VOICES OF POWER: FEMALE POLITICAL DISCOURSE AND AUTHORITY IN ROMANIAN MODERNITY (1890–1940) – SOFIA NĂDEJDE, ELENA VĂCĂRESCU, ELLA NEGRUZZI

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Abstract The present article examines the construction of female political discourse and authority in Romanian modernity (1890-1940), focusing on the voices of Sofia Nădejde, Elena Văcărescu and Ella Negruzzi. The study analyses the strategies through which women negotiated influence and social recognition within a male-dominated political and cultural landscape. Nădejde exemplifies intellectual-polemical authority, Văcărescu embodies transnational-symbolic authority and Negruzzi illustrates juridical-institutional authority. This research contributes to historical, political and communication sciences, as well as to gender studies by offering an informed framework for understanding the dynamics of female political voice, in a patriarchal society, and the evolution of authority in interwar Romania.
Keywords Female political agency, political discourse, Romanian modernity, gendered authority, political sphere.

Introduction

The article covers the period from 1890 to 1940, the core of first-wave feminism, marking the transition of women from the exclusively domestic sphere into the public, social and political sphere, representing a crucial phase in the emergence of the consolidation of women's presence in the political sphere in Romania. By examining a society deeply structured by patriarchal norms and situated at the periphery of Western European centres of modernity, this article explores the development of women's political rhetoric and authority through the voices of three prominent figures: Sofia Nădejde, Elena Văcărescu and Ella Negruzzi, highlighting their distinct, yet convergent contributions to the emergence of feminist political consciousness in Romania. Guided by Habermas's notion of the public sphere and Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital, the study

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analyses the methods through which these women negotiated visibility and influence within male-dominated political and cultural arenas. Nădejde exemplifies intellectual-polemical authority, Văcărescu embodies transnational-symbolic authority and Negruzzi illustrates juridical-institutional authority, highlighting the diverse strategies women used to assert their political presence. By situating their contributions within Romania's peripheral modernization and patriarchal constraints, the article highlights the ways in which these emblematic figures produced public conversations, leveraged social and professional networks, and strategically used print culture and institutional platforms to legitimize women's political agency and expand the boundaries of civic participation, thereby contributing to the evolution of political culture in interwar Romania.

Methodology

The research adopts a qualitative historical and political approach, with an emphasis on discourse analysis, and relies primary on the manuscripts, published writings, speeches and petitions of Sofia Nădejde, Elena Văcărescu and Ella Negruzzi, selected for their historical significance and representativeness of female political engagement in Romania between 1890 and 1940. Archival materials were consulted systematically, with attention to authenticity, provenance, and contextual relevance. Additionally, relevant scholarly perspectives in the field of women's political discourse and gendered communication were reviewed in order to contextualize and interpret the discursive strategies identified in this study. A comparative framework was adopted in order to identify both recurring rhetorical patterns and context-specific variations in the articulation of female authority. The discourses were interpreted within their historical, political and social contexts, considering contemporaneous debates on nationalism, suffrage, education and civic participation. By situating these findings in the broader historical and peripheral European context, the study reconstructs the ways in which women expressed their political voices and exerted influence in a society undergoing modernization and institutional change.

Literature review

In recent decades, historians and researchers from other fields have begun to explore the history of women in Romania. Some of them have published studies on the feminist movement, while others have started to integrate gender into social and political analyses of the recent past.

The period between 1890 and 1940 in Romania witnessed significant, though sometimes contested, developments in women's engagement in cultural and political life. Scholarship on this era emphasizes that women were increasingly present as intellectuals and social activists, yet their contributions were frequently marginalized by prevailing gender norms and institutional structures. Literary critics, historians and sociologists have highlighted the way in which women faced systemic barriers in gaining recognition for their intellectual and creative work, reflecting wider societal beliefs that intellectual and political authority were predominantly male domains.

As early as 1837, Ion Heliade Rădulescu justified the founding of his journal *Curier de ambe sexe* (Journal for both sexes) by explicitly situating women's rights, at least in their cultural dimension, within the broader framework of universal human rights. Acknowledging that "half of contemporary humankind belongs to the fair sex," he argued that women, too, could claim within society the rights pertaining to their human condition.[1] Ion Heliade Rădulescu also urged Romanian men not to forbid or restrict women's "right" to education, arguing that "ignorance is an evil, a deadly plague upon human happiness."

"Femeile sau cugetul acestei foi" (Women or the Reflections of This Journal) is a programmatic article written by I.H. Rădulescu and explains the rationale behind the journal's title, arguing that women represent "half of contemporary humankind" and that their education and emancipation are essential to social progress. Through this intervention, the author advocates for women's departure from the narrow and restrictive sphere of exclusively domestic concerns. He emphasizes the necessity of women's education and promotes the idea that they should be informed and actively engaged in the intellectual and social life of their time.

Amicul familiei (Family friend) was one of the earliest Romanian periodicals under female leadership and played a formative role in early feminist discourse in Romania. Edited by Constanța Dunca-Schiau, a well-educated pedagogue and early advocate for women's rights, the journal addressed issues central to women's social position at a time when female public voices were rare. It promoted women's education and instruction as essential foundations for social progress and argued that unequal educational opportunities contributed to the broader inequality of the sexes. Through its articles and essays, the publication raised public awareness of the limited status of women and the need to reform prevailing conservative attitudes towards women's roles in both family and society. Dunca-Schiau's activism through the journal connected pedagogy with calls for expanded opportunities and recognition of women's capacities, positioning education reform as an early feminist claim for greater female participation in public life.[2] As noted in *Amicul familiei*, "in France, women have begun to occupy a great number of public positions and fulfil them with a rare exactness and scrupulousness. At the post office, at the telegraph, in villages and towns, at times one sees only women." They possess all the qualities of men, with the distinction that they put more passion into whatever they do. "Sometimes, this goes even further. In the United States, for example, where out of 100 teachers, 70 are women, they bring to their positions a tact that is rarely found in a man. And if they can be reproached at all, it is only that they devote themselves with too much ardour to their work and compromise their health through excessive labour."[3]

Maria Rosetti, a participant in the 1848 revolutionary movement, was the first female journalist in Romania and the founder of the first Romanian-language periodical dedicated to

[1] I. H. Rădulescu, "Femeile sau cugetul acestei foi" (Women or the Thought of This Page), *Curier de ambe sexe*, 2, reproduced in Ş. Mihăilescu, *Din istoria feminismului românesc. Antologie de texte* (1838-1929) (Iaşi: Polirom, 2002), 55-59.

[2] *Amicul familiei* (The Friend of the Family), ed. Constanța Dunca-Schiau, Year I, No. 9 (Gherla and Cluj 1/13 December, 1878), 97.

[3] Ibid., 97

women. Unlike contemporary women's magazines, hers did not separate femininity from the maternal vocation, being titled *Mother and Child*. Moreover, the publication aimed to educate mothers in a national spirit, helping them become aware of and assume the decisive role they play in the evolution of the Romanian nation through the birth and upbringing of children. She organized relief committees to help the population during the famine of 1866–1867, and during the War of Independence she led the Women's Committee, which raised funds to establish the hospital in Turnu Măgurele and for the infirmaries behind the front lines. Her initiatives highlighted her commitment to raising and educating the younger generation and promoting the rights and responsibilities of mothers.[4]

The facts about Maria Rosetti align with a series of clichés of the feminine ideal: the simplicity of her attire, which evokes traditional and therefore enduring values, and her spiritual beauty, expressed above all through an angelic kindness, are attributes commonly found in her dominant discourse about respectable women. These qualities were generally recovered and emphasized by the nationalist ideologies of the 19th century. The female figures that appear in nationalist ideals, often transformed into myths and integrated into the national imagination, are women distinguished by purity and modesty, devotion and sacrifice for their family and their country.[5]

In *Ambasadoarea*, Camil Petrescu frames Elena Văcărescu as a paragon of Romanian national and cultural identity, emphasizing her "truest Romanian blood" and her ability to honour both Romanian and French literatures and her dual cultural belonging, and positions her as a figure who embodies national spirit even while writing abroad.

A critical reading suggests that such discourse both celebrates her contributions and constrains them, privileging her symbolic role as a cultural ambassador over her political and diplomatic agency. Moreover, the rhetorical strategies of idealization and mythmaking reflect broader patterns in nationalist literature, where individual achievement is subsumed under collective identity and gendered expectations.[6]

Over the past hundred years, the academic research concerning Nădejde, Văcărescu and Negruzzi has undergone significant evolution. Early interwar studies, such as those by Eugen Lovinescu and George Călinescu, primarily positioned these women within modernist literary, offering contextual references without explicitly addressing gender or feminist concerns.

During the communist period, critics like Șerban Cioculescu and Ovidiu Buruiană continued to reference Văcărescu and early feminist figures, though interpretations were sometimes filtered through ideological priorities, mainly in the case of Nădejde. The most nuanced analyses emerge in post-1989 feminist and gender historiography, with scholars such as Mihaela Miroiu, Maria Bucur, Alin Ciupală and Eliza Gheorghe foregrounding women's civic

[4] *Mama și copilul*, under de direction of Maria Rosetti, ed. C. A. Rosetti (Bucharest, 1865).

[5] Ionela Băluță, "Imaginea femeii în spațiul public: între realitate și simbol, A doua jumătate a secolului al XIX-lea (The Image of Women in the Public Sphere: Between Reality and Symbol, The Second Half of the 19th Century), *Annals of the University of Bucharest*. *Political science series*, 2, 21-33 (Bucharest, 2000): 26.

[6] Camil Petrescu, "Ambasadoarea," *Universul,* 4 March. (Bucharest, 1928).

activism and contributions to Romanian liberal and feminist movements. This shift highlights a growing recognition of female intellectuals not only as literary figures but also as active participants in political discourse and national life.

Intellectual competence was coded as masculine, while women's engagement in public debate and political discourse was dismissed as secondary, derivative or emotionally driven. As a result, women's cultural labour was either rendered invisible or framed as exceptional, but not necessarily legitimate. This marginalization was not social but structural, embedded in institutional practices, critical discourse and the mechanisms that regulated access to cultural and political authority. As E. Lovinescu remarked to one aspiring female writer, "literature is not a female vocation, but an eminently masculine one" (Lovinescu, 1970), reflecting the prevailing attitudes of the time.[7]

In a women's publication from 1938 called *Jurnalul doamnei*, the literary critic and historian Eugen Lovinescu reviewed the most recent female talents in literature. In this context, regarding his main concern, Lovinescu stated that "in public opinion there is a prejudice against women's literature, which naturally stems from a broader prejudice against women's very intellectual faculties. Having entered public life late, especially in the eastern regions, women have encountered and continue to encounter principled hostility in all their claims and manifestations, whether political, social, or artistic."[8]

E. Lovinescu's remark, "literature is not a female vocation, but an eminently masculine one," highlights the deeply ingrained gender biases that shaped the literary field during that period (Lovinescu, 1938). It reflects a cultural assumption that intellectual and creative authority in literature was inherently male, while women's contributions were often dismissed or undervalued. Such statements reinforced structural barriers, discouraging women from pursuing writing as a profession and limiting their access to recognition, critical legitimacy, and professional networks.

The phenomenon of exclusion functions to uphold masculine dominance and preserve their position within the literary field by creating and perpetuating symbolic violence. This is achieved through the naturalization of socially constructed gender roles, which are accepted and internalized by the dominated group.[9] According to Gisèle Sapiro's extension of Bourdieu's theory, symbolic violence serves to mask the ideology of the dominant group by embedding it within the very symbolic structures that define literature. In doing so, it conceals and legitimizes the ideologies of the dominant while reinforcing their power.[10]

As a conclusion to his book, Bourdieu states that although the feminist movement has significantly expanded the scope of what can be considered political, by allowing discussion and critique of issues traditionally dismissed as private, it should remain attentive to certain

[7] Eugen Lovinescu, *Aqua forte*. *Memorii,* vol. 3 (Bucharest: Minerva, 1970).

[8] Eugen Lovinescu, *Jurnalul Doamnei* (The Lady's Journal), No.3 (1938).

[9] See Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. by Richard Nice (Stanford University Press, 2002), 116.

[10] See Gisèle Sapiro, "Pour une approche sociologique des relations entre littérature et idéologie," *COnTEXTES*. 2/ 2007, Available at https://journals.openedition.org/contextes/165.

overlooked struggles. In particular, it should not ignore conflicts over social institutions or agencies that, even though subtle, often invisible actions shaped by both male and female unconscious structures, continue to reinforce patterns of domination between genders. In other words, while feminism opens up new areas for political engagement, it must also recognize how seemingly minor or hidden mechanisms contribute to maintaining gender inequalities.[11]

Within the framework of Jürgen Habermas's views, the public sphere is theoretically a space open to all, where individuals can participate in rational-critical debate on matters of common concern, and this principle implies that women, like men, should have equal access to public discourse and the opportunity to exercise political and cultural authority.[12]

According to Mihaela Miroiu and the co-authors of *The Birth of Democratic Citizenship: Women and Power in Modern Romania*, feminists oriented toward education pursued radical goals, including increasing public spending on women's education beyond the "traditional" female disciplines such as music, foreign languages, literature and household economics. They also fought for women to have access to a variety of new professions associated with the modern state. As a result, women passed examinations that allowed them not only to become teachers in girls' schools but also to enter professions such as doctors, lawyers, architects or engineers. From this perspective, Romanian women did not lag behind their counterparts in Germany or the United States. In particular, after the 1890s, the struggle for education and professional equality among women in Romania, Western Europe, and America showed remarkable similarities.[13]

Between 1918 and 1939, the *Chronological Dictionary of the Romanian Novel* records sixty women prose writers who published novels, a considerable number of whom were newcomers to the literary scene. It allows researchers to identify novels written by women and the presence of female characters in Romanian literature, especially when combined with thematic or quantitative analyses. Further research using this dictionary for quantitative analyses of the presence of women writers in Romanian novels shows that, for example, between 1918 and 1939 the chronological register records dozens of women novelists and provides statistical data on the participation of female authors in the field of the cultural activities. This suggests a visible process of feminisation within the field during the interwar period. However, this development occurred against the backdrop of a limited integration of women into literary professions, which continued to be regarded as consecrated and predominantly male domains.[14] While much progress has been made in documenting and

[11] Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 117.
[12] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991), 301.
[13] Maria Bucur and Mihaela Miroiu, *Nașterea cetățeniei democratice. Femeile și puterea în România modernă* (The Birth of Democratic Citizenship: Women and Power in Modern Romania) (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2019), 53.
[14] Mircea Popa, Doina Modola et al. *Dicționarul Cronologic al Romanului Românesc de la origini până la 1989*. (The Chronological Dictionary of the Romanian Novel from Its Origins to 1989) (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române, 2003), 934.

analysing women's contributions, these works also underscore the ongoing need to explore the intersections of gender, culture, and power in Romania's historical and literary landscapes.

Assertive voices of Sofia Nădejde, Elena Văcărescu and Ella Negruzzi in cultural and political spheres

While the language of citizenship, rights and progress gained increasing prominence, women remained largely excluded from political participation, higher education and the legal professions. The extension of modern institutions did not automatically entail gender equality; rather, it frequently reproduced older hierarchies in new forms.

Within this context, the struggle for women's rights in Romania did not take the shape of a single linear movement, nor did it unfold exclusively through organized suffrage campaigns. Instead, it developed across multiple arenas: journalism, literature, education, diplomacy and law, where women gradually demanded recognition and exposed structural discrimination. Among the figures who decisively contributed to this transformation, three stand out for the distinct but complementary ways in which they viewed Romanian society: Sofia Nădejde, Elena Văcărescu and Ella Negruzzi.

Each of them operated in a different sphere such as intellectual debate, international cultural diplomacy and juridical activism but all three contributed decisively to expanding women's rights and redefining women's role in Romanian public life. Their significance lies not necessarily in being "firsts" or exceptions, but in how their work altered regimes of validation.

This chapter examines, therefore, three distinct modalities through which women in modern Romanian history constructed and exercised authority in contexts that systematically restricted their formal access to power. By analysing the careers of Sofia Nădejde, Elena Văcărescu and Ella Negruzzi, we argue that female authority in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries emerged along three structurally different but interconnected axes: intellectual-polemical, transnational-symbolic and juridical-institutional.

Sofia Nădejde, the intellectual emancipation and the politics of argument

In late 19th century Romania, the exclusion of women from political and academic life was frequently justified through appeals to science. Biological determinism, social Darwinism and also pseudo-medical theories about female inferiority circulated widely in European intellectual culture and were adopted by Romanian thinkers seeking to rationalize gender hierarchy. Against this context, the interventions of Sofia Nădejde were both radical and foundational. Born in Botoșani county in 1865, into a family of free peasants with four children, Sofia Băncilă-Gheorghiu would go on to make her way in a hierarchical and male-dominated world, relying on her best ally: the written word. She became a journalist, prose writer, playwright and feminist activist, and her work carried enormous weight in the process of women's emancipation at the time. Sofia made her debut in the Bucharest feminist publication *Femeia Română* (*The Romanian Woman*) edited by the writer Maria Flechtenmacher, which advocated for the civic rights of women in Romania and reported on the process of women's emancipation abroad. In the column *The Condition of Women Through the Centuries,* signed by Sofia Nădejde, she gathered theories and materials examining

the situation of women in both the past and the present. Her reputation reached Bucharest. In 1894, Sofia moved to the capital, and the city fell irrevocably in love with this feminist and socialist activist, gifted writer, wife and mother. In 1895, she was encouraged to further develop her oratory talent by joining the Bucharest Workers' Club as a lecturer, a union that fought for the rights of the working class and supported their protests. The series of 55 speeches under the title *Traces of Sacrifice Among Romanians* would later bring her recognition, when she was elected president of the 4th Congress in 1897 as a member of the PSDMR (Social Democratic Workers' Party of Romania). In this way, Sofia Nădejde became the first woman in Romania to hold the position of president of a political Congress.

The pages of the publication *Contemporanul* record a sharp and spirited exchange of arguments between the essayist Titu Maiorescu and his new female *nemesis*, Sofia Nădejde. In a lecture delivered at the Romanian Athenaeum in 1882, he declared: "Man must drive culture; he must lead or support the state, make the arts flourish, expand the realm of ideas and facilitate the well-being of humanity through daily discoveries and improvements applied to practical life. Meanwhile, the woman is reduced to a much more limited role in the movement of cultured societies."[15]

To contradict the great Maiorescu, especially as a woman, was unthinkable at the time. Yet Sofia Nădejde had the courage to publicly challenge his scientifically unsupported arguments: "If we compare the cranial cavity of primitive humans with that of modern humans, we find a decrease in capacity and volume in both men and women."[16] This statement not only disproved Maiorescu's claim that women's brains were inherently smaller, but also highlighted her reliance on empirical observation rather than social prejudice.

Sofia Nădejde's journalistic discourse is highly crafted. She is aware that her only weapon is the word, which she wields forcefully, using a radical tone. The instructive, pedagogical tone at the beginning of an article, when addressing women, now changes. Sofia Nădejde even emphasizes this violent expression and explains it: verbal expression is still expression, even in its violent forms, whereas "treating" (referring to violent action) means acting directly and irreversibly: "I express myself violently, for which you will be upset, won't you? I only express myself, but you treat us not merely violently, but barbarically!"[17] In another article, *Woman and the Law*, Sofia Nădejde commented on provisions in the Constitution concerning the status of women in relation to men: Article 195, "The man is obliged to protect the woman, the woman to obey."[18]

In her novel *Robia banului* (Slavery to Money), a critique of avarice and materialism, Sofia Nădejde presents a deeply personal complaint that functions as a critique of women's social condition in nineteenth century Romania. The speaker's despair stems from her total dependence on marriage as the only path to social legitimacy and economic security. Having failed to become

[15] Titu Maiorescu, *Patru conferințe*, summaries by Mihai C. Brăneanu (Bucharest: Tipografia Ștefan Mihălescu, 1883).
[16] Sofia Nădejde, "Răspuns D-lui Maiorescu în chestia creierului la femei" (Response to Mr. Maiorescu on the Question of Women's Brains), *Contemporanul*, Year I (1881-1882): 873-881.
[17] Ştefania Mihăilescu, "Din istoria feminismului românesc" (From the History of Romanian Feminism), *Antologie de texte (1838-1928)* (Iaşi: Polirom, 2000).
[18] Sofia Nădejde, "Femeia şi legea" (Woman and the Law), *Contemporanul*, Year I (1881-1882): 83-85.

a "respectable" married woman, she finds herself in a humiliating liminal state, "neither married nor among the maidens," revealing how rigidly society defined female identity. Her lament about not receiving even "a scrap of paper" underscores women's exclusion from education, legal rights and property ownership. The proverb "if you have schooling, you have a share" suggests that access to education is directly tied to autonomy and social participation, yet women are denied this opportunity. Through this voice of frustration and self-pity, Nădejde exposes the structural injustices of a patriarchal system that leaves women socially vulnerable and judged and deprived of independent identity: "She had sworn on her child that she would marry me off to the Armenian and that I would become a lady. But I pity myself. I've lost my youth, I've made myself the laughingstock of the village: I am neither dog nor hound, neither a married woman nor among the maidens. Lord, forgive me, one should curse him so he never decays in peace. Why didn't he think to give me my share as he swore he would! How many times had I not begged him: 'Give me at least a scrap of paper there, because as the saying goes: if you have schooling, you have a share.'"[19]

Last but not least, when discussing Sofia Nădejde as a precursor of Romanian feminism, attention must also be given to her translations. The work she translated in 1891, *The Woman Question and the Working Women of Today*, belongs to Clara Zetkin, the woman thanks to whom International Women's Day was celebrated for the first time. Sofia Nădejde's involvement in promoting women's chances of emancipation, alongside other women around the world, justifies her inclusion in a recent publication, *Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, 19th and 20th Centuries*, her activity being representative of Romania in this regard.[20]

Today, activism or advocacy for women's rights is broadly understood as feminism. It "means recognizing the fact that, regardless of time and place, women and men are unequal in terms of the power they hold, both in personal life and in society."[21] Sofia Nădejde's advocacy, however, must be analysed in the context of her era, as she fundamentally supported the emancipation of society as a whole, not only of women, which demonstrates her socialist vision.

Her contribution to Romanian society can therefore be summarized in three interrelated achievements: discrediting scientific arguments for female inferiority, situating feminist claims within extended social reform movements and legitimizing women's participation in intellectual and political discourse.

Elena Văcărescu, ambassador of Romanian letters and diplomacy

Elena Văcărescu (1864–1947) distinguished herself as a Romanian writer, poet, playwright, translator and diplomat, whose work gained recognition across Europe. In 1925, she became the

[19] Sofia Nădejde, *Robia banului* (Slavery to Money) (Bucharest: Editura Librăriei C. Sfetea, 1906), 62-63

[20] Ștefania Mihăilescu, "Sofia Nădejde," in De Haan Francisca, Daskalova Krasimira and Loutfi Anna, *Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms in Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe*, *19th and 20th Centuries* (Budapest-New York: Central European University Press, 2006), 360-362.

[21] Mihaela Miroiu, Otilia Dragomir, *Lexicon feminist* (Iaşi: Polirom, 2002).

first woman to be elected as a foreign honorary member of the Romanian Academy, marking a historic breakthrough in a male-dominated institution. Being the first woman to receive this privilege, it came as a well-deserved public recognition of her artistic and diplomatic merits. We present the following excerpt from her reception speech: "Born from the purest Romanian soil, raised generation after generation in the swirl of Romanian centuries, I have breathed the fragrant breeze of our springs […] I love my country for all its authentic originality, from which my own originality was shaped […]. I have served the Romanian idea, I have sought to spread abroad the fame of the Romanian people, and I have promoted the expansion of the Romanian spirit in the world […]. I first learned that the Romanian idea cannot be dissociated from the veneration of the Romanian past."[22] Elena Văcărescu was convinced that "a nation cannot understand its own tradition, its own being, its own destiny except by comparing itself with other nations […]. I believe that the true position of an enlightened and responsible patriot can only result from a lucid and balanced combination of the national factor with the international factor.[23] By defining others, we define ourselves." Respect among peoples and a dignified attitude were other guiding principles of her activity. At one of the conferences she gave on the radio in 1934, speaking about the League of Nations, Elena Văcărescu proudly expressed her belief: "Our country was at an advanced stage of evolution in which its participation in the international movement of ideas and the dissemination of national creations abroad had become a true and sacred duty."[24]

Notable Romanians, travellers, or students were recommended and sent to Paris to Elena Văcărescu, asking her to take care of them and watch over their first steps in a foreign country. All of this is reflected in Elena Văcărescu's extensive correspondence with Romanian cultural figures, among whom we can mention Octavian Goga, Emanoil Bocuța, Victor Eftimiu, Horia Petra Petrescu, Agepsina Macri Eftimiu and Ion Al. Brătescu-Voinești. This correspondence is preserved in the *Elena Văcărescu* Collection of the archives of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.[25]

She was related to noble families such as Cantacuzino and Rosetti, being a descendant on her father's side of the renowned Văcărescu family. Iancu Văcărescu was her grandfather. A telling passage is the one in which Elena recalled her childhood years: "In my grandparents' house, where I lived, life was calm and patriarchal, and, according to the custom of the time, strongly contested between the traditions of the East and that thirst for the West, which our family, eager for civilization and guided by the call of its origins, had always embraced."[26] She completed her studies in Paris, where she deepened her knowledge of philosophy, poetic art and history, attending courses at the University of the Sorbonne. Among her teachers were Sully Prudhomme, Leconte

[22] Elena Văcărescu, "Discursul meu de primire la Academia Română," *Memorii*, chap. VI. (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 1989), 168.
[23] Ibid., 172.
[24] Ion Stăvăruș, Prefață la volumul *Elena Văcărescu – Scrieri alese* (Bucharest: Minerva, 1975), XI.
[25] Gloria Gabriela Radu, Dumitra Bulei, "Personalități ale culturii române în corespondența Elenei Văcărescu" (Prominent Romanian Cultural Figures in Elena Văcărescu's Letters), *Valachica*, *Studii și cercetări de istorie și istoria culturii,* 16 (Târgoviște, 1998): 113-119.
[26] Ibid., 14-16.

de Lisle, José-Maria de Heredia, and others. There she founded a literary salon attended by important literary and cultural figures, such as Marcel Proust, Miguel de Unamuno, Aristide Briand, Sarah Bernhardt and Paul Valéry. In 1908, she published the novel *Amor vincit*, followed in 1911 by *Vraja*, works inspired by Romanian mythology. These were later followed by the collections *Kings and Queens I Have Known* and *Le Roman de ma vie*. In 1912, she wrote the play *Cobzarul* (The Minstrel), which was performed at the Paris Opera. During the same period, she also established collaborative relationships with the Romanian publications *Adevărul* and *Dimineaţa*. In January 1919, Elena Văcărescu became a member of Romania's delegation to the Paris Peace Conference, and she was also elected secretary-general of the Romanian Association to the League of Nations, a position from which she advocated for the cause of peace.[27]

In 1928, Camil Petrescu noted that "… there, in the capital of France, we have a Romanian woman of the truest Romanian blood (…) who proudly asserts her Romanian origin and spirit (...). Elena Văcărescu carries out an immense activity to make it known that she is Romanian."[28] At the third Congress of the International Confederation of Intellectual Workers, held on January 3, 1925, in Paris, she was part of the delegation representing Romania, together with Dragomir Hurmuzescu and Ion Atanasiu,[29] the so-called intellectual syndicalist movement between 1923 and 1926, which involved a large number of participants from several European countries.

Contemporary with the horrors of the First World War, Elena Văcărescu never ceased to fight for peace. Retired in Cannes, in the free zone during the Second World War, she condemned with full firmness, alongside the French intellectual community, the Nazi occupation. She also advocated for Romania's alliance with France, England and the United States.

Elena Văcărescu died in Paris in 1947, and part of the will she drew up in 1945 stated: "Although I was forced, due to the unfortunate circumstances of my life, to live far from Romania, my heart has never ceased for a single moment to beat for her. Nearly half a century of my activity has been devoted to the interests of our nation, seeking to strengthen the ties between France and Romania, which was for me a second homeland and where, fortunately, my name is and will remain a symbol of the two peoples I honour."[30]

Ella Negruzzi and the struggle for women's equality in Romanian Law

Granddaughter of the modern prose writer Constantin Negruzzi, Ella Negruzzi was born in 1876 at the family estate in Hermeziu, Iași county. She attended the Faculty of Law of the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, graduating in 1913. She was one of the founding members of the National

[27] Elena Văcărescu, *Projected Beyond Political Horizons*, excerpts from a lecture delivered in Cannes on 18 March 1941.

[28] Ion Stăvăruş, *Elena Văcărescu*, chap. "Ambasadoarea sufletului românesc" (The Ambassador of the Romanian Soul) (Bucharest: Univers, 1974), 91–92.

[29] L'oeuvre de la C.I.T.I., *Le Congres de 1925* (Paris, 1925), 110.

[30] Andrei Radu, "Aspecte româneşti în opera Elenei Văcărescu" (Romanian Elements in Elena Văcărescu's Work), *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai* (Cluj-Napoca, 1966): 61.

Orthodox Society of Romanian Women, Iași branch, in 1911, and contributed to the drafting of the association's programs, regulations and statutes. After the Great War, she continued to advocate for women's education, especially in rural areas. Ella Negruzzi founded the society *Gospodăriile Rurale* (Rural Households) with the aim of training and educating villagers. The society sent female instructors of various specialties to villages, where they offered free courses to the local population.

In several churches in Iași and its surroundings, she personally conducted a survey and compiled lists of women who were able to knit, weave and prepare jams for the fundraising exhibitions organized by the National Orthodox Society of Romanian Women. In June 1922, objects and food products made by the association's members were exhibited and sold in the courtyard of the Dacia Printing House, and the funds raised were used to provide dowries for sixteen girls.[31] She was a member of the National Council of Romanian Women, founded on 4 July 1921, with Calypso Botez serving as president. The Council sought to coordinate the activities of all feminist organizations of the period, sometimes collaborating with the Association for the Civil and Political Emancipation of Romanian Women, the Federation of University Women, the Society of Romanian Women Writers, and others. From its very year of establishment, the association affiliated itself with the International Council of Women, based in London, and adopted the motto: "Do unto others what you would have done unto you."

Ella Negruzzi was the first woman admitted to the Bar Association and granted the right to plead, after a long series of lawsuits against the Iași Bar Association, which had denied her entry on the grounds that, being a woman, she did not have the right to vote, and as a lawyer she would have had to possess this right. In the end, she won the right to plead at the bar alongside men and became a member of the Baroul Covurlui-Galați and later of Ilfov, continuing to fight against the mentalities and prejudices of her time.

During the First World War, she served as a nurse in hospitals in Iași as well as on the front line, and she was also a member of the Action Committee of the *Protection of War Orphans Section,* alongside other personalities of the era.[32] She became an activist for the rights and emancipation of Romanian women. Together with Maria Baiulescu and Elena Meissner, she founded the *Emancipation of Woman* Association, of which she was the president.[33] The right to vote and the right to stand for election for women were her ideals, and in 1917, she signed the Petition of Romanian Women to the Senate of Romania, which called for the granting of political and civil rights to women.[34] In 1929, she joined the National Peasants' Party, and in the local

[31] Adina Berciu-Drăghicescu et.al., *Eroinele României Mari. Destine din linia întâi* (Heroines of Greater Romania: Destinies from the Front Line) (Bucharest: Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române, 2018), 140.

[32] Ion Agrigoroaiei, "De la mutarea Capitalei la Iași, la epopeea de la Mărășești" (From the Relocation of the Capital to Iași to the Epic of Mărășești), in ed. Ion Agrigoroaiei, *Orașul Iași. Capitala rezistenței până la capăt (1916-1917)* (Iași: The Capital of Resistance Until the End) (Iași: Junimea, 2016), 145.

[33] Ionel Maftei*, Personalități ieșene* (Personalities of Iași) (Iași: Comitetul de cultură și educație socialistă al județului, 1972), 419

[34] Ștefania Mihăilescu, *Din istoria feminismului românesc. Antologie de texte (1838-1929)* (From the History of Romanian Feminism: Anthology of Texts (1838–1929) (Iași: Polirom, 2002), 186-188.

elections of spring 1930 she ran and was elected as a local councillor in Bucharest. She wrote feminist articles in various legal publications, delivered lectures in many cities across the country, appeared on the radio, gave interviews and maintained a rich activist activity.[35]

Asked "Why do women demand the right to vote?", Romania's first woman pleading lawyer replied: "Because women work, because they pay taxes, because it is unjust that in a democratic country, where all citizens take part in choosing the government, women should not exercise this right."[36] In 1936, Ella Negruzzi initiated the *Women's Front*, aiming to defend women's rights and promote their involvement in all areas of society, in order to protect the institutions of the democratic regime against the fascist threat. Fighting for women's rights through articles, the press of her time published: "Who does not know this name? The boldness to enter the legal profession, at a time when women were confined by boundaries drawn by prejudice, sparked malicious comments on every lip. The struggle that led to success was relentless. A great spirit was asserting itself, carving a wide path for those who would follow," wrote *Ilustraţiunea Română,* in February 1933.

She was also active in the *Democratic Lawyers' Group*, founded in 1935, against the danger of fascism. She carried out sustained activity in the antifascist press of the time, writing articles, signing appeals, fighting in defence of those imprisoned, even delivering speeches, and she made a distinct contribution to the labour movement. In 1936, she organized the defence of a group of communist women.[37]

Ella Negruzzi's work can be summed up as a breakthrough on two fronts: professional and civic. She challenged a major barrier by becoming the first woman in Romania admitted to the Bar, after repeated rejections and nearly six years of court battles, showing that discrimination could be confronted through persistence and legal argument. She then turned her own experience of exclusion into organized activism for women's rights by helping the "Women's Emancipation" association and later the "Women's Front". She was resilient in the face of public prejudice, strategic and disciplined in using the courts to win her rights, and deeply committed to fairness.

[35] Anca Chilom, "Ella Negruzzi, prima femeie avocat din Estul Europei" (Ella Negruzzi, the first woman lawyer in Eastern Europe), *Legal Magazin* (Bucharest, April 2014): 15.

[36] George Marcu and Rodica Ilinca, *Enciclopedia personalităților feminine din România*, (The Encyclopedia of Female Personalities of Romania), (București: Editura MERONIA, 2012), 218

[37] Ionel Maftei, *Personalități ieșene* (Personalities from Iași), vol. I, (Iași: Comitetul de Cultură și Educație Socialistă al județului Iași, 1972), 420.

Table. Comparative features of female political discourse in Romanian modernity (1890–1940)

Analytical Dimension	Sofia Nădejde	Elena Văcărescu	Ella Negruzzi
Type of discourse	Explicitly political, polemical, ideological	Cultural-symbolic, diplomatic, indirect	Legal-political, institutional, pragmatic
Primary arena of expression	Press, socialist circles, public debates	Literature, international diplomacy, elite networks	Courts, professional organizations, civic associations
Thematic focus	Gender equality, education, labor rights, social justice	National identity, cultural legitimacy, representation	Legal equality, civil rights, political inclusion
Relation to power	Contestatory (challenging dominant norms)	Adaptive (negotiating within elite structures)	Transformative (seeking institutional change)
Form of political agency	Discursive activism (counter-hegemonic)	Symbolic authority (soft power)	Institutional engagement (legal and organizational)
Target of intervention	Public opinion, ideological frameworks	International perception, cultural prestige	Legal system, state structures
Strategic approach	Confrontation and critique	Mediation and representation	Reform and advocacy
Constraints	Limited institutional access; ideological marginalization	Elite expectations; limited radicalism	Structural legal barriers; slow reform processes
Contribution to political development	Expansion of public debate and feminist consciousness	Normalization of female presence in public/diplomatic roles	Advancement of legal rights and civic participation

Discussions

The political discourses of Sofia Nădejde, Elena Văcărescu and Ella Negruzzi offer a rich lens through which to examine the construction of female authority in Romanian modernity between 1890 and 1940. While women's formal political power was limited, their speeches and published writings demonstrate the way in which the discourse itself became a medium of influence, negotiation and leadership. Their rhetorical and linguistic strategies illuminate the ways in which women articulated legitimacy and social critique in a predominantly male political sphere. First, it should be acknowledged that the presentation of women's roles and movements in this study is

necessarily selective and partial. Like all historical research, it reflects both the interests and theoretical orientations of scholars in the field, as well as the political and cultural contexts in which prior studies were conducted. Moreover, the historiography of Romanian women's movements remains limited, with few comprehensive studies and only recently emerging collections of archival sources. Notably, there is still no critical-analytical study encompassing women's movements in the Romanian provinces and in Greater Romania, which underscores both the novelty and the exploratory nature of the present analysis.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to a growing body of research that seeks to uncover the voices and influence of women in Romanian modernity. By examining the discourses of figures such as Sofia Nădejde, Elena Văcărescu, and Ella Negruzzi, it is possible to trace patterns of rhetorical innovation and engagement that were crucial in creating public debates and expanding the space for female political agency. Furthermore, this research highlights the potential of discourse analysis as a methodological tool for understanding gendered leadership and civic participation, offering new perspectives on both historical and contemporary feminist scholarship. As more archival materials become accessible and theoretical frameworks continue to develop, the study of women's political discourse in Romania promises rich opportunities for further exploration and a deeper understanding of the interplay between power of language and social transformation.

Conclusion

The history of women's rights in Romania cannot be reduced to a single legislative act or suffrage milestone. It is the cumulative result of intellectual courage, symbolic visibility and institutional persistence. Through her polemical brilliance, Sofia Nădejde reshaped public discourse on gender and education. Through her international cultural and diplomatic engagement, Elena Văcărescu expanded the visibility and legitimacy of Romanian women in global arenas. Through her legal activism, Ella Negruzzi transformed the juridical boundaries of professional inclusion.

Together, they demonstrate that feminist progress in Romania was achieved not only by protesting exclusion but by occupying and institutionalizing spaces of authority. Their contributions remind us that modernization without gender equality is incomplete and that the expansion of women's rights was central, not peripheral, to the making of modern Romanian society. These three figures map a progression, not chronological, but structural, in the modalities through which women accessed public power. From polemical discourse, to institutional inscription, they reveal that female authority in modern Romania was neither linear nor homogeneous. Although their authority frequently remained symbolic instead of institutional, their initiatives opened tangible spaces for female leadership and set the stage for later generations of women activists. Their discourse strategies and public interventions illustrate the mechanisms through which women asserted influence, managed social and cultural constraints and contributed to the development of modern Romanian political life.