

**FOR**

Focus on Romania

Cabinet VERHEUGEN

3, Kirkfield Cottages, Clonsilla Road, Dublin 15, Ireland

Mr Gunter Verheugen  
Commissioner for Enlargement  
Rue De La Roi 200 - B-1049 Bruxelles  
Belgium.

26<sup>th</sup> January 2002.

*Re: Inadequate care of children and young adults in State care in Romania.*

Dear Mr. Verheugen,

You wrote to me in my capacity as a member of the Irish NGO "Trade Aid" in October 2000, following representations made on my behalf by John Cushman MEP. I had raised the issue of human rights abuses within the Romanian orphanage system, and your response detailed the measures being taken by the EU under the PHARE Child protection Programme.

The problems in the Romanian orphanages have in many cases actually worsened since 2000. A number of returned Aid workers in Ireland, along with other individuals concerned with Human Rights issues, have formed an organization called FOR (Focus on Romania), with the intention of focusing world attention on this ongoing scandal. It is our view that this issue is being largely ignored in the rush for European expansion. In addition, the Romanian Authorities are able to convince the European policy makers that the Child Protection Authority is improving the lot of these forgotten children, when in fact in some instances it is making their situation worse.

More than ten years after the issue of mistreatment of children and young adults in State institutions in Romania first came to the attention of Western media, this denial of basic human rights continues. Children and young adults are forced to live in appalling conditions, with inadequate nutrition and lack of basic comforts. Access to education, therapy and any kind of quality of life is denied. The government of Romania has not and will not provide adequate resources to deal with the issue, preferring instead to allow time to solve the crisis - children will eventually die or become adults and will statistically no longer be a problem.

Our benchmark institution in Romania is the orphanage at Negru Voda, on the Bulgarian border and about 30 km inland from the Black Sea port of Mangalia. This institution currently is home to 185 children, about half of whom are under 18. CPA intends, by begging for money abroad, to relocate about 80 of these under eighteens to group homes near Constanta, following the model of a project run by our associate organization "the Aurelia Trust". The remaining children will then be re-classified as adults, and Negru Voda will then become an adult institution. Many of these so-called adults are undersized and underdeveloped both physically and mentally and will not survive in a situation where able-bodied adults are relocated to fill the places created in Negru Voda by the departure of the children. In addition, the institution will then revert to the control of the Department for

Handicap, or some other equally under-funded body, and starvation and neglect will continue. In the eyes of the International community however the problem is moving towards a solution.

The life of a typical inmate in these concentration camps consists of being herded between their filthy bedrooms and a room or yard (depending on the season) where they are penned all day until bedtime. No stimulus or therapy is provided, and access to any kind of education is rare. Nutrition is at best barely adequate, and the children are often only kept alive by food supplements provided by foreign NGOs. Sleeping conditions, as well as being dirty and bleak are usually overcrowded – children's sleeping five to a bed is a common occurrence. Some children are still fed from buckets like animals. Beatings are common. The UN convention on Human Rights is ignored. Life only improves when a visit by a representative from the EU or other foreign agency is imminent, and as soon as they have departed the suffering continues.

Many of the children, some now approaching the adult age of eighteen, suffer from varying degrees of mental or physical handicap. Some would have been born with handicap, but many are physically deformed as a result of being tied up from birth in cots in the State institutions. Much of the mental handicap is likewise simply very disturbed behavior resulting from being incarcerated in these terrible places. The Government of Romania has continually shown that it does not care about the fate of these its weakest citizens, and the International community likewise is happy to turn its back on this problem in the race for European expansion

The Romanian Government has the capability to deal with this crisis, a crisis of its own making. It has to be remembered that this problem is not the result of war, famine or other natural disaster – it is the result of a deliberate Government policy of neglect of its weakest citizens. This is a problem in other words, which politicians caused and which politicians can easily solve. The closure of these concentration camps and the provision of smaller group homes with adequate and trained staff could in theory be done before the end of 2002, if a start was to be made now. A number of such group homes, provided and run by foreign (including Irish) NGOs are operating successfully at an ongoing cost which compares favourably with the large institutions. There is no shortage of skills, expertise and resources within Romania, and foreign NGOs are eager to provide advice and assistance.

From your letter to me in 2000 it is clear that you agree with us that external funding should be used to support reforms, but that the provision of adequate budgetary allocations for food and maintenance is the responsibility of the Romanian Government. Unfortunately the Romanian Government has no intention of providing adequate resources, and will happily use external funding to replace already inadequate budgets. Previous experience has taught us that Political action is the only way in which to force the Government of Romania to address this problem in a serious manner. This must be done in the following manner:

1. **There must be a complete freeze on all Adhesion and other EU Structural Funding to Romania until this problem is addressed.** We are familiar with the mood on the ground in Romania, and we know that this would solve the problem almost overnight.
2. We want Romania placed on the "list of shame" along with Turkey, deferring their accession to the EU until this gross violation of human rights has been addressed.
3. We will be asking the Irish Electorate to vote NO to any expansion of the EU, which includes Romania, unless this problem has been addressed. Politicians in Europe have chosen to ignore this issue, but they could solve it in a very short time if they chose to do so. Their position on this matter is that it will be sorted out eventually when Romania becomes a full member of the EU. This stance is tantamount to asking the children who currently live and die in squalor to suffer on for six or seven

years more at least. We believe that our "NO" campaign will put this issue back on the European agenda.

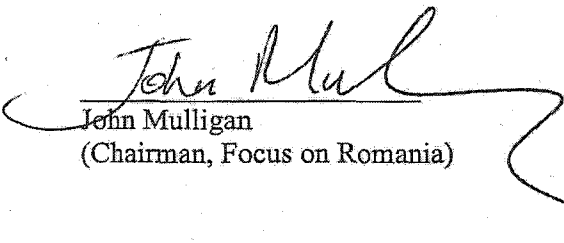
**FOR** is a one-issue organization with no connection to any political or sectarian group. Our only concern is the issue of human rights for children and young adults in State care in Romania. We believe that the Irish Government could advance this cause through the Council of Ministers if they so wished. If the Irish Government were to make a principled stand on this issue in Europe and at the UN, this cause could be advanced quickly. We have already contacted all members of the Government seeking their assistance and including a three-minute video showing conditions in an orphanage visited by one of our members in recent months.

We believe that all right-thinking people will agree with our view that Romania has not yet earned the right to join the EU, and that the next referendum in Ireland on the Nice treaty should be opposed unless sweeping changes are made within the orphanage system in Romania. Our campaign opposing the referendum will be well resourced and will have a very high profile.

We are including a short (three minute) video with this letter, showing conditions in the Negru Voda orphanage when it was visited recently by one of our members with a small video camera. We apologise for the quality of the footage, but it shows in graphic detail the extent of the problem. We believe that it may be enough to convince you that our version of events is the correct one, and not the cover-ups by the Romanian Authorities, which comprise the official version of events. We are available at all times to discuss this issue with any member of your staff, and we are willing to provide personnel and expertise to monitor improvements in conditions in Romanian institutions.

Please help us to sort out this problem once and for all. It could be resolved in a matter of months, or we could still be writing to each other in another eighteen months. We cannot allow this to go on for much longer. I was in Negru Voda last weekend and it remains a modern day horror story. Please help.

Yours sincerely,



John Mulligan  
(Chairman, Focus on Romania)

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**FOR** is a non-profit Irish voluntary organization which aims to focus world attention on the inadequate care of children and young adults in State Institutions in Romania.