

## **Ceausescu's Children: The Process of Democratization and the Plight of Romania's Orphans**

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With the fall of Communism, the vast majority of citizens in Central and Eastern Europe have been able to build a better life for themselves and their families. While the process of democratization has brought some challenges, especially economically, most citizens in the region are working towards a level of prosperity and individual freedom that would have been impossible during the Communist regime. However, for Ceausescu's Children, those children who grew up in state-run orphanages which failed to provide them with adequate education and emotional development, such opportunities are not available. Paralyzed by foreign debts and mounting poverty, the Romanian government – though it has the desire – does not have the economic means to provide these children with the treatment, education, and rehabilitation which would allow them to become productive members of society.

### **History and Background**

During his 24 years in power, Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu sought “to spread communism by increasing the communist population of Romania to 30 million by the year 2000” (White 2003). In an attempt to achieve his vision, Ceausescu banned abortion and the use of contraceptives and instituted a law which decreed that each family must have at least five children. Furthermore, families were given monetary incentives upon the birth of each new child, and families with more than

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four children would receive 500 lei per-month, about one-fifth of low-income workers' monthly salaries, for each new child (Kligman 1998, 73). This proliferation of infants, spurred by Ceausescu's vision to promote Communism and the economic needs of many in society, led many children to be placed in state-run orphanages. Among the 150,000 children who lived in state-run orphanages during Ceausescu's regime, some children faced physical, emotional and sexual abuse as they received little education and prepared to serve in Ceausescu's special police units, while still others – the ones who were not as lucky – were left to wallow in their own filth and would die from malnutrition and disease (SouRelle 1996). As Herta Mueller writes: “the healthy ones were groomed for the secret police's special units; the sick and disabled wasted away in their own filth – the flotsam of an uncaring, insane society” (Muller and Klitch 2002, 3).

With the assassination of Nicolae Ceausescu on Christmas Day 1989, the citizens of Romania were overjoyed. The man whose family policies had ravaged the children and families of Romania had fallen from power - and there was hope that the situation of Romania's orphaned children could finally be addressed. As the international community learned of the horrible atrocities that occurred in state-run orphanages under Ceausescu's regime, journalists sought to document the plight of these children. As Mary Battiata of the *Washington Post* wrote after a 1990 visit to an orphanage in Videle, Romania: “despite the heat of the day, several of the children are wrapped in dirty blankets. From one still bundle, only a bluish patch of scalp is visible. Asked if the child inside is alive, an orderly says, “Of course,” and pulls back the cover. The tiny skeleton stirs, turns onto its side and groans” (Battiata 1990).

Twelve years have passed since Battiata filed her report. While there was optimism that the process of democratization, which has improved the lives of many Romanians, would also better the situation for Romania's orphaned children - the conditions remain largely unchanged. As Baroness Emma Nicholson, the European Parliament's special envoy to Romania, wrote in 2001: children in the country's orphanages are still subjected to “daily beatings and assaults, food deprivation leading in some cases to starvation, sexual abuse, and lack of proper medical care” (Associated Press 2001).

### **Why has the situation failed to improve? Three Possibilities**

As we seek to learn why the situation of these children has yet to improve, we must consider three possibilities. First, we will discuss the possibility that the Romanian government lacks both the means and the desire to help these children. Second, we will examine the possibility that the Romanian government has the economic potential, but does not wish to help these orphans. Finally, we will consider the possibility that the Romanian government desires to help these orphans but does not possess the economic means necessary to improve upon their situation. Now that we have outlined our hypotheses, we can proceed to evaluate each of these possibilities as we work to understand the lack of improvement in the situation of Romania's orphaned children. The first among these possibilities is that the Romanian Government lacks both the means *and* the desire to aid Romania's orphaned children.

#### **No Means and No Desire**

In the early 1990s, Romania, like other countries in Post Communist Europe, was struggling with one of the most daunting tasks for a newly-democratizing country: economic liberalization. As Offe states: "at the end of socialism the additional task of reforming the economy is the order of the day" (Claus 1991, 868). As a result of the economic demands of democratization, a Romanian government official admitted in a 1993 interview that the Romanian government had not paid adequate attention to the situation of Ceausescu's Children. As he stated: "when you are converting to capitalism you have to kick start the more prosperous areas of the economy. You can't afford to worry about poor people until later. That is the way capitalism works" (Branson 1993). In the first years of democratization, Romania was focused on the challenge of economic liberalization, rather than the situation of Ceausescu's Children. During this time, the Ministry of Health – the department which oversees state-run orphanages - was also directed by Dr. Ivan Mincu, an appointee from the Ceausescu era. As Ruth SouRelle of the *Houston Chronicle* writes, with regard to the situation faced by Ceausescu's Children, "the almost universal opinion is that Mincu is the problem -- not the solution" (SouRelle 1996).

As we work to illustrate this point, we need only to consider the case of Thomas Preindl. Preindl, a social worker with the non-profit organization Concordia, built a shelter and soup kitchen for the orphaned children of Romania in 1996, officials from The Ministry of Health -- closed the building because they believed that "the air was inadequate" (Calabresi 1996). As Preindl would later remark: "We tried to do something for the children, but the officials did not want it" (SouRelle 1996). Upon reading about the government's desire to focus on the economy -- rather than Ceaucescu's Children, and the practices of the Health Ministry, Western observers might conclude that the problem of Ceaucescu's children is a problem of both means and desire. This, however, is not the case. Since Mincu's resignation on August 1, 1996, the situation for Romanian orphans, especially with regard to governmental intervention, has improved -- even if only slightly. In late 1996, governmental officials started accepting the blame for the situation, and recognizing the need for reforms. According to former Romanian Education Minister Liviu Maior: "the people in the Ministry of Health are not qualified. When we take charge, the children cannot speak or feed themselves. People in our orphanages start to work for recovery of this period" (SouRelle 1996). In fact, former Prime Minister Petre Roman admitted in a 1996 interview: "unfortunately, for the past few years, health has not been a priority of the government" (SouRelle 1996). While individuals like Maior and Roman admit that changes must be made in order to improve the situation in Romanian orphanages, some in government, like Romania's Princess Sophie, are to implement changes through increased educational opportunities.

Romania's Princess Sophie has founded a program called ArtSchool-Young Voices, which seeks to provide the orphans with increased educational opportunities. As Princess Sophie states: "ArtSchool-Young Voices is primarily about saving lives. It gives to these orphans the chance to raise their voices, not live with their cries unheeded, and the opportunity to learn ideas and skills. Some of those children now are running around the floor with puppets in their hands, bright little faces. They're learning new skills they're happy they're playing and this is what we're trying to achieve" (Villafranca 1995). While programs such as ArtSchool-Young Voices work to provide these children with the chance to bolster their education.

While the efforts of Princess Sophie demonstrate the desire of the government to improve the situation of Romania's orphans, the work of NGOs reflects that, there are groups like Health Aid which are working with the government to help provide the means; from monetary assistance to housing and supplies, which are necessary to help the orphaned children of Romania. As Kent Klich writes, Health Aid "has worked with HIV-Positive children in Romania since 1990, brought in medical supplies and were helping to train Russian caregivers to work in the three small homes they had established for HIV-Positive Children" (Muller and Klitch 2002, 97). Furthermore, the government has also worked with Britain's "Nightengales", an organization which moves children out of the orphanages and provide them with opportunities to live a prosperous life. As Klich writes: "In 1998, twenty children from the orphanages in Cernavoda moved into a new building run by Nightengales, where they live and go to school" (Muller and Klitch 2002, 3).

With this analysis, which highlights the work of both the Romanian government and NGOs, we can disprove our first possibility. When we consider the government's desire to implement programs which can improve the education of Romania's orphans, and the fact that NGOs are working to provide at least some of the necessities which are required to help improve the situation of these orphans, we recognize that the government has both the desire and *some* means, to help improve the situation of Romania's orphaned children.

### **Means But No Desire**

While the support of NGOs has been instrumental in the Romanian government's efforts to improve the situation in that country's orphanages, Romania is faced with such poverty and debt that not even the assistance of groups such as Health Aid and Nightengales can provide the necessary means to improve the situation for Ceausescu's Children.

According to a 2002 report published by the World Bank, an astounding 28.9% of Romanians – or 6.4 million people – live in poverty (Tesliuc, Pop and Pandaru 2003, 10). While the citizens of Romania have experienced much poverty during the transition period, the government is also riddled with debt. In fact, the IMF and World Bank have been instrumental in providing the Romanian government with loans in order to

make progress in democratization. As a report by the European Forum, published in 1999, states: "IMF loans are a necessity to enable Romania to regain [the] confidence of international markets and to manage external debt servicing of around USD 3 billion in 1999. Without the IMF loans, the Romanian government will not be able to pay its foreign debts in 1999" (European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity 1999). With this examination of Romania's dismal economic situation, we recognize that the country most certainly does not possess the necessary means to address the needs of "Ceausescu's Children."

### **Desire But Insufficient Means**

While the efforts of Princess Sophie demonstrate that the Romanian government has taken an interest in improving the lives of Romania's orphaned children, in order to recognize the magnitude of the government's desire we must examine the efforts of Romanian Prime Minister Adrian Nastase. In 1998, Romania's international adoption process was in disarray, with some orphans being sold for as much as \$50,000 (Kirka 2002). In an attempt to reform the corrupt process, the Romanian government imposed a temporary ban on international adoptions. While the ban was overturned by a Romanian court in 2001, Nastase maintains that a ban is still necessary, because the government has not had the opportunity to sufficiently improve the situation. As Elliot Tomiuc writes: "The government is using the ban to give it time to rewrite laws to improve the adoption process and the treatment of orphans" (Tomiuc 2001a). While this position has drawn skepticism from some in the international community, Nastase is pursuing this ban in the interests of the country's orphaned children. As Nastase states: "Our main goal is to improve conditions for all children in our country" (Kirka 2002).

While Nastase's unwavering desire to assist the children of Romania's orphanages is a very promising sign for the future, his efforts are being severely hampered by the country's ongoing economic crisis. While we have already discussed the dismal state of the Romanian economy, the gravity of the situation is further exemplified by the inability of the Romanian government – even though it has the desire – to provide sufficient Antiretroviral drugs (ARVs) in order to treat HIV-positive children. As Mueller and Klich write: "there is not enough money for the

high-priced, triple-therapy anti-retroviral drugs for all young patients, forcing the caretakers to choose who receives the medication and who must suffer without” (Muller and Klitch 2002, 97). Indeed, with its massive economic concerns, there is little that the Romanian government can do about the situation of Romanian orphans. When Baroness Nicholson criticized Romania’s inaction with regard to the orphans, and cited “persistent abandonment of children, child abuse and neglect, international adoption and child trafficking” in the country’s orphanages, Romanian President Iliescu responded that Nicholson should “try to raise children in Romania on the average monthly salary of \$100” (Tomiuc 2001b).

With this analysis of Prime Minister Nastase’s pledge to help the orphaned children of Romania, the government’s efforts to reform the health care and adoption procedures in the country and Romania’s continuing economic crisis, we recognize that the failure to improve the situation for Romanian orphans is an economic problem; rather than a lack of desire by the Romanian government.

### **Conclusion: Building Hope for the Future**

While Romania’s economic struggles may continue well into the foreseeable future, there is reason to be optimistic about the orphaned children of Romania. In the twelve years since the death of Ceausescu, the Romanian government and NGOs have worked to bring reforms to the orphanages and sought to improve the overall quality of life for these children – but there is much work to be done.

As these children continue to die from abuse, malnutrition and disease, NGOs must recognize the magnitude of this issue and continue to work diligently with the Romanian government to improve the situation for Romania’s orphans. As NGOs continue to train qualified medical personnel to work in the state-run orphanages, there is hope that the country’s orphanages, which, as late as 1990, staffed only one nurse for every 65 orphans will be better equipped to address the educational and emotional needs of these children. Furthermore, NGOs must also work to decrease the stigma among Romanian doctors about children with AIDS. Recently at the Cervoda orphanage, one orphan required surgery to address a testicular hernia, but, because he was HIV-Positive, Nightengales was unable to convince any Romanian doctor to perform the operation (Battiata 1990, A1;

Muller and Klitch 2002, 55). From the importance of training qualified medical professionals and working to eliminate preconceived notions about the country's orphans, NGOs play a vital role in the future of Romania's orphaned children.

However, the support of NGOs is not enough to help the Romanian government, burdened by massive debts, improve the situation for Ceausescu's Children. Western pharmaceutical companies must recognize that the state-run orphanages are in dire need of drugs to address the rampant spread of AIDS – thousands of orphans have died and roughly 10,000 are currently suffering from the syndrome - as well as other diseases which are prevalent in these orphanages (Muller and Klitch 2002, 62). As Mueller and Klich write: “many of the multinational drug companies have stood firm in greed and defense of their patents and refused to offer discounts” (Muller and Klitch 2002, 66). Indeed, Western drug manufacturers need to recognize the gravity of the AIDS situation in state-run orphanages, and work to bring these orphans the treatment which, given the government's economic constraints, they could not otherwise obtain. As Klich and Mueller write: “These are deaths that are preventable. And there is so much work to be done for these innocents – still” (Muller and Klitch 2002, 64).

When the international community learned of the atrocities which occurred in the orphanages of Ceausescu's Romania, many Western observers were both shocked and saddened. Throughout the 1990s, the conditions in these facilities failed to improve, and Romania fell deeper into economic despair. Then, in 1996, former Romanian Prime Minister Petre Roman recognized the past failures of the Romanian government, and made a plea to the international community: “Blame us, but help us” (SouRelle 1996, 1). Seven years later, the necessary help has yet to arrive. But there is hope. With an approach which focuses on Romania's continued cooperation with the IMF in order to rectify the country's outstanding debts, while promoting the educational and emotional development of these children and working with international NGOs such as Nightengales and Health Aid to lobby for increased ARVs and ensure that these orphans receive health-care from qualified medical professionals, the Romanian government can help these individuals become productive members of society.

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