the public agenda:¹⁵ how did feminist NGOs act in this transition period, and what were their strategies of promoting such issues on the public and formal agendas?

While talking about the various strategies through which various groups can introduce their issues of interest on the two agendas (the exterior initiative model that works in the case of civil society) Cobb, Ross and Ross mention that they can be classified into four basic categories: (1) violence and threatening with violence;

12 We are considering the recurrent attempts to introduce issues on the public agenda conducted by alliances of feminist NGOs, like the actions from March 8 and November 25. Also see the second part of the paper.

13 Miroiu, op. cit., pp. 256-260.

14 Neaga, op. cit., pp. 96-97.

15 Miroiu, op. cit., p. 82.

(2) institutional sanctions – vote, strike; (3) collaboration with political parties and with other groups of interests; (4) direct access through influential persons.¹⁶

Dalton and Recchia propose a different classification for environmentalist groups and we believe it to be suitable for feminist organizations as well. The two distinguish between fundamentalist and pragmatic strategies. Fundamentalist strategies refer to the civic attitudes addressing the political and social systems, to the challenging of the capitalist system and to the promotion of alternative values that would deconstruct gender inequities. We are also talking about the decentralization of decision making; about a rather nonhierarchical organizational culture resulted from the challenging of power and oppressive structures, elements that lead to the implementation of such combative strategies. As for pragmatic strategies, the latter are development with the goal of ensuring organizational continuity and a form of stability that implies the collaboration with the political system. Therefore, the adopted strategies also have to be pragmatic, by virtue of the multiple objectives that an organization has to fulfill simultaneously (mobilization, motivation, organization, access to resources, access to public discourse and to decision making).¹⁷

As for the ways of constructing civil society and for the latter's courses of action in Eastern Europe, we could mention several theories, among which the one according to which autonomous associational ways of collaboration and cohabitation were developed informally during the period of the authoritarian regimes and that such collaborations were aimed at surviving the daily brutal interventions of the state. These formulas led to the radical rejection of the collaboration with the political system during the transition period and to the trap of the democracy of civil society.¹⁸

While summarizing the scholarly literature on social movements, political ways of action and on public policies, Norma Leslie presents the following analysis framework:¹⁹

Sentence 1: the constant pressure of social actors will lead to political and legal changes despite the initial resistance of the state's institutions, due to the institutional diversity that can develop within democracy and to the opportunities and competition resulted in this manner.

Sentence 2: the social movements that operate in powerful and stable states have increased chances of imposing the desired change if they adopt innovative and tactical strategies, compared to disruptive tactics.

16 RW Cobb, JK Ross, & MH Ross, 'Agenda Building as a Comparative Political Process', *American Political Science Review*, vol. 70, no. 1, p. 131.

17 Dalton, & Recchia, op.cit., p. 746; AN Leslie, *Democracy in Africa: The impact of women's struggle for equal rights in Botswana*, New York & London: Routledge, 2006, p. 9.

18 The focus on the legitimization and justification of the need for civil society overshadow the theories analyzing the effective possibilities of the democratization of the state. G. Baker, *Civil Society and Democratic Theory*, New York & London: Routledge, 2002, p. 90.

19 Leslie, op. cit., p. 49-50.

Sentence 3: there are higher chances for parliaments to take into account the gender agenda during times of increased pressure, both local and international (also see room-service feminism here). The capacity of organizations to impose change depends on their ability to create local and foreign alliances, thus increasing the impact of their actions.

Sentence 4: the more capable they are to conduct better information of the public, the greater the success rate of the organizations and this takes place by virtue of the influence that political leaders have upon public opinion.

Starting from the above mentioned sentences, we will attempt to analyze the way in which five Romanian feminist organizations have chosen to act, while pursuing their specific agenda in the wider context of transition, of the relation with political society and with the state. In the subsidiary, we will also try to observe the impact of the courses of action adopted by civic actors on the Romanian process of democratic consolidation.

Methodology

We should begin by saying that our study is one of a prospective nature, in other words, it isn't an exhaustive attempt to analyze the entire specter of feminist organizations, but rather an attempt to test the methodological apparatus and to adapt the theoretical framework to the realities found in the field. This is the perspective from which we propose the understanding of the way in which we have selected the organizations that are to be analyzed in the paper. Taking into account the variety of manifestations found in the feminist movement and the fact that more often than not they are contradictory, but also considering the fluidity of the manifestations and ideological assumptions found in an organizational context, it becomes clear that an obvious classification between feminist and non-feminist NGOs is virtually impossible. Even more, at certain times and taking into account the stereotypes and prejudices faced by this movement, failure to explicitly assume and manifest feminism can become a strategic decision (also see the feminism – gender studies debate). For example, the fact that FILIA recently made a statutory change²⁰ explicitly specifying the assumption of feminist ideology makes it difficult to set the formal embrace of feminism as valid classification criteria – FILIA has always advocated feminist arguments and actions, despite the fact that these were not stipulated in its status. Therefore, we believe that the assumption of feminism represents a secondary selection criterion. In fact, we believe that a more complex set of criteria is more fitting for our analysis, so we considered local, national and international visibility and activism as well as the assumption of an agenda that includes gender issues explicitly (equality between men and women, violence aimed toward women, discrimination, etc.). In the same time we wanted to introduce in our sample also NGOs from outside Bucharest in order to identify some possible

²⁰ Diana Neaga is a member of Center for Curricular Development and Gender Studies Filia and the information about the statutory changes have been accessed by her from the meetings of the organizations.

patterns of action connected to the regional criterion. Selecting the organizations has been performed based on this formula, while the limitation of their number was given by the prospective character of our research. At the same time, we should mention the issue of access to data, which became a selection criterion itself. We decided to operate with public data, with the information available on the websites of the respective institutions – from mission, value and goals, to the conducted activities and projects (usually included in the annual activity reports). This was possible in the case of some organizations (A.L.E.G., FILIA, Front, AnA and ARTEMIS), but not in the case of others: the website of Ș.E.F. (Equal Opportunities for Women) from Iasi was under construction, while the site of the Center Partnership for Equality from Bucharest wasn't functional, so we removed these organizations from our list, even if their role could be significant. Therefore, the organizations analyzed in this paper are:

- Gender Liberty and Equality Association A.L.E.G (<http://www.aleg-romania.eu/en>) – is a Sibiu based NGO, focused on violence and sexual abuse against women. The choice regarding A.L.E.G. connects with the regional criterion and also with the fact that this NGO has distinguished itself overtime in the field through a series of activities, such as the Gender Equality Festival, being an active member in international NGO networks, etc.

- The Society for Feminist Analysis AnA Bucharest (www.anasaf.ro) – is one of the first established Romanian feminist NGOs after 1989, its activities being recognized publicly over the time, in public events such as The Civil Society Gala. It is specialized in applied research and gender equality training courses, developing community programs focused on gender discrimination or editing *AnaLize Journal* – the first feminist Romanian publication after 1989 (re-branded in 2013 as *AnaLize – Journal of Gender and Feminist Studies*).

- Front Association (www.feminism-romania.ro) – is an organization focused on feminist activism and organizing advocacy campaigns for gender equality. It went into the public eye after organizing a series of street protests regarding violence against women, sexual harassment, media representations of women and also wrote a number of notifications for the NCCD, organizing public debates and a feminist summer camp in August 2012. Front distinguishes itself by the fact that clearly and publicly assumes a left-wing feminist stance, street activist tactics and also by managing the www.feminism-romania.ro website.

- Center for Curricular Development and Gender Studies Filia Bucharest (www.centrulfilia.ro) – is an organization initially oriented towards gender and feminist academic research, but later shifted to a more activist approach. Filia got involved in public debates regarding the formulation of public policies, writing petitions and notes, actively supporting the Gender and Minorities M.A. program at NSPSPA in Bucharest and also by displaying a real ability to recruit in its ranks people with a relevant academic background.

- Women's Association against Violence ARTEMIS (<http://www.artemis.com.ro>) – Based in Cluj, is focused on the rights women and children, diminishing their vulnerability in situations of abuse and empowering them mainly through means of information. It also offers services of psychological and legal counseling for children and women victims of violence, and also by offering shelter to these victims. ARTEMIS is also strongly involved in the European network of programs for women – WAVE (Women against Violence in Europe), at a local level is a founding member of the Coalition for a Healthy Community, while nationally it is a founding member of the Coalition of NGO's against domestic violence and human trafficking.

Nevertheless, we are aware of the limitations of our methodology, and we consider developing it in the future. The range of organizations will be wider, while data collection will not be limited only to the information available online. We also intend to double the quantitative collection of data with a qualitative analysis during the second phase of research, when we plan to conduct semi-structured interviews with the decision makers of the NGOs. In the same time, through this exercise, we had the chance to experience what access to information about civil society activities really means for the ones usually called “beneficiary” or for other stakeholders such as us, while conducting this research. We would like to stress the difficulties we encountered while trying to access the information regarding the NGO's and the activities, programs and services they offer. In our opinion, this flaw originates in the absence of a common public space where these activities could be centralized in an accessible manner (possibly structured by following the type of the intervention domain). Therefore, a potential intention of the beneficiary to access a specific type of service offered by an NGO could turn into a long string of uncertain searches over the internet, finding obsolete information presented in a non-transparent manner, fact that can only result in deepening the gap between the NGO's and the citizens and also doomed to weaken the democratic consolidation in this area. As an example, in February of 2010, a research funded by the Civil Society Development Foundation in Bucharest shows that 11% of the respondents consider that the NGO sector has no utility, and only 21% could identify an NGO which they would consider useful.

Coming back to our research, the data collected has been structured according to two main dimensions: themes approached and ways of action. We designed the coding for the themes as a result of the information declared by the NGOs on their sites under the “projects and activities” sections (therefore we do not claim that we have put together an exhaustive list of possible themes)²¹: V – violence; E – education/rising awareness; DE – Economic discrimination; S – sexual education and reproductive rights; C – research; I – Inter-sectionalism; R – networking (the initiation or participation in NGO networks); PP – political participation; ES – equal opportunities, non-discriminatory action (here we are referring especially to

21 For Front Association we had access to a document they made public regarding the organisation projects and activities.

general approaches, descriptive of the gender problematic, actions that aim to familiarize the public or certain institution with gender issues in general. Usually, in this category we find a combination of different themes – e.g. a summer school on gender equality might imply topics such as the access to the labor market, violence against women, discrimination, reproductive rights and so on); Rec – the reconciliation between private and family life; A – art; Mmed – mass media; T – human trafficking ; J – justice; SC – civil society; DI – institutional development; M – maternity; N – unspecified, unclear; PM – access to the labor market. Regarding the ways of action, we coded the data by following the two categories identified – top-downward, bottom-upward. The first one refers to the actions regarding the interaction between the political society and state institutions, by following a dynamics centered on the pressure/collaboration binomial, shaped within the various contexts in/to which the NGOs find themselves or have to react to (following Dalton and Recchia's (2003) distinction between fundamentalist and pragmatic strategies: the first one relates to the watch dog type of actions, while the second strategy refers to the cases of cooperation). Here we are talking about those activities which target a wide area of results which include influencing the political decision, bringing specific issues on the public agenda, elaboration of public policy models and strategies or fulfilling the watch dog role in regard to the public institutions and actors. To sum-up, the Top-Down actions (TD) we identified are the following: initiating think tanks; the participation in formulating public policies; data collection/monitoring; networking (the initiation or participation in NGO networks, seen as an element which enhances the negotiating potential with state institutions); research (producing studies, reports, various research pieces regarding gender issues, editing journals); open letters; petitions; organizing workshops/debates/conferences; offering inputs for public policies (proposing public policies, participating in public debates initiated by various public institutions and so on).

The Bottom-Up (BU) type of actions refers to grass-roots activism, involving rising awareness, empowerment and mobilizing citizens (or well-defined groups of citizens) for civic and political action. Also, it has a secondary dimension, that of civil society involvement in solving the problems at the community level, e.g. by providing services such as: psychological and legal counseling, building shelters for women victims of domestic violence and so on. Thus, the Bottom-Up actions that we identified are the following: expositions, raising awareness campaigns, mobilization, protests, competitions and prizes, organizing festivals, services (which are offered to the community), community development.

Data Analysis

Topics. We have identified two main trends regarding the topics (themes): on one hand, those organizations focused on specific, punctual objectives (local character, centered on the problem-solving aspects, such as social/community services, raising awareness and education strictly on specific issues) – ALEG, ARTEMIS and, on the other hand, organizations having rather wide, all inclusive objectives, which refer mostly to visibility of the gender and feminist issues, principles, mainstreaming and

raising awareness – Front, Ana and FILIA. These two distinct positions imply both advantages and disadvantages, such as: for the specialized organizations – difficult access to funding, increased capacity to effectively solve problems through their offer of services, risks regarding their capacity to mobilize citizens; for the all-inclusive organizations – the opportunity to access various funding sources, higher degree of mobilization, dilution of message, risks regarding sustainability and so on.

The analysis of the themes approached by the selected NGOs illustrates a clear tendency towards focusing around two main directions: equal opportunities/non-discriminatory practices (which tend to be approached in a more general manner by the Bucharest-based NGOs) and violence against women (a tendency manifested especially in the case of the NGOs countryside). There can be a number of possible explanations formulated for this state of affairs. First of all, the predominance of projects aiming at an integrated approach to the gender issues, combining themes (see the methodology) such as gender equality and non-discriminatory practices, could be connected with the weak level of public awareness regarding these issues of the Romanian society and, therefore, relating to an inherent need for education and public informative campaigns. This thesis is supported also by the fact that, from all types of activities, the most frequent are those involving raising awareness or informative campaigns. Therefore, we can observe a strategic behavior of the NGOs, particularly Filia, Ana, Front and also ALEG, that manage to connect their projects with the realities on the field. Also, there can be noted that this approach is more common for the Filia and Ana cases, while ALEG, even if it is using most frequently raising awareness strategies, it does so only in relation to its specific theme – violence against women. On this topic, we must also discuss a shortcoming involving the link between theme, modes of action and impact. Thus, the abundance of such projects and campaigns over the years could also signify a lack of efficiency (or effectiveness) of such actions. This argument is indirectly supported by the fact that gender studies didn't have a significant impact in the curricula, mainly being concentrated in a few university centers – such as the National School of Political Science and Public Administration - NSPSA, Bucharest University, Babeş-Bolyai, West University in Timișoara, and are much less integrated in the secondary school educational programs.

As mentioned before, the second theme appearing in the NGO's projects is related to the issue of violence, including sexual violence. In this case, it's clearly noticeable the high degree of specialization professed by organizations like ARTEMIS and ALEG, but also the involvement of Filia and Front for the past two years. It is interesting to note that during this period a major legislative change occurred in the 25/2012 law regarding the modifications of the 217/2003 law for preventing and combating domestic violence. This legislative change occurred as a result of a concentrated effort from the civil society actors (including the mobilization of some 21 NGOs in a protest meeting held in front of the Parliament building in Bucharest). Therefore, it might confirm the thesis according to which there are increased chances of success in imposing certain changes when the non-governmental actors manage to create coalitions, to mobilize and to increase the visibility of the issue at hand.

Other elements, which must be underlined, in our opinion, regarding the themes or areas of action of the five NGOs are:

- Women's political participation – this theme is mostly approached by Filia (6 projects), Ana (4 projects), while ALEG and Front have only one project per organization, and ARTEMIS none, fact which illustrates the importance of human resources for an organization. Ana and Filia were initiated and developed as NGOs around NSPSPA by individuals with a predominantly academic profile, with a background in social and political sciences. Therefore, the issue of women's political participation, the political connection and the feminist stance is much clearer or more visible in their case²² (perhaps also as a consequence of expressions such “what is personal is political” or “what is political is personal”).

- Sexuality and reproductive rights – it is a common theme for all five organizations, but there are few initiatives: either a single project (for Front and ARTEMIS) or two (for Filia and Ana). To exemplify, Filia initiated a project involving the following activities: an internship for students, a campaign promoting a better cooperation of law firms (on pro bono grounds) with the women's rights NGOs, initiating a Resources Center on Women's Rights, organizing a Summer School entitled “Gender, Legislation and Civic Empowerment?” The project also developed a public policy input regarding the “harming the fetus” felony, proposed in the project of the New Penal Code. Front organization is supporting the “Sex vs. the Stork” project – the one of the first online sexual education platforms for young people, while Ana has realized two researches on reproductive rights and reproductive health in Romania. Nevertheless, we consider that this theme is still explored insufficiently, deserving to be further developed by the NGO sector.

- Reconciliation between career and family life – appears to also be a low frequency theme, but it must be underlined that all six projects implemented in this area were developed by Filia, fact which might put into perspective a strategic approach in terms of resource management and of positioning within the civil society environment by finding a free niche and exploiting it.

- Art – Filia was the most consistent NGO overtime in this aspect, by having three such projects – e.g. the cultural dialogues project Bohemia Academy or the Momentum exposition. Also, it must be mentioned that this modality of contesting the patriarchy through cultural activities is rather new in Romania, the mixture of art and feminism having to deal with the critique of elitism.

- Intersectionality – even if it's a very hot topic in the academic literature, the intersectionality issue remains marginal by comparison with other themes approached by the NGOs, appearing only in five projects out of the total of 141 analyzed. Worth to note here is the imperialist critique addressed to the feminist NGOs, regarding their lack of sensitivity in reference to overlapping vulnerabilities,

²² Assuming the feminist stance is valid also in the case of Front organization, perhaps the most visible argument being that Front is managing the www.feminism-romania.ro site.

in the Romanian case the main issue being that of the Roma women. We consider that introducing in our future research a NGO focused on Roma women issues will emphasize the tendency towards specialization within the Romanian NGOs.

- Civil society – this is a theme of interest especially for the wider context of our research. From this perspective, we identified only four implemented projects, one per organization (with the notable exception of ARTEMIS). The projects were focused on: initiating a women's NGO database (Ana organization, 2002); Participating at the NGO Fest (Front association); the annual event organized by Filia, focused on the recognition of women's participation to various social and educational actions, and the AWID international prize, won by ALEG. Therefore, the issue of strengthening NGO capabilities is not usually approached in the projects we analyzed, a probable cause for this being the lack of funding.

Amongst the themes which are to be found on the public agenda (especially regarding actions or legislative projects initiated by politicians), such as the restrictive measures limiting the free access to abortion for women (e.g. the mandatory counseling before abortion and so forth) or the appeal made by the president to increase natality as a patriotic duty for Romanian women (compared with the high natality of the Roma women, said Mr. Băsescu), are rarely addressed in the NGO's projects and activities (with the notable exception of sexual education and reproductive control). Nevertheless, we must mention here Filia's actions regarding the "Harming the fetus" felony in 2009 or the support offered by Front NGO to the "Sex vs. the Stork" project of sexual education for the youth.

From the 5 NGO's studied, just one managed to implement overtime projects focused on institutional development (5 such projects) – AnA. The reason for this originates in the particular context in which AnA has activated in its early period – the transitional period after 1989 offered for newly formed NGOs in Eastern European emerging democracies a considerably wider array of funding opportunities for strengthening their organizational capabilities. This particular context was no longer applying in the case of the other NGOs, most of which were initiated after the year 2000 (for details see Table 2 in the Addendum).

Types of Activities. The overall image of the NGO's modalities of action (synthesized in table 2) reveals a predominance of the Top-Down type of actions, compared to the grass-roots ones. This state of affairs reflects in our opinion the primary effect of the civic and political culture in Romania. The subject model of civic culture present in our country shapes NGO's behavior by orienting them towards looking for a privileged relationship with the authorities and political decision makers, by following the abovementioned dimensions of pressure/collaboration. From this point of view, the pressure over the political decision factors and state institutions takes shape especially through the use of petitions and open letters – an array of instruments developed particularly during the past three years. (see table 3). As an action mechanism, the petitions are aiming to appeal to the checks and balances system (in the sense of horizontal responsibility), while the open letters are mainly

trying to bring specific issues on the public agenda – by using the visibility provided by the use of media channels – of gender issues, by exploiting the public opinion-civil society binomial, in a unified strategy of controlling state institutions and decision processes in respect to the women and gender issues. Also, within the pressure dimension the appeal to public debates could be introduced, through which the NGO's were trying to formulate a quick reaction when facing problems considered to be of importance, while the spokespersons were contributing to the propagation and visibility of their positions in the public opinion, through the mass media.

The collaborative strategy on the other hand, is comprised of a number of types of actions, which could be synthesized on two main dimensions: public agenda and policy and strengthening the negotiation capacity. The first of the two is also the most comprehensive, involving a plethora of potential means of action. Researches, reports and think-tank reactions are meant first of all as useful instruments provided by NGOs for the decision makers, in order to ease the process of public policy elaboration and, secondly, as tools for stimulating public debates, which will allow relevant themes to enter the agenda, even by appeal to the inside access model.²³

The grass-roots model of action appears to be of recent origin, especially in its protest-mobilizing dimension. And also, it is geographically overlapping the capital city, therefore suggesting a valid correlation with a more participatory model of civic culture. The Bottom-Up actions are not limited to protests, which are just another type amongst many – community services, raising awareness and educational campaigns, community development activities and so on. As in the case of Top-Down actions, there can be identified a synthetic formula: pressure, communication and educational/ awareness rising initiatives. The last two are, as noted before, the first to appear, fact that again leads to the model of political culture present in post-communist Romania. In the context of a predominantly submissive political culture – implying passiveness, lack of interest and citizen's mistrust towards public institutions and decision makers (doubled by their passive monitoring of the governmental outputs, but almost complete disinterest towards formulating inputs)²⁴ – the NGO's propension towards educational and raising awareness activities appears as natural. The same thing could be noted in regard to the projects of community development, in a context of an acute lack of official involvement in gender issues, particularly those linked to violence against women. The NGOs based outside the capital city are usually specialized on one particular issue – mainly linked to violence against women and the connected issues (such as rape, human trafficking, violence against children and so on) – are predominant, as well as the advantages and disadvantages implied by this type of positioning. Generally, the community-based activities are basically centered on counseling the victims and offering them shelter, as it is the case for ALEG (in Sibiu) and Artemis in Cluj. The social services provided by the NGOs are also reflecting a certain

23 Cobb, Ross, & Ross, op. cit., p. 128.

24 In the 2012 Democracy Index, Romania has the 59 position with 5.9 rank, being characterized as a hybrid regime.

relationship with the (local) authorities they have developed overtime. Although funding for projects of this type is primarily foreign (sometimes involving private donors from abroad), their implementation implies a close collaboration with the local institutions – city or county based – not only regarding bureaucratic approvals or the legal aspects of running such establishments, but especially in terms of managing the cases received. For the cases involving young girls (generally high school students), the NGO's cooperation with the County School Inspectorate, with the social services (therefore with the mayor's office) is paramount. And it must be noted that a very interesting intersection with the Top-Down strategies occurs in this area, concerning the instruction or education of officials in relation to gender issues (police employees, social workers or school psychologists).

At the same time, by using a temporal framework, a different aspect emerges: the local NGOs, as a result of their consistent and constant activities, and of their successive partnerships signed with various state institutions, are starting to expand over their local boundaries and becoming relevant NGO actors at a national level. Perhaps the most visible case of this sort is that of ALEG). This evolution represents in our opinion a “pattern of growth” specific to the grass-roots organizations; an organic growth, consequential to their constant involvement on both communitarian and educational/raising awareness dimensions. At the same time, these types of NGOs tend to “discover” relatively late in their existence the instruments of top-down pressure (the same being true for the bottom-up type of pressure instruments), and then make use of them parsimoniously. The reason behind this behavior is to be found by evaluating the long-standing successful cooperation of these NGOs with public institutions and officials in various projects and campaigns, which resulted in an enhanced efficiency of both non-governmental and public institutions, therefore augmenting trust between these actors. As an effect, the tendency towards contesting the authorities tended to decrease, the possible conflicts being solved through other means – usually through means of dialogue and cooperation.

Conclusions

In our view, perhaps the most important conclusion refers to the public access to information regarding the projects, activities and services offered by the NGOs active in the gender equality field²⁵. Accessing the services provided by the NGOs becomes very difficult for their beneficiaries, as a result the organizations being susceptible to be accused of lack of transparency, especially concerning listing information on their websites activities and projects implemented (funding sources, partners, follow-up, sustainability and so forth). Searching for funds available for organizational development and enhancing visibility could be an answer to this problem, either through the centralization of their services on a specialized online platform, or through the transparentization and optimization of this process on

²⁵ We are not excluding the possibility that this situation is also valid for NGOs active in different areas, but this exceeds the limits of our research interests.

their own websites. This proved to be the most important challenge for us also from a methodological standpoint, the lack of transparency regarding funding (and use of it), program implementation and sustainability of these projects or area of services provided for the beneficiaries seriously affected our access to

information and also raised legitimate questions regarding the real impact and efficiency of those projects. Also, it raised another serious problem in terms of correctly differentiating active NGOs from those existing only by name. The databases available offer information on all registered NGOs, but the sad reality is that many of those are inactive, fact that makes a research on NGO activities and projects more difficult. Expanding our research will therefore imply a thorough investigation of all registered NGOs in the gender equality field and firstly establishing which ones are active and which are not, before proceeding for a second step involving the data collection itself. In our opinion, this would offer a solid base for research and also will enable us to establish the necessary contacts for the qualitative part of the research.

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ANEXES

Table 1. Themes

	V	E	R	DE	I	S	PP	ES	Rec	A	Mmed	T	SC	DI	J	PM	M	N	Total
1. ALEG	20	2	1	3	1	3	1	5					1					1	35
2. Filia	4	1		2	6	18	6	3	2	1	1	1	1						44
3. Front	7	1		1	1	5			1				1						17
4. Ana	2	3		1	2	4	11						1	5	1	1	1	1	34
5. ARTEMIS	8	1		1	1	1	1												11
Total	39	3	7	1	5	6	11	40	6	3	3	1	4	5	1	1	1	1	141

Tabel 2. Types of action I

Types of action	ALEG	Filia	Front	Ana	Artemis	Total
Expositions BU	1	1				2
Competitions (prizes) BU	1					1
Festivals BU	1					1
Services BU	2				6	8
Raising awareness campaigns BU	17	9	8	4	2	40
Community development BU				1		
Protests BU	3	3	1			4
Mobilizing BU	1	1	5			6
Data collecting/monitoring TD	3	2		3		8
Think tank TD	2	2		1		5
Cooperation/networking TD	4			1	1	6
Research TD		6		13	1	20
Open letters TD		9	1	1		11
Workshops/debates/conferences TD	1	4	3	1		9
Trainings TD	3				1	4
Petitions TD		6				6
Policy inputs TD		3		1		4
Institutional development				8		8
TOTAL	35	44	17	34	11	141

Table 3: Types of action II

	Top Down	Bottom up	Unspecified	Comments	Total
ALEG	15	20		With a project involving combined types of action.	35
Filia	28	14	2		44
Front	5	12			17
Ana	19		10	5 - institutional development	34
ARTEMIS	2	8	1		11
Total	71	52	13	5	141