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The impact of descriptive representation on substantive representation of women at European and national parliamentary levels. Case Study: Romania

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the consequences of the level of descriptive representation of women in the National Parliament (NP) and European Parliament (EP) on the substantive representation of women. In the achievement of this endeavour, first, I have examined the legislative initiatives of the NP in the period January 2012 - June 2014. Second, I have examined the activity of the Romanian delegation in the plenary of the EP in the 2009 – 2014 legislature. The findings show that Romanian women members of the EP, corresponding to 36% of the Romanian delegation in the analyzed period, were more active as regards women’s substantive representation than their Romanian male colleagues. Contrariwise, in the NP women are descriptively underrepresented (11.71 %) and neither them, nor their male colleagues are particularly active regarding the substantive representation of women.

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Keywords: women; descriptive representation; substantive representation; European Parliament; National Parliament; Romania.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to investigate the consequences of women’s descriptive representation (DRW) on the substantive representation of women (SRW) at national and European parliamentary levels. Legislative
The concept of representation has a major importance in a democracy, as legislation has both direct and indirect effects on citizens' life. The underrepresentation of a certain group in decision making positions is considered a democratic problem of justice, legitimacy, responsiveness and effectiveness (Philips 1995). Women represent 52% of Romania’s population and they are more qualified than men for top political positions, as they represent more than 70% of the graduates and about 60% of the PhDs in political science, European studies, law, public administration, economy, management, sociology, and communication sciences. Despite their high qualifications and being more than half of the population, women stay for only 11.71% in the National Parliament. Therefore, women do not constitute a minority group, but a marginalized group.

The political class of the last two decades is in the greatest part constituted by men and women’s issues did not represent a priority on their agenda. Moreover, there are not any prominent organizations or movements at the level of civil society to foster women’s descriptive or substantive representation. The only exception that could be mentioned is, arguably, at the academic level, where a new generation of scholars with gender and feminist concerns is raising in the last years. Unfortunately, they do not increase the awareness of civil society regarding women’s political representation.

The inquiry whether DRW affects SRW occupies a central position in the study of women’s political representation, and the empirical findings are diverse. The studies vary from those which establish a correlation between women’s numerical presence in legislatures and the SRW (Celis 2006; Mansbridge 1999; Wångerud 2009), to others which reveal insignificant differences between the acts and behaviours of female and male legislators (Childs and Krook 2009).

In the achievement of this endeavour I have focused on the activities of the Romanian members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and the members of the National Parliament (MNPs). Although an assessment of women’s situation in politics at regional level is also important, it nevertheless falls outside the scope of the present work.

2. Research context and concepts. Descriptive and substantive representation of women

In this study I will focus on descriptive and substantive representation as defined by Hanna Pitkin in her seminal work *The Concept of Representation* (1967). Pitkin identifies there four types of representation: formalistic, descriptive, symbolic and substantive. The formalistic representation is defined as the formal bestowing of authority onto a person to act for others. This form is problematic because all the actions of the representatives count as ‘representation’, regardless of their quality. Descriptive representation indicates the correspondence between the characteristics of the represented and the representatives. According to Pitkin, this concept is limited because it emphasizes the composition of a political institution rather than its activities. Symbolic representation, instead, deals with the beliefs and attitudes of the represented. The disadvantage of these notions is the vulnerability to manipulation by representatives, and the tendency to involve arbitrary images. As the first three forms of representation do not deal with the crucial aspect of ‘what is going on during representation’ (Pitkin 1969: 9), she considers the substantive representation, defined as ‘acting for’ or ‘acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them’ (Pitkin 1967: 209) as the most important. In contrast to the other three concepts, in the case of substantive representation the representatives have to be responsive to the represented and not the contrary. Among the four forms of representation established by Pitkin, descriptive and substantive representation (and the relations that could be established between them) are the most extensively investigated by gender and politics, and feminist scholarship (Childs and Lovenduski 2013: 491).

Issues regarding women’s representation were addressed by political scientists (mostly feminists) only toward the end of the twentieth century, with the emergence of gender and politics scholarship. Until recently, the main concern on the topic of women’s political representation was linked to women’s numerical presence in parliaments, or ‘descriptive’ underrepresentation. Many countries have made efforts to increase the number of women representatives, and the sex quota (either reserved seats, legislative quotas or party quotas) was the most frequent method used. These strategies have had successful results over the years in certain countries, and consequently it raised also the variety of questions to be asked regarding women’s representation.

The SRW started to be investigated especially during the last decade and in its study could be established three phases: first, scholarship evolved around the study of the relations that could be empirically established between women’s descriptive representation in certain institutions (generally in legislatures) and the representation of
women’s interests. Nevertheless, women’s numerical presence in decision-making positions does not guarantee the representation of women’s interests (Philips 1995; Young 2000; Williams 1998), and a representative does not have to look like the represented in order to act in their interests (Celis 2008: 81). According to Dodson (2006) and Philips (1995) the influence of descriptive representation on substantive representation is ‘probabilistic, rather than deterministic’. In other words, a higher DRW in legislatures increases the possibilities of the achievement or improvement of SRW, but does not guarantee it. Therefore, the research in the second phase tried to identify individual or institutional factors that could establish the existence of a connection between descriptive and substantive representation. In the last phase, women’s descriptive representation started to be seen as one of the many ways toward the achievement of the SRW. ‘Critical actors’ and ‘representative claims’ are at the centre of the debate in this specific phase (Celis 2008, 2009; Celis and Childs 2008; Celis et al 2008, 2014; Childs and Krook 2009; Saward 2010).

In this study I chose to limit the investigation to elected representatives, therefore to focus on the legislative arena, as other alternative sites of representation are neither visible (in terms of ‘representative claims’), nor particularly effective regarding the Romanian women’s substantive representation (as an outcome). Nevertheless, in the section 4.2. I will make also reference to the non-legislative entities that have activities regarding women’s issues.

3. Methodology

The research methodology applied in this study is qualitative. I use the document analysis, for which I intend the examination of both primary sources (i.e.: legislative documents) and secondary sources (specialty literature and statistics). I have examined the legislative activity in the NP, and Romanian MEPs activity in the plenary of the EP. Regarding NP’s activity, I have examined the period January 2012 – June 2014, while regarding the EP, the period 2009-2014. First, regarding the Romanian delegation in the EP, I have analyzed the whole activity of every deputy in the mentioned period, observing from the total number of actions (and here I mean speeches in plenary; reports as rapporteur; reports as shadow rapporteur; opinions as rapporteur; opinions as shadow rapporteur; motions for resolutions; written declarations; parliamentary questions) how many refer to women’s interests. Second, at national level, I have investigated how many initiatives referred to women from the total of the legislative activity of the NP, and I have also traced their dynamic. There were three situations: the first one, of those which evolved from legislative initiatives, or law projects, to laws, and this one was the best trajectory, a second case was of those definitively rejected (as with most of them happened).

4. Analysis

4.1. The Substantive Representation of Women in the European Parliament

Certain studies argue that descriptive representation does not guarantee substantive representation. On contrary, several empirical studies showed that women representatives act more in women’s interest than their male colleagues. This is also the case of my research on Romanian MEPs activity in the 2009-2014 legislature.

Descriptively, in the analyzed period Romania had 12 women euro-deputies, standing for 36%, from a total of 33 MEPs. I synthesized in the tables 2 and 3 the results obtained from the examination of Romanian MEPs activity in the plenary of the EP. The figures in these tables show, on the one hand, that Romanian women MEPs were more active in the plenary of the EP regarding women’s interests than their male colleagues. This difference can be observed especially comparing female and male MEPs’ numbers of speeches in plenary regarding women. On the other hand, comparing the total number of speeches in plenary, it can be also noticed that women were generally more active than men, not only regarding women’s issues.

Therefore, at least from a quantitative point of view, women’s presence was advantageous for substantive representation. I use the term ‘quantitative’ in the sense Karen Celis gives to ‘quantitative improvements’ regarding substantive representation, as more support for women’s interests by representatives (Celis 2009: 95).
Table 1. Romanian women MEPs’ activity in the plenary of European Parliament during the 2009-2014 legislature. Source: Both data in Table 1 and Table 2 are obtained on the basis of information provided on www.europarl.europa.eu.
<table>
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<th>OGS</th>
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<th>RFLS</th>
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</table>

Table 2. Romanian men MEPs’ activity in the plenary of European Parliament during the legislature 2009-2014

4.2. The Substantive Representation of Women in the National Parliament

The study of the SRW and its relationship with the DRW raised with the increase of women’s number in legislatures. The very low DRW of women in the Romanian NP and the only recent join of the EU could explain the scarcity of studies on these topics regarding Romanian women, at both NP and EP levels. Legislation regarding women’s issues is considered by many scholars as the central aspect of the SRW (Tamerius 1995; Kathlene 2001; Swers 2002). On the other side, recent research on women’s political representation established that unelected actors may also claim to represent women (Celis et al 2008; Celis 2009) and even offer an efficient alternative to the
legislative arenas (Weldon 2002). However, the potential of alternative sites of representation, as women’s policy agencies, non-governmental organisations or women’s movements to promote SRW may vary across countries and over time (Celis et al 2008: 105).

As regards Romania, there are relatively few entities whose activities deal with women’s issues, at both public and private level. At public level, the initiatives can be divided in legislative and non-legislative. The legislative initiatives belong to the NP which has two bodies specialized on equal opportunities (see www.senat.ro and www.cdep.ro). First, there is a Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men in the Chamber of Deputies, whose main fields of activity are the elimination of the sex based discrimination and the improvement of women’s condition in the society. Secondly, there is a Committee on Equal Opportunities in the Senate, whose purpose, among others, is the examination of legislative initiatives and projects regarding the elimination of all kinds of discrimination, including the discrimination based on sex, and the improvement of women’s condition in the society. The public non-legislative initiatives belong basically to four entities (see ec.europa.eu): the National Agency and the National Commission for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men; the National Council for Combating Discrimination; and the National Development Plan. They are all funded by the Government and gender equality is listed among their objectives. On the other side, at private level, there are few associations and centres that deal with women’s issues, as: AnA Society for Feminist Analyses; Centre for Partnership and Equality; Centre for gender studies; Equal Pay Day (ec.europa.eu). Their activities consist mainly in studies, projects and programs which can be considered as ‘representative claims’, but unfortunately without an ample visibility in the society or impact on the decision making institutions. Thus, the most important category of activities regarding SRW (understood whether as representative actions or processes) in Romania rests the legislative one, because of its capacity of having direct or indirect effects on women’s lives through politics and policies which can be favourable to women’s interests, needs and demands.

Women’s descriptive representation in the NP undergone a dramatic fall in the postcommunist period, as everywhere in the former communist Central and Eastern Europe. The percentage of women in the NP stayed in single digits and did not overpass 5% for the first three postcommunist legislatures, and only beginning with the forth it raised to about 10%. In the current legislature, started in 2012, it was reached the highest percentage of female MNPs of the last 25 years. There are currently 67 women out of a total of 572 MNPs, corresponding to 11.71% of the MNPs. As regards the division by chambers, the inferior one have always had a higher percentage of women. In the current legislature there are 55 women in the Chamber of Deputies (13.71%) and 12 (7%) in the Senate. As regards the SRW, in the period January 2012 – June 2014 there have been 10 legislative initiatives regarding women in the NP, of which 4 came from the Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men from the Chamber of Deputies. As it can be seen in Table 3, only 3 initiatives became laws, but none of them was proposed by the Committee on Equal Opportunities. This parliamentarian body is composed of 13 members, 6 of them being women. From its total number of 4 legislative initiatives regarding women on July 3rd 2014, 2 initiatives were at the Senate, 1 at the Committees, and 1 on the agenda. They had 9 initiators, of whom 5 women and 4 men. Thus, not even the women members of the parliamentary body that has as purpose the equal opportunities are not particularly active regarding the SRW. Besides, Committee’s activity as a whole did not materialize into any concrete outcome during this period.

As the examination of the Romanian MEPs activity also suggests, a major number of women office holders does not increase only the possibilities of having a critical mass (Kanter 1977; Dahlerup 1988) which addresses women’s concerns, but also the chances of more critical actors (Childs and Krook 2009). For instance, Romanian women MEPs are more active than the Romanian men MEPs, but not as a critical mass, through joint activity or creating alliances. Instead, they are more active individually. This observation confirms the recent findings in the study of the SRW, that deeper research on women’s substantive representation should focus on individuals and what specific actors do, instead of what women do, displacing the centre of interest from the macro towards the micro level, and from the question ‘when SRW occurs?’ towards ‘how SRW occurs?’ (Childs and Krook 2008; 2009; Celis et al 2008; Celis 2009).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Legislative initiatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Regarding women:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. National Parliament’s activity in the period January 2012- June 2014. **Source:** Data obtained on the basis of information provided on www.cdep.ro and www.senat.ro.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>474</td>
<td>6 (5 definitively rejected, 1 at the Commission)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>688</td>
<td>4 (3 became Laws, 1 on the agenda)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014 (until July, 3rd)</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Conclusions

In this study I have tried to answer a basic question in the research of women’s political representation: what are the consequences of the descriptive representation of women (DRW) on the substantive representation of women (SRW)? In the achievement of this purpose, I have examined the legislative initiatives of the NP in the period January 2012 - July 2014, and Romanian’s delegation activity in the plenary of the EP, in the 2009-2014 legislature. The findings show that descriptively women stay for only 12% in the NP, and 19% in the Government. As the very few women in national politics do not reach 30%, the application of the critical mass theory (Kanter 1977; Dahlerup 1988) cannot be checked. Moreover, it does not occur to have among the MNPs any ‘critical actors’ (Childs and Krook 2009) which to increase and improve the SRW. There have been only 10 legislative initiatives regarding women out of a total of 1512 initiatives from January 2012 to June 2014, and only 3 initiatives became laws. Neither the female, nor the male MNPs are particularly active as regards SRW, and definitely women are not more active than their male colleagues. In other words, at national level SRW is low, as both process and outcome (Franceschet and Piscopo 2008). Contrariwise to the national political underrepresentation, in the EP, Romanian women have always had a higher percentage, close to the European Union average. Furthermore, in the analyzed period, Romanian female MEPs have had a considerably higher percentage than the female MNPs (36% compared to 11,71%) and they were more fervent representatives of women’s interests than their Romanian male colleagues. Therefore, beyond the influence of different institutional contexts, there is possible to establish a correlation between the higher DRW in the EP and the higher SRW, while in the NP, not only that the critical mass misses, but there are neither critical actors which to improve the SRW.

Therefore, the empirical data examined in this study confirm the theory that a higher percentage of women in legislatures increases the substantive representation. In this context, the introduction of sex quotas for the Romanian NP, beyond compensating a social injustice of women as a disadvantaged group (about 52% of the population and less than 12% in the NP), could also improve women’s substantive representation.

Acknowledgements

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