

## Creating and feeding discourses on political representation of women. Can MPs and NGOs join hands on quotas?

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**Abstract:** *In this paper I reflect on the discourses created around political representation by MPs and feminist NGOs associated with the Gender Equality Coalition in their endeavor to strengthen women's representation in the 2016 Parliamentary elections. My aim is twofold. On one hand, I seek to draw on the expanding scholarly literature on gender or women and political representation in order to illuminate and critique the discourses of MPs and NGOs from the Gender Equality Coalition. Here I draw heavily from Pitkin's (1967) classic conceptualization of political representation and the critical analysis developed by Sarah Childs (2008). My purpose here is not to reflect substantially on these works or to contribute to the development of social theory so much as to use these works to better understand current political debates. On the other hand, I try to identify commonalities and differences in discourses of MPs and NGOs on descriptive and substantive representation. The current round of political discussion of gender quotas has just begun and the proposal for fair representation of women is under debate in Romanian Parliament. I believe that a critical reflection on the aims and arguments of the NGOs and MPs may reveal whether collective action is possible and it can tell us more about its limitations. At the same time this discussion may help identify some potential inner weakness of their arguments and invite the parties to strengthen them during the coming public and political debate.*

**Key words:** descriptive and substantive political representation • gender quotas • mobilization • Gender Equality Coalition

### Introduction

Women in Romania are under-represented politically at both the national and local levels. Electoral reforms did not help redress trend in women's representation nor did they impact the number of women as elected officials despite the change of electoral

system. Feminist scholars and activists troubled by this situation have sought to explain it as a result of traditional gender roles, gender biases in the educational system, the distinctive socio-economic obstacles facing women, or the patriarchal character of the dominant political party ideologies (Băluță, 2006; Ghebre, Tătărâm, Crețoiu, 2005; Miroiu, 2004; Popescu, 2004; Pasti, 2003). Yet rarely have institutional political factors, such as the electoral system or the structure and recruitment practices of the political parties, come under the scrutiny of consistent research and public debates in post-communist countries (Montgomery, 2004; Pasti, 2003; Miroiu, 2004; Popescu, 2004). My aim in this paper is to focus attention on precisely these factors, and to suggest that attention to them can point the way towards a new political coalition linking MPs and feminist NGOs interested in promoting greater political representation of women. The facts are plain. In the first decade after Communism, women made up only around 4% of the Romanian Parliament, and as Table 1 demonstrates, they continue to be poorly represented in spite of minimal increases in recent years.

**Table 1: The evolution of women’s mandates in Romanian Parliament**

Legislature	% of women’s mandates	Overall number of MPs
1990-1992	4,9%;	515
1992-1996	3.7%	484
1996-2000 closed party lists	4,7%	486
2000- 2004 closed party lists	<b>10,8%</b>	485
2004-2008 closed party lists	10,2%	466
<b>2008-2012</b> mixed system with uninominal candidates <sup>1</sup>	9.8%	470
2012- mixed system with uninominal candidates	<b>11.5%</b>	<b>588</b>

Reference: Permanent Electoral Authority (Autoritatea Electorală Permanentă), „The evolution of women’s representation in Romanian Parliament” Report, February 2013

<sup>1</sup> In 2008, the electoral system in Romania was changed from a proportional representation system into a uninominal/mixed system. Law no 35/2008 proposed “an original type of uninominal” as it cannot be fully considered majority system because it includes proportionality provisions in regards to the overall number of votes and MP mandates. The election is conducted in single-member constituencies and candidates need an absolute majority of the vote in order to win a constituency seat. Overall, each uninominal constituency has one corresponding MP mandate/seat. The distribution of seats in each chamber is carried out by proportional representation among parties winning at least five percent of the nationwide vote, or first place in a minimum number of constituency seats (three in the Senate, six in the Chamber).

With the party lists adopted once more for the 2016 legislative elections, there are no high hopes for a substantial change in women's presence into Parliament, considering previous experience of party lists.

Obviously the persistent exclusion of women from political offices, at the national and the local level, has many social, economic and cultural dimensions, and feminists interested in gender equality need to address all of these at the level of policy. At the same time, electoral rules may be more easily bent in order to create opportunities for women in politics, and such opportunities may open up the possibility of more egalitarian social and economic policies. I believe that a novel legislative proposal addressing gender quotas may be provocative enough, in a context where previous legislative attempts were unsuccessful in the face of criticism and opposition, to move the cause of gender political equality forward. And two recent developments in the local political and activist field offer a particularly promising occasion for reflecting on legislative political representation of women in Romania and 'narratives' of women MPs and feminist activists. In what follows I **reflect on the discourses created around political representation by MPs and feminist NGOs associated with the Gender Equality Coalition<sup>1</sup> in their endeavor to strengthen women's representation in the 2016 Parliamentary elections.** My aim is twofold. On one hand, I seek to draw on the expanding scholarly literature on gender or women and political representation in order to illuminate and critique the discourses of MPs and NGOs from the Gender Equality Coalition.<sup>2</sup> Here I draw heavily from Pitkin's (1967) classic conceptualization of political representation and the critical analysis developed by Sarah Childs (2008). My purpose here is not to reflect substantially on these works or to contribute to the development of social theory so much as to use these works to better understand current political debates. On the other hand, I try to identify commonalities and differences in their discourses on descriptive and substantive representation. The current round of political discussion of gender quotas has just begun and the proposal for fair representation of women is under debate in Romanian Parliament. For a number of months various NGOs and informal groups have mobilized to support electoral reform and to create other

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<sup>1</sup> Not all the NGOs within the Gender Equality Coalition assume a feminist identity, some embrace women's rights, others gender equality. As women's rights and gender equality do not oppose feminism, I chose to simplify language.

<sup>2</sup> For more data on the Coalition and its objectives, see <http://ongen.ro/coalitia-pentru-egalitate-de-gen-si-a-marit-numarul-de-organizatii-membre/>.

electoral opportunities. There is widespread and growing public criticism concerning the substance of the representatives and their responsiveness.

This is an important moment for advocates of women's political equality. Both MPs and NGOs associated with Gender Equality Coalition may create not only the necessary public and political context for representation to be interpreted in terms of gender fairness, but to actually create the premises to achieve the goal of getting more women into politics through collective action.

### **The importance of women's presence in office**

#### *Conceptualizing political representation*

Political representation of women has been an important area for theory production and consistent research since the middle of the last century (Paxton, Kunovich, Hughes, 2007, p. 264). There is a wide and engaging literature on gender and politics addressing various topics from voting behavior, obstacles women face when entering politics, strategies used to increase women's political representation, the role of women's movements, policy outcomes when women enter politics etc. Pamela Paxton, Sheri Kunovich and Melanie M. Hughes (in a 2007 article, *Gender in Politics*) when selectively reviewed the literature on gender in politics focusing on women's formal political participation, they notice that „our knowledge of women in politics is still expanding. Indeed, the literature on women in politics could be described as exploding.” (Paxton, Kunovich, Hughes, 2007, p. 264).

Contemporary political analysis and debates concerning political representation are usually grounded in the work of Hanna F. Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (1967), however critically revised by subsequent approaches. For the objectives assumed within the present article both the works of Pitkin and the critical analysis developed by Sarah Childs in her 2008 volume about British politics, *Women and British Party Politics. Descriptive, Substantive and Symbolic Representation*, stand as two important theoretical references. Childs embraces Pitkin's typology and proposes a feminist critique or reading of her arguments and depictions of representation. It is not the aim of this paper to reflect substantially on Pitkin's and Child's work, but to create the theoretical grounding for my case study.

According to Pitkin, representation is “the making present *in some sense* of something which is nevertheless *not* present literally or in fact” (Pitkin, 1967, p. 8-9). I believe it is

widely known that Pitkin proposes a four-part typology of representation: formalistic, descriptive, substantial and symbolic. For the purpose of the paper I shall briefly present this typology.

*Formal representation* refers to the institutional rules and procedures governing elections, thus “the crucial criterion becomes elections” (Pitkin, 1967, p. 43).

*Descriptive representation* refers to the correspondence between representative’s characteristics and the represented (politicians and citizens) as representatives ‘stand for’ them (Pikin, 1967, p. 61). Taking into account the extensive body of literature dedicated to the ‘politics of presence’, I want to add that Pitkin is doubtful in regards to this type of representation, as she says: “we tend to assume that people’s characteristics are a guide to the actions they will take, and we are concerned with the characteristics of our legislators for just this reason. But it is no simple correlation; the best descriptive representative is not necessarily the best representative for activity or government” (Pikin, 1967, p. 89). This perspective was vividly criticized by feminist theoreticians who provided powerful arguments in favor of descriptive representation centered on the politics of presence (Phillips, 1995; Mansbridge, 1999; Young, 2002; Dovi, 2002).

*Substantive representation* refers to the congruence between representatives’ actions and the interests of the represented as representatives act ‘on behalf of others’, ‘in their place’, ‘in their interest’: “he must act in their interest, and this means that he must not normally come into conflict with their wishes. (Pitkin, 1967, p. 166) This ‘acting for’ type of representation is Pitkin’s preferred conception (also see Childs, 2008, p. 97; Schwindt-Bayer, Mishler, 2005). Under the umbrella of substantive representation there is an extensive and important body of international and national feminist literature dedicated to women’ political interests or gender political interests addressing: a.) commonalities and differences among women and their interests (Butler, 1998; Sapiro, 1998; Phillips, 1998; Diamond, Hartsock, 1998; Grünberg, 1998) b.) typology of interests (Molyneux, 1985, 2003; Thenjiwe, 2003; Peterson, A.S. Runyan, 1994; Pringle, Watson, 1998; Miroiu, 2004; Pasti, 2003; Magyari Vincze, 2002; Băluță, 2007, 2013) c.) the ideological utility of the concept of interests (Diamond, Hartsock, 1998) d). the need to redefine the concept of interests (Jónasdóttir, 1988).

*Symbolic representation* refers to the represented’s feelings of being fairly represented. According to Pitkin, “symbols, too, are often said to represent something, to

make it present by their presence, although it is not really present in fact” (Pitkin, 1967, p. 92).

Researchers have usually dwelled on descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation, rarely have they operationalized all its four dimensions (also see Schwindt-Bayer, Mishler, 2005). I am interested here in the connections between descriptive, substantive and formal representation. More specifically, the question is this: can rules governing descriptive representation in legislatures—quotas—enhance the robustness of political debate in ways that make possible social policies promoting gender equality (substantive representation). Obviously, gender equality requires much more than the descriptive representation of women. But just as obviously, it is hard to imagine political processes being responsive to the interests of women if women are absent from these processes<sup>1</sup>.

#### *Normative arguments in favor of women’s presence*

There are some important normative prevailing arguments (though possibly not the only ones) when discussing the case of more women into politics (an increase of their number or gender parity). In this section I will mostly list them, and not go into critical reflection about their substance.

One major source when addressing the topic is the work of Anne Phillips. In *The Politics of Presence* (1995), she elaborates on three interesting entry points (Phillips, 1995, p. 40-43). The first one introduces the *symbolic significance* of who is present, thus by including those previously excluded, political institutions become “more legitimate, more obviously and visibly representative of those they pretend to represent” (Phillips, 1995, p.40). This argument reminds us of symbolic representation as conceptualized by Pitkin. A second one puts an emphasis on the need to *tackle exclusions rising from party representation* focusing on the politics of ideas. Outside the electoral campaign, issues not previously discussed with citizens may come out on the political agenda, as not everything can be debated. Taking into account the relative autonomy of representatives, his or her gender may turn out to be important when new issues emerge. A third argument discusses about a *politics of transformation*- ones some preferences have not been yet expressed and ideas have not reached the political agenda, more women into politics can substantially change political practices and

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Jeffrey Isaac for his substantive suggestions and correlations.



agenda. Some other demands rely on the concept of *justice* and on *values and experiences* women would bring into politics, the latter turning society into a more compassionate and caring one<sup>1</sup> (Phillips, 1991, p.62-63). According to Ballington there is also an issue of authenticity as "the development of any political agenda that does not include the perspectives, views and experiences of those who will be affected is not credible" (Ballington, 2005, p. 24). The *justice argument* is understood as a matter of fairness and obstacles women face: "it is unfair for men to monopolize representation. If there were no obstacles operating to keep certain groups of people out of political life, then we should expect positions of political life to be randomly distributed between both sexes. (Phillips, 1998, p. 229)

Another argument introduces the *role model effect*. More women in politics will alter the perception of an all-male domain, will raise women's self-esteem and may encourage others to step into politics (Phillips, 1995, p. 63). I need to add two comments on the role model issue. Despite the fact it is important to have individuals as life or career models, Phillips notices that the argument "has no particular purchase on politics *per se*" as it is not directly connected with democracy. (Phillips, 1995, p. 63) At the same time, due to stereotypical media portrayals of women and to symbolic annihilation, one can hardly argue there is a profound positive intersection between descriptive and symbolic representation of women (Childs, 2008)<sup>2</sup>.

Phillips also supports the argument of *political realism* correlated with interests<sup>3</sup> that women have and that would be overlooked in the absence of women politicians (Phillips, 1995; 1998). Yet, I should mention, as the idea has a rather controversial character, that Anne Phillips does reflect extensively on the issue of particular interests of women and additional questions that complicate the argument, for instance: do women share common interests? Do they share only distinctive interests from men? What about differences among women? and so on<sup>4</sup> (Phillips, 1995).

<sup>1</sup> Also see the discussion of Anne Phillips on "maternal feminism" and its echoes into politics (Phillips, 1995, p.73-76)

<sup>2</sup> For a broader local analysis of gender, media and politics, see Băluță, Oana, 2015, *Gen, politică și mass-media: reprezentări stereotipizate. Cum tragem linia?* in Sfera Politicii, Sfera Politicii nr. 1 (183), March-April 2015, p. 105-119. <http://www.sferapoliticii.ro/sfera/183/pdf/183.10.Baluta.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> For an extended analysis of women's interests see Băluță, Oana, 2013, *Feminism modern reflexiv*, Tritonic Publishing House.

<sup>4</sup> For a more in-depth reflection on the topic of women's interests or gender interests, see Băluță, Oana, 2013, *Feminism modern reflexiv*, Tritonic Publishing House, Bucharest; Băluță, Oana, 2007, *Gen și interese politice. La intersecția dintre teorie, cercetare și viața cotidiană*, in Băluță, Oana; Dragolea, Alina; Iancu, Alice, *Gen și interese politice*, Polirom Publishing House, Iași.

Even if more descriptive representation stands as an argument for increasing levels of democratization within institutions, debates, *democracy* turned out to be an argument in itself as it “by definition, cannot afford to be gender blind” (Ballington, 2005, p. 24).

We know that women’s mobilization has been crucial to advance a gender friendly political agenda and this is true for expanding descriptive representation as well. According to Shvedova, one of the important reasons in increasing women’s parliamentary representation has been “the impact on women’s organizations inside and outside political parties” (Shvedova, 2005, p. 38). A dialogue between women politicians and women in NGOs is one predicator of success. **Alongside this path of communication it is important, in my opinion, to better understand the motivation driving each part into action, that is to understand what type of political representation do women MPs and feminist NGOs embrace or favor: descriptive and/ or substantive?** It goes without saying that when women’s NGOs mobilize to support more women into politics they assume more substantial representation would follow. However when it comes to women MPs arguing for better representation, more substantial representation is not ‘naturally’ attached to their endeavor.

We may presume that women MPs will advance more arguments favoring descriptive representation as it is in their best interest to alter electoral rules and create more electoral opportunities for themselves. Gender quotas are an end in itself.

We may presume that feminist NGOs will support substantial representation and thus they will advance the betterment of women’s interests/rights/needs. Gender quotas are a means only.

One may argue the above demarcation is rather artificial as accountability is a crucial aspect that accompanies representation and it is conceived in terms of policies, programs and ideas. Nevertheless without any clear binding mechanisms<sup>1</sup> the two assumptions may not be that artificial. How is dialogue possible if one part creates only electoral opportunities while the other one tries to create opportunities for a gender friendly political agenda? I think this is one legitimate question.

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<sup>1</sup> The relationship between the representatives and those represented is important and it is also debated, and while considering the autonomy of the first, we cannot dismiss the latter from acting responsively. This issue of accountability is highly important in my opinion especially in a context of growing criticism in regards to MPs. And judging by street protest, it is the case of Romania as well.



It is obvious that I perceive the two approaches as slightly different in terms of **aims**. One can hardly argue that gender quotas perceived as means or as an end don't open different doors and generate different expectations.

### **Authentic or just a wanna be collective action?**

This case study is based on a micro document analysis of one recent legislative proposal<sup>1</sup> supporting gender quotas and A Call to Action launched by Gender Equality Coalition in December 2015. On the basis of content analysis structured alongside a broad guiding axis of *what* and *how* (see table below), this section aims to reveal the discursive preferences of the two parties in regards to political representation. The two questions organizing the chart are meant not only to give an insight into the arguments supporting the aims of NGOs and MPs, but to also better clarify their 'cause'. I shall analyze the legislative proposal and the Call for Action by delineating two main axis: *commonality* and *specificity*. These axis will demarcate both common arguments, aims and particular differences between the two. The main purpose of the chart is to clarify whether the *what* and *how* axis opens doors for collective action in regards to women's representation. At the same time, the table below is a good instrument to further reflect more on both the intersection of these preferred arguments with what representation stands for and with normative arguments previously discussed.

The legislative proposal presented as an initiative of the Liberal Party s – though supported by other political groups- comes to amend and complete the process of electing the representatives for the two chambers of the Parliament. The MPs also elaborated a comparative distinctive proposal focusing on local elections, as it is outside the reach of the article I did not include it in the analysis. The two proposals were preceded by a debate that took place at the Parliament on the 17<sup>th</sup> of December 2015, an event that reunited speakers from political parties, The Gender Equality Coalition, academia etc. One day before, on the 16<sup>th</sup> of December, The Call to Action initiated by the Gender Equality Coalition was publicly presented during an event held in Bucharest that grouped together more representatives of the civil society then politicians. Even if the two events and actions happened almost simultaneously they were not meant to be coordinated as such. I believe that a critical reflection on the aims and arguments of the

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<sup>1</sup> Legislative proposal to amend and complete Law no 208/2015 on the election of the Senate and Chamber of Deputies, as well as on the organization and functioning of the Permanent Electoral Authority.

NGOs and MPs may reveal whether collective action is possible and it can tell us more about its limitations. At the same time this discussion may help identify some potential inner weakness of their arguments and invite the parties to strengthen them during the coming public and political debate.

**Table 2 - What and Why?**

	<b>Legislative proposal- MPs</b> Reference: original documents handed at the debate	<b>Call to Action -Gender Equality Coalition</b> Reference: <a href="http://ongen.ro/apel-la-actiune-2016-an-electoral-cum-vor-fi-reprezentate-femeile-in-alegerile-locale-si-parlamentare/">http://ongen.ro/apel-la-actiune-2016-an-electoral-cum-vor-fi-reprezentate-femeile-in-alegerile-locale-si-parlamentare/</a>
<b>What?</b>	<b>30% Gender quota</b> as a condition to validate electoral lists of candidates	<b>30% Women quota applied to eligible positions or as zipper system (one woman, one men)-</b> as an instrument political parties have to express democratic values
		<b>Additional party strategies to support women-</b> empowering women’s party organizations and their role in the internal decision making, training programs for women candidates (to alter pressure coming from double burden and different access to resources); politics of parity (no more than 60% men or women) in all party actives
		<b>Include women specific issues in the 2016 competing electoral programs</b> - the 2016 elections must not avoid or exclude “problems that women citizens confront with” (care infrastructure for children, elderly and disabled, multiple discrimination, support services for victims of domestic violence, poor access to contraceptives and reproductive health services, feminization of poverty, institutionalization of double burden, lack of gender budgeting) <b>Political campaign without discrimination-</b> general principles guiding political parties, men and women candidates <b>to refrain from</b> 1. discourses, images, messages that promote hate on the basis of various criteria (race, color, nationality, ethnicity, gender, age etc.), 2. Stereotypes and gender prejudices; <b>respect human dignity</b> during electoral campaign no matter race, color, nationality, ethnicity, gender, age etc.; <b>impose sanctions.</b>

		<b>Demands for to political parties</b> to respect national legislative provisions and “to substantially represent women’s interests”
<b>Why?</b>	<b>Juridical arguments-</b> Constitution, equal opportunities legislation, positive actions- financial rewarding parties that support women, CEDAW, UN- MDGs, European recommendations	<b>Juridical arguments-</b> Constitution, equal opportunities legislation.
	<b>Alignment to standards</b> of European states and consolidated democracies	
	<b>Expectations and requests coming from society</b> concerning substantial change of the political class	
	Integration of all <b>human resources</b> to tackle the political crisis and division between political class and citizens	
	<b>Family values and gender balance</b> within society as incentives for a real symmetrical representation within democratic institutions	
	<b>Mirroring one practice of Executive European institutions</b> that introduced gender quotas	
	<b>Mirroring the national Cabinet</b> where the presence of women was considered during formation process	
	<b>Quantitative and educational arguments-</b> Large number of women citizens, high number of women graduates that do not mirror Parliament	<b>Justice argument-</b> women score more than 50% as citizens, and it is <i>unfair</i> to reach less 15% as elected representatives

	<b>Global representation index - Romania is at the bottom</b>	<b>European representation index- Romania is at the bottom</b>
	Gender quotas as one <b>global mechanism</b> embraced by various states	
		<b>Women's underrepresentation affects substantial representation</b> – poor inclusion on the political agenda of the problems women confront with (domestic violence, sexual violence, patriarchal values in the family and community, disrespect for sexual and reproductive rights, poor care infrastructure, gender discrimination on the labor market, including wage discrimination, lack of coherent work-life balance policies etc.)
		<b>Specific arguments</b> depending on the identified problem/specific women's issues
		<b>Democracy or inclusion argument-</b> decision making should be more inclusive and democratic

Once information is organized into a table, the content reveals specific preferences and approaches of the two parties. I shall discuss the above in terms of commonalities and specificities as previously mentioned.

*Commonality axis*

As we shall see, there are some important common points when addressing the why and what.

**What.** Both parties demand quotas, however while MPs prefer a more 'gender neutral language', the Coalition speaks of quotas for women and formulates its request in terms of eligible positions and zipper system. We already know that quotas in itself, without additional mechanisms, do not automatically have more women in elected positions as outcome. I believe that the two approaches also reveal that NGOs and MPs have different degrees of autonomy. MPs' choice for neutral language may diminish criticism inside political parties (usually reluctant to quotas), yet how they formulated the quotas includes no guarantees for a viable 2016 change. MPs have just begun to pave the road for fair political representation of women. It is an important step within a sequence as it fosters debates, and forces political parties to choose sides and arguments and, in fact, somehow, challenges them to frame political representation. I shall give an example to

clarify my remarks. Imagine political parties will put an emphasis on women's lack of qualifications or on citizens' who just refuse to vote women<sup>1</sup>. If so, I believe political parties will just try to move the focus from their responsibility during the recruitment process and some careful analysis of former parliamentary elections will deconstruct the arguments of political parties. Improving descriptive representation depend on political parties to make sex another legitimate criterion when selecting their candidates.

**Why.** We also notice a common ground in terms of reasons to support descriptive representation: juridical input generously presented by MPs as we notice in the Table above, the justice argument- more adequately shaped by NGOs in terms of fairness- and the European representation index with Romania at its bottom. While NGOs take European Union as main referent, MPs arguments also appeal to international ones, like UN Millennium Development Goals and Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (ratified by Romania). It is the case that international actors have been an important incentive for legislative changes in Romania. Mihaela Miroiu calls this top-down emancipation, room service- feminism (Miroiu, 2004). Yet, it is not the case to consider this action room-service again as there is no mandatory request for descriptive representation coming from any international actor, be it EU or UN and, this time there is indeed organized local demand for more women in politics coming from the Gender Equality Coalition.

### *Specificity axis*

**What.** The what-question reveals clear cut preferences. If MPs put an emphasis on gender quotas, the Call to Action has larger demands varying from descriptive and substantive to electoral campaign practices and additional strategies parties may use to support women's political representation. We see that MPs have one target only- a legislative one, while the aims of NGOs are more extensive in their demands for policy change and campaigning practices. It is understandable as I compare one legislative proposal with a position paper document on political representation elaborated by The Gender Equality Coalition. Until the present, NGOs in Romania have organized and

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<sup>1</sup> Romanian citizens who refuse to cast their vote to women in legislative elections stand as a poor argument considering women's representation in the European Parliament that exceeds 30% (Băluță, 2014a). The descriptive representation of women in the European Parliament was 28.57% between 2007 and 2009, 36% between 2009 and 2014 and is currently 31%. See "European Parliament. Results of the 2014 European Elections", <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/20150201PVL00021/Previous-elections>.

mobilized their resources to support substantive representation. I am not aware of any other previous Coalition striving for an increase of women's number in politics, only for solitary interventions of NGOs<sup>1</sup>. Yet, in Romania, human rights and feminist NGOs joined efforts to support substantive representation of women in regards to violence against women/domestic violence, sexual and reproductive rights.

**Why.** We notice abundant arguments supporting the parliamentary initiative raging from old European rhetoric, contextual and more mundane (expectations and requests coming of society), economic mantra (value human resources), mirroring European institutions or national Cabinet, also insertion of puzzling and slightly incomprehensible ideas since the number of women citizens is larger than 30% (family values and gender balance within society as incentives for a real symmetrical representation within democratic institutions). The *alignment rhetoric* has been a rather powerful one during Romania's integration into the European Union and it should not be abandoned, nevertheless it should not be considered a cornerstone as well<sup>2</sup>. Today, the alignment rhetoric was transformed from European Union's rules into a shameful position within a worldwide index of political representation of women.

The Call to Action does not provide substantially different arguments to support its cause. As an important part of the document focuses on substantive political representation, we notice that NGOs do provide particular arguments depending on the identified problem/specific women's issues, for example when they demand political parties to include the issue of poor access to contraceptives and reproductive health services in the electoral programs, the Coalition explains it in terms of "Romania has the highest underage birth rate in the European Union, 3 out of 10 women do not use contraception and only 51% use modern contraception"<sup>3</sup>. The topic of multiple discrimination (Roma, disabled, women with other sexual orientation than majority, and others) is largely acknowledged by the Coalition and we also notice the democracy or inclusion argument.

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<sup>1</sup> Pro Democrația NGO, for example.

<sup>2</sup> See Elena Brodeală's paper who explains the correlation between Europeanization and women's political representation- *Women and politics: the impact of the European integration process on women's political representation in Romania*.

<sup>3</sup> <http://ongen.ro/apel-la-actiune-2016-an-electoral-cum-vor-fi-reprezentate-femeile-in-alegerile-locale-si-parlamentare/>



### How close to the normative or contextual arguments supporting women in office?

When we compare the arguments of MPs and of the Gender Equality Coalition, we notice the latter is much closer to the normative arguments provided by scholarly feminist literature on representation. One reason for this “normative closeness” is the educational background of its members. In Romania, academic feminism and activist feminism remain closely connected (despite diversification of its discourses and strategies) as teaching, researching and advocating for women’s rights is one particular feature embedded in Romanian feminism (Iancu, Băluță, 2012, p. 211). Obviously, I do not expect MPs to be political theorists or philosophers, but I cannot help noticing their market-oriented argument of human resources.

Striving for more political representation is not the same as striving to have more women occupying decision making positions in companies. I understand the focus on human resources as an analogy to the marketplace. Women should not be absorbed into politics as they should be absorbed by the market. Representation means much more than qualified individuals having a four years job. It is not as if when entering an electoral competition, you have to present your PhD diploma to legitimate yourself as a valid “human resource”. I should remind that the argument of MPs is the following: gender quotas would integrate all **human resources** to address the political crisis and the division between political class and citizens. This political crisis - translating in protests and wide criticism of politicians (MPs particularly) - has to do a lot with political values and transparent recruitment practices, with representatives acting for citizens’ interests.

At the same time, the analogy representation- marketplace may open wide doors for the topic of merits. When it comes to gender quotas, the issue of merits does pop-in debates and I expect it to be raised again next year. Why give unnecessary munitions, though? Those opposing selection by gender, argue it opposes selection by merit and abandoning meritocratic principles poses a certain danger. Such arguments were fought back either by gathering empirical data on availability of qualified women or by criticizing the assumption that existing incumbents were chosen by merits only. To briefly conclude, there are more arguments to appeal to in the future as the debate has just been announced. The process has only begun and there may be a long road ahead.

## **Conclusion – reflecting further on descriptive and substantive preferences as a framework of probabilities**

Can MPs and NGOs join hands on quotas in spite of their differences of emphasis? Obviously dialogue is possible. If the above commonalities and demarcations are not convincing enough, I may add another argument lying in a former legislative attempt to introduce gender quotas. In 2011, a liberal woman MP placed the topic of representation and quotas on the political agenda. However, when transposing the topic on the public agenda, she organized one round table at the Parliament on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2011, where she invited only men to discuss the quotas for women<sup>1</sup> (in fact the title of the debate). This inadequate communication strategy severed dialogue with NGOs from the start. Three reasons were mentioned in the invitation sent to NGOs, in favor of such a male-centered discussion: 1. The power to decide a mandatory quota for women belongs to men, 2. Debates on women's political representation are usually initiated by women and have women as participants, 3. The topic of women's representation has been attached to a group of women's rights activists, a fact that raises men's reticence to act and further causes women's reticence as well. Paradoxically or not, what has functioned in 2011 as arguments for a male-centered discussion just turns out to be political practice or empirical truth in 2015: gender quotas initiated mostly by women MPs, with women's and feminist NGOs supporting the initiative. If one compares the two liberal initiatives of 2011 and 2015 and MPs' strategies, one can clearly see how dialogue is possible this time.

I did mention that the legislative proposal as such is one crucial moment *out of a series of such moments*. Establishing underrepresentation of women as one legitimate issue to be placed under political and public scrutiny **is a political struggle in itself**. Acknowledging this poses less comfort (at least I feel less calm) as it seems I may be talking about *one quarter of a century of political loneliness for women*. I am rather reluctant to embrace the idea that the statistics of women in local and national politics tell a scary story that is regarded as a problem by political parties or broadly by active NGOs striving to achieve some sort of political reform<sup>2</sup>. Constructing underrepresentation of women as a problem is good in itself, though far from satisfying.

<sup>1</sup> Also see Băluță, Oana, 2014, *Reprezentarea intereselor de gen: între 'politica ideilor' și 'politica prezenței'* in Sfera Politicii, no. 178 p. 74-85, <http://www.sferapoliticii.ro/sfera/178/art10-Baluta.php>.

<sup>2</sup> See Politica fără bariere Campaign. Their goals are legitimate and open more electoral opportunities, yet I cannot help noticing it is not a gender electoral reform, too. I do not criticize their approach, I just notice some facts and also add that I support their struggle. At the same time, I do see political reform as a gendered one, too.

Achieving the goal of having more women into politics seems satisfying. But satisfaction is achieved by understanding that fair representation is a **process** and it cannot be achieved in one moment, not matter how crucial it might be. This process needs a constant relationship between representatives and represented, between MPs (or broadly said, politicians) and all parties interested with advancing women's interests, needs.

There is one **puzzling question**, as when specificity may turn into something that separates MPs and the Coalition. In my opinion, it is the expectation or argument of the Coalition that women's underrepresentation affects substantial representation and more women into politics means more substantive representation. As far as we notice, there is deep silence coming from MPs on this question. Staying silent on women's issues and gender neutral language may be perceived as irritating when energies are mobilized into action. Whereas the NGOs support descriptive representation in order to advance substantial representation of women, the legislative proposals of MPs only try to create electoral opportunities for women and align Romania to some minimal liberal democratic standards. The two approaches reveal different significance attached to gender quotas.

I have important **reservations towards the discourse of descriptive representation understood as a tool for more substantive representation of women**. This argument has been largely criticized and according to Sarah Childs it is "the most contested argument for women's political presence" (Childs, 2008, p. 100). Some theorists criticize this argument of acting for women once in politics as "it seems to be both reductive (reducing women representatives' attitudes and behavior back to their bodies) and essentialist (presuming that women are a category who share a set of essential attributes)" (Childs, 2008, p, 100).

My objections are rather different and I shall explain them. My argument lies both in Dovi's (2010) *mutual recognition* and in a different historical development of feminism in Romania. I shall briefly explain the two. In *Preferable descriptive representatives: will just any woman, black or Latino do?*, Suzanne Dovi discussed about mutual recognition and she explains that:

"Mutuality requires an interactive relationship between representatives and citizens. Mutual relationships require a historically disadvantage group to recognize its descriptive representatives in a particular way as well as a descriptive representative to

recognize that group in a particular way. Such reciprocal recognition is necessary for descriptive representatives and their groups to coordinate consciously chosen political activities” (Dovi, 2010, p. 217-218).

If women MPs do not recognize the topic of substantial interests of women citizens, there may be an important flaw in the expectations the feminist NGOs have, expectations transposed as: more women into politics means women’s interests will be better represented, that is the political agenda will include more gender sensitive issues that affect women’s lives. In my opinion, this belief carries with it one intrinsic inner flaw as **Romania did not have a second feminist wave** with masses of women becoming conscious of their rights and then mobilizing to advance them. There was no such broad awareness raising. This does not mean that in all the countries where second feminist wave developed, women politicians act for women, but this different development of feminism does add one more cautionary stance to the whole debate.

At the same time, I consider that when assuming descriptive representation influences substantive one, *feminist NGOs presume women MPs will advance interests or needs of women citizens in a feminist stance*. And we know this is not the case<sup>1</sup>. Even if hard to admit, I can provide at least one counter example that generated turmoil and protests of women’s rights and human rights and feminist NGOs. In 2010, one legislative proposal introducing mandatory psychological counseling before abortion had a women MP as the co- initiator. Despite relevant differences within Romanian feminism, one can hardly argue that a feminist group might support such an initiative. And feminist groups did not support it. Religious conservatives did offer support. I admit the example is delicate, but it just explains that when it comes to women’s interests or issues, one should not neglect feminist men MPs. Considering the above, the gently shaped discourse of the Gender Equality Coalition relying on **more women acting for women might backfire**.

**Their argument becomes further complicated** if we consider political parties and party discipline. We can hardly argue that MPs have a mandate of autonomy. Party obedience is one hard nut to crack, but one to honestly consider especially when political parties are the main vehicle for legislative recruitment.

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<sup>1</sup> For an interesting analysis of representation of conservative women see Celis, Karen; Childs, Sarah (eds.), *Gender, Conservatism and Political Representation*, 2014, ECPT Press.

Addressing the Call to action to political parties as well, and to both female and male candidates, **might temper the expectation and the burden** attached to the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation. Such demands for gender friendly electoral programs ought thus to be addressed to political parties and candidates no matter their gender as men can be allies and supportive of gender equality<sup>1</sup>. Such a broader call to action also diminishes the moral weight put on women politicians – to represent women’s interests-. In support for “no matter their gender” comes the *constituency argument*, too. Elections are organized by geographical constituencies which do not coincide with concentrations of men or women. If we assume individuals, men and women, have political interests and they do differ sometimes, then men MPs should also represent those interests usually correlated to women. Otherwise the process of representation will be affected. I shall give an example. Domestic violence is widespread and is affecting women not matter the geographical constituency. When an MP opposes legislative instruments that help victims, I have a strong inclination to consider that the MP fails to represent women’s interests. Alongside constituency argument, comes the *strategic argument*: more men are elected officials so, from a substantive point of view, valuable “human resources” ought not to be neglected.

One more contingent argument that may favor the action of MPs and NGOs is the previous *mobilization for electoral reform*. In 2014, a coalition of 17 organizations mobilized and launched *Politica fără bariere Campaign* (Politics with no barriers) asking for electoral reform<sup>2</sup>. Even if the Campaign is gender blind, the topic of electoral reform placed on the public and political agenda as coming from NGOs and their emphasis on equality of opportunities may be turned into an asset by the Gender Equality Coalition and MPs. *The point I am making is electoral reform also means gender electoral reform*, thus the Gender Equality Coalition and MPs may argue there is growing demand for

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<sup>1</sup> I want to add that politics may have a formative character for both women and men, and this formative aspect is less acknowledged when it comes to descriptive and substantive political representation. I do not fully embrace Phillips’s remark, but I do carefully consider it as well as it helps diminishing romanticized views on women and politics: “I incline to the view that politics is more formative than sex, and that the contrast between those who get involved in politics and those who do not is deeper than any gender difference between those who are elected” (Phillips, 1995, p. 75).

<sup>2</sup> They aimed to eradicate specific administrative obstacles for parties that are new-comers on the political scene and support equality of opportunities among large and small parties, or new-comers and independent candidates during electoral competition. For more information, see <https://politifarabariere.wordpress.com/2015/01/11/amendamente-legislative-pentru-o-politica-fara-bariere/>

substantial change coming from civil society. At the same time, I do think additional supporters for gender quotas might do no harm; on the contrary, I believe.

A greater presence of women in politics is no guarantee that women-friendly policies will be supported or enacted. At the same time, it is highly unlikely that representative assemblies that lack women will be disposed to support the substantive representation of women. It will be undemocratic to underplay this correlation and doing so mean we might just take a quick time lap where it was believed women were pretty well represented by men.

Coming back to the idea that changing the gender composition is one enabling condition, I want to add that I have started to favor some measures<sup>1</sup> that may bind politicians tightly to their electoral promises, but not turn them into messengers only. In my view, more attention should be guided towards keeping politicians more accountable to the programs on which they were elected in office.

Supporting a greater presence of women in politics is worthwhile for two reasons: because doing so will attack long-standing gender biases in the processes of political recruitment, and because it will make it more likely that women's interests, needs, and demands will be heard in the highest provinces of government. The arguments for more women into politics are complex, and some of them may pose risks. But all politics involves risks. And, it is a fact that when it comes to effects, to how women in politics might make a difference, there is surprise waiting for us around the corner. It is not as if women have been in politics worldwide for too long and in too great numbers to almost mathematically acknowledge their contribution. One can hardly rely on the contribution of women during communism despite their impressive presence<sup>2</sup> as politics was void of meaning and power was heavily centralized.

It is important for supporters of the Call to Action to work with supportive MP's, both female and male, to promote gender-based legislative quotas. It is also important for these groups to be honest about their differences. A political alliance is not a marriage for life. But it is a commitment to work together for a common good, and also to be open to the possibility of disagreements and of honest and respectful divorces in the future<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> It is not the place to develop more on binding measures, yet I want to add that we may elaborate on some arguments starting from the concept of active citizenship.

<sup>2</sup> In 1989, there were more than 30% in Marea Adunare Națională (The Great National Assembly).

<sup>3</sup> I one more express my gratitude to Jeffrey Isaac for sharpening my conclusive remarks that brought more clarity into my arguments.



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