The Limits of Coercive Pronatalist Policy:

Evidence from Romania's Decree 770

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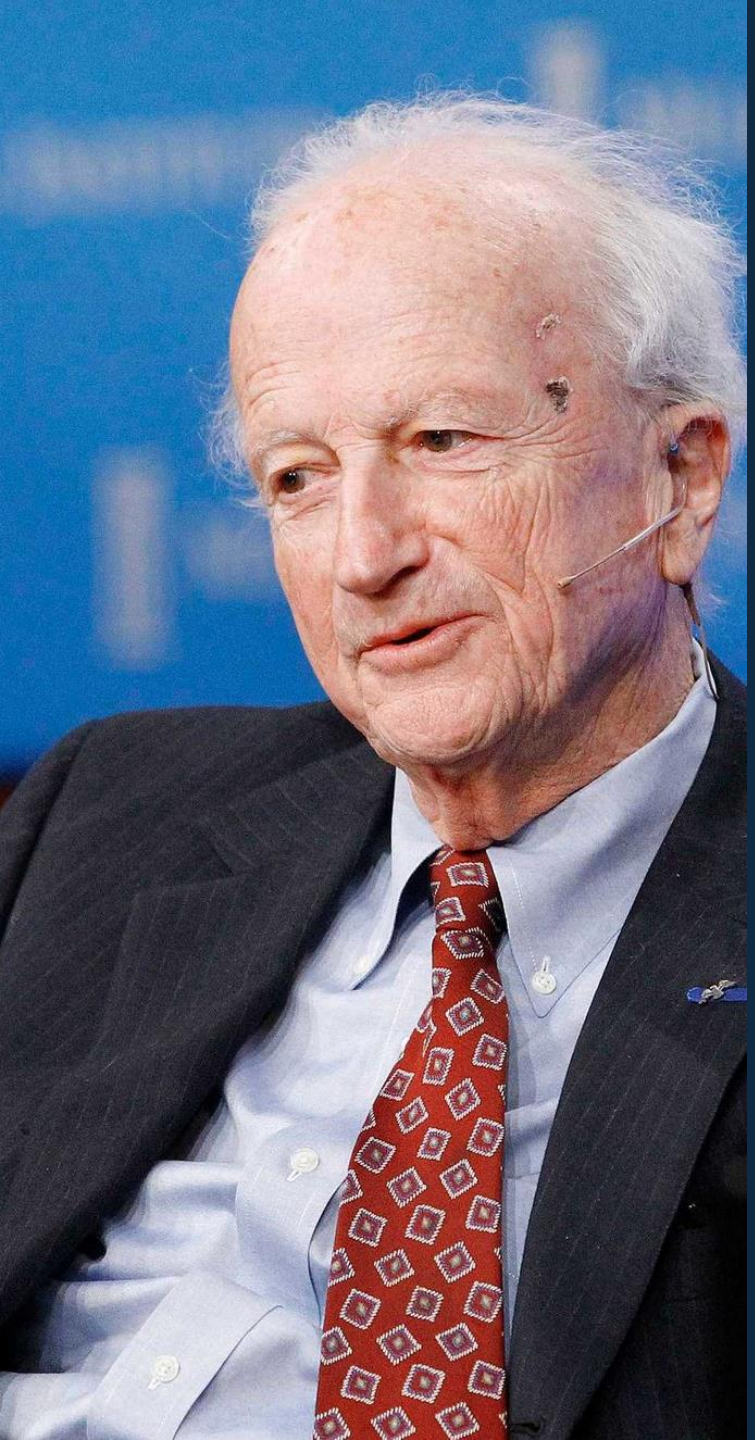


The Basics of Fertility Economics

- **Fertility is a choice-** Humans have for thousands of years practiced behaviors to manipulate their own fertility
- **Opportunity Costs**-when the opportunity costs of having children are low, all else equal, people have more children

First-Generation Economic Fertility Models

- **Income**- More income → Quantity vs. Quality tradeoff → Less Children
- **Education**- Less available time/ higher Income → Higher Opportunity Costs → Less Children
- **Urbanization**- More options for consumption → Higher Opportunity Costs → Less Children

Two Types of Governmental Pronatalism

Supply-Side

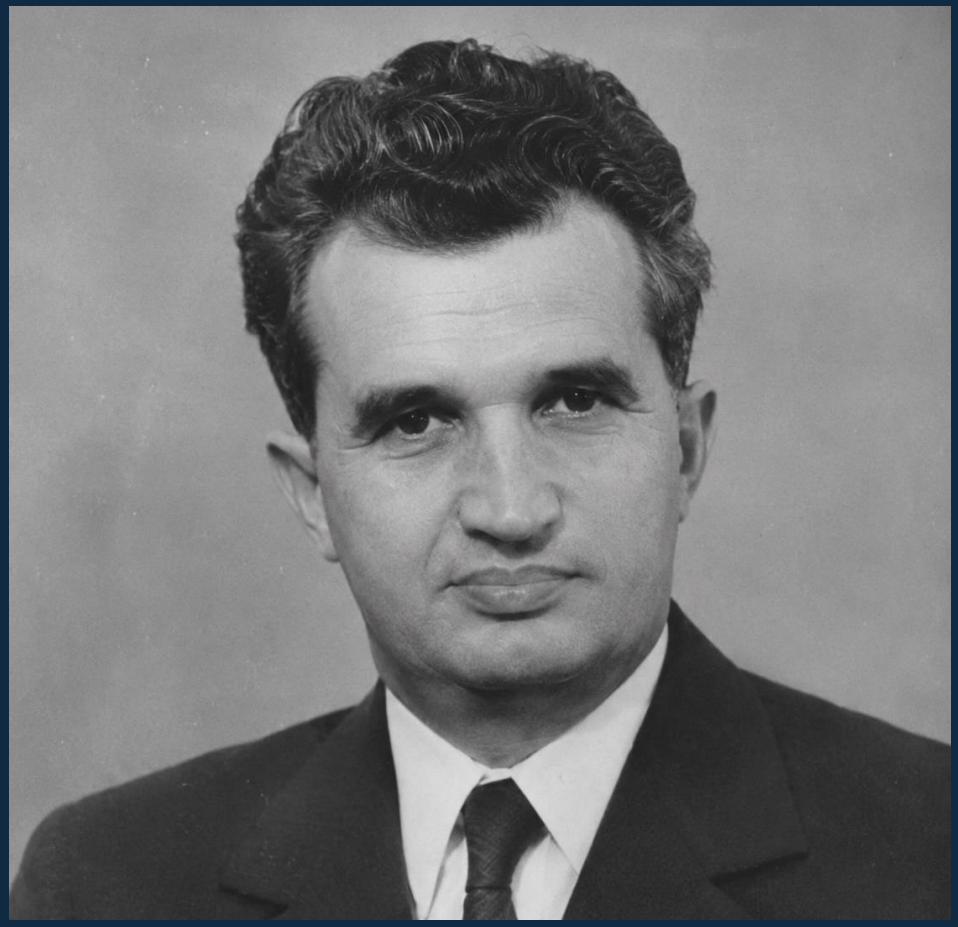
- Restrict access to **ALTERNATIVES** to childbearing
- Examples:
  - Abortion Bans
  - Contraception Bans
  - Reproductive surveillance and enforcement
  - Proscriptions against non-procreative sexual activity
- Romania is the most **extreme** case of Supply-side pronatalism

Demand-Side

- Reduce the **RELATIVE** opportunity cost of having children
- Examples:
  - Child Tax Credits
  - Child-related financial transfers
  - Bachelor(ette) or childless taxes
  - Parental leave systems
- The predominant approach to contemporary pronatalism

Romania Before Decree 770

- **1957:** Romania legalized abortion, establishing one of the world's most permissive abortion regimes.
- **1965:** Nicolae Ceaușescu became General Secretary of the Romanian Communist Party.
- **1966:** Abortion had become the primary method of birth control, with approximately **FOUR abortions for every live birth**.
- **1966:** Romania's total fertility rate had fallen to **1.9, below replacement level**, alarming Nicolae Ceaușescu.



Decree 770: An Abrupt and Unexpected Policy Shock

Abrupt	Romania rapidly reversed its permissive abortion regime, imposing sweeping restrictions.
Unexpected	Announced in October 1966 without public debate or a phased rollout.
Distinct	Abortion and contraception were restricted together, with unusually intensive enforcement.
Sustained	The restrictions remained in place until 1989, creating a 23-year policy period.



Research Questions

1. **Did Decree 770 and its associated policies cause Romania's dramatic increase in fertility?**

2. **How much did Romania's aggregate birth rate and population change relative to a formal counterfactual?**

3. **Was Decree 770 as successful as Berelson (1979) predicted?**

4. **What does Romania's experience reveal about the limits of governmental pronatalism?**

Empirical Strategy: Synthetic Control

Treated unit: Romania

Donor pools: Communist countries; three retained specifications

Pre-period: 1960–1966 (treatment in 1967) (1967-1989 post treatment)

Outcomes: Crude birth rate (primary); TFR (supplementary)

Predictors: Pretreatment birth rate, age dependency ratio, total population, rural population share

Method: Nonnegative weights that sum to one approximate Romania's pretreatment characteristics.

Table 4. Synthetic Romania Country Weights

Panel A. Eastern Europe, minus Bulgaria and Hungary

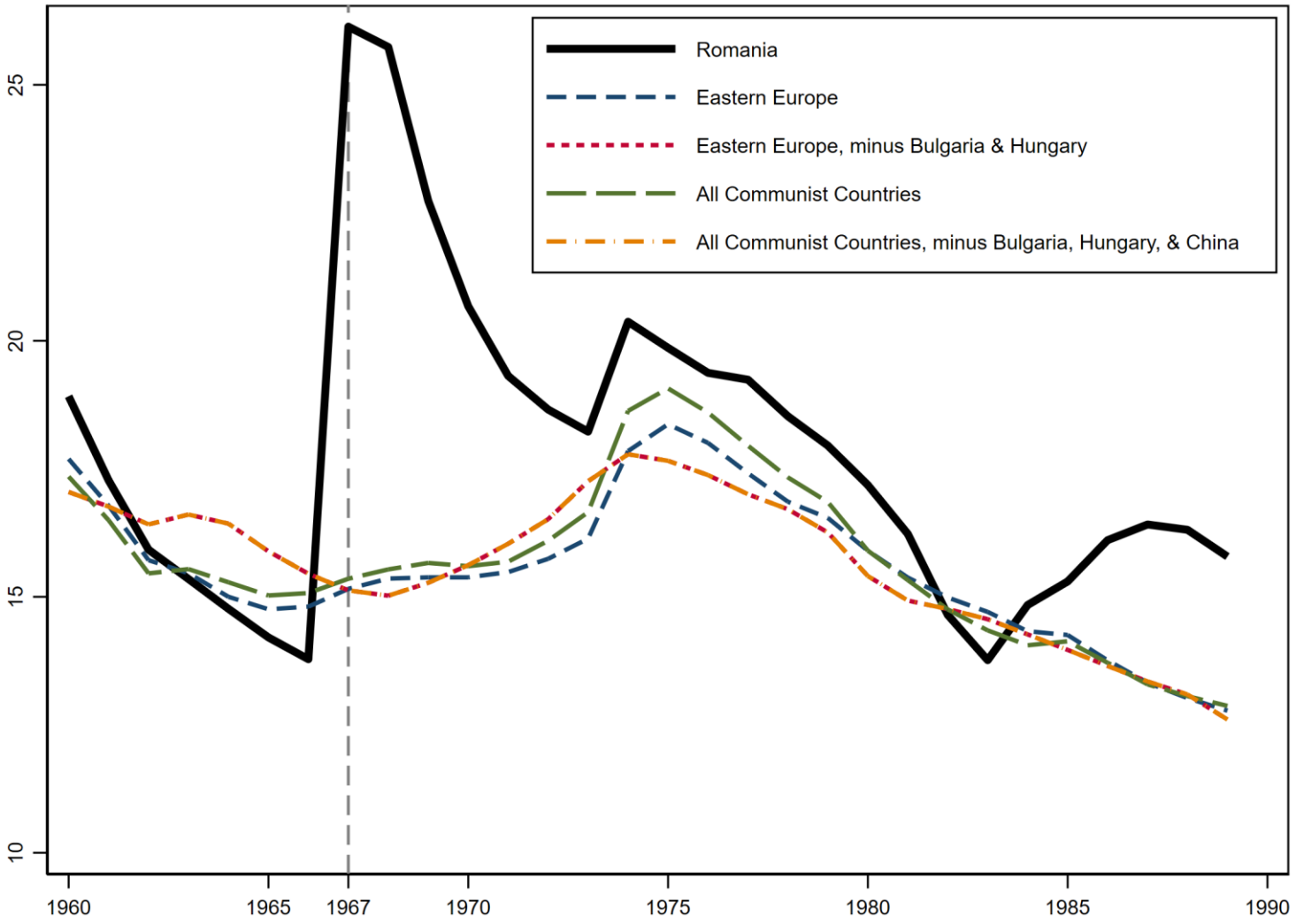
Country	Weight	Country	Weight
Serbia	0.461	Poland	0.039
Czechia	0.415	All others	0.000
Russian Federation	0.085		

Panel B. All Communist Countries

Country	Weight	Country	Weight
Hungary	0.635	All others	0.000
Slovak Republic	0.241		
Poland	0.124		

Panel C. All Communist Countries, minus Bulgaria, Hungary, and China

Country	Weight	Country	Weight
Serbia	0.461	Poland	0.039
Czechia	0.415	All others	0.000
Russian Federation	0.085		

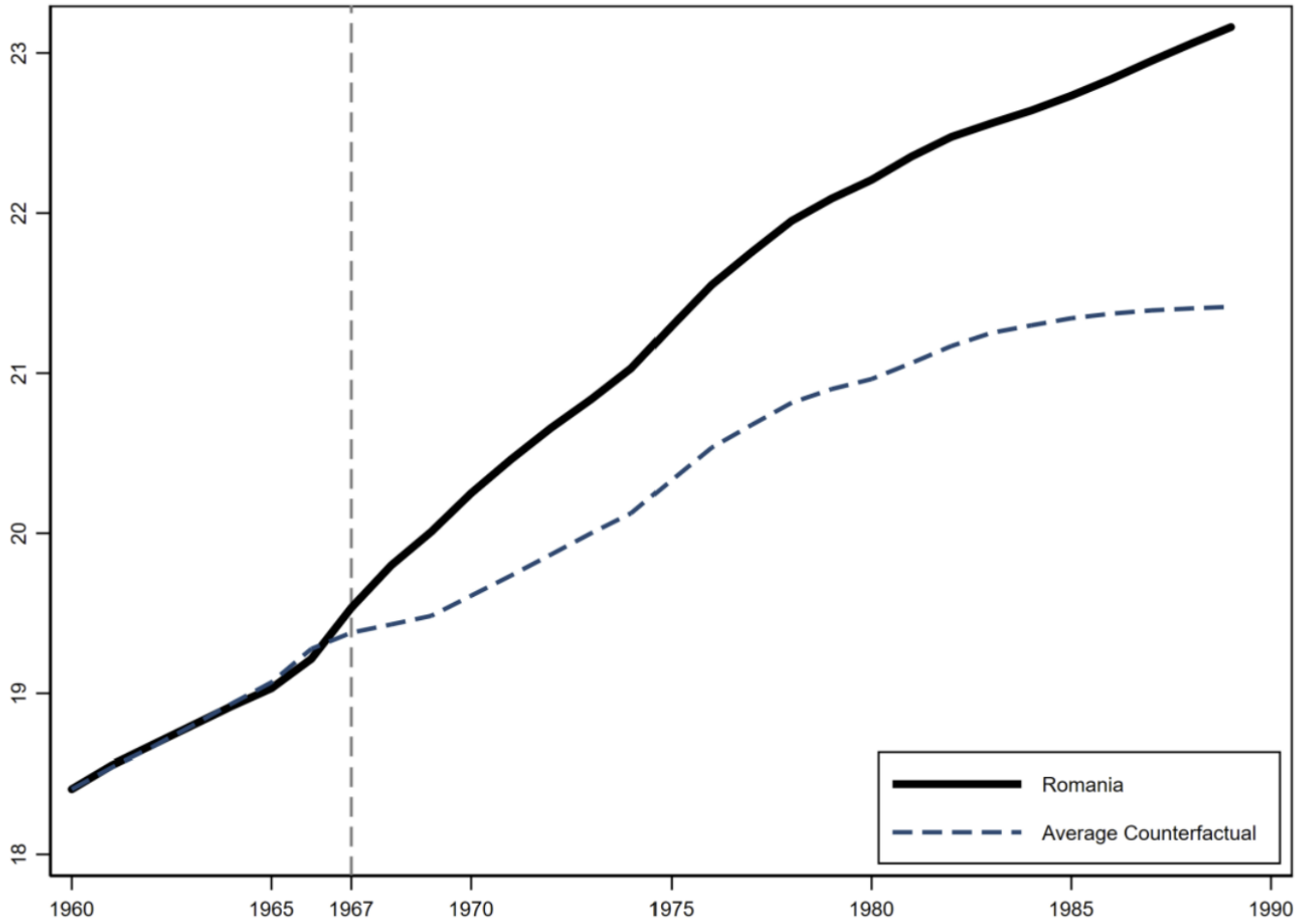


Decree 770's Effect on Birth Rate

- **Approximately 11 additional births per 1,000 population in 1967**, relative to Synthetic Romania.
- **89.3% increase in Romania's observed birth rate** between 1966 and 1967.
- **Effects attenuated over time**, but increased again following tighter enforcement in 1985.

The Population Results

Fig. 6 Romania Population, Actual vs. Average Counterfactual



Robustness Checks

Placebo-in-place tests

Romania ranked first in every retained donor pool, 1967–1969.

Eastern Europe
excluding Bulgaria & Hungary

p = 0.091

All communist countries

p = 0.033

All communist countries
excluding Bulgaria, Hungary & China

p = 0.037

1967 permutation p-values • For the 11-donor Eastern Europe pool, 0.091 is the minimum attainable p-value.

Alternative donor pools

Similar effects across all three retained specifications.

Leave-one-out tests

Results persist without the highest-weight donor.

Alternative treatment years

1965 and 1968 checks support a 1967 onset.

Supplementary TFR outcome

Same direction, timing, and attenuation.

Source: Nowrasteh & Remien, Romania working paper (Table 1; Figures 4–5; Appendix).

Research Answers

1. **Yes, Decree 770 caused Romania's Fertility increase, with its effect dependent on enforcement.**

2. **TFR nearly doubled, 90% increase in the birth rate, 1.7 million additional Romanians born as a result of the Decree**

3. **Romania fell short of the State's ambitious population target, despite initially doubling TFR**

4. **Romania's case remains the most "successful" pronatalist intervention in modern history, representing the outer-bound**

Why The Quotation Marks?



The Costs Behind the “Success”

- **Humanitarian Consequences:** Maternal mortality increased tenfold, children were abandoned or institutionalized, and women faced invasive reproductive surveillance.
- “Successful” is in quotation marks because the regime minimized state expenditures while imposing enormous human costs.



What Does Romania Mean For Policy?

Supply-Side

- Can Produce **LARGE** fertility increases
- Requires **Intensive** state enforcement
- Is something under consideration by **Authoritarian States** undergoing demographic collapse

Demand-Side

- Can modestly increase fertility
- Comparable increases to Romania would require substantial expenditures or unpopular negative incentives
- Unlikely to restore replacement rate fertility, can **substantially** dampen the decline though

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