

## Haunting Impositions: Women and Reproductive Policies in Romania under Communism and After

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**Abstract:** The paper revisits the issue of women's emancipation in communism and its consequences in terms of the double burden imposed on them. The state-approved reproductive policies are analysed in terms of their ideological dimension and also of their practical consequences on the liberated women's lives. Due emphasis is attached to the recent research and to the emerging re-evaluations of the "red century" and its impact on women. The focus is constantly dual throughout the paper: women in the Soviet Union and women in Romania where we tend to see, just like in all communist states, a replication of the Soviet blueprint, which justifies the interest attached to the condition of the Soviet women after their emancipation.

A personal touch in the form of anecdotes illuminating the hypocrisy of the communist propaganda and the communist overall vision will add a distinctly real-life Romanian dimension. The personal anecdotes are intended to further validate the research findings, while also highlighting the current challenges facing women when making their reproductive decisions in the post-communist society.

**Keywords:** women's apparent emancipation, state-imposed reproductive policies, double burden, high-flown ideology, harsh realities.



## 1. The Light Comes from the East: Women’s Emancipation in a Brief Historic Survey

This is the year of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution which ushered in the communist regime in Europe. The communist experiment has left indelible marks, or rather scars, on mankind and its complex, tragic, and pervasive legacy is still with us, almost three decades after the collapse of the communist system in Europe.

Given the centrality of the Soviet Union to the communist experiment, the paper develops a two tier-focus that involves a brisk review of the relevant Soviet realities under communists, and then shifts the focus to the Romanian communist environment, so as to particularize and refine the supra-national Soviet blueprint that was exported to the satellite states. The women’s emancipations and the reproductive policies that lie at the core of this paper were no exception, therefore the paper starts by outlining the Soviet context and then moves on to the harsh Romanian realities.

Upon the anniversary of the red century, it might be appropriate to point out that the communist party in the Soviet Union, which set the tone for the other communist states emerging after World War II, had as its distinct and ambitious goal “to keep society atomized and to create as rapidly and as completely as the recalcitrant human material and the refractory surrounding world will permit, a new man, a new society, and a new world.”<sup>1</sup> The perspective shared by the history professor at the California State University in Los Angeles reflects the communist party ideology and sadly resonates with the experience of the people who lived under communism in the Soviet Union and the satellite states.

Where did women stand in this endeavour? According to research, “the ideological foundation for women’s equality with men was laid by August Bebel and Friedrich Engels in the 19th century.”<sup>2</sup> The inspiration for the emancipation of women is commonly traced to Engels’ work of 1884 as it is actually in his book “The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State” that he lays the cornerstones to women’s liberation:

*“The emancipation of women and their equality with men are impossible and must remain so as long as women are excluded from socially productive work and restricted to housework, which is private. The emancipation of women becomes possible only*

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<sup>1</sup> Choi Chatterjee, “Ideology”, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Kristen Ghodsee, “Why Women Had Better Sex Under Socialism”, 3.

*when women are enabled to take part in production on a large, social scale, and when domestic duties require their attention only to a minor degree.*"<sup>3</sup>

The Soviet women were the first to experience what was expected to be the liberating effects of their emancipation and what, in real life, turned out to be additional burdens. Since the Soviet women's emancipation was the first of its kind and originally appeared to carry a lot of promise for women, I will point out its main features, all the more so as its blueprint was subsequently exported to all the communist countries and then imposed in an effort to build what the communist propaganda described as the new man and the new society.

The consequences of women's emancipation in the wake of the 1917 revolution in Russia were sweeping. They permeated all the layers of the Soviet society as the liberated women emerged out of their households and joined the workforce in unprecedentedly high numbers. This emancipation process was facilitated and accelerated by the Constitution adopted in 1918 which "mandated labour as the primary duty of all citizens. And as Stalin said very succinctly, 'it is not property status, not national origin, not sex, nor office, but personal ability and personal labor that determines the position of every citizen in society'."<sup>4</sup>

In the short span of less than two decades the labour market in the Soviet Union was able to expand vigorously thanks to women's emancipation. The figures capture all this dramatic increase in the workforce called to build the new world: "In 1935 women made up 44% of the work force of the USSR, and by 1937, 50%."<sup>5</sup> With what consequences for the liberated women? Researchers are unanimous in identifying the double burden that the communist state was thus imposing on the liberated women, as well as the discrepancy between the high-flown communist ideology and its precarious materialization. "Bolshevik ideology was unique in that it tried to encode the utopian, serving both as a means of social control and fuel for revolutionary experimentation and radical change."<sup>6</sup>

The changes were indeed radical while the experimentation was unprecedentedly large in scale and, by way of consequence, socially unsettling, as the range of statements below are able to document:

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<sup>3</sup> Ana Maria Ducuta, "Communism and women in Ceausescu's Romania", 2.

<sup>4</sup> Choi Chatterjee, "Ideology", 10.

<sup>5</sup> B. Armstrong, "Was life better or worse for women under Stalin?", 1.

<sup>6</sup> Choi Chatterjee, "Ideology", 3.

*“In reality, however, women all too often found themselves both caring for the home and family in addition to working a full-time job in a factory or farm. Women did benefit from the improved health and living conditions provided for workers and their families. But they rarely made it to senior positions.”<sup>7</sup>*

Not to mention the fact that in the name of equality - the hallmark of the communist ideology - women were offered the “opportunity” to do man’s work: in mining, in construction work, in heavy machinery factories.

A woman researcher’s perception comes across as even harsher when she surveys the women’s predicament under communists in the Soviet Union that was soon to be elevated to blueprint status, that was promptly adopted by all the states behind the Iron Curtain:

*“While the state claimed to have achieved the liberation of women in a flood of self-serving propaganda, in reality all affirmative action policies were abandoned as women were turned into workhorses-cum-brood mares. The patriarchal family, renamed as socialist, was glorified, divorce became difficult to obtain, abortion was declared illegal, and women were exhorted to both produce and reproduce for the sake of the nation.”<sup>8</sup>*

The situation obtaining in communist Romania was no different. The vision was similar and so were the economic goals of maximizing the workforce by enlisting the liberated women’s efforts. Like the other East European Communist states, Romania needed to attract women’s labour in order to enhance the workforce and implement the local communist party’s program for the country’s rapid industrialization in the early decades after World War II.

Little surprise then that the plight of the Romanian women resonated so predictably with that of Soviet women:

*“The woman had to be a great mother, accomplishing all her duties at home, but in a parallel plan <sic> she had to be a good socialist worker, who wasn’t to be discriminated when it came to do work done only by men. Communists claimed that being given the chance to work, to study and to be a housewife, women could fulfill all their dreams. The communist state was the only entity through which happiness could be pursued.”<sup>9</sup>*

This constant drive for reaching high standards in whatever women were called to do - that the communist regime tooted in order to project its superiority over the capitalist regime - gradually eroded the Marxist dictum, long perceived as the very core of the communist ideology, about the

<sup>7</sup> B. Armstrong, “Was life better”, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Choi Chatterjee, “Ideology”, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Ana Maria Ducuta, “Communism and women”, 2.

contribution of each communist citizen according to his or her abilities and the state's support according to each citizen's needs. As a result, throughout the states in which the communist regime was imposed, "women suffered from the notorious double burden of formal employment and housework."<sup>10</sup>

The original plans to put in place a comprehensive support system for the liberated women never materialized to the extent that was intended by the communist regime. Thanks to their emancipation, women in communism were expected to be focused and effective at the workplace, with no worries and concerns about their traditional family responsibilities they could no longer attend to, and then continue to be equally focused and effective as homemakers despite their outside-home job-related commitments. Communal canteens, laundry places, and open-air crèches and kindergartens solved only to a limited extent the problems that emancipation has created by plunging women abruptly into the "socially productive work", to stick to Engels' phraseology. To conclude,

*"the 'New Soviet Woman' served as the embodiment of Soviet belief in gender equality and state welfare policies. Although the Soviet Union did not create a truly efficient system of childcare, or communal institutions that would take over the domestic tasks that women traditionally performed, it was a goal that the Soviet Union publicly adhered to."*<sup>11</sup>

And so did the satellite states which took over the approach and implemented it with varying degrees of success in making the much needed communal institutions available. As concerns women's emancipation, communist ideology and economic pragmatism joined forces throughout the newly emerging communist states in Europe in unleashing a social phenomenon of unprecedented magnitude. "The acute male labor shortages that followed World War II spurred other Communist governments to push forward with various programs for women's emancipation".<sup>12</sup>

By redirecting women's energy towards production in such consequential numbers, the communist system reshuffled the traditional family and set out new domestic paradigms. "In all the Warsaw Pact countries, the imposition of one-party rule precipitated a sweeping overhaul of

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<sup>10</sup> Kristen Ghodsee, "Better Sex Under Socialism", 1.

<sup>11</sup> Choi Chatterjee, "Ideology", 13.

<sup>12</sup> Kristen Ghodsee, "Better Sex Under Socialism", 2.

laws regarding the family. Communists invested major resources in the education and training of women and in guaranteeing their employment.”<sup>13</sup>

Women’s engagement in communist production work, on a par with men, soon came to alter the traditional domestic patterns concerning their child bearing and child raising responsibilities, as well as their massive amount of domestic labour, this time on top of the labour they did outside home, for lucrative purposes. For whoever is interested in the reproductive policies and their impact on women throughout the communist system, it is highly relevant to learn the communists’ answer to the fundamental question: was “the act of biological reproduction socially useful labour”<sup>14</sup> to the communist state built on the universal right to labour and promoting labour as the supreme value ?

*“It was Kollontai, the arch-feminist, who argued that as reproduction ultimately guaranteed the existence of the labour republic, the state should facilitate motherhood by providing ideal conditions for it. This argument received great prominence in the 1930s when biological reproduction was valorized as socially useful and necessary.”<sup>15</sup>*

In close correlation if not direct causality to child bearing was the women’s full responsibility for household work. Given the communist egalitarian vision and the system’s pressing economic agenda intended to prove the superiority of the communist system in the face of capitalist nations, on “the issue of domestic labour, Marxists were unanimous in their condemnation of women's exclusive engagement in household tasks.”<sup>16</sup>, and their ideological offspring were expected to set up an effective domestic support system for the liberated women in which “communal organizations would take on the tasks of cooking, cleaning, washing and childcare”<sup>17</sup>, according to August Bebel’s design.

Almost thirty years after the collapse of the communist system in Europe, we know from our first-hand experience throughout Romania that the high-flown communist ideology ushered in by the “omnicompetent state”<sup>18</sup> consistently failed to translate into the desired high standards of social support and equal rights in the wake of women’s emancipation. Utopian and never fully-

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<sup>13</sup> Kristen Ghodsee, “Better Sex Under Socialism”, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Choi Chatterjee, “Ideology”, 8.

<sup>15</sup> Choi Chatterjee, “Ideology”, 10.

<sup>16</sup> Choi Chatterjee, “Ideology”, 16.

<sup>17</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>18</sup> *Idem.*

worked out, the communist designs have left their imprint on the post-communist mindset, as the third section of this paper aims to demonstrate.

*“Bolsheviks believed that the state should protect the rights of women and children, ensure that women had access to education, relieve women from the onus of domesticity, and promote them to positions of power and authority. The modern vision of both the affirmative action welfare state and the omniscient state therefore, derived from Marxist thinking and Soviet practice.”<sup>19</sup>*

## 2. Romanian Women under Communists

Romania fell under the massive influence of the Soviet Union starting in March 1946 and was soon taken over by the new regime which planted its Soviet-born or Soviet-trained representatives in all the key sectors of activity. With communism as a supra-national ideology permeating all the new communist nations and promoting supra-statal policies intended to ascertain the superiority of the new system and to humble the rotten capitalist one, the Soviet approach to women’s emancipation was promptly imposed in Romania and the Soviet blueprint was replicated nation-wide.

Just like in the Soviet Union, pro-natalist policies were adopted by the communist leaders and they brutally came into force. Since Romania’s communist experience is indissolubly linked to Ceausescu’s regime and his long years at the helm of the local communist party, we will look upon his policies as representative of the overall communist approach. All the more so as his decisions regarding state-mandated population growth had such tragic and comprehensive consequences, while his pro-natalist vision soon emerged as one of the most repressive reproductive policies in Europe, if not in the whole world.

The landmark was the dreaded Decree 770 issued in 1966 which made abortion and the use of contraceptives illegal. “Under Decree 770, women were given prison sentences if convicted of having an illegal abortion. Though strictly illegal, abortions remained a widespread birth-control measure of last resort <sup>“20</sup>, often with fatal consequences upon the desperate women who were forced to undertake them in inadequate, life-threatening circumstances, under immense

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<sup>19</sup> Choi Chatterjee, “Ideology”, 10.

<sup>20</sup> Ana Maria Ducuta, “Communism and women”, 5.



psychological pressure, and with the prospect of being sentenced to prison for undermining the regime, therefore as foes of the communist system.

In retrospect, the impact of the Decree was so tragic also because it affected a society in which abortion had been freely available and financially accessible for almost two decades. As a result, there was no culture of alternative family planning methods. The whole society plunged into chaos and disaster the moment the free and easily affordable contraceptive method was banned and perceived as a criminal offence by the communist leaders of Romania.<sup>21</sup>

Additional decisions were made to boost the much-desired population growth. A celibacy tax was introduced, financially penalizing all adults over the age of 25 who had no children and thereby undermined the party policy. The communist state took further steps to encourage, or rather impose, a large-scale pro-natalist campaign. Throughout his long leadership of the communist party Ceausescu was known for his megalomaniac projects and insatiable appetite for manpower and resources. It was this hunger for manpower, alongside ideological constraints, that unleashed the ill-boded, excessive, and ill-conceived pro-natalist policy in Romania that trampled on people's private lives and distorted their bodies and minds, when not directly killing them. As a result, women's fertility became a state issue, the object of party officials' keen interest. As such, it was being monitored and reported. "Beginning with 1966 and until the 1989 revolution, Romanian women's fertility was permanently supervised by state officials. They were taken from their workplaces and had to go through medical exams to determine even the earliest pregnancy."<sup>22</sup>

To the party leader of Romania, women were valuable as dedicated mothers - of many children, preferably - and committed workers, a vision which echoed the Soviet official approach to their own liberated women. Incentives to this effect were put in place: "Mothers of at least five children were to be entitled to significant benefits, while those, having at least ten descendants were declared heroine mothers by the Romanian state."<sup>23</sup> Despite the official propaganda, the psychological and physical resources for raising so many children were never fully fledged and available to the heroic women undergoing state-imposed emancipation.

Women were pressured to comply with the official policy. They were also offered raw models intended to inspire them in accomplishing their key social reproductive mission. What

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<sup>21</sup> Zoe Petre, "Promovarea femeii", 33.

<sup>22</sup> Ana Maria Ducuta, "Communism and women", 4.

<sup>23</sup> *Idem.*



better example than the party leader's own wife, dubbed "the mother of the nation", who had three children but, unlike the ordinary heroines, enjoyed all the lavish support and resources the system would make available to the leading family in the nation.<sup>24</sup> All the while conveniently forgetting that "Romanian women had to work many hours a day, to stay in line for basic food like milk, bread and sugar which were rationed."<sup>25</sup> In extreme weather conditions, too. Under the circumstances, the state-imposed, top-down equality with men was an excessive burden for the Romanian women who had to work in improper labour conditions, often times engaging in strenuous activities better suited for men, such as in mining, construction works, weapons and arms factories, steel mills, and heavy machinery.

Communism promised emancipation but, according to Mihaela Miroiu, only managed to "emancipate women through work," by compounding the whole situation and turning them from domestic slaves into slaves serving two masters: the family and the communist state. Draught animals became also breeding animals in communist Romania.<sup>26</sup>

Starting with 1966 until the collapse of the communist regime in Romania, the communist rulers of Romania imposed pro-natalist policies and gave women no choice. With abortion available only in a number of restricted circumstances - see the dreaded Decree 770 - and virtually no other pregnancy avoidance means available, maternity was perceived as a service to the state by the communist authorities and an imposition by the women suffering under this policy.

In addition, what Ashwin calls the "pseudo-egalitarian mythology"<sup>27</sup> of the communist regime left women responsible for household care, with domestic work commonly viewed "as inalienably female"<sup>28</sup>. Work was state-imposed and domestic work was indispensable, therefore unavoidable. The much-celebrated women's emancipation and liberation that communist authorities presented as an unprecedented form of social justice and progress may well have been merely an instance of "pseudo-emancipation which left them [the women] torn between work and home".<sup>29</sup>

The 23 years in which Decree 770 was enforced brought about tragic consequences for the Romanian women and the Romanian society at large. As the Final Report issued by the Presidential

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<sup>24</sup> Ana Maria Ducuta, "Communism and women", 4.

<sup>25</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>26</sup> Mihaela Miroiu, *Drumul catre autonomie*, 185-213.

<sup>27</sup> Sarah Ashwin, "Gender, state and society", 2.

<sup>28</sup> Sarah Ashwin, "Gender, state and society", 3.

<sup>29</sup> Sarah Ashwin, "Gender, state and society", 2.

Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania, under the coordination of Vladimir Tismaneanu, repeatedly points out, women's emancipation in communist Romania was never fully fledged and the so-called humanistic measures that the Decree was allegedly promoting were hypocritical and demagogical. The report states that women's emancipation builds on women's access to contraceptive methods, which was not the case in communist Romania where women were forced to rely extensively on the use of abortion as the primary contraceptive method. The report also points to the manipulation of the statistical evidence by the communist authorities which chose to ignore the official statistical data and studies revealing the harsh realities, the high social costs, and the limited efficiency of the reproductive policies imposed on Romanian women.<sup>30</sup>

As to the overall outcomes of these draconic reproductive policies intended to boost the size of the population of Romania and to ensuingly increase the country's prosperity, as early as 1992 researchers were able to distill the pain, misery, and waste of human life that are the hallmark of the bleak 23 years in which the Decree was in force into clinical conclusions that point out the murderous futility of Ceausescu's approach.

*"The heartbreaking and chilling irony of Ceausescu's pronatalist policies was that illegal abortion became the predominant contraceptive method. The consequences of legislating reproduction without regard for the material conditions of daily life meant that many women, unable to fulfill their "patriotic duties " gave up their lives in the service of the state."<sup>31</sup>*

### **3. Romanian Women in Post-Communism**

From the women's perspective, the post-communist era in Romania appears to have operated significant changes at the level of the *locus of control*, primarily in terms of causality and source of control. What used to be the communist state impositions have now evolved into individual decisions with a marked economic causality. Basically, the communists' pro-natalist policies imposed on women have been replaced by anti-natalist policies self-imposed by women themselves or by the harsh economic realities they live in.

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<sup>30</sup> Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Comisia Prezidentiala. Raport final*, 521.

<sup>31</sup> Gail Kligman, [When Abortion Is Banned](#), iii.

According to my personal observations of former students and graduates of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies and based on the direct experiences they shared when reconnecting with their former professors who had acted as mentors, supervisors of their graduation paper, and occasionally role models, the women's self-imposed decision of delaying motherhood or even the radical option of suspending motherhood at all in response to economic pressures or professional growth priorities is becoming prevalent in the free market economy where the yearning for higher living standards appears to run counter to reproductive options in the case of highly-educated, urban-based, and professionally successful women.

A particularly complex situation occurs when the potential employer uses the employment interview with female job applicants as an opportunity to inquire about their reproductive plans. The situation is documented extensively, albeit informally, in oral narratives that graduates of our higher education institution offer when updating their academic mentors on their professional and personal developments.

As the female graduates contact faculty to update them on their developments, professional and beyond, they tend to mention recurrent and disturbing job interview questions probing into their reproductive intentions. Based on 16 graduates' reporting - informally, in conversations with me and other faculty members who had also developed a closer relationship to them - over the past 5 years, the questions around their potential motherhood tend to come in the first half of the interview and appear to assess their inclination towards starting a family in the near future. According to the interviewees' perceptions that were self-reported to faculty members, the female job applicants read into these questions the potential employers' displeasure with such a course of action which would upset their career and, above all, their dedicated, long-term engagement with the respective company.

Given the currently favourable terms available to mothers, actually to parents, who can spend up to 2 years with their infants and enjoy child-care benefits throughout the full period, such a significant suspension of labour relations with the employer may be a legitimate source of concern. Clearly, the male-dominated interviewing committees find maternity disruptive, if not counterproductive for their purposes related to business development and larger profit margins. This is the interpretation that female interviewees self-report.

Their reaction in the face of this potentially conflictual topic relies on avoidance as the power relationship will not allow them to express their dissatisfaction with the approach:

avoidance of truthful responses and a deliberately distorted presentation of their intentions. Interestingly, the graduates I have been in direct contact with in order to document this post-communist form of imposition on women appear to unanimously find their own distortion of their real intentions to be ethically acceptable given their own resentment of the question and of the employers' approach which they intuitively interpret as an intention to control their private lives, this time for economic purposes.

As an aside issue, one may wonder why is it that potential employers continue to ask this type of questions of female interviewees when the answer they get is clearly questionable in terms of life's unpredictable developments and definitely not binding for the respondents. Another apparent paradox stems from the generous provisions for parental leave according to EU legislation and the intricate ways in which female employees are locally inspired to defer motherhood, as revealed repeatedly in the multiple conversations I had with the 16 graduates over 2013-2017.

This post-communist imposition is unwritten and insidious, but all the more so powerful and difficult to fight in a world dominated by the economic pressures that higher living standards and the human yearning for comfort and luxury bring about. To the quiet observer, it looks like the ideological imposition to multiply for the benefit of the community state has been traded for the economic imposition not to multiply, this time for the benefit of business owners, in the name of institutional profit and personal affluence. With the consequence of significantly delaying motherhood and, actually, parenthood.

The optimal work-life balance is as yet an exotic concept in Romania and so is the perception of a well-balanced and productive life building on personal and professional fulfillment that are harmoniously intertwined.<sup>32</sup>

#### **4. Conclusion**

The most adequate conclusion will come from a historian who has never lived in a communist state and therefore does not have the bias, the pain, the frustration, and the sense of waste that women who have undergone this experiment may commonly have. Her conclusive remarks focus on the Soviet Union, but they hold only too true for Romania as well.

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<sup>32</sup> Roxana Marinescu, "Keep your balance: work, learn, socialize", 1-2.

*“Historians have blamed the Soviets for failing to solve the ‘woman question’ and criticized the hypocrisy that underlay the pervasive revolutionary rhetoric about gender equality. But the non-correspondence of ideology and reality constituted an important element of the Soviet experience. Soviet propaganda for women was characterized by a literary style that was marked by what we read as excess, exaggeration, falsifications, distortions, embellishment, fantasy and over-statements.”*<sup>33</sup>

I do believe that there is no better conclusion to the topic of this paper than the excess, exaggeration, falsifications, distortions, and over-statements that the communist regime in Romania employed in its handling of the reproductive policies that were expected to boost the country’s population to 25 million.

A second conclusion inspired by the consistent experiences of young Romanian women nowadays is that reproductive issues are as topical as they were under the communists, but for the reverse reasons. The outcomes may still be similar.

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<sup>33</sup> Choi Chatterjee, “Ideology”, 8.

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