

INTERVIEW EUROSPANOVA



RAMONA STRUGARIU MEP

#ELLESFONTBOUGERLEUROPE

Interview conducted as part of the #ellesfontbougereurope project

CONTEXT

In Europe, the gender gap between women and men is still very present. While women are slightly more educated than men, the gap is widening considerably in the professional environment, the environment of action and influence.

These conditions do not seem to make it easier for women to act and decide to build the Europe of tomorrow. This is why EuropaNova has decided to create the Scientific Council of Women Acting for Tomorrow's Europe. Ecology, finance, business, academic professions or national and community institutions... Everywhere, many women are rising to the highest level of decision-making, it is important to value their action.

"They are moving Europe" is a programme of both studies and actions, carried out by and with the help of students and doctoral students from the EuropaNova network, which chooses to highlight the female profiles who are acting in Europe and for Europe.

CONTEXT

What has been your journey to reach the position you currently hold? And have you felt, during your career, that being a woman could be an obstacle, or at least have an influence on your career path? If so, how did you overcome it?

I was one of the many people taking to the streets for justice, rule of law and the end of corruption in Romania. For many years before that, I was part of international organisations fighting for human rights, bringing support and knowledge to various communities in Romania, trying to make a difference. Over time I realised that this contribution, no matter how hard we work to make it happen in one community, will be a temporary and limited one, with no profound or systemic effect for the society. After a flourishing period – the years after Romania’s joining the EU - the political perspectives of my country were growing darker, once the populist social-democrat party, descending from the former communist party came to power. Corruption was growing, people were leaving the country and looking for a better place in Europe or worldwide in order to fulfil their dreams of a better life.

Then 2015 came, the year of the Colectiv fire, a tragic incident in a night club in Bucharest which caused 65 deaths and hundreds of injured people. At the time, I was a Brussels-based Law graduate, with a master in European Law, a vast experience in the non-governmental sector and a fresh job in the European Parliament. The lives lost in that fire were a tribute paid to corruption, negligence, incompetence, indifference of a government and political representatives who should have put people’s safety and care on the first place. Instead, they proved arrogant, unprepared and eager to lie in order to hide a rotten system.

There were massive protests triggered by the way this event was handled by the authorities. The government fell, new hope was on the way - with a technocrat government trying to fix things until the elections. But one year later, the socialists came to power again with a large majority and Romania suddenly found itself in the darkest period of all its post-communist years, democracy wise, because the first target of the newly installed government became the rule of law.

That was the trigger for my decision to step into politics. I realised that unless a new generation of politicians would take over and literally rock the country - like we wrote on our banners while taking to the streets - the democracy and all the European values that we treasured were in great danger.

I decided to join a brand-new political party and help build it from scratch. It was a huge challenge - PLUS is a basket of technocrats who had enough of the lies and the incompetence of the classical parties and decided to move forward towards a new thinking in politics - very disruptive for the old Romanian system. It was also the most beautiful and complex construction project I have ever got involved into. In only one year, together with our Alliance partners from USR, we won a refreshing and outstanding 22,4% in the elections for the European Parliament.

I have never felt, in all this time, that being a woman could be an obstacle for what I wanted to accomplish, nor did I have time to reflect upon it too deeply, because I was busy doing my job as a professional and as a young politician committed to people, values and work.

As a matter of fact, the first time and one of the extremely few times when I was told straight into the face that I was a woman, therefore irrelevant, was more than 20 years ago,

when I was the very young team leader of an American organisation and one of my volunteers - dean of a well-known US University - told me that he would never obey a 20 something years old woman. I looked into his eyes and replied that he always had a choice not to, provided that he took his luggage and firm principles and travelled back with them to the US, because right then and there, under my responsibility, the rules were different and equal for everyone. And that was it, we settled it, afterwards things went well until the end of the programme.

What dimension do you think the European Union should explore in the future? What are the key values that you would like to see its representatives uphold?

Its bridges, this is what the European Union should explore. All of them. Everything that can bring us closer, harmonise our rules, promote and share our cultures and experiences. The European leaders should look at what makes people within the EU borders feel and act more united, more solidary with each other. It is a long term bet on education and humanity, that we must win.

It is not an easy task, because individualism lies within human nature and the governing rules of populism bare no generosity or long-term people-oriented goals. But with resilience and leadership, strong leadership, we can do it.

We need to defend our core values, those we've been born from, as free and powerful nations forming a Union of values: rule of law, freedom of expression, respect for human rights, dignity, equality before the law and fair justice for all. We need, by all means, to continuously defend our democracies and our peace. There is no disproportionate price to pay to protect all of the above.

What advice would you give to a young woman who might be afraid to enter this sector?

If you mean politics, I would give them the same piece of advice that I have for a woman, no matter what she does, and that is to be confident, to have trust in her knowledge, her resilience, her principles, her instinct, her faith, her power. A woman's place is wherever she wants to be. Do we need to push this understanding by actively creating space for women, through public policy and legislation, until we reach a balanced representation and equal opportunities in all our societies? Yes, we need to. The European Commission and the European Parliament are a good example of gender balanced political representation, that can inspire national parliaments and political parties.

When I chose to become a politician, I did not think whether being a woman would influence it in any way. I trusted my competence and motivation to change a political system tributary to corruption and selfish interests. I then became aware of the power of example and driving forces that we can get together in order to motivate others.

I thought primarily at the responsibilities associated to the job. Power itself and its mere temptation mean nothing. In my view, a leader's strength resides in empowering people. Otherwise, one enters a vanity fair that dismantles minds, communities, nations. But once you replace the word 'power' with the word 'responsibility' in any phrase or action referring to your own mission and leadership, perspectives change.

It is the essential conversion of 'I have the power to push the world forward' to 'I have the responsibility to make the world move forward'. And it is something that women can do as well as men.