

Pick up and pay

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Romania's President Ion Iliescu signed a law this week to end one of the strangest excesses of Eastern Europe's 'liberation'. In Romania, where the regime of former N. Ceausescu will cause unsorted grief for generations to come, the trade in babies has quickly become the cottage industry of the 1990s. Prices of twenty thousand dollars per child are no exception.

- [Marc Chavannes](#)

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Surprisingly enough, it is Western benevolence that has pushed up the demand and thus the price. Affectionate citizens from 'the free world' are attracted by the first reports on Romanian warehouses full of neglected, sick or deformed orphans. They want to do something for the fruits of the dictatorial injunction

to procreate and the accompanying ban on contraceptives and abortion. This is how a people market was created.

Deeply Christian couples in particular - by no means always childless - from the United States and Canada see adoption as a duty of charity. Freed from their hesitations by video seminars and advertisements in their own newspaper ('How to adopt a healthy Romanian orphan in 30 Days or Less and under \$3000!!!'), they fly to Romania with the desolate TV images still in their minds. To save a little one. Even less religious Western Europeans, who do feel for a Latin-looking child, have gone to Bucharest with receptive feelings over the past year and a half.

And then the practice of adopting. Handy Romanian guys in leather, who already knew their way around as a waiter or informant during the Conducator, are usually the impresarios of this festival of mixed intentions. They show up in the hotel bar, speak a little English, understand what the foreigners are looking for and offer mediation. "Hey, hey, at least we have a contact." Exciting rides to homes and private addresses follow. Children on sight.

In reality, these dealers operate a network of questionable doctors, nurses, lawyers and orphanage staff. Local judges, who have to validate the 'transfer' according to a first adoption law after Ceausescu, often play the game.

The really disowned and in need of adoption children rarely show up in the shop window. The prospective adoptive parents are not always aware of this - all conversations are conducted in Romanian and translated by 'interpreters' from the network. And because the parents-to-be have heard about the risks of AIDS and hepatitis B, they don't ask where the tragic cases are on their excursions through babyland.

Visits to homes mainly serve to connect with existing TV sentiments. The honest-as-gold businessmen benefit more from deliveries 'directly from producer to buyer'. For quick decision makers, healthy babies, toddlers and even preschoolers with medical testing are available. A lot of money plus a car (preferably turbo) is in many cases enough to get young parents to give up the

little one without an emergency. A dash of familial crisis is added in the translation just to be sure.

Most authentic (disabled or not) orphans remain in their homes, unattractive as they are to this form of market-based international charity. They quickly become too old for adoption. Fortunately, their number hardly expands; last year an estimated one million abortions were performed in Romania, three times as many as children were born.

The scandal came to light this spring. Romanian television has shown poignant examples, including three gypsy children being sold on screen to journalists posing as adoptive parents.

In The New York Times Magazine of March 24, 1991, Kathleen Hunt, who speaks Romanian and has spent quite some time in the country, describes how the traffickers manage to play on the Western emotions and poverty in their own country perfectly. They are very annoyed when, after all their preparatory work, a transaction is canceled at the last minute because a baby turns out to have jaundice, or a six-year-old girl threatens to commit suicide when she is ransomed from her own mother.

An international commission of inquiry (of *Defense des enfants international* and *Service social international*) visited Romania this spring. After careful exploration, she determined that it is likely that 2,000 children were exported abroad in this way in the first three months of this year. In total, perhaps 5,000 children have moved like this. If this development were left untouched, Romania would account for more than a third of the entire international adoption traffic (between eighteen and twenty thousand children per year).

The Dutchman JHA van Loon was part of the committee. He is First Secretary of the Hague Conference on Private International Law. This is an organization in which thirty-seven countries - since this year also Romania - work together to somewhat streamline 'ordinary' law, such as in the field of purchase, marriage, procedural law and adoption in international traffic.

This Conference hopes to celebrate its centenary in 1993 with a 'The Hague Convention for International Cooperation and Protection of Children in International Adoption'. While Western countries are raising their admission standards for asylum seekers, the Conference is also trying to achieve greater cooperation between donor and host countries in this area. Adoption is already further along.

Van Loon is hopeful that the new law will put an end to the national drama of Romanian baby exports. Thanks to the work of the authoritative pediatrician Dr. Alexandra Zugravescu, it has now been arranged that parents can no longer transfer or sell their children directly to buyers. Adoptive parents can only qualify through organizations in their own country, while only children who cannot be placed in Romania can be given a foreign destination through the National Adoption Committee.

An example of international cooperation that works. The trade is now banned in Romania. What will it bring? Economically speaking: less turnover and higher prices. But not everything is economics.