

Policy brief, 2021



WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN ROMANIAN POLITICS

femei în
politică



FRIEDRICH NAUMANN
FOUNDATION For Freedom.

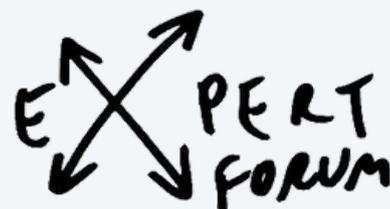


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Introduction

Women's representation in politics has become, during the last decade, a priority of the European Union and an important topic of the public agenda within the family of the European states. The long road of recognising women's suffrage, the validation of the equal citizen status when it comes to the political and civil rights have not resulted in an equal representation of women in the elected political offices. In the case of Romania, the indicators of women's political representation are such as to reflect a substantial discrepancy as compared to Western Europe. Therefore, Romania comes last in the Gender Equality Index (GEI), the index of gender equality within the EU countries and the representation of women in the parliament, in the government or in the local councils respectively, which places it next to countries without solid democratic traditions, with hybrid or authoritarian regimes.

This report provides a brief description of women's representation in the parliament, the government and the local councils. Although the under-representation of women in the Romanian politics is often discussed, this report is founded on an extended data collection, available through the previous documentation of the non-governmental sector.

The final sections provide the reader with a comparative analysis of women's political representation, narrowed down to six mini-case studies from the EU countries, in order to contextualize Romania's situation. Aside from Hungary's specific case, the government of which has turned gender equality into an anti-European fight frontline, the selected examples show that a fairer representation of women in politics can be achieved in two ways:

- (i) organically, in the democracies with a long history of progress and political emancipation or,
- (ii) by adopting the gender quotas, namely establishing a minimum percentage of women on the lists of candidates, plus other related measures.

1. How women entered politics: the principles and history of representation

Women's representation in politics was the result of certain long-term convergent processes, by means of which, the woman's full citizen status was recognised in the constitutions of the 19th century democrats and, later on, the voting rights were validated by the laws. Romania, just like other countries from Eastern Europe with a modernization deficit, was among the last European states where women's political representation, namely the voting right, the right to be elected and the actual access to the legislative and executive forums, transposed into political institution.

Although the women's political representation is not, at least on regulatory level, contested, an overview of the main arguments for women participation to politics remains relevant, also for the current public debates. The most compelling reason is the **equality of rights**, the citizenship concept respectively, in a democratic society, cannot be limited to half of a state's members. Historically, the European societies, and not only, have been deeply patriarchal, meaning that the power and the resources have been exclusively a male monopoly. Secondly, besides the equality of rights, the argument of **gender interest representation** claims that women have specific interests, often in conflict with the ones of men, and, as such, only a women's representation in politics can ensure the protection of these specific interests. The **symbolic argument** underlines that any woman elected to a political office can inspire and, therefore, can become a role model for all women, including young generations, thus gradually contributing to balancing women's presence in politics. Last, but not least, the **democratic argument** claims that the balanced representation of women and men is able to consolidate the democratic order, both in advanced democracies and in societies in transition towards democracy.

The women's political representation topic is included in the wider area of gender equality, a coordinating value that is more and more visible on the European institution level. The equality between women and men does not reside solely in an equal representation within the elective democratic institutions, but it also covers the economic area, such as the gap between women and men regarding the remuneration for the equal work performed, within the healthcare system, the access to education, the social policies and the violence control, all based on gender.



2. Mandatory standards and international recommendations

The evolution of the international right and the ratification of the treaties and declarations of the international bodies are a reference system of the obligations adopted by Romania as signatory party to the said treaties and declarations.

The most recent and important document, at European level, regarding gender equality – A Union of Equality: the gender equality strategy 2020-2025 – and, implicitly, the equity of women representation in politics was signed, in 2020, by president Ursula von der Leyen and has as its preamble Article 8 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union – „In all its activities, the Union aims at eliminating the inequalities and at promoting the equality between men and women“. Section 3 of the European strategy maintains as a strategic objective the idea of gender balance in the decision-making processes and within the political environment, starting from the finding that only 32.2% of the members of the national parliaments are women. As for the political parties requesting financing from the EU, they „are encouraged to be transparent regarding the gender balance at the level of their political party members“ (p. 15).

The novelty of this strategy resides in the undertaking of a more ambitious indicator for women representation in the political decisions, namely the gender parity of 50%, which becomes a goal of the Commission for all its levels of management.

Thus, the international law's repertoire is a primary source for coordinating the efforts of the national states in order to ensure a better representation of women in politics and it provides a legal framework that imposes obligations on the member states.

3. The situation in Romania

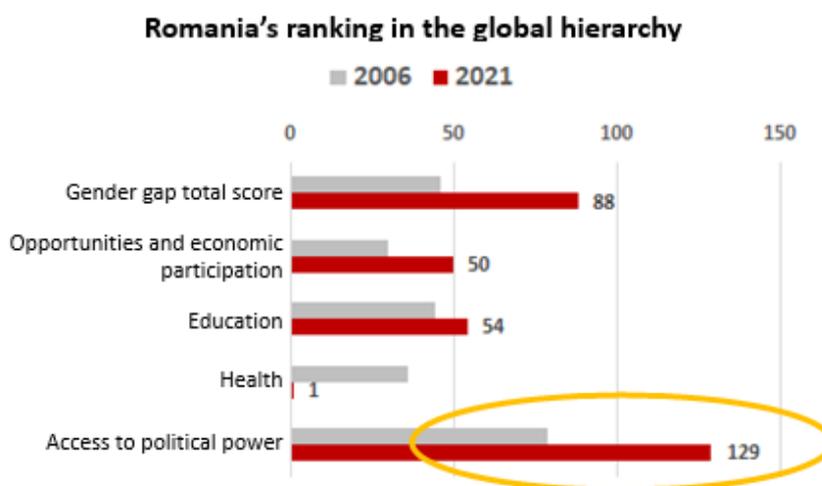
During the last two decades, the gender equality topic and, implicitly, the women's fair representation in the political decisions has been the subject of certain more and more refined analytical assessments, using quantifiable indicators, in order to measure the differences among countries and the progresses made. The first global instrument of this kind appeared in 2006 under the name of Global Gender Gap Report, carried out by the World Economic Forum.

The most recent edition, published in March 2021, has as its main conclusion the fact that **the COVID-19 pandemics has deepened the pre-existing gender inequities** and has exposed women to increased socio-economic pressures, because the business areas that were most affected by the sanitary crisis are known to have significant percentages of women employed [1].

[1] <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2021>

In this index, Romania ranks 88 among the 156 countries included in the report, traditionally dominated by countries in northern Europe. The report covers four macro-topics on gender equality: Opportunities and participation in economy, Education, Health and Access to the political empowerment, the last one being also the worst of all indicators for Romania (ranking 129).

Graph 1. Global Gender Gap Report / WEF 2021



It is to be noted that these evolutions show the pronounced downfall after 2006, of 50 positions for the equity of access and political representation. Even more interesting is to see where such negative dynamics comes from: it is not about the access to social services, as it happens on other continents; considering the gender dimension "Health and life span" Romania has even climbed up the chart!

The difference between us and other states is mostly explained precisely by the "Access to political empowerment" dimension, where we are way behind of all the variables calculated, as it can be seen in the graphs above:

- a) on one hand, we have started from an unsatisfactory position, as shown by the 2006 score;
- b) and while we have stagnated since then, other countries have made important progresses, surpassing us, and therefore we have dropped in the global hierarchy from the 79th position to the 129th position.

There are no figures more convincing than these to illustrate the field where we must take urgent action to improve the gender gap in Romania: the access to actual public decision-making positions.

A second instrument, a regional one this time, is the Gender Equality Index (GEI), carried out by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), initially published in 2013, with a two-year frequency. It covers all the 28 countries of the EU and has six basic thematic areas (labour, money, knowledge, time, power and health), the last edition including also two additional topics, violence against women and intersectional inequality.

Graph 2. Gender Equality Index (GEI). Access to political power. Scores for the domain of power, and changes since 2010 and 2017, in the EU Member States.



The argument of the GEI authors for the improvement of women's representation in the parliament is that only a mandatory mechanism of representation through quotas will have optimum results for the mitigation of gender inequity at political level.

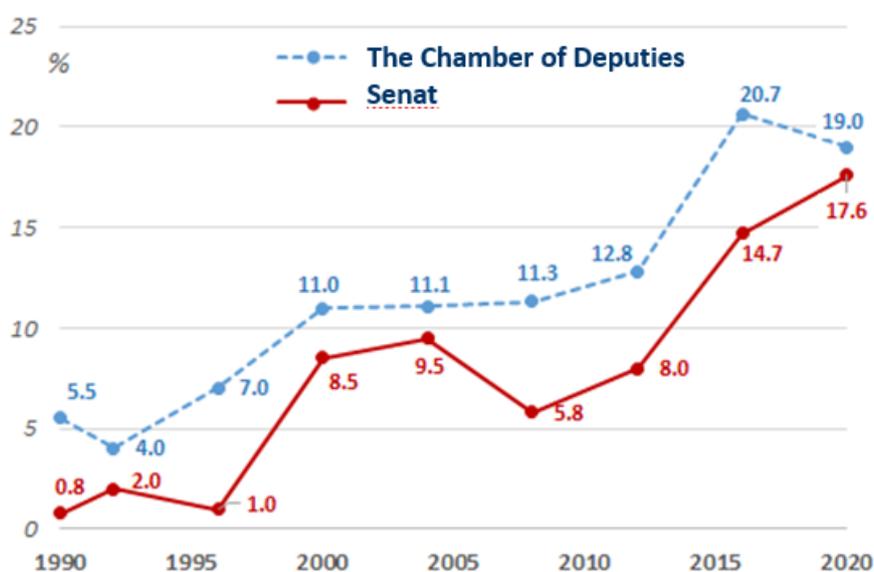
4. Women's political participation in Romania: Government, Parliament, local authorities

Women representation in the legislative body is marked by the historical experience of the communist regime, which, at the level of appearances, was meant to be an egalitarian ideology, of women emancipation. Thus, their representation in the Grand National Assembly was, starting with the 1980s, of more than 30%, almost double as compared to the current parliament.

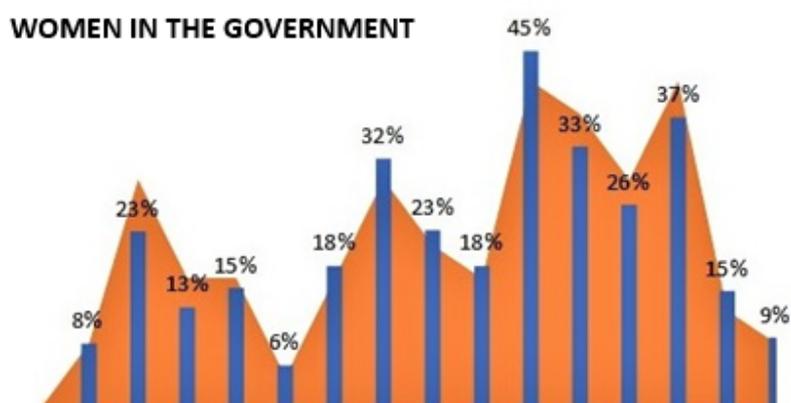
This apparent participation should not overshadow the actual power relations in the communist systems: the highest the level of women representation at legislative level or at the level of local councils and functions, where the actual power was lower, in parallel, the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party, the more the de facto instance of the communist power exercising was becoming an exclusive monopoly of men.

Following the first post-communist free elections, women's presence in the Romanian Parliament wavered, on a slowly upward trend between 0.8% (the Senate of Romania, in the first term, had only one woman) and 19%, following the 2020 elections. The comparative data below show the gender deficit of representation in both Chambers of the Parliament, and then at the Government level, between 1990 and 2021.

Graph 3. Women's representation in the Romanian Parliament 1990–2020.

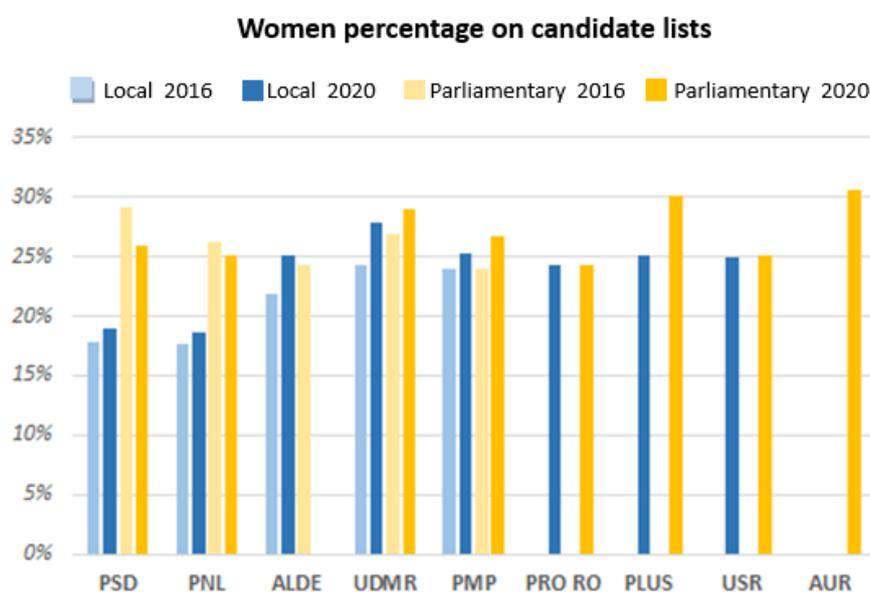


Graph 4. Women's representation in the Romanian Parliament 1990–2020.



Although there is less data, the same representation imbalance is found at the level of the local elected representatives.

Graph 5. Women's percentage on candidate lists.

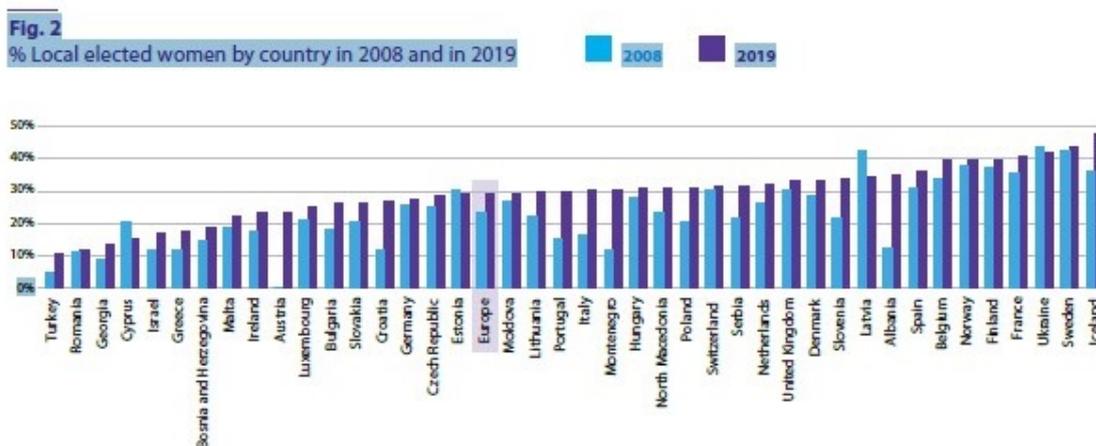


Source: see note 9, and <https://expertforum.ro/participarea-femeilor-parlamentare/>

The number of women candidates remains relatively low, as it can be seen in the table below, even without an electoral system with mostly uninominal constituencies, which is suspected to suppress their participation to the political processes. Moreover, the monitoring reports have highlighted that there are political parties that submit their lists of representatives in violation of the law, meaning that there is no woman on those lists (for which, there are no explicit sanctions), the percentage reaching 5% of the candidate lists. Likewise, the electoral legislation is not specific about such sanctions as the annulment of the lists, and the electoral offices approving the candidatures apply different practices. During the parliamentary elections, at least, there have been a few cases where the non-compliant lists have been rejected by the electoral bureaus.

Thus, for the indicators regarding the local elections, **Romania is second to last in Europe, Turkey being the last one ranked, and the European average being 29%** [2].

Graph 6. women’s representation in the positions elected at local level in the EU



5. Models of good practice at European level

The models of good practice regarding a fairer participation and representation of women in the national and local political processes are centered on the regulatory ideal of the gender representation quotas. These are already applied in several European countries and are part of the „hard“ regulatory instruments proposed as models to be adopted in the democracies that are unreceptive to the gender balance or parity. They are balanced against the so-called soft instruments, namely encouraging the construction of a gender perspective based on voluntary bases, without explicit sanctions or constraints. The mandatory representation quota system can be imposed through the electoral national legislation or it can be adopted as an internal recruitment mechanism of the political parties’ statute.

Other instruments, applied at institutional level, belonging to the good European practice category include: constitutional guarantees and guarantees within the primary legislation regarding gender equality, the internal management of the political party (voluntary gender quotas, which can vary from 25% to 40% or joint models 50% women – 50% men), public budgeting, receptive to the gender dimension (GBR – gender responsive budgeting) etc.

[2] Women in Politics. Local and European Trends, CCRE / CEMR, 2019.

The quota system has been implemented, mainly, in a particular sequence: voluntary party quotas (VPQ), public bodies quotas (PBQ), legislated electoral quotas (LEQ) and, the last ones to be adopted, the corporate board quotas (CBQ), for instance in Austria, Germany, France, Norway [3].

Therefore, **the parties have been the pioneers of the institutional change in the sense of promoting a fairer gender representation, and later on the quota system has been extended to the national and regional representation bodies, then to the corporate private sector, although there are some reservations here.**

Currently, ten European countries use the quota system for women's political representation: Belgium, Ireland, Greece, Spain, France, Croatia, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Spain. The quota system for women's representation involves introducing a number of women candidates for parliamentary elections subject to penalties for non-compliance. The latest European country to use this formula is Luxembourg, which has set a 40% quota for women on its legislative electoral lists.

6. Women's representation: structural blocking variables

Starting with March 2021, the Renew/Alde group has initiated The Alliance of Her platform, designed as an advocacy instrument for the promotion of women and girls empowerment and leadership in the political sphere, starting from the European Women's Academy programme (2016-2020).

The Alliance for Her platform was launched alongside with a study about the percentage of women in the ALDE/Renew political parties, starting from the factual prerequisites that „women are under-represented in politics and they still encounter bigger difficulties as compared to men regarding political participation and keeping a position after they have been elected“ [4]. The mentioned study, carried out by The Alliance of Her platform, has presented the conclusions of a questionnaire applied to the members of the ALDE family, to which, 189 women answered, of whom, 64% have held leadership positions in the liberal parties, the main conclusion being that the progress of a fairer gender representation remains relatively slow (more than 60% of the respondents).

Although it is not representative, this questionnaire confirms a significant part of the difficulties encountered by the women in their political ascension: the gender stereotypes, the online and social media harassment, the online and offline sexist comments.

[3] Women in Politics. Local and European Trends, CCRE / CEMR, 2019.

[4] Igniting Her Ambition: Breaking the barriers to women's representation in Europe, Daniela Morales Garcia, ALDE, EUPP, accessed on 28.05.2021.

Likewise, the study tried to highlight the main structural and motivational barriers encountered by women in politics:

- the responsibilities related to family or time constraints (16%)
- higher standards regarding the women who intend to candidate (14%)
- the lack of self-confidence and a fragile support network (12%)
- the lack of inspirational women and of political mentoring (10%)
- the predominant gender stereotypes regarding a woman's role in society (10%)
- the online harassment (10%)

On the other hand, the mentioned study reveals that the gender equity topic is not suffering from a Western Europe vs. ex-communist Europe splitting, many parties from central Europe having a pronounced gender balance (ANO 2011 in the Czech Republic, Nasa Stranka in Bosnia and Herzegovina). The authors recommend the introduction of internal voluntary gender quotas, showing that the impact of this measure cannot be ignored: „**between 2014 and 2019, the percentage of the parliamentary women in the EU countries has doubled, from 18 per cent to 34%, in the countries where gender representation quotas have been introduced**” [5].

7. Conclusions regarding the political representation in view of the 2024 elections

The year 2024 will be an extremely intense one from the electoral point of view for all the parties, where four series of elections will overlap, namely the local ones, the parliamentary, the European Parliament elections and those for the state presidency. As it has already been mentioned, the European Commission has undertaken the goal of a joint gender representation for Europe's Parliament, **the target being 50% women and 50% men**. This result indicator cannot be imposed to the member-states through hard regulation and obligations deriving from the statute of EU member, but it is anticipated that the EC will use all the soft leverage to determine the parties to propose joint gender voter rolls, or at least with voluntary party quotas, so as this goal is not compromised.

Hence, the scenario of a fair and equal representation of 50% in the European Parliament seems improbable without political coordination and without the adoption of gender quota mechanisms according to the “zipper” or „zebra” model, where the candidates are alternated according to the sex criterion. The women percentage in the European Parliament has gradually increased during the latest electoral cycles, but this evolution was not organic nor natural, but it was facilitated by the extension of the gender quotas, either voluntary, or legislated at national level.

[5] Ibidem, p. 17.

The cases in Western Europe where the percentages of women reach 35%-40% without having affirmative action instruments or gender quotas are related to an unrepeatable socio-historical context in Eastern and central Europe.

The first initiative that is worth analysing internally and subsequently implemented at the level of the new USR-PLUS party is the adoption of the zipper gender quota system, in the first stage, for the European Parliament elections, marking thus its Europeanization and the integration to the broader trend of the European policy.

Currently, none of the possible strategies [6] on the gender equity is internalised or implemented by the Romanian political parties. The first of these strategies, the one that uses the electoral system, will be difficult to implement in the current legislative cycle. The second strategy, policies with equal opportunities for women remains problematic considering the dominant political discourse and the indicators noted in the previous sections. The positive actions for a better gender representation could offset the current inequity.

The progress of women representation in the Romanian politics has been a slow process and there are critical voices that would more likely speak of a setback from this point of view, and in countersense with the evolutions at the European level.

The Europeanisation of Romanian political parties cannot ignore a project centred on increasing the representation of women in the executive, legislative and local authority bodies.

[6] Pippa Norris, "Recruitment" in Katz, Krotty, Handbook of Party Politics, Sage, 2006 identifies in 1) rules of the political game, 2) policies of equal opportunities and 3) positive policies for increasing women' representation as being the main strategies for this last goal.

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Author: Alexandru Gabor, PhD in Political Science (gabor.alexandru@gmail.com)

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About Expert Forum

Expert Forum (EFOR) is a Bucharest based think tank, set up by four well-known experts in public policy and public governance reform. The main sectors covered by the organization are: administration reform and public sector integrity; decentralisation, regional development, public finance; justice and anticorruption reform; social policy and pensions; energy and transport; healthcare: active citizenship and elections.

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About Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom Romania

Romania became part of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom Southeast Europe's sub-region in the early 1990s. The regional SEE office was already established 1999 in Bucharest when in 2006, the entire central coordination of FNF's work was moved to Sofia. In 2014 FNF re-opened a bureau for Romania and its sister-country of Moldova in Bucharest. In over 20 years of ceaseless activity, the FNF has worked with all the local liberal parties, forces and NGO's, and by doing so, made thousands of young people interested in liberalism. Today the main political partner is the USRPLUS party. The FNF is also in contact with all the local NGO's who fight for the ideal of freedom.

Web: <https://www.freiheit.org/romania-and-republic-moldova>



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