

The Legacy of *Decree 66/770* in Romania: Women's Collective Memory of a Transgenerational Trauma

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Abstract

The trauma Romanian women endured under Ceaușescu's pro-natalist policies, particularly Decree 770, persists long after 1989 as a form of collective memory. This memory is not only conveyed through literary and cinematic works, with critical reflections emerging only in the early 2000s, after a decade of societal silence. The legacy of forced motherhood and unsafe abortions has also resulted in widespread mistrust of medical institutions and poor sexual education, perpetuating a preference for abortion over contraception to this day. This transgenerational trauma continues to influence women's reproductive health, reviving taboos and reinforcing societal roles in contemporary Romania. In this paper, the legacy of such policies is explored through a combined perspective of biopolitics and memory studies considering three generations of Romanian women: socialist mothers, their Decreței daughters and their daughters in turn who outlived the abortion ban after 1989.

Keywords: *Decree 66/770, Communism, Ceaușescu, abortion, demographic policies, biopolitics, Decreței, transgenerational trauma*

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The aggressive demographic policies imposed by Ceaușescu between 1966 and 1989 have been already approached in literature from several theoretical perspectives, specifically historical and political, medical and legal, analysing the repercussions of the abortion ban on pregnancy, motherhood, and fertility rate in Romania after 1989. However, research has proved that this dark page of Romanian history has been little talked about in Western countries that did not experience state socialism (including mine, Italy), or outside academic contexts regarding Romanian studies. What is even more worth mentioning is that, when researched, few are the studies analysing the topic from the victims' or survivors' viewpoint, showing a literature gap which this paper aims to fill.

A paper in this direction is "Haunting Impositions: Women and Reproductive Policies in Romania under Communism and After" (Arsene, 2017: 87-100); here the attention is massively focused on a double burden: the state propaganda on women as dedicated mothers and socialist workers and, nonetheless, the economic considerations Romanian women make today (either of delaying or renouncing motherhood at all). The economics of motherhood is indeed an essential aspect of socialist states between the 1960s and the 1980s, given the shortage of goods and the burden of work on a mother's shoulders. In other words, Romanian women thought twice before having another child for economic reasons. This is central to "Becoming a Mother in Hungary

and Poland during State Socialism” (Oláh; Fratzak, 2004: 213–244.), underlying a shared trend of economic scarcity and decreased childbearing across the entire Eastern bloc. Another work, this time by Pop (2017), focused on three specific city-factories case studies in Romania, namely Someșul, Clujana, and Carbochim, delves into women workers and the facilities created by the regime to encourage motherhood around those factories, however failing from a welfare perspective. While all papers consulted touched upon essential information about the history of *Decree 770* in Romania, very few approached the matter from the viewpoint of generations of women and their trauma.

Therefore, two theories are employed in the present study to offer a new perspective. An unavoidable theory to provide a sociological nuance to this topic is Michael Foucault’s *biopolitics*, which investigates how the state’s control reflects broader strategies to govern life and bodies. *Decree no. 770*, signed in 1966, did not come overnight but resonated with the specifics of Ceaușescu’s goal of increasing the Romanian population to a staggering 20 million citizens. Out of the extensive work on biopolitics conducted by Foucault, sexuality and reproduction hold centrality. In particular, they form and perpetuate forms of power relations, while at the same time continuing the “life” of the state through reproduction (Kristensen, 2013). Biopolitics i.e. exercising politics over people’s bodies, has different nuances, and Foucault mainly focused on the German and French settings, while little attention was given to socialist states formed already by the time he was an active researcher, in the 1970s. In spite of that, a recent work that approaches biopolitics in Soviet socialism (Prozorov; Rentea, 2017: 94-111) reveals the relevance of Foucault’s theory to socialist societies like the Soviet Union, referring for instance to the myth of the “New Soviet Person” creation. This can be applied to Socialist Romania,

where Nicolae Ceaușescu aimed to nurture a “New Man” (Omul Nou), born and raised at the expenses of women’s reproductive health that we adhere to nowadays.¹

A memory-based approach is blended with a biopolitical one. Memory theory, deriving from a multidisciplinary field such as sociology, psychology, and neuroscience, was introduced by sociologists’ and historians’ contributions in the first half of last century. Some of the precursors are such as Karl Mannheim (1893-1947), George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) and Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945). Contemporary scholars continue investigating the relationship between memory and history, or memory and identity: they are respectively the British historian Peter Burke and the Canadian historian Allan Megill. Memory understood as collective or individual elaborates this trauma from one generation of women to another. The generations I will be focusing on are that of Romanian socialist mothers, their *decreteii* daughters (born as a consequence of the decree banning abortion, who most likely would not have been born otherwise), and their daughters in turn, the ones whose fertile years stretched to post-1989, after the decree was deleted.

Of high importance for the topic of my research is Mannheim’s identification of generations as “similar ‘located’ contemporaries [who] participate in a common destiny and in the ideas and concepts which are in some way bound up with its unfolding” (Mannheim, in Olick et al., 2011: 98), or in other words, units of people that do not just share historical events but move alike in elaborating a response. It may be the case of a sub-generational unit, such as women sharing their

¹ Reproductive health is quite a recent concept, defined by the World Health Organization as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in all matters relating to the reproductive system and to its functions and processes. Reproductive health implies that people are able to have a satisfying and safe sex life and that they have the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how often to do so.” [Reproductive health \(who.int\)](https://www.who.int/health-topics/reproductive-health)

illegal abortion experiences after 1966, in response to *Decree 770* which would have criminalized them. Mead, on the other hand, firstly underlined that the past was malleable and representational and, secondly stated that memory worked through images of our present, then overlapping with someone else's present (Mead, in Olick et al., 2011: 127-128). Memory, for Mead, flows through continuity of experience, hence could be moulded from individual to individual. To this regard, even if it does not apply specifically on anti-abortion policies, I am making reference to Bopp-Filimonov's (2021) research on "Bad Communism". This is an example of how different memory images shaped in people's present influence the classification of the Communist experience in Romania.² French sociologist and founding father of memory studies, Halbwachs, discussed the relevance of subjectivity in collectivity by arguing that, despite memory being built on a collective base (e.g. a generational unit), it changes according to an individual's single relationships and experiences. According to him, history differs from collective memory because it considers periods as a "whole", a persistent strand of time. Collective memory, on the other hand, keeps track of the differences and boundaries within a given period. This frames the variety of memories and experiences we can collect on those years in Romania.

Additionally, collective memory exists as long as a remembering group exists (Halbwachs, in Olick et al., 2011: 139-144). Today we can still engage with the people living in Communist Romania, especially those Romanian women whose bodies endured the Communist-driven pro-natalist choices, and outlived them. Since many of

their contemporaries perished while getting an abortion, punished by the Securitate,³ or of maternal mortality at birth, I consider the former reasons valid to engage in similar research. The aims are to embrace a three-generation collection of women to understand how their trauma for unwanted pregnancy, forced motherhood and criminalization of reproductive rights affected their choices through the narration and revival of collective memory of the *Decree 66/770*, and the consequences it had had on women after 35 years after Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime fall.

2. METHODS

This paper employs a qualitative analysis of documents, including personal recollections and artistic products (particularly cinema and novels), presented as collective accounts. The focus is on the experiences of trauma related to abortion and forced motherhood, two interconnected aspects of reproductive health under the pro-natalist policies of Communist Romania.

Demographic policies in Romania, often referred to as anti-abortion legislation, are more accurately described as population policies designed to address the size and composition of the country's population. Nicolae Ceaușescu's political agenda aimed to increase the population to 20 million by the end of the 1980s, and to 30 million by 2000. There are two main types of population policies: pro-natalist policies, which aim to increase the birth and fertility rates in slowly growing countries, and anti-natalist policies, which aim to reduce fertility rates in fast-developing countries. Notable examples of anti-natalist policies include the "one-child policy" in Communist China, in force from 1979 until the early 2000s, and the forced sterilizations in India during the 1960s and 1970s. Both countries are now amongst the most populous in the world. In contrast, Eastern European countries behind the

² See more: Bopp-Filimonov, jIV. (2021). 'Shaping, Questioning, Contradicting "Bad Communism:" Aspects of Generational Memory in Romania after 1989', vol. 3, no. 1, *Journal of Romanian Studies*, available at <https://www.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/doi/10.3828/jrms.2021.3.1.05>

³ Romanian secret police, short for *Departamentul Securității Statului* (Department of State Security).

Iron Curtain, including Romania, Poland, and the Soviet Union, implemented pro-natalist policies to grow their workforce, economic power, and industrialize agrarian communities. Key-terms used in the study include fertility rate, birth rate, and live birth, which are common in demographic statistics. To mention the most important ones, birth rate (BR) is the total number of births per 1,000 inhabitants in a specific period and is useful for understanding population trends. Fertility rate (FR) is more specific, calculated as the number of live births per 1,000 women of childbearing age. A live birth is defined as a birth where the foetus shows any sign of life (Carmichael, 2016). Abortion on request (hereinafter simply abortion) is the intentional interruption of pregnancy, as opposed to miscarriage. Examining Romania's birth and fertility rates from 1950 to the present reveals significant trends. Between 1953 and 1966, the total fertility rate dropped drastically, only to increase sharply in 1966 and 1967 following Ceaușescu's abortion ban. Despite fluctuations, a consistent downtrend in the fertility rate emerged by 1973-1975. After 1989, with abortion again legal, a negative trend consolidated. The Romanian population is expected to further decrease by 2100.⁴

The collective memory built between 1966 and 1989, as revived in this study, predominantly centres on the experiences of white ethnic Romanians. This narrow focus underscores the limitations and exclusivity of such memory, effectively marginalizing the experiences of other groups of women, particularly Roma women. Despite being the country's largest minority, their experiences under the natalist policies have been significantly underexplored. Unlike their Romanian peers, who were often denied access to abortion, many Roma women were allowed to terminate pregnancies, although as part of a

broader eugenic strategy aimed at reducing the Roma population (Adam, Mitroiu, 2016). This stark disparity in treatment reflects the broader racial ideologies of the regime and suggests the need for a more diverse approach to the subject within the unexplored cohort of Roma women.⁵

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Demographic policies in Communist Europe: socialist motherhood in socialist families

Communism in Eastern Europe not only marked a political shift on the post-war continent but also introduced a new socio-economic approach to the state and its citizens, aiming to build prosperous economies under a socialist society. Achieving a communist state required the contribution of every citizen, including women, who were active in all economic sectors. In Romania, for example, the first twenty years of Communism (1945-1965) saw a strong emphasis on birth rates as a social foundation supporting Communism. Families, particularly those with numerous children, were supported through subsidies, gratuities, and economic resource transfers (Lataianu, 2002). However, state support for birth rates could not prevent a decline on account of the core ideals of a Communist society: modernization and urbanization progressed rapidly, with a significant part of the population migrating from rural areas to cities. Despite the increased participation of women in the labour force, life standards did not grow accordingly. Encouraged by socialist ideas of gender equality, women faced a double burden: working alongside men while also managing housework and children's education.

After 1955, abortion in Romania was liberalized again and became the most common

⁴ Real-time fertility rate predictions in Romania can be tracked here: [Total Fertility Rate of Romania 1950-2024 & Future Projections \(database.earth\)](#)

⁵ An interesting contribution in this regard is Bogdan, I.M. (2022), 'Gender, State Policies and Lived Experience(s) Among Roma in Romania During the Communist Regime', Perspectives on Gender in Romania.

form of birth control in both urban and rural areas.⁶ This trend was influenced not only by women's private decisions but also by the emergence of a new family model in the socialist-oriented society. Lataianu (2002) highlights that the period of compulsory education was extended, access to higher education increased, and the age at which individuals could live autonomously was delayed. "The child – considered a source of income in traditional society – became only a consumer in the modern one, based on a salary economy" (p. 4). That prompted families, particularly women, to have fewer children. A new family model emerged, transitioning from single-waged to dual-earner households. The liberalization of abortion supported this model, encouraging a declining birth rate. However, after 1965, Ceaușescu imposed a new demographic model overnight to pursue the "perfect" Romanian family: dual-earner working parents with at least four children.

Similar demographic trends occurred in other Eastern European countries between 1945 and 1965, such as Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. Research by Oláh and Fraczak (2004) identified variables influencing fertility patterns in Hungary and Poland from the 1950s to the 1980s. They noted that highly educated women postponed childbearing, especially for their first child; employment status influenced fertility; marital status, particularly marriage, helped with housing availability and childbearing. In both countries, state-supported policies balanced women's employment and family formation. However, as the family institution evolved and birth rates generally declined across socialist states, the outcomes varied. Pro-abortion policies remained stable until 1989, after which they were reversed in Poland, now one of the most restrictive countries regarding abortion (Angelova,

2018). Hungary maintained similar policies until the 2010s. Hence Romania, with its rapid shift between 1966 and 1989, stands out as a unique example of anti-abortion legislation in state socialism, followed by a return to liberalized abortion policies in the 1990s, contrasting with the trajectories of Hungary and Poland.

3.2. *Sexual education under Ceaușescu's regime*

Under Ceaușescu's regime, childbearing was considered the ultimate contribution a woman could make to socialism, yet this did not come with an open, taboo-free discourse on sexuality. With the emphasis on society over the individual, communist-imposed sexual norms prioritized reproduction over pleasure, in contrast to the Western (particularly American) trend of the 1960s. These norms strongly influenced abortion and demographic policies by promoting the idea that reproduction was vital for socialism and a counter to individualism and capitalism. Men and women were encouraged to view sexual intercourse not as a source of personal enjoyment but as a patriotic duty to produce new citizens for Romania, a similar approach to the one imposed by the Orthodox Church's dogmas. Following Ceaușescu's appointment as general secretary of the Romanian Communist Party, the building of socialism involved not only an almost total abortion ban and the criminalization of women's reproductive health but also party-approved "sex education." Two major sex manuals circulated in Romania between 1966 and 1989, setting norms for sexual intercourse and married life and contributing to the concept of "communist sexuality" (a term coined by Biebuyck, 2010). These manuals, *De vorbă cu tinerii: probleme de educație a sexelor* (Talking with the Youth: Problems of Sex Education) and *Viața sexuală și căsătoria* (Sexual Life and Marriage), published in 1968 by Radu Dimitriu and Maria Alecu-Ungureanu respectively, were widely distributed

⁶ A short history of abortion laws and decrees in Romania is provided in the paragraph 3.3. Abortion-related policies in Romania (1955-1989).

to diverse segments of Romanian society. The first manual targeted teens and adults encountering sex for the first time, while the second was designed for newlyweds. Both manuals were intended for men and women, and aimed at citizens born in the 1940s and 1950s.

The manuals emphasized that sexual instinct was associated with masculinity and that femininity involved subjecthood and submission, considered positively. Heterosexuality was deemed normal, while non-reproductive sex and homosexuality abnormal. Dimitriu reinforced heterosexual normativity through his use of gender-specific pronouns and terms for partners (*el partener* and *ea parteneră*). The idea that women's greatest fulfilment came from reproductive sex was also prevalent among Romanian doctors. The emphasis on reproductive sex as the only correct form, the subordination of individual pleasure (often the woman's), and the promotion of feminine passivity were key elements of Ceaușescu's pro-natalist socialism. Any form of individualism was condemned, and socialist mothers were expected to adhere strictly to these norms. The socialist ideology of femininity was synonymous with forced motherhood, supported by draconian laws banning abortion and coercing women into having children. As summarized in *The Decree Chronicles*, "The post-Decree sexual era was marked by an obsessive concern: not to get pregnant. Sex education and contraceptives did not exist, and abortion was completely forbidden. [...] The obsession of our youth was not to get pregnant. I think that was even more important than finishing college" (Oncioiu & Meseșan, 2021).⁷

⁷ *The Party State Tasked Women with Having Children. The Repercussions Are Still Felt.* By Diana Oncioiu, Diana Meseșan, November 4, 2021. [The Party State Tasked Women with Having Children. The Repercussions Are Still Felt - Decree Chronicles](#)

3.3. Abortion-related policies in Romania (1955-1989)

Within a decade, Romania's stance on abortion dramatically shifted. Initially punished as a criminal act under the 1948 Criminal Code, abortion was liberalized with Decree 55/456, published on November 1st, 1955, in *Buletinul Oficial al Marii Adunări Naționale a Republicii Populare România*⁸. This decree allowed abortions to be performed by doctors or other qualified personnel in cases where the pregnancy posed life-threatening risks to the woman. Two years later, Decree 57/463 made abortion legal in any case (Sala, 2018). State support and allowances were introduced for families with children, aligning with the policies of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, the first General Secretary of the Romanian Communist Party, who led Romania from 1955 to 1965. When Nicolae Ceaușescu succeeded Gheorghiu-Dej in 1965, he implemented coercive pro-natalist policies, the most infamous being *Decree 66/770*, which severely restricted access to abortion. Under this decree, abortion on request was prohibited except under specific conditions:

1. When the woman's life was endangered by the pregnancy, as judged by a special commission.
2. If the future child was at risk of hereditary diseases or congenital deformities.
3. In cases where the woman was physically, psychologically, or emotionally incapacitated.
4. For women over 45 years of age.
5. For women already supporting four or more children.
6. If the pregnancy resulted from rape or incest. (Anton, 2011)

In preparation for hosting the United Nations Third World Population Conference in Bucharest in 1974, Romania had to adjust the stringent

⁸ The Official Gazette of the Grand National Assembly of the Romanian People's Republic.

Decree 66/770 to align with international standards. Consequently, *Decree 53/1972* lowered the age at which a woman could request an abortion from 45 to 40. However, in 1985, another decree reinstated the threshold at 45 years (Anton, 2011). Overall, it was ironic that Romania hosted a conference promoting the right to freely and responsibly determine family size and access to family planning services, given that these rights were severely restricted within its own borders.

The state's interference in personal life extended beyond abortion policies. Between 1967 and 1977, additional decrees were enacted to strengthen family institutions, limit divorces (*Decree 66/779*), increase state child allowances, and introduce other forms of assistance for large families (*Decree 77/246*). Anton (2011) also mentions a celibacy tax imposed on childless men and women over 25. The aggressive pro-natalist policies drove women to seek underground abortions, risking arrest or death. By the 1980s, particularly in 1984, the regime observed a decline in fertility rates and reinforced anti-abortion measures. Health personnel were tasked with monitoring women's compliance with the law. In 1986, three years before his demise and assassination, Ceaușescu publicly declared: "The foetus is the socialist property of the whole society. Giving birth is a patriotic duty. Those who refuse to have children are deserters, escaping the law of natural continuity" (David & Băban, 1996). The *Decree 66/770* remained in force until 1989.

3.4. Stories of Underground Abortions in Romania

Between 1967 and 1969, Romania's birth rate doubled due to *Decree 66/770*, which heavily restricted abortions. However, women soon began circumventing this law by seeking illegal and often unsafe abortions. This subject drew my interest due to the dreadful accounts from women in Communist Romania collected in the documentary "Decreții: Children and Women of

the Decree" (2005). Indeed, today numerous stories of these experiences have emerged, particularly through literature, and cinema. Their narratives not only reveal a long-hidden history but also highlight the lasting traumatic effects on modern-day Romanian society and women's perspectives on motherhood and abortion – which are to be explored further in the next section.

Florian Iepan's "Decreții: Children and Women of the Decree" provides a harrowing testimonial of women's experiences during Ceaușescu's regime until 1989. A shadow industry of clandestine abortions emerged, often performed by doctors, midwives, nurses, or even individuals with no medical training, motivated solely by money. The goal was to induce bleeding so the woman could go to the hospital and receive a curettage, masquerading the procedure as a miscarriage, which was legally permissible. Adrian Singeorzan, a gynaecologist during Communist Romania, explains that common methods included inserting substances like mustard, tea, antibiotics, plant leaves, or even lemon juice into the uterus.⁹ These substances, according to Romanian folklore, were believed to have abortive properties but were also toxic and infectious. Even celebrities of the time were not spared from these dangerous measures. Delia Budeanu, a popular TV presenter in the 1970s, recounts how she resorted to desperate measures, including throwing herself into a pool of cold water, nearly causing a heart attack, to induce an abortion. In another documentary, "The Unforgettable Tragedy: Confessions from the Decree Era,"¹⁰ from *The Decree Chronicles*, three women recall their experiences: a nurse working in abortion hospital sectors, a woman who sought an abortion herself, and Irina, the daughter of a woman who died due to the decree. Elena Copaciu, the nurse, recalls the pale, green-tinged

⁹ From "Decreții: Children and Women of the Decree". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZgZJ-IV8Et0&t=2383s>

¹⁰ "The Unforgettable Tragedy: Confessions from the Decree Era". <https://youtu.be/WTMImVNWrIc>

faces and dark-circled eyes of women queuing up to complete their abortions, often initiated at home. After the curettage, these women would rise from the table like shadows, profoundly weakened by their ordeal, with the fear of death ever-present. Ioana Coja, who sought an illegal abortion during her third pregnancy, recounts her terrifying near-death experience: at four months pregnant, a midwife inserted a saline solution mixed with hot water into her uterus, intending to detach the embryo from the placenta and cause the curettage. The method failed, leading to septicaemia, and Ioana was driven to the hospital where doctors treated her severe infection without notifying the authorities as they were supposed to. Reflecting on her experience, Ioana initially appears detached, but when recalling the moments after the curettage, she breaks down in sobbing and covers her eyes. Irina Chelba's account tells the tragedy of her mother, who developed a severe infection after undergoing a clandestine abortion. Unlike in Ioana's case, when doctors discovered the abortion, the police intervened, demanding to know the identity of the person who performed the procedure. Irina's mother, refusing to divulge the information, was left to die from septicaemia.

These documentaries intertwine the lives and experiences of two generations of women: those becoming mothers in the late 1960s because of the ban (they were referred to as socialist mothers), and those in the 1980s due to the tightening of it (their daughters). They share the same destiny of forced motherhood and abortion taboo. Numerous literary novels published after 1989 recount abortion stories, though none are available in English. Marinescu (2022) provides access to their major themes and main characters. These novels depict fictional personal stories of missed motherhood, reflecting on the construction of gender roles in the 1970s and 1980s. However, the narratives primarily focus on white, ethnic Romanian, middle-class, and educated women, with little attention given to women of different economic statuses or ethnicities. Striking

examples include *Fontana di Trevi* by Gabriela Adameșteanu (2018), *Și se auzeau greierii*¹¹ by Corina Sabău (2019), and *Complezență. Înălțarea la ortopedie. Musafir pe viață*¹² by Simona Sora (2020). Although the novels were published recently, these authors draw on their youthful experiences, shaping their cross-generational memory and that of their children.

In *Complezență*, metaphoric terms used to refer to the unborn child include "o păpușă însângerață" (a bloody doll), "mogâldeța proaspăt lepădată" (the freshly dropped piece), "boțul de om" (the human piece), and "corpul delict" (the criminal evidence) (Sora, 2020:33). The first three expressions highlight the foetus's dehumanization, while the last one refers to the criminal act of obtaining an abortion. The novel describes a scene where an aborted baby is retrieved, and a criminal investigation starts. The post-abortion death rate was high, often due to extended and unhealed bleeding. *Și se auzeau greierii* depicts a similar scene, and *Fontana di Trevi* includes positive characters like a nurse who takes pity on a woman seeking an abortion and tells her the name of a good doctor.

The 2007 film *4 luni, 3 săptămâni și 2 zile*¹³, directed by Cristian Mungiu, revisits the abortion theme in 2007. Set in the 1980s, it tells the story of two friends, Otilia and Găbița. Găbița becomes unwantedly pregnant and struggles to obtain an abortion because the pregnancy is advanced. The abortion is eventually performed in a hotel room, unsafely and illegally by a shadowy and deceitful man, Mr Bebe. The foetus is thrown away in a trash bag, and the two friends promise never to speak of it again. This tale contrasts with a Communist propaganda film, *Ilustrate cu flori de*

¹¹ In English, *And one could hear the crickets*, translation by Marinescu.

¹² In English, *Complaisance/Complacency. Raising in Orthopedics*, translation by Marinescu.

¹³ In English, *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, official translation at Cannes Film Festival.

*câmp*¹⁴ (1975), which aimed to teach “disobedient” women a lesson. Set in early 1970s Bucharest, it follows Irina and Laura, the latter becoming pregnant after engaging with a married man and seeking an abortion. Laura insists on getting an abortion but questions her decision when it is too late and dies of complications, while Irina kills herself, feeling responsible for her friend’s death. The film served a propagandistic purpose, instilling fear and regret in women considering abortion and underscoring the dangers of illegal procedures. In conclusion, novels and visual productions such as films and documentaries like these which narrate a collective past, intertangle different personal stories, evoke a dreadful atmosphere and resonate with younger generations and with those who have no direct experience of the Communist regime, keeping alive a not-too-far past (Adam & Mitrou, 2016).

3.5. Processing the Trauma from Generation to Generation

At the dawn of post-communist democracy, at Giulești Maternity Hospital, Marinescu recounts that there were 50 to 60 hospitalized women who wanted to terminate their pregnancies. Some of the women were seven months’ pregnant. (The Decree Chronicles)¹⁵

In Romania, evidence shows that during the Communist years working women were forced to undergo gynaecological examinations on a monthly basis in order to detect early pregnancies, and monitor them until birth. “The mentality that developed is that screening is a check-up on pregnancy and not a screening for diseases such as cervical cancer.” (Ungurean in Oncioiu & Mesean:

2021). The figure of the medical practitioner was usually negative, linked to lack of interest and automatic work rather than interest in the patient’s wellbeing, the imperative being to give birth to new citizens. This, as widely talked about, creates the collective memory of women enduring on their bodies such aggressive laws. What is in turn surprising is what happened after 1989 in the third analysed generation, the one outliving the demise of anti-abortion policies.

In December 1989, after the overthrow of Ceaușescu’s regime, abortion was re-legalized in Romania. The Romanian population saw a significant decrease between 1991 and 2001, with a birth-to-mortality rate ratio of 9.8:11.6 per 1000 inhabitants in 2001, indicating more deaths than births. The fertility rate among young women aged 15 to 24 also dropped significantly. In 2014 the right to abortion was regulated by Article 201 of the Romanian Penal Code, which penalized abortions in the following cases: 1) if performed by unqualified personnel or outside medical institutions, 2) if the pregnancy exceeds 14 weeks (except for therapeutic purposes up to 24 weeks), or 3) if the woman unwillingly undergoes the procedure. Moreover, the Article made self-induced abortion unpunishable, unlike under Communist laws¹⁶ With the regime change in 1989, contraceptives were allowed for import, sale, and use by women in order to manage their reproductive health. Despite the availability of contraception, abortion remained a commonly used method of birth control.

To understand why abortion continues to be widely relied upon as a birth control method, memory theory, and particularly body memory, offers valuable insights. Memory functions as a process rather than a fixed entity. Amongst the four dimensions of memory identified by Craps and Vermeulen (2016), transgenerationality

¹⁴ In English, Postcards with Wild Flowers, translation by IMDb. <https://m.imdb.com/title/tt0071651/releaseinfo/>

¹⁵ *The Party State Tasked Women with Having Children. The Repercussions Are Still Felt.* By Diana Oncioiu, Diana Meseșan, November 4, 2021. [The Party State Tasked Women with Having Children. The Repercussions Are Still Felt - Decree Chronicles](https://www.the-party-state-tasked-women-with-having-children-the-repercussions-are-still-felt-decree-chronicles/)

¹⁶ For more information, see Codul Penal, Lege nr. 286 din 17 iulie 2009, Articolul 201. <https://reproductiverights.org/maps/provision/romania-abortion-provisions/>

explains how the violence experienced by one generation is transmitted to the next, even if they did not experience it directly but lived through its memory images. This transmission reshapes and remoulds the memory, whether within families or publicly. The descendants of Holocaust survivors, for example, adopt their ancestors' trauma as part of their identity, despite not having experienced the genocide themselves (Craps & Vermeulen, 2016).

Based on the WHO assessment in 1999¹⁷, some factors made abortion more accessible than contraception: firstly, in 1999 the cost of a legal abortion ranged between 60,000 and 92,000 lei (approximately \$2 to \$3); secondly, legal abortions typically involve a one-day hospital or clinic stay, meaning a quick procedure. Moreover, it was women aged 25 to 29 who most frequently sought abortions, often due to low income, unemployment, partner-related issues, and overall lack of information on contraceptive use. The assessment revealed that the overall contraceptive prevalence rate among women was 63.8%, with 29.5% using modern contraception and 34.3% using traditional and highly ineffective methods like withdrawal and rhythm (WHO report, 2004)¹⁸. Modern contraceptives such as condoms, oral contraceptives, and IUDs, which have the lowest failure rates, were often avoided due to their cost and the need for a prescription. Contraception was also believed to cause serious side effects and more health problems than abortion. Thus, abortion remained seen as an accessible, cheap, and quick procedure. Another reason emerging from the report is the reluctance to undergo gynaecological examinations and regular checks for Romanian women, with serious repercussions not only on their reproductive health, but also on their medical state. For instance, cervical cancer, the second leading cause

of female death in Europe, counts the highest mortality rate in Romania. Despite a screening program by the Ministry of Health between 2012 and 2017, only a few women, mostly those educated and living in urban areas, regularly see a doctor and undergo periodic checks like the Pap smear test (Todor et al., 2021).

In conclusion, transgenerationality of trauma defines interesting, apparently contradictory behaviours. Those women fertile in the 1990s and 2000s, despite not undergoing the abortion ban on their bodies, recollected the tremendous experiences of those women before them but still preferred abortion over contraception in fear of an inadequate healthcare system. Hence, the repercussions on post-1989 Romanian women also manifest infant and maternal mortality issues, and inadequate reproductive health care and cancer prevention such as cervical cancer screenings. The main, still present legacy printed in women's collective memory is that abortion, in contrast to medical checks and contraception, is the only way to exercise control over their own bodies (Anton, 2011).

4. CONCLUSIONS

In the Romanian context, the memory and trauma of pro-natalist policies persist among Romanian women born after 1989, in the form of a collective past, even though their bodies did not endure such atrocities. Literary and cinematic works from the previous section indicate how transgenerational memory is processed, with the critical works on the abortion ban emerging in the early 2000s, when awareness of past events reached a maturity point. The Romanian pro-natalist past remained a taboo for at least a decade after 1989, until the early 2000s. The absence of a scapegoat to punish (Ceașescu and his wife Elena were executed after a brief trial, without being held accountable for Decree 770) contributed to this silence. The release of the documentary "Decreteii: Children of the Decree" was a pivotal moment. Additionally, post-1989 Romania saw a

¹⁷ Abortion and contraception in Romania. A strategic assessment of policy, programme and research issues. Report issued in 2004.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

return to traditional gender roles, reinforced by the Orthodox Church, which expected women to be mothers, albeit not socialist mothers. Consequently, abortion was widely practiced but remained a woman-only matter, surrounded by shame, painful memories, and a sense of privacy (Anton, 2009).

The first generation affected by the ban *i.e.* women born in the 1940s and 1950s, was still influenced by state socialism, while their daughters lived through it and witnessed its demise. A new generation has emerged since the overthrow of the Romanian communist regime in December 1989, allowing for greater reflection on that past (Bopp-Filimonov, 2024). Oral narratives and later cinematic productions revealed how the generation of socialist mothers developed a collective memory based on abortion language and places of remembrance. This language included anecdotes about unreliable contraception methods (e.g., ‘And how exactly can one use aspirin as contraception?’ ‘By keeping it between the knees – that’s how!’, a folklore joke goes)¹⁹ and verbs gaining new meanings, such as "a sonda" (to probe), redefined as getting an abortion. The unwanted foetus was often described as a "problem," reflecting the specific vulnerability of women targeted by *the Decree* and the detachment towards the child in societies with a history of abortion liberalization, like pre-1966 Romania. Hospitals and police headquarters became significant memory spaces, as women often initiated abortions at home and then sought medical help, pretending it was a miscarriage. If suspected, they could be reported to the police, arrested, and incriminated for attempting an abortion (Anton, 2009).

After 1989, abortion became a woman's individual choice rather than a state imposition.

¹⁹ This line, in its simplicity, draws attention to the popular belief that aspirin could prevent unwanted pregnancy if inserted vaginally before intercourse, and to abstinence as the only contraception method.

However, the transition from a socialist to a free-market state led to worsening economic conditions, causing women to delay or suspend motherhood plans to participate in the workforce. Motherhood became an obstacle to work fulfilment and hiring possibilities, with women being questioned about their family plans during job interviews. Arsene argues that the ideological imposition to multiply for the state's benefit was replaced by an economic imposition not to multiply, benefiting business owners and institutional profit (Arsene, 2017). This shift indicates that control over women's bodies has transitioned from the state to the economy and profitability. To this day, many Romanian women, especially those over 40, fear regular gynaecological check-ups and mistrust doctors and medical interventions. This mistrust and lack of sexual education contribute to the continued preference for abortion over modern contraceptives and preventive health measures. The generation of socialist mothers experienced oblivion, fear of death, and mistrust, being deprived of the right to safe abortions. Their trauma was passed on to subsequent generations, impacting women's general and reproductive health. Unwillingly, they raised a generation with little knowledge of sexuality and reproductive health (Anton, 2011) with its remnants in today's one. The present study contributes thus contributes to the exploration of Romanian women's transgenerational collective memory in relation to abortion and forced motherhood. Through the lens of political and historical vicissitudes, three generations of women living in Romania during and after Communism were put under scrutiny and showed how the Decree 66/770 repercussions remain perceivable to this day. This memory revives not only through cinematic works, but on women's actual bodily experiences, resuscitating discomfiting feelings of fear and distrust towards medical examinations and state's interference in their intimate life.

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