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Addressing Risk Situations through Measures Designed to Prevent and Combat Social Exclusion of Romanian Children from Transnational Families

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Abstract: The phenomenon of transnational families is a topical issue on the European Union's family policy agenda, especially in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Europe 2020 Strategy. Romania, not only as a member state of the European Union, but also as a country directly affected by the scale of this phenomenon, must include in the public family policy the issue of transnational families and provide solutions for these families. Starting from the identification of the risk factors faced by children whose parents are working abroad, the article proposes a critical analysis of existing programs and measures in national legislation aimed at preventing and combating the social exclusion of Romanian children from transnational families. The results of the SWOT analysis carried out indicate a number of shortcomings in covering the risk situations of these vulnerable children, the access to education and a good start in the life of these children being quite affected. The obtained results have implications at the level of decision-makers, helping to improve the efficiency of measures and programs for the left behind children and transnational Romanian families.

Keywords: *Transnational families; vulnerable children; social policies; policy measures; social inclusion.*

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1. Introduction

The topic of left behind children from transnational families has enjoyed a growing research interest in recent years, being a topical issue on the European Union's family policy agenda, especially in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Europe 2020 Strategy (Adams & Page, 2005; Baldassar & Merla , 2013; Eremenko& González-Ferrer, 2018; Vanore et al., 2015).The literature has consecrated the definition of transnational families as "families that live some or most of the time separated from each other, yet hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely familyhood, even across national borders" (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002).

Although migration generates substantial economic resources that contribute to improving the access of lagging families to public services (social, medical, educational, etc.) its social costs are significant, arching the developmental path of children left behind. The impact of parents leaving abroad for work on children depends on a number of features that characterise the departure: who leaves (mother, father or both parents) and what was her/his role in the family, the job for which she/he leaves (legally, in the short or long term), the existence of remittances and their level, in whose care the children remained, the possibility of family reunification.

The scientific literature even speaks of a vicious circle of migration even in the context of the remittances. The families in which the mother migrates are especially affected by this phenomenon. This happens where the father left in the country with the children only wastes the financial resources sent by mother (Lam et al., 2013). Moreover, there are studies who argue that parental migration is detrimental to the health of children and adolescents left behind, without any evidence of any benefit (Fellmeth et al., 2018). In this explanatory context, it is necessary for political factors to take measures to improve the safety net provided by their social protection.

In Romania, however, despite the magnitude of the phenomenon, very few studies have focused on this vulnerable group compared to the impact of the phenomenon. These studies focused mainly on the psychological effects on the child in transnational families, but also on the impact of the absence of parents on the education of these children (Bezzi 2013; Botezat & Pfeiffer, 2014; Ducu, 2018; Robila, 2011). There are many cases in which parents do not inform the authorities about their departure, so many children whose parents have gone abroad to work are not included in the official statistics. It is necessary to reduce the obstacles that discourage parents from informing the authorities about their departure. There is also a need to provide adequate support for the children left behind and their

carers, including socially, psychological and legal services, with special attention paid to grandparents.

In 2016, an inter-institutional working group was set up in Romania to address the issue of children whose parents work abroad. The recommendations of this report, made public in 2018, took into account: an accurate data collection, flavouring and streamlining of legislation and administrative provisions, to facilitate access for parents, children and caregivers to appropriate child protection services.

In this context, starting from the statistical description of the phenomenon, the article proposes a critical analysis of existing programs and measures in national legislation aimed at preventing and combating the social exclusion of Romanian children from transnational families.

2. The phenomenon of children with parents working abroad

2.1. Statistical representation of the Romanian migration phenomenon

Poverty has been a marked phenomenon for vulnerable groups in Romania, with significant increases over time, but also with some important decreases, especially in recent years, not being fully absorbed by the appropriate economic and social development processes. With the worsening of poverty and its severe and extreme forms, the placement of some segments of the population in the sphere of these social risks has led to ongoing vulnerabilities and challenges. Among the groups most affected by poverty and social exclusion have been children and families with dependent children. We highlight in the following the statistical indicators that characterise the phenomenon of poverty among these households.

At-risk-of-poverty and social exclusion rate, total population and children

Over the period 2010-2020, at national level, Eurostat data show a particularly high incidence of the social risks associated with poverty and social exclusion, both at the level of entire population and also among children and families with children. Over the decade, the poverty rate for the whole population has been between 21.6-25.4% (AROP), while children under the age of 16 have consistently experienced a higher level of poverty, between 29.7-38.7%. In contrast, the poverty and social exclusion incidence is much more pronounced, having higher values, such that for the entire population rates were between 30.4-43.2% (AROPE), while children under the age of 16 were permanently at a much higher risk, between 34.6-52.8% (which means that 1 in 2-3 children faced poverty and social exclusion).

However, for both social risks, poverty on the one hand and poverty and social exclusion on the other, a downward trend in these rates can be noted in recent years, both at the level of the total population and also among children, with significant rates of decline towards the end of the analysis period compared to the peaks reached in the last period 2012-2016. But nevertheless, at the 2020 level, incidences of poverty and social exclusion above 30% remain high, and children face the risk of poverty to a much higher extent.

Thus, the magnitude and persistence of poverty and social exclusion remain major challenges among vulnerable families, but also at the policy level, as incidences are significant both for the entire population and also for children.

Permanently, children are most at risk of poverty / poverty and social exclusion compared to all other age groups and total population. At the level of 2020, a valuable image concludes the following: 23.4% of the country's population is at risk of poverty / AROP (more than 4.5 million people), while poverty among children under the age of 16 is much higher (30.2%, i.e. approx. 980 thousand children). For the other social risk, we mention that poverty and social exclusion / AROPE affect 30.4% of the entire population (more than 5.8 million people), and again, children are the most exposed segment (36.1%, i.e. more than 1.1 million children).

At-risk-of-poverty rate by household type

The composition of different types of households has a strong influence on the poverty incidence, and the risk increases in households with dependent children. Taking into account the presence of children, one can observe quite large discrepancies between poverty rates, but also increasing amounts between different household types.

It can be seen that poverty affecting the single person caring for one child varies over the period 2010-2020 around 30-40% - which means a high poverty incidence. The presence of children among single-parent households differentiates poverty quite a lot, with a gap ranging between 3-11 percentage points (4.4 percentage points in 2019), almost permanently the presence of children in single-parent households leading to a much higher poverty rate. By contrast, in 2020 there is a significant decrease in the poverty rate, which falls below 30%, and represents a minimum value for the decade under review. This remarkable minimum in the poverty rate for single-parent families with dependent children could be due to the increases in the state child allowance that took place in 2020, which led to an increase in household income and thus a reduction in poverty level, even amidst

increases in inflation (especially in a pandemic year full of economic and social challenges).

Adding one more adult to the picture reduces household poverty further, as a result of adding one more income to the household's material situation, generally an income earned from work. Comparing poverty by household type shows that as the number of adults in the household increases, the level of poverty is reduced, which means that the presence of more (earned) income in the household leads to poverty alleviation. In comparison, at the level of the last year of analysis, poverty among a single person is 34.6%, while for two adults, poverty reaches 16.4%, which is therefore a significant reduction of 18 percentage points.

Households with many dependent children are in large numbers under the poverty spectrum, and the incidences of these social risks are particularly significant. This is not a situation of a certain conjuncture, but a permanent one among large households facing high poverty thresholds of over 50%, sometimes even over 70% (2014). Thus, the incidence of poverty is not evenly distributed across household types, differing greatly according to the number of adults and dependent children. The presence of more dependent children in the household generates salient patterns of poverty as their number increases.

Definitive and temporary emigration

The extent of poverty and the lack of prospects for a better standard of living, together with a multitude of other factors, have been real reasons for many people to go abroad to ensure their survival or a decent living.

Definitive emigration has recorded an almost continuous upward trend, with substantial rates since 2015, and this aspect has been recorded both nationally and in all macro-regions of the country, in some cases even doubling the incidence of definitive emigration cases.

Alongside permanent emigration, temporary emigration (which is based on going abroad for a period of at least 12 months) is another option for those who are driven to change their place of residence, leaving the country for various socio-economic reasons. Being easier than permanent emigration, temporary emigration was even 9-15 times higher than that involving permanent settlement in another country.

2.2. Addressing risk situations through measures and programs designed to prevent and combat the social exclusion of children whose parents have gone to work outside Romania's borders

Even though in recent years, specific statistical indicators have been on a downward trend, both in terms of the number of children whose

parents are working abroad (whether it is one parent, or both parents, or even the single supporting parent is working abroad), and the number of children left at home in the special protection system, the values recorded in the last reference year (2020) are still significant. The administrative data of the National Authority for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Children and Adoption show that at the end of 2020 there were a total of 75136 children with parents working abroad and a total of 57391 families working outside borders. Of these families, 9844 were with both parents working abroad, while 39874 families had one parent away and 7673 were families with a single-parent working abroad.

These significant figures are alarm signals, as even today one in three children with parents who have emigrated for work is without parental care, which leads to a deepening of the difficulties faced by these vulnerable children, and also by parents/carers of dependent children, which leave a particularly strong mark on the minds of many of them. Many of these vulnerable children need support, not only psychological one, but also educational counselling, then employment counselling, as well as medical and social services, in a word that means integrated social services addressing a broad spectrum of specific needs.

In addition to these risks, cumulatively, vulnerable children may also face the risk of poverty and social exclusion, as it is known that the phenomenon of parents emigration going abroad to work is particularly marked in the areas/counties with the highest incidence of poverty, which further exacerbates the problems of those households, local communities, and not only (the largest clusters of poverty are found in the north-eastern part of the country, where there is also a higher number of children whose parents have gone abroad to work).

In order to reduce these social risks, there is a need for short-, medium- and long-term solutions and resources (financial, human, and institutional) to support the implementation of appropriate initiatives in support of the vulnerable, i.e. children and parents/carers of dependent children as a result of parents leaving for work abroad.

The departure of parents to work abroad can be one of the risks faced by children who remain at home, by carers, by special protection systems, and so on, going down to the local level, i.e. the community, especially where the phenomenon is more prevalent, which involves a number of institutional actors in finding solutions to protect these vulnerable segments of children. The impact of parental migration for work on children are well known (emotional shocks related to behavioural problems, effects associated with continuing education, or with health

problems, which then influences employment, poverty and social exclusion, and the quality of life, in a word a wide range of social risks that may arise not only during the period of parental absence, but also afterwards, which can leave deep traces on the existence of the vulnerable child and then on the respective adult). As such, in view of the many social risks linked to parents' going abroad to work, the contingencies involved, and the fact that these risks can intersect, accumulate, influence each other and amplify, even if the parents' emigration for work is not the only cause (e.g. school drop-out, poverty, and so on), a number of national strategies have been developed for the social protection of these groups in order to overcome the vulnerabilities they face (National Strategy on the Protection and Promotion of Children`s Rights, National Strategy on Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction).

The National Strategy on the Protection and Promotion of Children's Rights for the period 2014-2020 aims to promote investment in the development and well-being of children, based on a holistic and integrated approach by all state institutions and authorities, in conditions of respect for children's rights, meeting their needs and universal access to services. These strategic documents include among their objectives the provision of adequate support to children whose parents have left for work abroad, and to their carers, through the development of specific measures and support services; by increasing the role of schools in compensating for the lack of support generated by the absence of their parents, through the development of personalised educational support programmes for pupils who experience a drop in school performance; by providing health services for children and adolescents.

Law no. 272/2004, republished, on the protection and promotion of the rights of the child provides for a section dedicated to the protection of children with parents who have gone abroad to work (Section 4 of the law), taking into account both these children left at home and the designated persons in whose care the child will remain, setting out the stages and procedural steps to be followed. According to the legislative regulations (Law no. 272/2004, republished, on the protection and promotion of the rights of the child), parents who intend to go abroad to work, if the child is not accompanying them, have the obligation to communicate of this intention to the Public Social Assistance Service (PSAS/SPAS) of their place of residence, together with the designation, in accordance with the regulations in force, of the person who will take care of the child during their absence. Under these conditions, the Public Social Assistance Service (PSAS/SPAS) shall provide to that designated person technical counselling and information on the

responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child for a period of 6 months.

Pursuant to Law no. 272/2004, GD no. 691/2015 comes into force for the approval of the Procedure for monitoring the raising and care of children with parents working abroad and the services they may benefit from, as well as for the approval of the Working Methodology on the cooperation between the General Directorates for Social Assistance and Child Protection and the Public Social Assistance Services and the standard model of the documents drawn up by them, through Annexes 1 and 2. According to this Government Decision, among the risk factors faced by children whose parents are working abroad are:

- the economic situation of the family;
- the social situation of the family;
- the health status of family members;
- the level of education of family members;
- the family's living conditions;
- the existence of identified risk behaviours within the family.

Identifying and analysing all these general aspects leads to knowledge of the risks associated with poverty and social exclusion to which these children could be particularly exposed, in the absence of measures and programmes aimed at eliminating these potential risks to which children whose parents are working abroad could be exposed throughout their entire absence.

3. Data and method

3.1. Objectives

In the present paper we want to answer the following research questions:

- How well approached is the phenomenon of transnational families in Romania?
- What is the effectiveness of the Romanian measures and programs addressing the phenomenon on left behind children?

3.2. Method

In order to the analyse the existing Romanian programs and measures aimed at preventing and combating the social exclusion of Romanian children from transnational families we used as research methods document analysis and SWOT analysis (Table 1).

Document analysis is a type of qualitative research that involves a systematic procedure for analysing documents that involves repeated review, examination, and interpretation to answer specific research questions (Bowen, 2003; Bowen, 2009; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Document analysis as a research method is a valuable method in the social sciences, but unfortunately underused (Dalglish et al., 2020; Mogalakwe, 2009). For the purpose of our research, document analysis was used as a stand-alone method that preceded the SWOT analysis stage.

Although SWOT analysis was conceived as a type of analysis of the strategic management process (Gürel &Tat, 2017), there are studies in which SWOT analysis has been used as a powerful tool for analysing national strategies and programs in various fields (Goffetti et al., 2018; Markovska et al., 2009). Thus, SWOT analysis allows the identification of changes that will strategically improve the proposed measures and actions, maximizing strengths, reducing weaknesses, exploiting available opportunities and avoiding threats (Fertel et al., 2013).

Table 1. Methodological framework

Research question 1	**Research question 2**
Method: Document analysis	**Method:** SWOT analysis
Investigation units: institutional documents (central public authorities)	Investigation units: institutional documents (central public authorities)

Source: Developed by the authors

3.3. Sampling

After selecting and reviewing the analysis documents, the general categories of analysis were identified (Table 2) in order to answer the two research questions: (1) Relationship between poverty and left behind children; (2) List of measures/programs designed for transnational families/left behind children; (3) Contextual data used to justify measures.

Table 2. Sampling of documents and data analysed

Research question 1	
Documents selected	Data analysed
National Strategies National Strategy on the Protection and Promotion of	

Children`s Rights (2014-2020) National Strategy on Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction (2015-2020).	Relationship between poverty and left behind children
Legislative framework Law no. 272/2004, republished, on the protection and promotion of the rights of the child **(Section 4)** Government decision no. 691/2015 for the approval of the Procedure for monitoring the raising and care of children with parents working abroad and the services they may benefit from, as well as for the approval of the Working Methodology on the cooperation between the General Directorates for Social Assistance and Child Protection and the Public Social Assistance Services and the standard model of the documents drawn up by them, through Annexes 1 and 2.	List of measures/programs designed for transnational families/left behind children Contextual data used to justify measures
Research question 2	
National Strategies National Strategy on the Protection and Promotion of Children`s Rights (2014-2020) National Strategy on Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction ((2014-2020).	Based on the data analysed using document analysis method, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the implementation of the intended measures and programs for left behind children were established.
Legislative framework Law no. 272/2004, republished, on the protection and promotion of the rights of the child **(Section 4)** Government decision no. 691/2015 for the approval of the Procedure for monitoring the raising and care of children with parents working abroad and the services they may benefit from, as well as for the approval of the Working Methodology on the cooperation between the General Directorates for Social Assistance and Child Protection and the Public Social Assistance Services and the standard model of the documents drawn up by them, through Annexes 1 and 2.	

Source: Developed by the authors

4. Results and discussion

The results of SWOT analysis indicates that, apart from the measures specified by law, no specific programs have been developed at national level to address the issue of children with parents who have gone to work outside the country. From the perspective of child protection and ensuring the rights of children whose parents are working abroad, according to the legislation, interventions are provided from an integrated perspective, covering issues related to psychological support, educational counselling, medical services, etc. The analysis also indicates that the basic legislation does not provide a set of measures and programs for the protection of children whose parents have gone abroad to work, except directly through the special protection mentioned above, namely the action of special protection systems for these children, supplemented by the identification of potential causes and factors that generate this phenomenon of emigration of parents with impact on children left in the country, with steps to be followed by local institutions SPAS (Public Social Assistance Service) to ensure the protection of these vulnerable children.

Well-developed legislative framework to address the phenomenon of the left behind children and the existence of a procedure for monitoring the raising and care of children with parents working abroad are elements that give to the approach of the phenomenon of transnational families in Romania a very good position in the context of drafting public policy documents (Table 3). Unfortunately, the monitoring part of the flow of these documents is poorly developed, this having implications in the good management of the left behind children's problems. The lack of a general framework for operating the collaboration between the institutional actors involved in the management of the phenomenon it is also a weakness of these programs. To this is added parental distrust in social protection institutions, an aspect that cannot be ignored, because it has implications for monitoring the phenomenon of the left behind children, and also many parents who do not declare to the authorities their departure from the country.

At the level of the European Union, there is a growing concern about the impact of poverty-driven labour migration on the left-behind children. It is necessary to know the magnitude of the phenomenon at the level of each Member State, as ad hoc measures are not enough to improve the situation. It is also important to recognize the harmful effects on the child of the parent's migration when children remain in the country of origin. In this context, the development of the European legal framework

for the protection of transnational families represents an opportunity that must be seized.

The results of the SWOT analysis carried out indicate a number of shortcomings in covering the risk situations of these children, the access to education and a good start in the life of these children being quite affected. The obtained results have implications at the level of decision-makers, helping to improve the efficiency of measures and programs for the left behind children and transnational Romanian families. The limits of the research approach carried out mainly come from the lack of public access to the monitoring documents of the analysed strategies. Despite this, the authors analysed publicly available documents on the researched topic to answer the research questions.

Table 3. SWOT analysis (main findings) of the Romanian programs and measures for left behind children (main findings)

Strengths	**Weaknesses**
- well-developed legislative framework to address the phenomenon; - existence of a procedure for monitoring the raising and care of children with parents working abroad	- poor monitoring of the implementation of legislative provisions; - the lack of a general framework for operating the collaboration between the institutional actors involved in the management of the phenomenon
Opportunities	**Threats**
- the development of the European legal framework for the protection of transnational families	- parental distrust in social protection institutions; - lack of human resources at the local level in the social protection system

Source: Developed by the authors

5. Conclusions and recommendation

In the context of the development of the phenomenon of transnational families and transnational parenting, children left behind by parents migrating for work outside Romania are a social problem that needs special attention from public authorities, especially in the case of children without maternal care. Finding the best ways to meet the needs of

transnational families in order to protect the rights of children left behind becomes a complex task for policy makers, who need to develop appropriate tools to enable them to carry out the functions of transnational families.

Policies in this area should help to reduce barriers that discourage parents from informing authorities of their departure and provide adequate support for left-behind children and their carers, including social, psychological and legal services, with a special focus on grandparents who are thus forced to take care of these children. Measures to promote equal opportunities for lagging children are needed, in particular by ensuring continuous contact with their parents, access to education, supporting quality educational outcomes, providing guidance and preventing early school leaving. The negative effects of migration on children's health also need to be addressed and also to provide psychological support to overcome emotional shock.

Despite the existence of legal provisions to quantify the phenomenon, its magnitude is not surprised by official data, especially in the case of families where the parents are not the only supporters of the family. There is also a lack of evaluation of intervention programs for this phenomenon, which are underdeveloped and which could provide solutions for an effective intervention strategy in this area of social vulnerability.

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