

## Ceausescu's abortion restriction and its implications for orphanages in communist Romania (1966-1989): A historical review

### Introduction

During the communist period in Romania, the state exerted significant influence on family life, implementing a series of measures aimed at reshaping family dynamics. This influence evolved over distinct sub-periods and was enforced through coercive measures such as strict restrictions on abortion and access to contraception.<sup>1</sup> The state's regulation of family life involved both strengthening existing laws and introducing new legal principles aimed at transforming the institution of the family to align with the socialist vision.<sup>2</sup> This vision involved promoting gender equality, with a strong emphasis on integrating women into the workforce, while the state actively participated in child rearing and education through state-run facilities.<sup>3</sup> Following the example of the Soviet Union and other state-socialist countries, Romania legalized abortion on demand in 1957 and became one of the most liberal countries in Europe.<sup>4</sup> However, in October 1966, a year after Ceausescu assumed power, the Communist Party enacted stringent legislation banning abortion in all but a few exceptional cases in the name of national sanctity with Ceausescu declaring childbirth a patriotic duty.<sup>5</sup> He also declared that the practice of terminating a pregnancy violated »the laws of nature, the laws of the State and the laws of social development.«<sup>6</sup>. The *Scotsman* newspaper on 21 July 21 1966 reported

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1 Dumănescu, Luminița: Family upbringing in communist Romania, in: *Wychowanie w Rodzinie* IX (2014), No. 1, pp. 49-61, DOI: 10.23734/wwr20141.049.061. (01.02.2024).

2 ibid.

3 ibid.

4 For further reading on the liberalization of abortion in Romania (1957-1966) refer to: Kligman, Gail: *The Politics of Duplicity: Controlling Reproduction in Ceausescu's Romania*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles California 1998, pp. 47-49.

5 Anton, Lorena: On Memory Work in Post-communist Europe. A Case Study on Romania's Ways of Remembering its Pronatalist Past, in: *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* 18 (2009), No. 2, pp. 106–122, pp. 5-6.

6 Balfour, Richard: Police monitor pregnant women in abortion drive, in: *The Canberra Times*, 30.06.1985, p. 10, [www.nla.gov.au/nla.news-article122519735](http://www.nla.gov.au/nla.news-article122519735) (21.02.2024).

that Ceausescu announced in a recent speech that he planned to impose stricter regulations on liberal abortion laws in Romania in response to concerns about declining birth rates.<sup>7</sup> This resulted in a temporary rise in birth rates followed by a decline as women sought alternative methods of contraception. This pronatalist policy, driven by nationalist, economic and moral factors promoting a vision of a strong nation and an abundant workforce, lasted for 23 years until the fall of the regime in 1989, when restrictive abortion laws were reversed.<sup>8</sup> This study investigates the impact of Nicolae Ceausescu's restrictive reproductive rights regulations and abortion policies on the proliferation of orphanages in the Socialist Republic of Romania from 1966 to 1989.

### Methodology

The methodology includes several key elements aimed at providing a nuanced understanding of sociopolitical dynamics underlying the proliferation of orphanages during this period. Initially in addition to the academic literature on the subject documenting the rapid growth of orphanages during the Ceausescu regime and the harsh conditions, primary and secondary sources are considered. Based on content analysis and critical discourse analysis, historical evidence is examined. Specifically legislative documents and government decrees, which are crucial for understanding the official policies and legal framework imposed by the Ceausescu regime. Also documents from the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives (CNSAS), which offer information on the enforcement of policies and surveillance methods used by the state documenting the extent of state control over family planning and reproductive health. In addition, relevant official reports and announcements related to pronatalist policies are taken into account in order to aid our understanding of the regime's public discourse and to interpret the implementation and enforcement of Ceausescu's policies on the issue under investigation and their impact in the welfare system. Selected newspaper articles from the Romanian communist era reflect the official narrative disseminated by the regime, offering insight into state propaganda. These articles reflect

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<sup>7</sup> The Scotsman, 21.07.1966, p. 9, [www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000540/19660721/211/0009](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000540/19660721/211/0009) (24.02.2024).

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

the government's efforts to control information and shape public opinion. However, due to media censorship in the country, these sources present a biased view of events. To balance this, Western newspapers are also used, as they were not subject to the same level of state control and can provide a critical perspective by examining outside views for a balanced overall analysis. By combining and comparing reports from Romanian and Western newspapers, the analysis aims to achieve a more complete and nuanced understanding of the impact of Ceausescu's policies. Testimonies of individuals are also taken into account, providing valuable qualitative data about lived experiences under the Ceausescu regime, offering insights into the human impact of policies, which are not always visible in official documents. All the aforementioned data will be analyzed using qualitative methods to draw out patterns and themes related to Ceausescu's policies and their impact on orphanages in communist Romania.

### The Impact of Ceausescu's Pronatalist Policies on Reproductive Rights

According to Decree No. 770 of 1 October 1966, issued by the State Council of the Socialist Republic of Romania and published in Official Bulletin No. 60 on the same day, termination of a pregnancy was prohibited, except in special circumstances such as a threat to a woman's life, serious hereditary diseases, serious physical or mental disabilities of a pregnant woman. Furthermore, those regulations contained advanced age of the mother, care of (at least) four children or pregnancy due to rape or incest. Procedures were to be performed by obstetrician-gynecologists in specialized health facilities and authorization granted by a medical committee established by regional or municipal councils.<sup>9</sup> Minor adjustments to the Decree 770/1966 were introduced in 1972 and 1985. The legal criteria for obtaining an abortion remained consistent between 1966 and 1972, except for a reduction in the eligible age from 45 to 40 for women seeking the procedure.<sup>10</sup> Alterations were made to the legislation in 1985. Among others article 2/1985 permitted women to undergo an abortion, if they were

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9 Consiliul de Stat al Republicii Socialiste România. (1966, October 1). DECRET Nr. 770 din 1 octombrie 1966 pentru reglementarea întreruperii cursului sarcinii [Decree No. 770 of October 1, 1966 for the regulation of interrupting pregnancy]. BULETINUL OFICIAL NR. 60 din 1 octombrie 1966, [www.legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocumentAfis/177](http://www.legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocumentAfis/177) (02.02.2024).

10 Kligman: The Politics of Duplicity, p. 61.

already responsible for the care of at least five children or if they were over the age of 45.<sup>11</sup> The decree was enacted as a response to the »demographic crisis«. It is worth noting that this term, as used by the Ceausescu government, referred to a decline in the birth rate in Romania in the early 1960s, which was seen as a threat to the country's economic and social future. However, it has been argued that this decline was part of a wider trend towards modernization and the adoption of the nuclear family model, which is typically characterized by fewer children. According to scholar Adina Maria Pop, the decline in household size and the shift from extended families to nuclear families was influenced by several factors, including lower fertility rates and urban living conditions.<sup>12</sup> While urban areas saw a decline in multigenerational households, rural areas continued to maintain extended family structures with higher fertility rates.<sup>13</sup> The changes, as she points out, were part of a wider social evolution and not a crisis. According to Dumănescu, changes in family structure in communist Romania, driven by legislation, industrialization, urbanization, and mass education, were not indicative of a demographic crisis but rather the result of complex social transformations.<sup>14</sup> These included shifts towards gender equality, the displacement of rural families by urbanization, and the acceleration of women's emancipation through education.<sup>15</sup>

Nicolae Ceausescu's government pursued industrialization in Romania by expanding the workforce. This led to agricultural decline and exacerbated food shortages, while this pronatalist policy, combined with the taxation of the childless, led to insufficient economic incentives for childbirth, worsening economic hardship and creating a demographic imbalance that burdened social support systems, leading in high maternal mortality rates and increased institutionalization of children.<sup>16</sup> In addition, a formidable security force with a wide network of informants was

11 Ileanu, Bogdan-Vasile: Time Lag Evidence of Anti-Abortion Decree and Perturbation of Births' Distribution. A Benford Law Approach, preprint arXiv:2106.15520 [physics.soc-ph] (2021), p. 5, DOI: 10.48550/arXiv.2106.15520. (24.02.2024).

12 Pop, Adina Maria: The Romanian government and demographic policies. Ceaușescu's regime and contemporary perspectives, Università degli studi Roma Tre 2020, pp. 89-90, <http://hdl.handle.net/2307/40772> (30.05.2024).

13 *ibid.*

14 Dumănescu: Family upbringing in communist Romania, p. 58.

15 *ibid.*

16 Morrison, Lynn: Ceausescu's Legacy: Family Struggles and Institutionalization of Children in Romania, in: *Journal of Family History* 29 (April 2004), No. 2, pp. 168-182, DOI: 10.1177/0363199004264899. (02.02.2024), p. 170-171.

established, the Securitate. A physician stated that there were numerous instances of maternal deaths and a significant number of abandoned children due to the abortion policy, mentioning also that in Iasi medical instruments potentially utilized for abortions were securely stored and could only be accessed under the supervision of a state security police officer.<sup>17</sup> In Romania, institutionalized care arose from social deficiencies in social services, leaving families vulnerable, exacerbated by the lack of foster care facilities and the systematic placement of children by the Ministry of Education based on developmental criteria, leading to neglect and misdiagnosis.<sup>18</sup> Ceausescu's prenatal policies further contributed to the increase in children with developmental disabilities due to economic hardship and malnutrition during pregnancy.<sup>19</sup> In addition to restricting access to legal abortions, Ceausescu's government, which declared the fetus socialist property, instituted monthly gynecological examinations for working women, imposed taxes on celibates and childless marriages, and with the active policed by Securitate, punished those involved in illegal abortions resulting in increased maternal deaths and injuries from unsafe procedures.<sup>20</sup> According to the article on Financial Times, if the woman was not pregnant after a year of marriage, the couple, under the supervision of the Securitate, was examined by gynecologists to determine whether they were fertile and if the couple was over 25 years old and still childless, an additional tax of 250 lei was deducted from each of their monthly wages, on suspicion that the couple had access to illegal contraceptives.<sup>21</sup> However regarding infertility specifically, there was not a direct citation or provision within the decree that outlined consequences for infertility itself. According to the 8 March 1984 Decree, doctors were mandated to conduct quarterly visits to factories, examining all women aged 20 to 30.<sup>22</sup> Any gynecological issues potentially linked to miscar-

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17 Binder, David: Upheaval in the East; Where Fear and Death Went Forth and Multiplied, in: The New York Times, 24.01.1990, p. 12, [www.nytimes.com/1990/01/24/world/upheaval-in-the-east-where-fear-and-death-went-forth-and-multiplied.html?searchResultPosition=9](http://www.nytimes.com/1990/01/24/world/upheaval-in-the-east-where-fear-and-death-went-forth-and-multiplied.html?searchResultPosition=9) (24.02.2024).

18 Morrison: Ceausescu's Legacy, p. 171.

19 *ibid.*

20 Hord, Charlotte et al.: Reproductive Health in Romania: Reversing the Ceausescu Legacy, in: Studies in Family Planning 22 (Jul.-Aug. 1991), No. 4, pp. 231-240, DOI:10.2307/1966479. (02.02.2024), pp. 232-233.

21 The Financial Times: Bedrooms no barrier to the tyrants, in: The Canberra Times, 03.02.1990, p. 20, [www.nla.gov.au/nla.news-article131176192](http://www.nla.gov.au/nla.news-article131176192) (21.02.2024).

22 *ibid.*

riages (suspected by the Securitate to be induced) had to be reported to the police. Pregnant women had their pregnancies monitored monthly, with the Securitate opening a file on them upon confirmation of the pregnancy. Anca Alexandru, gynecologist at a central hospital in Bucharest, describes the unbearable conditions in the factories, where women resisted this treatment, lined up for examinations every three months.<sup>23</sup> Despite initial disbelief, Alexandru and her colleagues reassured them, that they were not »pregnancy hunters« and that they were only looking for any infections. They discreetly dealt with those who miscarried or had abortions, avoiding reporting to the Securitate and tried to treat them secretly in hospital.<sup>24</sup> An article in 1985 highlights these controversial measures in Romania, where female employees face regular gynecological checks, sometimes with police present, at their workplaces and once pregnancy is confirmed, it is closely monitored by state agencies until birth, regardless of a woman's desires, prompting comparisons with Western societies' privacy and reproductive rights standards.<sup>25</sup>

A document from the Ministry of Internal Affairs dated 21 March 21 1984 signed by the by the then Minister of the Internal Affairs George Homoștean reveals an important aspect of the authoritarian control exercised by the regime under Ceausescu, particularly over reproductive health care and surveillance mechanisms. It is the issuance of a secret order »regarding the implementation of the demographic policy and ensuring a corresponding population increase«, which highlights the interventionist tactics of the regime, through the police, in monitoring and controlling medical professionals, especially doctors working in maternity hospitals, general hospitals and clinics.<sup>26</sup> By assigning police officers to supervise health professionals, the regime sought to ensure compliance with its strict policies on childbirth and abortion, which were characterized by prohibitive measures such as termination of pregnancy and the

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23 ibid.

24 ibid.

25 Balmforth, Richard: Police monitor pregnant women in abortion drive, p. 10.

26 Consiliul National pentru Studierea Arhivelor Securitatii, Republica Socialistă România, Ministerul de Interne, Program de măsuri cuprinzând sarcini ce revin unităților de milăie pentru îndeplinirea Hotărârii Comitetului Politic Executiv al C.C. al P.C.R. din 02.03.1984 privind înfăptuirea politicii demografice și asigurarea unui spor corespunzător al populației (Direcția secretariat-juridică nr. S/95380 din 21.03.19), Dosar Nr. XIII-II-I | 1984, no. vol. 4, 21.03.1984, f. 27-30, [www.cnsas.ro/documente/acte\\_normative/D%203642\\_004%20fila%20027-030.pdf](http://www.cnsas.ro/documente/acte_normative/D%203642_004%20fila%20027-030.pdf)

enforcement of prenatal policies aimed at increasing birth rates. Another secret document of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which was approved by George Homoștean, dated 12 February 1979, mentions the plan to improve the work of the militias for the consistent implementation of the legislative provisions regulating the interruption of the course of pregnancy, as stated in the document, and the intensification of the activity of prevention and suppression of this »crime«<sup>27</sup>. Commencing with a directive to improve the functioning of the militia in enforcing abortion laws, the document underscores the regime's stringent control over reproductive rights and its determination to curb unauthorized terminations of pregnancy. The language used, particularly the categorization of abortion as a »crime«, reflects the regime's moralistic and authoritarian stance on reproductive matters. This archival document provides valuable insight into the surveillance and enforcement tactics employed by the Romanian Ministry of Internal Affairs under the communist regime of Ceausescu. Specifically, it is written that the leaders of the county militias (municipality of Bucharest) will analyze the activity of the center for the prevention of illegal abortions. Particular attention was to be paid to the recruitment of informants in maternity hospitals and general hospitals, clinics and other places where illegal terminations of pregnancies are carried out.<sup>28</sup> In addition, it was written that they would take measures to improve the information taken of persons employed in the medical field and health professionals, but also faculty and students of the medical school.<sup>29</sup> This strategy highlighted the pervasive atmosphere of suspicion and fear cultivated by the regime, wherein individuals were coerced into reporting on their colleagues and peers. Finally, it was reported that officers and non-commissioned officers will be trained to gather information to »defeat the crimes of illegal abortion« and identify Romanian citizens or foreigners importing illicit substances or drugs against conception or

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27 Consiliul National pentru Studierea Arhivelor Securitatii, Republica Socialista România, Ministerul de Interne, Plan de măsuri privind îmbunătățirea muncii organelor de milăie pentru aplicarea cu fermitate a dispozițiunilor legale care reglementează întreruperea cursului sarcinii și intensificarea activității de prevenire și reprimare a infracționalismului pe această linie, Arhiva Fond Informativ, Dosar Nr. 10428, vol. no. 11, 12.02.1979, f. 33-37, [www.cnsas.ro/documente/acte\\_normative/D%2020000125\\_011%20fila%20033-037.pdf](http://www.cnsas.ro/documente/acte_normative/D%2020000125_011%20fila%20033-037.pdf)

28 *ibid.*

29 *ibid.*

abortion.<sup>30</sup> Overall, this archival document sheds light on the mechanisms of surveillance and coercion employed by the Ceausescu regime in its quest to enforce strict reproductive policies. It serves as a testament to the authoritarian nature of the regime and its disregard for individual autonomy and rights in pursuit of its ideological objectives. As it can be understood, the implications of this policy, both on a social and an individual level, were numerous. Furthermore, the veiled nature of the aforementioned orders suggests a deliberate attempt to hide the extent of government intervention in reproductive health care practices from the public. The secrecy surrounding the directive reflects the regime's authoritarian tendencies and its reliance on secret measures to maintain control and suppress dissent. Despite government restrictions, the birth rate increased marginally, while maternal mortality and disease increased significantly, and unsafe self-induced methods of abortion remained widespread, leading to infertility, psychological traumas, or even death.<sup>31</sup> An article in the *Financial Times*, republished by the *Canberra Times* on 3 February 1990, sheds light on the measures imposed by Ceausescu. In the article, there is the testimony of above mentioned gynecologist Anca Alexandru, who claims that: »If the infection got worse after one of these abortions, the possibility of infertility increased. Many families broke up under the pressure. The women became helpless«.<sup>32</sup> Many women were also afraid to go to the hospital because they knew it was full of informers. The gynecologist states that: »Under Them [a common euphemism for the Ceausescu's regime] the Securitate were turned overnight into doctors«. The state secret policy could suddenly be transformed into pseudo-medical authorities monitoring medical procedures. The gynecologist testifies that: »They would hang around the operating theatre. If we carried out a dilation and cauterization, they wanted to see if the uterus had been infected. If it was, they concluded that the woman had had a failed, illegal abortion«. This situation forced medical professionals to withdraw to their families, as trust became scarce and the pervasive atmosphere of suspicion made everyone distrustful. He adds: »all of us had to retreat to our family. We could not trust anybody, not even friends or relatives. We were all

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30 ibid.

31 Hord, Charlotte et al.: Reproductive Health in Romania, pp. 232-233.

32 The Financial Times: Bedrooms no barrier to the tyrants, in: The Canberra Times, 03.02.1990, p. 20, [www.nla.gov.au/nla.news-article131176192](http://www.nla.gov.au/nla.news-article131176192) (21.02.2024).

suspicious, and the suspicion made everyone else suspicious.<sup>33</sup> Ion, a 30-year-old engineer from Bucharest, recounted having had six girlfriends since he was 18. Five of them underwent abortions in the homes of their mothers' friends, except for one instance where they sought medical help for the abortion at a hospital, paying a doctor 10,000 lei, equivalent to at least two months' salary; following this, he admits he stopped having relationships due to the fear and irresponsibility associated with such experiences.<sup>34</sup>

A hard case is the story of a 35-year-old woman in January 1987 in a hospital in Zalău, which was found and brought to light by historian Florin Soare based on the CNSAS archive.<sup>35</sup> The woman, it is stated in the Securitate records, reported that she was diagnosed with an impending miscarriage and that the medical staff were not allowed to provide her with medical care, in order to obtain the information and make her confess the means by which she induced the abortion, as she was suspected of an illegal abortion. This procedure resulted in her enduring five days of suffering without treatment until her demise.<sup>36</sup> According to Florin Soare, the unfortunate reality of this case is that there were no indications of an induced abortion, based on the conclusion of the forensic report.<sup>37</sup> Ion Tudor, a 46-year-old museum worker, recounted a tragic incident in February 1975 when he returned home to find his 26-year-old wife, Florica, in critical condition after undergoing an abortion by a medical technician. He describes in *New York Times* as follows: »I called an ambulance. It took 12 hours for the ambulance to arrive. We went to the Giulesti Maternity Hospital. They called the police, who said she could not receive treatment until she confessed who had performed the abortion. She received no care for two days. Then she had a kidney collapse. The doctors sneaked her over to the Emergency Hospital, where the doctors treated her. The doctor there told me if she was strong, she had a chance to live. She died 18 days later.<sup>38</sup>

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33 ibid.

34 ibid.

35 Coman, Octavian: Guardians of the Decree: The Hidden World of the Anti-Abortion Enforcers, in: The Decree Chronicles, 03.12.2021, [www.decreechronicles.com/guardians-of-the-decree-the-hidden-world-of-the-anti-abortion-enforcers/](http://www.decreechronicles.com/guardians-of-the-decree-the-hidden-world-of-the-anti-abortion-enforcers/) (25.02.2024).

36 ibid.

37 ibid.

38 Binder, David: Upheaval in the East; Where Fear and Death Went Forth and Multiplied, in: The New York Times, 24.01.1990, p. 12, [www.nytimes.com/1990/01/24/world/upheaval-in-the-east-where-fear-and-death-went-forth-and-multiplied.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1990/01/24/world/upheaval-in-the-east-where-fear-and-death-went-forth-and-multiplied.html)

It has also been argued that Decree 770, initially aimed at population growth, eventually became a tool of »ethnic cleansing«, as Roma women were often still allowed to have abortions, which were granted in hospitals.<sup>39</sup> However, Corina Dobos, researcher and associate lecturer at the University of Bucharest, argues that the policy of Decree 770 had a limited impact on the Roma, while acknowledging the lack of documentation about the group during the communist era.<sup>40</sup> This discussion underscores the necessity for further examination and in-depth research into the multifaceted implications of Decree 770, particularly regarding its potential impact on ethnic minorities such as the Roma.

In addition, it is noteworthy that Romanian newspapers during that era regularly featured short articles detailing the tragic outcomes of women who succumbed to fatal complications arising from clandestine dangerous abortions performed outside the bounds of legality. For example, the newspaper *Flamura Prahovei* published in 1985 the indicative story of Elena J., who died at the age of 25, after suffering severe toxicosis due to the induced abortion.<sup>41</sup> The article stated that »this is sometimes the price of ignorance«. The inclusion of specific details, such as the amounts paid for the procedure by young women and the identity of those involved in the induced abortion, underlined the seriousness of the situation in the context of propaganda. Specifically, it was written that Elena J. paid 700 lei for the procedure. Even the full name of the woman who empirically operated the girl as well as her assistant were published. This could already been observed in other cases, noting that according to article 185 of the criminal code the penalty for the offense of performing an abortion could reach up to 12 years imprisonment, while for complicity in the action 5 to 10 years of imprisonment were foreseen. One of the regime's tactics

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/upheaval-in-the-east-where-fear-and-death-went-forth-and-multiplied.html?searchResultPosition=9 (24.02.2024).

- 39 Adam, Elena & Mitroiu, Simona: Remembering the past. Representations of women's trauma in post-1989 Romanian cinema, in: Cogent Arts & Humanities 3 (2016), No. 1, p. 7; DOI: 10.1080/23311983.2016.1182718.
- 40 Cerezuela, Castillo Queralt: »We no longer want to be second-class citizens. We do not beg for rights, but demand them«. The Roma struggle in Romania, in: Nationalia, 19.12.2019, [www.nationalia.info/new/11277/the-roma-in-romania-from-ceausescus-communism-to-the-current-struggle-for-rights-and-recogn](http://www.nationalia.info/new/11277/the-roma-in-romania-from-ceausescus-communism-to-the-current-struggle-for-rights-and-recogn) (28.02.2024).
- 41 Oncioiu, Diana & Meseșan, Diana: The Party State Tasked Women with Having Children. The Repercussions Are Still Felt, in: The Decree Chronicles, 14.11.2021. *Flamura Prahovei*, 1985. [www.decreechronicles.com/the-party-state-tasked-women-with-having-children-the-repercussions-are-still-felt/](http://www.decreechronicles.com/the-party-state-tasked-women-with-having-children-the-repercussions-are-still-felt/) (25.02.2024).

to enforce strict anti-abortion policies and punishing those who violated them was to expose people who performed illegal abortions to the media. A typical example was the public exposure of a doctor and the women who performed illegal abortions in the newspaper *Flamura Prahovei* in June 1986, where it was written that the 84-year-old retired doctor—name given—terminated the pregnancies of four women—names given—from whom he received 1500 lei each.<sup>42</sup> It was added that during the search at the residence of the doctor, precious metals and foreign currencies were found, and he was taken to court.<sup>43</sup> However, the article does not provide any further information of this case. First, the public exposure of doctors and women who performed abortions aligns with the regime's propaganda efforts to vilify and exterminate individuals deemed to transgress state-imposed moral and ideological boundaries. By highlighting these individuals in the media, the regime aimed to publicly stigmatize them, thereby deterring others from engaging in similar practices and enhancing compliance with anti-abortion laws. Additionally, the use of media exposure as a punitive measure highlights the regime's use of mass media as tools of social control and manipulation. Through the selective dissemination of information, the regime sought to shape public perceptions and foster a climate of fear and compliance. These examples demonstrate the concerted secret efforts of the Ministry of Internal Affairs to strengthen propaganda by using the militia to stage public trials and forcing law enforcement agencies to supply communist news media with propaganda material in an effort to create a climate of fear and of condemnation around illegal abortions.<sup>44</sup> The involvement of law enforcement agencies in disseminating information to the media underscores the regime's authoritarian control over the flow of information and its manipulation of public opinion to align with its ideological agenda.

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42 Stoicescu, Vlad & Oncioiu, Diana: »I Secretly Performed Over 100 Abortions on Kitchen Tables«, in: The Decree Chronicles, 18.11.2021. *Flamura Prahovei*, June 1986. [www.decreechronicles.com/i-secretly-performed-over-100-abortions-on-kitchen-tables/](http://www.decreechronicles.com/i-secretly-performed-over-100-abortions-on-kitchen-tables/) (25.02.2024).

43 *ibid.*

44 Coman, Octavian: Guardians of the Decree. (24.02.2024).

## Consequences of the Decree: Children in Orphanages and State Institutions

After the overthrow of Ceausescu on 22 December 1989, the world was confronted with the harrowing images of Romania's more than 100,000 orphaned children, especially infants with disabilities and HIV/AIDS, who mostly resided in dismal, understaffed orphanages, which the regime had established to manage the effects of its coercive pronatalist policies.<sup>45</sup> In 1985, Romania reported its first case of HIV/AIDS, but due to limited communication with the West and underdeveloped healthcare services, the true extent of the epidemic remained hidden, as local and central authorities tended to withhold information that could have a negative impact on the regime.<sup>46</sup> Dr. Patrascu, a virologist, was convinced that HIV was present in Romania, despite official policy statements at the time that the disease did not exist in the country, persuading a group of doctors to test some patients for HIV.<sup>47</sup> The results were overwhelming showing that 10% of children in hospitals were HIV positive and over half of children in orphanages were infected.<sup>48</sup> According to *Washington Post*, Dr. Patrascu was the first doctor to sound the alarm about the AIDS situation in Romania, declaring in July of 1990: »In theory we have done things, but in practice, not really. We still don't know the extent of the problem.«<sup>49</sup> In the same year, an HIV/AIDS surveillance system was established with the support of the World Health Organization, revealing thousands of infected children in state institutions and orphanages. Accurate reporting showed that more than half of the HIV-infected children in Europe were in Romania, marking the beginning of a more transparent approach to tackling the epidemic.<sup>50</sup> In Romania, though the numbers of infected were relatively low compared to Western countries, it was unusual that the majority of those infected were children, with 428 out of 478 recorded

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45 Romania's Orphans: A Legacy of Repression, in: News from Helsinki Watch 2 (December 1990), issue 15, p. 1.

46 HIV Outcomes: Case study. Romania. Ceausescu's Children. [https://hivoutcomes.eu/case\\_study/romania-ceausescus-children/](https://hivoutcomes.eu/case_study/romania-ceausescus-children/) (08.06.2024).

47 *ibid.*

48 *ibid.*

49 Battiata, Mary: Romania lacks means to fight growing outbreak of AIDS in children, in The Washington Post, 10.07.1990, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1990/07/10/romania-lacks-means-to-fight-growing-outbreak-of-aids-in-children/f611419f-edc7-467b-af30-fe56b458d95a/>, (08.06.2024).

50 HIV Outcomes: Case study. Romania. Ceausescu's Children. [https://hivoutcomes.eu/case\\_study/romania-ceausescus-children/](https://hivoutcomes.eu/case_study/romania-ceausescus-children/) (08.06.2024).

cases being children under four years old. This situation was attributed by Patrascu to bureaucratic inertia within the Ministry of Health: »They're playing with AIDS like they're playing with the flu. [...] This is typical communist behavior.<sup>51</sup> Many infants in Romania were suspected of contracting HIV through blood transfusions to treat premature and malnourished babies—a common medical practice until the government's ban.<sup>52</sup>

During a period characterized by a shortage of food resources in communist Romania, the enactment of the new legislation restricting termination of pregnancy coincided, exacerbating the prevailing issue of infant malnutrition, where a significant proportion of newborns were underweighted. Also, during the 1980s, Romania's standard of living sharply declined, rendering it among Europe's poorest nations, as Ceausescu's prioritization of repaying foreign debt<sup>53</sup> led to the exportation of the majority of agricultural products, culminating in economic collapse by 1989, consequently exacerbating child malnutrition and prompting desperate parents to abandon their children in state institutions ostensibly tasked with addressing such issues.<sup>54</sup> An interesting article was published on 21 June 1984 in the Australian newspaper *Canberra Times* by journalist Gwynne Dyer in London, which dealt with the authoritarian rule of Nicolae Ceausescu in Romania and the miserable economic conditions facing the Romanian people.<sup>55</sup> The economic mismanagement of the Ceausescu regime led to delinquency and serious hardship for the population. The article criticized Ceausescu's justification for rationing, citing his claim that disease in Romania was caused by gluttony and recommending a restrictive diet for the people.<sup>56</sup> It highlights the stark contrast between the sacrifices suffered by ordinary Romanians and the privileges enjoyed by Ceausescu and his family members in positions of power.<sup>57</sup> Despite the hardships which the Romanian people were facing, there was skepticism as to whether these sacrifices would actually solve the country's problems,

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51 Battiat, Mary: Romania lacks means to fight growing outbreak of AIDS in children.

52 ibid.

53 The attempt to industrialize the country through the utilization of foreign credits led to a growing external debt, which was paid off during the 1980s after the implementation of strict austerity measures.

54 Romania's Orphans: A Legacy of Repression, p. 4.

55 Dyer, Gwynne: No guarantee sacrifices will solve problems. Romania »a family business«, in: The *Canberra Times*, 21.06.1984, p. 6, [www.nla.gov.au/nla.news-article127004236](http://www.nla.gov.au/nla.news-article127004236) (24.02.2024).

56 ibid.

57 ibid.

given the regime's flawed plans and projections.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, according to the same article, the portrayal of Romania as a »family business« dominated by Ceausescu and his relatives further highlighted the nepotism and corruption within the regime.

The phenomenon of Romanian mothers sending letters directly to Nicolae Ceausescu, expressing through their adherence to their »patriotic duties«, their imperative need for material and financial support to raise their children, highlights the complex socio-political dynamics of the Ceausescu regime in Romania during the second half of the twentieth century. Through the act of writing directly to Ceausescu, framing their needs in the rhetoric of patriotic duty, as he argued, these mothers sought to leverage their »loyalty to the state« as a means to rally support for their family needs. In addition to direct appeals for support via written correspondence, another notable move by mothers seeking support amid the socioeconomic challenges prevailing in communist Romania was the symbolic gesture of naming newborns after Ceausescu, inviting him to participate in the christening ceremonies of these children. By giving names directly associated with Ceausescu to their children, mothers engaged in a deliberate act of symbolic relationship, aligning their family identity with the ideological constructs propagated by the regime. The choice of names such as »Nicolae« or »Nicoleta« can be said to reinforce the narrative of his paternalistic role as leader and protector of the nation. The very need for mothers to resort to such practices highlights systemic deficiencies, particularly in social welfare and family support. An indicative example is the letter by a Romanian mother sent to Ceausescu in December 1968, extending an invitation for him to attend the baptism ceremony of her tenth child, within the correspondence, she expressed her intention to christen the child with the name Nicolae or Nicoleta.<sup>59</sup>

The infant mortality remained high, with many children abandoned due to economic hardship, resulting in overcrowded and under-equipped orphanages and increased rates of psychological and neuropsychological disorders among these children.<sup>60</sup> However, the high infant mortality

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58 ibid.

59 Fiscutean, Andra: Romania's communist-era abortion ban harmed hundreds of thousands of children. Is history repeating itself?, in: Grid News, 08.08.2022. Document by Dobos Corina / The National Archives of Romania, [www.grid.news/story/global/2022/08/08/romania-s-communist-era-abortion-ban-harmed-hundreds-of-thousands-of-children-is-history-repeating-itself](http://www.grid.news/story/global/2022/08/08/romania-s-communist-era-abortion-ban-harmed-hundreds-of-thousands-of-children-is-history-repeating-itself) (02.09.2022).

60 Hord, Charlotte et al.: Reproductive Health in Romania, pp. 232-233.

rates in Romania during this period cannot be attributed solely to the decree and its consequences. While restrictive abortion policies may have contributed to some extent, other factors such as economic hardship, inadequate health care infrastructure, and social conditions also played an important role. An article in *New York Times* by Kathleen Hunt, reporting from Romania for National Public Radio on 24 June 1990, documents the devastating impact of Ceausescu's policies on Romania's children, focusing in particular on the consequences of the strict ban on abortion and the subsequent abandonment of tens of thousands of infants due to economic hardship.<sup>61</sup> Even after the fall of Ceausescu, the situation of these children remained, with many living in squalid conditions in state institutions. According to the aforementioned article: »Approximately 100,000 children and adolescents up to 18 years of age remain in the care of the state, many confined to institutions indescribable in their filth, degradation and misery—understaffed and ill-equipped nurseries, preschool orphanages and homes for the handicapped and ›irrecoverables‹.«<sup>62</sup> Systemic damage was compounded by bureaucratic negligence, as government agencies deflect accountability for children's suffering. The article depicts the harsh and squalid conditions in Romanian institutions, highlighting practices such as tethered to the crib for agitated children and head shaving. This practice was often employed for reasons, such as maintaining cleanliness and preventing the spread of lice. In addition, the reporter highlights the tragic toll of the AIDS epidemic among Romanian children, with many infected due to uncontrolled blood transfusions and unsterilized needles, claiming that based on studies about 10 percent of the 8,000 orphans under the age of three examined, were infected with HIV.<sup>63</sup> Despite some improvements in health care facilities, Romania's recovery from these crises remained slow and challenging, as discussed in the article, which concludes with a reflection on the country's ongoing struggles and the urgent need for humanitarian assistance to address the challenges facing Romania's children and ensure their well-being.<sup>64</sup>

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61 Hunt, Kathleen: Romania's Lost Children. A Photo Essay by James Nachtwey, in: The New York Times, 24.06.1990, p. 28, [www.nytimes.com/1990/06/24/magazine/romania-s-lost-children-a-photo-essay-by-james-nachtwey.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1990/06/24/magazine/romania-s-lost-children-a-photo-essay-by-james-nachtwey.html) (24.02.2024).

62 ibid.

63 ibid.

64 ibid.

An article from 8 January 1990 by the news agency Reuter stated that 64 Romanian orphans had arrived in Paris from Bucharest on a government-chartered flight, marking a new chapter for these children as they prepare for adoption by couples in the West after the freeze in adoptions abroad was lifted in Romania.<sup>65</sup> The lifting of restrictions on foreign adoptions in Romania signaled a significant shift in adoption policies, spearheaded by the National Salvation Front (FSN). This transition occurred under the leadership of the Provisional Council of National Unity, the initial governing body following the fall of Nicolae Ceausescu, which was predominantly composed of FSN members. Subsequently, the FSN, led by Ion Iliescu, formed the first elected government post-Ceausescu era. It was also stated in the article that despite administrative obstacles, the children, ranging from infants to teenagers, have found new families in countries such as the United States, Italy, France, Belgium, Switzerland and Britain.<sup>66</sup> The article concluded that this change comes after Ceausescu's policies aimed at increasing Romania's population led to an increase in orphaned children, many of whom now have a chance for a better life abroad.<sup>67</sup> It was claimed in *New York Times* that a significant number of children, estimated at around 5,000, were embraced into new families through adoption from Western nations; among those adoptions, it is reported that about 1,500 children found homes specifically in American families.<sup>68</sup> Dr. Alexandra Zugravescu, a pediatrician in Bucharest, stated in the *New York Times* on 3 October 1991 that she was making efforts to tackle one of the nation's most notorious scandals: the trafficking of babies for adoption.<sup>69</sup> It ran that under her guidance at the Romanian Committee for Adoptions, significant changes were underway, particularly affecting American families who had adopted a large number of children from Romania. Worth noting is the point in the article, which mentions that Romania's troubled history, including bans on abortion and contraception,

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65 Reuter: Romania orphans head West, in: The Canberra Times, 08.01.1990, p. 6, [www.nla.gov.au/nla.news-article120871154](http://www.nla.gov.au/nla.news-article120871154) (21.02.2024).

66 ibid.

67 ibid.

68 Associated Press: U.S. Limits Adoptions of Romanian Children, in: The New York Times, 28.07.1991, p. 7, [www.nytimes.com/1991/07/28/world/us-limits-adoptions-of-romanian-children.html?searchResultPosition=1](http://www.nytimes.com/1991/07/28/world/us-limits-adoptions-of-romanian-children.html?searchResultPosition=1) (21.02.2024).

69 Lawson, Carol: Doctor Acts to Heal Romania's Wound Of Baby Trafficking, in: The New York Times, 03.10.1991,

p. 1, [www.nytimes.com/1991/10/03/garden/doctor-acts-to-heal-romania-s-wound-of-baby-trafficking.html?searchResultPosition=2](http://www.nytimes.com/1991/10/03/garden/doctor-acts-to-heal-romania-s-wound-of-baby-trafficking.html?searchResultPosition=2) (24.02.2024).

combined with widespread poverty that had made children a commodity, sometimes even sold on the streets. However, approximately 100,000 children in Romanian orphanages were in a state of legal uncertainty, as they were neither officially claimed by their biological families nor available for adoption because their families did not relinquishing their legal rights. Thus, the adoption process for these children was slow and inefficient.<sup>70</sup> The effects were still evident as late as in 1994. According to a *New York Times* article, which depicted the bleak conditions in Romanian children's institutions, neglected infants in cribs struggled to grow and playrooms remained locked, because of the children's caretakers considering it too much trouble to supervise, despite marginal improvements after the fall of Ceausescu.<sup>71</sup> The article stated: »As the children shuffle from institution to institution, they suffer from poor and hostile care at the hands of untrained staffs, Romanian and Western experts say«.<sup>72</sup> It also reported that Western aid had failed to prevent alarming rates of baby abandonment, highlighting the government's reluctance to promote family care. Experts, according to the article, identified the presence of Iulian Mincu as Minister of Health as a significant obstacle to improving conditions in Romanian orphanages. He had previously been involved in the medical practices during Ceausescu's regime of giving micro-infusions of blood, much of which turned out to be H.I.V.-infected, to underweight Romanian babies in the 1980s.<sup>73</sup>

In reflecting on the communist era in Romania, it is evident that the influence of the state on family life went through several stages, characterized by coercive measures such as strict restrictions on abortion and limited access to contraception. Concluding this study, it is worth mentioning statistics illustrating the significant fluctuations in live births, maternal mortality rates, and infant mortality rates over the years in communist Romania based on the article of the *New York Times*. According to Bruke, a demographer and economist, from 1966 to 1967, live births in

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70 Altstein, Howard: Rescuing Romania's Orphans, in: The New York Times, 28.11.1992, p. 19, [www.nytimes.com/1992/11/28/opinion/rescuing-romania-s-orphans.html?searchResultPosition=2](http://www.nytimes.com/1992/11/28/opinion/rescuing-romania-s-orphans.html?searchResultPosition=2) (25.02.2024).

71 Perlez, Jane: Bucharest Journal; Little Care and Less Love: Romania's Sad Orphans, in: The New York Times, 27.10.1994, p. 4, [www.nytimes.com/1994/10/27/world/bucharest-journal-little-care-and-less-love-romania-s-sad-orphans.html?searchResultPosition=1](http://www.nytimes.com/1994/10/27/world/bucharest-journal-little-care-and-less-love-romania-s-sad-orphans.html?searchResultPosition=1) (24.02.2024).

72 *ibid.*

73 *ibid.*

Romania nearly doubled to 528,000, coinciding with a decline in factory production as a significant portion of the workforce went on maternity leave.<sup>74</sup> With a declining standard of living due to prevailing economic inefficiencies, Romanian women turned to illegal abortions, leading to a subsequent decline in birth rates between 1967 and 1970. This trend was accompanied by a predictable rise in maternal deaths, reaching 506 in 1968, with Romania's maternal death rate significantly high. By 1983, the crude birth rate returned to its 1966 level. In 1985, the reported infant mortality rate in Romania was 25.6 deaths per 1,000 infants in their first year of life.<sup>75</sup> Ceausescu's 23-year pronatalist policies, reinforced by state propaganda, were overturned with the overthrow of the regime in December 1989, leading to the legalization of abortion on demand (by qualified personnel within the first trimester of pregnancy) and the approval of modern contraceptives. Yet despite changes in demographic and public health policies after 1989, Ceausescu's pronatalistic era in Romania remains a taboo subject in the public sphere and continues to exert impact on the nation's reproductive health landscape.<sup>76</sup>

## Epilogue

Summarizing, this chapter focused on Nicolae Ceausescu's strict reproductive regulations and abortion policies due to »demographic concerns« and the impact on the proliferation of orphanages in the Socialist Republic of Romania. Initially strict restrictions on contraception and abortion, combined with harsh economic conditions, led to an increase in abandoned children. Families, faced with significant financial difficulties and unable to cope with the burden of raising additional children, handed them over to state care. This influx of abandoned children overwhelmed existing social services, necessitating the establishment of new orphanages to accommodate them. As a result, orphanages in Romania became overcrowded and under-resourced, unable to provide adequate care and support to the growing number of children in their care. The quality of life for

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74 Brue, B. Meredith: Ceausescu's Main Victims: Women and Children, in: The New York Times, p. 27, [www.nytimes.com/1990/01/10/opinion/ceausescus-main-victims-women-and-children.html?searchResultPosition=1](http://www.nytimes.com/1990/01/10/opinion/ceausescus-main-victims-women-and-children.html?searchResultPosition=1) (20.02.2024).

75 *ibid.*

76 Anton: On Memory Work in Post-communist Europe, p. 6.

these institutionalized children was often dismal, characterized by neglect, malnutrition and inadequate medical care. The pronatalist policy endured for 23 years, from 1966 until the collapse of the regime in 1989. Subsequent amendments in 1972 and 1985 introduced minor modifications, but the fundamental criteria for terminating a pregnancy remained largely unchanged, strengthening state control over reproductive rights. Through the historical sources presented and analyzed, this chapter explored the implementation of decree no. 770 as a solution to the »demographic crisis« and the significant impact on the social fabric of Romania, with an emphasis on »Ceausescu's orphans«. These institutionalized children suffered from abuse, malnutrition and severe developmental and mental health problems. Despite the regime's demise, many children continued to endure appalling conditions within state institutions, trapped in a cycle of neglect and despair. Through the analysis of this historical case, this article offers valuable contributions to the academic discourse by shedding light on the complex nature of state intervention in reproductive rights and its far-reaching implications for welfare systems.

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