

Insights from the Kajántó Mária Home for Children and Youth in the View of the Romanian Child Protection System

INGRID SFET

Affiliation: Ecumene Doctoral School
Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
Email: sfetingrid@gmail.com

Abstract

This article highlights the support and care provided to disadvantaged children by the Reformed Church in Romania and by other religious institutions abroad, including the Dutch Church. Simultaneously, it highlights the Romanian child protection system and its transformation after 1989, drawing a perspective on the Kajántó Mária Home for Children and Youth, a childcare home in Aleşd, Romania. Most studies and research focus predominantly on the Romanian child protection system and legislation. These studies provide an account of the change in attitude, opportunities for improvement, good and bad practices, highlighting the outline for children's care that has developed over the past 30 years. However, child protection homes and the voices of the institutions have received significantly less attention to show what a disadvantaged child truly needs. The article illustrates the challenges of adapting to changing legislation and highlights community resilience through the example of Kajántó Mária Home, which provides comprehensive care programs for vulnerable children. It provides a critical examination of how social and cultural circumstances have shaped the development of the Romanian state's child protection framework. By aligning the case study, this paper underscores the importance of collective action and constitutional measures in shaping societal structures and protecting vulnerable populations.

Keywords: child protection system, challenge, disadvantaged community

Introduction

Established in 1996, the Kajántó Mária Home for Children and Youth in Aleşd (hereafter Kajántó Mária Home) operates as a charitable institution under the Királyhágómellék District of the Reformed Church in Romania. The institute is mainly financed by the Reformed Church but also receives regular sponsorship from the Netherlands, Germany,

Switzerland, America, and Hungary. Although the Home's life is not barrier-free, the obstacles have been overcome to achieve the main goal. The Kajántó Mária Home celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2022 (which was due in 2021 but was affected by the COVID-19 outbreak), which not only represents the Home's foundation, but also its importance and depth of what has happened during these years.

This study will provide an overview of the Romanian child protection system from the country's regime change to the present, covering nearly 30 years of development and modification, highlighting the psychological and developmental aspects of children, as well as the Home's life throughout the years. It is also noteworthy that I highlight only the changes in the law that have influenced the functioning of the Home. The interviews with the Home's administrators—Júlia Balla and Éva Dénes—provide an insight into their everyday life and functioning. The interviewees were chosen based on their knowledge of the legislative system and experience in the field, which offers us a deeper insight into the functioning of the Home and the challenges it has encountered. The lack of yearbooks from the past 27 years results in *grey fields*; however, the key moments of change can be explored in relation to the modifications of the Romanian child protection system and social legislation.

Through the method of in-depth interviews with the two participants, the subjective or personal approach to the home becomes visible, revealing the dedication of the administrators and caregivers. After a thorough overview of the development of the Romanian child protection system, these interviews sought not only to highlight the administrative challenges throughout the life of the Kajántó Mária Home, but also to emphasize its best practices. The aim of this study is to highlight a family-type home in the light of the past and current Romanian child protection system. In this case, the study aims to present the actual challenges of the family-type homes in the light of the Romanian child protection system (RQ). To achieve this, an overview of the system following the fall of the communist regime is offered, complemented by examples of best practices of the Home for the integration and reintegration of children. The in-depth interviews reveal practical recommendations and solutions that benefit the psychological well-being of the children; these are also summarized in the Conclusions section of this paper.

The Development of the Romanian Child Protection System from the Regime Change (1989) to the Present

Established in 1996, the Kajántó Mária Home is notable for its special background. The Romanian child protection system underwent numerous changes following the regime change in 1989. At the beginning of 1997, the Department for Child Protection (DPC)

was established as a government authority. The purpose of this section is to present the major changes in the system that influenced the Home. This section is divided into three subsections, starting from the fall of the communist regime to the present day. Each section examines a period of change in the child protection system, showing how new approaches to addressing challenges ultimately impacted the lives of children in need. To understand the challenges and the changes introduced in the system, this study presents a literature overview of the topic and a relevant data analysis of the child protection system in Romania. The lack of studies dealing with the analysis of child protection systems in Romania, more precisely in Transylvania, underlines the importance of Deák's (2020) work, which analyzed and synthesized in depth the legislation of the Romanian child protection system.

Beginnings: Between 1989 and 1997

The final decades of the Communist regime in Romania were marked by controversial efforts in the domain of child protection. As long as the focus of attention was on the child, the withdrawal of social support and forced population policies resulted in negative effects (Deák, 2020). As a result, a flawed child protection system remained. Between 1945 and 1989, the state established institutionalized settings in which many children lived in precarious conditions: in 1989, more than 100,000 children resided in such conditions, and more than 16,000 died from curable illnesses or other causes (Deák, 2020). There is consensus amongst experts discussing the strong and negative impacts of institutionalization on a child's healthy development, psychological well-being, and the negative direction of many other developmental stages (Johnson et al., 2006).

While the post-regime-change period introduced structural reforms in child protection, implementing a child-centered orientation faced significant obstacles. The social policy system became confused and lacked a coherent support strategy. The emphasis shifted towards education and health services, while financial support for families with children dropped (Zamfir, 1997). Nevertheless, during this period, Romania ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in the early 1990s (Deák, 2020). As far as changes in legal norms were concerned, the responsibility for child protection was scattered, and the activities were not coherent. This meant less attention was given to child protection services and their improvement, resulting in inadequate services, management, and a lack of coherence.

The development of child protection services in Romania was supported by international organizations. Between the regime change and 1996, several NGOs were set up to support children. In 1993, the National Commission for the Protection of Children (CNPC)

was established, and in 1995, the National Action Plan was adopted (Zamfir, 1997). However, these efforts required time to develop and started with the beginning of the decentralization process in 1997 (Stanciu, 2013).

The First Wave of Deinstitutionalization: Between 1997 and 2001

The year 1997 is considered a crucial year in the history of Romanian child protection, as at the beginning of 1997, the National Commission for the Protection of Children (CNPC) was transformed into the Department for the Protection of Children (DPC).¹ Between 1997 and 2000, its primary responsibility was to develop a government strategy for child protection (Deák, 2020). As the system was entirely focused on institution-based care until 1997, another significant change was the transfer of responsibility for child protection to the county council.² In the meantime, efforts have been made to deinstitutionalize and reorganize large networks of institutions. These shifts have also produced effects that were unexpected and had a negative effect on both children and institutions.

Between 1997 and 2000/2001, a phase of institutionalization occurred, with limited financial resources allocated to achieve rapid and effective results: extended family placements, foster care, and adoption (Deák, 2020). Family-type services started to grow, but foster care services were less effective because children were placed with families with inadequate monitoring. Foster care served as a short-term solution, which resulted in discrepancies in the structure and quality of services. It failed to address low-quality standards and raised problems of neglect in foster parent training (Deák, 2020). An alternative solution was to transform large institutions into smaller units, or family-type homes. Over time, this proved to be another compromise that failed to clearly distinguish the classic residential institution from the alternative family-type care proposed by this approach (Deák, 2020).

As the system was overwhelmed by the number of children with special needs between 2000 and 2001, the process of closing old institutions began (Stanciu, 2013). Thus, during this period, the ANPDCA³ coordinated the implementation of policies in the area of services and the reform of the system of institutions that ensure the promotion of children's rights, care, and protection of children with difficulties and disabilities (OUG 192/08.12.1999.).

¹ This was a separate authority within the government, responsible for coordinating and developing child protection strategies.

² This led to the formation of Child Protection Committees (CPC) and Specialised Public Services for Child Protection (now known as DGASPC)

³ The special child protection services (DGASPC) began to take over the central administration of the institutions in 1998, and in 1999, the DPC was restructured as the National Agency for the Protection of the Rights of the Child (ANPDCA) (OUG 192/08.12.1999.).

The Second Wave of Deinstitutionalization: Between 2001 and 2007

The second phase of deinstitutionalization took place between 2001 and 2007. At this time, the process accelerated along with strong political and financial support from the European Union.⁴ During the second phase, financial resources were no longer a problem, and family-type homes became favored alternatives to residential care (Deák, 2020). Foster care continued, but capacity development was not in proportion, which affected the quality of services.

In 2005, the introduction of the prohibition of institutionalization of children under 2 years of age caught the system unprepared and was not preceded by adequate planning. This led to older children living in foster care being transferred to child protection centers to make room for younger children (Deák, 2020; Dénes, 2024).

Another challenge was the number of youngsters leaving the system after turning 18 as they prepared for independent living and social integration. There was no coherent approach for reintegration support services, which eventually led to the development of a standard case management and reintegration guide to help young people leaving the system to integrate into society (Dénes, 2024; Deák, 2020). This was only approved in 2006 and resulted in many adolescents leaving the system, not receiving adequate monitoring and support, leading to unemployment and homelessness. Today, the system continues to face difficulties in adopting the developed guidelines, which cannot be applied uniformly at a national level.

The development continued after 2007, but at a slower rate. While Romania made efforts to reduce the number of children in institutions, the total population of children has also decreased, making it statistically difficult to determine the proportions. Despite substantial efforts to lower the number of children in the child protection system and to strengthen family-type services, there have been no positive results since 2010 (Deák, 2020).

The Third Period of Deinstitutionalization: From 2014 to Today

The ANPDCA announced a third wave of deinstitutionalization in 2014, which started in 2016. This was only possible with European Union funds. The aim was to stop placing children in accommodation centers and to keep children under the age of 3 out of institutions (Deák, 2020). The national body is encouraging their return to the biological families, adoption, or alternative services closer to a family environment.

⁴ Also, pre-developed public awareness campaigns attracted considerable financial support (Deák, 2020).

Romania developed two important strategies at the start of the third wave: the protection of children's rights and a national strategy for social inclusion and poverty reduction. The government has decided to close all centers by the end of 2020 (Deák, 2020). If they cannot place children with relatives or foster families, they will be provided with care in family-type homes. In these property-type services, the maximum number of children is 6 or 12, and the state promotes initiatives that aid children in accessing stable housing and career opportunities.

Law No. 268 from 2018 states that a child under the age of 7 cannot be placed in a children's home and can only live with relatives to the 4th degree or foster care (Parlamentul, Legea 286/29.11.2018). This law also seeks to promote adoption, and it was amended in June 2022, Section 2 of Article 64, which stated that children under the age of 7 can only be placed in such institutions if he/she is disabled.⁵ This demonstrates the efforts of the state to reduce the number of minors placed in institutions by reducing the number of children living in them. At the same time, they seek to educate them in family-type centers. For children, this is a last resort, as the state takes them through a process of prioritizing kinship and foster care. If they cannot find a suitable place at this level, he/she is placed in a family-type institution. Furthermore, Article 64. Section 3 (a) (b) of Law No. 272/2004 emphasizes that they do not want to separate siblings (Parlamentul, Legea 272/21.06.2004.). The law from 2022 not only sought to age-index, but also significantly reduced the number of children in residential care. According to Section 4 of Article 123, family-type homes can accommodate a maximum of 12 children.⁶

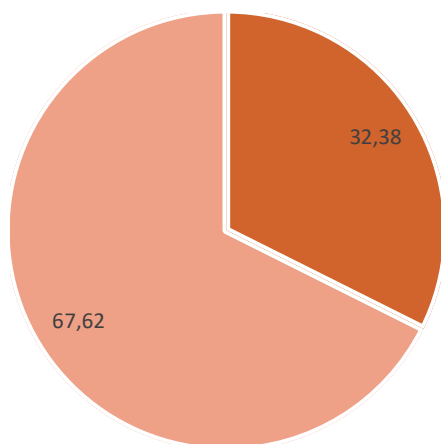
The Romanian Government is promoting the child protection system through its national strategies developed in 2014. From a 2019 ANPDCA report we can see that the number of children in family-type homes has increased significantly, as 52,783 children had to be taken care of by the state, from which 17,096 children were in institutionalized placement centers and 35,687 in family-type homes (see Fig. 1). A few years later, in June 2023, 40,066 children were looked after by the State, out of which 27.39% were in institutionalized centers, either public or private, and 72.61% in family-type homes, level 4 relatives or foster cares (see Fig. 2). The reports show a decrease in the number of children and a significant difference between the data for institutionalized and family-type services (ANPDCA, 2023).

⁵ However, the same law highlights that children between the ages of 3 and 7 can only be placed in a home if he/she cannot be rehabilitated in other types of services (OUG 191/28.12.2022.).

⁶ In extraordinary situations, the number can be 16, but only for a specified exceptional period (OUG 191/28.12.2022.).

Figure 1

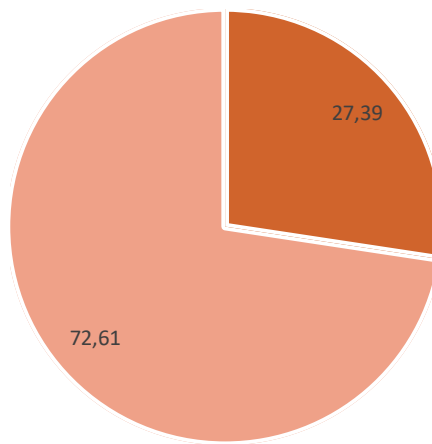
Distribution of children in 2019



● Inst. Centres ● Family type homes

Figure 2

Distribution of children in 2023



● Inst. Centres ● Family type homes

As seen in the chapters above, Romania's child protection system underwent three major phases of decentralization, aiming to break free from the Communist-era model. Although these implications improved local ownership, they also led to integration challenges and disparities in quality and resources between institutions. The first wave initiated decentralization and introduced the family-type homes.

Although many family-type homes emerged from institutions, they preserved their original model. This led to homes often becoming default placements rather than tailored choices. The second wave was marked by assistance from the EU; nevertheless, the reintegration framework has yet to be fully optimized. The third wave made progress in eliminating institutional care for children under seven, but there is a lack of monitoring and even quality.

Approaches Based on Child Psychology and Development

While institutional care is widely acknowledged to have a negative impact on children's development, children have been placed in institutional care in Romania and worldwide (Carter, 2005; Johnson et al., 2006). These children are more likely to suffer from poor health, physical underdevelopment, impaired brain development and growth, and emotional

attachment disorders. As a result, children's intellectual, social, and behavioral abilities are impaired compared to those of children growing up in a family home. Related research and surveys have been published in Europe to support child protection efforts.

The purpose of this chapter is to systematically summarize the studies that show the disadvantages of institutions, which are largely due to the partial absence of caregivers in a closer relation, environmental, and external factors. Bagdy (2014) emphasized that growing up is a socially determined process with a foundational effect, and its most important stage takes place within the family. From the many social influences that shape children, family is important because it is the primary and emotionally most significant community that introduces the individual to the patterns of social behavior. Therefore, she rightly points out in her book that when guessing the causes of disturbed, faulty, maladaptive behavior, we often lose sight of the most important thing: a child's behavior is connected to their background and to one or two causes. The causes are revealed to us by understanding the child's individual life, the particularities of their family, their relationship with their parents, siblings, and personal environment (Bagdy, 2014).

The study by Johnson et al. (2006) is a systematic literature review of literature between 1944 and 2003. They are mainly about parental deprivation and abandonment, or children living in institutions or residential homes. Their results are significant, as they give us insight into the disadvantages of children developing in inappropriate conditions. In conclusion, my aim is to summarize the relevant research and studies on the topic, which will help to provide an analysis of the Kajántó Mária Home, showing the efforts and measures taken by the home to become aware of and counteract these effects. After analyzing the studies, it becomes evident that they focus on institutionalized homes, while some studies show that in family-type homes, various effects are reduced from the outset by the environment.

Physical development and motor abilities

Institutions for children under the age of 4 are significantly overcrowded, clinical environments with regulated routines and disproportionate carer-child ratios. Their staff is largely engaged in nursing and physical care (Nelson et al., 2007). Children in these facilities spend a significant part of their day in cots, in sterile environments (Maclean, 2003). There is a strong emphasis on infection control, and children have infrequent contact with the outside world. We have seen that in many institutionalized settings, there are up to 100 children, so excessive supervision and sterile environments are a good choice, as mass illness with few caregivers can result in greater losses. However, at this stage

of development, it is essential to provide care for children that focuses not only on emotional attachment and development, but also on the development of their immune systems. Several studies highlight that excessive control of a child's environmental experience has several detrimental effects (Carter, 2005; Mulheir & Browne, 2007; Smyke et al., 2007). Daily contact with the outside world is challenging, but it also helps children's immune systems mature and adapt.

Kevin Brown's study (2009) shows that body weight, height, and head circumference are lower than normal. These serious conditions can lead to developmental delays, including problems with hearing and vision, which often stem from poor nutrition and/or insufficient stimulation. These problems often go undiagnosed and thus remain untreated for years (Brown, 2009). Furthermore, it is common to miss developmental milestones in motor skills, which can also lead to stereotyped behaviors such as body rocking. It can be concluded that institutionalized care up to the age of 4 is associated with physical and learning disadvantages, which also have a negative impact on motor skills. In such institutionalized environments, developmental stages are delayed, and excessive sterile environments also have long-term negative effects on the development and health of children.

Impacts on Mental Health, Social Behavior, and Interaction

The psychological effects of institutionalized care for children have been examined for more than 50 years. Goldfarb (1944; 1945) and Bowlby (1951) highlight a range of emotional, behavioral, and intellectual impairments among children in such settings. Children living in institutions not only perform poorly on intelligence tests and have difficulty learning, but also experience language, social, and attachment difficulties, in contrast to children living in foster care. A lack of emotional attachment to a mother figure in early childhood is a significant problem, resulting in long-lasting damage to the child's life.

Bowlby's (1969) 'attachment theory' emphasizes this negative impact, which contrasts the importance of the family or a primary carer in the child's development. Bowlby (1951) highlighted that children in similar situations show signs of distress when there is a short-term separation from their primary attachment figure. These were divided into different stages, so that we can observe the application of the PDD model: (a) protest, which results in anger, crying, screaming and clinging; (b) despair, when he is calm on the surface but rejects attempts to help and comfort him; (c) detachment, when he begins to interact with others but rejects the caregivers help. These studies helped to reduce the use of institutional and larger residential care for children.

Johnson et al. (2006) conducted a systematic review. From the 27 studies, 17 focused on social and behavioral problems, and the results show that 94% of children in institutional care had the following problems: antisocial behavior, social competence difficulties, play and peer/sibling interaction problems. Due to poor or incomplete care practices and failed initiatives, young children learn to be antisocial, and it becomes apparent that the child's effort becomes rarer. This observation is particularly significant for children under 3, in which case a 6-month institutional placement already represents a significant part of early life experiences (Nelson et al., 2007).

Institutional care also has a significant impact on the formation of emotional attachment and development. Johnson et al. (2006) reviewed 12 studies on this topic, from which 9 highlight that children growing up in institutions experience emotional attachment difficulties and show extreme behavior types: over-friendliness and/or over-inhibited behavior, which is indicative of 'disorganized attachment disorder.' Smyke et al. (2002) highlighted the "continuum of attachment disorder" after comparing emotional attachment problems in three groups of Romanian children. They observed that few children in (a) foster care with their biological parents showed attachment problems, few children in (b) family-type homes with 4 caregivers present at all times showed such symptoms, and in (c) residential homes with 20 caregivers at different times, the majority showed attachment disorders. Kevin Brown points out in his study (2009) that even seemingly 'good quality' institutional care for emotional attachment can have detrimental effects on children's ability to form relationships throughout their lives.

Bagdy (2014) discusses in detail the illnesses caused by maternal absence, which have two symptoms: depression and hospitalism. Her work highlights the results of René Spitz's study, reflecting on the significant consequences of 'motherlessness.' René (1949) observed developmental characteristics in the nursery environment of 170 children and determined that the temporary 'lack of substance' in the first year produces specific symptoms similar to depressive mood disorders. Among the infants, 10 became withdrawn in the second half of their lives, indifferent to external stimuli, and spent much of their time lying in bed, turning their heads away from their peers. The observation found that between the ages of 6 and 8 months, when they are separated from the mother for 2–3 months, upon her return, the symptoms began to disappear. It was interesting to observe that the longer the mother was away, the slower the recovery was (Spitz, 1949; Bagdy, 2014).

Effects on Language Learning, Communication, and Intellect

Johnson et al. (2006) not only focused on social and behavioral problems but also examined cognitive developments. Of the 13 studies, 12 highlight that children growing up in institutional care show poorer cognitive performance compared to children growing up in a family environment. Nelson et al. (2009) compared children in Romanian residential institutions with children who were placed in foster care from institutions. Their study highlights that the 54-month-olds who remained in institutional care showed no detectable improvement in cognitive performance (average IQ 73), while those who were placed in foster care had higher cognitive ability (average IQ 81), but still did not reach the level of children in biological families (average IQ 109).

In addition to cognitive effects, language learning also proved to be problematic for children in institutional care. Goldfarb (1944, 1945) studied the organization of speech and language in children, working with several control groups of different ages. He found deficits in infancy, early school age, and adolescence compared with children's early years. This has been confirmed by other studies demonstrating the presence of language skill deficits and early reading problems in children raised in such settings (Roy & Rutter, 2006). On the other hand, Croft et al. (2007) found that children compensate well for these language developmental deficits once they are placed in a family. However, evidence suggests that the socioeconomic status and background of the child's new family influence their language development (Geoffroy et al., 2007).

The Kajántó Mária Home for Children and Youth in Aleșd

The Kajántó Mária Home was founded in 1996. The September 30, 1999 issue of *Romániai Magyar Szó* published a letter stating that 24 orphaned, abandoned Hungarian children had been placed at the Home. It is also clear that the Home had already received help from abroad by this time, when, at the request and with the contribution of István Dénes, many theologians from Krasna rushed to help the home with their generous donations, declared Fejér in the above-mentioned newspaper. The letter shows that the Home had already grown to a considerable number of people.

During the jubilee celebrations and thanks to a newspaper article by Ciucur on the Erdon.ro reports that the Kajántó Mária Home was the result of a *joint effort* that has stood the test of time. In the Reformed Church, two names are important when mentioning the foundation: Pál Kajántó and his wife Mária, who had the dream of establishing such a home. By the time the children's home opened its doors, Mária Kajántó had already passed away, so it was named after her (Balla, personal communication).

The study seeks to examine the challenges encountered by family-type homes within Romania's child protection system. To highlight these challenges, I conducted an in-depth interview with the two administrators of the Kajántó Mária Home. These interviews highlighted the bureaucratic obstacles within the legislative framework while revealing the interviewees' dedication to maximizing outcomes for the children under their care. The in-depth interviews focused on the psychological, developmental, and integrational challenges. Their aim was to make the best of the situation in order to support children facing psychological and social integration difficulties. Éva Dénes and Júlia Balla took the lion's share in solving these issues as administrators, creating a true family atmosphere in the home.

Beginnings: Between 1996 and 2001

To explore the early history of the Home prior to Éva Dénes's tenure (the first interviewee), I supplemented this research with newspaper sources as well as the responses provided by the interviewees. This was necessary, given the lack of yearbooks from the early years of the Home.

The Home was established in 1996. It relies primarily on the support of the Reformed Church,⁷ and also receives regular support from abroad. Júlia Balla explained that the Kajántó Mária Home has always worked as a foundation. On 24 September 1996, it opened its doors as "Fundăția Casa Copilului Kajanto Maria," having received a founder's permit from the Reformed Bishopric. Since its inception as a foundation, the Reformed Church and the Dutch Reformed Church have also contributed significant additional funds for the home's maintenance, development, and construction. On the part of Pál Kajántó, the Reformed Church gave them land on which to build the institution itself (Balla, personal communication).

Dr. Annemarie Sadler, director of the Home, emphasizes that the Home housed Hungarian children, which was also highlighted by Éva Dénes during the interview. Thanks to the legal status and the support of the Church, the home continued to serve Hungarian children, even after the regime change. As one of the unique examples, Éva Dénes pointed out that this was made possible because, until the 1999 Child Protection Act, children were not placed by a committee, but taken and brought by the pastor (Dénes, 2024). The establishment of the ANPDC introduced centralized institutional management, enabling the agency to fulfill the following functions in pursuit of its objectives: strategic, legislative, administrative, representative, and official functions (OUG 192/08.12.1999.). This reorganization also led to the placement of children in the Home.

⁷ Also belongs to the Királyhágómellék Diocese of the Reformed Church in Romania.

Between 2001–2017: From Care to Community

Between 2001 and 2007, deinstitutionalization accelerated, the state became more financially backed, and NGOs also played a significant role. The 2004 Child Protection Act stipulated that different standards had to be met, and a mandatory care plan was developed. At that time, it was more difficult to admit children to the institution, and only children under the age of 2 with disabilities could be admitted. In addition to institutionalized residential solutions, family or small residential homes are being sought. In 2013, the law permitted a foundation to operate multiple social services, and a children's home was classified as a social service (Dénes, 2024).

Children who left the system were increasingly receiving specialized services such as financial support, job provision, and aftercare, which were only approved in 2006. As this was a standard case management and reintegration guide, many young people did not benefit from monitoring. In the case of the Kajántó Mária Home, it should be emphasized that their caregivers treated children as their own, paying close attention to their development.

Multi-level activities were carried out both inside and outside the Home to promote integration. Their efforts demonstrated a commitment to positive progress, which contributed to the children's development. In the case of the family environment, it was noticeable that the caregivers rotated due to their work program, but it was also noticeable which foster carer was more attached to which child. Important holidays were organized in a way that created a warm and intimate atmosphere by involving the caregivers' own families in the events, which helped to create a stronger bond of trust (Dénes, 2024). As they made an effort not to rotate staff, a significant emotional attachment could be developed, which is essential at this stage of the child's development.

In the interests of integration and a family-like atmosphere, children were an integral part of life in Aleșd. Besides attending church on Sundays, they continued their studies at the local school. Here, students range from those with lower academic achievement to high-achieving peers who have participated in competitions. In the afternoons, the governesses placed great importance on learning, so they sat down with the students who had lower academic achievement to help them with their studies. During high school, children were given the opportunity to attend major schools in Oradea. Informal activities were also encouraged as long as they served the child's development (Dénes, 2024). As Aleșd is not a municipality, integrating children living in the Home into the town's life was easier: town days, cultural events, and organized performances.

The effort to reintegrate them and prepare them for adult life has produced results. We can see not only preparation, but also serious attention, or monitoring. After reaching the age of 18, children could seek employment. In many cases, residents sought employment with assistance from their caregivers or with recommendations from the Home. There are also cases of children aged 16 and above working in the summer by their own choice. Even after 18, the young person's contact with the home was not terminated. We also find cases of caregivers being invited to the wedding of the young person living in the Home (Dénes, 2024).

As the Kajántó Mária Home does not have yearbooks, data compiled from internal archives, media coverage, and interviews show the number of children, the internal atmosphere of the home, and the success of their children. In the first trimester of 2016, it was reported that the Kajántó Mária Home in Aleşd housed 25–30 children (Fried 2016). At that time, Éva Dénes was running the "orphanage" with István Dénes as social worker and director. Éva Dénes asserted that by 2021, the Home helped 50 children who had already left the home, adding that almost all these adolescents were more successful in life than the family or community from which they came to the Home as children (Dénes, 2024). The anniversary celebration in September 2022 was attended by former residents who, by then, lived independently, and they related their experiences and life in the Home, as well as their status (Dénes, 2024).

Between 2017–2023: *We went to the graduation of one of our children...*

In the third wave of deinstitutionalization, which started in 2016, Romania sought to eliminate institutionalized children's homes. As a result of changes and adaptation in 2020/2021, the institution began operating as a family home for 12 children (Dénes, 2024). During this period, the life of the Home was disintegrated. Thanks to the law, the Home can now operate with a small number of children, and the process of integration has become more complex and difficult. For a child to be admitted into a home, someone in the immediate environment must indicate that the child is having problems. The person who reports the situation to the authorities has the obligation to follow through with the minor, which in many cases discourages people who notice such a problem. Once a decision has been made, the child is placed in a collection center or in foster care, and only then can he/she be placed in a family-type children's home (Dénes, 2024). Thus, in the first years of the Home, it was obvious that the child was caught and brought in, and the director of the institution could admit the child into the home, but now they are being placed. This also affects the Home, specifically, until now it was sustainable to have only Hungarian children; however, due to the above-mentioned legal changes, Romanian children are also being placed here.

The 2018 law, which came into force in 2019, aimed to ensure that children under the age of 7 were placed with relatives or foster parents. For children in foster care, this was a law that had a negative effect, as many foster parents were not adequately prepared for adoption and the difficulties of a child coming from a different background. It can also be seen that in many cases, children were placed in a similar home by foster parents at the age of 13–14, as they were not able to educate the child properly. In the case of the Home, this is a negative factor, as the caregivers must start the process all over again, and it is also more difficult to educate a child after the age of 8. Stability should be the primary goal, and a child's living situation should not be disrupted during their teenage years; therefore, this law should be revised to ensure that children are raised in a permanent, stable environment from the outset whenever possible (Balla, personal communication).

The 2022 law not only sought to reduce the age limit but also significantly reduced the number of children in children's homes; thus, family-type children's homes could accommodate a maximum of 12 children. In the case of the Home, a larger building was constructed to accommodate children over the age of 16, providing them with greater independence. The aforementioned law not only regulates the number of children but also the space available for use on the home's premises, making this building unused (Balla, personal communication).

In the situation of children, we see state support. The current Ministry of Family Affairs has provided them with opportunities, rights, and obligations in their present situation to support them after the age of 18. Therefore, they may remain in the child protection system after reaching the age of 18, up to the age of 26, as long as they continue their education. Even if they have finished their studies but are not yet independent and cannot get back on their feet, they can stay in the system for two years, during which they can work and save money (Barabás, 2023). To enable adolescents to assume various responsibilities, the system also provides financial support to help them stabilize their lives. There is a one-off allowance worth approximately three salaries, and they also receive the value of the child benefit they have accumulated up to the age of 18, which is collected for them in a separate account they can access at the age of 18 (Barabás, 2023). At this point, it is up to the young person to decide on what and how quickly to spend the financial support they receive. From October 2022, we also find educational financial support. This support is nearly 2800 lei per month, according to Barabás, and is paid until the age of 26 if they meet the conditions to continue their studies or work.

The Romanian system appears to encourage adolescents to pursue further education while also supporting those who choose to enter the workforce, providing them with financial security and stability. Júlia Balla (personal communication), current head of the institution, pointed out that despite the educators' efforts and financial support, this amount of money is not effectively used by children who leave school and is spent on things that do not provide them with a secure future.

One of the features of the Home that aims to promote good living and integration of children is its open doors of opportunity. In public institutions, children are not allowed to leave the institution if they are not going to school. Currently, the school in Aleșd boasts a strong handball team comprised of many primary and secondary students who regularly participate in competitions. Practices are held almost daily after school. Students living in children's homes face greater barriers to tournament participation due to child protection regulations, which particularly complicate attendance at out-of-town events scheduled on short notice. In many cases, there is a wait of weeks for permission to leave the city, which is a disadvantage for the children and the handball team (Balla, personal communication).

Another feature of the home is that adolescents can remain after reaching the age of 18 until they are fully established, up to the age of 26. The aim is to provide them with a safe place and community to return home to for further education and other support. Thus, in the case of reintegration, caregivers can aid the young person with financial support and appropriate advice to help them develop their role in society and get their life moving in the right direction (Balla, personal communication). An example occurred in the life of the Home, as in the summer of 2023, the Kajántó Mária Home was invited to a university graduation in Debrecen, where one of their foster children completed his studies. Júlia Balla pointed out that they had an experience similar to the story of the starfish this summer. They went to the university graduation of one of their children in Debrecen (Balla, personal communication). In addition, thanks to the contacts, it is known that another of their children is working as a social worker in Austria, and several others have stable jobs and families (Dénes, personal communication; Balla, personal communication).

Other usual activities include participation in Sunday services, youth, and children's programs. Efforts are made to organize church camps. After years of presence in Aleșd, the Home has achieved excellent community integration through positive relationships with local schools, teachers, and residents. The Home also organizes open days, where at least 50 children from Aleșd come to the activities. Despite these efforts, the children continue to bear significant emotional burdens and often struggle to form typical attachments due to their personal histories. (Balla, personal communication).

Children's daily lives are also divided. Students attending secondary school in Oradea get up at 5 AM to catch the bus to the city at 6 AM. It is also unique for the Home that they support high-quality education and consider the preferences of the children, despite the administrative work involved. Smaller children go to primary school with the governess until 4th grade, after which they are brought home by the teacher who looks after them in the afternoon. Secondary school pupils travel to school independently and are met at home by their teacher. Various informal activities are encouraged to support the children's development, including "curiosity clubs," school sports clubs, and participation in the choir. (Balla, personal communication).

Conclusions and Recommendations

These efforts and the laws that were introduced as the child protection system evolved and developed have led to the abolition of institutionalized children's homes, which in many places could accommodate 50–100 children. These efforts have also had an impact on family-type homes, although they were not the main focus, and often these impacts were accompanied by problems and negativity (Dénes, 2024). However, many changes have not only had positive impacts but have also been accompanied by difficulties. Many experts share a common opinion when considering the effects of institutionalization (Johnson et al., 2006). In this context, family-type homes and services can have a more positive impact on children's development and future well-being. Thus, the Kajántó Mária Home was one of the few positive examples and services during the period of regime change, and one of the services that the Romanian system was striving for.

On the other hand, we face obstacles originating from the child protection system itself, as the constant administrative processes make it difficult or impossible for the Home's management and its tenants to have different opportunities. From the very beginning, the Kajántó Mária Home has been a foundation supported by the Reformed and Dutch Church. Despite having to comply with Romanian child protection laws, which have led to many changes in the Home's operations, they still maintain their primary goal of caring for children. During my conversations with Éva Dénes and Júlia Balla, it has become clear that the changes in legislation have made it difficult for the Home to operate. Accreditation is required to operate and must be renewed every 5 years through an administrative process, allowing the home to continue providing social services. Nevertheless, it has become apparent that the Kajántó Mária Home strives to educate, mentor, and guide children. The children's past has left them with a heavy baggage to deal with, but with the help of the Home, they received a good direction to follow, making it a guiding example.

Psychological and developmental outcomes for children of similar backgrounds are shaped by numerous factors that influence their future and who they will become. The Kajántó Mária Home is aware of its responsibility; therefore, it makes every effort to minimize these problems. In 2005, during the second period of deinstitutionalization, authorities announced that children under 2 years of age should not be institutionalized. In 2018, the age limit was raised to 7, and in 2019, the adoption subsidy was implemented. Balla suggested that the law should be reworked with the aim of providing stability from the beginning, as such impactful changes in the early stages of a child's development can have negative effects. This also makes it harder to educate and integrate children after the age of 8.

An even greater challenge, which is also important for children's lives, is the impact on mental health and social behavior. These social and attachment difficulties are present from the moment of separation. According to Bagdy (2014), the bond between a mother and her unborn baby begins to develop while the baby is still in the womb. In our case, one of the best practices of the Kajántó Mária Home is making efforts both internally and externally for the benefit of their children. Éva Dénes and Júlia Balla highlighted how the Home's internal events—holiday celebrations and excursions—cultivated an intimate, family-like atmosphere. In the Home, there are a few caregivers and teachers, and they rarely alternate, so they can be with the children for years. Éva Dénes (2024) pointed out that they always knew which governess could communicate more effectively with which child because of their bond. They are also becoming more engaged with the outside world, which is a key aspect of integration, allowing the children to play an active role in the life of Aleșd. They are present not only at Sunday services, but also at Bible weeks, classes, and choir. Outside the classroom, children also receive spiritual and emotional support, as teachers not only monitor them individually but also support them in subject competitions, enabling them to participate in workshops and sports teams. However, such activities have run into administrative problems in recent years. According to child protection regulations, a child residing in a home cannot leave the municipality without higher authorization, which is a time-consuming process. An obvious example is when children are given a week's notice of a handball tournament that is outside of Aleșd, so permission, even if requested, does not arrive in time. A significant administrative challenge stems from children being registered under the county director of child protection rather than the institutional head, adding layers of bureaucratic complexity. The frequent changes to laws and regulations make it difficult for the institution to operate, creating the impression that each new requirement adds unnecessary operational barriers (Balla, personal communication).

In the case of Romanian efforts, it was evident that during the second wave of deinstitutionalization, there was only one guide for the reintegration of 18-year-olds, but children were not monitored, which in many cases led to unemployment and homelessness. Subsequently, during the third wave of deinstitutionalization, a new reintegration strategy was developed, which provided significant financial support to adolescents who had left the system. Prior to the first strategy, the heads of the institutions had already been striving to integrate and reintegrate them. The internal reintegration efforts included not only support and preparation before the adolescents left home, but also the assistance and voluntary monitoring of their life by caregivers. They also helped them find employment and allowed them to do student work to support their transition to adulthood. Following the second state reintegration strategy, it was also observed that they had access to a considerable amount of money, but without proper preparation, they were unable to manage it effectively, and much of it was squandered. The opposite, positive example is the individual who uses this amount for further education. This also highlights the recommendations for the development of the reintegration strategy with more child-oriented solutions.

Studies also show that children growing up in institutionalized environments have lower intelligence and cognitive performance. Nelson and colleagues highlighted in their study that those who are placed in a family perform better. This also demonstrates that a child's environment influences their development. Éva Dénes and Júlia Balla (personal communication) also highlighted that in the Home's life, it is observed that former residents become more successful than the environment they have come from. As a result of the care and dedication provided, there are numerous examples of individuals who have gone on to lead fulfilling lives. For instance, one former resident is now a social worker, and in the summer of 2023, the Home celebrated a university graduation in Debrecen. Also, many of their children excel in their schoolwork, personal, and professional lives.

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