

Digitalised Gendered Memories of Romanian Socialism: Intergenerational Trauma, Healing, and Nostalgia

Monica Ciobanu 

Plattsburgh State University of New York

Abstract: The article examines current competing memories and gendered narratives of the state-socialist draconian pro-natalist policies in Romania in the current context of increasingly restricted reproductive rights. The focus of this analysis is the digital project Jurnalul Decretului (The Journal of the Decree) undertaken by a group of investigative journalists from 2019 to 2021. I distinguish two patterns of remembering, which illustrate two competing views regarding women's reproductive rights. First, through women's recollections on digital platforms of previously silenced memories of illegal abortions and their dire consequences for their families, such as imprisonment, physical ailments, and sometimes death, victims, their families, and activists promote women's legal right to abortion. The second illustrates how these traumatic memories are challenged and weaponised by increasingly influential religious and conservative groups, which promote far-right, anti-globalist, and anti-genderist ideologies. The analysis concludes that while the first mnemonic trend could provide some grounds for considering the transformative potential of memory-making for women's rights, the latter generated some serious scepticism about the possibility that the former may prevail.

Keywords: Romania, abortion, Decree 770, state socialism, gendered memories, women, reproductive rights, post-memory, digital platforms

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A guy's life in communism was much cooler than a girl's one. Guys used to be freer. They couldn't get pregnant. If they got married, many became some kind of masters. Girls didn't like masters. Neither did guys.
(Popescu 2008: 209)

This testimony illustrates the lived experiences of what came to be known in Romania as the 'decree generation' (*decreței*), i.e. those born in the aftermath of the draconian communist pro-natalist Decree 770 of 1966, criminalising abortion.¹ As Gail Kligman argued, 'political demography legitimated the state intervention in the internal affairs of the citizens' (Kligman 1998: 10). Instead of bringing enjoyment and personal gratification, sexuality and marriage became traumatising experiences (Miroiu 2013). But, as Popescu's recollection shows, the trauma inflicted on girls was much more severe, as it was simultaneously shaped by the political and gendered norms of social control. An unwanted pregnancy subjected the young woman to the authority of both the authoritarian communist state and the patriarchal system. Official data of the time recorded 9,452 maternal deaths between 1966 and 1989 (Tismăneanu, Dobrinicu, Vasile 2007: 422).²

After the overthrow of the communist regime in December 1989, the newly set up provisional government, represented by the National Salvation Front (FSN), was quick to abrogate the abortion law.³ This decision brought much relief to many women and men whose lives were severely impacted by Decree 770, and it legitimated the new regime. The following year, the Ministry of Health reported no fewer than 992,265 abortions (Kligman 1998: 218). Despite access to legally available birth control methods and the availability of sexual education, abortion continued to be perceived as a legitimate form of contraception.

However, more than thirty years later, civil society groups, activists, and international women's rights organisations began to document, yet again, an imminent severe threat to women's reproductive rights.⁴ In response, memory activists, feminist groups, and the victims and descendants of Decree 770 of 1966 began to utilise women's memories of communism as a cautionary tale against current attempts to

¹ Decret Nr. 770 din 1 Octombrie 1966 pentru reglementarea întreruperii cursului sarcinii, published in *Buletinul Oficial* nr. 160 din 1 Octombrie 1966.

² These data, however, should be regarded with caution since they do not include the number of women who were refused medical assistance after a botched abortion.

³ See article 8 in Decret Lege nr. 1 (Journal of the Degree No. 1), 26 December, 1989, privind abrogarea unor decrete, legi și acte normative, *Monitorul Oficial*, nr. 4 (Official Gazette No. 4), 27 December 1989.

⁴ In June 2019, the feminist NGO Filia Center in collaboration with the Euroregional Centre for Public Initiatives released a report *Raport de Cecetare: Refuzul La Efectuarea Raportului la Cerere* (Cilibiu 2019), which shows the following: out of 158 public hospitals that agreed to participate in the study and

restrict women's reproductive rights. It is important to note that, in contrast to other selected political and demographic groups, including former political prisoners, deportees, or those whose properties were confiscated, women's victimisation under communism did not become part of any state-sponsored initiative of historical redress or other informal truth-telling initiatives (Stan 2013).

Thus, the article examines current competing memories of women's experiences under state socialism by focusing on the individual recollections of the regime's repressive pro-natalist policies on digital sites. A special emphasis is placed on the intergenerational transmission of this past to those generations who either matured or were born after the demise of communism. My goal is to provide some insights into how gendered narratives of state socialism either conform or depart from similar mnemonic practices that suggest the co-existence of contradictory and ambiguous historical narratives that range from outright condemnation to reflective or restorative nostalgia (Ciobanu, Șerban 2025: 1–9). The focus is on how the memory of Decree 770 is currently transmitted, used, or misused in the era of post-memory. I utilise qualitative content analysis to explore the work of mnemonic actors engaged in the transmission of gendered memories of state socialism through digitally mediated sites. The focus of the analysis is the work undertaken by a group of investigative journalists engaged in civic activism, who have participated since 2019 in the digital project *Jurnalul Decretului* (The Journal of the Decree) under the slogan 'The Past That Never Goes Away' (Trecutul care nu mai Trece). By collecting and disseminating the testimonies of individuals who experienced or witnessed first-hand the harsh realities of Decree 770 of 1966, their stated goal is to use these life stories and warn the public of the imminent dangerous consequences that restrictive reproductive policies could have on women and their communities. This team of journalists undertook the work of memory-making as whistleblowers.

The main argument of the article is that while the two patterns of remembering the communist past seem to illustrate competing recollections – condemnation versus reflective/restorative nostalgia – both reflect distinctive gendered patterns of memory-making. The first highlights women's recollections on digital platforms of long-term repressed or silenced private lived experiences regarding sexuality and reproduction as a participatory grassroots type of remembering, which brings redress, healing, and

have the necessary infrastructure to provide abortions, only 40 in 24 counties (excluding the capital Bucharest) always do; 36 hospitals in 19 counties refuse to do so during religious holidays; 51 hospitals in 21 counties refuse to provide abortions altogether; 31 hospitals declined to participate in the telephone survey. Another report issued by Human Rights Watch in April 2025 documents how doctors invoke conscientious objection to provide abortions and the significant inroads that the Orthodox Church in Romania (BOR) and transnational and foreign anti-abortion groups have made in public hospitals and government structures to undermine women's reproductive rights (Human Rights Watch 2025).

agency. Scholarship of memory-making from below engages with a variety of topics, including, but not limited to, vernacular memories and practices involving mourning rituals (Verdery 1999), private musealisation initiatives of daily life in state socialism (Stephen 2020), and national commemorations in rural areas and small towns (Bădescu 2026). However, what sets the *Journal of the Decree* apart from previous mnemonic practices is the activist angle, triggered by deeply intimate recollections. A community of memory bound by multiple individual recollections of common experiences, which could eventually coalesce into a site of resistance, seems to emerge.

At the same time, it highlights a particular type of intergenerational transmission. The so-called 'hinge generation' (primarily daughters and granddaughters) continues to have a 'sense of living connection' with the generation of decree women (Hirsch 2012: 1–2). However, as Simona Mitroiu argued, women's transmission of traumatic histories (i.e. post-World War II dislocations) remained for the most part relegated to oral family histories and did not significantly impact the officially sanctioned historical narratives of the past (Mitroiu 2018: 15). Similarly, women's private recollections of sexuality under state socialism conflict with the official ideologies of gender equality (Gore-Gorszewska, Štulhofer 2024). The absence of gendered memories from public sites of memory leads to my second point. Specifically, these traumatic memories are easily challenged (as in other post-communist countries) by the increasing influence of transnational and national religiously conservative groups, which promote far-right, anti-globalist, anti-genderist ideologies. (Desperak 2023: 84–94; Norocel, Paternotte 2023: 123–129)

To pursue this analysis, a brief overview of the legacies of communist reproductive policies in post-communist Romania is provided. This is followed by a presentation of scholarly analyses, oral histories, and artistic productions, which incorporated gendered aspects of the memory of state socialism. A third section of the article consists of an interpretive analysis of the *Journal of the Decree* and an in-depth examination of two articles that provoked contradictory comments and strong emotions among Facebook users. Some concluding remarks will address three broader questions: (1) How do gendered memories of state socialism expressed in digital contexts and on social media platforms promote and/or shape an intergenerational dialogue between the children of the decree and the next generation? (2) How relevant are such intergenerational exchanges for current and ongoing national and transnational cultural wars, which either promote the return to traditional gender roles or, on the contrary, advocate for a progressive and liberal agenda in the areas of gender and minority rights? (3) Given the current international context in which reproductive rights are being dismantled or are highly restrictive (Center for Reproductive Rights 2025), what are the lessons that can be learnt from the Romanian case?

Patriarchal state socialism and its legacies

Scholars of gender and nationalism have emphasised that nation-states represent women in stereotypical gender roles (as mothers, daughters, or wives) and in need of male protectors (Yuval-Davies 1997; Verdery 1991). Contrary to the Marxist ideology that claims equality between men and women through the abolition of private property in state socialism, this pattern persisted in state socialist Romania. In the aftermath of World War II, the Romanian Communist Party (PCR) passed several laws that seemed to emancipate women from their traditional agrarian roles (Bucur, Miroiu 2018: 118; Massino 2019: 145). But eventually, the socialist state clearly turned into a state socialist patriarchal system, which reached its peak by the 1980s.⁵ The two main pillars of patriarchy during state socialism were represented by highly restrictive reproductive legislation and a virulent nationalist masculinist rhetoric that proclaimed hybrid motherhood – mother/worker and mother/hero – as the core of communism’s gender ideology (Olteanu 2004: 158–179).

After abortion was legalised in 1957 by the regime under the leadership of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, the country had the highest number of abortions in Europe (Massino 2019: 256–271). However, alarmed by a significant decrease in natality rates, and responding to the regime’s need to increase its industrial workforce, abortion was criminalised in 1966. Article 2 of Decree 770 of 1966 prohibited a woman’s right to terminate a pregnancy and listed extraordinary circumstances in which an abortion could be legally allowed, including: serious risks to the woman’s health, if the woman was over forty-five years old, if the pregnancy was the result of rape or incest, if the woman had already given birth to four children and had them in her care, or if one of the parents suffered from a hereditary disease. Article 3 restricted legal entitlement to abortion under the above circumstances to the first three months of pregnancy. Articles 5, 6, and 7 incorporated clear provisions that made such medical interventions subject to the authority of the office of the prosecutor.

⁵ While the concept of patriarchal socialism and socialist patriarchy may not be appropriate for describing the gender regimes implemented in other former socialist countries in the region, it is outside the scope of this article to provide an in-depth analysis of the topic. However, it is important to note that studies on sexuality differ in their assessment of women’s experiences of sexuality in socialism. For example, examining the case of East German women, Ghodsee (2018) argues that socialist welfare policies granted women more freedoms and, in contrast to capitalism consumerist societies, it normalised sexuality. Lišková (2018) makes a similar argument in the context of communist Czechoslovakia. But, as Maria Bucur has argued, ‘the experience people had under neighboring communist regimes was quite different, with not only communist ideology, but religious ideology and sexological research all playing varied roles’ (Bucur 2022: 198).

A whole apparatus was designed to ensure compliance with the decree. Under the dictatorship of Dej's successor, Nicolae Ceaușescu, compulsory gynaecological examinations were performed in socialist factories with more than 2,500 women employees to detect unreported pregnancies (Jinga 2011: 42). The communist secret police (the infamous Securitate) relied on informers recruited among medical staff, co-workers, and neighbours to report undeclared or illegal terminations of pregnancies. Ten years after the decree was issued, more than 200 medical doctors and over 1,000 medical staff were indicted for terminating pregnancies (Soare 2011: 75). These doctors were stripped of their right to practise medicine (Stoicescu, Oncioiu 2021). Desperate women seeking to save their lives after illegal botched abortions were not given any medical assistance unless they agreed to collaborate with the Securitate.

Nonetheless, given the lack of proper childcare and adequate housing and the absence of basic commodities in the market (food, gas, electricity), which reached severe levels in the 1980s, the decree did not result in a significant increase in birth rates. As *Jurnalul Decretului* points out, while in 1967 the total number of live births reached 527,000 (almost double the figures in 1965 and 1966), a year later the number had fallen to 400,000 (*Consecințele decretului din 1966* [The consequences of the 1966 decree]). Some women used primitive and painful methods, including scissors, knitting needles, shoehorns, infusion tubes, and root worms, to provoke spontaneous abortions (Vines 2003: 42–44). Others, in exchange for considerable sums of money, found qualified personnel who clandestinely performed abortions. The preferred method was curettage, which was frequently performed on the kitchen table with rudimentary tools that were not always properly sterilised, and often without any anaesthesia. Those who did not have the resources or access to the underground medical network ended up in the hands of the so-called 'skilled women' who had taught themselves how to induce a miscarriage (Botezatu 2024). As a result, many women became physically and emotionally scarred for the rest of their lives or were unable to conceive later. Many died and left orphaned children behind.

But, given the very limited sexual education and the lack of available contraceptives in the market, illegal abortions became a profitable enterprise. For some women and doctors, an illegal abortion meant an act of resistance and opposition against the regime's coercive pro-natalism. In an oral history interview published in 2003, one forty-two-year-old woman said: 'Ceaușescu wanted slaves... but we still didn't have children' (Vines 2003: 48). Official data showed higher rates of pregnancy terminations among young urban working-class women (Jinga 2011: 171). Giving birth in unheated, overcrowded, poorly supplied medical facilities, assisted by unsympathetic and verbally abusive medical staff, became an equally traumatising experience (Miroiu, Dragomir 2010).

The ramifications of these reproductive policies extended beyond the lives of women. Under the pretence of regulating the phenomenon of child abandonment, the socialist state continued to practise the interwar inhumane eugenic conception of selective breeding (Turda 2024). Abandoned children – especially those classified as partially recoverable and irrecoverable – were doomed to either remain in a state of permanent physical and mental underdevelopment or to premature death (Neagu 2024: 19–29). Data collected by the digital museum Muzeul Abandonului (Museum of Abandonment, n.d.) show that by 1991 over 700 such childcare institutions were spread throughout the country. Investigations led by the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile (IICCMER) in 2017 and 2018 revealed that, as a result of the extreme neglect and inhumane treatment of abandoned children, 769 children died in three of such facilities between 1966 and 1991 (Jinga 2025: 237). Clearly, the success of the demographic project of creating a healthy, happy, and productive socialist nation remained nothing but a lie manufactured by the regime's propaganda.

These gender traumas of state socialism continued to persist and influence women's lives during the post-communist transition. The country's consistent position at the bottom of the European Union's Gender Equality Index illustrates the ongoing inequalities and systemic discrimination that Romanian women experience in the areas of the economy, politics, education, and health (EIGE 2025). As Beatrice Scutaru and Luciana Jinga pointed out, '1989 did not signify a decisive rupture with respect to sexual and health rights, the decriminalisation of abortion notwithstanding' (Scutaru, Jinga 2024: 143). In September 2014, Article 201 of the penal code introduced more specific regulations to the right of abortion, which can be performed up to the 14th/15th week of pregnancy and only by authorised medical institutions and offices (*Noul Codul Penal* 2014). Exceptions are made up to twenty-four weeks for medical reasons in the interest of the mother or the foetus. Women are not punishable by law for illegal abortions, but medical doctors can face imprisonment, fines, and the suspension/loss of certain rights (*Noul Codul Penal* 2014, Article 201, lines 7, 3, 4). It is this latter aspect of the law that has opened the door for medical obstetricians to refuse to perform abortions. It has also become increasingly common for medical doctors to refuse prospective patients by citing conscientious objections. A 2019 survey (Cilibiu 2019) showed that out of 158 hospitals that can provide an abortion, only 40 accept such requests. Some public hospitals have made it a mandatory requirement for women seeking an abortion to appear before a committee that provides counselling and includes representatives of anti-abortion associations and the Orthodox Church (Oncioiu 2018). But the anti-abortion crusade extends far beyond the local reach of the Orthodox Church. In 2019, investigative journalist Diana

Semeşan showed that most pregnancy counselling centres in the capital Bucharest belong to NGOs set up by neo-protestant American missionaries and/or Romanian immigrants in the United States connected to ultraconservative religious groups (Semeşan 2019). Women who cannot access reproductive care are misled and told that both contraception and abortion result in severe physical ailments and lifelong depression and guilt.

The insurmountable difficulties in obtaining legal access to an abortion, together with the absence of family planning and subsidised contraception (Doboş 2024: 166–167), could easily throw women back to the infamous communist era of the ‘kitchen table’ (Şerban 2021). During the COVID-19 lockdown, some women had no choice but to perform abortions in their homes. As in the pre-1989 era, the most vulnerable women are those who are poor, reside in remote rural areas, and have little education (see, e.g., Redacţia Observator 2017). Yet medical doctors are again capitalising on the lack of easily accessible, low-cost abortions and charge large sums of money in private medical offices. In the absence of legislation that requires mandatory sexual education in schools, many parents (children of the decree) choose not to discuss sex with their children (Scutaru, Jinga 2024: 145–146). According to a 2021 UNICEF study, one in ten children in Romania is born to a teenage mother, and the birth rate for girls aged 15–19 is 3.5 times higher than the EU average (Necualu et al. 2022).

The recent rise of the far right, represented by the ultra-conservative, xenophobic, anti-globalist, nationalist Alliance for the Union of All Romanians (AUR) party brought the pro-natalist rhetoric into the mainstream public debate. Its anti-gender political message and support for the ‘traditional Christian family’ (Dragolea 2022: 90) under the slogan Faith, Liberty, Family, Nation seem to resonate with a large segment of society (AUR, n.d.). The AUR’s rhetoric combines the Christian nationalist discourse of the interwar fascist Iron Guard movement with the current far right ideology of the Make America Great Again movement (MAGA). The sharp demographic decline that the country has experienced since 1989, from a population of 24.49 million to 18.9 million in 2025, has only amplified such nationalist rhetoric (World Population Review, 2025). Moreover, the AUR found allies among the Orthodox Church and parts of the liberal and social-democratic political establishment. During the 2025 presidential elections, the AUR’s anti-genderist rhetoric became the core of its ultra-conservative message (Băluţă, Tufiş 2026). These seemingly contradictory messages propagated by the AUR and its allies, which mix nostalgia for the authoritarian past (for both communism and fascism) with transnational far-right messages, are part and parcel of a global trend that places anti-genderism at its core. As Judith Butler has persuasively argued: ‘Contradictions like these abound in the anti-gender ideology movement (...). One of the most powerful sites of anti-gender influence is in national elections’ (Butler 2024: 43).

These ultraconservative trends continue to coexist with memories of the communist-era Decree 770. Moreover, in the last decade, an increasingly militant feminist movement, which engages in public rallies and street protests, has been vigorously campaigning against domestic violence and for reproductive rights, the rights of Roma women, and the rights of LGBTQ communities (Băluță, Ignățoiu-Sora 2024; Miroiu 2024). Several questions thus arise: Given that, as Marianne Hirsch (2019: 1–2) has pointed out, ‘collective memory has, in recent years, been weaponised for conservative and even violent ends’, could the increasing influence of the far right in Romania restore the type of patriarchal nationalist regime promoted both before and during communism? Given that recent public opinion surveys show that more than half of the country’s population has a positive perception of the communist regime (INSCOP 2025), to what extent is this ultra-conservative message attuned to nostalgia for the old regime? Or, conversely, could the recent boom in state-socialist-era gendered memories potentially have a transformational effect and elicit an intergenerational dialogue between the children of the decree and their own children? How do mnemonic actors mobilise these memories to defend reproductive rights? These questions are addressed below.

Gendered memories of state socialism: between marginalisation and redress

In the aftermath of the December 1989 revolution, memory politics was heavily shaped by the anti-communist militancy of former political prisoners incarcerated during the early stage of Soviet-style communist repression (Ciobanu 2021). Stereotypical public representations of women’s experiences of political repression resulted in the reification of ‘political victimhood as masculine’ (Haliuc 2013: 120).

However, since the 2000s this hegemonic heroic-masculinist narrative of the past has coexisted with a more nostalgic view of state socialism, which shifted the focus from the elites and former political prisoners to ordinary people, and from early communist Sovietisation to late nationalism communism. This primarily retrospective nostalgia (Boym 2001) attempted to recuperate memories of a socialist childhood (Mitroiu 2020). As the last generation that grew up under state socialism – the decree generation (*decreței*) – entered adulthood, online platforms increasingly became the preferred sites of memory-making and memory preservation. In an ironic twist, this first post-socialist generation to become conversant with computer and internet technology used the latter to express their longing for a time when people enjoyed social interaction through physical proximity (Petrescu 2017). Also known as the ‘latchkey generation’ (due to a lack of adequate and sufficient childcare, many children spent some after-school time by themselves in their state-socialist dwellings), they utilise

social media platforms, particularly Facebook (FB), to assert their distinctive lived experiences. These FB communities represent the voices of ordinary working-class people who lived in state socialism (Pohrib 2019: 173–174).

Simultaneously, scholars and memory activists started to delve into the gendered aspects of lived experiences. Women's recollections of late communism highlighted a specific gender trauma shaped by forced motherhood and daily material struggles (Gheo, Lungu 2008: 10). A few middle-class intellectual women were able to maintain a sense of agency by clandestinely writing about their daily experiences (Mitroiu 2023). The majority, however, managed to cope with daily challenges through women's support networks made up of neighbours, co-workers, and family members (Bucur, Miroiu 2008: 94–97) as well as through intergenerational solidarity (Dobre 2020: 132).

But several studies seem to indicate both continuities and changes among different generations of women regarding their perceptions of state socialism. For the women who experienced girlhood or young womanhood in the 1980s, their recollections embody the experience of 'femininity under siege' (Fătu-Tutoveanu 2015: 124). Despite the liberalisation of abortion in December 1989, the inhibitions and constraints of the communist era still linger on. In fact, except for a few oral histories and interviews, the lived experiences of sexuality and motherhood did not overtly enter the vernacular practices of remembering (Anton 2009).

Instead, it was through mediated artistic representations that the experience of abortion and its intergenerational transmission was more bluntly presented to the public. A major turning point was the release of Cristian Mungiu's internationally acclaimed movie *4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days* in 2007. Florin Iepan's documentary *Framing the Change: Children of the Decree* enjoyed an equally powerful reception. Contemporary women writers also portrayed in their novels the unspoken suffering of 'aborted motherhood' (Marinescu 2022) and the ongoing unresolved ambivalence of motherhood passed on to the children of the decree children and especially to their daughters (Vlada 2021: 9). But these accounts reach out to a rather limited audience confined to the urban educated middle-class segment.

However, increased internet access and engagement with social media (especially Facebook), redefined the social and political landscape. Especially after the country's accession to the European Union in 2007, social media fostered increased civic engagement and citizen mobilisation against government corruption, abuses, and social injustices (Vasilendiuc, Bardan 2022). Digital sites are increasingly facilitating a type of grassroots participation in the act of memory making, which seems to indicate that a different mnemonic pattern is emerging. The large number of Facebook accounts shapes what Andrew Hoskins describes as 'the memory of the multitude' grounded in hyperconnectivity and readily available data, diminishing the legitimacy of the 'former gatekeepers of memory' (Hoskins 2018: 85–89). Such increased participation in

the act of recasting the past creates communities of memory and empowers them to project ownership over the historical narrative (Hirsch 2012: 240–242). By sharing personal testimonies and transmitted memories, social media users transform digital sites into living archives (Gibbons 2019).

A glance at the Facebook page of the Journal of the Decree, whose first post was dated 26 June 2019 and the last one 12 July 2022, gathering 47,000 followers, seems to suggest that victims, survivors, and the descendants of Decree 770 are finally coming together to validate themselves as the agents of its transmitted memory. However, because the digital arena is prone to gross misinformation and manipulation, the past could easily be weaponised by illiberal anti-democratic actors pursuing a restorative agenda. Several Facebook pages opened in 2023 that mix religious prayers, photos of animals, and communist nostalgia. In only one year they gathered over 50 million reactions (likes, shares and comments) (Cârlugea 2024). Some of these sites openly praise the benefits of a happy childhood during the ‘Golden Age’ – as Ceaușescu’s propaganda used to call his regime.⁶ Somewhat similarly, in 2023, in an interview on the demographic decline of the economically active population, the Minister of Labour, Marius Budăi, stated that it is false to think of these children as unwanted (*decreșei*) because they were born out of the love of their parents (Radu 2022). Other sites illustrate a more complex range of conflicting attitudes towards the past, from outright condemnation to reflective and restorative nostalgia, indicating the struggles of the post-memory generation to make sense of divergent narratives (Petrescu, Petrescu 2025).

Methodology and ethical issues

To analyse the issues raised above, I chose to conduct a qualitative analysis of the posts, comments, and reactions associated with two articles posted on the Journal of the Decree Facebook page. The first, ‘Să nu țipi, Chiar dacă doare, să nu țipi’ (Don’t scream. Even if it hurts, don’t scream), was posted on 5 July 2019 and includes the testimonies of women who had clandestine abortions. From 16 July 2019 to 16 August 2019, it gathered 422 reactions, 65 comments, and 130 shares. This post clearly indicates a living ideological polarisation over reproductive rights and sharp division among those who condemn the past and those who express nostalgia for it. The second post was triggered by Diana Meseșan’s article ‘Viața noastră sexuală a fost un

⁶ The Facebook site is named *Trairi și Scîlpiri* (Feelings and Sparkles) and has 160,500 members. The post – consisting of a poem praising childhood in communism and a photo of three beautiful, healthy-looking children, taken from the famous movie of the era *Ani de liceu* (*High School Years*) – was uploaded on 16 May 2025.

calvar' (Our sex life was an ordeal) and was posted on 10 December 2021. Although it generated fewer reactions – a total of 31 comments, 404 likes, and 116 shares from 10 December 2021 to 31 December 2021), it led to a genuine transgenerational dialogue between women. It stands out as a powerful example of how traumatic recollections of personal stories create solidarity among women and increase awareness of their rights and bodily autonomy. The information was accessed, collected, and uploaded from 10 September 2025 to 28 December 2025. However, by April 2026, when I tried to access the 31 comments, I discovered that they had been deleted and replaced by 22 new posts. The language, themes, and sentiments incorporated in the new posts depart significantly from the previous ones. They mirror the type of polarisation over both the past and the present status of reproductive rights. In fact, this seems to confirm that digital memory-making is a living and ongoing process of creation, dismantling, and recreating memory archives without an end in sight. What seems to characterise grassroots memory-making is its elusiveness and volatility.

Through manual coding, I pursued an inductive analysis at three levels.⁷ The first includes the dominant themes associated with the topics of abortion and sexuality, which were identified in public comments and the replies posted on the Facebook platform. The second refers to the framing of these themes through language patterns. Finally, I consider how the emotions associated with the former are expressed through strong adjectives and exclamation marks. Ultimately, I attempt to understand how these 'new forms of remembering and forgetting' expressed on such platforms (Bartoletti 2011: 82–11) shape the legacy of Decree 770 as part of the post-communist collective memory.

Given the sensitive nature of the personal stories shared by the users of these Facebook platforms, I chose to anonymise their comments and ensure that their identity is not revealed. Thus, this article follows established ethical guidelines and concerns regarding social media research, acknowledging respect for the privacy and autonomy of individuals and communities of social media users (Centre for Data, Culture & Society 2021). I also approach ethical issues as contingent upon the specific context of reproductive rights and choices, which involve unequal power relations (Gliniecka 2023: 1–11). In the section below, the analysed comments are anonymised and attributed to one of the two articles – for example, A1 is the comment below the post 'Don't scream...!', while A2 is the comment below the post sharing Diana Mesešan's article. Given the absence of the second set of comments addressed above, exact publishing dates are not provided.

⁷ AI tools were also consulted to assist with identifying the main themes.

Journal of the Decree: between healing and nostalgia

In 2018, when the ultimately unsuccessful referendum on banning same-sex marriages was underway and its core supporters were also lobbying for abortion to be banned (Norocel, Băluță 2023), Mihai Matei, a middle-age information technology entrepreneur and civic activist, whose own mother barely survived an induced abortion, posted on his Facebook page a call for users to share their stories. After hundreds of people posted personal testimonies, the idea of the Journal of the Decree came about (Avadani 2023). Matei reached out to the Bucharest-based NGO Center for Independent Journalism and a team of reporters from the independent journalism project Dela0.ro (Diana Oncioiu and Vlad Stoicescu), freelance journalists Octavian Coman and Diana Meseșan from daily *Libertatea* were appointed.⁸ They brought the project to fruition in 2021. From October to December 2021, 14 multimedia pieces were released in Romanian, English, and Hungarian. A historical section that combines texts with images (photos and archival materials from different eras) delves into the lengthy history of reproductive rights from pre-modern times until the communist era. The latter era is presented in much detail and in a multifaceted manner. The gruesome reality of the decree is narrated by posting images of the original decree, photos of party officials, propaganda articles in the official media of the time (on divorce and health), and especially details on the grim consequences of the decree – such as statistics on convictions for illegal pregnancy interruptions, maternal mortality, and the disastrous situation in maternity hospitals. But the report also incorporates current instances of criminalisation or attempts to criminalise abortion in different countries and regions of the world. Their goal is to look into the future: ‘We want to find out and understand. About yesterday, about today, but especially about tomorrow’, states the project website. The fourteen articles mix a variety of topics that cover both the communist past – illegal abortions, orphanages, the role of the secret police, sex life – and the present, referring to official government attempts to implement pro-natalist policies, deficient natal care, women’s inability to access abortion services, the lack of sex education. Experts’ opinions are personalised by vivid, graphic, and gruesome testimonies of the decree’s victims and survivors (women and their children, abandoned children, doctors).

But how do these stories resonate with the digital public? How do different demographic groups – those who lived through the decree era and chose to transmit their memories to the next generation (mostly from mothers to daughters) – rationalise and interpret them? And to what extent could this intergenerational dialogue help women overcome the gendered traumas of state-socialist pronatalist policies? Since

⁸ Information about the project is available at: <https://jurnalul-decretului.ro/despre-proiect>.

abortion is a highly morally and politically contested topic in Romania and elsewhere, how is the ideological divide between the proponents of 'pro-life' and 'pro-choice' articulated on this digital site? How do these two segments of the audience engage with the politics of the present and the memories of the past to frame reproductive rights? By analysing reflections on the two posts discussed earlier through the lenses of a qualitative content analysis, some tentative answers will be provided.

The Facebook post 'Don't scream, even if it hurts, don't scream' is based on an interview with a 59-year-old TV producer (R). Her mother-in-law's apartment was used as a secret location where illegal abortions were performed by doctors. Recollections of the place and time bring back the pain and the fear experienced by all the parties involved (the doctor, the host/intermediary, and the woman): 'If you shout, if they found out, we all end up in jail', recollects the interviewee. Such fear was common in the apartments of the grey socialist buildings of the 'Golden Age'. 'The living room was transformed into a gynaecological office! Not to die was a privilege!' This chilling testimony speaks to historical gendered trauma, which represents the first major theme expressed through the users' comments. A total of eight testimonies recollect the tragic stories of women who died because of botched abortions or experienced severe haemorrhages after being denied medical care. One narrative belongs to a medical doctor who worked in a textile factory, who tried to save women and protect them from the authorities (I1, 14 August 2019). These stories generate powerful reactions ranging from empathy, pity for what women lived through, praise for the women's courage to defy the regime, and words of remembrance coined in religious terms: 'God have mercy on their souls' (A1, 12 August 2019). This bodily trauma is intertwined with the psychological trauma that women and their families lived through during the decree era, characterised by a fear of being under constant surveillance and the secrecy of pregnancy terminations.

The second principal theme articulates reproductive rights from a moral and religious perspective. Accordingly, abortion is a sin, and the women who underwent abortion are labelled as sinners and criminals. Unlike those who condemned the imposition of motherhood by the communist regime, they frame it as an unquestionable moral and religious duty. Thus, the actual guilt lies with women themselves and not with the state-socialist regime. In response to those who recollect the lack of access to proper childcare and basic goods under state socialism, one user replies: 'This is the most ridiculous excuse to kill children. Then you become the murderer of your own children.' (R1, 9 August 2019) For R1 and others, raising children during the difficult circumstances of the 1980s was a worthwhile sacrifice. Such comments reflect deeply polarised ideological positions. Against the feelings of empathy for the women who died and suffered, one person responds that 'a real sin is to expect others to live like you', i.e. to express solidarity with women who interrupted their

pregnancies (L1, 10 August 2019). The way these two themes are framed also indicates a dichotomy to how Facebook users reflect on the past through the lens of the present. Those who adhere to the historical trauma theme emphasise ongoing systemic gender discrimination and its legacy in post-socialism, i.e. the lack of sex education and contraception. Misogyny is internalised as a political issue: ‘then and now...women are second-class citizens’ (H1, 9 August 2019). Two comments also describe women’s dehumanisation by the communist regime by making an analogy with breeding cows and breeding stock (M1, 11 August 2019; P1, 12 August 2019). In contrast, those who condemn abortion express nostalgia for the security (real or imaginary) offered by the state-socialist system: ‘during communism everyone had a job and a place to stay’ (C1, 14 August 2019). As a counterbalance to nostalgia, a shared community of memory rooted in collective suffering evolves among those who condemn pro-natalist socialism: ‘All the women who lived in those times have something to tell us.’ (M1, 16 August 2019)

At the level of sentiment, these tense exchanges reveal negative emotions that indicate an ongoing process of reckoning with the traumatic past. Feelings of grief, anger, and solidarity clash with an ideological backlash. Against the latter, one male user, for instance, responded with crude insulting words, such as ‘idiots’, ‘fools’, and ‘stupid’ (T1, 10 July 2019). This reaction illustrates the irreconcilable antagonism between the proponents of the two themes and indicates that digital platforms are simultaneously sites of remembrance and of ideological struggles.

The article ‘Our Sex Life Was an Ordeal’ addresses the trauma of women and sex life under communism from an intergenerational perspective. Above the article’s title, an illustration attributed to Roman Gavrilă prepares readers for the extraordinary stories of pain, frustration, and injuries they are about to read. A woman with red hair in a red dress holds a bouquet of red flowers in her hand. The presence of the blood that seems to be dripping from her left hand amplifies the tension in the room. Her left hand is raised as she appears to reject her husband’s attempts to comfort or maybe seduce her. Her whole posture shows pain and loneliness. A photo on the wall shows her together with her three children dressed in pioneer uniforms worn by middle school children on special occasions. Their expressions are bleak and do not project any emotions or a particular image of a happy family. This impersonal (almost robotic) image contrasts sharply with the official propaganda of the 1980s that praised the fulfilment of women as mothers and the family as the basis of the state-socialist system. The illustration and the article are accompanied by a post summarising the author’s interviews with women and adds an explanatory layer to the image: ‘Sex was dangerous (...) If you got pregnant, it was your problem. If your husband left you, it was your fault. (...) The only advice from your parents was: don’t bring shame on us’ (Jurnalul Decretului, 2021). The interviews included in the

article are supplemented with statements from specialists on matters of family relationships and sexuality. For example, Adriana Băban's 1996 study of sex life in state socialism based on fifty interviews with women shows that forty of them had illegal abortions, only five were able to find contraceptives on the black market, and just one recalled her sexual experience as enjoyable (see also Baban, David 1994). Psychotherapist Cătălina Hetel argues that a lack of partnership and genuine intimacy in sex life under socialism is reflected today in the dysfunctional relationships between those mothers and their children (Jurnalul Decretului 2021). Most daughters lack any memories of their mothers as wives and have a hard time finding their own path after they become mothers themselves.

The prevailing themes that emerge throughout the thirty-one comments posted under this Facebook contribution are consistent with the above analysis. Two inter-related themes – the collective trauma experienced by women and its transmission to the next generation – are almost unanimously framed by the platform's users through the lens of gender inequality. The explicit expression of strong emotions such as 'collective trauma' (A2, 2021), 'the drama of women at the time' (B2, 2021), 'tormenting times' (C2, 2021), together with intimate testimonies of the lived experience of the loss of bodily control and shame, are clear indicators of a commonly shared experience of humiliation and suffering. These deeply disturbing injuries, cohesively articulated, are not relegated to the past but serve as forces actively shaping the present. The recurring theme of transgenerational trauma is described in comments as the 'lingering effects that many women still resent' (D2, 2021), as 'traumas that roll from generation to generation' (E2, 2021), or plainly as 'transgenerational traumas'.

However, although re-constructing the trauma of the past generates such powerful emotions, the counter-theme of healing further reinforces the bonds between the two generations of women. Healing is framed as both a duty to understand the past and a moral duty to move forward and to break this cycle. The following comments are significant: 'the young generation has no idea what women went through in those times' (F2, 2021); 'It's very hard to understand these things if you are not told about them' (G2, 2021); 'I was growing up like this for thirty-two years (...) the barriers are still there (...) although the cage is gone' (H2, 2021); 'It is up to us, women, to heal from our mothers' trauma and to raise our daughters as happy and fulfilled women' (I2, 2021). These comments indicate that the strong 'living connection' between mothers and daughters is characterised 'by an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture' (Hirsch 2012: 6). As one user puts it: 'These traumas are all inside us, and it is good to know our mothers' lives, so we can understand and heal ourselves.' (J2, 2021) But overall, there is a sense of relief and that it is only through empathy that genuine understanding can be achieved, which, in turn, could pre-empt nostalgia for communism. These feelings of relief and healing are amplified by comments that call

for awareness and collective action. One user noticed the lack of any male audience on this platform of remembering: '[It] would be interesting to know a gentleman's opinion of that era...The article should be written in red letters and distributed to those who claim, [everything] was better before' (K2, 2021). In other words, unless this past is not rejected by everyone (including those who contributed to women's individual traumas), there is no guarantee it will not be repeated.

The frequency of the concepts presented above (trauma, women, mothers, generations, healing) indicates that the memory archive built around the post 'Our sex life was an ordeal' validates women's experiences of restricted reproductive rights, resulting from Decree 770. Moreover, the critique of unequal power relations between men and women – then and now – frames and attempts to counter repressed feelings of shame, anger, and imposed silence over personal stories of death, unwanted pregnancies, and societal prejudice. One testimony stands out: A contributor lost her loving mother to a botched abortion, and her childhood was haunted by shame. To protect the family honour (because her mother's pregnancy was the result of an extramarital affair), her family persuaded the local authorities to attribute her death in the official death certificate to cardiac arrest. Only much later did she learn that her father was also physically abusive (M2, 2021).

At the level of sentiment, we can distinguish a combination of negative feelings towards the past and solidarity built through empathy among the members of the Facebook platform, who almost unanimously express gratitude and thanks to Diana Meseşan, the journalist who authored the post. As a result, a third feeling – of hope for the future – is added to the sum of such strong emotions. By remembering Decree 770 as a historical injustice, this memory community shows the potential that women's shared memories of repression can have for activist mobilisation towards progressive change (Rigney 2018; Altınay et al. 2019). However, given the country's current turn in a highly conservative and illiberal direction and the utilisation of digital sites by its advocates for spreading disinformation and promoting communist nostalgia, one should be cautious about further generalisations.

Concluding remarks

Ultimately, the analysis of the two Facebook sites indicates that there exist two principal and competing versions of remembering women's lives (and especially the reproductive aspects) under state socialism. First, remembering becomes a grassroots participatory activity that gives women the opportunity to speak without inhibitions about intimate aspects of their lives, which have been repressed for a long time. By acknowledging the unique gendered experiences, women seek both agency and recognition. However, in contrast to other groups victimised by communism, women

do not require material restitution. For them, acknowledgement means reparatory justice, which could potentially influence systemic change in the status of women. Second, sensitive issues like abortion, motherhood, and family life are easily prone to nostalgic recollections, which are partially rooted in the current dissatisfaction with the present capitalist global order. For the most part, the Facebook users (especially those commenting on the 'Don't cry...' article) who condemn abortion and the women who choose[chose] to have one are also praising the securities and benefits that state socialism provided for families.

While the first mnemonic trend could provide some grounds for considering the transformative potential of memory-making for promoting women's rights, the latter raises some scepticism about whether the former may prevail. As described earlier, the current transnational rise of anti-globalist, far-right political and cultural actors, to which Romania is not immune, is strongly advocating for a return to traditional patriarchal values. In September 2025, two former deputies of the far-right Partidul Oamenilor Tineri (Party of Young People) attempted to introduce a bill that would have imposed further legal restrictions on abortion (Mamulă 2025). However, this initiative did not gain significant support among MPs and was swiftly criticised by civil society activists, including those involved in the Journal of the Decree.

This unsuccessful attempt leads us to conclude[It can be concluded from this unsuccessful attempt] that although grassroots memory-making does not necessarily preclude restorative trends (both societal and political), it could mobilise against the further backsliding of reproductive rights. The Romanian case shows that memory activism can potentially be utilised as a tool of resistance to worldwide far-right, anti-genderist politics and their use of social media platforms for disinformation and manipulation.

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Monica Ciobanu holds a PhD in sociology from the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research and is a Professor of Criminal Justice at the State University of New York in Plattsburgh. She has published extensively in the areas of historical memory, transitional justice, and democratisation in East and Central Europe and in Romania. She is the author of *Repression, Resistance and Collaboration in Stalinist Romania 1944-1964: Post-communist Remembering* (Routledge, 2021) and the co-editor (with Mihaela Șerban) of the volume *Between the Memory and the Post-Memory of Socialism in Romania: Fluid Memories* (Routledge Press, 2025). During the 2021–2022 academic year, Dr Ciobanu was a faculty fellow at the Center for the Study of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention at SUNY Binghamton. In 2015 she was the recipient of the SUNY Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Scholarship and Creative Activities. ORCID: 0000-0001-8860-5415. Contact e-mail: monica.ciobanu@plattsburgh.edu.