

When Children Need Protection from Parents: Citizens' Views of the Bodnariu Case in Romania and Their Determinants

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Abstract. The article examines the relationship between child protection policies and public attitudes in Romania through the lens of the Bodnariu case in Norway (also known as the Naustdal case). We use data collected through a representative survey of the Romanian adult population to explore citizens' attitudes toward this case. Our analysis reveals several compelling insights. Even five years later, more than half of the respondents vividly recall the Bodnariu case, and a significant majority of them express dissatisfaction with its handling. Notably, religiosity and views on the church-state relationship emerge as robust predictors of public perception of child protection services in Norway and the role of Romanian authorities. Gender, age, and education also exert significant influence. At the same time, those who remember the case tend to exhibit greater support for non-democratic alternatives, including a church-led regime.

Keywords: child protection; child protection systems; Bodnariu case; Norway; Romania; corporal punishment.

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1. Introduction

Decisions made in the realm of child protection are never inconsequential for the parties concerned (Benbenishty et al. 2015), and can become an important reminder that, in circumstances where children are believed to be exposed to risk, the state can make its way into the private sphere of family, to exercise its protective prerogatives (Berrick et al. 2023). As such, there is always a chance that interventions resulting from such decisions will sit uneasily with how the affected families or wider community envisage the just way of action.

In this paper, we discuss an instance where such interventions have been strongly contested, both by the family in question and the public opinion. Specifically, we analyse the 2015-2016 case of a Romanian-Norwegian family from Naustdal, Norway, whose children were removed by the child protection services (Barnevernet), on the grounds of suspicions regarding parents' alleged mistreatment of the young ones. The chain of events started in October 2015, with a notification made to the local child protection services by a teacher from the municipality of Naustdal, which pointed to an alleged mistreatment of children in the Bodnariu family (Pantazi 2016). The mixed family (with a Norwegian mother and a Romanian-born father) had five children, with ages ranging - at the time of the occurrences - from 4 months to 9 years old. The parents have been accused of applying physical punishments to their children, while the suspicion of a potential religious indoctrination of the young ones was also part of the discussion (Pantazi 2016; Popescu 2016). During the following month, all of the five children were removed from their biological parents and placed to live with three different foster families (Pantazi 2016). It must be noted that, in December 2015, during a TV interview, the two parents in question admitted to have occasionally applied slight physical corrections to their children (Pantazi 2016). Notwithstanding, the severity of the authorities' intervention created a massive flow of indignation, as the decision to separate the children from their parents has been largely interpreted as abusive and exaggerated. In response to Barnevernet's decision, the family stressed the procedural inadequacies of the intervention and initiated a legal action, contesting the measures (Pantazi 2016; Popescu 2016). An unprecedented wave of solidarity with the family emerged internationally, particularly among religious groups affiliated to the Pentecostal faith, to which the Bodnariu family belongs (Hotnews 2016; Popescu 2016), covered extensively by the mass media and the online environment (Paulesc 2019; Vasile 2016). The controversy around the case went beyond demonstrations of empathy from the part of civic or religious groups. It also reached the political arena, where Romanian MPs were quick to take hold of the topic: ardent debates in the

Parliament (Soare and Tufis 2023), and an official trip to Norway in view of discussing the case with the relevant actors (Alexandrescu 2016; Ministerul Afacerilor Externe 2016). Moreover, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the representatives of the Romanian state in Norway had several meetings with the relevant Norwegian authorities, during which the controversial decision of Barnevernet has been repeatedly addressed (Ministerul Afacerilor Externe 2016). It is difficult to gauge the exact impact that the multitude of reactions to Barnevernet's decision, in the civic realm, mass media and at political/diplomatic level, had on the subsequent course of events. Notwithstanding, in June 2016, the Norwegian authorities agreed to return the children to their parents.

Despite the successful reunification of the family members, the Bodnariu case became somewhat synonymous with the idea that state institutions can at times intervene abruptly in the private sphere of individuals. Along these lines, we ask in this paper whether and how these events remained imprinted in the memory of the Romanian population, given the sensitivity of the issue and its extensive media coverage at the time of the events. The paper begins with a review of recent studies that examine public attitudes towards violence against children and people's views on the legitimacy of state interventions in circumstances where children are at risk in their families. The review section also covers studies about people's trust in child protection institutions and the likely factors associated with trust. The following part describes several key attributes of the child protection systems from Norway and Romania, thus shedding light on the possible sources of variation found in the literature between the attitudes that prevail among the Norwegian and Romanian populations. The next section introduces the survey data analysis and its results, followed by a discussion of the main findings and the key conclusions of the study.

2. A review of recent research on public attitudes towards violence against children and the institutions responsible for their protection

According to UNICEF (2023), by 2023, 65 countries have introduced specific legislation that makes corporal punishment of children illegal, regardless of the context where it might occur. Norway is among the countries that were quick to ban physical violence against children, having introduced specific legislation in 1987, thus being preceded only by Finland, in 1983 and Sweden, in 1979 (Burns et al. 2021; End Corporal Punishment n.d.).

In Romania, the corporal punishment of children is addressed by Law no. 272/2004 (the Law on the Protection and Promotion of Child's Rights), the

provisions of which explicitly forbid violence against children in all of its forms, within the family and generally in institutional contexts “that provide services to or organize activities with children” (Article 95, Parlamentul României, 2004). In addition, the above-referred to law provides that “the measures for disciplining the child can only be established in accordance with the child's dignity, physical punishments or those that are related to the child's physical and mental development or that affect the emotional state of the child are not allowed under any reason” (Article 33, Par. 2, Parlamentul României, 2004).

Apart from the introduction of legal regulations banning the corporal punishment of children, where inter-country variations in terms of timing can be traced, a relevant aspect regards the public's views on this matter, i.e. how regular people assess the acceptability of violence towards children.

This aspect too reveals significant variation, as shown, among others, by Hayes and O'Neal (2018). Using data collected by the World Values Survey, the authors find an impact of country-level attributes on individual-level views regarding child maltreatment, in that “more supportive attitudes toward violence at the national level lead to more supportive attitudes toward child maltreatment at the individual level” (Hayes and O'Neal 2018: 90). In the above study, the existence of specific legal provisions regarding child protection does not significantly impact individual-level views about child maltreatment, a finding interpreted by the authors as an indication of a reverse chain of influence, whereby attitudes towards child maltreatment are likely to promote legislative changes and not the other way around (Hayes and O'Neal 2018).

A possible relationship between people's willingness to report instances of corporal punishment on the one hand and the confidence in the institutions involved in child protection on the other hand is discussed by Burns et al. (2021) in their study on Austria, Estonia, Ireland, Norway and Spain. While finding that corporal punishment is rejected by large segments of the population in all five countries (with Norway standing out as the least tolerant towards such practices), the study also reveals several incongruences between rejecting corporal punishment and willingness to report it to child protection institutions. A partial explanation suggested by the authors is that people's circumspection concerning reporting instances of corporal punishment goes hand in hand with how they assess the child protection system and with the trust they have in its institutions.

Skivenes et al. (2024) look at how the public evaluates the appropriate state intervention in various cases where children are faced with specific

challenges within their family contexts, using data collected through an experimental survey vignette from Austria, England, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Norway and Spain. The study uses a typology of child protection systems (CPS) with three categories resulting from the different approaches taken by states on safeguarding children from being at risk within their families: “maltreatment protective systems”, “child well-being protective systems”, “child’s rights protective systems” (Skivenes et al. 2024). The three types of CPS differ in relation to their key focal points, which refer to, respectively: children’s safety and health; their safety, health, together with aspects of the family context that matter for children’s well-being; all of the previously listed elements along with a strong concern for children having their rights properly observed. Norway is included in the third category. An important result shows that in each of the 8 countries, only a minority of respondents favour no form of intervention on the part of the state, thus supporting the idea that people are generally willing to accept that in situations of risk faced by children in their family context, authorities’ intervention is needed (Skivenes et al. 2024).

Similarly, in an earlier analysis, Skivenes (2021) examined citizens’ views on government responsibilities towards children in several countries, including Romania, finding a general agreement on the need for government intervention in cases of unsatisfactory parental care, although the type of parental problem significantly influenced opinions on intervention methods.

Returning to the study by Skivenes et al. (2024), the authors find an association between the public views on restrictions placed on parents on the one hand and the type of CPS in place on the other hand. State interventions in the direction of limiting parents’ rights are endorsed to the highest extent by those living in countries with a CPS focused on protecting children’s rights (Norway included), followed by the public from countries where the CPS is centred on fighting child maltreatment and by those from contexts where child well-being is at the core of the CPS (Skivenes et al. 2024).

Further studies in the field rely on a two-categories typology of CPS, as in the study by Berrick et al. (2023). Comparing the US (more specifically the state of California) and Norway, the authors find that Norwegians are more willing to endorse restrictions placed on parents, in circumstances where children are exposed to risk. The authors link this finding to the differences between the CPS in place, as the US is usually included in the category of “risk-oriented” approaches, whereas Norway, with its strong emphasis on children’s rights, developed a system that highlights support offered to families (Berrick et al. 2023).

A further example is the analysis by Loen and Skivenes (2023), who build on the same distinction between “risk-oriented” (found in Czechia, Poland and Romania), and “family service-oriented” CPSs (developed by England, Finland and Norway). In the first type, the emphasis is placed on keeping children safe, the state is responsible for a limited number of aspects and there is a “relatively high threshold for interventions” (Loen and Skivenes 2023: 4). The second type professes a lower threshold for intervention, focusing on aiding families so that their situation can improve, while being a system where the state takes responsibility for comparatively more aspects (Loen and Skivenes 2023). Against this background, the authors find a relationship between the type of CPS in place and people’s confidence in the institutions responsible for child protection, with higher levels in countries that developed a family-service oriented system. Moreover, the study reveals that higher trust is associated with stronger endorsement of interventions that limit parental freedom. In terms of individual attributes, employed people and those who have children seem to be more trustful of CPS, while age displays a more specific pattern of influence, in that “younger people believe the CPS is fairer and more respectful, and elders believe the CPS is less discriminatory” (Loen and Skivenes 2023: 15).

A meaningful relationship between the type of CPS and level of trust in its institutions is also found by Skivenes and Benbenishty (2022), whose research show that public trust is highest in countries with child-centric systems (Finland and Norway) and lowest in instances that have a risk-oriented system in place (England, Estonia, Ireland, US (California)). In between the two are the publics from Austria, Germany and Spain, where the CPS is focused on family service (Skivenes and Benbenishty 2022). The same study reveals a link between trust in CPS and several socio-demographic attributes, among which individuals’ age and their educational capital: younger people are more trustful of the CPS, whereas people with low education trust the system less than those with average or high education (Skivenes and Benbenishty 2022). Similarly, higher education is associated with greater confidence in the child protection system in the study by Juhasz and Skivenes (2017). Along with being highly educated, high trust in CPS seems also to be predicted by being younger and having left-wing political convictions (Juhasz and Skivenes 2017).

We end this section with several observations about the Romanian context, where the issue of child protection and concern for children’s rights is best understood in relation to the different approaches that characterized the country’s recent past. Along these lines, Dumănescu (2014) analyses the extensive state intervention in family life during communist Romania, where

the state substituted parental roles to align with communist ideals. This dualism between traditional child-rearing practices and state-imposed guidelines has had a long-term impact on family dynamics and child upbringing. With regard to Romania's post-communist legislative framework and public policies addressing child care, Băluță (2014) finds that these policies are influenced by a political ideology emphasizing familialism. This emphasis on traditional norms and values about gender roles continues to dominate cultural meanings and social practices, suggesting a complex interaction between historical legacies and current policy directions. Just as importantly, Ursa (2000) evaluates the impact of educational programs on children's rights awareness in Romania, finding significant improvements in knowledge, acceptance of rights, and social competence among children. This underscores the importance of educational interventions in promoting children's rights.

3. A note on the different paths taken by Norway and Romania regarding child protection

As described in the introduction, the Bodnariu case produced quite a commotion, making the event known well beyond Norway and Romania, with the help of substantial media coverage. As child protection became, at least for several months, a topic of interest not only for experts but also for ordinary people, the Bodnariu issue seemed to have also brought about an apparent clash between two different worldviews and institutional circumstances.

Norway is a country that usually receives favourable scores in relation to its child protection system in international rankings, yet the practices of its CPS have often been subject to public criticism in relation to a perceived exaggerated intrusiveness (Falch-Eriksen and Skivenes 2019). Critical responses towards the Norwegian CPS are not limited to negative portrayals in the mass media, being also voiced by various states, and international structures, notably the European Court of Human Rights and the CRC Committee (Luhamaa 2020). Recent instances of criticism from the European Court of Human Rights regard the provisions of Article 8 of the European Convention of Human Rights (on the right to respect for one's private and family life), as the complainants pointed to restrictions on contact between families and children removed through CPS decisions (Luhamaa 2020).

Although critical opinions on its CPS are not sparse, Norway did establish a solid structure of legal mechanisms that seek to safeguard the best interest of the child, within a system where, while ideally children are raised within their families, the state can intervene if circumstances require it (Helland 2020). According to Falch-Eriksen and Skivenes (2019), the legislative

framework in the Norwegian context went through a number of relevant changes that strengthened the existing concern for protecting the rights of children, in accordance with the principles set by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Notable among these is the provision - introduced through amendments to the Constitution in 2014 - according to which “[c]hildren have the right to protection of their integrity” (Falch-Eriksen and Skivenes 2019: 110). This has been considered by the authors to stand for “a strong right when applied to child protection” (Falch-Eriksen and Skivenes 2019: 110).

Yet, despite the clear accomplishments in the realm of legal protection of children, the Norwegian CPS practice seems indeed troubled by several phenomena that raise concern among experts. Along these lines, according to Falch-Eriksen and Skivenes (2019), the following aspects are problematic: the comparatively more numerous CPS interventions in families with immigrant background and the associated perception of a potential discrimination towards non-native families; the lack of unitary professional guidance creates high variability of decision-making among case workers, which in turn produces situations where unequal cases are treated as if they were equal / equal cases are treated as if they were unequal; the professional training of caseworkers is not sufficiently tailored to prepare them for the actual practice of child protection, in which ideally they would be able to back their professional judgement with the relevant knowledge at all times; the existence of a comparative disadvantage in outcomes at the adult age in the case of individuals who received protection from the CPS during childhood; children’s own views in the context of child protection decisions are not sufficiently taken into consideration, thus hindering their right to participate in a process that greatly concerns them and their future.

As far as Romania is concerned, its child protection system can be considered a paradox. On the one hand, it operates on a very modern legislative basis, following the CRC recommendations, as the existing legislation and procedures suggest the system is theoretically functional and possibly superior to other child protection systems (Johansen 2023). On the other hand, as explained in the following, it seems to be a system that fails to protect children in Romania, particularly those placed in its care.

Several decades ago, the images of orphanages in communist Romania, where children lived in unthinkable conditions (dirty, malnourished, without regular human relationships), intensely disseminated by the international press, led to the Romanian child protection system being labelled as inhumane (Neagu 2021).

The massive trend of international adoption that gained momentum after the 1989 revolution deepened the negative image of the Romanian CPS. The wave

of sympathy for Romania's orphaned children, coupled with weak or inconsistently implemented legislative measures led to many children being adopted internationally both from the system and directly from families outside the system. In some of the cases, the legality of adoptions seemed entirely absent: buying children, trafficking and even kidnapping them (with parents being told by hospital staff that their child had died) (Neagu 2021).

The ensuing scandal related to the practices mentioned above led to a legal ban on international adoption, the premises of which were set in 2001, through a moratorium (Deutsche Welle 2004), and taken further through the Law 273 on Adoption from 2004 (Neagu 2015). The restrictions are still in force today, with a few exceptions (e.g. one parent is married to a foreign citizen or at least one adoptive parent being a Romanian citizen).

Bearing in mind the developments outlined above, it becomes clear that Romania needed to modernize its child protection system as a precondition for joining the EU in 2007. Along these lines, the Law 272/2004 on Protection and Promotion of Child's Rights is a modern law that follows the principles of the CRC, to which Romania has adhered on paper since 1989 (Anghel et al. 2013; Roth et al. 2019a). It places the dignity, protection and even participation of children (Richter Nunes 2021) at its core, being developed under the monitoring and with the participation of international experts. As such, it supports the discourse according to which the Romanian child protection system is an example to follow, had the legislation in place been the only aspect taken into consideration.

A further relevant aspect regards the process of heavy deinstitutionalization that Romania started in 1997 (Deák 2020; Herczog 2021; Neagu 2021), partly a response to international pressure, and following a similar trend encountered in other Eastern European countries. Unfortunately, as Neagu (2021) reminds us, this process of deinstitutionalization was prompted by research on children who were institutionalized during the communist and post-communist eras. This body of research revealed the negative effects of living in care institutions on brain development, thereby using children for a purported development of science. At the same time, the results of the deinstitutionalization process and its replacement by in-home foster care are yet to be scrutinized.

Regrettably, although Romania has a proper child protection legislation in place, in practice the system has failed to truly protect children, particularly those in its care. Lack of trained staff, lack of money, lack of pragmatic procedures to implement the law are just a few of the reasons given for the inability to implement what the law provides (Szabó 2020). For that reason, the

need for real development and improvement remains beyond the success in the formal modernization of the system (Szabó 2020).

Beside the failure to effectively protect children outside the system, worrisome situations emerge among the children under the protection of the Romanian state, regardless of the form of protection: foster care, family-type homes or large residential homes. Many of these children, who are theoretically under the protection of the state are currently - as in the infamous past - subject to multiple forms of abuse: trafficking, exploitation, sexual and physical abuse (Alexandrescu 2019; Brătianu and Roșca 2005; Neagu 2021; Roth et al. 2019b; Rus et al. 2013). Abuse comes either from peers / other children within the same form of protection (Rus et al. 2018), as part of power relations between children or as power exertion delegated to them by adults (Neagu 2021); yet often, abuse is perpetrated by the very adults employed to protect them: employees of the child protection system (Rus et al. 2013) or foster carers (Neagu 2021).

In recent years in Romania, the press has been revealing such abuses with increasing frequency (Telegdi-Csetri et al. 2021). Many such occurrences are treated as isolated cases by those who should take relevant action, reducing the issue to the person of the abuser and ignoring the responsibility of those who should have prevented the abuse through monitoring, communication and generally through professional protection work. In the light of the above, the usually low public reaction is quite understandable, since most people lack expert knowledge of the Romanian child protection legislation, and instead associate the system with the scandals above referred to.

Last but not least, Bulboacă (2016), upon examining perceptions of violence experienced by children in institutional care, and the various forms of violence (including peer violence), abuse by caregivers, and discrimination, emphasizes the acute need for systemic changes in child protection services to ensure better protection and care for children. Moreover, a recent study (Popoviciu et al. 2013) that explores social workers' perspectives on parental engagement in child protection services in Romania highlights challenges such as the lack of evidence-based risk assessment tools and personal biases, particularly towards Roma parents. These challenges underline the need for more robust tools and training to support social workers in their roles.

Summing up the above discussion, it appears that, while both countries developed thorough legal provisions regarding the protection of children, albeit at different paces, and with varying emphases on the centrality of child's rights, in practice there are specific challenges that keep the implementation of legislation to a suboptimal level.

4. Analysis of survey data and main findings

Earlier in the paper, we pointed out that, starting from a problematic treatment of children during communism, the child protection system in Romania is likely to have maintained a tainted image in the eyes of ordinary citizens. This, in all probability, makes the Romanian public grow sensitive to and critical towards instances where children are removed from their families by state authorities, regardless of where this happens. The Bodnariu case involved such a state intervention and its developments prompted extensive mobilization, widely covered by the mass media and the online milieu.

Against this background, in this section, we examine the Romanian population's awareness of the Bodnariu case, its views on how the Norwegian institutions handled the case, and their assessment of Romanian authorities' response to it. Additionally, we explore the factors that contribute to people remembering the case, and those that explain the attitudes of the public around the conduct of Norwegian and Romanian authorities respectively.

The analysis is based on survey data collected in 2021 within the project *Cosmopolitan Turn and Democratic Sentiments*. The case of child protection services (CONSENT). The Romanian sample includes 2962 adult respondents.

The respondents were asked if they had heard about the Bodnariu case. The wording of the question was the following: *A few years ago, the media reported about the experience of a Romanian family with the child protection system in Norway. Have you heard of this case?* (Yes, No, Possibly/Not sure). 59.2% of the respondents said they did, and 3.8% that were not sure (Table 1.)

Table 1. Awareness of the Bodnariu case among the Romanian adults

	Frequency	%
Yes	893	59.2
No	558	37.0
Not sure	57	3.8
Total	1508	100.0

Note: part of the questions in the survey have been asked of only half of the sample, which is reflected in the total number of respondents.

In addition, the respondents were asked to assess how the authorities had handled the Bodnariu case by choosing among three alternatives:

- (1) The Norwegian authorities acted correctly,
- (2) The Norwegian authorities acted excessively,
- (3) The Romanian authorities needed to be more involved.

The vast majority of the respondents blamed either Norwegian or Romanian authorities, with only 8.7% saying that the Norwegian authorities acted correctly.

Table 2. The assessment of how the Bodnariu case was handled

	Frequency	%
The Norwegian authorities acted correctly	78	8.7
The Norwegian authorities acted excessively	364	40.8
The Romanian authorities needed to be more involved	415	46.5
I do not know	36	4.0
Total	893	100.0

Finally, we assessed respondents' views regarding the compliance of Romanian families that migrate/move to another country with the host versus Romanian society regulations about child-rearing. Two-thirds of the respondents are of the opinion that the host society's laws should be obeyed, 20% believe that no authorities should interfere in family life, whereas 13% consider that Romanian laws should be prioritized (Table 3).

Table 3. Opinions regarding the compliance of Romanian migrant families with the host versus Romanian society regulations about child-rearing

	Frequency	%
Romanian laws	368	12.6
The host country's laws	1952	66.7
Authorities should not interfere with family life	606	20.7
Total	2926	100.0

What explains awareness of Bodnariu's case among Romanian adults? The multivariate analyses show that older respondents, more educated, with lower religiosity, and with lower trust in church tend to remember the case more often than others (Table 4).

Table 4. Determinants of remembering Bodnariu case in two binary logistic models

	B	S.E.	Sig.	B	S.E.	Sig.
Gender (1-man, 0-woman)	0.22	0.17	.192	0.26	0.17	.129
Age (years)	0.04	0.00	.000	0.04	0.00	.000
Education (1-low, 3-high)	1.02	0.18	.000	1.00	0.18	.000
Income (1-low, 8-high)	-0.16	0.10	.098	-0.14	0.10	.165
Migration (1-yes, 0-no)	-0.15	0.18	.384	-0.18	0.18	.320
Having children (1-yes, 0-no)	0.07	0.21	.741	0.08	0.22	.702
Experience with CPS (1-yes, 0-no)	0.62	0.35	.079	0.60	0.36	.090
Importance of god (1-low, 10-high)	-0.13	0.04	.002	-0.07	0.05	.156
Religious law (1-low, 4-high support)				-0.47	0.05	.000

Note: Dependent variable: Remember Bodnariu case: 1 – yes, 0 – no

Surprisingly, lower religiosity and lower trust in church predict better remembering. A possible explanation is that religious people tend to pay less attention to events taking place beyond their local communities.

The analyses of what explains critical views on how Romanian or Norwegian authorities treated the Bodnariu case show that women, religious people, and those with higher support for a regime led by the church tend to be more critical of the authorities than others (Table 5).

Table 5. The determinants of critical views on how authorities reacted, in binary logistic models

	B	S.E.	Sig.	B	S.E.	Sig.
Gender (1-man, 0-woman)	-0.67	0.30	.039	-0.62	0.30	.022
Age (years)	-0.22	0.15	.147	-0.20	0.16	.191
Education (1-low, 3-high)	0.42	0.31	.210	0.41	0.30	.228
Income (1-low, 8-high)	0.24	0.22	.285	0.23	0.22	.294
Having children (1-yes, 0-no)	0.70	0.43	.104	0.67	0.43	.119
Importance of god (1-low, 10-high)	-0.12	0.06	.040	-0.08	0.07	.272
Religious law (1-low, 4-high support)				0.45	0.21	.012

Note: Dependent variable: Romanian or Norwegian authorities are to blame, 1 – yes, 0 – no

When asked to evaluate the responsibility of the Norwegian and Romanian authorities in dealing with Bodnariu's case, older people and those with higher support for a political regime led by the church tend to be more critical of the Norwegian authorities (Table 6).

Table 6. The determinants of blaming more Norwegian than Romanian authorities on Bodnariu's case, in binary logistic models

	B	S.E.	Sig.	B	S.E.	Sig.
Gender (1-man, 0-woman)	0.01	0.23	.961	-0.03	0.23	.895
Age (years)	0.21	0.09	.024	0.19	0.09	.040
Education (1-low, 3-high)	0.26	0.22	.250	0.22	0.19	.420
Income (1-low, 8-high)	0.22	0.13	.085	0.20	0.13	.117
Having children (1-yes, 0-no)	-0.16	0.31	.609	-0.21	0.31	.510
Importance of god (1-low, 10-high)	0.00	0.05	.963	0.03	0.05	.517
Religious law (1-low, 4-high support)				0.27	0.12	.022

Note: Dependent variable: 1 - Norwegian authorities are to blame, 0 - Romanian authorities are to blame

5. Discussion and conclusions

While the sequence of events in the Bodnariu case concluded with the successful reunification of family members, this instance has come to symbolize the potential for abrupt state intervention in people's private lives. The extensive media coverage helped the Bodnariu case become known worldwide, generating strong reactions among various groups, most of which were critical of the actions of the Norwegian child protection institutions and highly supportive towards the family.

At the time of the events, notably in 2015 - the year when Barnevernet removed the five children from the family - child protection became a focal topic not only for experts, but also for the general public, highlighting an apparent clash between differing worldviews and institutional practices. The private feelings of vigilantism for families (and implicitly their children) fueled a collective - national, religious and pro-family - selfhood that was then performed co-agentically across borders, overwhelming any notion of child integrity and all potential perceptions of positive institutional duty and skill. The long-imprinted image of an out of hand abusive child protection system and the revolt against its (seemingly) abusive actions - when coming from a foreign professional and political body - seem to have been key in the public attitude in Romania.

To this end, in this paper we investigated whether and how these events have remained in the collective memory of the Romanian population, considering the sensitivity of the issue and the substantial media coverage of the topic.

As the aspects involved in the Bodnariu case brought up the thorny issue of disciplinary measures used by parents, we reviewed recent research that examines public attitudes toward violence against children and the perceived legitimacy of state interventions in circumstances where children are at risk within their families. Relatedly, we looked at relevant studies on trust in the institutions responsible for child protection and outlined several attributes of the child protection systems developed by Norway and Romania respectively.

The literature review indicates that a mix of historical legacies, socio-economic conditions, cultural norms, and the effectiveness of educational and policy interventions shapes parental attitudes and behaviours regarding children's rights in Romania. Programs and policy reforms that promote children's rights and improve family dynamics are essential for enhancing children's well-being in Romania. These efforts must address the specific challenges faced by marginalized groups and ensure the consistent

enforcement of children's rights to foster a more equitable and inclusive society. Moreover, research on Romania reveals that the impact of socio-economic factors is exceeded by the cultural models within families and communities when we look at the parental attitudes toward children's rights (Voicu et al. 2015), suggesting that training programs for parents that promote not only the understanding of children rights but also pro-democratic values could shift their attitudes to be more oriented towards children's interests (Voicu et al. 2015; Mag 2013).

Building on this background, we used survey data collected in 2021 to analyse the Romanian population's awareness of the Bodnariu case, their views on how Norwegian institutions handled it, and their assessment of the Romanian authorities' response. We also explored the likely factors that contribute to the public's memory of the case and the attitudes towards the actions of both Norwegian and Romanian authorities.

Our findings reveal that nearly two-thirds of Romanian adults remember the Bodnariu case, which occurred five years before the survey was conducted. Interestingly, lower religiosity and lower support for a church-led regime predict better recall of the event. This may be because religious individuals tend to focus more on local events. It also suggests that the case enjoyed widespread but short-term visibility among the Romanian public. Since the level of education is positively correlated with cognitive skills, including long-term memory, it is not surprising that highly educated respondents are more likely to remember Bodnariu's case: among those with a university education, the proportion of those who remember the case is almost double than among those with less than high school (80% vs. 43%).

Analyses of the critical views on the handling of the case by Romanian and Norwegian authorities show that women, religious individuals, and those who support a church-led regime are more critical of the authorities. When asked to assess the authorities' handling of the Bodnariu case, almost 90% of respondents blamed either the Norwegian or Romanian authorities. Notably, a higher proportion of respondents blamed Romanian authorities despite the case occurring in Norway, likely due to the low level of trust in Romanian institutions, including child protection services. Furthermore, those who support greater church influence in governance are more likely to blame Norwegian authorities, reflecting Norway's more secular society.

Overall, these results suggest that religiosity, particularly views on the church-state relationship, is linked to perceptions of child protection crises involving Romanian citizens. Although our cross-sectional data do not allow us to determine causal directions, they support the notion that support for

greater church involvement, low institutional trust, and awareness of child protection crises reinforce each other, creating fertile ground for populist political movements and actors.

Acknowledgements

The research leading to this article was funded by the EEA Grants 2014-2021, under the Project CONSENT, contract no. 11, EEA-RO-NO-2018-0586

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