

CITIZENSHIP, GENDER, AND THE EVERYDAY IN ROMANIA SINCE 1945:

WORK AND CARE

An NCEEER Working Paper by

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Executive Summary

This project has as its point of departure a basic question: what does ‘citizenship’ mean in everyday life? Is there evidence of how politics is part of routine behavior and banal choices one makes along any average day? And since everyday life is fundamentally gendered—our behavior, the choices we make and their meaning are part of the larger socio-cultural web of gender norms and relations—how is then everyday citizenship gendered? How have the lives of average persons changed (or not) significantly since the end of World War II?

Citizenship, Gender, and the Everyday in Romania since 1945: Work and Care

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I started down this path from a personal observation, by looking at three generations of women under communism—my grandmother (born in 1919), my mother (born in 1942), and I (born in 1968). There are important continuities in terms of gender roles that I grew up learning from the two. Yet I have come to observe constantly, tensions between my grandmother and my mom, or either of them and me, in terms of how we understand our obligations and rights as women in the communities we inhabit. As I matured, I realized that I stand on the shoulders of these two generations; freedoms/entitlements I take for granted were somewhat inconceivable to my grandmother; to my mother they represent an uncomfortable reality. The narrative of change and renegotiation of gender roles that has taken place in my family over the past six decades is a common phenomenon in the communist world, and I wanted to test it at a larger social level, to assess the significance of these dramatic changes in the context of the communist regimes after World War II and in the lives of average people.

The result was an oral history project that included ethnographic field work, focus groups, and individual life-story interviews involving 110 women from an urban-rural region in Romania, Hunedoara, with women ages 85 to 35 as part of the sample, a significant number of them come from a rural area, together with a sampling of ethnic Hungarians and Germans in the

mix, so as to replicate the sociological variety of the population in the region. The material I gathered with my three collaborators was extremely rich, as most of these women poured out their hearts and offered great details about their lives and also many interesting observations about politics in their city, region, and country. We revisited some of them since the interviews and reconnected with follow-ups. Before I analyze some of these findings, however, a few definitions are in order.

Citizenship and Gender before 1945: Definitions and Background

If we are to look at citizenship as a realm of political engagement for individuals living in a state (whether as active agents or as beneficiaries of programs that derive to individuals from being citizens), this term potentially encompasses most of the actions and relationships between individuals and institutions of the modern state.¹ This is in fact especially the case under communist regimes,² and especially for women, who have been the subject of greater biopolitical oversight in the modern period than men.³

In Romania, for instance, (as in several of the other communist bloc countries, such as Yugoslavia and Bulgaria), women didn't become full citizens until after the communist regimes came to power. The argument about women under communism used to be focused on the emptiness of the notion of voting in a one-party state that offers no real democratic opportunities to participate in electoral politics and instead makes voting compulsory.⁴ More recently, this position has come to be reconsidered, as it focuses only on electoral aspects of citizenship and it offers only a normative, liberal perspective on rights.

Seen in the local context of a society with very low levels of literacy, urbanization, and overall engagement with state institutions in the pre-war period, the transformations that took

place in the lives of average persons, and especially in the lives of women at the beginning of the communist period are in fact much more dramatic and should be viewed in a more nuanced fashion.⁵ In *Inventing the Needy*, Lynne Haney demonstrated beautifully how women appropriated new citizenship benefits (social welfare programs) as a means to garner economic autonomy in a system that in fact aimed at controlling their choices as mothers.⁶ Like Haney, I am also interested in seeing the ways in which new rights and benefits developed by the communist state, though presumably controlled by a draconic dictatorial regime, could also represent means for carving out economic and personal autonomy as citizens.

Citizenship in post-World War II Eastern Europe also needs to be placed in a longer twentieth century trajectory of how gender norms and roles developed to fully understand the context in which these women narrate their everyday existence, joys, and challenges. In Romania the political story is a simple one: universal male suffrage was a direct result of World War I and the participation of a large percentage of the male population in the war effort in uniform.

The radical changes after 1918 were two-fold: in terms of class, giving peasants the vote was an important departure (and since 85% of the population was rural at that time, it also added a huge new constituency to the community of voters in the country); and in terms of religious tolerance, giving Jews the vote represented an important readjustment after the heavily anti-Semitic debates over giving Jews citizenship in 1878 in Berlin.

Women gained some voting rights at the local (municipal) level after 1929, on the basis of income and education.⁷ That slight reform introduced a small percentage of the female population to the exercise of voting and to debates about political rights, local administration, and social programs that affected their daily lives, such as the availability of running water,

education, and public health measures.⁸ Yet most women remained mere recipients of such measures, rather than stewards.

Citizenship for most women in interwar Romania meant in fact a new set of social and moral obligations and, in some areas, also access to new types of services. The most aggressive area of reframing citizenship for women was public health under the auspices of the eugenics movement, which counted among its supporters some prominent self-identified feminists, such as Maria Baiulescu.⁹ I have written at length elsewhere about the gendered aspects of eugenics in Romania, from questions of marriage to birth, post-natal care, and women's employment in paid labor. For this discussion, I will only mention that the first school of social work in Romania was started by proponents of eugenics, many of whom had 'cut their teeth' at this new endeavor through studies and research in western Europe and especially the United States, with the help of the Rockefeller Foundation.¹⁰

Programs for educating young mothers, enforcing 'proper' social behavior along gender lines, taking care of infants, protecting domestic workers, and even regulating sex work¹¹ all saw lively discussions but relatively scant implementation in the 1930s. The Great Depression, vagaries of electoral politics, and ultimately the special interests of Carol II, especially after 1938 when he assumed dictatorial powers, all worked to render these projects of social welfare (however ethnocentrically and patriarchally defined) short lived or small in scale, despite the grandiose hopes of their advocates to develop them on a national scale. Instead, between 1938 and 1945 fears of ethnic and racial 'pollution' came to define access to any public services, excluding Jews, Roma, and other 'undesirables'.¹²

Citizenship under Communism

Overall, these legacies meant that, in 1945, inhabitants of the Romanian state primarily

understood social programs such as education, public health, or the building of infrastructure (e.g., running water), to be not a reflection of their rights as citizens and of the obligations that the state assumed towards citizens. Such benefits had generally been implemented with little regard for grassroots sentiments, in a top-down fashion by politicians and bureaucrats who saw themselves as part of a new technocratic enlightened elite that frowned upon liberal democracy as dangerous. The kind of grassroots mobilization the communists undertook after 1945 (with all its attendant forms of violence) was in fact unprecedented in the country.

The generations of women interviewed as part of the Hunedoara project grew up in the 1930s (a handful), in the 1950s (the majority), in the 1960s (about 20 of them), and in the 1980s (a handful). Most of them, therefore, had the pre-1945 legacies as an unmarked and un-negotiated component of their own lives. Many grew up with parents who had lived mature lives in the interwar period, but few brought those legacies up. Their personal frame of reference was the communist regime and, most recently, post-communism.

The institutional framework of their lives under communism in the Hunedoara region can be briefly summed up as follows: this region was overwhelmingly rural before 1945, with a small but significant portion of the economy dedicated to mining of coal, salt, as well as precious metals (gold in particular).¹³ In addition to agriculture, the predominant force in the economy, other areas included artisanship (workshops, small factories), and social and administrative services (in the urban centers of Deva, Hateg, Hunedoara, Orastie, and Simeria).

The region was transformed dramatically by the communist regime, which identified these cities as important centers of urbanization and industrialization. One of the largest steel plants in Romania was built in Hunedoara, accompanied by the heavy emphasis on mining in the region for the materials (coal and iron ore) needed in that industry. Petrochemical and clothing

manufacturing (from leather tanneries to textiles), as well as food processing plants followed.

Deva and Hunedoara developed into relatively large cities over the first two decades of communist rule, demanding new types of services (local hospitals, larger school systems, other public infrastructure services such as roads). While in the 1940s all ambitious pupils could attend one high school in the whole region, by the 1970s, each of these cities boasted several high schools, some with a technical or vocational profile and others geared towards preparing students for university education. By the 1970s, the profile of the region had changed from overwhelmingly rural to significantly urban. For instance, the most important national center for training Olympic gymnasts was in Deva, and a few other athletic centers of national prominence in sports such as tennis and handball, also developed in this area.

The majority of our subjects were thus participants in a very dynamic set of processes that radically transformed this region. These women mostly started in the countryside or at least still have close relatives (usually parents) who lived there, and thus are still intimately aware of rural conditions of living and the political problems that have confronted rural inhabitants since the beginning of communism. For instance, the process of collectivization was for some a personal reality, for others a familiar problem.¹⁴

Work and Care: Fundamental Elements of Everyday Citizenship

This paper focuses on one aspect of these women's lives that was clearly reshaped by the communist regime and that has come to deeply influence how they think of themselves as citizens. Upon being asked what was different today from the communist period, nearly all of our respondents who were in their fifties or older talked about work. A common response was that 'back then, everyone had to work and this gave us a great deal of pride.'¹⁵ Women, thus, came to see themselves tied to the state in terms of the individual obligation to have a paid job.

They regarded working as an essential element of their identity as a member of the community in which they live.

This apparently simple answer, which might seem like indoctrination and blind-sidedness, needs to be unpacked. To begin with, the word ‘work’ has many synonyms in Romanian, and they quite specifically connote different kinds of activities. The word ‘munca’, a Hungarian neologism, simply means work in a rather generic sense—working at home [‘munci casnice’], working in the fields [‘munca la cimp’]. This word in fact is seldom used to speak of salaried work. One might say ‘merge la munca’, meaning ‘she’s going to work’ about a woman walking down the street in the morning to her office or factory. But our respondents, like most native speakers of Romanian, used the word to speak generically about being busy with various chores, as in ‘muncesc de dimineata pina seara’, [‘I work from morning ‘til night’]. The word ‘treaba’, or ‘a face treaba’ is used also to describe chores at home.

When our subjects described the transformation of Romanian society under communism in relation to work, they generally used the words ‘lucru’ or ‘servici’, which means a paid job or service: “We are tributaries to the communist regime, some doctrines stay stuck in your head...The generation of my parents [the speaker is 50 years old] felt better [under communism] because they came from poverty and communism gave them that certainty that they would always have a job [servuciu].”¹⁶ Another subject spoke about the communist regime in similar terms: “everyone had a job [serviciu], a house, you didn’t have to go around to find one, the factory, the place where you worked [lucrai], gave you one.”¹⁷

By using these terms so precisely, our subjects were in fact dividing the narratives of their lives between the private and the public in a self-conscious way. The familial/homebound chores being described by ‘munca’ and ‘treaba’ encompassed everything from washing dishes

and helping children with homework to tilling the fields and carrying water from the well. In other words, these women generally look at their own daily and essential contributions to the household as naturalized givens that they and those around them take for granted as being women's work. They seldom problematized the gender division of household chores.¹⁸

Instead, some in fact praised their husbands or fathers for helping at home with cleaning or shopping, as if to take on such chores for a man would be a difficult matter and therefore praiseworthy.¹⁹ In fact, many of these women clearly helped produce the gender division in household chores themselves, when they said things like: "I wouldn't let my husband in the kitchen, he makes a big mess and then I need to clean after him."²⁰

Thus, while they accept their role in the home as primary care takers of virtually all elements of the household (moving furniture and cleaning the carpets seem to be two chores that most women agree are 'men's work'), most of our respondents see themselves essentially as valuable members of their communities because they also perform paid work. This element of their sense of citizenship comes out in a few parts of the interviews. For example, we asked all participants whether they would be satisfied to stay at home if their partners or spouses would bring in enough money. Not one of the women over 50 who are currently employed (or were before they retired) answered yes.²¹ The only respondents who answered yes were three younger women who grew up in the post-communist period.²² For the older generation, all of whom have been clearly engaged in the double or triple burden of household caretaker, parent, and salaried employee, the notion that staying at home would have some value (free time, less stress) seems nonsense.

In fact most women just laughed at the question. They simply could not see themselves as homemakers:

I would find it very strange to depend on someone else...My mom was a home-maker and I thought it was strange she had to depend on dad who, fortunately, was an extraordinary man, so mom didn't suffer from this. But I have seen many who suffered because they had a difficult husband...So [having a job] gives me a different sense of faith in my own powers, and a different perspective. Just to stay locked up in the home and see only... Yes, definitely, a woman has to go to work and have her own self-assurance.²³

The value these women ascribe to paid work is tied to both their evaluation of the communist regime and also to their own personal life path. Ideologically, they seem to buy into the concept of the obligation to work that the communist regime in fact ardently pushed for through propaganda and legislation. During the communist period, all persons over 18 were obligated to work, be in military service, or be in school, and show proof of it, or they could be picked up by the police for vagrancy and put in jail. Intellectuals have decried this policy as a totalitarian form of controlling and mobilizing individuals, while denying them basic personal freedoms.

It seems the average worker, as most of our respondents were,²⁴ thought otherwise, or at least that is how they choose to remember the policies of the communist regime. We heard the phrases 'there was more respect for the law', 'people feared the law' and 'everyone had to work, and everyone could find a place to work', all of them in contrast with descriptions of lawlessness and disarray in the post-communist period, sometimes in relation also to descriptions of street violence and immorality.²⁵

We also heard women describe the life of a homemaker as 'closed in' and losing touch with reality.²⁶ When they spoke about the rewards of working in a paid job, money was not the most important issue they brought up. They spoke about working outside of the home as something personally fulfilling—being able to be a full human being by virtue of socializing with other adults during the daytime, as well as doing something that has some public/social

utility:

First of all, [a woman] needs to step outside the home, to change the environment that will slowly and surely turn you stupid. I see my friends who were rich and quit their jobs, they have become very unhappy, even though they have lots of money.²⁷

Some women showed professional ambition as well—being the best at what they do, wanting to be recognized and appreciated for their knowledge and skills, as the following quote shows:

If you work you are an autonomous human being. I've advised those young women who sought my opinion to find the independence of a profession that would make them proud and in which they can develop their aptitudes. I think any material dependency brings with it humiliation; thus, I always thought that professional fulfillment, in addition to, of course, the familial one, are two aspects that can develop in harmony, and for a woman it is a special thing to have a profession that she can be pleased with and in which she can take pride and see that others value her.²⁸

But others projected their homegrown caregiver role into the public sphere. Teachers and medical personnel in particular spoke of their desire to take care of children or the sick, evaluating their own value as a working person through the impact they had on others in need: "I wanted to save the world", said one subject. Another, who spent her working years (some in an isolated mountain village) as a teacher, spoke of teaching as "my life": "our job was to visit other schools and pupils, who needed our help...and when people saw I lent a hand in everything, either with finding wood or other supplies, they started to depend on me."²⁹

These stories were interwoven with many other aspects of the interviewees personal, daily lives, as well as their thinking about the local communities in which they spend most of their time. For instance, in speaking about the needs of their city/village, the deficiencies and qualities of their political local and national leaders, they often described questions of taking care of the community in a parental fashion. When asked what she would focus on as a local administrator in Hunedoara, one subject responded: "I would like to create jobs...I would take

care of the parks, of kindergartens and schools, to make sure there is warmth—also spiritual—and I would take care of the retired population, [...] of their pensions.”³⁰

One of the main deficiencies described by many interviewees was the failure of local and national leader in generating jobs to replace those lost at the end of 1989 and to uphold the narrative of pride in work well done. This attitude regarding ‘creating jobs’ was also a reflection of nostalgia for the communist regime’s ability to deliver the social goods these women had come to depend on, many of which vanished after 1989. With the passage of time and the current dissolution of welfare programs, the authoritarian patriarchal social welfare programs of the communist period appear less like a legacy of oppression, and more like one of care taking.³¹

Conclusion

Overall, the narratives of these women in connection with the communist and post-communist past showed how deeply in fact the communist experience shaped their sense of citizenship in fundamentally gendered ways. Very few of them challenged the double burden—women’s role as main actors in home making and parenting—of their daily lives at home. In this regard, they demonstrated how ineffectual and in fact superficial the attempts of the communist regime were to challenge patriarchy at home in the ways critiqued by Friedrich Engels and Aleksandra Kollontai. By the same token, these women’s clear separation between ‘munca’ and ‘lucru’, between the unpaid labor of care giving and the ability to derive a sense of personal autonomy, of social worth, or doing something publicly useful, also shows just how important the new ideology of the communist regime was in reshaping how individuals thought of themselves in relation to the state. The party might have become a despised notion for many people by the 1980s, but some of the fundamental concepts of the communist state, that work

and workers form the backbone of the economy and society clearly had a powerful impact on how citizenship came to be defined. In women's case, this definition seems to have become in many cases an extension of their caregiver roles as women, even as women themselves were quick to separate care giving in the home from professionalized forms.

Endnotes

¹ See T.H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950. For engagements of a feminist kind with the concept of modern citizenship see Nira Yuval-Davis, "Women, Citizenship, and Difference." *Feminist Review* 57, (1997): 4-27; Ruth Lister, *Citizenship: Feminist Perspectives*. New York: New York University Press, 1998.

² By this I mean that the totalitarian project of the communist regimes in both controlling and mobilizing the lives of all individuals dwelling in their realm can only be compared to the zeal of the fascist regimes in doing so. The issue of comparing the two regimes has been fraught with a great deal of controversy and I do not wish to engage in that debate. For this paper, I take communist regimes to stand out primarily because of their multi-generational duration that has contributed to producing more sustained long-term changes in social and political behavior.

³ See Ruth A. Miller, *The Limits of Bodily Integrity. Abortion, Adultery, and Rape Legislation in Comparative Perspective*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Press, 2007; Patrizia Albanese, *Mothers of the Nation: Women, Families, and Nationalism in Twentieth-Century Europe*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006; Maria Bucur, *Eugenics and Modernization in Interwar Romania*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002; Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Duplicity. Controlling Reproduction in Ceausescu's Romania*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998; Melissa Feinberg, *Elusive Equality: Gender, Citizenship, and the Limits of Democracy in Czechoslovakia, 1918–1950*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006.

⁴ Sharon Wolchik and Alfred G. Meyer, eds, *Women, State and Party in Eastern Europe*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985.

⁵ Jill Massino and Shana Penn, eds, *Gender Politics and Everyday Life in State Socialist Eastern and Central Europe*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009; Malgorzata Fidelis, *Women, Communism, and Industrialization in Postwar Poland*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010; see also "Forum: Is 'Communist Feminism' a Contradictio in Terminis?" *Aspasia*, 1 (2007); Maria Bucur, "Gendering Dissent: Of Bodies and Minds, Survival and Opposition under Communism," in Angela Brintlinger and Natasha Kolchevska, eds, *Beyond Little Vera*. Bloomington, IN: Slavica, 2008, 16-32.

⁶ Lynne Haney, *Inventing the Needy. Gender and the Politics of Welfare in Hungary*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002.

⁷ Stefania Mihailescu, *Din istoria feminismului romanesc. Din istoria feminismului romanesc. Studii si antologie de texte (1929-1948)*. Iasi: Polirom, 2006; Maria Bucur, "Calypso Botez: Gender Difference and the Limits of Pluralism in Interwar Romania." *Jahrbücher für Geschichte und Kultur Südosteuropas*, 3 (2001): 63-78; Mihaela Miroiu, *Drumul catre autonomie. Teorii politice feministe*. Iasi: Polirom, 2004.

⁸ Bucur, "Calypso Botez."

⁹ Tanya Dunlap, "Maria Bailuescu," in Francisca de Haan, Krassimira Daskalova, and Anna Loutfi, eds, *Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminism in Central, Eastern, and South Eastern Europe. 19th and 20th Centuries*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2006; Bucur, *Eugenics and Modernization*; Maria Bucur, "In Praise of Wellborn Mothers. On Eugenics and Gender Roles in Interwar Romania," *East European Politics and Societies* 9, no. 1 (winter 1995): 123-42.

¹⁰ Maria Bucur, "From Private Philanthropy to Public Institutions. The Rockefeller Foundation and Public Health in Interwar Romania," *Romanian Civilization* 4, no. 2 (summer 1995): 47-60.

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- 11 Maria Bucur, “Fallen Women and Necessary Evils: Eugenicist Cultural Representations of and Legal Battles over Prostitution in Interwar Romania,” in Marius Turda and Paul Weindling, eds, *Blood and Homeland. Eugenics and Racial Nationalism in Central and Southeast Europe, 1900-1940*. Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2006.
- 12 Vladimir Solonari, *Purifying the Nation: Population Exchange and Ethnic Cleansing in Nazi-Allied Romania*. Baltimore and Washington, DC: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009.
- 13 Dimitrie Gusti, *Enciclopedia României*, vols. I-IV. Bucharest, 1938, 1943; Mihail Hașeganu, ed., *Geografia economică a R.P.R.* București, 1957.
- 14 This is an important sub-topic of the study; we will be developing it further through interviews with men from the same region.
- 15 E.g., interview D. Lazarescu.
- 16 Interview C. Pasculie.
- 17 Interview D. Lazarescu.
- 18 E.g., interviews with Viorica; M. Vegh.
- 19 E.g., interview M. Popescu; A. Pasare.
- 20 E.g., interview E. Motonia.
- 21 See focus groups 1-3.
- 22 See interview with R and T. Vis.
- 23 Interview I. Raduli.
- 24 We had a few teachers and doctors among our respondents, but the majority of the interviewees would be best described as having lower class status in terms of education and employment.
- 25 E.g., interview M. Tomdan.
- 26 E.g., interview M. Sandru and quote above from I. Raduli.
- 27 Interview L.
- 28 Interview D. Lambropoulos.
- 29 Interview E. Barsan.
- 30 Interview M. Popescu.
- 31 For the best analysis of ‘state patriarchy’ in Ceausescu’s Romania see Miroiu, *Drumul*.

