

# The Evolution of Gender Relations in Romania after the Great War

**Luminița Ignat-Coman**

*Babeș-Bolyai University, Faculty of History and Philosophy,*

*Cluj-Napoca, Romania*

Email: ic.luminita@gmail.com

**Abstract: The Evolution of Gender Relations in Romania after the Great War.**

The Romanian national state was constituted shortly after the end of the Great War, in December 1918, when provinces that had previously been under foreign rule – Bessarabia, Bukovina and Transylvania – joined the Old Kingdom of Romania. The paper focuses on the changes that occurred in the role of Transylvanian women within the new national state after 1918. I analyse their political grievances and how they acted to obtain rights by starting from the questions: Were women considered second-class citizens? How were they perceived and how did they perceive themselves? My analysis focuses on aspects such as their level of education, given that many of them had only primary school education, their career outside home, most often as domestic servants, their political rights, especially the right to vote given that the 1918 Union Declaration of Alba Iulia proclaimed universal suffrage which was later conspicuously absent from the 1923 Constitution. The article also discusses to what degree we can speak of the existence of women leaders in this period, marriage age, and the changing vision on motherhood previously seen as an obstacle to professional success. A significant part will be devoted to the arguments that women used to obtain the rights they demanded. As for sources, I mainly use newspapers in my analysis, but also legislation and political literature from the period. The article concludes that despite significant steps forward, the striking and persisting differences between women from the rural and urban areas prevented the attainment of West-European emancipation levels. The paper reveals many common features with the newly-formed nation states that took a similar path. Therefore, the paper is a historical and a comparative analysis of feminism as an important factor for gender relation changes after the Great War.

**Keywords:** women, war, gender, Transylvania, Romania, rights

**Rezumat: Evoluția relațiilor de gen în România după primul război mondial.**

Statul român s-a constituit la sfârșitul primului război mondial, în decembrie 1918, când provinciile aflate anterior sub dominație străină - Basarabia, Bucovina și Transilvania - s-au alăturat Vechiului Regat al României. Articolul de față se focalizează pe schimbările care au loc în ceea ce privește rolul femeii în cadrul noului stat, după 1918. Voi analiza nemulțumirile lor politice și modul în care au

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acționat pentru a obține drepturi pornind de la întrebările: au fost considerate femeile cetățeni de rang doi? Cum au fost percepute și cum s-au autoperceput? Analiza se concentrează pe aspecte ca: nivelul de educație, dat fiind faptul că multe dintre ele aveau doar școala primară, cariera lor, cel mai adesea ca servitoare, drepturile lor politice în special dreptul de vot, având în vedere faptul că *Declarația de la Alba Iulia* proclama sufragiul universal care a fost apoi cu desăvârșire absent din *Constituția* adoptată la 1923. Articolul discută, de asemenea, în ce măsură putem vorbi despre existența unor femei-lider în această perioadă, vârsta la căsătorie și schimbarea viziunii asupra maternității, văzută anterior ca o piedică în calea succesului profesional. O parte semnificativă va fi dedicată argumentelor utilizate de femei pentru a obține drepturile solicitate. În ceea ce privește sursele, voi utiliza presa și, de asemenea, legislația și literatura politică a perioadei. Articolul concluzionează că, în pofida unor progrese semnificative, diferențele izbitoare și persistente dintre femeile din zonele rurale și cele urbane au împiedicat atingerea nivelurilor de emancipare vest-europene. Lucrarea relevă trăsături comune cu statele națiunilor nou formate, care au avut un parcurs similar. Prin urmare, lucrarea este o analiză istorică și comparativă a feminismului ca un factor important pentru schimbarea relațiilor de gen după primul război.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** femei, război, Transilvania, România, drepturi

### The Great War and the premises of change in gender roles

The Great War reshaped the international political order, one of its main consequences being the disappearance of multinational empires and the establishment of national states. As a result, Romania, a case as many other, became a national state in accordance with the peoples' right to self-determination. The establishment of Greater Romania through the addition of Transylvania, Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina to the Old Romanian Kingdom occurred in 1918 in the favourable context of the end of the Great War. This context witnessed the emergence of a new concept of democratic state, which also opened the path for a reshaping of gender roles by placing women on a more equal footing with men from a legal, economic, social and cultural standpoint.<sup>1</sup>

The impact of the Great War was also visible at the level of mentalities, since it prompted changes in the traditional way of thinking. Especially the issue of women's status had faced much resistance before de war, but one could finally sense some optimism: *"This issue, which faced much resistance in the past, (...) still makes headway because of the Great War that revolutionized many*

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<sup>1</sup> Calypso Corneliu Botez, "Problema feminismului. O sistematizare a elementelor ei" in *Arhiva pentru știință și reformă socială*, year II, no. 1-3, 1920, pp. 27-28.

people's way of thinking",<sup>2</sup> even if the road ahead was still long in the case of Romania.

The Great War provided women with the opportunity to demonstrate skills and abilities previously denied to them. They fully demonstrated their ability to successfully fulfil the tasks and responsibilities of men fighting on the front lines: "During the First World War women had fulfilled with success, tenacity and sacrifice the economic functions abandoned by the husbands serving at the front".<sup>3</sup> Apart from supporting the war effort, they also took over household chores normally reserved for men. Furthermore, the war also offered women the opportunity to volunteer their services as nurses, doctors, ambulance drivers or cooks on the front line. In Romania, the case of Ecaterina Teodoroiu, who volunteered as a nurse, was promoted to Second Lieutenant and died in combat in August 1917, is well-known.<sup>4</sup> Over the decades, she has slowly become a revered historical character with a special place in the pantheon of national heroes.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, in many cases the war led to a multiplication of women's tasks and presented them with numerous challenges that they had to face. By multiplying women's tasks and responsibilities, the war created an unprecedented situation: it increased their level of self-confidence, which in turn would have a great impact on the evolution of gender roles in society. Therefore, the war was an exceptional situation that created the premises for women to become more visible in the public sphere.

Apart from fulfilling various important roles in the war effort, many women – regardless of social class – shared the distress of watching their brothers, husbands, lovers or friends leave for the front and of knowing that they might never come back alive.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, they were a source of constant moral support to the men fighting at the front. One should also emphasize here the significant role that Transylvanian Romanian women played in the difficult context in which Romanians living in the province were conscripted into the Austro-Hungarian Army and thus forced to fight against Romanians from the Old Kingdom, which caused further psychological distress among them. A remarkable example in this respect is Liviu Rebreanu's novel, *Pădurea spânzuraților* (*Forest of the Hanged*), which is inspired from actual

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<sup>2</sup>Hilda Beșa, "Despre drepturile femeii" in *Patria*, year II, no. 6, 1929, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup>Ioan Clopoțel, "Un început bun: dreptul de vot al femeilor" in *Patria*, year XI, no. 32, 1929, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup>Arina Avram, *Femei celebre din România. Mica enciclopedie*, vol. II (București: Allfa, 2005), pp. 110-111.

<sup>5</sup>See Lucian Boia, *Istorie și mit în conștiința românească*, ediția a II-a (București: Editura Humanitas, 2000), p. 310.

<sup>6</sup>Susan Grayzel, *Women at Home in a World at War*, <http://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/women-at-home>, (last accessed 07.05. 2016).

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events. Undoubtedly, the vital role that Romanian women played on the home front, being aware of the psychological traumas their loved ones were experiencing on the front line, was impressive. Therefore, this role demanded recognition and reward.

The Great War was a catalyst for change and for the elimination of many stereotypes regarding women's participation in public life, but it had a different impact in various countries around the world.<sup>7</sup> Even though in many European countries and in the United States women's suffrage was granted during or shortly after the war, in many others their full participation in the political life remained limited or only a distant goal.<sup>8</sup> Romanian women's struggle for these rights was barely starting after the Great War. In general, we can identify two models of civic and political emancipation: the Anglo-Saxon / Nordic model and the Latin model, together with its derivatives. The first model is that of the woman who became emancipated from a civic and political standpoint during or shortly after the war. Conversely, the second model includes the states where the emancipation of women was late. This is also Romania's case.<sup>9</sup> If we assess this process in the Central-East European context, we note that it occurred later in Romania and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes compared to other states in the region, even some of those recently-established, where the emancipation of women was almost complete.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, the Great War opened the path for a new stage in gender relations and accelerated the rhythm of changes<sup>11</sup>, even though in certain states, including Romania, expectations proved too high.

As a result, in Romania the struggle of women for rights that we consider normal today was long and difficult due to the duplicity of politicians, who were willing to admit the need for equality only verbally, as well as to the extreme conservatism of Romanian society. It is noteworthy that, until the end of the nineteenth century, women did not have access to higher education in the Romanian-inhabited provinces. Thus, until 1920, women in Wallachia and Moldova did not have the right to become lawyers. Until 1932, married women in Romania did not enjoy property rights, could not enter into

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<sup>7</sup>Birgitta Bader-Zaar, "Controversy: War-related Changes in Gender Relations: The Issue of Women's Citizenship" in *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, available online at: [http://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/controversy\\_war-related\\_changes\\_in\\_gender\\_relations\\_the\\_issue\\_of\\_womens\\_citizenship](http://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/controversy_war-related_changes_in_gender_relations_the_issue_of_womens_citizenship), (last accessed 2.11.2016).

<sup>8</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup>Ghizela Cosma, *Femeile și politica în România. Evoluția dreptului de vot în perioada interbelică* (Cluj Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2002), pp. 8-9.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup>Veturia Manuilă, "Feminismul și familia" in *Buletin eugenic și biopolitic*, vol. II, January-February 1928, no. 1-2, p. 93.

a contract, could not turn to courts, nor could they act as tutors to their own children. Until 1946, Romanian women did not have citizenship, which meant that they did not have the right to vote in general elections without limitations, could not be elected to Parliament or take up any government position.

This article focuses on the movement of Transylvanian women in two different contexts, as part of Austria-Hungary and as part of the Romanian national state beginning from 1918, and discusses the changes that it went through especially after the Great War.

### **The case of Transylvania**

In the case of Transylvania, a province that before the war was part of Austria-Hungary and after the war became part of the Romanian national state, we can talk of two different stages of the feminist movement and must stress a great paradox, namely that after the war, there was a noticeable regress regarding women's rights in spite of the above-mentioned overall progress made in this respect during the war. Having national education on their agenda and devoting much energy to the national cause, women in the province were the first to organize themselves, thus serving as a model for the entire Romanian area from this point of view.

**In the first stage**, namely before the Great War, especially throughout the Dualist era (1867-1918), Romanians living in the province, who represented the majority, were extremely displeased with their inferior political and social status, and steadily intensified their struggle for rights.<sup>12</sup> As for the Transylvanian Romanian feminist movement, it had its own distinct agenda during this period; therefore, only after 1918, namely after the establishment of the Romanian national state, can we speak of a relatively unified movement.

The prevailing unfavourable political circumstances conferred specific features to the Transylvanian Romanian feminist movement. Thus, its agenda was limited to demands regarding access to education. However, this issue was even more complex as it was also on the agenda of the Romanian national movement given that mother-tongue education was limited by the Hungarian legislation. Moreover, the predominant and traditional role reserved for Romanian women was that of raising and educating their children. At the time, this role appeared more important due to its national dimension as well. In this capacity as “mother of the nation”, the Romanian woman contributed to the consolidation of national consciousness and its cultural endurance in the

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<sup>12</sup> See Luminița Ignat-Coman, *Imagine de sine la românii ardeleni în perioada dualistă* (Cluj Napoca: Editura Argonaut, 2009).

context of foreign rule. Women as mothers guaranteed the preservation of the mother tongue and of family traditions.

Thus, national education, whose goal was to shape and preserve Romanian identity, but which also contributed to the social advancement of women, was the main demand on the agenda of the Romanian feminist movement in Transylvania until the outbreak of the Great War.<sup>13</sup> Demands for civic and political emancipation were marginal, almost non-existent, Romanian feminists being more focused on national issues. The national dimension of the feminist movement largely coincided with that of the national movement of Transylvanian Romanians in general.

A perfect illustration of Transylvanian Romanian women's devotion to the national cause are the statements they issued in support of the *Memorandum* – an important petition in which Romanians outlined their national demands, – and of the Romanian national leaders who were convicted as a result of this action.<sup>14</sup> In addition, they created a “Political committee” in Braşov, whose main purpose was to inform western governments on the lack of rights of Transylvanian Romanians and on the intense Hungarization process initiated and conducted by the Hungarian authorities.<sup>15</sup> Through their actions, Romanian women brought significant support to the national movement. It is paradoxical, however, that the demand for full participation in the political life was missing from their agenda, given that their political activity was so remarkable. Only after the Great War did it become evident that, although a number of Transylvanian women had supported women's suffrage privately, they nonetheless considered that it was inopportune to campaign for it publicly in the prevailing political circumstances.<sup>16</sup>

Transylvania was the first Romanian-inhabited province where women solidarity became publicly visible, where women organized themselves by founding the so-called Women's Societies (*Reuniuni de femei*). In this respect, the province served as model for the organization of feminists first in the other Romanian principalities (Moldavia and Wallachia) and later in the Romanian Kingdom. Their first public endeavours were philanthropic and charitable, and aimed poor children, especially girls who they wanted to help with their education in order to preserve their national and religious identity. The first known women's organization is *The Society of Romanian Women in*

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<sup>13</sup>Simona Stiger, *Asociaționism și emancipare în Transilvania până la Primul Război Mondial* (Arad: Editura Fundația “Moise Nicoară”, 2001), p. 20.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 176.

<sup>15</sup>Paraschiva Căncea, *Mișcarea pentru emanciparea femeii în România: 1848-1948*, (București: Editura Politică, 1976), p. 59.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibidem*, pp. 89-90.

*Buda* (*Societatea Femeilor Române din Buda*), established in 1815 with the aim of 'providing support for Orthodox schools in the capital of Hungary.'<sup>17</sup> Better known was, however, *the Society of Romanian Women in Braşov* (*Reuniunea Femeilor Române din Braşov*) established in 1850, whose aim was initially philanthropic, namely to help the orphans of the 1848 Revolution. Later, the society also acquired an educational role, more exactly that of educating Transylvanian Romanian women: "We want to establish a ladies' association or society by following the example of other European ladies and with the aim of protecting orphan and poor girls, but our intention is to establish a school to provide better education of our girls, establishments to raise our girls in several Romanian-inhabited areas, regardless of religion".<sup>18</sup> Due to the efforts of the president of this Society, Maria Secăreanu, between 1878 and 1886, the first boarding school for girls was established in Transylvania at a time when there was an urgent need for a school devoted to educating Romanian girls.<sup>19</sup>

After these initial successes, other women's societies were established in several important towns, such as Sibiu, Blaj, Deva, etc. According to the findings of a research on the organization of Romanian women in Transylvania, there were around 103 such organizations established between 1850 and 1914.<sup>20</sup> The analysis of their geographic distribution reveals that first they were established in urban areas and only much later, after 1900, in rural areas as well.<sup>21</sup> The protagonists, namely those brave women who created these societies and demanded rights, were the wives and daughters of the leaders of the Romanian national movement. This attests to the movement's political finality and to the close connection between the feminist movement and the national one.<sup>22</sup>

A crucial element that foreshadowed the movement's future evolution in Transylvania was the idea of unifying all women's societies operating in the Romanian-inhabited provinces that were part of Austria-Hungary. It was proposed by Maria Baiulescu, leader of feminists and president of the Society in Braşov, in 1911. The aim was that Romanian women should be able to challenge and deal with the Hungarian authorities as a unified force. Therefore, at the congress that took place in Braşov on 3-4 June 1913, they founded the *Union of Romanian Women in Hungary* (*Uniunea Femeilor Române*

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<sup>17</sup>Aurel A. Mureşianu, "Cea dintîi însoţire femeiască a neamului nostru: «Societatea femeilor române din Buda» din anul 1815" in *Carpaţi*, year VI, no. 339, 1926.

<sup>18</sup>Stiger, *op. cit.*, p.39

<sup>19</sup>Căncea, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

<sup>20</sup>Stiger, *op. cit.*, p.84.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 87.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 88.

*din Ungaria*)<sup>23</sup> which included 37 women's organizations<sup>24</sup> and marked the beginning of a new stage. The Union's programme focused on women's access to education and training. The second congress was held in 1914. It included more participants and reiterated their support for the initial programme.<sup>25</sup>

During the Great War, the activities of Transylvanian women's societies were put on hold, but when the province united with the Old Kingdom of Romania in 1918, their pre-war efforts did not go unnoticed. Thus, *Article III* of the Declaration of Alba-Iulia stipulated: “*The complete implementation of a fair and democratic regime in every sphere of public life. Popular, direct, equal, secret, proportional ballot for both sexes aged 21 or over for representation in municipalities, counties and Parliament*”.<sup>26</sup> This highly advanced legal provision virtually proclaimed women's full participation in public life. Unfortunately, despite considering it indispensable to a democratic state, Transylvanian Romanian leaders failed to impose it in post-war Romania.

In analysing this period, we can note that the feminist movement in Transylvania was still in the early stages. Although they were better organized than women in other provinces, they were much more involved in the national movement or various other charitable activities than in public campaigns to obtain political rights, such as the right to vote.

**In the second stage**, after the Great War, although things looked very promising for Romanian women, especially given the principles included in the *Declaration of Alba-Iulia* and that several successor states of Austria-Hungary, such as Czechoslovakia, granted women's suffrage, resistance to change proved too powerful due to the persistent social conservatism. Therefore, the initial unexpected promise to grant women's suffrage was broken.

While women in other states were granted the right to vote, in the period shortly after the war, the agenda of Romanian feminists was extended to include the idea of full political participation and equality with men. These completely reasonable demands only attested to and emphasized the prevailing social backwardness. Therefore, the establishment of the Romanian national state did not change women's status as second-rate citizens. The

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<sup>23</sup>Maria Baiulescu, *Correspondența* (ediție, note și index de Ruxandra Moașa Nazare) (București: Editura Ars Docendi, 2001), p. 8.

<sup>24</sup>Stefania Mihăilescu, *Din istoria feminismului românesc: antologie de texte: (1838-1929)* (Iași: Editura Polirom, 2002), p. 166.

<sup>25</sup>Câncea, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

<sup>26</sup>Ioan Scurtu, Gheorghe Z. Ionescu, Eufrosina Popescu and Doina Smârcea, *Istoria României între anii 1918-1944. Culegere de documente* (București: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 1982), p. 26. *The Resolution* is also available online at: <http://www.cimec.ro/istorie/unire/alba.htm> (last accessed: 24. 10.2016).



realities of the new state, the insincerity of politicians (in public they were all for women's full participation in public life, while in practice they did nothing), the prevailing conservatism and prejudices towards women, to which one should also add the indecisiveness of feminists whose programme had not included this demand until after the war, were all contributing factors to the exclusion of women's suffrage from the legislation of the new Romanian state despite the solemn promise made in the *Declaration of Alba Iulia*.

However, a few aspects give scope and force to the post-war feminist movement in Romania (and Transylvania from now on): firstly, the establishment of suffragette societies and the publication of women's magazines that intensified their struggle for political rights due to their propaganda. One such example is the magazine *Acțiunea Feministă* (*The Feminist Action*) that was exclusively devoted to women and outlined a general programme for the Romanian feminist movement in this new stage: "Convinced of the righteousness of the feminist cause whose triumph was sealed into *The Act of the Perpetual Union of Transylvania with the Motherland*, our magazine aims to fight for the awakening of women's human and civic consciousness, for winning the right to vote and for equality in all administrative and legislative bodies, for equal legal rights with men so that they can work together intensely and fruitfully to forge the new Romania".<sup>27</sup>

After the war, Romania witnessed the emergence of two types of discourse on the emancipation of women. The first was *moderate* and was promoted by the *Union of Romanian Women* (*Uniunea Femeilor Române*) which continued to represent the nucleus of the feminist movement in Transylvania and became an important voice at national level. The second was *radical* and was promoted by the *Association for the Civic and Political Emancipation of Romanian Women* (*Asociația pentru Emanciparea Civilă și Politică a Femeii Române*) founded in Iași in 1918, whose programme was constructed around the objective of complete and equal rights to women.<sup>28</sup> The numerous conferences organized by this association in various cities and its propaganda conducted through magazines, such as *Buletinul Asociației pentru emanciparea civilă și politică a femeii*, *Acțiunea Feministă* or the *Foaia Gospodinelor*, as well as its connections with similar movements from abroad contributed significantly to the intense promotion of the feminist cause<sup>29</sup> and made the association become the most radical in Romania.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>*Acțiunea feministă*, year 1, no. 1, 1919, p. 1.

<sup>28</sup>Căncea, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

<sup>29</sup>Cosma, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-21.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibidem*, pp. 27-28.

*The Union of Romanian Women* quickly expanded after 1918 and, similarly to the Transylvanian Association, opened new branches in the big cities. In parallel, other very ambitious associations and societies were established across the country, such as the *National Council of Romanian Women (Consiliul Național al Femeilor Române)* which was notable due to its intention to become associated to the *International Council of Women* in London. However, the Council's attempt to become an umbrella organisation for all women's associations and societies in Romania was ultimately unsuccessful.<sup>31</sup> Another important association within the Romanian feminist movement was the *League of Women's Rights and Duties (Liga Drepturilor și Datorilor Femeii)* which was founded before the Great War in Bucharest and which actively campaigned for women's suffrage and for their participation in the political life of the country.<sup>32</sup> Another major association, founded in the 1930s, was the *The National Association of Romanian Women (Gruparea națională a femeilor Române)* which recruited members from other associations and became very influential within the emancipation movement.<sup>33</sup> All these associations as well as other smaller ones spent much energy in the struggle for political rights and the elimination of gender discrimination in Romania.

### **Second-rate citizens: women as legally incompetent subjects and children**

The situation of women in the newly-created national state appeared complicated due to the various traditions that the newly-joined provinces brought and the diversity of codes in force which to a greater or lesser degree emancipated women prior to the war, such as the 1811 Austrian Civil Code that remained in force in Transylvania and Bukovina until 1918 and Andronache Donici's Code (*Codul lui Andronache Donici*) and Justinian's Novels in Bessarabia. In these provinces the woman had more autonomy even if the concept of family was based around male authority.<sup>34</sup> In comparison, in the Old Kingdom, where prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza's Civil Code of 1865 was in force, things were not so advanced.<sup>35</sup> The difficulty arose from the fact that the adoption of a united legislation required referral to the most advanced legal provisions because, otherwise, a natural question arose, namely: "*Will women from the recently-joined provinces be declared incapable in order to have the same status as those in the Old Kingdom, thus maintaining a much too old*

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<sup>31</sup>*Ibidem*, pp. 36-37.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 39.

<sup>33</sup>Mihăilescu, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>34</sup>Botez, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

<sup>35</sup>Ion Palade, *Codul Caragea reproduc după manuscrisul original românesc* (București: Editura Librăriei Ion Alcalay, 1907), p. 5.

tradition?"<sup>36</sup>. Legal harmonization occurred precisely in that sense. As a result, after the Great War women in Romania came to be treated as second-class citizens, being put on the same level as the legally incapable subjects and the children.

Romanian women's struggle for participation in the country's political life started decades before the Great War. The issue was included in the agenda of Parliament in the Old Kingdom by Eliade Rădulescu during the debates on the 1866 Constitution, but remained unsettled. On 6 May 1917, the Chamber of Deputies debated a proposal for electoral reform and women's suffrage in local elections. The arguments in favour of the proposal focused around women's predilection for domestic activities, social assistance and childcare.<sup>37</sup> During the debate there were even more radical voices that demanded women's suffrage for the general elections as well. These opinions were voiced by prominent political figures, such as N. Lupu, Gr. Trancu-Iași, I. Th. Florescu, G. Diamandi and N. Iorga. Their appeal was accompanied by a petition signed by 200 women. A similar petition signed by prominent feminists was presented in the Senate. The pro-suffrage arguments voiced here were partly economic, such as women's contribution to the war effort, and social, such as their ability to assert themselves in the public sphere, in education, medicine, the administration, etc.<sup>38</sup> Ultimately, however, the issue remained unsettled this time as well. The new state's legislation discriminated against women, excluding them from the political life. A decree issued in 1918 increased the electorate, but with the notable exclusion of women.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, the electoral legislation passed in 1918-1921 did not bring any change in this respect.<sup>40</sup>

The debates on the draft of the *1923 Constitution* included the issue of women's suffrage against the backdrop of high expectations in this regard. However, the draft limited women's rights only to civil ones. In this context, three separate opinions voiced by as many groups emerged. The first supported the draft in its actual form which limited women's rights to civil ones exclusively, the second argued for political rights at least at local level, while the third argued against suffrage at any level.<sup>41</sup> Anti-suffrage arguments consisted of claims that women's suffrage could jeopardize the family, that women were biologically and physically inferior to men (for instance, women

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<sup>36</sup>Botez, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>37</sup>Câncea, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 97.

<sup>39</sup>Cosma, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 44.

<sup>41</sup>Eufrosina Popescu, *Din istoria politică a României. Constituția din 1923* (București: Editura Politică, 1983), pp. 130-131.

could not be soldiers), that this demand was missing from the agenda of feminists, and that such a reform would generate massive political instability.

The failure of those who argued for women's suffrage is clearly reflected in *Article 6* of the 1923 Constitution: "*The present Constitution and the other laws pertaining to political rights are, apart from the status as Romanian citizen, the necessary conditions for exercising these rights. Special laws passed with a two-third majority will determine the conditions under which women can exercise political rights. Women's civil rights will be established based on the full equality between men and women.*"<sup>42</sup> Despite the wave of protest from feminist organizations, Romanian women remained second-rate citizens following the adoption of the new Constitution, being placed at the same level with the incompetent and the children.

Two additional laws were passed against this backdrop of great expectation, namely *The Administrative Unification Act of 1925* and *The Electoral Act of 1926*. The first act contained provisions that enabled women's inclusion in county and communal councils, while the other did not bring any changes regarding women's suffrage.<sup>43</sup> Following these failures, the feminist movement further radicalised and vehemently demanded women's suffrage. In 1929 this was considered one of the "*most burning issues of the time*".<sup>44</sup> The main argument in favour of voting rights, even for few categories of women, if not for all, was that women successfully performed various jobs during the war, when men were fighting at the front. Other arguments referred to equal opportunities, equal education for women and men, but also to the situation abroad, where many gave voting rights to women.<sup>45</sup>

### **Women's suffrage: an illusion in Romania?**

The analysis of the Romanian legislation in the period that followed the Great War reveals numerous attempts to limit their political rights. However, beginning with 1929 certain steps were made in the right direction. Thus, *The Administrative Organisation Act (Legea pentru organizarea administrativă)* passed the same year stipulated for the first time women's right

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<sup>42</sup> "Constituțiune" in *Constituția din 1923 în dezbaterile contemporanilor* (București: Editura Humanitas, 1990), pp. 611-612. The 1923 Constitution is also available online at: [http://www.cdep.ro/pls/legis/legis\\_pck.htp\\_act\\_text?id=1517](http://www.cdep.ro/pls/legis/legis_pck.htp_act_text?id=1517) (last accessed 2.11.2016).

<sup>43</sup> Cosma, *op. cit.*, pp. 47-51.

<sup>44</sup> "Dreptul de vot al femeilor" in *Patria*, year XI, no. 161, 1929, p. 1.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 1-2.

to vote and to be elected in local elections.<sup>46</sup> Maria Baiulescu, one of the feminist movement leader wrote in this occasion: '*The Government's new Administrative Organisation Act achieves one of the aspirations for which Romanian women have fought as a united front, contributing to the elevation of their dignity by giving them voting rights and eligibility in townships and counties.*'<sup>47</sup> Nonetheless, due to the limitations imposed by the law, the impact of this piece of legislation was minimal. Thus, in order to be able to exercise this right, women had to fulfil certain criteria, namely to have secondary education, teacher or vocational training, to be a state, county or municipal civil servant, to be a war widow, to be decorated for wartime activities, to have been a member of entities with legal personality in the field of social demands, social security at the time of the law's enactment.<sup>48</sup> One should also note that, according to the law, voting was compulsory.<sup>49</sup>

Even though in this context many women had open access to positions such as local councillor or mayor, discrimination regarding universal suffrage was maintained. Therefore, the demand for full political emancipation remained on the agenda of Romanian feminists who continued their campaign for it throughout the 1930s. In these years we can note the emergence of two emancipation strategies: one postulating that women should remain excluded from the political life until its radical reform, and another arguing for women's involvement in the activity of political parties as an exercise and as a possibility for them to become influential in decision-making. A side-effect of the aforementioned Act was precisely the creation of women's sections within the main political parties, thus settling the long debate on whether or not women should create their own party or join the existing ones.<sup>50</sup>

Although the activity of feminists was intense throughout the 1930s and minor successes were obtained, only at the end of the decade were women granted much wider voting and political rights, but on certain conditions. Paradoxically, the introduction of this measure coincided with the establishment of an authoritarian regime and not with the consolidation of a democratic one. As a result, it was nothing more than an illusion as the direct

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<sup>46</sup> See *The Administrative Organisation Act (Legea pentru organizarea administrativă)* accessible online <http://www.monitoruljuridic.ro/act/lege-nr-95-din-13-iunie-1925-pentru-unificarea-administrativ-emitent-parlamentul-publicat-n-monitorul-107203.html> (last accessed 19.05.2017).

<sup>47</sup> Maria Baiulescu "*Româncele în viața politică*" in *Patria*, year XI, no. 217, 1929, p. 1.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>49</sup> C. Hamangiu, *Codul general al României*, vol. XVII, 1929, p. 986. See also article 17 from *The Administrative Organisation Act (Legea pentru organizarea administrativă)* accessible online <http://www.monitoruljuridic.ro/act/lege-nr-95-din-13-iunie-1925-pentru-unificarea-administrativ-emitent-parlamentul-publicat-n-monitorul-107203.html> (last accessed 19.05.2017).

<sup>50</sup> Cosma, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

influence of women's vote was very marginal. Articles 61 and 63 of the 1938 Constitution granted women the right to participate in the elections for the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, but this right was restricted by age limitations (they had to be at least 30 years old) and by the practice of a profession.<sup>51</sup> The 1939 Electoral Act would further increase these limitations by granting suffrage only to literate women.<sup>52</sup> Consequently, the inter-war years, women's suffrage was almost an illusion. Despite all the efforts for emancipation, and even in the context of certain successes, Romanian women remained excluded from full political participation.

### Conclusions

I have examined the gender-specific impact of the Great War on women in Transylvania and in Romania. The war represented the premise for the disappearance of imaginary barriers between men and women, between the private and public spheres, and an opportunity for women to show the inherent unreality of these dichotomies. It had different impact in the numerous countries around the world.

In the newly-established Romanian national state many barriers persisted and women remained largely discriminated politically until the end of the Second World War. The change of gender roles remained an illusion given that each success obtained by women was restricted by limitations and that the concrete effect of these successes was marginal. There are several factors that contributed to the inefficiency of the Romanian feminist movement, such as the huge discrepancy between women living in urban and rural areas, respectively, low literacy, and differences in the perception of emancipation. Transylvania was almost a paradox: although women in this province organized themselves and were very active politically before the Great War, and although their role was recognized in the *Declaration of Alba-Lulia* which promised them full participation in the political life, they nonetheless proved more conservative regarding political participation after the war, and included this issue on their agenda only in the 1930s. Social conservatism was perhaps the main factor that made things move much

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<sup>51</sup>*Monitorul Oficial al României*, partea I, no. 048/27 February 1938, pp. 1119-1120, available online at: <http://www.digibuc.ro/proxy/?px=aHR0cDovL2RpZ210b29sLmRjLmJtbXMucm86ODg4MS9SL0UyS1QzT1BNMUpsSQ0lEQ0JlU0FRN0JlU0BOMjRESU1SDE4UFZBWTNJTlJ0R0s3OFJCLTA4MTAxP2Z1bmM9cmVzdWx0cy1qdW1wLWZ1bGwmYW1wO3NldF9lbnRyeT0wMDAwMDImYw1wO3NldF9udW1iZXI9MDAzMjM0JmFtcDtiYXNlPUdFTjAx> (last accessed 2.11.2016).

<sup>52</sup>*The Electoral Act of 1939*, available online at [http://fp.kross.ro/pdf/le\\_1939.pdf](http://fp.kross.ro/pdf/le_1939.pdf) (last accessed 18.10.2016).

slower in the right direction than in other countries. Despite the establishment of a democratic state and the radical activity of feminists in the Old Kingdom, the analysis of Romanian legislation reveals persistent discrimination against women throughout the entire inter-war period, even if, some progresses was obvious. The biggest problem remains that despite all the efforts for emancipation, and even in the context of certain successes, Romanian women continued to be excluded from full political participation, particularly owing to the nature of the subsequent regimes from Romania, this dream of complete participation being accomplished only after the instauration of a real democratic rule.