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**NAVIGATING IDEOLOGICAL DIVIDES: ALTERNATIVE FEMINIST
DISCOURSE(S) WITHIN THE ROMANIAN CONTEMPORARY LITERARY
SPHERE**

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Abstract: This paper aims to analyse the emergence of alternative feminist platforms (such as *Literatură și feminism*, *Premiile Sofia Nădejde*, *Buletin de știri Ecaterina Arbore*, *Cooperativa arbore*, *Pagini libere*, *Cenaclul X*, *frACTalia*) within the context of an ideologically divided Romanian literary sphere. The national political climate registers conservative attitudes towards feminism as volatile. They oscillate between that of “opportunist non-sexists” (Grünberg, *Lived Feminism(s)*), who appropriated the movement for cultural capital, and the outright rejection of feminism, understood as inextricably linked to imported Western ideology (*Miroiu*, *Drumul către autonomie*). In response, our paper implements a double perspective: one that juxtaposes instances of feminist appropriations with leftist feminist articulations.

We first adopt a birds-eye view, examining the post-communist political climate that gave rise to waves of “retraditionalization” in Eastern European countries (Bluhm et al.), as well the issue of alignment or synchronisation of feminist ideals with similar

local and global movements. Then, we showcase the means of disseminating anti-genderist and anti-feminist ideas within the Romanian academe, as well as the larger civil society. Lastly, we aim to highlight alternative feminist platforms, which we interpret as feminist “counterpublics” (Fraser; Majewska) able to form sites of resistance within the masculinist public sphere. Our study highlights *convergent time-frames* or temporal coherence within alternative feminist discourses, illustrating how non-liberal feminists sometimes coordinate actions and responses to better address social struggles.

Keywords: post-communist feminism, socialist feminism, Eastern European feminism, anti-feminism, Romanian literary sphere, alternative feminist platforms, counterpublics.

Introduction

Our research seeks to analyse the emergence of alternative feminist platforms within the context of an ideologically divided Romanian literary sphere. The national political climate exhibits a volatile conservatism towards feminism, oscillating between the stance of “opportunist non-sexists” (Grünberg, “Lived Feminism(s)”), who appropriate the movement for cultural capital, and the outright rejection of feminism as an imported Western ideology – the so-called “room service political feminism” (Miroiu, *Drumul către autonomie*). This creates ideological grey zones where leftist ideas are assimilated, risking the loss of their political edge. Our study therefore focuses on radical projects that address growing concerns over the slow development of a *grassroots* feminist movement in Romanian society. To achieve this, a dual perspective is required: firstly, one that highlights instances of feminist appropriation within mainstream media outlets and the cultural or intellectual sphere. Secondly, we aim to illuminate leftist feminist projects and platforms, linking them to the concept of counterpublics to explore how they challenge established media.

Leftist feminist articulations disrupt dominant discourses by reframing mainstream cultural debates, shifting them away from essentialist or simplistic binaries – such as “aesthetics vs politics”, “femininity vs masculinity”, or “normal vs pathological” – and towards collective welfare that fosters grassroots feminist movements. This dual approach will thus highlight the polarised nature of Romanian feminist discourse. The significance of this study lies in its effort to map the cultural

landscape in which non-liberal forms of Romanian feminism struggle to gain traction – a subject we believe has not yet been fully explored. Our aim is not to present our research as exhaustive but to offer an academic contribution to the study of feminist appropriations in cultural media outlets while also providing visibility to local leftist feminist initiatives.

Post-communist feminism in Eastern Europe: between *top-down* emancipation and grassroots movements

Over the past decade, the revival of feminist traditions in Romanian society during the post-communist transition has faced criticism for being rooted in liberal, academic, and therefore elitist circles. The women’s movement, as it emerged during the transition to neoliberalism, is frequently portrayed as closely tied to figures such as Mihaela Miroiu (Dumitrache 73) and other researchers who, through networks of “academic mobility and socialisation” (Moroşan 124) and international projects, worked to institutionalise feminism within the intellectual sphere. Consequently, both Dumitrache and Molocea critically discuss the nascent development of feminism as a movement separate from politics, oriented towards civil society and “advocacy” (Dumitrache 54), alongside the notable lack of “grassroots” feminist initiatives during the 1990s (Molocea 31).

Given its slow evolution into a street movement, which only materialised in the early 2000s (Miroiu, *Mișcări feministe* 203), studies of Romanian or broader Eastern European post-communist feminism often adopt frameworks of *top-down* emancipation (Miroiu, *Drumul către autonomie*; Dumitrache; Grünberg, “Lived Feminism(s)”; Trifan) or NGO-ization (Grünberg, “Lived Feminism(s)”; Ghodsee). However, these perspectives – along with concepts such as “showroom costless state feminism” (Miroiu, “Not the Right Moment!” 588), used to describe the Romanian case – can be problematic. To some extent, they obscure the contributions of local activists or risk framing Romanian feminism as a purely foreign import.¹ Agnieszka Graff’s critique of top-down emancipation, or the “co-optation argument”, aligns with this concern, highlighting the limited recognition of current local initiatives and

¹See Roxana Dumitrache’s article, „Construcția feminismului românesc în tranziția timpurie” where she describes feminism as part of the westernising, post-communist modernisation project (Dumitrache 71), a statement which glances over the pre-communist history of the women’s movement in Romanian society.

the lack of alternatives outside the NGO sector during the transition period (Graff 30–31).

Alexandra Ana offers a valuable critique of the NGO-ization paradigm, advocating for a decolonial framework to illuminate grassroots feminist projects in Eastern Europe. Her research on decolonising scholarship on Eastern European feminism also underscores the importance of critically interrogating the idea of “synchronisation” with Western feminism, often framed through the wave metaphor. Eastern Europe’s “missed wave” is frequently described in terms of “cultural or political mimicry” (Ana 6–7). This remains a debated topic among Romanian feminists and gender studies scholars, often framed as a shortcoming due to being “lost between waves” (Graff 103), accompanied by recurring questions such as: *Can the “lost” second wave be recovered? If not, which wave does Romanian feminism belong to?*

The prevailing position in “searching for the right wave” of local feminism is often neutral. Scholars such as Băluță and Miroiu advocate for a “hybrid feminism that encapsulates both second and third wave features” (Băluță, “Feminismul românesc”) or for moving “across the equality/difference/differences debates” (Iancu *et al.* 24), emphasising the importance of simultaneity. However, the wave metaphor itself operates as a legitimising construct imposed by the Western world. Alexandra Ana critiques the adoption of the “naturalised division of feminism into three waves” (Ana 7), arguing that it perpetuates the notion of a linear and universal modernity “for the subjects who were excluded and the historical experiences that were erased or rendered invisible” (Ana 4).

Moreover, Laura Sandu offers a productive critique of liberal feminism, highlighting its obsessive drive for synchronisation, which she describes as “self-colonising” (Sandu 143). Sandu clarifies her adopted feminist stance as anti-capitalist and epistemically disobedient, emphasising that it is not a simple act of synchronisation but a continuous questioning of knowledge produced by the West. As a result, the feminist projects and initiatives analysed in this paper do not identify themselves through the wave metaphor. Instead, they are characterised by *shared values* and the concept of a *network* — both locally, within a close-knit group of members, and internationally, through intertextual references spanning diverse spaces and time periods. This reinforces the argument that these initiatives do not

align with the notion of a specific wave but rather with a *commonplace* built stratified social struggles.

It is important to note that, in contexts where (neo)conservative discourse gains influence, the militant, activist, and radical efforts of leftist feminism are increasingly undervalued. These struggles are often depicted as marginal or even struggling to persist, a perception frequently linked to the recurring argument of uneven development attributed to the imposition of communism. This sentiment is prevalent across many post-socialist regions in Eastern Europe, where the boundaries of the political spectrum are frequently blurred due to ongoing (internal) co-optation. Nevertheless, this trend is closely tied to populist agendas, which rely on “the Manichean division between the pure people and the corrupt elite” (Soare and Tufiş 6).

Furthermore, as multiple scholars have noted, there are direct and interwoven connections between the right-wing populist movement and the shared anti-gender stance. First and foremost, terms such as “(anti-)genderism”, “gender ideology”, or “gender theory” serve as a shared ideological platform for right-wing parties, creating common ground for chauvinist, xenophobic, traditionalist, and religious dogmas. As Paternotte and Kuhar observe, these ideological campaigns are “designed to oppose women’s and LGBT rights activism, as well as the scholarship deconstructing essentialist and naturalistic assumptions about gender and sexuality” (Paternotte and Kuhar 8). Additionally, this agenda is rooted in a hostile attitude towards Western (woke) culture, which is perceived as “a covert political strategy, a sort of conspiracy aimed at seizing power and imposing deviant and minority values on average people” (Paternotte and Kuhar 9). Paternotte and Kuhar emphasise the need for a more precise definition of the umbrella term “Global Right Wing” to avoid overly broad and unproductive generalisations: “[it] should be disentangled at a theoretical and empirical level, as well as located in concrete settings” (Paternotte and Kuhar 7).

Following this framework, the next section of this article will examine the anti-genderist discourse within the Romanian intellectual sphere. Returning to the political overview of Romania’s current profile, it is essential to highlight the significant impact of the “mainstreaming of the extreme” (Norocel and Szabó 4) through mass media on the depiction of gender (roles). As Ov. Cristian Norocel argues, Romanian right-wing female politicians base their strategies on media

visibility, creating the illusion of self-representation and agency by invoking traditional family values. He explains:

Claiming to defend conservative family values, they employ motherhood instrumentally to position themselves as nurturing and protecting “their people”, thereby justifying strict and dominant female party leadership. [...] On the conservative right continuum, these women come to represent the “truly liberated women”, as opposed to the allegedly “self-serving and hypocritical” feminists (Norocel 45).

This pattern is also evident in Hungarian politics, where the marginalisation of women from legislative positions and the emphasis on the so-called “nuclear traditional family” simultaneously underscore the struggle for feminist representation: “women’s over-inclusion in the family masks their exclusion from certain rights and services” (Iancu *et al.* 39). This issue is widespread within Central and Eastern European feminism. For example, in Poland, researcher Agnieszka Graff observes that the dominant narrative frames feminism as a “disability” stemming from a repressive history, despite the existence of mass mobilisations and radical demonstrations. Similarly, in Romania, the cliché that feminism or queer identities were non-existent during communism continues to obstruct meaningful progress (Popa 3–4). Recognising local queer and feminist histories is a crucial starting point for advancing the political projects of grassroots feminist initiatives and for constructing feminist discourse(s) that move beyond the fixation on “synchronisation” with Western feminisms.

What we are witnessing today is less the unprecedented emergence of marginalised communities and more a process of decoding repressed queer and feminist identities. These communities are increasingly entering the *counterpublic* sphere through manifestos, independent programmes, and projects aimed at creating safe spaces for representation, as well as delivering socio-political critiques of dominant power structures.

The Romanian intellectual sphere: the dissemination of anti-genderist and anti-feminist sentiments

In the following section of our research, we aim to discuss the dissemination of anti-genderist and anti-feminist ideas in the cultural and intellectual spheres. To achieve

this, we will first provide a brief overview of the waves of retraditionalisation² experienced in Eastern Europe post-1989, focusing on the local manifestations of anti-gender politics as threats to both civil society and academic freedom. Subsequently, we will analyse content published by several established Romanian cultural outlets between 2010 and 2024, showcasing their appropriation of a feminist agenda through a juxtaposition of anti-feminist or traditionalist think pieces with articles displaying clear feminist political engagement.

As Bluhm and other scholars argue, the first wave of Eastern European “retraditionalisation” can be traced to the late 1980s and early 1990s. This period, marked by efforts to break away from communism, resulted in the dismantling of the welfare state. Factors such as “the relative decline of women’s labour market participation [...] the dismantling of universal childcare [...] and the withdrawal of women from politics” contributed to a revival of conservatism (Bluhm et al. 2–3). The second wave, fostered by the 2008 financial crisis (Bluhm et al. 3), was characterised by “anti-Western” and “anti-liberal” sentiments, alongside the anti-communist attitudes central to the first wave of political conservatism (Bluhm et al. 4). This period is frequently discussed as part of an “illiberal turn” in Eastern and Central Eastern European countries.

Illiberalism often manifests as anti-genderism, which is typically associated with populism (Graff and Korolczuk) or “democratic backsliding” (Krizsan and Roggeband). Despite regional differences, Graff and Korolczuk identify common core elements in anti-gender ideology. They argue that anti-genderism encompasses a religious component opposing “social constructionism”, a cultural and anti-progressive core resisting perceived Western decadence, and an appropriated anti-colonial framework in which gender and feminism are framed as Western impositions (Graff and Korolczuk 17–18). Whether understood as an “empty signifier” (Mayer and Sauer qtd. in Graff and Korolczuk 16) or as a “symbolic glue” uniting various conservative or extremist ideologies

² “Western feminist scholars described the changing power relationships in postsocialist gender regimes as a process of «retraditionalization», which refers both to the reform discourses of the late 1980s and early 1990s and to practical changes of the gender regime after the breakdown of state socialism” (Bluhm *et. al* 2). It is important to note that the usage of “wave” in this context still has a negative connotation, despite differing from its meaning in Western feminist discourses. The notion of “wave” here might still be problematic in the sense of constructing a uniform view on Eastern European histories, however Bluhm’s volume acknowledges the differences between Western and Eastern modes of “retraditionalization”, and, as such, works as an important point of reference for our study.

(Grezebalska qtd. in Bluhm et al. 5), gender became perceived as a threat during the second wave of retraditionalisation. This shift, as Bluhm notes, stemmed from the “*redistributive* component” of this stage, centred on the “traditional nuclear family”, in contrast to the first wave’s preference for minimal state interference in private life (Bluhm et al. 6).

In Romania, anti-gender mobilisations often take the form of demonising non-heteronormative sexualities and family configurations within civil society. In academia, anti-genderism and anti-feminism are manifested through efforts to delegitimise gender studies. Băluță argues that the fragile state of gender studies serves as a litmus test for Romanian democracy (Băluță 37), while Vlase and Terian highlight the “weak institutionalisation of gender studies in higher education” (Vlase and Terian 1825–1840). Moreover, anti-feminist attitudes in academia are reinforced by prominent intellectual figures such as Ana Blandiana, Gabriel Liiceanu, Aurora Liiceanu, Andrei Pleșu, and Radu Paraschivescu. The statements made by these intellectuals, primarily between 2015 and 2023, reveal consistent opposition to feminist principles. Blandiana and Pleșu critique feminism as a form of imposed political correctness. Paraschivescu dismisses feminism’s “sour seriousness” towards misogynistic discourse³, while Gabriel Liiceanu labels feminism one of the six modern social disorders, alongside moral relativism, the sublimation of tradition, and egalitarianism. Aurora Liiceanu adopts an essentialist biological and psychological stance, stating her aversion to “identity confusions” and supporting psychologists “who do not pledge for fluid identities, something that would lead to general chaos”⁴.

Such misuse of scientific arguments, laden with personal biases, is not an isolated phenomenon. In 2022, *Viața Românească* published an article by psychologist and writer Ioana Scoruș, who referred to feminism as a purely imported ideology that “destroys the minds of teenagers and young adults” while denying any scientific contributions of gender studies. She described these studies as virus-like:

This is how healthy psychic structures are damaged, through permanent contact with the source of disruption. This is how minds are ideologised [...] I was used to ‘scientific’ feminist journals from American universities, I was in contact with the

³ „seriozitate acră”, (all translations from Romanian sources, unless otherwise specified, are ours).

⁴ „nu îmi plac confuziile identitare și sunt de partea psihologilor care nu pledează pentru fluiditatea identitară, care ar duce la un haos general”.

number of monstrosities produced through ‘scientific’ methods, with the absurd conclusions of absurd studies, but I did not believe Romania to be so majorly contaminated⁵ (Scoruș).

The language employed by Scoruș frames both “ideology” and queer identity as “diseases”, grouping them into deviant patterns of thought and behaviour.

The volatile political acceptance of a feminist agenda in Romanian civil society – often associated with the notion of *top-down* emancipation, as highlighted by Miroiu, Trifan, and Grünberg – is a recurring theme, particularly when examining the 2020 bill passed by the Romanian Senate, which forbids discussions of gender theory in schools and universities. This is further evidenced by the Coalition for Family’s referendum initiative, launched in 2016, to define marriage exclusively as a union between a man and a woman – an effort that ultimately failed. These illiberal political initiatives align with the timeline previously outlined in relation to intellectuals’ anti-feminist attitudes. Similarly, the Family Alliance Romania, established in 2007, advocates redefining marriage as between husband and wife, while the PRO VITA Bucharest Association, founded in 2005, champions a strong anti-abortion agenda under the banner of protecting “life, family, and parental vocation”⁶.

Although research into anti-genderism and anti-feminism frequently adopts populist, nationalist, or neoliberal frameworks, scholars such as Norocel and Paternotte argue for the necessity of more precise terminology when analysing Eastern European anti-gender politics. These movements differ from those in the United States and cannot be fully explained using the vocabulary developed to study right-wing “expansion [...] in the U.S.” (Norocel and Paternotte 126). We build on these authors’ concept of local anti-feminist and anti-gender initiatives as “vernacular declinations of global anti-gender campaigns” (Norocel and Paternotte 126). This perspective situates our research within broader Central and Eastern European literature while recognising that not all labels are applicable to the Romanian context. In Romania, anti-feminism and anti-genderism are not solely tied to populist movements but are also perpetuated through elitist discourse by key

⁵ „Cam așa se distrug structuri psihice sănătoase, prin contactul permanent cu sursa disturbatoare. Cam așa se ideologizează mințile [...] Eram obișnuită cu revistele «științifice» feministe de pe la universitățile din SUA, eram în contact cu cantitatea de monstruozițăți produsă în mod «științific», cu concluziile aberante ale unor studii aberante, dar nu credeam că și România este major contaminată”.

⁶ „vieții, familiei și vocației parentale”.

intellectual figures and established cultural publications. These outlets continue to frame feminism as a dangerous Western import imposed on Romanian society.

Building on Mihaela Ursa's study regarding the spread of anti-feminist sentiments through three primary channels—advertising, politics, and the intellectual sphere (Ursa 77) — our research focuses on the perpetuation of anti-egalitarian ideologies within institutionalised cultural media outlets such as *Dilema Veche*, *Viața Românească*, and *Observator Cultural*. While researchers such as Moroșan and Băluță have also proposed systematic analyses of the main anti-feminist arguments encountered in the cultural and academic spheres⁷, we present our own categorisation, based on articles published in these outlets and interviews we have consulted. Our findings link the dissemination of anti-feminist and anti-genderist ideas to the following attitudes and trends: 1) an understanding of *feminism as a monolithic movement*, since anti-feminists equate women's emancipation to an imported ideology, negating both the history of feminism in Romania before the onset of communism, as well as the existence of multiple local/international branches of feminism, 2) an aversion to the perceived “*forced egalitarianism of political correctness*”, 3) a *depreciation of gender studies as pseudo-scientific*, 4) a perception on feminism as being *overly belligerent*, and, therefore responsible for the destruction of femininity and the relationship between the “natural” man and woman, and, 5) the description of feminism as an *anti-aesthetic ideology*.

In examining *Dilema Veche*'s engagement with feminism between 2010 and 2024, two thematic issues stand out: the 2010 dossier *Who is Afraid of Feminism Anymore?* [*Cui îi mai e frică de feminism?*] and the 2022 dossier *Femininity, Feminism* [*Feminitate, feminism*]. Both titles reflect broader cultural perceptions of feminism: the first frames the movement as alarming, while the second explores feminism and “femininity” in tandem, reflecting a common cultural assumption that the two are mutually exclusive.

⁷ See Moroșan's “The institutionalization of feminism in the Romanian academic and intellectual sphere” and Băluță's “Studiile de gen: un turnesol al democrației românești”. In her research, Moroșan identifies the following arguments: the “meritocratic” argument, the “lack of humour” argument, and the equation of feminism with a new form of totalitarianism (Moroșan 131), while Băluță's classification relies on the following components: the academic marginalisation of gender studies, the automatic equation of feminism to Marxism and, as such, to a dangerous ideology, and, lastly, the anti-gender campaigns undertaken in 2018, 2020, as well as intellectuals' responses to feminism (Băluță 37-8).

The primary issue with both inquiries is their juxtaposition of feminist and anti-feminist stances, which creates an illusion of political neutrality while avoiding clear political commitment. In the 2010 issue, two out of seven articles advocate for a non-militant feminism, either by praising the advent of a “new age” feminism described as “a more relaxed version of the women’s «movement» that proves to be both pragmatic and intelligent”⁸ (S.S.), or by asserting that feminism can only succeed through non-aggression, claiming that it “makes itself heard best by whispering”⁹ (Olivotto). Similarly, the 2022 issue on feminism maintains this political ambiguity. With the exception of three articles – one by Grünberg, which critiques stereotypical portrayals of feminists as “manly,” “unattractive,” and “warrior-like,” and two that focus on the Sofia Nădejde Awards – the remainder frame feminism as a threat to femininity.

In *Viața Românească* and *Observator Cultural*, anti-feminist attitudes extend beyond essays to include book reviews, which often promote a strictly aesthetic interpretation of literature while minimising feminist ideas in contemporary literary works. This stance reinforces the cultural status quo. Two notable examples of such reviews are Mircea Ciobanu’s *The Poetry of Women vs Feminist Poetry* [*Poezia femeilor vs poezia feministă*, 2020] and Tudorel Urian’s *Velvet Feminism* [*Feminismul de catifea*, 2021]. Ciobanu’s review, written in response to *A Century of Romanian Poetry Written by Women. Volume I (1990–2019)*, coordinated by Alina Purcaru and Paula Erizanu, argues that the literary canon is free of gender injustice. Ciobanu contends that Purcaru and Erizanu’s project is unnecessary, as the anthology includes works by established poets, implying that women writers are not “excluded” from the canon. Urian’s review of Ioana Pârvulescu’s *The Ladies’ Alphabet. From Mrs. B to Mrs. T* (*Alfabetul doamnelor. De la Doamna B la doamna T*, 2021) constructs a false dichotomy between two types of feminism: one militant and one apolitical. Urian praises Pârvulescu’s work for embodying a “different type of feminism” rooted in “literary history,”¹⁰ which he claims avoids political outcomes. This framing diminishes the political implications of literature, promoting the notion that feminist writing can exist purely in theoretical terms, detached from activism or socio-political engagement:

⁸ „o nouă vîrstă, mai relaxată, a mișcării feminine care dovedește și pragmatism, și inteligență”.

⁹ „vorbește cel mai bine în șoaptă”.

¹⁰ „alt tip de feminism [...] unul de istorie literară”.

Is this a feminist work? Definitely, yes, especially from the perspective of the subject it addresses, but it represents a different type of feminism than the one promoted today, particularly after the emergence of the *MeToo* movement. Ioana Pârvulescu is not a *neo-suffragette*; her approach is neither militant nor centred on the act of reclaiming; it is far from having (or even suggesting) any political outcome. At this level, her approach is that of the literary historian (even though it includes political, historical, sociological, philosophical, psychological, and anthropological considerations), and the author's evident aim is to provoke thought and encourage people to reread the great texts of literary history¹¹ (Urian).

Literary reviews published in *Observator Cultural* exhibit similar hostile attitudes. Octavian Soviany's article, *Single-Use Feminism [Un feminism de unică folosință, 2022]*, is overtly anti-feminist in its reaction to Alina Purcaru's poetry volume, *More and More Splendour [Tot mai multă splendoare, 2022]*. Soviany creates a false distinction between two strands of feminism – a cultural feminism and one drawn from lived experience – with the latter being praised for its perceived sincerity. His conclusion leans on the argument of the autonomy of the aesthetic, framing Purcaru's work as successful *despite* its feminist ideas.

Ioana Tătărușanu's review, *O tempora, Dolores!* (2024), adopts a similar approach, critiquing feminist literature through the lens of aesthetics. Reviewing Medeea Iancu's latest work, *The Weaver [Țesătoarea, 2023]*, Tătărușanu undermines Iancu's explicitly political view of literature, which rejects the canonical primacy of the aesthetic: "The texts of Medeea Iancu clearly state their disinterest, or, better yet, their disdain towards the stifling, discriminatory criterion of the primacy of the aesthetic"¹² (Tătărușanu). Nevertheless, the review reinforces the aesthetic as the central interpretive criterion, asserting, "The question remains: why would we, given the circumstances, use the aesthetic criterion in reading and

¹¹ „Este aceasta o operă feminisă? Categori, da, mai ales din perspectiva subiectului abordat, dar este alt tip de feminism decât cel promovat astăzi, cu precădere după apariția fenomenului *me too*. Ioana Pârvulescu nu este o *neo-suffragette*, demersul său nu este unul militant și revendicativ, este departe de a avea (sau măcar de a sugera) vreo finalitate politică. La acest nivel, demersul ei este unul de istorie literară (chiar dacă din el nu lipsesc considerentele politice, istorice, sociologice, filosofice, psihologice, antropologice), iar scopul evident al autoarei este acela de a da de gândit și de a-i îndemna pe oameni să recitească marile texte din istoria literaturii”.

¹² „textele Medeei Iancu rostește răspicat dezinteresul, ba chiar disprețul față de criteriul sufocant, discriminatoriu al primatului esteticului”.

evaluating such a book? Simply put, because it cannot be done otherwise”¹³ (Tătărușanu).

Despite these negative reviews of feminist literature, the content of these publications is not uniformly anti-feminist. For example, the essay “From Classical Feminism to Recent Intersectional Literature” [De la feminismul clasic la literatura intersecțională recentă, 2023] by Grete Tartler in *Viața Românească* offers an overview of feminist literature’s evolution, highlighting its recent focus on intersectionality. Similarly, in *Observator Cultural*, think-pieces such as Olivia Nițiș’s “Feminism and Culture: Relevance and Perspectives in Art History and Cultural Analysis” [Feminism și cultură. Relevanță și perspective în istoria artei și analiza culturală, 2010] dismantle stereotypes associated with the women’s movement and advocate for the persistence of feminist discourse in art and culture.

Even more conflicting are the contributions from radical leftist voices in *Observator Cultural*. For instance, Medeea Iancu published four articles in 2020 offering robust feminist critiques of the masculinist cultural sphere, alongside earlier pieces in 2017 and 2021, including an excerpt from her writing. In 2023, Maria Martelli contributed a review of Laura Sandu’s collection *Feminist Writings* [*Scieri feministe*], reaffirming the necessity of a feminism that accommodates the diversity among women by fostering suitable networks. The paradox lies in the presence of these feminist and anti-feminist or anti-genderist pieces within the same liberal, centrist publication. This dynamic creates *ideological grey zones*, blending conflicting perspectives in ways that merit further exploration. These grey zones leave open questions about their potential impact, particularly regarding how they may dilute the political edge of leftist critiques when absorbed into mainstream platforms. Future research could address the implications of this phenomenon and its influence on feminist and leftist discourse.

Counterpublics and feminist alternative platforms

In critical social theory, the public sphere refers to a shared arena, a space for participatory approaches to democracy and an opinion-making process shaped by multiple agents and factors. Habermas’ concept of the “public sphere” envisions an idealised bourgeois public, presupposing an undifferentiated cultural background as

¹³ „O întrebare rămîne: de ce ne-am folosi, așa stînd lucrurile, de criteriul estetic în lectura și evaluarea unei astfel de cărți? Simplu spus, fiindcă altfel nu se poate”.

the foundation of modern democracy. In our analysis, we adopt the concept of the “public sphere” to encapsulate the mainstream trends within established cultural publications and intellectual circles. The platforms and sources mentioned above function as a public sphere for the contemporary Romanian cultural scene due to several factors: the arbitrary and unchallenged authority of their organisers, the longevity argument—which, particularly in a culturally progress-resistant country like Romania, equates tradition with legitimacy—and the overall consensus among both their consumers and participants. This consensus is reinforced by the juxtaposition of anti-genderist and feminist stances, creating *grey zones* where feminist discourse oscillates between appropriation (as a trend for profit) and a politically subversive act, ultimately homogenised with other content.

We use the concept of *grey zones* to describe these confounding cultural outlets. The authoritative position of the Romanian cultural public sphere is further entrenched by the processes of institutionalisation and monetisation, often reliant on unethical funding and sponsorships (as exemplified by the BRD and *Scena9* case¹⁴). Moreover, after 1989, the process of “democratic backsliding” (Krizsán and Roggeband 4) intensified the androcentric nature of the public sphere, pushing neoliberal feminism into the background. It was only around 2010 that radical feminism began to gain more ground, which in turn led to the increased demonisation of feminist initiatives.

Anti-feminist sentiments can also be traced to the uneven development of the political spectrum in Eastern Europe, where a clear left-wing/right-wing binary is difficult to establish. As Paula Erizanu observes: “Outrageous levels of corruption combined with the communist inheritance mean politics in Eastern Europe can’t be mapped on to the familiar left-to-right spectrum that explains voter behaviour in much of Western Europe” (Erizanu). In this context, alternative movements that seek to challenge the hegemonic public sphere are not constrained by the public vs. private dichotomy – categories often reductive and steeped in liberal connotations – but instead take the form of *counterpublics*.

¹⁴ See, for example, the article posted on Ecaterina Arbore’s Substack, where the collective criticises both the bank’s (BRD’s) and the publication’s (Scena9’s) motivation of their collaboration. While the article is only available in Romanian, statements such as “Does cultural production serve the self-affirmation of the capital?” or does “cultural production as commodity serve the production of surplus value?” provide a valid critique of the cultural market’s mechanisms. <https://cooperativaarbore.substack.com/p/tirada-1>.

In what follows, we provide an overview of the most consistent local initiatives for alternative spaces dedicated to feminist discourse and literature, and analyse their potential to form counterpublics within the mainstream Romanian cultural scene. This section will focus strictly on literature-related feminist initiatives and acknowledges that these account for only one segment of a broader interdisciplinary, political, and subversive movement.

Counterpublics, defined as “those publics or groups that form and organise through mutual recognition of wider public exclusion so as to overcome those exclusions” (Majewska), aim to address heterogeneous social struggles from an inclusive and intersectional perspective, creating *spaces* for representation and political resistance. Importantly, we adopt a broader definition of *spaces*, following Laura Sandu’s argument that these are not limited to geography or initial purpose but instead encompass “breaches, opportunities, [and] occasions for expression created for/by artistic/political groups that act punctually or repeatedly in togetherness”¹⁵ (Sandu 141). The spaces we examine in our research are: Literature and Feminism [Literatură și feminism], the Ecaterina Arbore Research and Political Action Cooperative [Cooperativa de Cercetare și Acțiune Politică Ecaterina Arbore], the Sofia Nădejde Awards [Premiile Sofia Nădejde], *CUTRA* magazine, the X Literary Circle [Cenaclul X], *Free Pages* [Pagini Libere], and *frACTalia* publishing house. Notably, these platforms reject the neoliberal rhetoric that often divorces feminism from its socio-political implications, reframing it as an apolitical academic product.

For the latter, the evolution towards a committed leftist political programme is somewhat atypical but nonetheless crucial for its future implications. Founded around 2015, the *frACTalia* publishing house initially served as a space for experimental and hybrid texts, offering an alternative to rigid canonical literary standards. However, it was not until 2020 that the editorial group publicly articulated their selection criteria, thereby formalising their political and ideological agenda. Their editorial policy firmly rejects any form of anti-feminist, homophobic, transphobic, classist, fascist, ableist, or speciesist discourse or attitudes, irrespective of the aesthetic or stylistic value of the texts submitted.

The significance of this statement lies in its public, transparent dimension, which not only reinforces the publishing house’s politically subversive values but also

¹⁵ “ci și breșele, oportunitățile, ocaziile pentru expresie create pentru/de grupuri artistice/politice care acțiunează punctual sau repetat împreună”.

fosters a network of feminist authors, activists, and artists—an essential element for its emergence as a counterpublic: “These projects aimed not only to challenge the established media, but also to build independent networks based on an alternative organisational model of the media” (Miloni qtd. in Venema 246). Understanding the polyvocal and heterogeneous nature of this programme is crucial to avoid oversimplified labelling of resistance as an exception or fetishisation. As Majewska notes, “contemporary media depictions of resistance, too, often do not provide a balanced description [...] choosing the most extravagant characters and presenting them as leaders, sometimes without any insight into processes within the movements” (Majewska 130). The publishing house’s commitment to leftist ideology was further consolidated in May 2024 when it joined the International Union of Left Publishers (IULP). According to Fraser’s concept of *subaltern counterpublics* — “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses” (Fraser 67) — we classify *frACTalia*, the Ecaterina Arbore Research and Political Action Cooperative, *Literature and Feminism*, and the Literary Circle X as counterpublics. These entities represent a distinct branch of feminist literature and discourse locally, challenging the agenda of neoliberal women’s movements. Additionally, members of these groups participate in multiple leftist feminist initiatives and extend their work into non-literary spheres, such as community service, donations, fundraisers, and protests. This intersectional approach is vital in a stratified society, embodying the dual function of subaltern counterpublics described by Fraser:

On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics. It is precisely in the dialectic between these two functions that their emancipatory potential resides (Fraser 68).

To better understand the emergence of these spaces, it is essential to examine their main goals and directions. The diversity and intersectionality within these groups counteracts internal separatism and hierarchies. Drawing on historical perspectives and local practices, these spaces foster what Sandu describes as “a fusional dynamic which transcends the others with separating potential” (Sandu 155), relying on a transversal capacity inherent to counterpublics.

The platform *Literature and Feminism* was founded around 2019 at the initiative of Laura Sandu and Mihaela Michailov, materialising with the publication of the anthology *The Art of Reclaiming* [*Arta revendicării*], coordinated by Medeea Iancu. Currently financed by the Quantic Association and formerly co-financed by the Administrația Fondului Cultural Național (AFCN) programme, the platform aims to produce, publish, and promote feminist literature in Romanian. It maintains transparency in its ideological stance and publication norms, with the explicit goal of increasing the representation of women in contemporary Romanian literature. It consists of multiple initiatives, such as: The Publishing House for Feminist Literature [Editura pentru Literatură Feministă], The Days of Feminist Literature [Zilele literaturii feministe] (online event, poetry and prose reading), The Women Writers' Circle [Cercul scriitoarelor] (book recommendations), Feminist Talks [Convorbiri feministe] (weekly column) and Borderline Knowledges [Cunoașteri de frontieră] (theoretical and hybrid brochures related to socialist, queer, intersectional and decolonial feminism). It is noteworthy that the weekly column began with the publication of “The Manifesto of Leftist Women Writers” [Manifestul scriitoarelor feministe de stânga], which was created in response to the *Mihai Eminescu Awards* scandal¹⁶.

The X Literary Circle was established in the spring of 2021, advocating for queer, feminist, anti-speciesist, anti-capitalist, autonomous, and non-hierarchical values. Between 2021 and 2024, the group published four anthologies—*Shelters* [Adăposturi], *Clearings* [Lumișuri], *Work Days, Working Bodies* [Zilele muncii, corpurile muncitoare], and *Queers for Palestine, Transitions* [Tranziții] — with most of these works freely available as PDFs online. The Circle actively engages in political activism, organising fundraisers for Palestine in Bucharest and Cluj-Napoca and translating Palestinian poetry. Notably, the essay and poetry collection *Queers for Palestine* was published in collaboration with Blocul Roz, The Queer Vegan Community, and *Free Pages*. The significance of groups like the X Literary Circle lies in what Farnatu describes as a “theoretical import through creation”¹⁷ (Farnatu 28),

¹⁶“This manifesto aimed to give voice to the feminist community following the controversy surrounding the «Mihai Eminescu» prize awarded for poetic debuts in 2021, specifically to Ileana Negrea, a queer, mad feminist, and after another feminist poet, Cătălina Stanislav, was criticised for the obscene nature of her poetry. This was not the first time feminist writers faced attacks in the media or by jury members of the «Mihai Eminescu» prize after the awards ceremony. For example, Medeea Iancu experienced similar criticism in 2018 after reading one of her poems, deemed too vulgar to have any real aesthetic value” (Tite 167-8).

¹⁷ “import teoretic prin creație”.

which builds a non-normative poetry canon and advances the queer gaze in local literature. This queer gaze promotes a non-essentialist perspective, challenging and dismantling binary epistemologies.

The Ecaterina Arbore Research and Political Action Cooperative is a more recent addition to Romania's left-wing feminist initiatives, founded in 2022 by a group of writers, artists, and activists. The Cooperative aims to contribute to the growth of local feminism while maintaining connections with international movements through collective anthologies, research, theoretical texts, manifestos, and position papers. It is also working to create an archive of texts from the socialist feminist tradition, making these resources accessible in educational and cultural spaces. The collective draws inspiration from the historical figure Ecaterina Arbore, noted for her advocacy of the emancipation of both wage-earning and non-wage-earning working women. The Cooperative is well known for its calls to protest and its interventions, such as organising general feminist strikes, marking International Safe Abortion Day, and participating in other marches. While its members remain anonymous, the group's activities align with those of *frACTalia* and Literature and Feminism. In April 2024, the Cooperative expanded its project by launching a free-subscription Substack newsletter. This channel provides timely critiques of current national issues, tackling topics ranging from music and academic research to online debates, while incorporating literature and culture into its discussions.

Adopting a similar anti-capitalist ideology, *CUTRA Magazine* and *Free Pages* both began their activities in 2018, aiming to disseminate knowledge in line with the libertarian tradition. *CUTRA Magazine* focuses on a primarily non-binary perspective, while *Free Pages* operates as an informal anarchist collective. In 2018, Elena Vlădăreanu highlighted the unequal dynamics within the Romanian literary scene, observing that “the relationship between male and women writers appeared to be more unequal than ever before”¹⁸ (Vlădăreanu). In response, the Sofia Nădejde Awards were launched as the first initiative to promote difference, highlight the work of women writers, and showcase valuable literature outside of mainstream publishing houses. It is important to note, however, that the Sofia Nădejde Awards do not strictly adhere to an anti-capitalist ethos. The first two editions were funded by BRD Residence Scena9, enabling the sponsorship of literary prizes as well as covering accommodation and transport costs for nominated writers. Since 2020, the

¹⁸ “raporturile dintre scriitori și scriitoare au părut mai dezechilibrate ca oricând”

Awards have been funded by AFCN¹⁹. Although their focus is more aligned with representational politics than left-wing critique, the Sofia Nădejde Awards have been instrumental in laying the groundwork for other feminist cultural projects. These include the cineclub *F-Sides*, the multimedia project Her WORD, and the French Film Festival's 2020 edition, which focused on *Feminine Film* [*Film la feminine*], as noted by Elena Vlădăreanu.

From this overview we can establish several coinciding timelines:

- I. 2018 is the year that Free Pages, CUTRA and Sofia Nadejde Awards emerged.
- II. In 2020, during the pandemic, frACTalia made its political agenda explicit, and The Days of Feminist Literature was initiated as an online project.
- III. The time-frame of 2021-2022 is when the X Literary Circle was founded (2021); most queer poetry anthologies published by frACTalia in the Pansophie collection appeared²⁰, the Queer Box collection, focusing on queer knowledge production, came about (concerning queer knowledge production and offering visibility to queer theoretical language); the *Manifesto of Leftist Women Writers* was published, and Ecaterina Arbore Collective was formed (2022).

These timelines can be grouped into two major points of reference: the year 2018 and the period between 2020 and 2022 (the pandemic and post-pandemic years). These key moments mark pivotal developments that allowed alternative leftist feminist discourses to gain traction, particularly in their local manifestations rooted in social struggles. Convergent timeframes reveal a coherence within alternative feminist discourse, as well as its capacity to respond to social struggles. This dynamic is exemplified by Ewa Majewska's concept of *weak resistance*, which seeks to "embrac[e] various aspects of the perspectives and agencies of different oppressed and marginalised groups while also capturing certain elements of the dynamics of the multitude becoming the common" (Majewska 123). This framework aims to revise political agency from a feminist perspective, transforming it into a politics of everyday life. These platforms reaffirm their role as proletarian, subaltern, and feminist counterpublics by opposing the bourgeois and masculinist public

¹⁹ But, as Vlădăreanu notes, this process wasn't always seamless since, in 2022 they didn't initially get the funding, and had to appeal, via [Scena9](#).

²⁰ Even though the earliest volume dates from 2019.

sphere. They achieve this by building intersectional networks, disrupting hegemonic discourses, and fostering local, grassroots feminism.

Conclusions

To summarise, our research first explored post-communist Romanian feminism, critically examining the limitations of NGO-isation literature and the implications of the wave metaphor. We then analysed the spread of anti-feminist and anti-genderist rhetoric within the intellectual sphere, concluding with a critical assessment of local alternative feminist platforms through the lens of counterpublics. Following this structure, our study sought to identify and map discursive ideological grey zones, where feminist and anti-feminist stances intersect, while also charting the anti-egalitarian sentiments prevalent in the mainstream. When examining left-wing feminist discourse in relation to literary production, we identified two pivotal moments: 2018, marked by growing concerns over the representation of women in the cultural sphere, which laid the foundation for alternative leftist platforms; and the 2020–2022 pandemic period, crucial for cultivating queer knowledges and creating spaces to express queer identities from an intersectional perspective.

By applying Fraser and Majewska's theory of counterpublics, we tested its validity within the context of Romanian leftist feminism. Our analysis confirms that this framework effectively captures the relationship between hegemony-disrupting and conservative dynamics within the local cultural scene. Through this research, we have contextualised the emergence of alternative feminist platforms, highlighting their subversive and essential role in a specific local climate that simultaneously appropriates and stigmatises their initiatives. This study opens avenues for further inquiries into the political impact of feminism's appropriation on its broader politics. However, the ongoing consolidation of grassroots feminism necessitates additional support, including from within the academic sphere. Further studies on the formation, resistance, and dissemination of locally rooted leftist feminist thought could play a critical role in this effort.

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