



## **FAMILY HEALTH AND BIRTH RATE AT THE BEGINNING OF THE XXI CENTURY: A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Darie CRISTEA<sup>a</sup> and Doru BUZDUCEA<sup>b</sup>

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, Bvd. Schitu Măgureanu, no. 9, Sector 1, Bucharest

*Corresponding author:* Darie Cristea, E-mail: darie.cristea@unibuc.ro; Doru Buzducea, E-mail: doru.buzducea@unibuc.ro

*Accepted July 4, 2022*

The low birth rate is a general problem of the European world. However, the case of Eastern Europe and Romania in particular stands out. Romania had gone from a “forced” increase in the birth rate before 1989 to a significant decrease in it after 1990. The birth rate is a legitimate concern of states and societies. The big question, however, is what are the legitimate ways in which the state can get involved in regulating this issue. The answer could lie in a program of sociological research of attitudes, perceptions, motivations and public opinion regarding family, childbearing, and parenthood.

*Keywords:* family health, birth rate, sociological perspective.

### **WHY ISN'T IT THAT SIMPLE TO TALK ABOUT THE BIRTH RATE TODAY?**

The *birth rate* has, as a sociological concept, several specific features. A demographer, a doctor or even an economist can talk about birth rates much more relaxed than a sociologist. Unlike the latter's speech, the other three scientific discourses mentioned above are somehow more technical.

Sociologically, however, the birth rate problem involves considering other narratives, with which the concept has been loaded throughout history, as well as a conceptual vocabulary that often incorporates strong symbols as well as ideological issues. Let us review it briefly: demographic deficit, public policies, family, mother, pronatalist policies, social and medical services addressed to families with children, all the way to the thorny family-state relationship, which extends from the desirable protection of the family by the state (in order to stimulate the birth rate, inclusively) to the unacceptable intervention of the state in the family (often, also for the increase in the birth rate).

About this ideological and political load of the concept of birth rate, there has been quite a bit of talk in Romania. This is particularly important, because, on the one hand, there is, as we said, technically, a wide awareness of the fact that, after 1990, Romania entered a long-term trend of

population decline (subsequently accelerated by the massive migration within the EU after 2007). On the other hand, the population growth in Romania during the communist period was a result of the forced pronatalist policies of 1966–1989<sup>1</sup>, and of the way in which the totalitarian state understood to intervene in the family life and even in the intimate life of the citizens. The collapse of the birth rate after 1989 is usually associated with the *anomy* (to use Durkheim's famous concept) installed after the change of the socio-political system from 1989/1990 with a capitalism that neither the new government, nor the national economy, nor by any means the population understood.

That is why a serious discussion on this subject is difficult. The state, on the one hand, is the guarantor of the development of a society. It performs the society's political management. Where is the line between the legitimate interest of the state as a manager of society and the risk that this interest (within an issue that, throughout the democratic world, is a matter for the private sphere: family life, birth rate etc.) will slip into the area of abuse? In short, the pronatalist policy in Romania between 1966 and 1989 was a horrific abuse. The collapse of the birth rate after 1989, even though everyone sees it as a negative phenomenon, was still the result of a kind of revenge taken by the individuals (and even the families) in front of the state. The issue is not one

of collective rights vs. individual rights, as is sometimes misinterpreted. It is rather one of collective interest vs. individual rights. And the individual rights got their natural revenge, so to speak, after 1989.

There is a whole sociological literature in Romania after 1989 that deplores the dissolution of the family. We can see in it, beyond the finding of a phenomenon, an upsetting ideological note. First, the benchmark for this assessment of today's crisis of the family, is the family from the communist regime, often mistakenly called the *traditional family*. We are talking about a *nuclear family*, specific to modern/ industrial/ urban societies, configured to a great extent also by the stimulation and the attention that the modern type of state (including the totalitarian regimes from the 20<sup>th</sup> century) invested in it. The nuclear family from communist Romania had its own features: the new family was formed at a young age, it received housing, public policy sought to protect the family core, the regime invested in health and education infrastructure (we are not discussing quality here, but the state's concern that they exist) for the young family (so children were also considered, since they were the whole purpose of the young family).

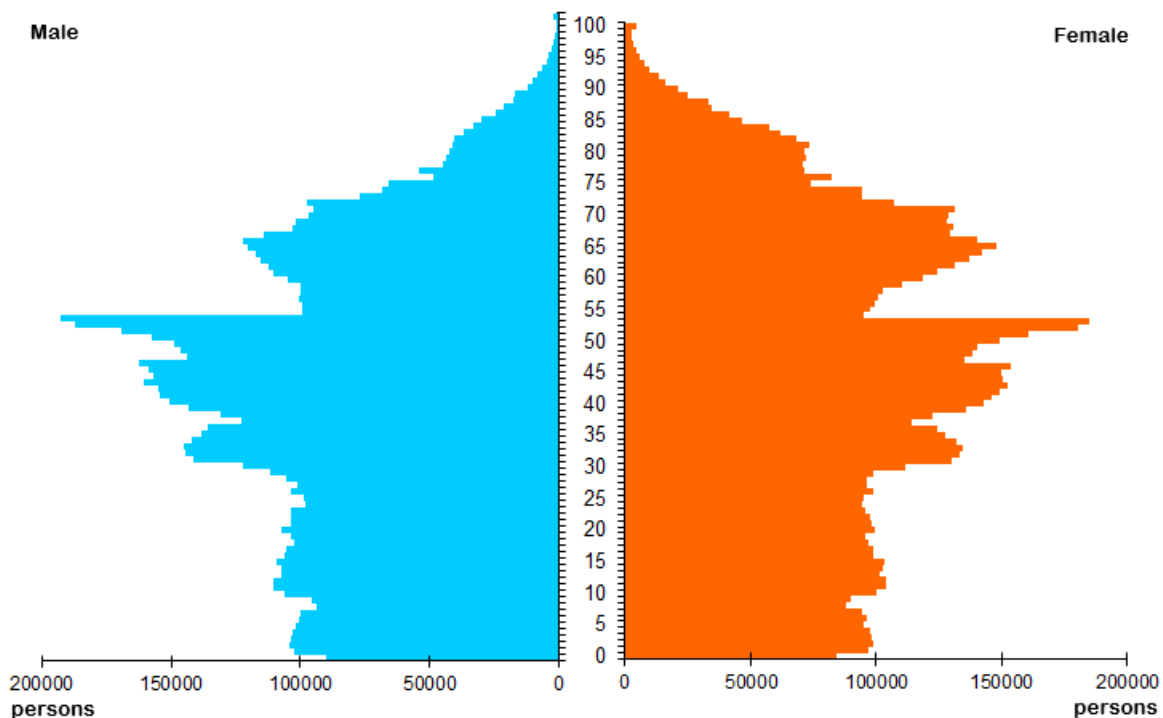
And, of course, the negative elements: the lack of contraceptives of any kind, the prohibition of abortions, the discouragement of divorce,

urbanization and forced industrialization, including of communities that formally remained rural, the prohibition of internal migration (outside the economic and industrial interests of the state), etc.

In short, at a first level we can put, sociologically speaking, the changes after 1990 regarding the age at first marriage, divorce, birth rate on account of the anomy brought about by the shock of changing the social-political regime and the weakening of social control.

On closer examination we cannot fail to notice that all these parameters have collapsed because they were just the result of a better (and abusive) social control, not the result of a better society or of better individuals. The social pressure, combined with certain incentives and benefits, also ensured before 1989 the low age of marriage, the longevity of the marriage and the number of children. Not the will of the partners, not the quality of family life. Or, if we were to refer to another important indicator: we do not know whether domestic violence “exploded” after 1990; we know, however, that before 1989 there was no talk about it.

Anyway, much more liberal in thinking about family than thirty years ago, Romanians remain among the Europeans (we refer to the EU Member States) with the most traditionalist attitude towards the family.



Romania's resident population by sex and age – January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021 – National Institute of Statistics (Romania)<sup>2</sup>. Notice the graphic area for the ages between 30 and 55.

## WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE TO SOLVE THE BIRTH RATE PROBLEM?

The literature provides many explanations for the decrease in the birth rate in developed countries. Many have become almost stereotypes; they are repeated as laws generally valid in specialized textbooks.

Perhaps a better approach would be to study the public's attitudes towards family, marriage, childbirth, parenthood in concrete socio-economic contexts, repeatedly, for shorter periods of time. This would get us out of the trap of using vague or macro-level explanations that once made sense, but we do not know how much sense they still have today, in a certain context.

The problem itself is more complicated than it seems. If we summarize, there are two large groups of theoretical explanations: 1) people do not want children because they do not have the necessary conditions; 2) people do not have children because they feel that this would affect their prosperity and lifestyle. Basically, the two models are contradictory, although both can be partially valid. Macro-social empirical evidence also shows that, as a society progresses, the birth rate decreases and the number of children per family also decreases.

We will be debating a list of such explanations<sup>3</sup>, not so much in the idea of clarifying them theoretically, but of exposing their specificity and including them in hypotheses, which could be listed as analytical tools in an empirical and current sociological approach of the phenomenon:

### HEALTH AND FERTILITY

We are dealing here with the medical and demographic basis of the birth rate. Of course, an obvious correlation is that between age and birth rate. The older the age at which the decision to have children occurs, the more difficult it is to achieve a pregnancy. To this we can also associate the idea that the state of health tends to deteriorate with aging.

But this factor works together with the one immediately below.

### LACK OF FINANCIAL RESOURCES

Although the degree of freedom of young people after 1989 was considerably higher than that within the communist period, achieving a reasonable standard of living at a young age is particularly complicated today. House prices are

very high, rents are unstable (and expensive), financial independence and stability at a decent level are difficult to obtain, especially in a context of lack of balance between income and pressures towards consumption.

Of course, in the middle can also be an illusory attitude ("in 10 years' time I will do much better").

Moreover, sociologists find that, despite a much better access than ever in the past to information, to knowledge, to experiences of all kinds (travel, luxury goods, computers, gadgets, automobiles), young people are late in developing "growing up"/adult behaviors. Starting a family is, after all, the most complex and responsible of these.

All these send the marriage pattern and the parenthood age in the area of the factor discussed above or, worse, in the area of voluntary childlessness.

### ACCESS TO HOUSING

This factor is also related to the previous one, but that does not exhaust it. Access to housing requires consistent income, but not only that. It assumes that a serious part of the income can be directed to the purchase of a dwelling, furnishing, arranging, etc. In addition, there has to be time invested in these operations.

Basically, the purchase of a dwelling blocks a significant part of the income of a young person and takes it from the area allocated to consumption.

Of course, stable young couples have a much stronger motivation to buy their own homes. Which sends us to the factor below.

### COUPLE UNCERTAINTY/ INSTABILITY

Today's world is marked by uncertainty. Couples, especially young ones, are more unstable than those in the past. It is not an accusation: as we said in the first part of the text, the stability of couples in the past was also achieved through social pressure, not only through the attachment of partners/ spouses.

The perception of this uncertainty leads to the postponement of important investments for the future family – the decision to buy a house, for example, and, obviously, the decision to have children.

### SOCIAL UNCERTAINTY

Beyond personal/ family uncertainty, social uncertainty also plays a role in the phenomenon we're discussing. The modern world is somehow

built on uncertainty, on dynamics – which often means risks, but also opportunities. Opportunities mean mobility, which often doesn't “rhyme” with our understanding of the family.

Instability related to the workplace, resources, the perception of risks and opportunities, all this affects long-term plans and decisions, even in the case of young people who can secure a certain level of resources from work.

#### LACK OF CHILDCARE INFRASTRUCTURE

Although it seems an easy factor to understand and often invoked today, it has a somewhat paradoxical situation. It's more of a factor invoked by those who have already had the experience of raising children to explain why others don't have children. Those who do not have children do not really know what it takes to raise a child and what infrastructure exists or does not exist in this regard.

Also paradoxically, societies with low birth rates have a much better infrastructure and services for raising children than those with a very high birth rate.

#### LACK OF FAMILY SUPPORT

A child generally gathers an extended family around him. Modern societies, because of the geographical distances between family members and because they are centered on the nuclear family model, rather than the extended one, have a problem at this point. Basically, one of the factors that make possible the emergence of the young family – their own home/ the separation from the parents' household – ends up being an issue later, when growing a child requires the support of the extended family (especially where none of the parents can stay at home with the child). It may be that the support of the family is a more important factor than the couple's own material resources in the decision to have a child.

Also, some of the grandparents may see their role in raising grandchildren differently today than 30, 40 or 50 years ago.

#### FAMILY MODEL

The way young people and adults see the family model might be especially important for the decision to have their own family and children. Even if it happens later than usual.

This model is related, in turn, to several factors: family of origin, family behavior of peers and friends, education, etc.

However, this factor may be more important than simply the level of instruction/ education for the decision whether to have a child/ children.

Also, other subjective indicators are to be considered: the assessment of the age at which it is normal to have children, whether having children is perceived as a strong social value, etc.

#### MOBILITY AND FOCUS ON NEW EXPERIENCES

The main argument against the idea of having children is related to the perception that family life contains personal freedom. Sociologists say that young generations focus on mobility (including geographical) and new, exotic experiences. Of course, this social focus puts in crisis the stability which we usually associate with the idea of family, children, etc.

#### INTENTION TO HAVE CHILDREN VS. BIRTH RATE

It should be noted that in sociological studies that investigate opinion, attitudes and behaviors regarding family, marriage, parenthood, etc. indicators such as the intention to have children are measured. Usually, this is not an exact predictor of birth<sup>4</sup>; there is a distance between opinion and behavior, especially in the case of a behavior so complex and influenced by so many variables as childbearing.

#### WHAT CAN BE DONE?

There are two levers to act on balancing the demographics of a country: one is related to the birth rate, the other to migration. Both sources of population loss are a consequence, however, of the democratization and openness of our country to the European and Western space and values.

The imposition of harsh pronatalist policies is the prerogative of the authoritarian/ totalitarian state. It is under no circumstances a path for a modern democratic state. As we pointed out at the beginning, a democratic state by today's standards is forced to approach demographic vulnerability with great caution. In fact, all European countries face low birth rates and some of them even high emigration rates (especially those from Eastern Europe).

Boosting the birth rate by providing benefits and support infrastructure for the family is the only solution, but some will say that it does not give spectacular results. Why? Because such measures cannot be applied in the absence of serious and operational knowledge of the attitudes and motivations of the population regarding family life and motherhood/ paternity. We believe that such an interest of society can be achieved democratically if it is built from the bottom up, starting not from the formatted designs of public policy, but from the knowledge of public attitudes, perceptions, and opinion.

### REFERECES

1. The topic was covered by international social scientists: Berent, Jerzy, *Causes of fertility decline in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, *Population Studies* 24, March 1970 and July 1970; Moskoff, William, *Pronatalist policies in Romania*, *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, Vol. 28, No. 3, 1980; Haupt, A., *How Romania tries to govern fertility*, *Population Today*, 15(2): 3-4, Feb. 1987; Kligman, Gail, *The Politics of Duplicity: Controlling Reproduction in Ceausescu's Romania*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998; Keil, T. J., Andreescu, V., *Fertility policy in Ceausescu's Romania*, *Journal of family history*, 24(4): 478-92, Oct. 1999.
2. National Institute of Statistics – Romania, *Press Release*, No. 218/August 30<sup>th</sup>, 2021, available at [Template comunicat presa \(insse.ro\)](http://www.insse.ro)
3. Can also be read on this topic: Testa, Maria Rita, *Childbearing preferences and family issues in Europe: evidence from the Eurobarometer 2006 survey*, *Vienna Yearbook of Population Research*, Vol. 5, pp. 357-379, 2007; Testa, Maria Rita, *On the positive correlation between education and fertility intentions in Europe: individual and country level evidence*, *Advances in Life Course Research*, Vol. 21, pp. 28-42, Sept. 2014.
4. Toulemon, Laurent; Testa, Maria Rita, *Fertility intentions and actual fertility: a complex relationship*, *Population & Societies*, Issue 415, pp. 1-4, Sep. 2005.



