

## **Undeserving daughters of hero mothers. The political disempowerment of women with many children in present-day Romania**

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**Cristina Rat<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract.** This paper examines forms of symbolic violence in the political discourse on motherhood in contemporary Romania, which push at the margins of the social policy debate the situation of jobless families with dependent children from economically underdeveloped areas and minimize their welfare rights, despite of the strong evidence that they have been facing the highest poverty rate since the fall of state-socialism. In an attempt to investigate the reasons behind the low political mobilization and quasi-absence from the public sphere of these categories, it tries to analyse the main barriers of political voice, with emphasis on the sources and forms of public discrediting of their concerns and claims. The context of discussion is laid by a synthetic presentation of the historical development of family policies in post-socialist Romania as compared to other CEE countries, arguing that they contain forms of “unfavourable inclusion” (Amartya Sen, 2000) of large families with dependent children. The analysis of two recent policy debates (on means-tested child allowance and earnings-related childcare benefit) serves to unfold the mechanisms of disciplinary policies targeting mothers with many children, who are no longer regarded as “hero mothers”, as they would have been during the pronatalist policies of state-socialism.

Whose voices are present in these debates? Are there any echoes of the communist speech on “hero mothers”, whose efforts to raise five or more children were recognized and rewarded? Which “fertility threats” are to be tackled? What types of “deserving” and “undeserving” motherhood are set forth and situated within particular ethnic, religious, and class positions? These are some of the questions the study tries to address.

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<sup>1</sup> Sociology Department, “Babes-Bolyai” University Cluj-Napoca, Romania, e-mail: crat@socasis.ubbcluj.ro

## *Introduction*

Scholarship on post-socialist welfare states has been much focused on the path-dependence versus path departure at the level of policy design, and the turn towards heterogeneous forms of mixing etatist-paternalistic legacies with neoliberal imports (Deacon and Szalai, 1992; Deacon, 2000; Kovacs, 2002; Popescu, 2004b; Ferge and Juhasz, 2004; Inglot, 2008; Cerami, 2006; Cerami and Vanhuysse, 2008; Szikra and Tomka, 2008). The domain of family policies constitutes one of the most frequent terrain for both ideological debates and implementation problems, as it catalyzes divergent normative concerns about defining how a family should be, what particular roles should be assigned for women and men as parents, or how much responsibility should the state hold for the upbringing of children. The pro-natalist legacy of state socialism only apparently provides a head start for the implementation of family policies that try to address the threat of demographic crisis: the pro-natalist policies were heavily discredited by the Ceausescu-regime and, after the 1989 change, the image of children was associated with the “unwanted and abandoned”, who are more likely to place a burden upon the society than to provide “human resources” for development.

The undisputable determinant of the Romanian baby-boom in 1967-1970 was the Decree 770/1966 on the interdiction of abortion and the prohibition of selling contraceptives. Nonetheless, socialist legislation also provided forms of symbolic and material rewards for families with many children, which were implemented much earlier. Most notably, the Decree 195/1951 sets forth distinctions in the honour of mothers who gave birth and raised five or more children:

1. for ten or more children, they received the distinction of “Hero Mothers” and a lump-sum of 2,000 lei);
2. for seven to nine children, they received the “Order of Maternal Glory”, which had three categories: category I (1,500 lei), category II (1,000 lei) and category III (500 lei);
3. for five or six children, they received the “Medal of Maternity” category I or II, but no financial premium.

All distinctions were accompanied by certain privileges, similar to those received by the “Heroes of Socialist Work”: they were invited to various public manifestations, had

priority at state credits for building or buying personal houses/apartments, and a holiday during the year in which they were decorated. (Albu, Ioan: *Dreptul Familiei [The Legislation on Family Rights]*, Cluj-Napoca). At least at the level of political declarations, the state and the Party praised families with many children and provided both services (crèches, kindergardens and day-care facilities – H.C.M. 586/1951) and cash benefits for children, received by one of the parents on the same pay-check as the salary (Decree 109/1950 with its further modifications; see also Kligman, 2000; Popescu, 2004).

In postsocialist Romania, this ethos of heroic mothers with five or more children was downplayed into a pejorative label for uneducated women who commodify their children in order to get welfare and subsist outside of the labour market. Throughout the last two decades, the changes in family policies indicate a strong preoccupation for “disciplining” mothers by sanctioning motherhood without prior employment and rewarding only the birth of the first four children. Romanian policymakers showed less concern for decreasing fertility rates than to the situation of “unwanted” children and “uncontrolled” fertility in poor rural regions, and especially among the Roma minority. Family policies maintained unfavourable conditions of entitlement for parents with inconsistent participation on the formal labour market. Arguably, the regulations on maternity benefits, childcare leave, and means-tested child allowance intended primarily to control the fertility behaviour of women, as these policies failed to meet the quest for “social investment” welfare (Lister, 2004) and support for balancing workplace and domestic duties. The intertwining between family policies and anti-poverty policies affected considerably the configuration of social inequalities in Central and Eastern European (CEE) transition countries and the deepening class division between low-skilled workers, especially those from rural areas, and the emerging urban middle class. Despite the high rates of child poverty, family policies in Romania systematically disfavoured mothers with irregular employment and large families, who were most affected by post-socialist transformations yet lacked the political power to push their problems on the policy agenda.

The welfare state enacts its disciplinary functions by imposing also a desirable model of the family and fertility behaviour. These might be rooted in the demographic

stress of ageing population and the decline in the size of the Romanian nation, as well as the prejudices against the Roma minority and the “social problem” of uncontrolled Roma fertility. In this context, the social control function of family policies was strengthened, parents who follow a traditional family model because of religious or cultural beliefs are disfavoured, and children treated unequally, based on their rank within the family. The insight into the development of family policies in Romania might serve as a case study for investigating welfare regulations as pragmatic solutions to heavily ideologised national problems, with consequences upon the structuration of social inequalities and the creation of new class divisions.

### *The post-socialist development of family policies in Romania*

Family policies in post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) show different patterns of re-familialisation and it is difficult to assess to what extent the socialist de-familiasing legacies, the revitalization of nationalism, the soft pressures of the EU and the deepening demographic concerns orchestrated the tune of policy design. Following Leitner’s (2003) conceptual distinction between “implicit” and “explicit” familialisation, Szelewa (2006), Polakowski and Szelewa (2008), as well as Szikra and Tomka (2009) convincingly argue that Poland adopted “implicit familialism”, the Czech Rep. and Slovakia “explicit familialism”, whereas Hungary embraced a mixed approach, labelled by the authors as “optional familialism”. Regardless of the (re-)familialisation model adopted, the policy outcomes had been apparently the same: fertility rates continued to decrease, whereas women’s participation on the formal labour market did not significantly increase (Szelewa, 2006). In the case of Romania, as discussed in the following paragraphs, there is a dual policy of “implicit familialism” for parents absent from or with irregular participation on the labour market, and “optional familialism” for working parents. This duality is rooted in the attempt to discourage women from the poorer segments of the population to have children, and encourage the fertility of middle-class women, though not necessarily their childcare role within the family.

As Daly (2004) insightfully remarks, the family should be seen in a broader approach, “as involving not just a structure or form, but sets of practices and relations”

(Daly, 2004: 136). At the level of policy priorities, she notices a shift from regulations on the obligations between spouses towards parental responsibilities. In this context, the transformations of care relationships constitute the core issue of “de-familialization”. The idea is developed by Leitner and Lessenich (2007), who draw attention that, behind the conceptual opposition between dependence and independence in familial care relationships, one should regard (1) both the perspective of the care giver and that of the care receiver, and (2) the social as well as economic dimensions of (in)dependence. Although quite intuitive, these prerequisites have been mostly disregarded by theoreticians and politicians of “de-familialization”, who, according to the Leitner and Lessenich (2007), focus on the care-givers (and the authors repeatedly remind us “read: women”) and economic (in)dependence (gainful participation on the labour market). The authors somewhat leave aside that the demarcation between dependence and independence is also ambiguous, given that emotional ties are difficult to be unrolled and rolled back.

Policies concerning children were often attempts of shaping parenting practices and, in particular, “disciplining” mothers (Rawlings, 2006; Haney, 2002) in the Foucaultian sense of the term (Foucault, 1979; Culpitt, 2001). Reproductive policies, i.e. prevailing medical, psychological and social normative considerations upon pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering had been shaped not by a monolithic non-feminist or anti-feminist “forces”, although they had been holding considerable influence on the development of these policies. Feminist critiques were incorporated in the evolution of these policies, just as the “resistance” of women claiming for giving birth to their children at home. The control of medicine (its “monopoly” over childbirth in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) was “not simply imposed from the top down” (Sawicki, 1993: 196), but it raised resistance and opened up a field of struggles. Looking at the development of what she calls “public maternalism” in Hungary, Haney (2002) concludes that “instead of remaining in the confines of the maternal, female [welfare] clients strategized with their maternal resources to defend their interests as wives, workers and women” (Haney, 2002: 133). Middle-class women might have acted in a similar vein in Romania as well, but it is difficult to assess whether women from subaltern groups (less educated women from rural areas, and especially Roma women) have ever exercised political voice.

Analysts of family policies usually put on gender lenses in order to scrutinize policy development (Haney, 2002; Lewis, 2006b, Lewis and Surrender, 2004; Newman, 2005; Popescu, 2006); but the impact of gendered policies is mediated and shaped by one's class position and ethno-cultural belonging. This becomes particularly salient when ethnic minority status overlaps with economic deprivation and marginal position on the formal labour market, such as in the case of the Roma minority.

Comparative studies on policy responses to declining birth rates ought to pay attention at the different demographic profiles and fertility rates of various ethno-cultural groups *within* states, and how family policies are turned into Trojan horses for ethno-nationalist interventions of governments. This is especially so in the case of Romania, which had a loud ethno-nationalist discourse throughout 1970-80, and extreme nationalist politicians continued to be popular after the change of the regime, some of them<sup>2</sup> even entering the European Parliament in 2009. During state socialism, the predominant policy towards well organized, politically strong ethnic groups (such as the Hungarians or the Germans) was to trim down ethnic difference at mere folklore (Verdery, 1992). Politically weak ethnic groups (such as the Roma or the Lipovean-Russians in Dobrogea) were not even recognized as national minorities, but labelled as having a deficit of civilization and forced to assimilate.

After the political turn in 1989, the Roma gained political voice and the cultural rights of a national minority, however, prejudices against the "Gypsies" perpetuated. One of the strongest elements of these prejudices is that the Gypsies instrumentalize their children in order to gain money either from child allowance or from begging. Their fertility behaviour is seen as irresponsible and abusive, and Gypsy women are perceived as uncaring and exploitative mothers.

Throughout Central and Eastern Europe, the incidence and the depth of poverty is considerable higher among the Roma than the non-Roma (European Commission, 2004; D. Ringold, 2000; D. Ringold, Orenstein, M., Wilkens, E., 2003; Szelenyi, 2002), and considerably more Roma than non-Roma receive means-tested income support benefits (Milcher, 2005; UNDP, 2003; Fleck and Rughinis, 2008), although the amount of these

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<sup>2</sup> It is the case of Corneliu Vadim Tudor, the leader of the Great Romania Party, elected in 2009 to enter the European Parliament.

benefits is hardly enough to ameliorate their situation of deprivation (Fleck and Rughinis, 2008; Milcher, 2005; Rat, 2005; Szalai, 2005; Stewart, 2002). National statistics on welfare receipt do not offer data split by ethnicity, given that welfare applicants are not required state their ethnic belonging on the forms submitted to the offices in charge<sup>3</sup>. Survey research leaves room to overestimating poverty and welfare receipt among the Roma, given that segregated, poor Roma communities are easier to be included in the sample than integrated Roma living amongst the mainstream. The latter might decline from revealing their ethnic identity to the interviewers, in the context of strong negative prejudices against them.

The superposition of the derogatory label of “welfare dependency” upon a whole “ethnic” group opened the door for politically loaded conceptualisations with some anecdotal evidence attached: “underclass”, “culture of poverty”, “ghettoization of the poor”. Dean and Taylor-Gooby (1992), in their response to the incipient British moral panic of the emerging “underclass” forecasted by Murray (1990), assert that if there were something common between the potential “underclass” in the US and that from the UK, it would be that they both serve a “conceptual repository for non-conforming social minorities (...). The reflexive effect of the underclass concept is not to define the marginalised, but to marginalise those it defines” (Dean and Taylor-Gooby, 1992: 44). Concerns for “welfare dependency” among the Roma penetrate not only in the mass media, but also the “expert” evaluations of transnational actors such as the World Bank or the UNDP. For instance, the 2003 World Bank report argues for the need for “breaking the cycle of poverty and social exclusion” whereas the 2003 UNDP report is tendentiously entitled “The Roma in Central and Eastern Europe. Avoiding the Dependency Trap”<sup>4</sup>.

“Social exclusion” as a concept gains relevance as: “(the) lack of empathy between the majority and socially isolated minorities makes it easier for ambitious politicians to advance their causes by demonizing and ultimately dehumanizing these

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<sup>3</sup> The regulation tries to combat the possibility of negative discrimination, nevertheless, it excludes any objective evaluation of actual welfare receipt among the Roma, as compared to majority populations (Cahn, 2004; European Commission, 2004; Rat, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> “If social welfare systems are to decrease (rather than increase) dependency cultures, they should be based on the principle of “positive net benefits for positive net efforts”. Social welfare systems should provide incentives (and not disincentives) for the adoption of pro to active life strategies” (UNDP, 2003).

minorities” (Barry, 1998: 18-19). Public expectations for state action in the case of the Roma have an inherent dimension of exercising social control upon “the Gypsies”. For example, in the 2006 survey on public opinion on ethnic minorities in Romania, 81% of the non-Roma respondents assessed that the majority of the Roma disobeyed the law, and, at the same time, 49% considered that the state should provide more subsidies and assistance for the Roma and 47% that the state should implement measures to stop the increase of the number of the Roma (CCRIT, 2006).

### *Fertility blues in Romania<sup>5</sup> – who has children and how many?*

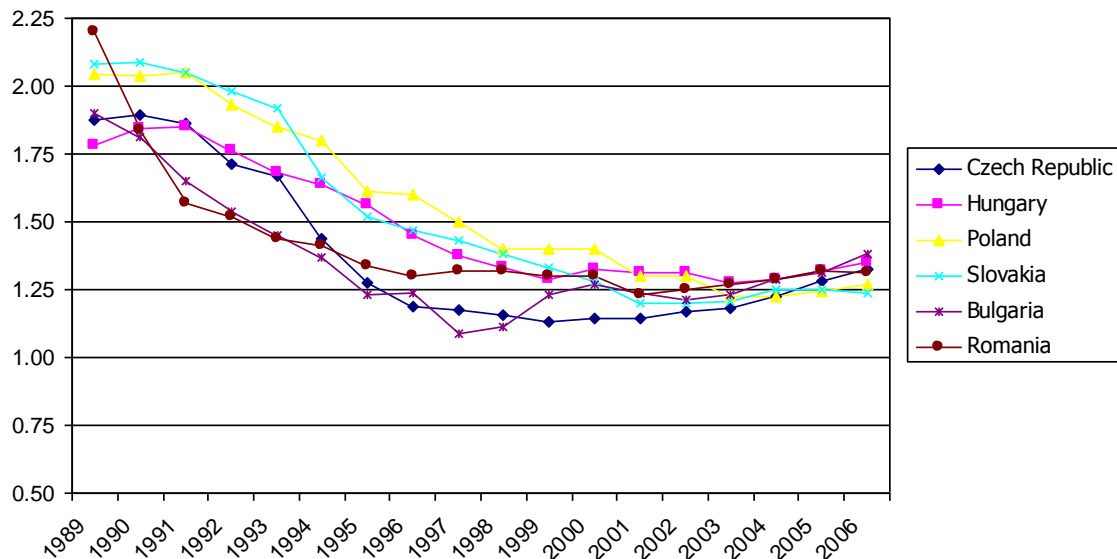
After the change of the political regime in 1989, there was a sudden drop of the fertility rate at the national level from 2.2 in 1989 to 1.6 in 1991. Most analysts (Haragus, 2008; Popescu, 2004a and 2006; Roth et. al., 2006; Rotariu, 2003) interpret this as a backlash of the coercive pro-natalist policy of Ceausescu and the availability of contraceptives and abortion after 1990, the abortion rate in Romania peaking at 315 legally induced abortions per 100 live births in 1990 and 1991 (UNICEF, 2008). However, the steady decrease of the fertility rate throughout the 1990s, common to all CEE countries, was induced primarily by economic insecurity and falling living standards in the region (Popescu, 2006). Natality slightly increased after 2002 and converged in 2006 at around 1.3 children (close to the EU-15 average) in 2006.

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<sup>5</sup> The title obviously paraphrases Castles’s (2003) title: “Birth Rate Blues: A Real Crisis in the Making?” (Castles, 2003, pp. 141-167).



### The evolution of fertility rates in CEE countries 1989-2006



Source: UNICEF TransMonee Project Database, 2008.

The evolution of fertility rates did not follow the same pattern for all socio-economic strata and ethnic groups. Throughout the transition period, fertility rates in Romania were higher in rural areas than in the urban, and women with lower level of education had more children and at younger ages than women with higher educational qualifications (Haragus, 2008; Rotariu, 2003). Unfortunately there is no data available for the *evolution* of fertility rates by ethnicity; the latest data split by ethnicity is provided by the 2002 Census, which also offers information on the age-group and family status of mothers.

**Table 1: The distribution of women by ethnicity and number of children in 2002**

<i>Computed for all women aged 15+</i> <i>(%)</i>	<i>Without children</i>	<i>1 child</i>	<i>2 children</i>	<i>3 children</i>	<i>4 or more children</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Fertility rate</i>
<b>Total</b>	28.3	22.7	27.5	10.4	11.1	<b>100%</b>	<b>1.65</b>
Romanians	28.4	22.9	27.5	10.3	10.9	100%	1.63
Hungarians	26.5	22.2	31.1	11.2	8.9	100%	1.61
Roma/Gypsies	28.3	14.2	15.8	11.9	29.8	100%	2.45

Source: Romanian National Census 2002, Own calculations based on census data provided by the National Agency for the Roma, [www.anr.gov.ro](http://www.anr.gov.ro). Fertility rate computed as number of live births per women.

Note: Out of the 29.8% of Roma women who had 4 or more children, 11% had four children, 13% had five or six children, and the rest more than six children.

As shown in Table 1, the fertility rate of ethnic Romanian and Hungarian women was 1.63 live births per woman aged 15 or older, as compared to 2.45 in the case of Roma women. Whereas more than 50% of both Romanian and Hungarian women had only one or two children, 30% of the Roma women reported one or two children at the moment of the Census. 12% of the Roma women had three children and almost 30% four or more children.

***Policy responses: who should have children and how many***

During state-socialism, child allowance was received as an income-supplement for one of the parents (usually the father), conditioned upon his/her working status. There was no means-tested additional support designed specifically for families and children. The legislation did not change until two years after the fall of communism, by the Law 61/1993 (Cerami, 2006; Popescu, 2004a; Popescu, 2006; Roth et. al., 2006). Given that many Roma were not working or they lost their working status right after 1990, in 1990-93 they were basically not entitled to receive financial support for children. Women from rural areas, formerly employed in state farms or collective farms, were in the same situation: they might have gained some land after the 1991 law on the restitution of private properties, but this was hardly enough to secure their living.

**Universal child allowance.** After the implementation of the new law (61/1993) all children were entitled to receive the universal child allowance (not their parents), but all school-aged children were supposed to attend institutions of education in order to receive the allowance. The administration of the benefit was fragmented, given that children who were not yet of school age received it through the local offices of social protection, whereas school-aged children through the educational institution they were attending. The legislation was discriminatory against young persons aged 16-18 who decided to leave earlier the educational system for paid employment, and favoured those still at school at the age of 18 or 19, as the latter continued to benefit until the end of the academic year. In 2005, the Constitutional Court decided that it was unconstitutional to condition the universal child allowance upon school attendance *at any age below 18*. On the basis of the governmental ordinance OUG 148/2005, starting with January 2007 the

universal child allowance was not conditioned anymore by school attendance, and in the case of children below the age of two the value of the benefits became considerably higher (around 50 €/month).

**Benefits for families with three or more children before 2003.** In 1997 (Law 119/1997), families with three or more children were entitled to a supplement to the universal child allowance. This supplement was not means-tested, it was granted upon request and its value was small and decreased considerably in real terms until 2004, when the laws on child benefits were changed. The legislation was abolished by OUG 105/2003, and no specific benefits targeting families with three or more children were introduced later on.

**Means-tested child allowance.** The universal child allowance was doubled starting from 2003 by a means-tested component for needy families with children, whose values are slightly higher in case of one-parent families (governmental ordinance OUG 105/2003). The eligibility threshold was initially established at around 50 € per family member per month, which was considerably higher than the corresponding level of the Minimum Income Guarantee. Between 2003 and 2009, the eligibility threshold and the values of the benefits were indexed annually through governmental ordinance. Starting from 2009, the eligibility threshold was set somewhat higher, at the minimum net national wage. The condition of receipt: every three months, parents should present at the welfare office a certificate testifying that their school-aged children attend school. The amounts remained rather low and after the fourth child the benefit does not increase anymore: this means that there is no means-tested allowance for children who rank fifth or higher in the family. In 2009, needy families with four or more children received a monthly complementary allowance of 17 €, whereas lone-parent families with four or more children 22 €. The value of the benefit is increased by 15% for families receiving social aid based on the Law on the Minimum Income Guarantee (see also Romanian Ministry of Labour, Social Protection and the Family, 2009a).

**Birth-indemnity** is a fix sum of around 60€, granted at the birth of the first four children. There is no indemnity for children who rank five or higher. Starting from 2007, the financial benefit is accompanied by a voucher for baby-items, which is a universal benefit, granted regardless of the rank of the child. According to the governmental

ordinance OG No.5/2010, the voucher for baby items (“trousseau” at birth) would have been replaced by a financial allowance; however, the “austerity package” adopted by the government in June 2010 withdrew the “trousseau” altogether.

**Paid maternity leave and child-care leave** before the child reaches the age of two (or three in the case of children with disabilities) is available for parents who were gainfully employed and contributed to the insurance-fund continuously for at least 12 months before the birth of the child (in the case of maternity benefit, the length of contribution follows the same logic as the sickness leave, and it is conditioned by one month of employment). Both maternity and parental leave are *paid* (i.e. parents receive a monthly state benefit) only for *three* children. Maternity benefit is granted for four months, out of which at least two should be used after the birth of the infant. The value of the benefit is earnings-related, computed as 85% of the previous income of the mother. Fathers are entitled to only two weeks of additional paid leave, which should be used after the birth of the child. Paid childcare leave for children below the age of two (or three for children with disabilities) can be taken either by the father or the mother, but the couple cannot use the parental leave and its corresponding benefit simultaneously. Before 2009, the benefit was flat-rate and computed as 85% of the national average wage. Starting with 2009 (following the governmental decision H.G. 1682/2008), an earnings-related alternative was introduced, which grants parents with higher incomes 85% of *their* average income during the last 12 months of gainful employment, ceiling the benefit at 952 € per month. The poorest categories of the population, with irregular participation on the formal labour market, do not satisfy the twelve months continuous contributory period and fail to qualify for these benefits. Many Roma parents are in this situation. Families with lower incomes, where only the male partner is employed for the minimum wage, often decide to combine paid childcare leave (used by the father) with informal work, especially in rural areas, leaving the actual caring role for the women at home (Petre, 2008; Barometer of Public Policies, 2008). The law does not stipulate that when one of the parents is staying home (as “housewife”), the other parent cannot claim the benefit: applicants should only sign a declaration that their partner is neither on maternity nor childcare leave (see also Romanian Ministry of Labour, Social Protection and the Family, 2009b).

**Table 2:** The evolution of the proportion of fathers on childcare leave by area of residence

	<b>National</b>	<b>Rural</b>	<b>Urban</b>
<b>First quarter or 2006</b>	17.9	29.7	11.8
<b>First quarter or 2007</b>	19.9	31.9	13.3
<b>First quarter or 2008</b>	19.9	31.1	13.4
<b>Fourth quarter or 2008</b>	18.8	30.1	12.4

Source: Romanian Ministry of Labour, 2009 b.

Table 2 reports on the evolution of the proportion of fathers on childcare leave by area of residence: it is noteworthy that in rural areas around 30% of parents on paid childcare leave are the fathers, although in rural areas the traditional gender roles are rather strong (Gender Barometer, 2000) and most women are either unpaid agricultural workers on family farms or “housewives” (Romanian National Institute of Statistics, 2008). The decision to go on childcare leave is most probably motivated by an economic rationale, to combine the financial benefit (which might well be higher than the wage of the father) with undeclared informal labour.

**Stimulant for returning to work** is granted for parents who are eligible for paid childcare leave, but decide to return to work: they receive a monthly financial benefit (“stimulant”) of around €30. As shown in Table 6, the number of parents opting for paid labour and receiving the “stimulant” instead of the childcare benefit was almost double in urban areas: 11.2% in the fourth quarter of 2008, as compared to 6.8%.

**Table 3:** The evolution of the proportion of parents opting for returning to workplace and receiving the stimulant instead of childcare benefits

	<b>National</b>	<b>Rural</b>	<b>Urban</b>
<b>First quarter or 2006</b>	2.4	1.5	2.9
<b>First quarter or 2007</b>	7.4	5.9	8.4
<b>First quarter or 2008</b>	8.8	6.6	10.0
<b>Fourth quarter or 2008</b>	9.6	6.8	11.2

Source: Romanian Ministry of Labour, 2009b.

Employers can also grant **crèche vouchers** for their female employees with small children, in case that none of the parents is staying at home with the infants. These vouchers are not liable to taxation. Both measures target middle-class parents from urban areas, given that childcare facilities are hardly available in rural areas.

**Table 4:** Distribution of beneficiaries of child-care benefit according to their incomes in 2009

	Number of beneficiaries (mothers or fathers)	Distribution of beneficiaries (percentages) according to their net income before going on parental leave (RON)					
		<= 706	<=1358	<=2716	<=4074	<=4706	>4706
Urban	113180	84.12	9.11	5.02	1.13	0.21	0.41
Rural	65613	93.26	4.99	1.46	0.21	0.03	0.05
<b>Total</b>	<b>178793</b>	<b>87.47</b>	<b>7.60</b>	<b>3.71</b>	<b>0.79</b>	<b>0.15</b>	<b>0.28</b>

Source: Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Protection, 2010

\*Note: 706 lei/month represents the amount of average monthly income, i.e. for beneficiaries with this income 85% of their wage is equal to the flat-rate value of the benefit.

As indicated in Table 3, only a reduced segment of the upper-middle class (15.8% in the urban and 6.7% in the rural areas) actually benefited from the change of the legislation on the amount of the benefit. Needless to say, the effects of the law are regressive, given that it was not coupled by providing a universal maternity or childcare benefit. The “higher” amount of the universal child allowance for infants below the age of two (around €50/month) was regarded to serve as a surrogate for “universal” childcare benefits: however, its value represents only one forth of the childcare benefit granted to insured parents, who were gainfully employed throughout the last 12 months.

In order to assess the coverage of family benefits, the ECHISERV dataset was used, collected within the framework of the research project CEEX 157/2006, “Disparities in the Use of Health Care Services in the North West Development Region. Socio-economic Patterns and Causes”, project director: prof. dr. Livia Popescu, “Babes-Bolyai” University Cluj. Details about the project and its results are available on the web-page of the project: [www.socialzoom.com/echiserv](http://www.socialzoom.com/echiserv).

**Table 5:** Sources of income and the coverage of means-tested social transfers in the North-West region, 2007

	Below the poverty threshold*		Above the poverty threshold	
	Region	Roma sample	Region	Roma sample
Income from wage labour	29.4	21.6	66.9	65.6
Income from agricultural work or assets	3.6	0.0	4.6	0.0
Income profits, rents, dividends	0.0	0.0	1.8	0.0
Work abroad with contract	0.0	0.0	2.1	0.0
Pensions (retirement and disability)	39.3	24.8	56.0	25.0
Universal child allowance	31.8	46.9	29.8	59.3
Means-tested child allowance for needy families	6.0	15.1	2.5	12.5
Maternity and child-care benefits during parental leave	2.4	1.4	4.3	7.8
Unemployment benefits	1.2	0.4	1.5	3.1
Social aid based on MIG	4.7	20.2	0.9	4.7
Emergency social security benefits	1.2	3.3	0.0	1.6
Disability allowance	2.4	4.2	0.9	7.8
Scholarships for good performance	3.5	0.4	1.5	0
Social scholarships (means-tested)	1.2	0.9	0.3	1.6
Support from relatives living in the country	1.2	0.9	1.8	1.5
Support from relatives living abroad	0.0	1.9	2.5	7.8
Occasional work without a contract	3.6	20.2	3.1	20.3

**Source:** ECHISERV dataset. Own calculations

**\*Note:** The poverty threshold was computed according to the €stat definition of the at-risk-of-poverty threshold: 60% of median income per equivalised household member, OECD-2 equivalence scale (weighting each adult except from the household head by 0.5 and each child aged 0-14 by 0.3).

As reported in Table 5, universal child allowance provides income for 46.9% of Roma households living below the at-risk-of poverty threshold, as compared to 31.8% of total households (Roma and non-Roma) in the N-W region. For households above the poverty threshold, 59.3% receive the universal child allowance in the case of Roma families, and 29.8% at the level of the N-W region. As mentioned before, the amount of the benefit in 2007 was around €8 per child per month, and it was indexed at €10 in 2009. Means-tested child allowance for needy families with children was received by 15.1% of the poor Roma households, as compared 6% of poor households at the regional level; for the households above the poverty threshold the corresponding figures were 12.5 (Roma) and 2.5% (regional level). Again, the amounts of the benefit are very low. Concerning maternity and child-care benefits during parental leave, it is noteworthy that only 1.4% of the poor Roma households received the benefit in 2007, as compared to 2.4% of the households at the level of the region. In the case of households above the poverty threshold, the situation was reverse: 7.8% of the Roma households and 4.3% of all

households received the benefit. The monthly amount of this insurance-based benefit was higher than the minimum national wage (it was computed in 2007 as 85% of the national average wage).

On the basis of the Integrated Household Surveys 1995-1998, Teşliuc et. al. (2001: 106-15) report that 11.1% of the Roma and 2.6% of the Romanian households received social assistance benefits in 1998, whereas in 1995 only 3.9% of the Roma and 2.1% of the Romanian households received welfare. Child allowance was received by 59.8% of the Roma and 38.3% of the non-Roma households in 1998, as compared to 55% versus 36.7% in 1995. The analysis PEGEE dataset<sup>6</sup> (see Rat, 2005) indicates that in 2000 only 10% of the Roma and 4% of the non-Roma households were receiving social assistance benefits. State transfers for children were received in 69.5% of the households whose head declared to be a Rom(ni), as compared to 42% of the non-Roma households.

The brief overview on welfare measures to support families with children reveals a dual policy of “implicit familialism” for women absent or with irregular participation on the labour market, and “optional familialism” for working women. This duality is rooted in the attempt to discourage women from the poorer segments of the population to have children, and encourage the middle-class women, though offering them both the alternative of assuming parental care responsibilities, and the alternative of return to their previous job.

***“Deserving” and “undeserving” families – political voice and silence in the case of two recent debates on policy proposals***

In order to gain insight into the political context of family policies and the distinctions between “deserving” and “undeserving” families, it is useful to look at two recent policy debates that penetrated not only the political agenda, but also the mass media. First, the

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<sup>6</sup> The PEGEE 2000 dataset was collected within the project *Poverty, Ethnicity and Gender in Transition countries* carried out by the *Center for Comparative Research* of the Sociology Department of the Yale University (lead by Iván Szelényi and involving social scientists from the all countries under study). The fieldwork took place in 2000 on national representative samples and oversamples of poor populations and the Roma minority. The following countries were included in the study: Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. See Szelényi (2002) for additional details.



proposal of the Democratic Liberal Party (PD-L) to change the universal child allowance into a selective progressive benefit (higher for low-income families), with an income eligibility threshold that would disqualify children from better-off families; the draft of the proposal passed the Senate in October 2009, but its revised version reached the public agenda only in February 2010, when it entered the Deputies' Chamber. Second, the project of the government to change the child-care benefit during parental leave (the right of working parents until their children reach the age of two, or, in the case of children with disabilities, three) from an earnings-related benefit to a flat rate benefit, set at around 150 Euro/month; this proposal was part of the "austerity program" designed by the government in May 2010 in order to reduce public spending, in accordance with the agreement with the IMF<sup>7</sup>. The comparison of the two debates is relevant not only because both have gained large media coverage, which is rather atypical for the Romanian family policy, but also because they allow us to scrutinize the mechanisms of public legitimization of expenditures from the central budget based on two rather different rationales: universality (in the case of child allowance) and contribution (in the case of childcare benefit during parental leave).

Concerning the debates on changing the universal child allowance, it ought to be mentioned that the first attempt to undertake such change belonged to the National Liberal Party (PNL) and it dates back to 2007. Tariceanu, at that time prime-minister from PNL, declared that he does not need money from the state in order to raise his daughters, and that the uniform amount of the benefit actually creates discrimination. This right-wind statement on behalf of the emerging Romanian upper-middle raised heavy criticisms of NGOs active in child protection (most notably *Save the Children*), just as the proposal of the PD-L did two years later. The attempts to introduce income-

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<sup>7</sup> The IMF declared that they did not impose a certain "austerity package" to the Romanian Government, but that it was the decision of the government what types of measures would be most effective to reduce public spending and meet the IMF criteria to qualify for the fifth IMF loan, planned for June 2010. The IMF actually granted the loan on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July 2010, after the Romanian Government implemented a revised version of the initial program (the Constitutional Court decided that cutting pensions by 15% was anti-constitutional, therefore the government maintained pensions but increased the VAT from 19% to 24%). Sources: The Press Releases of the Romanian Government ([www.gov.ro](http://www.gov.ro)) and the International Monetary Found ([www.imf.org](http://www.imf.org)): Press Release 10/280 and 09/148). For the initial declaration of the Romanian Prime Minister on the "austerity package" see: [http://www.gov.ro/prime-minister-has-argued-that-the-executive-has-opted-to-cut-budget-spending-for-at-least-two-reasons-not-to-further-stifle-the-economic\\_12a109224.html](http://www.gov.ro/prime-minister-has-argued-that-the-executive-has-opted-to-cut-budget-spending-for-at-least-two-reasons-not-to-further-stifle-the-economic_12a109224.html) (June 2010)

test for entitlement to child allowance and differentiate the amount of the benefit represented attempts to substantial policy shifts, given that they involved alterations of the Romanian welfare state: article 49 of the Romanian Constitution (2003) affirms that the state is responsible for the welfare of children and each child is entitled to state allowance. Unlike in other European countries, which grant family allowance for parents, in Romania the allowance is granted directly to the child and it “follows” the child (e.g., in case that the child is taken into foster care, the benefit “moves” from parents to the foster family). Another inconsistency of the proposal resided in the existence of means-tested benefits for families with children (O.U.G. 105/2003); however, the amount of the benefit flattens after the fourth child (i.e. the fifth child of an eligible family is not entitled to any means-tested benefit). Moreover, the proposal was hardly possible to be implemented: due to the scarcity of personnel at the local level and the fluctuation of earnings, the differentiation of child-allowance according to the income of the family is bureaucratically very complicated and time-consuming, determining delays in the payment of benefit.

The parliamentary debates in the Deputies’ Chamber that followed the proposal of PD-L to change the Law 61/1993 on the universal child allowance took place on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of February 2010. Before the debates, the head of the PD-L Women Organization declared that the Minister of Labour, Family and Social Protection (MLFSP) did not consult with the party before on the issue of modifying the law on universal child allowance, and that the organization she represents disagrees with the measure<sup>8</sup>. It is not surprising that, at the parliamentary debate from the 23<sup>rd</sup> of February, there was only one speaker from PD-L, with a marginal position within the party, whose declaration was rather general and strongly penetrated by a conservative-Christian ideology, emphasizing the importance of the institution of the family, and raising voice against divorce and abortion. In comparison, there were six speakers from the Social-Democratic Party (PSD) and five from the National Liberal Party (PNL), all stating that the law is anti-constitutional. The social democrats stressed that the proposal disregards the UN Convention on Child Rights (ratified by Romania in 1990), and that, due to the

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<sup>8</sup> See the declaration of Sulfina Barbu, the head of the Democratic Liberal Party Women Organization (OFPDL), as presented in the press: Veress, R. (2010): “Boc vrea sa elimine alocatiile nesimtite ale copiilor”, *Gandul*, 20 Feb 2010, [www.gandul.info](http://www.gandul.info) (February 2010).

fluctuations of family incomes, the right of many children to receive the allowance might be at risk. The liberals agreed that the amount of the allowance should depend on the income of the family, but they emphasized that child allowance was not a “dole”, but as an investment in future, therefore it should be granted to all children. The liberals also agreed that cuts are necessary in public expenditures, but instead of cutting child allowance, the “milk and bagel” program should be reduced, because that is not cost-effective. There was no mention about the situation of families with many children, and the small amount of means-tested benefits for families was criticized by only one speaker, from PSD, who compared the social expenditures of Romania with the EU-average and warned that the right-wing measures of the government intend to dismantle the welfare state<sup>9</sup>. A speaker from PNL, reading the messages sent on her Internet Blog, argued that the state provides more support for poor families with irresponsible fertility behavior than for the working middle-class<sup>10</sup>.

In May 2010, the government announced the “austerity package” proposed in order to reduce public spending. Out of the ten austerity measures, three concerned directly families with children: (1) the child-care benefit during parental leave would be cut by 15%; (2) the trousseau for new born, a universal benefit granted shortly after birth (around 35 Euro) would be eliminated; (3) the complementary allowance for needy families with children and the support allowance for single-parent families would be changed from an earnings-related to a flat rate benefit, at the value of 600 lei/month (around 150 Euro). On the next days, the representatives of women organizations of the major political parties and leading women political figures raised their critical voice in the mass media (on the major TV channels as well as on their Internet Blogs). But the emphasis was on their discontent with the flattening of the child-care benefit; the other two measures were seldom mentioned, and the whole media debate was channeled towards maintaining the earnings-relatedness of the child-care benefit. Even the leader of

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<sup>9</sup> The speech of Dumitru Chirita (PSD): the policy measures proposed by the president and the prime minister destroy the welfare state (“face praf statul social”). Debates in the Deputies Chamber, 23<sup>rd</sup> of February 2010.

<sup>10</sup> The speech of Cristina Pocora (PNL): reads the message signed by the director of a local-level social assistance office, who argues that both she and her husband work a lot in order to pay the costs of raising their two children, while the state supports poor families with many children, who have an irresponsible behavior. Source: Debates in the Deputies Chamber, 23<sup>rd</sup> of February 2010.

the PD-L Women Organization stated that the government should find other methods of cutting social spending (which was admittedly necessary), than reducing child allowances and child-care benefits: “the benefits for children cannot be obtained by lying to the authorities” (Sulfina Barbu, head of the PD-L Women Organization, 15<sup>th</sup> of May 2010, [www.hotnews.ro](http://www.hotnews.ro)). Protests of mothers with children were organized in Bucharest first on Saturday morning (16<sup>th</sup> of May), than on Monday morning (18<sup>th</sup> of May), when around 1,000 mothers with children gathered in front of the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Protection, bringing sacks with used pampers; an on-line petition was signed by 13,000 persons, who opposed the flattening of the child-care benefit.

This high mobilization of mothers with small children was unprecedented for Romania, and it clearly depicted the political voice of an emerging cosmopolitan middle class, making use of its specific political tools: organization through Internet forums, on-line petitioning, ensuring high media coverage through personal connections with the TV program directors. The situation was framed as an austerity measure against “mothers”, although, as a matter of fact, the benefit can be granted to either the mother or the father, and only in case that the claimant had taxable incomes from work throughout the last twelve months before the birth of the child. Moreover, the flattening did not affect all persons receiving the benefit, but only less than 15%: those with net incomes above 706 lei, i.e. earning 1.5 times the net minimum wage.

In the media debates, the advocates of maintaining the child-care benefit as earnings-related argued that it is a contributory benefit; as a matter of fact, the benefit is granted from the central budget, not from a separate social insurance fund. Neither the employers, nor the employees pay social contributions in order to qualify for the benefit.

Moreover, the coverage of the benefit is low. There are no statistics available from the MLFSP on the coverage of child-care benefit among parents with children below the age of two (or three, in case of children with disabilities), therefore we should rely on estimations. The Statistical Bulletin of MLFSP for the first quarter of 2010 reports for January 2010 that 386,537 children below the age of two received the universal child allowance, and 7,004 children with disabilities below the age of three: this means that there are roughly 393,541 children receiving the increased amount of child

allowance. The number of child-care benefits paid by the Ministry in January 2010 was 186,398, at which one may add the 11,697 “stimulants” paid for those parents who are entitled to child-care benefits, but they opt for returning to job: cumulatively, 198,095 parents with children below the age of two (or three, in case of children with disabilities) received some form of state support. In comparison, there were around 393,541 children below the age of two and disabled children below the age of three (cumulatively). Given that there is no data on how many twins are born or in how many families the distance between the children is less than two years, it is difficult to estimate how many small children are raised in families where parents are not entitled to child-care benefit. In case that we assume that the proportion of children born as twins or earlier than two years after the birth of their older sibling is 20% (which would be rather high), it results that only 63% of children below the age of two (or three, in case of children with disabilities) are raised in families receiving child-care benefits, whereas 37% are raised in families not receiving child-care indemnity. To summarize: the flattening of the child-care benefit affected less than 15% of parents entitled to receive state support during parental leave and probably less than 63% of small children live in families entitled to receive parental benefits.

However, the whole media debate was framed as an issue affecting all working mothers with small children. The problems of low-income families, who are entitled to receive only the flat-rate benefit (if regularly employed) and the universal child allowance, or (in case of irregular participation on the labour market) only the universal child allowance and the means-tested allowance for needy families with children, were never discussed in terms of inadequate state support. According to the estimations of the Ministry of Labor, 36% of the children live in families receiving either the complementary allowance or the sustenance allowance for single-parent families; there is a big discrepancy between rural and urban areas: whereas for children in urban areas the average coverage of the benefit is 18%, in rural areas the coverage is 54% (Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Protection, 2010). The amount of the benefit is very small: for a family with two children, the complementary allowance is only around 15 Euro/month, which equals with 12.7% of the minimum net wage.

As presented in the micro-simulation from Annex 1, a family with four children, where the youngest child is below the age of two and the mother went on unpaid child-care leave (child-care benefit is only granted twice) receives the universal child allowances for each child (i.e. 150 Euro for the child below the age of two and around 11 Euro for each child aged 2-18), and, in case that per capita income is below the minimum net wage, also the means-tested complementary child allowance (i.e. 17.5 Euro/month). In case that the father is working for the minimum wage, the family benefits will typically provide 84% of the income of the family; in case that he is working for the average wage, 28% of the income of the family would be from state transfers. In case that all children are above two years old and the mother returned to work, family benefits would typically represent 20% of the income of the family in case that both parents gain the minimum wage (they also qualify for the means-tested complementary family allowance), and 6% of the income of the family in case that both parents gain the average wage (they do not qualify for the means-tested complementary family allowance).

However, during the very same period of praising young middle class women for defending their social rights as mothers, the major Romanian newspapers published several articles that heavily criticised the “workless-ness” and “dependency” of recipients of social assistance benefits, most notably of the Minimum Income Guarantee program. Based on the number of on-line visualisations and forum comments, two articles were particularly popular: “Romanians whose profession is to receive social assistance” (Sorin Semeniuc: “Români de profesie asistați social”, *Evenimentul zilei*, 14 May 2010) and “Fifty Ways through which the state encourages worklessness” (Mariana Bechir: “50 de moduri prin care statul incurajeaza nemunca” de Mariana Bechir, *Adevarul*, 6 April 2010). Both articles framed the situation of families with children in the “welfare dependent underclass” approach, with allusions to the situation of the Roma minority, allegedly guilty of improper attitude to work and irresponsible fertility behaviour. The photos published along with the articles (see Appendix) present poor families with many children, but only the mothers and children are portrayed – mothers of more than five children, who would have been considered “hero mothers” twenty years before.

## *Conclusions*

During state socialism, the “double-burden” (Kligman, 1998) of wage labour and family responsibilities belonged to the taken for granted reality of mainstream women, who were perceived as resilient enough to use informal childcare through kinship or undocumented labour. After 1990, childcare services became increasingly difficult to afford. Optional crèche vouchers provided by employers were legislated only in 2007, but they are still seldom offered to the employees. The rank of the child conditions welfare entitlement: birth indemnity is granted only for the first four newborn babies, the amount of means-tested child allowance flattens at the fourth child, maternity and paid childcare leave is available only for the first three births. In low income families where mothers lack the necessary work record to qualify for the benefit, fathers go on parental leave, but usually they engage in informal labour and the distribution of family responsibilities follows the traditional gendered pattern. There are no means-tested maternity benefits, but the amount of universal child allowance is five times higher for children below the age of two (cca. €50). Given that child allowance is imputed when establishing the right to social assistance benefits, the birth of a child means losing the Minimum Income Guarantee and, consequently, the obligation to pay the healthcare contribution. Jobless families most often fail to pay the contribution and parents lose their public health insurance.

The moral panic of high and uncontrolled Roma fertility created in Romania a fertile terrain for implementing family policies which attempt to discipline motherhood by tying maternity and parental benefits to working status and the rank of the child, maintaining a very low level of universal and means-tested child allowance and imposing the proof of school attendance as a condition for welfare receipt. The recent modification of the law on childcare leave, which changes the previously flat-rate benefit into an earnings-related one, with a bottom-level of 85% of the national average wage and a ceiling at almost €1,000/ month, clearly favours the assuming of parental roles by the middle-class. The loud opposition of upper-middle class women when the government announced the intention to flatten the benefit as part of the “austerity package” from May 2010, determined the government to withdraw this proposal and diminish the amount of the benefit by 15%. The granting of a symbolic “stimulant” for parents who return to job

instead of staying on childcare leave, as well as the possibility of receiving crèche vouchers from employers, indicate a move towards selective “optional familialism” of the Romanian policies. However, poor families, with partners weakly integrated on the formal labour market, are left to make ends meet with very modest child benefits, and to satisfy care needs within their own domestic arrangements (as they cannot afford and sometimes even access services). “Implicit familialism” comes as a sanction for “undisciplined” mothers with more than three children.

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## Appendix

**Table A1. The incomes of a nuclear family with two children: one below the age of two, the other 5 years old**

Microsimulations of values in Euro/month	Father's income	Mother's social benefit	Children's social benefits	Total income	Social benefits as % of total income	The value of social benefits (Euro)
<b>Case 1: Father working for the minimum wage, mother not entitled to child-care benefits</b>	117.5	0	80.5	<b>198.0</b>	<b>0.41</b>	<b>80.5</b>
<b>Case 2: Father employed for the average national wage; mother on child-care leave, previously working for the average wage</b>	356.5	303.0	60.5	720.0	<b>0.50</b>	<b>363.5</b>
<b>Case 3: Father working for the minimum wage, mother on child-care leave, previously working for the minimum wage</b>	117.5	150.0	41.0	<b>308.5</b>	<b>0.62</b>	<b>191.0</b>
<p><i>Details:</i></p> <p><b>Case 1: wage income:</b> father's salary of 470 lei/month; <b>child allowances:</b> 200 lei for the child below the age of two and 42 lei for the five year old; and <b>means-tested complementary family-allowance</b> of 60 lei. The mother has no income.</p> <p><b>Case 2: wage income:</b> father's salary of 1426 lei/month; <b>insurance-based child-care allowance</b> received by the mother: 1212 lei/month; <b>child allowances:</b> 200 lei for the child below the age of two and 42 lei for the five year old, in total 242 lei/month.</p> <p><b>Case 3: wage income:</b> father's salary of 470 lei/month; <b>insurance-based child-care allowance</b> received by the mother: 600 lei/month; <b>child allowances:</b> 200 lei for the child below the age of two, 42 lei for the five year old and means-tested complementary family allowance of 60 lei, in total 322 lei/month.</p>						

**Table A2. The incomes of a nuclear family with two children: one below the age of two, the other 5 years old**

Values in Euro/month	Father's income	Mother's social benefit	Children's social benefits	Total income	Social benefits as % of total income	The value of social benefits (Euro)
<b>Case 1 (four children, one below the age of two): Father working for the minimum wage, mother not entitled to child-care benefits because the smallest child is her fourth child</b>	117.5	0	99	<b>216.5</b>	<b>0.84</b>	<b>99</b>
<b>Case 2 (four children, one below the age of two): Father employed for the average national wage; mother not entitled to child-care benefit given that the smallest child is her fourth child</b>	356.5	0	99	<b>455.5</b>	<b>0.28</b>	<b>99</b>
<b>Case 3 (four children, all above the age of two): Father working for the minimum wage, mother not working</b>	117.5	117.5	60	<b>295</b>	<b>0.20</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>Case 4 (four children, all above the age of two): Father and mother working for the average wage</b>	356.5	356.5	42	<b>755</b>	<b>0.06</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Details:</b>						
<i>Case 1: wage income: father's salary of 470 lei/month; child allowances: 200 lei for the child below the age of two and 42 lei for each of the other children; the family qualifies for means-tested complementary family allowance of 70 lei/month. The mother has no income, given that child-care benefit is granted only for the first three children.</i>						
<i>Case 2: wage income: father's salary of 1426 lei/month; child allowances: 200 lei for the child below the age of two and 42 lei for each of the other children; the family qualifies for means-tested complementary family allowance of 70 lei/month, given that income per capita is below the net minimum wage (470 lei); the mother has no income (see above)</i>						
<i>Case 3: wage income: father's and mother's salaries of 470 lei/month; each child receives the universal child allowance of 42 lei; the family qualifies for means-tested complementary family allowance of 70 lei, given that income per capita is below the net minimum wage (470 lei);</i>						
<i>Case 3: wage income: father's and mother's salaries of 1426 lei/month; each child receives the universal child allowance of 42 lei; the family does not qualify for the means-tested complementary family allowance.</i>						



Photo from the article “Romanians whose profession is to receive social assistance” (Sorin Semeniuc: “Români de profesie asistați social”, *Evenimentul zilei*, 14 May 2010)



Photo from the article “Fifty Ways through which the state encourages worklessness” (Mariana Bechir: “50 de moduri prin care statul incurajeaza nemunca” de Mariana Bechir, *Adevarul*, 6 April 2010).