

# Perceptions About the Role of Money in Contemporary Romanian Foster Care

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## Abstract

Despite foster care becoming central to the protection of children in state care in Romania following the push for a rights-based approach in anticipation of European accession, empirical research on fostering remains sparse. Using a mixed methods qualitative design combining findings from 15 in-depth interviews with 16 diverse expert participants with the analysis of a 2019 high-profile scandal surrounding the international adoption of eight-year-old Sorina by Romanian-US parents, this article explores systemic features of the role of money in contemporary foster care practice. The analysis explores three points of consensus articulated by experienced system insiders: (a) the stability of foster care placements; (b) the normalisation of quid-pro-quo arrangements between case workers and foster carers; and (c) inadequate monitoring and oversight of placements. To empirically explore the organisational context that leads to these systemic issues and the implications for care-experienced children, we also expand on the widely mediated Sorina case. In 2019, a prosecutor had to forcefully remove the adopted child from her former foster carer, who was keeping her without legal basis, to join her adoptive parents. The media attention led to a polarised public hysteria and politically motivated legal intimidation against the adoptive parents. The analysis unpacks the ways in which the relative financial generosity associated with foster care is seen by expert participants to lead to the self-selection of poorly trained, rural families fostering mainly for economic reasons, with potentially undesirable consequences for cared-for children’s rights. The article contributes with a detailed account of the variegated ways in which money shapes foster care in contemporary Romanian child protection practice.

## Keywords

child protection; foster care; international adoption; Romania

## 1. Introduction

Foster care—the placement of cared-for children in substitute family environments—plays a critical role in child protection and out-of-home care across Europe, including in post-communist nations (Eurochild, 2025). As a protective intervention and a societal service, foster care is meant to ensure children's safety, the stability of their upbringing, and personal growth in a way that contributes to social integration and cultural learning (Cameron et al., 2016). In Romania, foster care became an alternative to the Soviet-time large residential care homes after the massive legislative reform during the Năstase cabinet in the early 2000s (Rădulescu, 2011), in anticipation of EU accession (Gavrilovici, 2009). Consequently, not only has the number of children in state care decreased since the legislative reforms of 2004, from 50,238 to 26,823 in September 2024, but the share of children in familial care, including foster care, has been increasing steadily. Of 26,823 children in familial care in September 2024, 14,904 were fostered by 10,587 foster carers (ANPDCA, 2025). Foster carers, being employees of county-level Directorates General for Social Assistance and Child Protection (DGASPC, hereafter also Directorate), figure in staff reports. In September 2024, they represented 38.9% of the total workforce of the Romanian child protection system, the largest category of employees (ANPDCA, 2025).

Despite ample writing on the legal changes governing Romanian child protection, foster care remains a blind spot in research. There are also few system-wide statistical insights into the quality of care offered through fostering. Consequently, this contribution is an unprecedented, albeit incomplete, systemic analysis of contemporary Romanian foster care. The article is structured into five parts. The literature review briefly discusses foster care as a form of protection for children in state care, expanding on foster care systems in neighbouring post-socialist countries, then moves to contextualising the Romanian case by offering information on legal guidelines and a similarly detailed account of foster carers' (*asistent maternal* in Romanian) employment status and pay. Section 3 details the research methodology, including the primary data and analytical process. The empirical analysis in Section 4 is structured into two main components, one detailing the findings from the in-depth expert interviews, followed by the presentation and discussion of the Sorina case, then explores the role that financial motives may have played in the sequence of events leading up to the child's manhandling to remove her from the household of her former foster carer to join her adoptive parents. Section 5 concludes.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Foster Care as a Core Component of Eastern European Child Protection Systems

Foster care encompasses various forms: kinship care, which maintains cultural and relational continuity; non-relative care, which places children with unrelated carers; foster-to-adopt arrangements, which aim for long-term stability; and professional foster care, where trained and remunerated carers manage high-need placements (Chateaufneuf et al., 2022). In England, for instance, varieties of foster care include long- and short-term care, kinship care, emergency foster care, respite fostering, remand fostering, fostering for adoption, and, finally, specialist therapeutic foster care (Gov.uk, 2025). As will be discussed below, only some of these types of fostering are available in Romania.

While foster care is consistent as a concept and in its institutionalisation across European countries, implementation varies significantly, with distinct systems emerging in response to local welfare frameworks

(Herczog, 2024; Leloux-Opmeer et al., 2016). For instance, Norway's "family service" model prioritises in-home support, using foster care as a last resort and providing robust financial and supervisory support for foster carers (Berrick & Skivenes, 2013; Solvi et al., 2024). Norwegian foster parents receive a monthly foster subsidy recommended at NOK 6,700 (€837.50) per child in 2011, where the average net monthly salary is close to €4,986 as of 2024 (Statistics Norway, 2025), and where those caring for children with complex needs are often full-time state employees. In contrast, the US "child protection" model focuses on reactive interventions, with foster care subsidies varying widely by state, from \$271 to \$828 per month, in a country where the monthly average salary stands at \$4,776 per month in 2025 (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025). Foster parents in the US do not have employed status, limiting their access to employment protections and financial support, e.g., subsidised childcare (Berrick & Skivenes, 2013). In contrast, the UK offers foster carers the equivalent of €2,340 per child per month on average, which includes a professional fee and child's needs allowance, alongside National Insurance credits, training, and legal protection (National Fostering Group, 2025). This allowance is notably more generous compared to the average net monthly wage in the UK, which was £2,500 in 2024 (Office for National Statistics, 2024).

In Central and Eastern Europe, child protection system reforms aimed to shift Soviet-style residential care-based models to foster care systems, though institutional funding dominates child protection in countries like the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia (Herczog, 2024), and Romania (Stănculescu et al., 2016). In many post-socialist countries, around 60% of children in care enjoy familial care services, including foster care, on par with the EU-wide average (Eurochild, 2025), including Romania (ANPDCA, 2025). However, as with other welfare state functions, child protection systems remain underfunded, and financial support for foster carers varies greatly. In Hungary, low foster care allowances and underfunded local services continue to hinder effective reform, particularly in rural areas (Herczog, 2024). Foster carers receive a monthly fee of 55% of the minimum wage if they are employed only as a foster carer, i.e., €9.5/day, amounting to €285 per month, plus family entitlements (European Commission, 2024), though the minimum monthly wage is €861, one of the smallest in the EU (Eurostat, 2025b), and the average monthly salary is €1,598, as of 2025 (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2025). Poland's foster carers report that current allowances fail to meet children's basic needs, forcing many to seek personal subsidies (Herczog, 2024), creating a similarly difficult situation for foster parents as in Hungary. It is only recently that a bill has been introduced to increase foster care payments by €230 per month, raising total earnings to approximately €1,050 (Pyka, 2024), which is just below the average monthly mean equivalised net income for 2024, €1,086 (Eurostat, 2025a).

## 2.2. The Regulatory Context of Fostering in Romania

### 2.2.1. Foster Care

In Romania, professional foster care emerged after 1989 as part of the broader deinstitutionalisation process (Anghel et al., 2013), but genuine political commitment to professionalised service came during the early 2000s, when the entire child protection system and rules around adoption were radically reformed (Rădulescu, 2011). Several contributions provide detailed overviews of thirty years of post-socialist reform in the Romanian context (Marin & Stănculescu, 2019; Negoita, 2010), including reviews of legislative changes (Rădulescu, 2011; Roth, 2019).

Law 272/2004, the legal basis for child protection in Romania, defines foster care as a form of familial care for children in receipt of “special protection,” alongside daytime services, other familial care, and residential services (Art. 119). Entering foster care is preceded by children being taken into state care. The removal of children from their families starts with a formal request on behalf of the child made by a local or county-level Directorate social worker (for an outline of the Romanian child protection organisational structure, see Supplementary File, Appendix 1). The director of the Directorate approves this request, which is accompanied by an individualised plan of protection, issued within 30 days from receipt of the formal request, i.e., a prolonged process. This can lead to a limbo, e.g., if social workers do not proceed with formalising the request to be taken into care. Indeed, a few of our experts with experience in the child protection system recounted shocking anecdotes of children stuck in emergency residential homes for years.

Social workers elaborating individualised plans of protection are obligated to prioritise certain forms of care above others, prime among which is children’s own families (Art. 58), as in the Norwegian system. There is substantial emphasis on either family reunification or seeking other familial care. If these options are not feasible in line with provisions in Art. 28 and 29 of Law 273/2004 (on adoption), the case worker can propose placement (*poate prevedea plasamentul*) with a foster carer (Art. 62). Residential care is the last resort. The recommendation for placement has to then be formally established (*se stabilește*) by the courts, at the request of the Directorate (Art. 65).

The regulatory framework also extends to the establishment of emergency placement (*plasament în regim de urgență*) for children who are: (a) abused, neglected or victims of violence; (b) found or abandoned in medical units; and (c) children whose parents are detained, on remand or arrested; or are admitted to hospital (Art. 68). Emergency placement “is established” by the director of the Directorate (Art. 69(1)) if the child’s carers agree to collaborate with Directorate social workers intervening on the scene, a very unlikely scenario; or by the courts and the office of the state President (Art. 68(2)), through a legal procedure that involves social workers on site addressing the court for requesting the issuing of a presidential ordinance (*ordonanță președințială*; Art 100(3)). An experienced Directorate social worker frustratingly explained the significant practical limitations of either procedure, not least because the convoluted bureaucratic, multi-institutional mechanism to secure a presidential ordinance was ineffective for most cases of after-hours domestic violence involving (also) child victims.

Distinctions and varieties of foster care are less clear than, for instance, in the UK context. The Romanian legal framework mandates that all placements are temporary, but no distinction is made between short-term and long-term placements. In practice, placements are long-term and, as we describe below, there are incentives for both case workers and foster carers to make foster arrangements enduring for years. As already noted, kinship fostering is actively promoted and almost half of the children in so-called familial care were placed with extended family or other families and individuals in 2024 (approx. 12,000 out of over 26,800; see ANPDCA, 2025). Emergency foster care exists as a legal possibility, but is seen as difficult to impose. Interviewed experts suggest that children in need of emergency placement end up in specialised residential units rather than with familial care solutions following removal: It is from there that they may end up in foster care after some time. Remand fostering is stipulated in law (*supraveghere specializată*; Art. 71) and can be established in the same way as emergency placement, but is invisible in the Romanian context. Finally, there is no explicit, clear regulatory framework for arrangements such as respite fostering, fostering for adoption, or specialist therapeutic foster care, though—as elsewhere—expert interviews overwhelmingly

suggest that children taken into care in Romania have unusually complex needs (Solvi et al., 2024). In theory, all fostering is in anticipation of family reunification or adoption, and foster carers enjoy priority in adoption proceedings. However, as the Sorina case eloquently illustrates, ceasing to be a ‘maternal assistant’ to become mummy or daddy means notable monetary losses, and is therefore an unattractive option for foster carers for whom the financial component is important to the decision to foster.

### 2.2.2. The Status and Employment Conditions of Foster Carers

The institution of the foster carer was first regulated in 2003, through Cabinet Decision 679/2003, in 12 articles. This was replaced by a stronger legal instrument in 2024, Cabinet Ordinance 27/2024, with more detailed provisions for the selection, training, and certification of foster carers. Ordinance 27/2024 defines the foster carer as the certified person, employee of the County Directorate, who ensures “the raising, care and educating of the child” for the duration of the placement, including during “breaks” (*perioade de respiro*), i.e., paid holidays (Art. 1). Minimal requirements for being considered for the position include “affective availability” of and agreement from the applicant as well as his/her spouse and children over 14. Another requirement is that the applicant’s spouse has earnings (Art. 3) at the time of applying.

Candidates undergo an assessment comprising a social and a psychological component. The former is carried out by a Directorate social worker through a minimum of four meetings, one of which must be at the applicant’s home. The psychological component is carried out by a psychologist through at least two meetings, which can also include counselling (Art. 6). The assessment is followed by a total of 80 hours of training, comprising a theoretical component (50 hours) and a practical one. Training is organised by Directorates using a curriculum developed by the ANPDCA (Art. 13). Following the training, the assessment team compiles the applicant’s final evaluation report and makes a recommendation for the issuing/non-issuing of a certificate. If the report recommends certification, the applicant submits a formal request to the Commission for Child Protection within the Directorate, which has 30 days to make a decision (Art. 10). Positive decisions lead to certification, which needs approval every two years based on an evaluation carried out by a social worker-psychologist pair (Art. 11). The regulatory framework spells out conditions for certificate suspension and withdrawal.

As permanent employees of Directorates, foster carers’ employment is governed by provisions of national labour legislation (Art. 22). As public sector employees, their salaries are specified in national legislation on the payment of public servants (Frame Law 153/2017). Pay grades vary by experience (years worked) and child-related specifics, but not geographic variations in the cost of living: the higher the cost of living (e.g., in large, dynamic urban economies), the lower the financial attractiveness of fostering. In 2024, when the net minimum wage was 2,363 RON/month (€473; see Ministerul Muncii și Solidarității Sociale, 2024), a foster carer with two years of experience fostering one child earned 2,794 RON/month (post-tax, €562) plus a holiday voucher of 1,600 RON/year (€322); fostering two children 2,990 RON/month (€602) plus the holiday voucher; and fostering one disabled child 3,123 RON/month (€628) plus the holiday voucher (DGASPC Sector 3, 2024). In addition to their salary, foster carers also receive a placement allowance (*alocația de plasament*) for each child, amounting to 1,081 RON/month/child (€217) at the time of writing (ANPIS, 2024). In addition, as main carers, they also cash in children’s universal child allowance, which accrues to every Romanian national until age 18, amounting to 794 RON/month/child (€160) for children under two years of age and disabled children; and 323 RON/month/child (€65) for children aged two-to-eighteen. In short, a foster carer at the beginning of her “career” in spring 2024, taking two children

older than two into care, received almost 5,800 RON/month (€1,167) plus the annual holiday voucher. This amount exceeded the net average wage in 2024 and single-handedly put the foster family's household into the 4th income quintile (INS, 2024), a generous financial compensation, certainly in the very poorly remunerated context of Central and Eastern European nations.

In short, the foster care system in contemporary Romania may be summed up as follows: (a) foster care is seen as the second best solution after familial reintegration, which our expert participants explain is concerning in lieu of integrated social services to substantively address family abuse, neglect and violence; (b) the placement procedure is highly bureaucratic and with extended deadlines, including for emergency placement, prone to creating undesirable limbo situations during the early stages of children's care trajectories following state intervention; (c) only three in four children with placements enjoy some form of familial care, including foster care; (d) across most of Romania, fostering as a full-time job is decently paid and very generous for rural families whose local employment opportunities are often scarce-to-inexistent.

### 3. Methodology

This article draws on a mixed-method qualitative strategy combining in-depth interview material with diverse expert informants on rights-based child protection practice in Romania, and a case study, the highly mediated Sorina case in 2019. The latter centres on an eight-year-old girl in foster care for seven years with the same carer, adopted by the Romanian-US Săcărin couple in April 2019, but whose former foster carer, Mariana Șărămăt, had been preventing her from joining her adoptive parents before and following adoption despite the withdrawal of her own foster carer's certificate. International adoptions are rare in Romania: They have ranged between seven (2013) and 41 (2018) since 2004, and in 2019, Sorina's adoption was one in a total of 22 international adoptions (ANPDCA, 2023). The case came to national media attention in June 2019, when a prosecutor, with assistance from police and riot police (*Jandarmeria*), carried out a search as part of a criminal investigation against Mrs. Șărămăt, initiated by the child's parents. The prosecutor was filmed by members of the Șărămăt family and neighbours forcefully removing the eight-year-old from the home of her former foster carer: This footage was then widely used in the press without protecting the child's identity. After a month of high-profile legal proceedings following Sorina joining her adoptive parents on 21 June 2019, the family was finally able to leave Romania for good. Favourable commentators in a national broadcaster TVR (2020) reportage described "the case" as a national media frenzy manufactured by parts of the media (specifically PSD-sympathetic Antena 3 and other tabloid media outlets, later fined for their coverage of the story) to reinforce a narrative of a corrupt judiciary and to promote conspiracy theories, including against Sorina's parents. Still, Sorina's experience highlights what are seen as typical and systemic shortcomings in the institutionally induced conduct of the Directorate employees involved, including the foster carer.

#### 3.1. Primary Data

The in-depth interviews form part of a comparative Norway-Romania study on child protection practices with a focus on the right to participation, the right to nondiscrimination, the right to family, and the best interests of the child. Information about foster care was not systematically sought, but brought up spontaneously by 16 of the 30 key informants (in 15 of the 28 in-depth interviews). Interviews were conducted via Zoom between October 2020 and February 2021 during the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic-related distancing measures, and transcribed verbatim into Romanian. Purposive sampling, typically used in



qualitative studies (Hennink et al., 2011; Silverman, 2013), was geared towards recruiting diverse expert participants in terms of age (young adults to senior professionals with decades of experience), professional background (youth NGO workers, social workers, local social services managers, central government agency staff, members of parliament, judges and academics), duration of professional experience with child protection (between one and over 25 years), and organisational perspective (local, county-level and/or national; see Supplementary File, Appendix 2).

Participants were invited to participate in the study by senior members of the research team on the basis of their direct and publicly visible involvement with Romanian child protection practice. Conventional ethical guidelines were observed in collecting and processing the primary data (Hennink et al., 2011; Silverman, 2013), including informed consent and the right to withdraw at any time, anonymity and the confidentiality of primary data, and the protection of participants.

The case study featuring the adopted girl Sorina is put together using online media coverage on the most-read Romanian news outlet *HotNews.ro*. Using the keywords “Sorina,” “cazul Sorina,” “Sacarin,” and “Baia de Arama” in the *HotNews.ro* search box, 35 news pieces were identified, all under the section ESENTIAL and signed by the editorial team. These news pieces cover the period between 21 June 2019, the day Sorina was forcefully removed from her former foster carer, and 12 September 2019, when *HotNews.ro* reported on five television channels being fined by the National Council of the Audio-Visual (CNA), the government regulator (and equivalent of the British Ofcom), for their coverage of the Sorina case (for a full list of news items, see see Supplementary File, Appendix 3).

### 3.2. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in MaxQDA® by a member of the research team not involved in interviewing, using the original transcripts. Thematic coding was mainly open, following the steps described by Hennink et al. (2011). However, given the prioritisation of the four rights of the child in our comparative study, deductive code families are more prevalent than with a mostly open coding process. Coding unfolded in three stages: (a) a “big picture” reading of all transcripts in no particular order; (b) the development of the code system using a random sample of one-third of all transcripts, audited by other members of the team; and (c) the coding of all transcripts. This coding process resulted in the “foster care” subcode (41 coded segments), nested under the code “inadequacies of the administrative system/context [of child protection],” suggestive of the highly critical tone that most participants—without prompting—discussing foster care adopted, regardless of their diversity. To ascertain rigour in the coding process, an ongoing auditing process was systematically employed to avoid under- and over-coding (by creating new subcodes or merging codes and related segments; coding earlier-coded transcripts with later emerging codes; and recoding segments where relevant in the initial stages of the code-by-code analysis process).

In writing up the findings from our expert interviews, we have chosen to prioritise telling rather than showing our findings. This means that we seldom use direct quotes. While this is unusual in reporting qualitative results (Parkin & Kimergård, 2022), our choice is supported by the fact that direct quotes in no way demonstrate either the rigour of our analysis or the validity of our findings (Corden & Sainsbury, 2006).

*HotNews.ro*'s media coverage was used to construct the timeline of Sorina's trajectory in state care (Figure 1), forming the basis for a systematic process analysis (Hall, 2006). We have chosen *HotNews.ro* coverage because this outlet is the most-read online national news portal. Compared to other outlets, including national broadcaster TVR, it provided the most extensive fact-based coverage during the tumultuous June-July 2019 period. However, later-fined tabloid media outlets ("Cazul Sorina," 2019) also created a lot of publicly influential content, including libelous interviews with public figures and former foster carer Mrs. Șărămăt. This content we excluded due to scope.

Typically, systematic process analysis is used in theory-led comparative research of historical political institutional developments to develop or refine theory (Hall, 2006), not our goal here. However, we employ this qualitative research strategy because it provides a systematic analytical approach to engaging with a process that unfolds in time, the child's care trajectory, in a structured, theory-led way. Furthermore, combining expert interview material with this case study enables us to articulate a more nuanced theoretical formulation for the role that money probably plays in the Romanian child protection system. Firstly, the case study provides a real-life illustration of the abstract, decontextualised assessments that our experts articulated, the two empirical components together contributing to the "rich rigour" and credibility of the study, key dimensions of quality in qualitative research (Tracy, 2010).

## 4. Money in Contemporary Foster Care Practice in Romania

Our empirical findings are organised into two main sections. In the first section, we highlight the variety of comments that our expert participants offered in relation to foster care in contemporary Romanian child protection practice. Interviews centred on participants' views of rights-based practice in child protection and public education and, consequently, discussions around foster care came up spontaneously: Discussions of foster care were a sidenote about different, broader rights-related issues in child protection. Thus, instead of the usual thematic organisation of interview data, we present our findings to best explore the tensions seen by experts to be generated by the cash transaction at the heart of Romanian foster care. The second part builds on the timeline of Sorina's care trajectory, outlining key moments in which financial considerations may have actively shaped care decisions on her behalf. This discussion builds on interview data in that it empirically illustrates the instances where systemic challenges in Romanian foster care, articulated by our expert participants, may be instantiated.

### 4.1. The Romanian Foster Care System Through the Lens of Diverse Expert Narratives

One joint interview with two youth NGO workers, both of whom grew up in state care—one in institutional care, the other in long-term foster care—offered a thorough, highly critical insight into "the problems of professional foster care." Among our experts with a system-wide perspective, there was consensus that the shift to foster carers, away from large residential care units, was very welcome and progressing, that there was adequate funding for it, but the shift was too slow. Only one of our participants decried the fact that the closure of large residential homes and children moving into foster care sometimes occurred without adequate planning, with children unprepared for care transition, a failing of adequately trained personnel. Another consensus was that foster care was the second-best alternative to long-term biological familial care arrangements. Overall, echoing other systemic generalisations (Kovács et al., 2025), experts agreed that the foster care system in place was well designed, but in some cases prone to disconcerting failings.



Whether implicitly or explicitly, foster care was imagined as a long-term, stable care solution akin to adoptive familial care, but paid. At least seven of our experts hinted at or described foster care arrangements as pseudo-adoptive familial care arrangements. One of our central government-experienced participants described the maternal assistant as someone “who raises the child as their own,” except being paid for it. Both dimensions of this formulation—(a) the foster carer *raising* the child rather than looking after her and (b) the foster carer raising the child *as their own*—are suggestive of foster care being understood as stable, predictable, in both logistic and emotional terms. An exception to this was the pair of care-experienced youth NGO workers, who were highly critical of this assumption. From their perspective, it was precisely this enduring, pseudo-familial dynamic that made it problematic, as highlighted in Sorina’s case, which they mentioned spontaneously. Here, the pair commented that it was Sorina’s long-term relationship that resulted in the child feeling and, for all intents and purposes, being a *de facto* adopted child, making her departure to join her adoptive parents a traumatic one. The drama of the departure, in their view, was a direct consequence of the maternal assistant developing a close tie to the child and, as a trusted adult, of convincing her that she’d be taken away by bad people:

We copied the legislation from France, but we don’t implement it properly. That’s the major difference. In France and America, the system works differently; it operates under the foster care model. Foster care means: I take you for a month or two, that’s it, but I don’t have the option to keep you here; during that period the social worker, the case manager, has the obligation to find you an adoptive family from the database of those already registered, vetted, and the match is made. In those two months, sure, the foster parent comes with you, the foster parent accompanies you to the meetings with the matching family, and that’s it. The foster parent is not allowed, only in Romania does this happen, not allowed to intervene, to tell the child: “Don’t go with these people, look how ugly it is!” like it happened with Sorina, where she was told that masked people in black would come to take her, to take her kidneys, and one morning, guess what, they did come, dressed in black, the riot police, they are clad in black, but they came because she had been kidnapped. That child had been kidnapped. (Interview 3, A & N, Pos. 85)

The NGO workers reference what former maternal assistant Mrs. Șărămăt included not only in confidential official addresses towards various state institutions (Cartianu, 2019), but also libellously stated live on television that the adopting Săcărin couple’s intentions with Sorina were to have her organs donated (Pora, 2019a). Care-experienced activists and a small number of other experts suggested that this type of unfounded scaremongering, alongside foster carer play-acting for the sake of the case manager on regular visits, taught helplessness among care-experienced children, and a lack of adequate Directorate control over foster children was systemic rather than isolated. It was against this highly personal perspective that these participants advocated a foster care system that would centre on temporary short-term solutions while children were being put up for (a much faster) adoption.

Another widely shared view among the experts was that foster care was corrupt, with maternal assistants creamed and certificates issued based on actual or future kickbacks. Of the 16 participants, six saw the foster care system as being typically governed by a financial quid-pro-quo logic, even if some participants mentioned that they also knew of dedicated, committed foster carers who really sought the best interests of the child and even took on conflicts with case workers so that their fostered child would get the therapy they needed. The context for the institutionalisation of kickbacks—experts mentioned rural foster carers offering milk, cheese, and other farm products not only to case workers, but their superiors, too—was

what was seen as too generous a financial arrangement for foster carers. Some of the central government-experienced experts noted that for rural families, especially, the amounts paid were very generous. Some argued that this financial generosity commercialised fostering, making children “lucrative,” i.e., reliable meal tickets, echoing Alexandrescu’s (2019) highly critical report. Indeed, one expert suggested that the high share of disability among children in state care can be explained by the fact that disability means higher per-child financing, creating a financial incentive to invent disabilities for these children. Furthermore, some experts described how, in rural families, foster children could be “lucrative” in other ways, for instance, as unpaid farmhands. One expert decried the absence of what he called the Dutch system, i.e., a register of potential foster carers who would take children into care without any financial compensation, and advocated for a lower financial compensation for fostering, the net minimum wage.

Inadequate oversight and insufficient control were also described by four participants in three interviews as another puzzle in what was seen as the undue commercialisation of foster care. Interviewees A and N, cited earlier, as well as other experts, criticised the fact that foster carers did not have to undergo the very stringent selection and monitoring process that would-be adopters had to, a problematic double standard; and that bureaucratic procedures to do with foster care could be easily carried out superficially, including the 80 hours of training, which they suggested were typically fictitious. A central government-experienced expert also indicated frustration with the absence of face-to-face, regular monitoring protocols of and with children in foster care similar to those that existed for residential care. In short, there was a shared sense among at least half of our participants that children in foster care were much less accessible to social workers than children in residential care, were less accessible unjustifiably, and that this inaccessibility was, in fact, problematic for children’s welfare.

In summary, the thorough criticism of the two care-experienced young men and sporadic mentions of fostering in our body of interviews suggest two main conclusions. Firstly, foster care is systemically treated as a *de facto* long-term solution for young children rather than a temporary arrangement pending expedient family reintegration or adoption: Children can legitimately be “forgotten” about once in foster care by case workers. These placements are often (created) “sticky,” i.e., difficult to reverse, exacerbated by weak monitoring, poor communication channels, and a lack of crisis intervention protocols. Secondly, foster care is described as primarily commercialised, financially motivated, as a stable, lucrative source of income, particularly in rural areas where even respectable citizens have very limited local employment opportunities. The financial attractiveness, coupled with weak oversight, is seen to instrumentalise the child’s placement, privileging carers’ economic interests over children’s welfare. Directorate staff, operating under both workload avoidance constraints (Lazăr et al., 2018) and sometimes personal financial incentives, are seen to be positioned to select foster carers based on both professional merit and informal or clientelist considerations, or sometimes only the latter. As a result, fostered children are often seen to end up in a social worker–foster carer relationship incentivised to be enduring, serving carers’ and sometimes case workers’ best financial interests rather than the best interests of the child.

Such a negative appraisal by diverse experts with very good knowledge of the Romanian child protection system in all sorts of capacities should, however, be considered against the background of absent administrative data on, for instance, the duration of individual children’s care trajectories in state care and that of placements, the number of placements per child and regional variations, reasons for placement changes and placement continuity, etc. While the aforementioned shortcomings, described as systemic by

participants, are undoubtedly valid, the absence of equivalent positive real-life illustrations leaves invisible the challenging work that over 10,000 foster carers in Romania today do for the over 14,000 foster children (ANPDCA, 2025).

## 4.2. The Sorina Case

### 4.2.1. A Brief Timeline of the *HotNews.ro* Media Coverage

On Friday, 21 June 2019 around 2 pm national news outlets show distressing amateur video footage of an eight-year-old girl being dragged by prosecutor Maria Pițurcă, accompanied by riot police, out of her home to join her adoptive mother, a social worker and a psychologist and be escorted for a medical check-up, in Baia de Aramă, Mehedinți county. The prosecutor is acting in a criminal investigation against the child's former maternal assistant (quickly identified publicly as Mariana Șărmăț), who has been keeping the child illegally and preventing her from joining her adoptive parents, a Romanian-US couple, since her adoption in April 2019. The criminal investigation was initiated by the Directorate, followed up by the parents. During the day, *HotNews.ro* clarifies the legal circumstances of the case and its antecedents (see Figure 1). At the same time, members of the PSD-led government make public statements to PSD-friendly television channel Antena 3 throughout the day. By the evening, acting Attorney General Bogdan Licu announces his request for an internal investigation into the case prosecutor, which later turns out to be a criminal investigation. There are local street protests asking that Sorina “returns home,” that “she decides [her fate] herself,” and that the child “deserves a place in Romania, with her [i.e., foster] family.”

On Saturday, the Minister of Labour and the Minister of Justice speak to reporters for later-fined Antena 3 in which (a) they state that the handling of the child's removal was inappropriate, causing “tears,” with the Minister of Justice publicly apologising “for what this little girl had to go through” (referring to her manhandling the day before rather than the 18 months of manipulation, emotional abuse and isolation by her maternal assistant during and after the adoption, which Mrs. Săcărin later details in an interview with Free Europe; see Pora, 2019b); and (b) they promise verifications, checks and other bureaucratic control procedures. On Sunday, some local protesters travel as a group to Craiova, Dolj county, asking for images of the child (made public later in the day by the Săcărin couple, with Sorina's face obscured) and for the annulment of the international adoption. Police trade unions promise new procedures for guaranteeing the rights of the child in similar instances and demand that the legal procedure underpinning the adoption is reviewed, an unlawful request given that the adoption decision was final. Finally, Prime Minister Dăncilă is asked to respond publicly, promising tough personal accountability of anyone “who made mistakes” in the case and an encompassing report, to be made public via the same PSD-friendly Antena 3.

Tabloid television outlets have been fuelling public hysteria since Friday, siding with the former maternal assistant, and promoting conspiracy theories about the adopting couple, including that the Săcărins paid off Child Protection staff to be able to adopt Sorina, which they publicly denied, and that the reason they wanted to adopt the child was to take her to the US and have her organs donated, which they could easily do since the adoptive mother and some of her close family were medical doctors. Interestingly, both accusations feature illegitimate financial motives to construct the adoptive parents into villains akin to the wolf of the widely known Romanian folk tale of the goat and her three kids (echoing the Little Red Riding Hood story). At the same time, the maternal assistant and her family are narratively constructed as Sorina's “real family” through making invisible the employment relationship that underpins Sorina's placement.

Sorina is born in 2011 and enters state care shortly after.

Sorina is placed with maternal assistant	2012		
<b>Adoption proceedings initiated</b>	2013		
M. Șărămăt does not wish to adopt Sorina, but continues to care for her	10 July 2013		
<i>Legislation on adoptions changes</i>	2016		
<b>New adoption proceedings initiated</b>	2017		
M. Șărămăt does not wish to adopt Sorina	4 Apr 2017		
Court rules that proceedings for international adoption can commence	16 Feb 2018		
M. Șărămăt formulates a request for Adoption	18 Apr 2018		
M. Șărămăt formulates a request to be certified as an adopter by the County Directorate	25 Apr 2018		
M. Șărămăt formulates a request to be evaluated for certification as an adopter	27 Jun 2018		
M. Șărămăt declares she accepts adopting Sorina if her international adoption fails	8 Aug 2018		
M. Șărămăt withdraws her 8 Aug Declaration	10 Aug 2018		
M. Șărămăt requests that her 10 Aug withdrawal is annulled	24 Aug 2018	24 Aug 2018	Adopting Săcărin couple formulate the request to adopt Sorina
<b>Due to multiple refusals by the maternal assistant, the Directorate has still been unable to organise meeting between child and her adopting parents.</b>			
Mehedinți County court decision on Sorina's adoption in favour of M. Șărămăt	18 Feb 2019		
		Feb 2019	Săcărin couple, County Directorate & ANPDCA attack the decision & request moving the case to Craiova Court of Appeals (Dolj county)
		23 Apr 2019	Craiova Court of Appeals decides adoption definitively in favour of Săcărin couple
County Directorate formally asks M. Șărămăt to bring the child to join her parents at Directorate offices, which M. Șărămăt refuses	16 May 2019		
County Directorate social worker and Police try to collect Sorina, but M. Șărămăt is hostile, refusin to let the child go	20 May 2019		
County Directorate issues an emergency placement order for Sorina, requests assistance from Police to collect Sorina, unsuccessfully	21 May 2019		
County Directorate withdraws M. Șărămăt's maternal assistant certificate and terminates her employment contract	24 May 2019	24 May 2019	Săcărin couple make a criminal complaint to the Prosecutor's office against M. Șărămăt for unlawfully holding their daughter
ANPDCA makes a criminal complaint against M. Șărămăt for a series of criminal acts	30 May 2019		
		10 Jun 2019	Săcărin couple make another criminal complaint to the Prosecutor's Office against M. Șărămăt for various rights violations
Country Directorate officials make phone call to M. Șărămăt to present Sorina at Directorate offices on 13 Jun to join her parents	12 Jun 2019		
Craiova Prosecutor's Office takes over 24 May complaining from Baia de Aramă Office	13 Jun 2019		
		14 Jun 2019	Săcărin couple add further points to their criminal complaint

In the 24 May 2019 criminal case, prosecutor Pițurcă carried out a search at M. Șărămăt's home on **21 June 2019**, with Police and Riot Police Dolj. The search is filmed by the husband of M. Șărămăt and neighbours; video fragments are circulated in local, then in national media.

**Figure 1. Timeline of Sorina's adoption.**

#### 4.2.2. Sorina's Adoption Process and Rights-Based Practice in Romanian Child Protection

The present discussion highlights how Sorina's placement and adoption highlight some of the criticisms highlighted by our expert participants in relation to fostering. It offers a detailed account of Sorina's situation and the circumstances that led to her forceful removal by state prosecutor Pițurcă and riot police to be able to join her adoptive parents. The focus in the analysis is on case workers' and foster carer Mariana Șărămăt's actions and the role that financial arrangements may have played in these actions.

Mrs. Șărămăt became a foster parent in 2012, at age 39, to foster two little girls, one of which Sorina. At the time, she had a son and a daughter who were both around 18. According to her own official declarations, Sorina and the other fostered girl were her first foster children (Cartianu, 2019). Sorina was taken into care around age one and remained with Mrs. Șărămăt for almost seven years until her international adoption—the very last resort—in April 2019, followed by her forced removal in June 2019. The Șărămăt family had adopted the other girl in their care during this period.

Sorina's first adoption procedure was initiated in 2013, when Sorina was around two. Mrs. Șărămăt had priority to adopt Sorina as her foster carer, but she declined in July 2013. This adoption procedure proved unsuccessful: Directorate staff were unable to find a suitable adopting family, though they consulted over 120 certified adopters (Pora, 2019b). Following legal changes in 2016, a new adoption procedure was initiated. Mrs. Șărămăt declined to adopt Sorina again in April 2017, contributing to the failure of the domestic adoption process. In line with the 2016 new guidance, waiting times were shortened so that the failed domestic adoption process could be quickly followed up by international adoption. International adoption is considered a last resort: In Sorina's case, her right to a family had no other means of being achieved but through this route.

In 2017, the Directorate finally managed to identify one couple who accepted to adopt without prior contact with Sorina, the Romanian-US Săcărin couple, and who remained committed despite Directorate staff being unable to organise meetings between the couple and the child due to repeated refusals by Mrs. Șărămăt. The Săcărins repeatedly declared publicly later on that they agreed to adopt the first child offered to them, Sorina, in response to public claims by Mrs. Șărămăt that the Săcărins had bribed themselves through the Romanian Child Protection System to have Sorina adopted to have her organs donated (Cartianu, 2019). Formal adoption proceedings were initiated in court in February 2018, as the timeline in Figure 1 above outlines. Shortly after, Mrs. Șărămăt's quality as an interested party in the adoption proceedings was admitted by the Mehedinți court against sound legal basis, given that she had foregone her opportunities to adopt Sorina. As a party to a civil case, Mrs. Șărămăt filed a request to have Sorina adopted. The foster carer followed up with a series of applications to Mehedinți Directorate to be certified as an adopter—against her earlier wishes to adopt Sorina. Then she withdrew all of these requests. In short, what seems apparent is that the foster carer was committed to having Sorina remain in her care. Her decision to put herself forward as an adopter only when the genuine opportunity to “lose” the child to international adoption arose, after two formal refusals to do so, suggests that the financial dimension of fostering Sorina was important.

The adoption in local courts was decided in Mrs. Șărămăt's favour in February 2019. It is interesting—and suggestive of a deep-seated conflict between the Directorate and the foster carer, precipitated by the international adoption—that the decision was appealed not only by the Săcărin couple, but also by representatives of the Mehedinți Directorate and the National Agency for Adoption. The fact that the appeal

was moved to another county court of appeals suggests that the international adoption process became a local public issue, making authorities and the Săcărins doubt the court's independence and/or the parties' physical safety. One of the striking details of Sorina's circumstances during her fraught international adoption is that social workers lost access to the child once the international adoption was underway. Between February 2018 and May 2019, when Sorina's adoption court decision remained final, i.e., a period of 14 months, social workers managed to organise meetings between child and adoptive parents only in the home of the foster carer and without opportunities for meetings in her absence. This lack of cooperation between case worker and foster carer should have raised concerns, including the option of discontinuing the placement on suspicion that the foster carer was not acting in line with her duties and the best interests of the child, but the Directorate, interestingly, failed to take action. Furthermore, Sorina's isolation from Directorate staff seems unusual also because fostered children spend time in institutional care while their carers take a paid holiday at least once a year. Yet Sorina seems to have had superficial contact with Directorate staff at least between February 2018 and May 2019, if not longer. This begs the question of why the Directorate team did not intervene at least to uphold Mrs. Șărămăt's contractual obligation to take a paid holiday, leaving the child in temporary institutional care, and failing that, consider changing the child's placement arrangements.

The Directorate staff's inferior power position in relation to Mrs. Șărămăt during the meetings does not in itself tell us much about the basis for the Directorate's failure to intervene: It may have been simply because good foster carers are hard to recruit and Mrs. Șărămăt may have been seen to be one such carer. However, the judge's admittance of her application to be part of the adoption proceedings, without legal basis for such admittance, suggests that, in fact, Mrs. Șărămăt might have been in an unusually strong position. She may have derived this power, for instance, from having political connections in a county that some critical voices have suggested was unusually clientelist in top public sector positions, including often-politicised social services appointments (Alexandrescu, 2019; Postelnicescu, 2019; TVR, 2020). Case workers may have had little to no choice but to go along with Mrs. Șărămăt's exploitation of her position if they could not rely on institutional support to end Sorina's placement with her.

Lack of adequate contact between case worker and child during the legal proceedings for international adoption led to the mishandling of the child's status. The lengthy fostering weakened the relationship between case worker and child and undermined Sorina's adoptable foster child status, enabling her socialisation primarily as a de facto adopted child in a family with another adopted daughter. By the time international adoption was underway, Sorina was, for everyone concerned, including herself, the adopted child of the Șărămăt family rather than the potentially adoptable foster child of Mrs. Șărămăt. For the very few adoptable children like Sorina, the dissociation of the child's legal-bureaucratic status from her de facto care status is evidently against the best interests of the child because it rests on blurring the identities, social roles and, thus, the boundaries that are the prerequisites for these adoptable children to be able to exercise their right to a family when the adoption procedure is successful. Even for cared-for children who are not adoptable, weakening their formal status as non-adoptable foster children in the benefit of a make-believe adopted child status is problematic because it mismanages expectations and emotional attachments in the event of a family reunification, which the child may or may not want, or her placement with another foster carer at a later date.



The broader context for this is what our expert participants reiterated time and again, namely that a systemic problem in Romanian child protection is that social workers are first and foremost office work-preferring bureaucrats rather than social workers doing fieldwork (see Lazăr et al., 2018): Insufficient personnel to work properly with clients is one impact of systemic underfunding. Consequently, there is system-wide, regular sidelining of personal contact between social workers and children in care. A good foster carer against systemic pressures for social workers to place children with foster carers—and Mrs. Șărămăt may have been a good foster carer—means that social workers will be happy to delegate the day-to-day work of caring for the child, including preparing her for adoption and leaving her foster family, to foster carers. In Sorina’s care, this led to undesirable outcomes, namely her isolation from Directorate control and intervention when Mrs. Șărămăt proved uncooperative. This is a failure of the system, to which adds the absence of routinised protocols to do with genuinely unannounced home visits (which, according to the rules, cannot be denied, yet seem to have been regularly denied by Mrs. Șărămăt, without penalty) and confidential meetings and discussions between children and their social workers. These shortcomings are further exacerbated by the physical distance, with Directorate social workers located in the county capital and fostered children living with families across the entire county, many in rural areas. For the social worker to have regular, quality contact with children placed in foster care, she would have to be on the road most of the time.

Finally, a frequently cited factor in expert narratives seen to undermine reliable child–social worker relationships is the likelihood of corrupt, clientelist practices between foster carers and social workers. As already noted, some analysts have claimed that Sorina’s case illustrated first and foremost the collusion between a PSD-controlled Directorate and its PSD-vetted “client” foster carer network (Postelnicescu, 2019). The level of institutional weakness to intervene against Mrs. Șărămăt, detailed earlier, seems puzzling unless the Directorate team was facing someone with political backing, as other research suggests (Alexandrescu, 2019). And wider institutional collusion seems even more likely since Sorina’s adoption court case presents unusual details: it was unusually protracted; the appeal had to be moved to Craiova (Dolj county); and the case came to national media attention via PSD-friendly Antena 3. Finally, a 2020 TVR reportage presented the Sorina case as a politically motivated attack, first and foremost, on the legitimacy of prosecutors in the Romanian judicial system, a PSD narrative at the time, rather than a case of international adoption gone awry.

It is interesting that the highly polarised media frenzy that followed Sorina’s forceful removal from her foster carer, whose certificate was withdrawn in May 2019 and, as far as media coverage indicates, was never reissued, heavily relied on financial motivations on both sides. Commentators critical of the Șărămăt family suggested that the foster carer and her family had expressed interest in Sorina’s adoption only once they saw they could lose her and the financial arrangement she represented. Mrs. Săcărin stated in interviews that Mrs. Șărămăt gave the impression during the adoption process that she hoped some private financial arrangement could be made with her so she would give up Sorina to this wealthy Romanian-US doctor couple (Cartianu, 2020). Similarly, the Săcărins were described—including by members of the Șărămăt family—as financially motivated: adopting to take the child’s organs and to have been “given” Sorina for adoption rather than a different child as a result of bribes.

After finally being able to leave Romania following a month of legal proceedings against the Săcărins, and heightened public attention at the Șărămăt family, with whom public opinion sided throughout the media

frenzy, public attention in the so-called Sorina case faded. Five television channels, including Antena 3, where Mrs. Șărămăt and other family members made strong claims against the Săcărins, were fined symbolic sums for their coverage of the story in August 2019 (“Cazul Sorina,” 2019). In 2023, the Săcărin couple successfully initiated forced execution of Mariana Șărămăt’s property for legal costs accrued in the court case in which Mrs. Șărămăt attacked the international adoption, and lost (“fanatik.ro: Lovitură,” 2023). Furthermore, the Săcărins, including Sorina, were awarded damages in excess of €120,000 from the Romanian state for being unlawfully detained for a month in Romania in 2019 (“Familia Săcărin câștigă,” 2023). In 2024, România TV had to pay damages close to €100,000 to the Săcărins for their portrayal by this outlet during the media frenzy of 2019 (Burlă, 2024). During the year after taking Sorina to the US, the Săcărins released several home videos to show her progress and her integration into her family’s day-to-day life (TVR, 2020). In an interview with Free Europe Romania a year after the adoption, Mrs. Săcărin stated that Sorina had offered ample details of her abusive treatment by the Șărămăt family, of her reluctance to visit Romania or be in any contact with her former foster carer (Cartianu, 2020).

## 5. Conclusions

The transition of Romania’s child protection system to a family care model was catalysed by the country’s European accession process, pressuring political elites to streamline a rights-based approach (Negoita, 2010). This shift, essential in doing away with the Soviet-style residential care-based system, emphasised fostering as a key component for children separated from their families (Anghel et al., 2013). Over the past two decades, fostering has become central to Romania’s child welfare system, but its implementation has been marked by significant systemic and financial difficulties.

Combining expert participants’ views on foster care in Romania and the analysis of Sorina Săcărin’s fraught international adoption aims to show that foster care in Romania, while potentially providing a family-like environment, can be entangled in practices that undermine its potential to serve as a stable, nurturing, strictly temporary care solution. The slow, bureaucratised placement process, coupled with weak monitoring mechanisms, engenders a situation where paid carers can exploit their position, not necessarily in the best interest of the child. This dynamic is especially evident in rural areas, where foster care is often more lucrative than potentially available employment options. Despite attempts at reform, the Romanian foster care system remains problematic due to insufficient funding for interventions and services, and weak monitoring, creating incentives for financial gain at the expense of the best interests of children (Alexandrescu, 2019; Anghel et al., 2013). The lack of adequate oversight is exemplified well in Sorina’s case, where foster care, initially intended as a temporary placement, became an indefinite arrangement. The inability of the Directorate to effectively supervise foster carers or intervene in cases where carers’ interests conflict with the child’s welfare highlights a significant flaw in the system.

The structure and regulation of foster care, marked by comparatively generous financial compensations, yet weak oversight and monitoring, mirror broader bureaucratic tendencies within the Romanian child protection landscape, where social workers appear increasingly disconnected from the social realities and lived experiences of their cases (Alexandrescu, 2019; Lazăr et al., 2018). The preference for desk-based administrative tasks at the expense of direct, ongoing, and meaningful fieldwork has contributed to an environment where foster care arrangements are allowed to evolve into quasi-permanent arrangements. This dynamic is reinforced by the legal and regulatory context governing foster care, which, despite

recent updates of standards and protocols, remains without robust mechanisms for oversight, accountability, and transparent reporting. As illustrated by Sorina's story, these shortcomings facilitate the personalisation and privatisation of child protection, effectively allowing individual foster carers considerable autonomy over the lives of fostered children. This autonomy can extend to a problematic sense of ownership of children, particularly when carers become emotionally attached to children and rely on fostering as an economic survival mechanism in lieu of other employment opportunities. Such a situation can distort the fundamental objectives of foster care, i.e., child welfare, emotional security, and eventual family integration or adoption. Foster children, already marginalised by separation from their biological families and placed into an environment ostensibly aimed at their protection, can become commodified within a bureaucratic-economic nexus.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### Data Availability

Primary data can be consulted upon request by individual researchers. Access to the data will be granted on a case-by-case basis.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors.

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