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DEALING WITH CHANGE. REFLECTIONS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF A FEMINIST ORGANIZATION

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ABSTRACT

For many decades now scholars have documented the divisive impact of internal processes and external pressures on feminist organizations. To further substantiate the claims on the difficulty to maintain a supportive and egalitarian character in the face of group enlargement and diversity, I aim at discussing the internal dynamic of such organizations. Based on participant observation and interviews with newer and older members of a recently established Romanian feminist group, I discuss issues of group identity building and transformation in the face of growing diversity of personal identities, backgrounds, and feminist visions on the principles, strategy and tactics of the organization. The section has both a theoretical and a practical stake, in that further inquiry into the internal dynamics of groups pertaining to the diverse field of women's rights organizations is needed in order to understand their engagement with other actors (state institutions, media, and other organizations) and their coalition building options. The practical stake hints at the benefits of a reflexive engagement with academics and activists over the importance of building non-hierarchical inclusive spaces that reflect the feminist values we wish to see implemented in society at large.

KEYWORDS

- Romanian feminism
- Collectivist organization
- spare time activism
- structurelessness

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Although the collectivist form, translating in an un-institutionalized existence, an horizontal structure, a participatory decision-making process, a certain emotional culture that fosters empowerment, solidarity practices and the transformation of anger over one's feeling of powerlessness into protest and activism¹ has been disputed as a sole legitimate model of feminist organization², the challenges posed by it continue to puzzle feminists.

The group whose development I will discuss in the present paper is Front, a young feminist organization established in 2011, but whose roots go back in 2010, when 6 women taking courses of Gender and Minorities in a MA Program in Bucharest got closer to each other and also got involved in a school initiative to build an online feminist platform, Feminism-Romania. Although the singular focus of the paper (the short life the organization had so far precluded any pretention of generalization), a thick description of its internal dynamics has the advantages of any other case study, helping to ground the literature on feminist and collectivist organizations in the Romanian context.

On the character of feminist organizations

What are the specifics of a feminist organization? What are the problems associated with different forms and structures it takes, and what are its chances of success? These are all questions that puzzled scholars of women's movements, and in the following pages, I will try to provide an outline of the literature dealing with the character of such organizations, in order to later discuss one particular group, embedded in the Romanian context.

Feminist groups are often presumed and expected to have a collectivist form, deriving from their opposition towards bureaucratic organization, taken as a "structural manifestation of male domination".³

1 V Taylor, 'Social Movement Continuity: The Women's Movement in Abeyance', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 54, 1995, pp. 761-775.

2 PY Martin, 'Rethinking feminist organizations', *Gender and Society*, vol. 4, 1990, pp. 182-206; H, Eisenstein, 'The Australian femocratic experiment: A feminist case for bureaucracy'. In MM Ferree, & PY Martin (eds.), *Feminist organizations: Harvest of the new women's movement*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, pp. 69-83; S. Staggenborg, 'The consequences of professionalization and formalization in the prochoice movement', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 53, 1988, pp. 585-606; S Staggenborg, 'Stability and Innovation in the Women's Movement: A Comparison of Two Movement Organizations', *Social Problems*, vol. 36, no. 1, 1989, pp. 75-92; S. Staggenborg, 'Can Feminist Organizations Be Effective?' In MM Ferree, & PY Martin (eds.), *Feminist Organizations: Harvest of the new women's movement*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995, pp. 339-355; V Taylor, 'Social Movement Continuity: The Women's Movement in Abeyance', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 54, 1989, pp. 761-775; KL Ashcraft, 'Organized Dissonance: feminist Bureaucracy as Hybrid Form', *The Academy of Management Journal*, vol. 44, no. 6, 2001, pp. 1301-1322.

3 KE Ferguson, *The Feminist Case Against Bureaucracy*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984; DK Mumby, & LL Putnam, 'The politics of emotion: A feminist reading of bounded rationality', *Academy of Management Review*, vol. 17, 1992, pp. 465-486; KL Ashcraft, op. cit.

In her inquiry on the collectivist groups that began to thrive in 1960 and 1970 in the United States, Joyce Rothschild-Whitt⁴ summarizes the characteristics of these as being in opposition with the features of bureaucratic forms of organization, based on the distinction between value and instrumental rationality theorized by Max Weber. Based on prior theorization of bureaucracy, Rothschild-Whitt outlines its traits as following: hierarchical, and having a maximal division of labour, led by fixed and universalistic rules that assure predictability in decision making, controlled through direct supervision and standardized rules and sanctions, characterized by impersonality of relations which are “role-based, segmental and instrumental”, and in which employment and advancement are made based on specialization and formal certification.⁵

The bureaucratic organization, based on the separation it operates between private and public and between rational and emotional, has as its basic unit the job, “a description of a set of tasks, competencies, and responsibilities represented as a position on an organizational chart” which is by excellence separate from people and “devoid of actual workers”.⁶ This makes the worker who fits the job in the hierarchy an abstract and bodiless individual, with no sexuality and no emotion. Investigating the gendered relations reproduced in work organizations, Acker roots the differentiated position that women and men have in organizational hierarchy, i.e. the exclusion of women from top positions and from certain types of jobs, in the embodied perception of women. “Women’s bodies - female sexuality, their ability to procreate and their pregnancy, breast-feeding, and childcare, menstruation and mythic “emotionality”- are suspect, stigmatized, and used as grounds for control and exclusion.”⁷

As opposed to the bureaucratic and instrumental construction of the worker as being bodiless and devoid of emotion, collectivist organizations aimed at creating alternative discourses on and structures of human cooperation, guided by value, not instrumental rationality, namely by the “belief in the value for its own sake... independent of its prospects of success”.⁸ Thus, the collectivist form aims at disturbing the divisions on which bureaucracy operates, by rejecting authority, hierarchical arrangements and division of labour, by assuming the personal and affective character of relationships, and by instituting forms of decision making that aspire at being egalitarian and fully participative, process from which derives the legitimacy of rules and decisions.⁹

4 J Rothschild-Whitt, ‘The Collectivist Organization: An Alternative to Rational-Bureaucratic Models’, *American Sociological Review*, vol. 44, no. 4, 1979, pp. 509-527.

5 *ibidem*, p. 519

6 J Acker, ‘Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations’, *Gender and Society*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1990, p. 148.

7 *ibidem*, p. 152.

8 Weber cited in J Rothschild, *idem*, p. 509.

9 Rothschild, *op. cit.*, p. 519.

How well this commitment towards egalitarianism truly works in practice is a question investigated by several researchers.¹⁰ As some of them note, we actually deal with a continuum between bureaucratic and collectivist forms, on which we can place organizations¹¹, depending on the way in which they manage the tensions that arise between their desired structure and the external and internal pressures that emerge. However, the women's movement literature mostly documents the processes in women's organizational field by dichotomizing between formalized/bureaucratic and informal/decentralized groups.¹² Some challenging contradictions are documented to stem from the collectivist form of alternative organizations. First of all, the fully participative requirement in decision-making is time and emotionally consuming. As Rothschild-Whitt notes in the case of an Alternative Newspaper, meetings occupied three days per week, leaving little time for the organizational tasks.¹³ In situations in which a balance was intended between bureaucratic and participative structures, as in the case of a hybrid women's shelter investigated by Ashcraft,¹⁴ certain tactics were employed in order to mimic the participative character, but without actually practicing it. In what the emotional intensity present in this type of organizations is concerned, small informal groups are usually highly affected by internal conflict, as Staggenborg¹⁵ documents in the case of the pro-choice movement in the United States, and Mueller¹⁶ in the more general case of the new branch of the second wave women's movement¹⁷. Internal conflict can be taken as stemming from the personal character of the relationships in these groups, which inevitably gives rise to interpersonal tensions,¹⁸ but it is also linked to a pressure towards homogeneity. In this vein, Staggenborg and Mueller provide a detailed account of the effects that growing membership has on the functionality of small un-formalized groups, whose consensus based, egalitarian structure is not fit to deal with enlargement.¹⁹ On the other hand, the rule generating capacity that characterizes hierarchical organizations prevents the emergence of factions and dissent inside a large group.²⁰

10 Rothschild, op. cit.; C Reinelt, 'Fostering Empowerment, Building Community: The Challenge for State-Funded Feminist Organizations', *Human Relations*, vol. 47, 1994, p. 685; S Morgen, 'Personalizing Personnel Decisions in Feminist Organizational Theory and Practice', *Human Relations*, vol. 47, no. 6, 1994, pp. 665-684; KL Ashcraft, op. cit.

11 Rothschild-Whitt, op. cit.

12 Staggenborg, op. cit, 1988; Staggenborg, op. cit., 1989

13 Rothschild-Whitt, op. cit., p. 520.

14 KL Ashcraft, op. cit.

15 Staggenborg, 'Can Feminist Organizations Be Effective'... 1995

16 C Mueller, 'The Organizational Basis of Conflict in Contemporary Feminism'. In MM Ferree, & PY Martin (eds.), *Feminist Organizations: Harvest of the new women's movement*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995, pp. 263-275.

17 This however is not limited to the women's movement field, being a pervasive phenomenon in informal collective groups, as shown by Rothschild-Whitt (1979).

18 Rothschild-Whitt, op. cit., p. 521.

19 Mueller, op. cit., p. 270; Staggenborg, op. cit., 1995, p. 345-346.

20 W Gamson, *The strategy of social protest* (2nd ed.), Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1990; C Mueller, op. cit.

However, this is not only a matter of numbers, but also one of diversity. Because of the high commitment on which small collectivist groups function, they tend towards homogeneity in both shared values and social origins of members.²¹ This could lead in turn to the marginalization of people with competing commitments (families, school, work, and other political concerns).²² Morgen makes a case in point when discussing the effects of class belonging on organizational functionality. Investigating aspects of personnel decisions in feminist collective organizations, she brings forward a clash between middle and working class women in one free clinic in the United States, in which working class women were fired by a middle class dominated board of directors for failing to respect the established working hours. This decision was met with frustration by the working class women, whose work in the community and the other responsibilities they had went unacknowledged by the middle class professional women who were officially running the clinic. The conflict situation that emerged was given by Morgen as an example of the tension between the presumed effort to pay attention to women's problems and needs in the personnel selection phase and the afterwards enforcement of strict, undifferentiated rules according to which work performance was evaluated.²³ Another issue stemming from the identity diversity of members is the different organizational agenda that concerns people of different race, ethnicity and sexual orientation. Analysing the effects of personnel change on the evolution of one feminist group in USA, Nancy Whittier points to the divisive impact that these identity coordinates have. As lesbianism grew increasingly tied to feminism in the 1970s, Women's Action Collective in Columbus Ohio became more and more clear-cut on the separation from men as part of women's liberation and on a women's only struggle, which in turn alienated heterosexual women, who felt "outnumbered and unwelcome".²⁴

In addition to that, other researchers on the women's movement in the USA, pointed to other risks of collectivist organizing, namely that organizations with no rules on division of labour, delegation and representation are more vulnerable to elite control inside the group and to a "lack of accountability for actions or for what took place in intergroup relations",²⁵ a situation termed by Jo Freeman as "the tyranny of structurelessness"²⁶. Although such forms of organization can provide a high sense of fulfilment and belonging, they can also lead to frustration over perceived inefficiency, as the lack of an established division of labour makes it difficult to complete organizational tasks²⁷. This situation eventually leads to

21 Rothschild, op. cit.

22 S Morgen, 'Personalizing Personnel Decisions in Feminist Organizational Theory and Practice', *Human relations*, vol. 47, no. 6, 1994, pp. 70-71.

23 *ibidem*, p. 776

24 N Whittier, 'Turning It Over: Personnel Change in the Columbus, Ohio, Women's Movement, 1969-1984'. In MM Ferree, & PY Martin, op. cit., p. 194; B Ryan, 'Ideological Purity and Feminism: The US Women's Movement from 1966 to 1975', *Gender and Society*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1989, pp. 239-257.

25 Ryan, op. cit., p. 249.

26 J Freeman, 'The tyranny of structurelessness', *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, no. 17, 1972-1973, pp. 151-164.

27 Morgen, op. cit.; Staggenborg, op. cit., 1995.

dissolution, and, as Staggenborg noted in the case of the pro-choice movement in the U.S, formalized and centralized groups, even if more narrowly focused, prove more organizationally stable, whereas the informal, decentralized ones have a shorter lifespan, although their experimental inclination favours tactical innovation²⁸.

In the following sections, I will try to illustrate the above mentioned tensions by examining a Romanian feminist group, but also pin point to other specific problems posed to collectivist organizing in a post-communist context, in which feminist activism is one of the many commitments that people involved in it have, besides family, work and school engagements. Dealing with the complexity and diversity of personal backgrounds, motivations and agendas, group cohesiveness and stability become problematic in the face of the high commitment expected. This becomes even more acute when some members aspire at making a living out of it, creating further polarizations concerning the goals of the organization and the activities and projects that should be undertaken. However, before a detailed discussion of this organization's trajectory, a brief introduction on previous feminist organizations appears as necessary.

Feminist Organizations in Romania

The Romanian case generally fits in the trend known to characterize women's rights organizations and more generally the civil society development in Central and Eastern Europe. The rejection of the term feminism in post-communist societies that experienced forced equality imposed from the top is part of the common legacy of the countries in the region²⁹. That is why researches of this phenomenon sometimes employ a more comprehensive definition of feminism, in order to include under the term of women's activism actual practices rather than using the sole criterion of feminist self-identification³⁰. Provided that this particularity is taken into account, women's organizations in post-communist countries have taken very various forms, structures and tactics, ranging from highly formalized groups to informal ones and from advocacy to cultural activities and protests³¹. If we look however for the degree in which women's rights activists overtly take on a feminist identity we would be left with only a couple of groups to study. Looking at the Romanian case, in the 1990s there was only one organization that included the term feminism in its name, The Society of Feminist Analysis, AnA, although many others dedicated to equal opportunities between women and men emerged.

28 Staggenborg, op. cit., 1988, 1989, 1995.

29 M Miroiu, *Drumul spre autonomie* [The Road to Autonomy], Iasi: Polirom, 2004; M Miroiu, & L. Popescu, 'Post-Totalitarian Pre-Feminism', in HF, Carey (ed.), *Romania since 1989. Politics, Economics and Society*, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2004, pp. 297-314; A Sloat, 'The Rebirth of Civil Society: The Growth of Women's NGOs in Central and Eastern Europe', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2005, pp. 437-452; K Fabian, *The Contemporary Women's Movements in Hungary*, Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2009.

30 Fabian, op. cit.; KM Guenther, 'The Possibilities and Pitfalls of NGO Feminism. Insights from Postsocialist Eastern Europe', *Signs*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2011, pp. 863-887; PY Martin, 'Tethinking feminist organizations', *Gender and Society*, no. 4, 1990, pp. 182-206

31 Fabian, op. cit; Guenther, op. cit.

Accounts of feminists active in this organization founded in 1993, collected through interviews and from written material³², talk about the clash between the embraced ideal of horizontal feminist organization and the bureaucratization that was perceived to be forced on them by foreign (but also internal) funders, who conditioned the accession of funds on endless paperwork, difficult to get through with, giving the reduced numerically staff and scarce resources. In this sense, Laura Grunberg, AnA's president, talks in her book about the permanent gap between the resources necessary for maintaining organizational survival, be it certain skills or something as simple as a computer, and the resources available:

When we connected to CMC (computer mediated communication), we didn't have an office, or a computer. We installed the modem at Cristina M., who had a computer at home (one of the few Anas (members of AnA) who had such a thing) and whose boyfriend was an IT specialist. This way we began to offer a minimum amount of information through NEWW network about women in Romania, to enter the international programs' circuit, to receive information and to easier identify donors, partners etc.³³

Moreover, the women active in this organization shared a sense of community, strengthened by the bonds of their ideological commitment, but also through friendship, thus blurring the line between private and organizational life. The informality of the structure (or lack of) accompanied an allergy towards formalization and hierarchy, augmented by the double lives of the ones involved, in that the women active in AnA had otherwise ordinary, bureaucratic jobs. This way, the feminist collective they started was regarded as a safe haven, in which one could dedicate to their activist interests and emotionally bond to their fellow women and feminists. They however experienced pressures towards formalization: an office had to be acquired and certain directions had to be followed in project writing in order to assure funds for organizational survival. The movement towards a more formalized structure, with organizational rules, division of labour and formal hierarchy (director, secretariat etc.), not only that it was not embraced wholeheartedly, but it was also resented. As Laura Grunberg recalls in her work on the lived history of this feminist organization,

We were determined not by our conviction, but by the "times" that it is best to accept the next step: institutionalization. At AnA there was a permanent subvert and overt resistance towards this step. But on the other hand it was obvious that we could no longer work effectively without an office, without files, and without order.³⁴ (Grunberg 2008, 78).

Another one of AnA's founding members eloquently expressed this perceived tension between the desired structure and the institutionalization pressures, when stating:

³² Laura Grunberg, *biONGgrafie. The Lived History of a Women's NGO*, Iasi: Polirom, 2008.

³³ *ibidem*, p. 110.

³⁴ *ibidem*, p. 78.

I was reading a lot then and I was convinced about the wonderful nature of network instead of hierarchically organizing... and in the 90s, in the first part, we were organized horizontally... we don't want bosses, we don't want hierarchies... And we faced the following situation: when you ask for funding, because there are so many things that you cannot do without it [...] they ask for all the documents on who is the authorizing officer, who is responsible, which is the bank account. [...] I have to say that when we had to organize hierarchical, all the beauty and joy of voluntarily being together was lost. (Interview with Mihaela Miroiu)

For some time, equilibrium was kept between the organization as a group of friends and the organization as a team of professionals. Rituals emerged and helped maintain the AnAs' community:

There was a time when we had AnAs' Christmas. It was such a beautiful thing... somewhere around 22nd of December, I don't know if somebody told you about this, there was an AnAs' meeting, there was an announcement and people came. There were hot wine, cookies, and there was a great atmosphere. And we tried to meet from time to time apart from problems and projects, just to have a good time together. (Interview C.I.)

Besides the resources and the formalization issue, building a non-hierarchical feminist collective provided a great sense of pride, which can explain the differentiation Grunberg operates within her book, between feminist i.e. committed activists and professional, paid activists, which she terms mercenaries (and says they would easily switch from one cause to another). This provides yet another line of comparison between this organization and the one that I will begin discussing in the next section, that of building a collective in contrast to other forms of organization existing in the field. The organizational building in contrast implied reflections and discussions over what feminist activism consists in: "Spare time activism, time actually freed of any institutional constraints, is different from activism as a job. The first one is more authentic, fresher, benefiting from the activist's need to get out from the routine of the job she already has. The latter is more efficient, more pragmatic, routinized. It would be ideal if we could do activism as a job like a spare time activism."³⁵

However, spare time activism began increasingly tiring, as the funding race and the unpleasant administrative chores led to frustrations and burnout³⁶. Moreover, from the different interviews with core ex-members of AnA, it came out as a problem the fact that they did not have a clear idea, as a group, on the types of actions

35 Grunberg, op. cit., p. 100.

36 Laura Grunberg shares in her interview the accumulated burnout feeling: *2007-2008 is the year in which AnA takes the decision. The (multiple) discrimination project was made without an office, we didn't have the organizing anymore. It was also the moment in which AnA had to take the decision, giving that we didn't have funds and organizing energy anymore. [...] I said I should retire, I couldn't gather people around me anymore, and probably the exhaustion and the frustration were evident on my face and I wasn't bringing energy around me.*

to be undertaken. Beyond what was perceived as a constant reorientation towards different types of foreign funds, the members' various intimate expectations on the direction the NGOs should take were not put together: some were more oriented towards research production, others came up with projects on service providing, and yet others were attached to a more trenchant activist stance:

Honestly, I saw a more activist, more engaged direction. It was a long time before I understood that AnA is mostly or exclusively focused on studies. That disturbed me. I would have wanted to move the mountains. (interview C.I.)

Growing frustration, disappointment and fatigue progressively led to fights, alienation and resignation and ultimately to AnA's lack of activity. As I will try to show in the following section, Front feminist organization experienced the same pride of being different and authentic, but also a similar growth in tensions, frustrations, and inherent burnout. However, in a more positive note, the recent revival of AnA around AnALize Journal, re-launched in 2013 with a new team, might suggest that we should think of AnA, as well as of Front, more as an umbrella organization (for whomever would want to implement feminist projects) than as a particular collective. As one of the Front founding members, now out of the country, told me in the interview I conducted in a small balcony in Barcelona:

(For me, feminism) is rhizome like, there is nothing analogical about it. Do you know how this works? I am here, so I will recreate here what I liked there. At a certain point there are things that you see, you feel, you will reproduce. (Interview I.V.)

Front. The Emergence Phase

Being part of Front³⁷ group for over two years, allowed me to witness all the worries, joys, discussions, tensions and changes that emerged in the interactional dynamic of this feminist organization. The data collected through the process of participant observation includes long lists of emails and numerous face to face meetings, Skype and Facebook conversations, one on one as well as group discussions, lunches, dinners, drinks, parties, debates, protests (from conception to enactment and assessment), home visits and seaside trips, basically a full participation in life and organizational events that strongly integrates a group for which the challenge of having divisions between personal and political issues is a core fact. Besides that, five interviews were conducted with older and newer members, either to supplement a lack of information on those particular trajectories or to clarify certain decisions and motivations of those persons, this in addition to many informal conversations with the other, non-interviewed members. The observation and the interviews sought to capture the group dynamic, from participants' motivations and concerns, to visions and practices on cooperation, negotiation and conflict and the way these are influenced by and translated into

37 All the names of the people involved were replaced with pseudonyms.

the interaction with outsiders (be it other Romanian and foreign organizations, activists, and state institutions).

The group that later on established itself as Front organization was initiated by six women of different ages and professional backgrounds, students in the MA Program on Gender and Minorities at the National School of Political Science and Public Administration in Bucharest. As they gradually began to meet outside classes over a cup of coffee, they also got closer to each other and began to discuss not only the official curriculum, but also their interests and preoccupations at the intersection between theory and their personal life experiences. A specific process, which favoured this strengthening of ties, was the conception and the construction of a feminist web platform, which originally developed as a school project, at the suggestion of one professor. Although initially a project meant to involve the whole MA class, it was eventually conceived and maintained by a limited number of students, plus a couple of other teachers and doctoral students who were affiliated with a feminist organization located in the university, named Filia Centre. Established in 2000 as a support Gender Studies centre, aimed at attracting research grants that absorbed interested students and university staff (interview with one of its founding members, Mihaela Miroiu), Filia also developed advocacy and activist concerns due to a complex conjuncture involving strategy change, personal time availability of members and internal pressures towards the opening of the organizations to more grassroots activism (interviews with two Filia ex-members).

The relation that the MA students had with Filia members, occasioned by the work on the feminist website, constituted a regular source of reflection for the group involved, and later on continued to be a permanent topic of discussion. Right from the start, the MA students were critical of the perceived position of Filia members toward students which were used as volunteers, in the awareness raising street actions that Filia started to organize on significant women's rights days, such as 8th of March and 25th of November. As one of the older Front members recalled:

Until we had the Front organization, we participated at Filia's protests, on 8th of March and 25th of November, but we had always felt an informational asymmetry and a separation between the girls that organized the event and the participants; I don't know how pertinent was our rebellion against this status-quo, but we certainly didn't feel very comfortable, in that we felt we had things to say and we didn't have the environment in which we could express ourselves. (Interview L.C.)

This opinion was also shared by the newer members, who reported the same feelings of uneasiness in the face of perceived power relations that made the volunteers feel disposable. After recalling how important they felt as volunteers and support base in the first protest, one of the Rise members said:

And with Filia, the yucky thing was that you were actually involved only at a minimal level, in which ok, you were a Filia volunteer, and you should be ok

since you were given the opportunity to do something for them. (Interview A.C.)

Meanwhile, the same type of critical reflection was occasioned by the work on the feminist website whose desired non-hierarchical character was perceived to be affected by the already existent teacher-student power relations. Many of Front founding members, then MA students, reported feelings of dissatisfaction on issues such as being told what and when to do and being devised on hierarchical lines (selecting some of the students as the editorial board for the website). As one of them said, recalling a discussion with one of Filia's members:

Listen, I agree with you, I don't like bosses either, but bosses that don't pay me, those I don't even see, they don't exist – I told her that as a hint on what was happening with the site and the authority claims that Filia tried to have with us, which I didn't understand, I took them ironically and they amused me, a thing that wasn't good for me; maybe it would have been better to not say anything and to try to avoid a face to face conflict. (Interview I.V.)

This process of negotiation and subvert and overt tension lasted for about two years, and the website was officially launched in 2010, at the end of the MA courses, at a party celebrating Filia's 10th year of existence. Inside the group, discussions continued on the way the perceived claims of Filia on the website should be handled, especially as they began to receive requests from Filia on officialising a partnership on the site. These requests were met with amusement, giving that the group of students was in no way established at that time:

“...then all sorts of official letters from Filia came (...) through which we were summoned to discuss, to make a partnership agreement. Front didn't exist then... to make an agreement between these inexistent legal persons, physical persons that were working on the website and Filia and that Filia needs it. We laughed our hearts out then (...). We refused to answer the email and that was the only wise thing to do, and that was the wisdom on which we played from then on, we refused to answer to them. I mean in our opinion it was so humiliating for them, as alleged feminists to do what they did, that we said “oh my God, no”. (Interview I.V.)

All these perceived pressures on functioning on a hierarchical, power logic were refused upfront by the informal group, which strengthened its oppositional stance. The idea of formalizing the group, of registering it as an association was more or less playfully raised by its members towards the end of 2010. One of the most salient reasons given to that was the fact that you could not obtain authorizations for protests and demonstrations without having an official legal status³⁸. Thus,

38 The Law no. 60/1991 (republished in 2004) regarding the organizing of public gatherings does not stipulate the obligation of the organizers to represent a registered, formally established association (Law 60/1991 republished can be accessed at http://www.jandarmeria.ro/documente/lg_60_1991_4ro.pdf). *De jure*, since there is no special mentioning of this constraint, physical persons or informal groups could as well be granted

despite the assumed egalitarian character, the group had to produce official papers, establishing the hierarchical positions of president and vice-president and the board of directors, an issue that has always been treated in Front discussions as a source of mockery and amusement, making it clear on whatever occasion that these positions were exclusively on paper. Still, as some of the founding members recalled, and partly stemming from its formalization in an oppositional style, the group knew more what it didn't want to be, than what it actually wanted to be.

We were organized on the idea that nobody was anyone's boss – this we knew for sure we didn't want; but to exactly define ourselves, who we were, how we were, we didn't have the chance yet. Of course, we talked at our meetings I don't know how many times about “we shouldn't do this and this”, but we didn't really have the discussion on “we are like this, these are our core principles”. That we made a bylaw... but we thought that our bylaw should be as comprehensive as possible, not to limit our actions... it was only “let's lay down the base of our house and after that we'll see how to decorate it”. (Interview L.C.)

Finally, in April 2011, Front was born as an NGO and soon enough started to experience all sorts of inside tensions, stemming from the conflict between the official hierarchical form and the desired egalitarian form, but also from the heterogeneity of the group, following enlargement.

The Enlargement Phase

Firstly, an issue that should be again noted for its specificity in the context in which these organizations are placed is the often mentioning of spare time activism. Although there are some organizations that are professionalized in the accurate sense of the word, i.e. people working there make a living out of it, the organizations mentioned in this paper are supported mostly on a voluntary, yet professional base, even if they did not succeed in mobilizing large numbers of people around their cause, falling in the category that Tarrow and Petrova called

the permission to organize peaceful public gatherings. The above mentioned reason for formally establishing Front, although might be explained through a lack of knowledge regarding the legal framework on public meetings, might also reflect a *de facto* difficulty of unofficial groups in obtaining consent from the local authorities. I met this account also when interviewing a woman from the Ladyfest collective; the interviewee recalled to have obtained the Municipality's acceptance to organize the *Take Back the Night march* in 2007, by asking the established LGBT rights organization, Accept, to apply for legal permission. Moreover, an amendment introduced in 2004 to the 1991 version of the law stipulated the establishment of a special commission within the Local Council that is responsible for modifying, rejecting or approving the requests for public gatherings, which in practice can lead to arbitrary limits on the right to public meetings. Actually, as ActiveWatch notes, this amendment turns the *notification* on organizing a public meeting into an authorization granted by local decision-makers (ActiveWatch website, “We want our freedom of gathering back! Modify the Law 60/1991”, <http://www.activewatch.ro/ro/freex/reactie-rapida/ne-vrem-libertatea-de-intrunire-inapoi-modificati-legea-60-1991>, accessed on 1st of September 2013).

transactional activism³⁹, when trying to capture the specifics of activist mobilizations in post-communist countries.

I use spare time activism to point to the fact that the civic engagement of the people active in these organizations is limited by their other personal and professional engagements, all Front members having either a full time job or a full time school program, besides their families and other personal commitments. This was sometimes referred to as an issue of high personal effort that raises tensions for those involved, forcing a polarization between physical and mental health on one side and feminist activism on the other:

I think all of us got involved in things that we could not carry, which caused very strong personal frustrations and I think that our duty as feminists is first towards ourselves, to protect ourselves. I don't think it's legitimate to go and pretend from other women to become autonomous, to become solidary, while I don't protect myself, and at the end of the day I acted and I contributed to changing the lives of x women, but my life is one that makes me depressive or frustrated ... I thought I'd give what I can give and do what we can do. (Interview L.C.)

However, these reflections appeared later on in the process, whereas in the first year of formal existence, this equilibrium between the different commitments of the members was perceived more positively, as a continuous and exciting rush, like in this recall on the organizing for OngFest, a fare dedicated to promoting the work of Romanian NGOs:

To me, the coolest thing was OngFest, where it went like this: over the night Elena called someone and asked if they had a little corner for us, because we've just become an NGO. (...) Elena and I went the first day, (used our) own cars, brought a table from home, Elena brought her toolbox, I brought candies, you came with panty liners, so each came with something else, Lucia and Vera printed as much as they could so we could make flyers, so everything, everything, including Lucia who imprinted Front t-shirts, was made in two days. (...) Again, these were stuff that we did among many others: I had a job, a child, and I'm talking only about myself now, but everybody had their own, and among these they had to do this as well. (Interview I.V)

Despite all the juggling described above, the interviews, and participants observation showed that the first year seemed the most rewarding and vivid, and also the time in which the new established NGO attracted new members. Although

39 This is a certain type of public engagement localized in the relations between “organized non-state actors and between them and political parties, power holders, and other institutions” and is analytically distinct from participatory activism, by which the authors designate “the potential and actual magnitude of individual and group participation in civic life, interest group activities, voting, and elections” (S Tarrow, & T Petrova, “Transactional and Participatory Activism in the Emerging European Polity The Puzzle of East-Central Europe”, *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 20, no. 10, 2006, p. 6.)

the feminist website and Facebook page started to grow and served as an outreach platform for online and offline activism, be it online campaigns and petitions, or offline protests, parties and fundraisings, the Gender and Minorities MA remained the primary recruitment pool, despite Front members' desire to reach out to young women having no previous connection to gender studies. Moving towards grassroots was seen as a legitimizing act, given the strong connection between self-identified feminist activists and previous contact with and specialization in gender studies. Although this aim never really materialized, as most of Front's 9 new active members had previous gender studies background, they nevertheless shared the old members' allergy to power relations and rejection of authority, including those present inside feminist circles.

Some of the new members were recruited at a young feminist international summer camp that took place in France in 2011, which occasioned new connections between the Romanian women who participated and who previously did not know much about each other. The closeness between some of them was favoured again through opposition, on one hand towards the Western feminists, whom they perceived as being colonialists towards East Europeans, and on the other hand towards other Romanian participants, whom they perceived as dominating and speaking in their name, without previously consulting with them. Both types of tension were touched upon in the following fragment from the interview with one of the older Front members, discussing the taking on an anti-capitalist position in the group's manifest, which was considered un-negotiable for Western feminists, but problematic for the Romanian participants:

And all of a sudden a manifest is written declaring capitalism the absolute evil, the cause of all the injustice against women ... I then said neither no nor yes; I had to understand more, to see to what degree I could endorse such a thing, although I didn't really have a problem endorsing it, because I agreed to it. (...) On the other hand, Sandra was vehemently against using the word capitalism in the manifest, and due to her personality she made a common stand for our group as opposing this. I then found myself in a position in which I didn't even know what I wanted (...) I discussed with the girls, we didn't really agree – the girls from our group. Sandra said she had problems with that and although it was a personal thing, in the end it came to be the group's position. And it was problematic for me, I didn't even get the chance to reflect on that, because I was extremely affected by the colonialism of the Western girls; I meant ok, Sandra opened a discussion - pertinent or not, it was the position of a girl from Eastern Europe who felt this way. (Interview L.C.)

Following this shared experience, three more women joined Front. Others were recruited either through family, friendship or academic ties, or in the organizing or participating at protest events. Old and new members alike had the feeling that something new and exciting was going on, a newly found effervescence in feminist activism, manifesting in the joy of being together and taking a stand against all sorts

of injustices against women. As one of the members that left another organization and joined Front recalled at that time:

I think it is a very authentic feminism what they're doing and I foresee some feminist actions together with them and I want to be part of those actions; I mean I even felt that if I wouldn't have joined Front, maybe I wouldn't have been called to join the discussions, where I really would have wanted to be - like it was at Slutwalk. And I said, "why don't participate in Front?" I like very much how they work; it has been a very engaged group. Now some of them left, they are no longer in the country, but in the fall of 2011 I remember we were meeting and we were 10 girls at one table; in that period when the Front girls were meeting, it was a great atmosphere. And feminism is not only about making protests, but it also means the discussions you have with other feminists. (Interview T.M.)

The Conflict Phase

The previous discussion was necessary in order to understand organizational emergence and development, including as a part of the explanation on why tensions started to arise and to seem insurmountable. What and when started to change, making people involved in Front to take distance from the organization or to withdraw altogether?

In 2012, Front succeeded in obtaining funds for organizing in Romania the follow-up of the young feminist summer camp that took place a year before in France, gathering feminists from all over the world⁴⁰. Obtaining that money was met with much excitement, giving that it was the organization's first big project to be handled collectively. However, contrary to the expectation that everybody will participate and help in organizing and handling the summer camp, a very small group of people ended up doing a large amount of work. The exploitation at which the Romanian feminists perceived to be subjected to by the foreign feminists, who constantly complained about food and other organizing conditions in a supposedly self-managed camp, drove them into a state of frustration, exhaustion and anger, and led them to question even more the context differences which divide Western and Eastern European feminist organizations. Talking about the fact that most Romanian feminists, including most Front members, came to the 10 days camp only for the weekend, one of the women said: many of the Romanian feminists work - again, an important thing to say on the relationship with the West, where there are many activists who work inside the organizations to which they belong to or have unemployment benefits big enough to afford to volunteer for some time. The girls are able to come only for the weekend. You think that they could have taken a leave, but you cannot ask them to sacrifice their life, I don't think that this would be fair. (Interview L.C.)

40 Medusa's Blog, The International Feminist Camp in Moroieni, Dambovită (6-16 August), 29 July 2012 <http://blogul-medusei.blogspot.ro/2012/07/tabara-feminista-internationala-la.html> - the announcement on the second edition of the camp, in continuation to the first one, which took place in 2011 in Terreblanque, France. Accessed on 20th of August 2013

When getting to deal with projects which presume organizing, delegating, assigning and accomplishing tasks, unequal participation and support led to the overload of a couple of members, causing dissatisfaction and frustration. While some were more understanding of the equilibrium that feminists had to perform between their different commitments, as in the fragment quoted above, others were much more critical of the lack of support in this process. As one of the members said (in an interview A.C.), that was a moment in which further discontent started to build. With no clearly established rules on the division of labour and in the context of spare time activism, accomplishing the organizational tasks became more and more difficult, if we also count the post-camp paperwork that had to be done in order to justify the money received. The paperwork consisting in gathering documents, communicating with the foreign participants, writing the financial report and making sure that the numbers are correct and rightly accounted for, etc fell in the responsibility of a few people, again overloaded and frustrated. This led to the building of a counter reaction against taking more responsibility, especially as there was only one person, the official president, who had the stamp of the organization and also the full responsibility for whatever could have gone wrong. The conflict between the official organizational hierarchy and the presumed egalitarian character deepened the distrust of the person who was de facto accountable and made her more reserved towards potential projects proposed by other members.

Even though collective egalitarian groups may have rules on information sharing and thorough communication, clear procedures were never proposed in Front, also due to the volatile availability of members. So, it was not a rare thing if emails sent to each other got no answer or if members got the group into project collaborations with other organizations, without a thorough discussion of its implications, and without subsequent communication on the stage and activities of those projects. This led in turn to dissatisfaction, expressed in regular informal discussions, concerning the lack of accountability on and the unpredictability of Front's engagements.

Additionally, another aspect that alienated some of the members concerns the intersection between the initial oppositional character of Front and the enlargement of the organization. Even though we are talking about small enlargements and not about the enormous flow of members into feminist organizations of the 60s and 70s, the problem that growth poses to small groups is nonetheless visible in this case. The difficulty to expand, in the case of older members, and to build, in the case of newer members, personal and affectionate relationships in the enlarged format was mentioned more than once in informal discussions and interviews. Named by some empathy based relationships and by others friendship, the interactions in the initial group had a strong intimate and emotional dimension, opposed by some members to the project concerned and oriented NGOs:

... for me Front was at some point that space in which I built a friendship with you, but with you, considering the whole... (complexity of your lives). I didn't want anymore to go to an association that does projects, programs (...)

I hoped that Front, being more left oriented, would start things in another way, from the individual solidarities between us, from our needs to express ourselves (Interview N.B.).

This longing for the personal and the intimate created sometimes pressures for the newer members to express themselves according to a certain emotional repertoire, which they were not feeling comfortable with⁴¹.

This added up to the fact that, after two years of existence, the group still hadn't established its goals and means of action, apart from the individual and group's general commitment to left wing feminism⁴², and despite regular proposals to "meet and define ourselves". This led on one side to a lack of coordination and ad-hoc entrance into different collaborations and projects (issue mentioned above), and on the other hand to the preserving of an oppositional character. The latter issue manifested through a reactive self-defining, that guided the evaluation of most of the actions proposed by members. Arguments like "how are we different from x organization by doing that" or "we don't want to be or wind up like x organization" were recurrent in Front meetings and discussions. Critical of what they saw was happening in other feminist or women's rights organizations, from the way they treated each other inside the group to the way they took decisions and to the actions and discourses that they supported, the Front women got a constant reminder to reflect on their own positions and practices. Although in principle a good thing, this permanent comparison became tiring for some members:

... the discussion on Filia makes me feel bad, also that's why I estranged myself (from Front), I think it was very clear. I mean I don't want to join a group that reproduces the same mistakes, the same stereotypes, the same dynamic like the Roma movement; it clearly is a social movement, there needs to be fractured,

41 Such discomfort was expressed in Front's General Assembly on 12th of March 2013, when one of the newer members stated that she feels pressure to always talk about personal aspects of her life. I participated at that meeting through Skype connection.

42 We can see this general, ideological commitment to the left, socialist feminist critique as exposed by Ioana Vrabiescu (also one of the founding members of Front) in her article "The feminist argument from the right to the left", published in a special issue of Critic Atac platform, "What kind of feminism I want on the 8th of March?", 9th of March 2011, <http://www.criticatac.ro/5192/argumentul-feminist-de-la-dreapta-la-stanga/> She advances the need to provide an intertwined critique of class and gender based oppression, in a context in which Romanian feminism of the '90s had played its only available card: liberalism, as a reaction to the communist burden of the lack of autonomy: "The left feminist critique addresses capitalism and patriarchy at the same time, as they both lead to the double estrangement of the product of women's work". However, when I say "general commitment", I point to the actual difficulty of conceiving empowerment tools that target this double oppression of class and gender, and which are able to address the structural, yet contextual character of unjust power relations. For instance, when discussing with prof. Eniko Vincze, a core activist involved in contesting the Cluj authorities' decision to relocate a Roma community to the Pata Rat garbage dump (in 2010), she tackled the difficulty to address class and race based marginalization of a community, while also exposing its internal inequalities. More often, the accent on instances of internal oppressive relations, such as prostitution or certain exploitive work arrangements, serves to further marginalize that community overall. Thus, "at certain times, class appears to topple gender and ethnicity" (interview Eniko Vincze).

but I am too tired, I got tired; there are 20 something years (of activism), I don't want to spend my time anymore listening to this stuff. (Interview N.B.)

The differences in personal experience and background that moulded the members' availability and agenda are a case in point for the effect of heterogeneity on small non-hierarchical organizations. These various dissatisfactions smouldered for some time, being expressed rather in informal conversations and only timidly in face to face group discussions, to which some members could no longer participate anyway, as they left the country for academic related work. Trying to maintain the personal and organizational connection through the organization's online group was more than once mentioned by the members as being difficult and frustrating, especially as tensions ended up being handled over email.

Bubble Burst

The bubble burst in April 2013, over the issue of the perceived heteronormativity and lack of solidarity of the group in a situation in which LGBT persons were threatened by members of right wing, religious fundamentalist groups. Referred to as the MTR case (the acronym for the Romanian Peasant Museum), the conflict started at a film projection organized by an LGBT rights association at MTR, as part of the LGBT History Month. Members of nationalist right wing groups infiltrated the movie hall and blocked the film projection, singing the national anthem, religious song and shouting "Death to Homosexuals"⁴³. This event was met with the prompt response of another feminist group, in which also a Front member was involved, that organized a small protest the following day in order to express its solidarity against LGBT directed hate-speech. The case comprised more episodes, as the protesting group launched an online campaign against the right wing groups, exposing their fascist positions and discourses, but also participated in the subsequent projections of the same movie in the same location, in order to confront and take a stand against the aggressors. However, the exposure through which the feminist protesting group went through in this course of events made them fear for their safety, in the face of a well organized and aggressive right wing counter-party.

Although all this happened in February, the discussion on these events in the Front group was brought up in April, when one of the Front members, a lesbian feminist also involved in the MTR case problematized the easiness with which Romanian feminists in general, including Front members treat the issue of heteronormativity as any other minor flaw: "Replace in all this semantic homosexuality with race or with gender to see how it sounds. Unfortunately, this entire heteronormativity thing is too easily accepted among feminists, unlike the other criteria, such as race, ethnicity and gender. Probably if you don't belong to that particular

43 For a full account on the events, see the anonymous article "How we ended up spending the evening of 21st of February in a legionaries' nest. Notes from the never-ending anti-fascist battlefield" <http://jalbanprotap.noblogs.org/post/2013/02/26/cum-ne-am-petrecut-seara-de-21-februarie-intr-un-cuib-de-legionari-note-de-de-eternul-front-antifascist/>

“marginalized” group, you don’t experience as much and you don’t realize the power of certain words.” (Email A.C.)

The long internal email thread that followed (on Front’s yahoo group) opened the debate on whether it is truly possible for members with different interests, backgrounds and identity concerns to take a stand in each other’s struggles, especially as everybody’s activity is somewhat constrained by their own personal issues. The pressure and the effort to live and act according to what you preach were often mentioned in the research on feminist groups as a source of conflict, trashing and eventually emotional burn out and withdrawal from the movement⁴⁴. This was a recurrent issue in the email discussions and in some of the interviews, as one of the members put it: “a simple statement regarding the fact that Front and we, the Front members, are pro-LGBTQI doesn’t solve the problem of heteronormativity experienced at some points inside the group. (...) For me, personally, questioning heteronormativity isn’t only an issue of principle, but I think we should be more sensitive towards each other because, in my opinion, the emotions, aspirations and wishes that we have about this group vary precisely according to the position that we have (being heterosexual or not).” (Email A.A.)

When high commitment and fast reaction are expected and when congruence between the professed principles of solidarity across race, ethnicity, sexual identity and class, and the practice of them is required, the complexity of the members’ lives and limits is sometimes overlooked. That made on the one hand the persons charged with hetero-normativity to experience a mix of guilt and unfair accusations, and the people who went alone through serious personal turmoil to resent NGO involvement as phony and more preoccupied with projecting a certain image rather than acting according to feminist principles. As one person was telling me in an interview:

I clearly prefer this type of action (underground, anonymous blogs and articles, graffiti) because I find it more authentic than “let’s organize a flashmob” where the same persons show up every time, and which is not taken seriously by anyone, anyway. (Interview A.C.)

Conclusion

Using participant observation, organizational documents and interviews, I tried to provide an in-depth look into the way in which the traits of a certain organizational form, the collectivist/non-hierarchical one, which lead to certain tensions inside a Romanian feminist group. As mentioned previously, although the issues raised in this case by group enlargement cannot be compared to the immense growth of Western feminist organizations in the ‘60s and ‘70s, the problem is not so much one of numbers, as one of homogeneity⁴⁵. The difference in agenda and

⁴⁴ Ryan, op. cit.

⁴⁵ This observation is congruent with Mueller’s study on the effects of conflict in the U.S. women’s movement (C Mueller, op. cit., pp. 268-272). She notes the “recruitment effect” that external conflict engaging feminist

concerns of people of different age, background, ethnicity and sexual orientation is augmented by the limited availability of members, who are caught in a complex web of personal and professional commitments. Moreover, the oppositional character of the organization, defined by what are the don'ts rather than the dos, as well as the difficulty to establish clear rules on communication, delegation and task accomplishment that assure a fair distribution of work and responsibility among the members, led to the alienation and even withdrawal of some of them. Differences in the degree of group involvement created further frustration, and the feeling that "some give nothing, whereas others end up giving everything", as one ex-member put it.

In the end, this is not a matter of organizing on fixed rules versus no rules, which makes the difference between the hierarchical and the egalitarian group. As Jo Freeman⁴⁶ argues, certain organizational principles can be agreed on, in order to maintain a balance between democratic structuring and political effectiveness that sometimes goes overlooked in the turmoil that characterizes small egalitarian groups. These structuring principles include: delegation "of specific authority to specific individuals for specific tasks by democratic procedures"⁴⁷, responsibility of those delegated towards the others; distribution of authority to prevent the monopoly of power; rotation of tasks, to prevent the monopoly on a certain responsibility and to assure the permanent control of the group; "allocation of tasks along rational criteria", i.e. according to ability, interest and responsibility, in order to prevent the assignment of tasks on personal likes and dislikes; frequent diffusion of information and equal access to resources, be it skills and information, or material ones⁴⁸. Although evaluating the efficiency of this type of groups is not a clear-cut issue, and the impact of their work should not be assessed only in terms of influencing politics⁴⁹, the effects of a certain structuring on the stability and longevity of feminist groups should not be overlooked, and Front makes a case in point for that.

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organizations has. The marches and demonstrations of women's groups in the 1970s led to an enormous increase in the number of members, which is differently handled by small, informal and formal organizations. "Thus, a recruitment effect may send dozens or hundreds of new members into small groups, but tens of thousands into the local branches of the formal, national SMOs" (C Mueller, op. cit., p. 271).

46 Freeman, op. cit.

47 Article available at <http://struggle.ws/pdfs/tyranny.pdf>, pp. 4-5

48 Freeman, op. cit.

49 See Staggenborg (1995) for a critique of a narrow definition of social movement organizations' success.

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