



Romania hails orphanage success story

Controversial adoption ban ends baby-trafficking but angers US lobbyists

Ian Traynor Bucharest

There are toys and teddy bears, colour televisions and good hot food, and a staff of 47 professionals looking after a noisy, happy brood of 49 toddlers and under-fives. For those who remember the squalor of Romania's orphanages a decade ago that came to define the cruelty of the Ceausescu dictatorship, the scene at the Sfintul Andrei day-care centre in northern Bucharest yesterday seems miraculous.

The infants here are among the most vulnerable in a country that remains desperately poor. Only a few years ago the chances are they would have been abandoned by their mothers – often young single women – and condemned to a life of Dickensian institution. Instead they get 11 hours free care a day, five days a week, and are fetched by their parents in the evenings to lead relatively normal lives.

"This is the alternative to a residential institution. This is how to prevent abandonment," said Elena Tartar-Arsene, the head of the unit, which was set up last year. The building used to be an orphanage that housed 60 children, who have since got new homes. "We found a family for everyone," said Dr Tartar-Arsene.

The scene is proof of the radical reform taking place in Romania's child-care sector – aspects of which are highly contentious. From the beginning of this year the country banned international adoption, ending its status as a magnet for desperate westerners wanting newborns. The ban turned the fate of unwanted children into an international political battlefield, with powerful American adoption lobbies pushing the US government to demand a U-turn.

They were backed by several west European countries, notably Italy and France, but strongly opposed by the EU, which insisted on reform of the child-care sector as part of Romania's bid to join the EU.

Last month US Republican Chris Smith introduced a bill in Congress demanding that Romania repeal the ban. "In each of the thousands of instances that Romania denies a child a loving home and a caring family, they commit another human rights abuse," he said. "We cannot sit by and allow petty politics to ruin the lives of thousands of children in need of a loving home."

Senior Romanian officials are angry at the constant international interference. "What we need is this issue taken off the agenda of international relations," said Theodora Bertzi, the head of the national adoption office.

Gabriela Coman, until last year the chief government official for child protection, said she had spent most of her four years in office trying to cope with western pressure rather than deal-



Children play at the Sfintul Andrei day-care centre in northern Bucharest Photograph: Horia Marusca

the battle over Romania's young. Romanian officials and experts said the Unicef evidence, 118 pages and seemingly exhaustive, was deeply flawed and untrue. The real figure for abandonment was half that cited, they said, and 75% of those were either quickly reunited with their mothers, adopted by relatives or taken into foster care.

Lady Nicholson called the Unicef study "mindboggling" and "completely false". "It has caused alarm, despondency and desperate sadness among the professionals in Romania trying to do things better."

Ms Bertzi, the national adoption chief, wields a different battery of figures. Less than a decade ago, she said, there were 100,000 children in institutions. The public child care system

The estimated number of children abandoned each year in Romania, according to Unicef **9,000**

was now looking after 82,000 – 50,000 of which are returned to their parents or extended families at night or are in foster care. And of the 32,000 still in institutions, four out of five were teenagers.

In the Bucharest day-care centre, among the lego, toy trains and big new Christmas tree, Dr Tartar-Arsene describes a recent success in stopping a child being abandoned. She tells of a mother of four children, all by different husbands, who had abandoned the first three one after another. Then the mother arrived at the day-care centre with her fourth. "She didn't want to touch the baby. She wouldn't kiss her. We had to teach her how. Then she learned to kiss the baby. And now they're still together. But she lost the other three."

ing with childcare. "When I took that job I didn't expect to have a diplomatic function," she said. "But all the time they [the west] are pushing to adopt Romanians. Their laws are restrictive, but they want us to be flexible. They tell us, 'You can't take care of your children, you don't love your children, you're too poor.' It's a lack of respect."

Bonanza

The adoption bonanza kicked off in the 1990s when international media coverage of the harrowing conditions in Romanian orphanages broke hearts and opened wallets in the west. In the decade before the ban it is estimated that 30,000 Romanian children were adopted abroad.

While there is no doubt that many adoptions had a happy outcome, there is also no doubt that the practice developed into a highly corrupt trade in babies lubricated by tens of millions of dollars which experts say hindered the development of social services and child protection policies.

"It was a huge corruption," said Alin Teodorescu, a social democrat MP and sociologist who conducted an in-depth investigation of adoption practices. "We couldn't stop the corruption, so we stopped the adoption."

He described a 1997 law that allowed foreign adoption agencies to earn points by ploughing resources into regional services and use these points to buy babies as a "baby-trafficking charter". "That law created the market. So that in the year 2000 alone, more than 3,000 babies were sent abroad at a cost of up to \$55,000 (about £30,000) a child."

With doctors, officials, nurses, and social workers lining their pockets from the trade, young mothers were encouraged to abandon their newborns.

Experts say the prohibition has helped them concentrate on proper child protection, reintegrating families, creating a new fostering system and establishing alternatives to residential care for unwanted children.

"Considering the low point it is coming from, Romania is a success story," said Lady Nicholson, a Liberal Democrat Euro-MP who has long campaigned on the issue.

Demanding a repeal of the ban last month, Mr Smith cited a recent report from the UN children's organisation, Unicef, which said 9,000 children were abandoned by their mothers every year in Romania and that the rate of abandonment had not changed in the past 30 years.

Statistics are a powerful weapon in



These two children lost their mother and father to AIDS. There are many orphans like them who also run the risk of losing their home. And then brothers and sisters may be separated and left struggling for survival alone.



A child is orphaned by AIDS every 15 seconds. Many can't afford to maintain their homes, which can then fall into decay. Worse, relatives or neighbours have been known to take houses and land for themselves and throw the children out.

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Backstory

Romania's crisis of unwanted children has its roots in the 23-year communist dictatorship of **Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu**. To boost the population in the mid-60s Ceausescu banned abortion and birth control. In conditions of national destitution, the result was a staggering epidemic of women abandoning babies at birth. By the time the Ceausescus were put before a firing squad on Christmas Day 1989 there were around **100,000 children** in appalling conditions in the country's orphanages (above). It has been an uphill struggle to cope with that legacy ever since.

Why are we caught out by the cold weather every year? In Estonia, schools only close when it's -25 °C
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