Constructions of childhood, victimhood and abortion in Romania: the 'little-girl mother'

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Abstract: In June 2008 in Romania an 11-year-old girl found herself thrust into the media spotlight when it was discovered that she was 17 weeks pregnant after being raped by her uncle. Romanian abortion laws permit abortion only up to 14 weeks gestation. In the weeks that followed, the case was rarely out of the popular media, with debates about both the minutiae of this particular case and more general discussion about the appropriateness of the current legal provision taking place within the context of widespread concern about the phenomenon of *fetite-mame* ('little girl-mothers'). This article considers the way the extensive media coverage of this case contributed to debates in Romania around abortion, childhood and child protection, but also exposed insecurities around national identity and Romania's place within a wider Europe. It argues that this case serves as a "critical discourse moment" (Brown and Ferree 2005:10) which highlights concerns about legislative shortcomings around abortion, media and professional roles in child protection, and the construction of childhood more generally in Romania.

Keywords: Romania, abortion, childhood, media, child protection

Introduction and Background

Throughout the world debates have intensified around the sexualisation of children and young people, and at all levels of society policy makers are keen to address the phenomenon of precocious sexual activity, particularly around pregnancy. Childhood and adolescence are periods which are framed as protected spaces, with "a powerful modern idea of the child as innocent (especially sexually innocent) but always potentially corruptible" (Moran 2001:75; see also Hillier and Mitchell 2008). In Romania a powerful concern has emerged around the high rate of teenage pregnancy (in 2008 Romania's teenage pregnancy rate was second in the European Union, behind the United Kingdom) and the figure of the fetiță-mamă ("little-girl mother"), with phrases such as copii nasc copii ("children give birth to children") and mame-copii/mama-copil ("child-mothers" plural and singular) common in media coverage. Whilst the term *fetele-mame* ("girl-mothers") generally refers to unmarried mothers (Stefan 1999), the diminutive *fetită-mamă* is used to emphasise the young age of the mothers under discussion. Whilst much of the coverage of this issue focusses on the issue of teenage pregnancy and motherhood, abortion too is a concern of commentators and frequent debates on the topic appear in the popular media, often viewed through the lens of discourses around "demographic crisis." Such discourses are common throughout central and Eastern Europe – for example in Russia (Rivkin-Fish 2003), Ukraine (Zhurzhenko 2012) and Poland (Mishtal 2012) - the term "demographic crisis" carries a strong resonance in the region, and thus imbues debates around abortion, motherhood and fertility.

Romania has a particularly tragic recent history in regard to abortion. The politicising of reproduction took place through the Communist leader Nicolae Ceauşescu's infamous Decree #770 of 1966, banning abortion in nearly all circumstances, halting contraceptive imports, mandating compulsory workplace gynaecological examinations and promoting a constant pro-familial rhetoric proclaiming the virtues of motherhood. The decree was aimed at combatting the declining Romanian birth rate, and Ceauşescu's declaration that "the fetus is the socialist property of the whole society" (Băban 2000:277; Kligman 1998) led to a direct link between childbearing and "the social reproduction of the Socialist Republic of Romania"

(Kligman 1998:20). Following the overthrow of the Ceauşescu regime in 1989, one of the first acts of the new government was to reverse the legal prohibitions on abortion and contraception. Romania's abortion law was amended in 1996 to allow abortion on request up to 14 weeks, and beyond in the case of risk to the woman's life (IPPF-EN 2012).

World Health Organisation figures show that abortions in Romania have dramatically reduced in number since 1989. In 1990 there were 992,265 abortions in total, whilst in 2011 (the last year for which figures were available) the number was 103,383 (a slight increase on the previous year's total, but the first increase since 1989). Of these totals, in 1990 51,830 (5.2% of the total) were to women under 20, whilst in 2011 this figure had reduced to 10,055 (9.72% of the total) (WHO n.d.). This rise in the percentage of abortions being performed on women under 20 (despite this being in the context of a significant reduction in total numbers of abortions) has been mirrored by a rise in media coverage in the phenomenon of childhood and adolescent sexuality and pregnancy.

In Romania the media landscape is well developed, with a number of commercial broadcasters and print news sources, the majority of which are owned by western media groups (Coman 2000). In general the foreign ownership of the bulk of Romanian media organisations, similar to the rest of central and eastern Europe, is judged not to have led to a 'westernisation' (and implicitly 'higher quality') of reporting standards, with quality reporting often deemed to have been sacrificed to commercial interests (Lauk 2009). By and large media reporting is deemed to still be largely partisan (Gross 2003) and with commercial driving forces political debate is often replaced with a focus on scandal and entertainment (Coman 2000).

The mass media, through its reporting of events and issues, creates what Charles Taylor (2002 cited in Frosh and Wolfsfeld 2007:107) refers to as "the social imaginary." In other words, how people imagine their lives and social relationships and interactions is at least partly formed by the media constructions and representations of aspects of society (Frosh and Wolfsfeld 2007). Erjavec (2001:702) also argues that the mass media plays an important role in both constructing and disseminating normative views of what constitutes 'reality':

The presentation of reality by news discourse is not reality itself, but reality generated by a general sign-system in relation to social structure ... It both shapes and reflects the dominant notion of what is significant, and therefore contributes to the ongoing process of constructing a dominant ideology through which the audience perceives reality

The media are thereby involved in constructing a consensus which contributes to formation of national, gendered, racial and sexual norms which are used to regulate what is seen as acceptable behaviour and identity.

The process of framing or translating issues from individual stories to public opinion is largely invisible (Kramer 2007), and is mediated by the social contexts within which the stories are read (Kitzinger 1990). The messages within media presentations of sexuality and reproduction do not merely consist of their content, but often frame the audience's thinking through omissions, value judgements, use of 'expert' opinion or choice of accompanying images. In this way dominant social values are reflected (Cotrău 2003), constructed (McRobbie 1991) and construed (Fairclough 2003:8), and stereotypes reinforced. The media acts as a mediator between the private domain of the audience and the postsocialist public sphere (Draga Alexandru 2007), and as such analysis of media portrayals is important to identify the issues and identities, both dominant and invisible, shaping contemporary discourses about reproduction and sexuality, including abortion.

Given that sexuality and reproduction are inherently social and relational issues, the mass media's role in constructing the 'social imaginary' is crucial in understanding how sexuality and reproduction are understood in wider society. Often issues are presented as the result of a "critical discourse moment" (Brown and Ferree 2005:10) and both the articles themselves and the responses to them are richly illustrative of current societal normative understandings. The case considered in this paper represents one of these critical discourse moments for Romania, as it involved all the issues of current and historical concern in Romanian society – abortion, a child victim, a *fetiță-mamă* – and led to national 'soulsearching' around Romanian abortion law, how children are protected (or not), and Romania's place in a wider European context.

Romania is not the only country where the issue of abortion and minors has led to intensive debate about national identity, gender, religion, and the place of abortion in national life. In Ireland the X case (Smyth 2005) sparked similar debates, and led to clarification of abortion laws. However, the recent case of the death of a mother refused an abortion for an unviable pregnancy (Berer 2013) has highlighted that this debate in Ireland is far from over, and the changes and legal clarifications at the time of the X case are far from being adequate or complete. Elsewhere in Eastern Europe, abortion continues to be a subject that exercises politicians, church leaders and activists and is invoked in different ways to enforce political legitimacy claims (Gal and Kligman 2000a). The case presented in this paper is an important one to consider given Romania's particular history around abortion, its current debates and anxieties around national identity as a relatively new member of the European Union, and the importance of the role of the Romanian Orthodox Church in attempting to define and frame the debate around abortion, sexuality and reproduction more widely. That this case also involves an 11-year-old child also brings into stark relief debates around sexual innocence, victimhood and child protection.

In June 2008, Romanian media sources reported the case of an 11-year-old girl from a rural area who had been found to be 17 weeks pregnant after being raped by her 19-year-old uncle. Stories of girls under the age of 16 becoming pregnant appear somewhat frequently in the Romanian press, with the standard portrayal being of an innocent child victim and a predatory adult perpetrator who is being sought by the authorities. However usually the pregnancy is discovered much earlier and the pregnancy is either aborted, or allowed to continue, in which case it subsequently contributes to the frequent debate around teenage pregnancy (where instead of being victims the girls are often cast as feckless and unrealistic). Stories are rarely followed up once they have been presented. The combination of facts of this case – the young age of the girl involved, the relatively advanced state of her pregnancy (past the stage at which abortion is legal in Romania), the fact that the pregnancy was incestuous, and later the debates around abortion legislation and whether or not the proposed abortion could or would take place in Romania - led to it dominating the mass media news in Romania for nearly two months.

After presenting at a local hospital with abdominal pains, which her parents had attributed to appendicitis, and the pregnancy being discovered, the girl told her parents that she had been twice raped by her uncle at her grandmother's house, but had been threatened if she disclosed the abuse. A local medical commission agreed that an abortion was possible under Romanian law due to the age of the child and the circumstances of the pregnancy, but procedural irregularities meant that this decision could not be ratified and instead her case was heard by more senior medical commissions at regional and national levels, all of which declined to make a definitive statement about whether an abortion was possible or not. The Secretary of State for Health at the time, Eugen Nicolăescu, called for a national debate about whether or not the abortion laws should be changed, particularly in regard to minors, whilst the head of the Romanian College of Physicians announced publically that any surgeon performing an abortion at such a late stage of pregnancy would have to take responsibility for their actions before the law and would not be supported by the College. Meanwhile, a Romanian expatriate living in the UK heard of the case and offered to pay for the girl and her parents to come to the UK to have the abortion there, as the UK laws allow for abortion up to 24 weeks of pregnancy. The Romanian Orthodox Church also became involved, offering to support the family financially both pre- and postnatally if the girl did not have an abortion but carried the pregnancy to term. She eventually travelled to the UK with her mother at 21 weeks pregnant, where every aspect of her story was still followed extensively in the Romanian mass media. The original private clinic at which the abortion was planned withdrew their service after her arrival due to the lack of a paediatric anaesthetist, but provided funds for her to have the abortion privately at 22 weeks at a National Health Service hospital a few days later than originally planned. UK police authorities were also involved as the Romanian police had requested a DNA sample from the foetus in order to establish the guilt of the alleged perpetrator. The girl remained in London for around a week after the operation, during which time her uncle, who had been on the run since the story broke, was found and arrested. Media coverage started to decline after she had returned to Romania, although it picked up again during the uncle's court appearances and subsequent trial (Hanganu 2010).

There were a number of striking features of the media coverage of this case. Firstly, it was clear from early on that the girl involved could easily be identified through the sensationalist coverage, despite the Romanian law on the Protection and Promotion of Children's Rights (272/2004) stating that the child has the right to protection of her image and intimate, private and family life, and that her name, location and photograph should not be revealed (Hanganu 2010). Her first name and initial, village and county, photograph with only her eyes blacked out, her parents' full names and photographs with no pixellation, and photographs of the village, as well as the photograph and full name of the uncle accused of raping her, were regularly included in news reports, along with details of the clinics and hospitals she was attending, the procedures and tests she was undergoing, and speculation as to the possible risks to her future fertility of the proposed abortion. Her parents, wider family and neighbours were frequently quoted in the coverage, and it was clear that there was a substantial media presence in the girl's village. Of the 983 articles (written and broadcast) about the case identified by Hanganu (2010:205), he reports that there were 1,780 references to the girl's name, 1,380 references to her parents' names, 980 references to her home location, as well as 2,140 references to "pregnant little girl" and 1,420 references to "abortion." In addition to the details of the case, including personal details about her parents and wider family, other notable features of the coverage included criticism of medical and political authorities for the indecision involved which prolonged the case for over a month after the pregnancy was discovered, coverage of the Church response to the case, and significant debate about what the case represented in terms of national concerns – for example comparison of Romanian and European Union (EU) laws, and how Romania is viewed internationally, including reporting the extent to which the story was being reported and viewed on international news sites such as BBC Worldwide.

The governmental response to the case involved the Secretary of State for Health initiating further medical commissions to discuss the particular circumstances of the 11-yearold girl, but also a public debate around whether the abortion laws needed to be changed to take this sort of case into account. Critical headlines such as "Nicolăescu treats the rape of a child with a debate" (Anghel 2008a), highlighting a perceived ineffectual and inadequate response, were common.

This paper will look at key actors and institutions involved in this case and consider how the coverage of each informs the debate about abortion, childhood and child protection in Romania. In addition it illustrates how this case highlighted wider national concerns about Romania's place in Europe, its identity as a nation, and how abortion remains a key arena within which these issues are framed.

Methods

The findings presented here are based on the analysis of 99 articles from across a range of online media sources between June - July 2008. Whilst a quantitative content analysis could identify the frequency of particular characteristics in the texts, this approach does not consider the wider context in which the texts are produced (Vanhala-Aniszewski and Siilin 2013). This paper on the other hand is concerned with how the events of 2008 were accorded significance by media sources and wider debates thereby framed and debated. Given that media is commonly considered to a social product, both reflecting and shaping dominant notions of significance (Erjavec 2001), a discourse analytic approach (Fairclough 2003) was taken, whereby the language employed was considered in the context of the wider social debates taking place in Romania around childhood, abortion and national identity.

The media articles accessed for this paper were all Romanian online sources collected while I was outside of Romania. Most of them are articles from the websites of national broadsheet newspapers, covering a spectrum of political sympathies and patronage. In addition to this, articles from a national free daily newspaper were also accessed, as were articles from one of the main news agencies (not state-owned) and a popular privately-owned TV channel. The blog of a prominent young Orthodox theologian was also featured in this analysis, in the absence of more 'official' publications from the Orthodox Church, as he featured two articles pertaining to this case which attracted considerable comment. In total, during June - July 2008, 99 articles in total were accessed relating to this case. Hanganu (2010:205) highlights that in totality across the Romanian media, 263 articles were written and 720 broadcast about the case. The sources used in this analysis in this paper are presented in Table 1.

broadsheet newspaper 10
l broadsheet newspaper 4
l free mid-range newspaper 13
l mid-range broadsheet/tabloid 11
ber
l broadsheet newspaper 3
l news agency (privately- 25
TV channel (privately- 21
l broadsheet newspaper 10
is blog 2

Table 1: Sources

Original articles were all in Romanian; all translations here are mine. The articles were coded first in terms of the aspect of the event they were covering, and then again to identify the main actors involved and focus of the article, in order to provide a rich picture of the different ways in which the different actors and situations were being discussed in the media. Both the articles themselves and any public comments on them were included in the

analysis. The comments were not considered beyond the scope of the media analysis as they were placed in the public domain in the context of a public discussion of the issues.

Findings

Analysis of the mass media coverage of this case identified a number of key actors/institutions in the story who had a say in what happened and how the situation evolved. Each of these will be taken in turn here, identifying through their coverage how abortion and child protection is constructed in Romanian media, how it is related to wider national and international concerns, and how the coverage shaped the wider societal debate.

The girl, her family and friends

The overwhelming construction of the girl at the centre of this case was that of victim. Her young age was often emphasised, both through the frequent use of the terms *fetiță-mamă* and *minoră* ('minor'), the use of stock photos of dolls, and, following the eventual abortion, headlines such as "Pregnant little girl of 11 years has regained her childhood" (Anghel 2008b). The circumstances of the pregnancy (rape and incest) were mentioned in most articles, but media sources and public commentary were also critical of the authorities and accused them of prolonging the girl's situation through their indecision. For example, in an article titled "Institutional Abortion", the daily broadsheet *Cotidianul* opined:

There are extremely few subjects which rally the whole of civil society in a for/against debate. Unfortunately, the case of the raped little girl represents one of these moments. [...] It perhaps seems strange that the state demonstrated its incapacity to reform society, when, apparently, it's about a situation involving relations in the sphere of regulating private life. [...] We have child protection authorities, we have hundreds of state structures involved ... where are they when you need help? Where were they on that day? How many debates were there in Parliament on this very theme, with possible legislative consequences? (Dragotescu 2008)

On the same lines, the commissions set up to debate the case were also criticised for indecision and prolonging the girl's suffering unnecessarily:

"Whilst the commissions of 'specialists' from the Ministries of Health and Justice debate the case of the little girl of 11 years, pregnant, so as not to appear sleeping, her mother decided to take her to Great Britain, considering that this is the only chance for this child to regain her childhood and to not be left with life-long effects ..." (Anghel 2008c).

The girl's parents were also featured heavily in the coverage, with a number of interesting tropes present. They were often presented as 'simple folk' – working on the land, God-fearing, supporting her in her education, and desperate to support their daughter to 'regain her childhood'. However, the region of Romania they are from meant that, particularly in the public comments to articles, they were often stereotyped as stupid, uneducated, Roma, with incest just being 'what happens there.' The girl's mother was quoted in reports as upset that they had been described as Roma:

Some comments made her extremely sad, being those in which it was said that her family are gypsies. 'In my papers it isn't written that I am Roma by ethnicity. We are Romanians, I don't wear flowery skirts or a scarf on my head. If we have darker skin, we're gypsies? And if I was, would that matter? If they don't have anything to say, they should stay quiet,' cried the woman. (Sofronia 2008)

The fact that the girl's mother herself was only 26 (so had given birth to her daughter when she was 15) was also frequently raised, and used in the public comments as another reason why the story was perhaps not so unusual, that young sexual activity in 'these types of families' was the norm. This brought this coverage into line with more general stories about young parenthood (where comments about this being common in their region are also frequent), and contrasted with the accounts of the family as hard-working.

The uncle accused of rape was also featured in a number of articles. He was arrested when the pregnancy was first discovered, but denied the allegation and had not been kept in custody. He subsequently disappeared, and the attempts of the authorities to find him, including court cases held in his absence, appeared regularly in the mass media. Like the girl and her parents, his photograph (usually the photograph from his identity card, featuring all his personal details) appeared frequently. He was usually labelled guilty, often referred to as *unchiul violator* ("the uncle-rapist"). Later on in the case, after he had been arrested, coverage extended to include his wider family – his mother (the girl's maternal grandmother, in whose house the abuse had taken place) and brother being vocal in their support of him and their criticism of his sister (the girl's mother), her husband and the girl herself. These accounts, in addition to the extensive coverage of the details of the rape and of the various medical tests and treatment the girl was to have, added to the intrusive aspect of the coverage.

Another important person in this story was the expatriate Romanian woman living in the UK who paid for the girl and her mother to come to the UK for an abortion. She was not known to the family previously, but decided to act after seeing the coverage of the case. She became a figure of interest herself ("She's around 40 years old, tall and chatty. She leads casually, sure of herself, going from one row to the other, like on the Romanian streets, yet without forgetting despite that to thank everyone. She's the type of person who you warm to immediately..." (Năftănăilă 2008a)), and her motives discussed. The comparison between the sophisticated expatriate and the 'simple' rural folk she was helping was striking.

Medical and Child Protection professionals

Medical professionals appeared frequently in the coverage of the case, particularly in the first month prior to the girl's travel to the UK, as they were involved in a number of commissions which were convened to discuss the case and try to come to a solution. In much of the coverage they were depicted as indecisive, conflicted or cowardly, not unanimous, incompetent and not up to European standards. They were also criticised by child protection specialists (who themselves were also criticised for the delay in their response) for not taking into account the child's best interests.

The contradictory conclusions of the different medical commissions were featured frequently, and blamed for prolonging the girl's situation. This coverage was often very openly critical, for example:

The ordeal of [girl's name], the child of 11, 5 months pregnant, goes on. Leaving the little girl's interests and health to the last place, the authorities are incapable of taking the best decision for the minor. On the one hand are the doctors from [regional centre], who don't see anything abnormal in a girl of 11, pregnant by her uncle, keeping the child, and on the other hand there is the National Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights, who, at the 11th hour, react and consider that, through continuing the pregnancy, in the girl's case the abuse to which she was subjected by the rapist will continue. (Anghel 2008d)

This criticism also highlighted the discourses around comparing this situation with the rest of Europe:

When they took the decision to not perform an abortion, doctors did not put the interests and rights of the child first, as the law states. In addition, they [child protection specialists] said that the majority of laws in [European] Union countries provide for the possibility of ending a pregnancy when it has come about due to a rape or incest. (*ProTV* 2008a)

The fact that Romanian law does not explicitly cover this scenario and the comparison with Europe was also covered in an article which began by articulating the different abortion laws in various European countries before asserting:

In Romania, according to the Penal Code, the doctor risks imprisonment for terminating a pregnancy after 14 weeks ... In the legislation there is no provision for what needs to be done in the case of a pregnancy caused by incest or rape. (Năftănăilă 2008b)

It was also widely reported that, regardless of the fact that there were some doctors who would have been willing to undertake the abortion in Romania, the Romanian Medical College was not supportive of this course of action:

The Romanian Medical College draws the attention of doctors the fact that nobody can be obliged to undertake this abortion, if this contravenes their conscience. In addition, the Medical College considers that the decision of the ministerial commission is actually a recommendation and, as such, in the case of a complication, the doctor will not be protected by the College. (*ProTV* 2008b)

The President of the Romanian Medical College went further than this in articulating a clear 'pro-life' position in regard to this case:

The President of the Romanian Medical College (CMR), Dr Vasile Astărăstoae, affirmed that he would not make any proposals to change the legislation covering abortion, because the existing law is of 'excessive laxity'. 'A being of more than 20 weeks feels pain, it moves! It cannot be blamed that in this world there are 'monsters', as proved by the girl's uncle,' said Vasile Astărăstoae, former president of the Bioethics Commission of the Medical College. (Croitorescu and Năftănăilă 2008) For his part, the president of the Romanian Medical College, Vasile Astărăstoae, considers that the regulations of the Council of Europe and the World Medical Association for Protecting the Embryo and Foetus need to be taken into account. 'They are living beings with rights, and developments in the medical field mean that at this moment a foetus older than 20 weeks has a chance to survive outside the intrauterine environment...' (Dumitrescu and Georgescu 2008)

This discursive environment meant that, even though the commission eventually pronounced that an abortion was legally possible in this case, under the provisions of the Penal Code and the law relating to the Rights of the Child, it was clear that doctors were not operating in a supportive environment and they were being encouraged from the highest level to not be involved in an abortion in this case.

Politicians

Like the medical commissions, politicians were widely criticised for their indecision, for talking rather than taking action. They were also, in common with the coverage of the medical authorities, criticised for not reaching a European ideal and for the fact that existing law was regarded as in conflict with European norms.

The indecision of politicians, particularly from the Ministry of Health, was most often criticised, for example:

'When you want to bury a problem, set up a commission' was the motto of the Ministry of Health, faced with an extremely delicate case, that of the little girl of 11 years, pregnant following a rape. For more than three weeks, the Romanian authorities didn't do anything except convene commissions, but without coming up with a single solution. (Anghel 2008c)

The Secretary of State for Health, Eugen Nicolăescu, was also personally criticised, not only for his apparent indecision and relying on ineffectual commissions, but also for responding to the situation with a proposal for a public debate, which was seen as overriding the immediate and long-term needs of the pregnant girl:

The Minister of Health, Eugen Nicolăescu, believes that there is a need for a collective opinion to decide the fate of the little girl of 11 years who, following a rape, became pregnant. Although the little girl is extremely young, and could have consequences for life in as much as the father of the child is a blood relative (her uncle), Nicolăescu does not consider that these arguments are sufficiently solid for the girl to have a termination of pregnancy. Therefore he is doing what he thinks is for the best: a public debate, to determine at what stage of pregnancy abortions can be done. (Anghel 2008a)

The laws and policies that the girl's situation highlighted as inadequate were also often compared unfavourably to European laws and norms. The abortion laws in different countries were elucidated, with the implication that Romania's laws were too restrictive, particularly in comparison with other European countries (to whose standards they wished to aspire). When Romanian representatives in various EU bodies raised the issue this was also extensively reported and commented upon in the public comments to articles. The potential for this case to change national law and reinforce more liberal law elsewhere was also recognised:

The British claim that [girl's name]'s situation will strengthen further the case for extending the period in which abortion can be done across Europe. 'This case is a good example to show that the British parliament took the right decision last month when it voted that women in Great Britain could have an abortion up to 24 weeks,' said the leader of the institute. (Croitorescu and Năftănăila 2008)

In this way, the Romanian media coverage was siting the debate as beyond national importance and with wider European implications. Romania in this coverage was positioned as aspiring to a 'valid' position as a member of the European Union but not meeting these standards due to outdated and inadequate laws.

The Romanian Orthodox Church

Shortly before the possibility of the girl travelling abroad for an abortion was reported as an option, the Romanian Orthodox Church and a group of Christian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) announced that they were prepared to support the girl and her family, financially and practically, if she did not have an abortion but carried the baby to term. The Church's position was broadly to be expected – pronouncing itself against abortion and against any relaxation of abortion laws, referring in the press release to abortion at 21 weeks (the stage of the girl's pregnancy at the time) as "particularly barbaric and painful for the baby, whose nervous system is already sufficiently developed to feel the intervention in which it is killed" (Dumitru 2008). It also criticised the pro-abortion stance of the National Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights, in the name of promoting the best interests of the child, as hypocritical given that they did not prevent the girl's identity being leaked to the media. However, although this position was clearly articulated, the Church's response was more nuanced and it was careful not to criticise the girl or her family, but concentrate its criticism on the structural and legislative systems in place which allowed for the possibility of abortion:

The Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR) has not adopted a firm position in this case. 'In the case of rape or incest, the recommendation is that the child should be born, respecting its right to life, but, ultimately, the family will take the decision, following which doctors will be informed of the moral implications ... It is an exceptional situation which needs to be treated in an exceptional way,' explained [...] BOR spokesperson, priest Constantin Stoica." (Ciocata and Busuioc 2008)

Whilst the public comments on articles covering this offer from the Church tended to be polarised for or against the Church and its position on abortion, the coverage of the family and their village revealed a more nuanced position, that of supporting the abortion despite their strong religious beliefs:

Although religious by nature, people from [name of village] appear to agree with the decision of the little one's family, to take her to have an abortion. (Nechita and Ciornia 2008)

Mass media

The media coverage of the case was clearly sensationalist and intrusive, and largely without regard for the wellbeing of the child's privacy and protection. Hanganu (2010) is extremely critical of both the actions of individual reporters and of the cumulative impact of the media 'circus' around this case. However, it is also certainly true that the media coverage proved proactive in shaping the wider debate around abortion and child protection in Romania, as well as considering what the case implied about Romania's place in the wider European context.

A number of sources held debates, via editorial pieces and through inviting public opinion and comment, both on whether the abortion laws in Romania needed to be changed, and also more widely about what this case said about Romania as a country. Several articles agreed that this case was not a 'one-off' case but represented incest as an ever-present and growing issue in Romania, presenting it in such a way as to suggest an epidemic (particularly in rural areas). This was also used to justify the media's coverage of this particular case:

EVZ chose to tell [girl's name]'s drama because there are already too many children abused by parents, relatives, neighbours, then threatened to keep it quiet. There are too many traumatised children and too many girls who give birth before knowing what's happened to them. Unfortunately, these things are reality in Romania more than we imagine. [...] Many have said: if some intrusive journalists hadn't intervened, it would have been easy to arrange an abortion, without fuss, and everyone saw the business. Many have said: you're only interested in the show of downtrodden people. Many have said, without reading: you haven't offered all points of view. As many critics have suggested, it is important that the debate took place unsparingly about a subject about which everyone has an opinion and expresses it vehemently. (Hera 2008a)

A number of editorials also pointed out how this case highlighted the gap between the state and politicians, on one hand, and the ordinary people of Romania on the other. For example, after criticising a number of different child protection authorities and state structures, as well as political parties of all stripes, one editorial concluded:

The lack of involvement of these groups paid for from public money, regardless what they call themselves, as well as the parents' decision to leave with their daughter for England shows, once again, the huge fault between civil society and the Romanian state. (Dragotescu, 2008)

The case was cited as an example of the gap between 'uncivilised Romania' and 'civilised Europe', with calls for earlier sex education (another deeply contested issue in Romania) linked to ridding Romania of the shame of high incest rates and young mothers:

Let us understand: it's not the doctors who are to blame for this situation. The guilty one is the rapist for whom I don't believe exists a sufficiently hard punishment. The guilty one is our backward, inflexible society. In countries somewhat more civilised than ours, they have early sex education. I admit, I did not realise how early. But it seems terrible to me that the parents of the child from [name of county] did not realise, for so long, that something terrible had happened to their daughter. (Hera 2008b)

Still more accounts called for Romania to re-examine its development priorities, blaming poverty (particularly rural poverty) for the 'epidemic' of 'monsters' so common in society, and reproducing the 'civilised/uncivilised' discourse:

Will someone take seriously the problem of extreme poverty in this country, which particularly affects the poor rural zones of Moldova and the south of the country? I would have expected that this question would find an answer with the launch of the Romanian National Strategy for Sustainable Development till 2030. Launched last week, the same day as the 11-year-old little girl from [name of village] left for England to escape the nightmare of the pregnancy resulting from a rape, this extremely important document said nothing about combatting poverty. The strategy thought up by our experts identifies some great challenges which lie ahead for Romanian development, but among them cannot be found the abyss in which some millions of citizens live. We have a plan for climate change, for sustainable transport, for production and consumption, for natural resources, health, social inclusion and even for global poverty! 'The EU action plan (to which Romania is automatically subscribed ed.) underlines the need to increase efforts (...) to combat poverty particularly in Africa,' as written in a document produced by the Government and UNDP. They have in their sights poverty in Africa, but not a clue about what we have to do with Africa in our own backyard. (Turturica 2008)

This national 'soul-searching' took place alongside the many articles with the intimate details of the girl's unfolding situation, and thus demonstrated how one case could encapsulate wider societal anxieties not only about young people's sexuality or abortion but about the country's place within Europe.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article considers the way the extensive media coverage of this case contributed to debates in Romania around abortion, childhood and child protection, but also exposed insecurities around national identity and place within a wider Europe. It argues that this case serves as a "critical discourse moment" (Brown and Ferree, 2005) which highlights concerns about legislative shortcomings around abortion, media and professional roles in child protection, and the construction of childhood more generally in Romania. The way the case was both handled and reported has considerable implications for child protection and abortion more widely in Romania.

Hanganu (2010:171) highlights the negative effects of the intrusive coverage of this case, both on the girl and her family, but also in terms of the sensationalising of the case and the constant search for new information, regardless of the psychological effect it would have on the girl. Despite the clear provision in Romanian law of legislation regarding the protection of a child's identity and their right to privacy, the girl and her family were repeatedly identified, through the use of the most minimal efforts at concealing (for example showing a photograph of her face with only the eyes blacked out or using her initial instead of a full surname, rendered useless by the subsequent use, often in the same article, of the full names of her parents). Within the media coverage itself, child protection authorities were being criticised for inaction on the girl's behalf whilst the mass media's right to discuss the minutiae of her case as the debate about incest and abortion needed to be brought into the open was proclaimed. This lack of reflexivity on the part of the mass media is by no means an exclusively Romanian phenomenon, although the specifics of this case show the

importance of resisting the focus on entertainment and scandal (Coman 2000) at the expense of sensitive reporting in Romania, particularly around controversial topics such as child protection and abortion.

The clear construction of the girl in this case as an innocent victim not only of her abusive uncle but also of the incompetence of doctors, child protection authorities and politicians both mirrors and problematises the wider debates around abortion in Romania. By using terms such as *fetita-mamă* and *minoră* the girl was positioned as dependent and vulnerable (Macleod and Feltham-King 2012) and in need of protection, protection that was sadly lacking in this case. The coverage of the search for her uncle by the legal authorities served to further cement her position as the innocent victim. This coverage reflects other cases where teenage pregnancy and motherhood is reported in Romania, with most of the reports emphasising that the putative father has either been arrested or is being hunted by authorities for charges relating to sex with a minor (Kirkham 2011). However, the fact that there was a five-month old foetus complicated the girl's status as victim, and indeed as child, as both public comments and statements from the Romanian Medical College's president positioned the foetus as equally if not more deserving of life and protection. These comments thus positioned the foetus as the "child" and the girl as the "mother", thereby justifying the call to carry the pregnancy to term. Macleod and Feltham-King (2012:745) highlight how the positioning of a pregnant woman (or girl) who has not yet borne a child as "mother" promotes "the imperative of procreation as the only route to womanhood and femininity. In this, women become defined by their reproductive capacity ..." The media coverage speculating on the potential risk to the girl's fertility should the abortion go ahead also contributes to this "imperative of procreation."

Alongside the constructions of childhood and victimhood, the issue of power and agency also emerged through the coverage of this case. Positioned as an innocent victim, powerless and at the mercy of both her abuser and of the authorities, both the girl and her family were portrayed as helpless and without agency. However once the opportunity to go abroad for the abortion was provided, the family were repositioned as taking an active decision to bypass the ineffectual professionals and politicians, something which was largely approved of in the media coverage. In many ways it is the position of the professionals and politicians which is particularly interesting in this regard. They are portrayed as both having the power to decide the girl's ultimate fate, but also as lacking agency to make any decision due to the restrictions inherent in the current legislation. Matters of reproductive and sexual health are particularly sensitive in Romania, given the legacy of the Communist government prior to 1989, and politicians in particular are often reluctant to be proactive, realising that any attempt to legislate in this area is seen as an intrusion into private (family) matters and is "regarded with suspicion" (Gheaus 2001:186). In addition, a politician's stance on abortion acts as a proxy indicator of their stance on anything from health and social welfare, churchstate relations, or Romania's position within Europe (Gal and Kligman 2000a; 2000b). As such, the situation since 2008 when this case came to prominence is that despite the talk of the need for a national debate around abortion particularly for minors, with the suggestion that abortion would be allowed up to 24 weeks for girls under 15, and the heated discussion in the public comments of the media articles at the time demonstrating the issue is as contested as ever, at the time of writing the law remains as it was, with Law #140 of 1996 still in operation (IPPF-EN 2012).

With respect to Romania's national identity and position vis-à-vis Europe, whilst the articles largely articulated criticism of Romania's inadequate abortion laws in comparison to the more 'civilised' Europe, the public commentary on them was much more mixed. Aspiration to a more European society with more liberal abortion laws was situated alongside calls to reject European liberalism and adopt even more conservative legislation. Many of

the articles, not just the editorials, mentioned European legislation and conditions in the middle of accounts of what was happening to the girl and her family at that particular time. It was clear that this case demonstrated that one girl's life was not only highlighting issues around abortion and child protection, but also reflecting national anxieties around Romania's national identity and place in the wider European polity.

This study of the media coverage of this case in Romania, as in other countries such as Ireland (Smyth 2005), has highlighted that abortion and child protection remain potent issues which are strongly contested. Useful research could be done among both population members and professionals working in child protective services and reproductive health services to ascertain the ongoing impact of this case and the wider debates around precocious adolescent sexuality and incest. Certainly this paper has shown that the topics of abortion and child protection can be used to reflect the wider societal processes being negotiated and performed as Romania settles into its new role as a member of the European Union.

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