

THE
CHILDREN
AND
WOMEN
OF THE
DECREE

The legacy of Ceaușescu's demographic policy

Text – Giulia Panfilo

The enforcement of Decree 66/770 in Romania

On September 27, 1966, the Romanian Executive Committee, under the communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu, deliberated on prohibiting pregnancy termination in Romania. Until then, abortion not only remained legally permissible but stood as the sole resource for contraception women could resort to. However, with this measure, Ceaușescu harbored ambitions far from family support or the preservation of human life. His vision? To propel the population to a staggering 20 million, while sculpting and nurturing the Romanian New Man (Omul Nou), a model citizen with a socialist and eugenic twist. Ironically, Ceaușescu was unwittingly nurturing the very generation that would depose him in 1989.

The decree was enacted in 1967 and proscribed abortions in Romania even in dire circumstances. Abortion was permitted only if a woman was over 45 or already caring for four children. A surge in births between 1967 and 1971 ensued, fervently chronicled by the regime. However, by 1973, the birth rate plummeted for the first time since the abortion ban of 1967. In response, Ceaușescu instructed prosecutors and local militia, the Securitate, to intervene in hospitals whenever a woman experiencing pregnancy-related bleeding sought assistance.

Securitate's modus operandi was grim: subject the suffering women to mental and physical torment, extract confessions regarding their abortion providers, and, if deemed necessary, let them perish in the quest for truth. Many women would claim self-inflicted abortion procedures. Occasionally police officers would authorize emergency curettages, observing the procedure firsthand. The psychological duress, compounded by fear, weighed heavily on both doctors and women. Working women were also subjected to monthly gynecological control to detect early pregnancy and monitored until birth impeding any chance of abortion. In 1974, Romania was lauded as a paradigm of population expansion, and even selected by the UN to host the World Conference on Demography and Development. Bolstered by increasing external support from the West and good relations with the Soviet Union, Ceaușescu persisted in his nationalist crusade, ruthlessly sacrificing the lives of Romanian women.



Pregnancy test used by the regime to investigate early pregnancy stages among women (Credits: Florin Iepan)

Women's voices from the Decree time

When pro-natalist policies are enforced, abortions do not cease to exist. Women seeking pregnancy interruption find themselves in unsafe, often incompetent hands, risking their lives in the process. Romania was no exception. After 1967, a shadow industry of abortion practitioners emerged, thriving behind closed doors and at the expense of women themselves. Clandestine abortions were frequently administered by doctors, midwives, nurses, and in the direst scenarios by unqualified individuals driven solely by financial gain. The praxis was, indeed, initiating the abortion at home, causing internal bleeding as if it had been a miscarriage, and heading to hospitals to have a curettage (scraping the embryo from their uterus). The most common methods included the insertion of substances into the uterus including mustard, tea, antibiotics, plant leaves, and even lemon juice. While these substances were believed to possess abortive properties according to Romanian folklore, they also posed severe risks of toxicity and infection.



"The Unforgettable Tragedy", accessible on YouTube, paints a poignant picture of the desperate lengths women were willing to go to in the face of abortion laws. Ioana, for example, forced to seek an illegal abortion, had a saline solution mixed with hot water inserted into her uterus, intended to detach the embryo from the placenta and induce expulsion. The procedure resulted in severe septicemia, and her death was only averted by compassionate doctors who performed emergency surgery. Even public figures like Delia Budeanu, a prominent television presenter in 1970s Romania, resorted to extreme measures to terminate unwanted pregnancies. Her "method" involved a plunge into icy water, which nearly triggered her heart attack. Yet, in the face of peril, she declares what was relatable to many women, "It didn't matter at all. The problem had to be solved."

In the late 1960s, a young woman's tragic tale was sensationalized in a regime-backed film aimed at curbing clandestine abortions and teaching "disobedient" women a lesson. Like many pregnant women of her time, she turned to a backstreet abortionist, notorious Transadira Popescu, only to later die of infection. The regime exploited her memory by portraying her and Transadira in a film riddled with half-truths, intended to dissuade women from seeking abortions and to vilify Transadira herself. The film "Ilustrate cu flori de câmp" (Postcards with Flowers, 1975) is set in early 1970s Bucharest and follows the story of Irina and Laura, who seek an abortion from Titina (Transadira's transposition). Irina is disturbed by Laura's apparent detachment from her unborn child, and through her eyes, the film aims to distance viewers emotionally and

Above: "The Unforgettable Tragedy": Ioana Coja recalls her abortion experience (Credits: Ioana Nicolescu)
Right: Poster of "Ilustrate cu flori de câmp" (Postcards with Flowers), 1975

ILUSTRATE CU FLORI DE CIMP

Montajefilm gratuit
a producție a Casei de Film Trăi

Film realizat în studiourile Centrale
de Producție Cinematografică „București”

scenariul și regia: **ANDREI BLAIER**
imaginea: **Dinu Tănase**
muzică: **Radu Șerban**
decoruri: **Vasile Rotaru**
costume: **Ileana Oroveanu**

cu **DRAGA OLTEANU-MATEI, ELIZA PETRĂCHESCU, CARMEN GALIM,**
ELENA ALBU, DAN NUȚU, GEORGHE DINICĂ, ANA CICOVAN,
GEORGE MIHAÎȚA, PAUL IOACHIM, CONSTANTIN FLORESCU.





Laura and Titina in "Ilustrate cu flori de câmp" (Credits: Florin Iepan)

vilify women seeking illegal abortions. Only as Laura questions her decision does the narrative shift to depict her as a victim. Tragically, it is too late: Laura succumbs to infection (David, 2022). The film served a propagandistic purpose, instilling fear and regret in women considering abortion, as it underscored the dangers of illegal procedures and sowed distrust towards unscrupulous practitioners like Popescu, who was later imprisoned but kept unabashedly boasting of her services.

Building the New Man

When the baby boom swept through Romania in 1969, it brought the propagandistic notion of the New Man, an emblem of the desired next generation of Romanians, molded and educated by Ceaușescu. Daniel Marius Stanciulescu, born as the 20 millionth baby in socialist Romania, symbolized the culmination of Ceaușescu's ambitious policies to bolster the population. However, Daniel's life until 1989 was a facade, an orchestrated portrayal of the perfect socialist child. He was subjected to constant surveillance, exploitation, and excessive mediatic exposure.

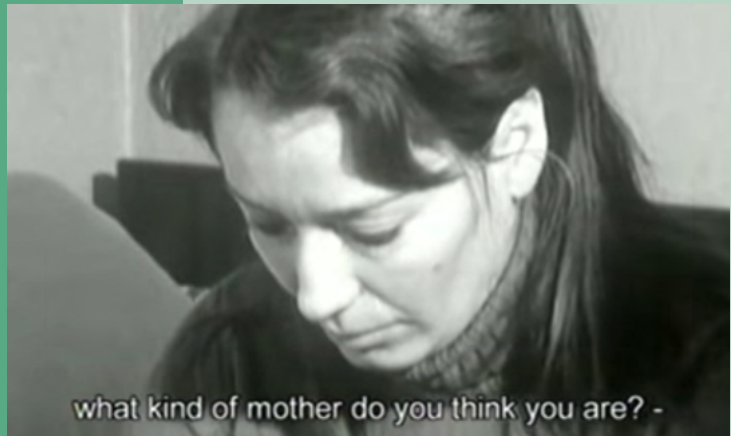
But what characterized the New Man? This new social archetype was envisaged to embody the ideal socialist citizen,



The birth of the 20 millionth Romanian citizen: Daniel Marius Stanciulescu, is celebrated by Ceaușescu (Credits: Florin Iepan)

meticulously crafted to construct the fabric of socialism. He was expected to be robust and healthy, athletic and talented from a tender age. The new generation of "Decreței" was to be extraordinary, with any perceived obstacle to their potential swiftly eradicated – including their own mothers, whom the state had coerced into bearing their children. Shocking testimonies from socialist Romania shed light on children forcibly taken into state custody because their mothers had been deemed unfit for initially considering abortion. Television programs such as "Spotlight" (Reflector) even subjected women to relentless televised interrogation until they confessed their reluctance towards motherhood, subsequently enduring public humiliation. Children were sometimes coerced into participating in these interviews.

Another figure of this era was Andrei Duban, chief of the Pioneer's organization as a child and later a prominent face on Romanian television during his teenage years. Duban had blonde hair, blue eyes, and robust health, emblematic of the regime's criteria for inclusion in the New Man narrative. Conversely, individuals who did not conform to these rigid standards were marginalized, abandoned, or subjected to inhumane treatment.



The "Reflector" journalist questions the woman, whose child would later be taken into state custody (Credits: Florin Iepan)



Famous actor and showman Andrei Duban (Credits: Florin Iepan)

The costs of homogenization

Population homogenization consisted of a neo-Stalinist-inspired social engineering project to converge the best socialist values into the next generation of Romanian citizens. Any impediment to homogenization was to be obscured or eradicated. For instance, the Roma community, highly visible in Romania, could never embody the ideal of the New Man. This led to the encouragement of abortion among Roma women, even in the later stages of pregnancy, as part of an insidious campaign of ethnic cleansing and eugenics.

Another facet of this drive for homogenization was the paramount importance placed on productivity within a socialist society. Every individual was expected to contribute to the nation's workforce, engage in competitive endeavors, and strive for success. Women were reduced, in a Foucauldian sense of biopolitics, to mere vessels for the reproduction of new citizens. No surprise that Margaret Atwood, author of 'The Handmaid's Tale,' noted the parallels between Romania and her fictional dystopia of Gilead (Kligman, 2022).

Anyone deemed unproductive or aesthetically unfit to represent the ideal Romanian citizen was swiftly marginalized. Romanian pro-natalist policies resulted in the abandonment of handicapped children, condemned to lives of neglect and squalor. In March 1990, the world discovered the appalling conditions endured by abandoned orphans and disabled children in Cighid Children's Home in Ghiorac, Western Romania. Hidden away in darkness, these vulnerable children were left to perish in abject conditions. This tragic reality exposed the hollowness of the dictator's professed love for children, which extended only to those deemed suitable for inclusion.

The 1989 revolution – a *parricidal* legacy

In the mid-1980s, as the Romanian leader's grip on power waned and pro-natalist policies lost efficacy, he resorted to even more draconian measures to control women's reproductive rights. In 1986, he declared the unborn fetus as part of a socialist society, motherhood a patriotic duty, and refusal to bear children a crime. At the same time, Romania had the highest maternal mortality rate in Europe, with 159 deaths per 100,000 live births, with approximately 87% attributed to unsafe abortion methods (Hord et al., 1991).



December 1989 demonstration in Timișoara (Credits: Urbán Tamás)

But what happened in 1989? Let us revive the ideological transformation experienced by the so-called "Decreței" generation, born between 1967 and 1971, in the revolution. The tide young Romanians – many of them children of the decree - found themselves in began to turn in December 1989 when the Iron Curtain fell in Eastern Europe. They started taking to the streets against the dictator and tragically over a thousand young lives were lost to his troops. On December 22, 1989, Ceaușescu and his wife, Elena, were captured in Târgoviște, 80 kilometers north of Bucharest, only to face a military show tribunal and execution two days later. The executioners, once fervent followers who saw

him as their symbolic father, were largely children of the decree. One of them describes, in “Children of the Decree”, the psychological shift that crossed his mind while tying Ceaușescu’s hands before the shooting with these words: “They were a father and a mother that didn’t deserve me anymore”. The generation born out of the decree ultimately toppled Ceaușescu’s rule. The legacy of 25 years of socialist regime made the old generation anesthetized, most likely scared of taking the streets, while the new one showed signs of change.



*A member of the firing squad and child of the decree
(Credits: Florin Iepan)*

The 1989 revolution in Romania stands out as a unique event in post-socialist Europe, characterized by its brutal nature and the televised spectacle of a double execution. As Ceaușescu’s regime fell, marking the bloodiest post-Communist regime changes in Europe, the new government swiftly legalized abortion and contraception, and family planning and mental health facilities were established to

address the trauma inflicted upon women and men during the socialist rule. This article is a testament to legacy in two distinct veins: the children born from aggressive pro-natalist policies are the “legacy” of Decree 66/770, but they were the antithesis of Ceaușescu’s New Man, spearheading the Revolution of 1989 and toppling their symbolic Father (as Ceaușescu was reverently titled). Ceaușescu’s policies led to the birth of countless children who might not otherwise have been born, engendering a sense of enduring gratitude and reverence. However, what unfolded in 1989 was not merely a manifestation of broader regional unrest inevitable in socialist Eastern Europe. Instead, it represented a violent rejection of the paternal figure of the nation. I dare to assert that it can be labeled as parricide – a generation, the “Children of the Decree,” symbolically killing their metaphorical parents. 📌

References

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[The children of Cighid](#)

[The Unforgettable Tragedy: Confessions from the Decree Era](#)