

The appalling situation of Romania's institutionalized children: From Ceausescu to today

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In 1990 the feature pages of US and European newspapers and magazines were full of photos depicting the appalling conditions prevailing for orphaned and disabled children in Romania. The many articles devoted to this theme denounced the conditions in children's homes in the country and predicted, or at least hoped for, improvements with the introduction of a free-market system.

Recent figures reveal that, in the wake of the latest economic crisis, the slight improvements in care of children, often carried out by private charitable agencies during recent years, are being reversed.

In Romania, cases of the inhumane treatment of children left abandoned in hospitals or simply thrown in the trash by their own parents are becoming increasingly frequent. The latest UNICEF study places Romania first among European countries regarding the abandonment of children. The number of children abandoned by their parents grew last year. Statistics show that almost 950 children were abandoned in maternity hospitals, an increase of 180 compared to 2010. Poverty, with all that comes with it—unemployment, decline in real incomes, decrease in purchasing power, lack of adequate housing, etc.—is a major cause of child desertion in the country.

An explosion in the number of children deserted by their parents started in the last decades of the Stalinist regime headed by Nicolae Ceausescu. In 1967, he passed a decree banning abortions. In the following decades an estimated 2 million unwanted children were born due to the withdrawal of the mother's right to choose an abortion and access to contraception.

As the birth rate boomed, thousands of children were abandoned in the country's orphanages. It is estimated

that Romanian orphanages housed more than 100,000 children at the beginning of 1990. Due to the lack of adequate care, the rate of mortality among these children became the highest in Europe.

In recent years a number of articles in the international press have sought to imply that the situation in Romania's orphanages has improved. In fact, the conditions currently prevailing in the country's orphanages are best described as hellish, evoking the types of negligence of children that characterized early capitalism. Many years after the nightmarish images shown all over the world after the "revolution", similar images are again being transmitted in the international press.

In 2010, *Daily Telegraph* reporter Angela Levin described the situation of orphaned children in Romania. Near Bistrita, she witnessed a kind of hell: "There is a place there that would be inappropriate even for animals, but it is the only shelter for 35 patients, ranging from few weeks to young adults. All suffer from physical or mental disabilities. The treatment to which they are subjected 'takes your breath away', is inhuman: children are restrained to their miserable beds, no one cares about their crying, while the stench of urine and faeces is overwhelming. There are no wheelchairs, elevators, or other facilities for patients with locomotive disabilities."

In 1989, over 100,000 children were abandoned and crowded in 700 orphanages. The closing of these orphanages and finding a solution to the problem of abandoned children was one of the conditions laid down to Romania for membership of the European Union. The investigations by the British reporter showed that this demand is far from being achieved.

The article raises the whereabouts of the 36 million pounds from European funds that were pumped into Romania to facilitate the closure of these orphanages.

In 2012, the situation remains deplorable. A report by HCC Romania was released in April this year. It showed that there are still more than 20,000 children in Romania's orphanages. From the total of 159 placement centres, half of the children of school age are not enrolled in the educational system. The main reasons described by the directors of the centres are severe medical problems, deficiencies that prevent these children attending school, but also issues such as the lack of a known identity of the children or the absence of free places in kindergartens. A quarter of the investigated centres do not provide anything resembling the type of care necessary for these children.

Thirteen years ago, sociologist Charles Nelson commenced a study demonstrating what happens to the brains of those raised in orphanages. Along with colleagues at Harvard University, Nelson studied 136 children placed in an orphanage in Bucharest. Although his report did not name the centre, his descriptions shocked the West: "Children are raised in an Spartan environment, where they are forced to stare for hours at a white wall, they are obliged to observe a very strict schedule and the lack of affection shown by those who take care of them is really shocking", he wrote. "Their behaviour shows severe deficiencies ... and communicative problems."

The recommendations made by HCC Romania report are, in this context, even more important. The report concluded that the state needs to pay special attention to the integration of these children into society. "The young people coming out of this system represent a very vulnerable category. The implementation of development programs and social services is badly needed: housing, employment, counselling and emotional support could partially mitigate the shock of independent lives, for which these young people are not at all prepared."

In fact, Romania is currently struggling with huge deficits in its social service system and an unprecedented political chaos that only serves to make the future of these children more perilous. Official employment, which gravely underestimates the true extent of the problem, now stands at 7.5 percent, or

735,000, with an additional 29,000 losing their jobs in the month of March. These are the figures recently made public by the National Institute of Statistics (INS).

Under conditions of a dysfunctional society, its weakest members are the hardest hit. Most of the stipulated social protections are inoperative. Laws adopted are not applied, the number of employees of state institutions are diminishing every year, and many of the state partnerships with private agencies only exist on paper.

In 2010—as part of the measures to reduce public spending—the government headed by Emil Boc cut 20 percent of the funding to feed the children living in state institutions. There is also a stop in place for new foster parents. This means that many small children refused admission to institutions end up in hospitals.

The consequences are dramatic. The number of children who try to commit suicide or flee from these placement centres is increasing. Statistics indicate that three out of every ten children try through various ways to escape the life they lead in orphanage homes.

As if this situation were not troubling enough, Gabriela Alexandrescu, president of Save the Children in Romania, told the press last Tuesday: "The rate of premature births—which is a major risk for infant mortality—is 9 percent in Romania, double that of other EU states. This makes Romania the country with most infant deaths in the EU."

In addition to poverty, poor infrastructure and lack of information, the emigration of medical personnel seeking better prospects abroad is one of the main reasons for this development, Save the Children announced in Bucharest.



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