

MATERNITY AND PARENTAL LEAVE POLICIES IN ROMANIA AND EUROPE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF LEGAL FRAMEWORKS AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examines the maternity and parental leave system of Romania in the context of European Union practices, focusing on legal frameworks and socio-economic impacts. It compares Romania's policies with those of France, Germany, Sweden, and Spain, highlighting differences in leave duration, benefit levels, and father involvement. The analysis explores how these policies influence labour market participation, gender equity in caregiving, and fertility rates. Drawing on recent data and studies, the paper identifies strengths and shortcomings of the Romanian model - including generous leave duration but limited inclusiveness - relative to other EU systems. Based on case studies and best practices, the study proposes policy recommendations to improve parental leave outcomes and promote gender-balanced, inclusive support for families in Romania.*

KEY WORDS: *maternity leave, parental leave, labour market, gender equality, social policy, family benefits.*

JEL CLASSIFICATIONS: *J13, J16, J18, J22.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Maternity and parental leave are core social policies at the intersection of labour rights and family welfare. They provide job-protected time off work for new parents and income replacement during that period. Across Europe, there is substantial diversity in how countries structure these leaves, reflecting different social models and demographic strategies. In Romania, maternity leave and parental leave are established by law to protect pregnant employees and ensure a minimum income for parents dedicating time to child-rearing in a child's early years. These policies carry significant implications not only for child and family well-being but also for labour market

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dynamics and population trends. Policymakers continuously debate their optimal design in terms of duration, compensation, and eligibility, especially as Romania's provisions are often contrasted with more expansive or flexible parental support schemes in other European states.

Studies indicate that adequate parental leave support can yield long-term benefits such as higher fertility and healthy child development (OECD, 2019; UNICEF, 2019). At the same time, questions arise whether current leave arrangements are equitable and if they enable parents - particularly mothers - to return to work without career penalties (Esping-Andersen, 2009). For instance, extended career breaks or low benefits may discourage labour market reentry or reduce women's earning trajectories. Nordic countries like Sweden and Norway have pioneered innovative parental leave models, offering generous, flexible leave including non-transferable "father quotas" to promote a more balanced sharing of childcare responsibilities between genders. In contrast, many Eastern European countries (including Romania) historically provided longer maternity leaves with modest financial support, which can negatively influence mothers' decisions or ability to resume employment (Eurofound, 2020; EIGE, 2022). These differences underscore the complex relationship between leave policy design and socio-economic outcomes such as female employment rates and gender equality in the workplace.

This paper aims to review the legal framework for maternity and parental leave in Romania, compare it with policies in France, Germany, Sweden, and Spain, analyse the socio-economic impacts on labour participation, gender equity, and fertility, and offer policy recommendations informed by best practices. The analysis draws on recent legislation, statistical data, and scholarly insights. By understanding the advantages and challenges of each system, we can identify possible directions for improving Romania's policies to better support families and promote equal opportunities. The findings are relevant for national and EU-level discussions, given that work-family balance policies are increasingly seen not only as social rights but also as an economic strategy for inclusive growth (European Commission, 2019).

2. THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK OF MATERNITY AND PARENTAL LEAVE IN ROMANIA

Romania's legislation provides a comprehensive set of entitlements for maternity and parental leave, anchored in the Labor Code and special laws. These aim to protect women during pregnancy and after childbirth, while supporting parents (typically the mother or either parent) in caring for an infant or young child. Key components of the framework include the duration of leave, the level of benefits, job protection provisions, and incentives for returning to work.

The standard maternity leave in Romania is 126 calendar days (approximately 18 weeks), which is split into 63 days of prenatal leave (before birth) and 63 days of postnatal leave (after birth; Government of Romania, 2005; International Labour Organization, 2021). The distribution can be adjusted based on medical advice, but a minimum of 42 days postnatal leave is mandatory to ensure adequate recovery time for the mother. During maternity leave, the mother is entitled to a maternity allowance

amounting to 85% of her average gross monthly earnings over the prior 6 months, paid through the social health insurance system (Government of Romania, 2005). This benefit is financed entirely by the National Health Insurance Fund, not by the employer, thus avoiding a direct financial burden on employers for maternity pay (Bălan, 2022). The rationale is to protect women's income and health without disincentivizing employers from hiring women of childbearing age. In addition, Romanian law explicitly prohibits the dismissal of a female employee during pregnancy and maternity leave. A woman on maternity leave enjoys job protection, meaning the employer cannot terminate her employment for reasons related to maternity and must reinstate her to the same or an equivalent position with the same salary upon return (Romanian Parliament, 2011; European Commission, 1992). These protections implement EU Directive 92/85/EEC on maternity protection and aim to prevent discrimination against new mothers.

After the expiry of maternity leave, Romanian parents have the option of taking parental leave for child-rearing. This leave is available to either parent (mother or father), but in practice it has been predominantly utilized by mothers. The duration is up to 2 years for a child's care (extended to 3 years if the child has a disability; Government of Romania, 2010). To qualify, the parent must have earned taxable income (e.g. salary or self-employment income) for at least 12 months in the two years preceding the child's birth (as per Emergency Ordinance 111/2010). During parental leave, the parent receives a monthly child-raising allowance of 85% of the net average income earned over the last 12 months, subject to a ceiling (cap) which was recently updated to 8,500 RON (approx. €1,700) per month (Government of Romania, 2010; Government of Romania, 2024). There is also a minimum benefit floor (around 1,250 RON in 2025) to protect parents with very low prior earnings. These benefits are funded by the state (through the social insurance budget), reflecting the policy's social protection nature.

To encourage earlier return to the workforce, Romania provides a return-to-work incentive. If a parent on leave decides to resume work before the child turns 2 (with at least 60 days before the standard leave period would end), they are eligible for a monthly incentive payment of 1,500 RON (approximately €300) for the remaining period until the child's second birthday (Romanian Parliament, 2016; Zamfir, 2020). This insertion incentive aims to reduce prolonged career breaks and facilitate reentry into employment. It has been observed, however, that relatively few parents take advantage of this option in the first year, given the preference for full-time parental care in the child's first two years (a cultural norm reinforced by limited availability of infant childcare services).

In addition to maternity and parental leave, Romanian law provides a short paternity leave for fathers. Under Law 210/1999, fathers are entitled to 5 working days of paid paternity leave at the time of the child's birth, to be taken within the first 8 weeks after birth. If the father has completed an infant-care training course (a basic puericulture course), he is granted an additional 10 days, bringing the total paternity leave to 15 working days (Romanian Parliament, 1999). Paternity leave is paid by the employer (usually at 100% of salary) and is meant to encourage father-newborn bonding and support the mother's recovery in the immediate postpartum period.

Recent developments, aligned with EU Directive 2019/1158 on work-life balance, prompted the Romanian government to extend and formalize paternal leave rights. Since 2022, fathers are eligible for paternity leave for each child born (previously it was once per father) and efforts are underway to promote fathers' uptake of childcare leave beyond the initial period (Labour Ministry 2022).

Another relevant measure is the allocation of non-transferable parental leave for the second parent. In compliance with the EU Work-Life Balance Directive (European Commission, 2019), Romania introduced a requirement that at least one month of the 2-year parental leave period is reserved for the other parent (typically the father). If the father does not take this one month, that portion of leave is lost and cannot be transferred to the mother. This provision, which became applicable in Romania in 2023, was intended to incentivize fathers' participation in childcare. However, it represents a significant cultural shift in a country where usage of parental leave by fathers has been extremely low (below 5%). Complementary policies, such as awareness campaigns and workplace support, may be needed to normalize fathers taking leave.

Beyond leave and cash benefits, Romanian parents are entitled to other supports, including a universal child allowance and job protection upon return. Employers are required to reintegrate employees returning from parental leave, allowing them to return to their previous position or an equivalent role and prohibiting dismissal for a defined period after return. Despite these legal protections, reentry can be challenging in practice. Surveys indicate that some women face difficulties in career advancement or subtle discrimination after a long childcare break (Avocatoo, 2024). Overall, the Romanian legal framework provides extensive leave durations and moderate financial support, but access to benefits is conditional on formal employment history. Women who have not been employed or who worked informally prior to childbirth are excluded from paid leave benefits - a gap that has drawn criticism from social advocates (Ziarul Social, 2024). This conditionality means that maternity protection is not truly universal but linked to labour force participation, leaving a vulnerable category of mothers (unemployed, informal workers or students) without income support during early motherhood (Ziarul Social, 2024; Zamfir, 2020).

Romania's maternity leave (18 weeks at ~85% pay) meets and exceeds the EU minimum standard of 14 weeks at adequate payment (Directive 92/85/EEC). The introduction of reserved parental leaves for fathers and expansion of paternity leave reflect alignment with Directive 2019/1158/EU, which seeks to improve gender balance in leave uptake (European Commission, 2019). However, challenges remain in implementation and uptake. The government's strategy acknowledges the need to improve childcare service availability (crèches and kindergartens) to complement leave policies and facilitate parents' return to work. The National Strategy on Gender Equality also emphasizes encouraging fathers to take on more caregiving roles as a means to reduce the gender employment gap (MMPS, 2022). In summary, Romania's legal framework is robust in protecting employed mothers and providing lengthy leave, but it lacks the flexibility and inclusiveness seen in some Western European models. The next section compares these features with policies in France, Germany, Sweden, and Spain, to situate Romania in a broader European context.

3. COMPARATIVE POLICIES ACROSS THE EU (FRANCE, GERMANY, SWEDEN, SPAIN)

European parental leave systems differ substantially, reflecting distinct welfare regimes and social priorities (Esping-Andersen, 2009). A comparison of France, Germany, Sweden, and Spain illustrates how varying combinations of leave duration, benefit generosity, flexibility, and incentives for fathers shape parental behaviour and work-family balance, offering relevant points of reference for Romania's system.

France relies on a model combining short, well-paid maternity leave with strong public childcare provision. Mothers are entitled to 16 weeks of maternity leave paid at close to full earnings, while parental leave may last until the child's third birthday but is unpaid or only modestly compensated for a limited period (Service-Public.fr, 2024). As a result, many parents return to work earlier for financial reasons. Rather than offering financial incentives for early return, France emphasizes the availability of childcare services and has significantly expanded paternity leave, granting fathers 28 days paid at maternity-level rates, part of which are compulsory (European Commission, 2023). This policy mix seeks to support maternal employment and increase early father involvement.

Germany's parental leave system emphasizes shared participation and flexibility. After a fully paid maternity protection period of 14 weeks, parents can take up to 14 months of paid parental leave if both parents participate, with two months effectively reserved for the second parent (BMFSFJ, 2023). Benefits replace around 65-67% of previous income, up to a ceiling (European Commission, 2023), and can be spread over a longer period at a reduced rate. The system allows leave to be taken in blocks, combined with part-time work, and even postponed until the child is older, which helps mitigate career penalties and encourages fathers' involvement. Recent reforms also align Germany with EU requirements on paid paternity leave (European Commission, 2019; Familienportal NRW, 2024).

Sweden represents the most gender-equal parental leave model among the countries compared. Parents share 480 days of leave, most of which are paid at around 80% of earnings, with 90 days reserved exclusively for each parent (Försäkringskassan, 2024). These non-transferable quotas have been highly effective, leading to very high uptake of leave by fathers and more equal sharing of childcare (Carlsson & Persson, 2023; Lunde, 2022). The system is also highly inclusive, guaranteeing a minimum benefit for parents with low or no income, and flexible, allowing leave to be used intermittently until the child is eight. Rather than return-to-work bonuses, Sweden relies on generous compensation, flexibility, and strong gender-equality norms.

Spain has pursued a strategy of formal equality between mothers and fathers through recent reforms. Since 2021, both parents are entitled to 16 weeks of fully paid, non-transferable leave, with mandatory periods immediately after birth (European Commission, 2023). This approach aims to reduce gender discrimination by ensuring that fathers take leave on the same terms as mothers. While extended parental leave beyond this period is unpaid and therefore less commonly used, early evidence shows a sharp increase in fathers taking the full leave entitlement (OECD, 2022). Spain's model

contrasts with Romania's longer leave duration by prioritizing short, fully paid, and gender-neutral leave during the first months of a child's life.

Overall, these country cases reveal different policy trade-offs. France and Spain prioritize short, well-paid leave and early return to work, supported by childcare services or strict gender parity, while Germany and Sweden emphasize flexibility and shared parental responsibility, with Sweden standing out for its strong father quotas and inclusive design. Compared to these models, Romania's system offers longer leave but weaker incentives for equal sharing, underscoring the importance of policy design in shaping gender equality and labour market outcomes.

Table 1 provides a comparative overview of key parameters of the leave systems:

Table 1. Comparative overview of parental leave policies in selected EU countries

Country	Total Parental Leave Duration (post-maternity)	Parental Leave Benefit (income replacement)	Early Return-to-Work Incentive	Dedicated Paternity Leave (at birth)
Romania	Up to 2 years (until child turns 2) <i>
3 years if child has disabilities</i>	85% of net income (average of last 12 months), capped at 8,500 RON (~€1,700) per month	Yes: Insertion incentive of 1,500 RON/month for remainder of leave if returning to work ≥ 1 year early (before child is 6 months)	5 working days (or 15 days with puericulture course)
Sweden	480 days (~16 months) per child <i>
(leave shared between both parents)</i>	80% of earnings for 390 days (remaining 90 days at flat rate); minimum level for low/no earnings	No direct cash incentive: Leave schedule is highly flexible; 90 days are reserved for each parent (use-it-or-lose-it) to encourage sharing	10 days (paid at ~80%) for father at birth (in addition to shared 480-day leave)
Germany	12 months standard <i>
(+2 bonus months if each parent uses ≥ 2 months, total 14 months)</i>	~65-67% of earnings (income-dependent, up to ~€1,800/month); can be taken part-time over longer period (e.g. 24 months at 33% pay)	Yes: 2 extra "partner months" bonus for sharing leave; also parental leave can be combined with part-time work	~10 days (recently introduced for compliance with EU norms) of paid paternity leave at birth (previously,

Country	Total Parental Leave Duration (post-maternity)	Parental Leave Benefit (income replacement)	Early Return-to-Work Incentive	Dedicated Paternity Leave (at birth)
			("Elterngeld Plus") to facilitate gradual return	fathers used part of parental leave or other leave)
France	Parental leave up to child's 3rd birthday (after 16-week maternity leave)	Flat-rate allowance (~€396 per month) for max 12 months; unpaid beyond that period (if extended up to 3 years)	No: No specific cash incentive; emphasis on providing subsidized childcare (crèche) to support working parents instead	28 days (4 weeks) paternity leave, paid at 100% (split into 3 days birth leave + 25 days parental leave for fathers)
Spain	No separate long parental leave (job-protected unpaid leave up to 3 years is available but no benefit) However, each parent has 16 weeks paid "birth" leave	n/a (no extended paid leave beyond 16 weeks) - Maternity/Paternity: 16 weeks at 100% of salary for each parent	No: (Focus is on equal 16-week leaves; no extended leave benefit to incentivize return)	16 weeks for fathers (fully paid, equal to mothers' leave; 6 weeks must be taken immediately after birth, remaining 10 weeks can be taken within 12 months)

Source: Compiled by the author from national legislation and EU summaries (European Commission, 2023; BMFSFJ, 2023; Service-Public.fr, 2024).

As shown in Table 1, Romania stands out for the length of leave available (up to 24 months) which is substantially longer than in Western European comparators. However, the generosity of benefits in Romania (85% wage replacement with a cap) is moderate - higher than the flat-rate systems (e.g. France's extended leave) but with a ceiling that can be restrictive for high earners. Sweden and Germany, with their earnings-related parental benefits, offer a high-income replacement albeit for shorter periods. Another contrast is in father-specific provisions: Romania's policy until recently had minimal father usage (only 5 days paternity leave and almost no fathers taking the 2-year parental leave), whereas Sweden and Spain explicitly allocate significant paid time to fathers (90 days and 16 weeks, respectively) and Germany and France provide incentives or separate leave for fathers. This has implications for gender roles, as will be discussed in the next section. Finally, reintegration support differs - Romania's insertion incentive is a unique feature among the compared countries, whereas others rely on shorter leave durations or part-time options to aid reentry.

In sum, Romania's framework is protective but somewhat traditional, emphasizing a long maternal-centric leave, while countries like Sweden and Spain illustrate more egalitarian models encouraging shared parenting. Germany's and France's models lie in between, blending moderate leave lengths with policies to prevent prolonged detachment from the labour market. The socio-economic outcomes of these policies - in terms of female employment, gender equity, and fertility - are explored next.

4. SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT: LABOR MARKET, GENDER EQUITY, FERTILITY

Parental leave policies have far-reaching effects on the economy and society. They influence labour supply (especially of women), the division of unpaid care work between genders, and family decisions about childbearing. In this section, we analyse how Romania's maternity and parental leave arrangements impact (4.1) labour market participation, (4.2) gender equality and father involvement, and (4.3) demographic trends such as fertility. Where relevant, comparisons are made with the outcomes observed in other EU countries, to contextualize the discussion.

One of the critical questions is how taking a lengthy parental leave affects an individual's employment trajectory and how aggregate leave usage reflects in female employment rates. Romania historically has had a substantial gender gap in employment. In 2022, the employment rate for women of working age (20-64 years) in Romania was only 59.1%, compared to 77.7% for men (Eurostat, 2022; Monitor Social, 2023). This 18.6 percentage-point gender gap has widened slightly since 2009, making Romania an outlier in the EU where most countries have narrowed the gender employment gap (Eurostat, 2022). A contributing factor is that many Romanian women interrupt their careers for extended periods due to child-rearing. It is common for mothers to take the full 2-year leave per child, and some exit the labour force entirely if childcare options or workplace support are lacking. Long career breaks can erode skills and professional networks, making return to work more difficult (Esping-Andersen, 2009).

At the same time, parental leave policy can positively influence labour market outcomes if designed well. In countries with supportive reentry measures, women's employment rebounds after childbirth. For example, availability of flexible or part-time return options in Germany allows mothers to remain connected to work, thus Germany's female employment rate (72% in 2022) recovered strongly after children, albeit many women work part-time (European Commission, 2023). In Sweden, female labour force participation remains high (over 75%) despite long leaves, partly due to the near-universal take-up of leave by fathers and strong state support for childcare. The quality of employment upon return is another aspect - if women return to equivalent positions without wage penalties, the long-term impact on earnings (the "motherhood penalty") can be mitigated. Research suggests that very long leaves (beyond 1 year) tend to amplify wage penalties for women, whereas moderate-length leaves (around 6-12 months) have a less detrimental effect on career progression

(OECD, 2022). Romania's average leave duration (close to 24 months) thus risks larger career costs for women, especially in fast-changing fields.

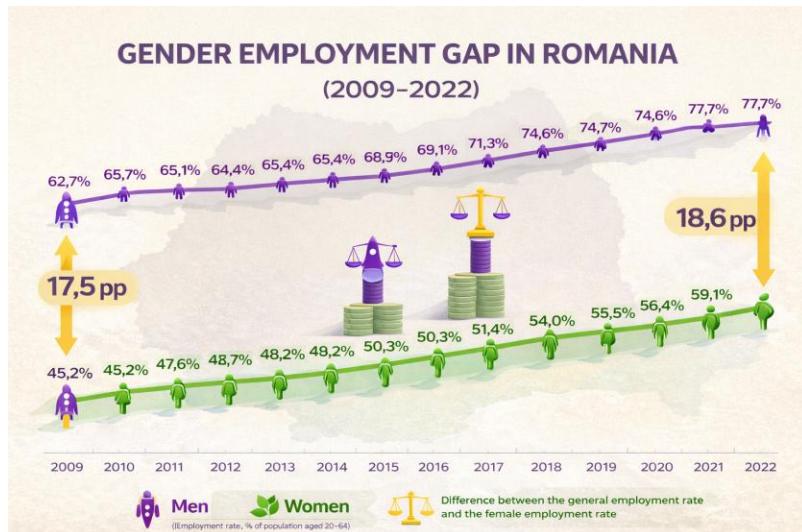
Despite these concerns, it should be noted that labour force attachment among Romanian mothers has seen slight improvements recently, potentially aided by the insertion incentive and evolving attitudes. According to the National Institute of Statistics, the proportion of women returning to work within one year of childbirth has increased in the last decade (INS, 2023). However, overall female employment remains low. The Romanian government has begun investing in day-care centres as part of its post-pandemic recovery plan, recognizing that the availability of affordable childcare is crucial for mothers to engage in paid work.



Source: Author's own elaboration based on Eurostat data (EU27,

Figure 1. Gender employment gap in the European Union:

In 2009, the EU-27 average employment rate was 74% for men vs 60.6% for women (13.4 p.p. gap); by 2022 the gap narrowed to 10.7 p.p. as female employment rose to 69.3% (Eurostat, 2022; Eurostat, 2022).



Source: Author's own elaboration based on Eurostat data

Figure 2. Gender employment gap in Romania:

The above figures illustrate the differing trajectories: while the EU overall saw rising female employment and a shrinking gender gap over the past decade (a positive trend partly attributed to improved work-family policies and higher paternal leave uptake in many countries), Romania's gender gap in employment persisted and even grew. This suggests that the labour market impact of Romania's current leave policy may not be fully positive. On one hand, the policy secures women's jobs during the leave, but on the other hand, the extended time away and the lack of universal applicability (excluding informal workers) may limit its effectiveness in keeping women in the workforce long-term. Additionally, Romania faces structural labour market issues - many rural or low-income women are not formally employed to begin with, hence they neither contribute to nor benefit from the leave system, and remain outside the labour force after childbirth (Zamfir, 2020). Therefore, improving female employment in Romania will require not just tweaking leave duration, but a holistic approach: encouraging shared parental leave (so women don't bear the entire absence), ensuring continuous skills development or part-time options for mothers, and broader inclusion of women in formal employment.

Maternity and parental leave policies have a direct bearing on gender equality, both at home and at work. Traditionally, generous maternity leaves coupled with minimal paternity leave reinforce the norm of mothers as primary caregivers and fathers as breadwinners. This often leads to "maternal wall" effects in careers and less involvement of fathers in early childcare. Conversely, policies that encourage or mandate father involvement can promote more balanced sharing of familial responsibilities, which has ripple effects on reducing gender inequality in earnings and advancement.

Romania's system until recently placed virtually the entire childcare leave burden on mothers. The data are telling: over 99% of parental leave beneficiaries in

Romania are women (Ionescu, 2023). Fathers taking the two-year leave have been extremely rare, due to a mix of cultural expectations and the design of the benefit (many families maximize income by having the lower-earning spouse take the leave - often the mother). The 5-day paternity leave was largely symbolic in terms of duration. Consequently, the norm was that women interrupt their careers for child-rearing, while men continue working - a pattern that solidifies gender role differences. This has implications beyond the workplace: studies have shown that when fathers are not involved early on, they tend to remain less engaged in child-rearing later, and mothers continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of housework and caregiving (Esping-Andersen, 2009).

However, changes are afoot. The introduction of a non-transferable 1-month father quota in parental leave and the extension of paternity leave to at least 10 days (as required by EU policy) are steps toward greater father involvement. Lessons from other countries suggest that such measures can shift behaviours if accompanied by cultural support. In Sweden, for example, the establishment and successive expansion of the “daddy quota” (from 1 month in 1990s up to 3 months now) led to a dramatic increase in fathers taking leave - today Swedish fathers take around 30% of total parental leave days, one of the highest in the world (Carlsson & Persson, 2023; Lunde, 2022). This has fostered more equal parenting and helped reduce stigma around men taking leave. In Spain, within the first year of introducing 8 weeks paid leave for fathers (2019), over 80% of eligible fathers took it; now with 16 weeks, it has become an expectation that fathers will be at home with the baby just as long as mothers (OECD, 2022). These examples show that policy can reshape gender norms.

In Romania, initial uptake of the father’s leave quota remains to be seen. There are anecdotal reports of a slowly growing number of urban fathers showing interest in taking one or two months of parental leave, especially in younger generations. However, barriers such as lower awareness, peer pressure, or employers’ attitudes may hinder utilization. Some Romanian fathers worry that taking long leave might be viewed negatively by employers in a culture where it’s not yet common (Avocatoo, 2024). To address this, several policy recommendations emerge: introducing campaigns to normalize fathers as caregivers, highlighting role models, and possibly increasing the non-transferable period (from 1 to 2 months, as EU minimum is 2 months) to strengthen the incentive. Indeed, experts argue that father involvement should be “encouraged or even enforced through minimum non-transferable quotas”, not just permitted (Oprea, 2024, as cited in InfoCons, 2023). Such encouragement could also come via financial means - e.g. a slightly higher benefit replacement rate for the father’s quota or bonuses (Germany’s partner bonus is an example).

From a gender equity perspective, when fathers share childcare duties, mothers benefit from more continuous employment and potentially a more equitable division of labour at home. Over time, this can help narrow gender pay gaps and improve women’s career prospects. The Gender Equality Index score for Romania remains below the EU average (EIGE, 2022), with particularly poor sub-scores in the “time” domain (indicating women spend much more time on unpaid care than men). By redistributing some of the child-rearing time to men through policy, Romania could improve these metrics. In broader terms, achieving gender equity in the context of

parental leave is not only a matter of fairness but also has economic rationale: it maximizes the utilization of the workforce and talent by not confining one gender predominantly to home duties (European Commission, 2019).

Summarizing, Romania's parental leave system is at a crossroads on gender equity. It has provided critical support for mothers, but it now must evolve to actively include fathers. The policy impetus from the EU and the examples of countries like Sweden and Spain provide a roadmap. If Romania succeeds in engaging more fathers in leave-taking, the long-run benefits may include more balanced family dynamics, reduced discrimination against women in employment (since child-related career breaks would no longer be seen as "women's issue" alone), and richer father-child relationships.

Romania's policy of up to 2 years off with an income replacement does relieve the immediate financial pressure of having a baby for employed women, which is a positive factor. However, there are also counteracting influences: the long break and potential career setback might deter some women (especially highly educated in competitive fields) from having children early or in quick succession, due to fear of losing professional momentum. Additionally, families where the mother is not eligible (informal sector) get no support, which might postpone childbearing for those who cannot afford unpaid time off. Demographic researchers note that countries that make parenthood "easier" - through both leave and childcare - tend to enable women to have the number of children they intend without giving up employment (OECD, 2019).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The protection and promotion of the rights of national minorities remain a fundamental pillar of democratic societies. Romania's model, marked by constitutional guarantees, anti-discrimination legislation, linguistic protections, and institutionalized parliamentary representation, offers a valuable case of comprehensive minority inclusion. Despite this progress, persistent challenges—particularly the underrepresentation and socio-economic exclusion of the Roma community, gaps in implementation of legal provisions, and occasional interethnic tensions—highlight the need for sustained political commitment and targeted interventions.

The European Union's legal framework remains fragmented, with no binding directive on minority rights. In this context, national best practices, including Romania's reserved parliamentary seats, Slovenia's minority veto, and Finland's cultural autonomy for the Sami, serve as illustrative models of effective minority participation. These experiences suggest that well-designed legal and institutional mechanisms can enhance minority agency without compromising state cohesion.

Drawing from both national and European contexts, this article proposes several strategic directions:

- The adoption of a European Charter on Minority Rights and Political Participation could set minimum standards for recognition, data collection, representation, and linguistic inclusion—strengthening the EU's normative role in ensuring "unity in diversity".

- Member States should critically assess electoral thresholds and district configurations to eliminate structural barriers to minority participation. In Romania's case, supplementing reserved seats with proportional adjustments for larger minorities (e.g. Roma) would enhance representativeness.
- Legal recognition and adequate funding of local or cultural self-governance bodies can empower minorities to participate meaningfully in decision-making, especially in education, cultural heritage, and language use.
- Leadership and Socio-Economic Equity: Investment in education, scholarships, and civic engagement programs for minority youth is essential to cultivate future leaders and address structural inequalities, particularly for marginalized groups.
- Visibility of minority languages and traditions in public life—through bilingual signage, minority media, education curricula, and cultural events—can normalize diversity and foster mutual respect.
- In sum, minority rights must evolve from legal formalities to lived realities. Romania's experience demonstrates that inclusive legal frameworks, when coupled with proactive and well-funded policies, can foster a pluralistic society. For the European Union to fulfil its democratic values, it must move beyond general declarations and toward enforceable standards that guarantee both representation and dignity for all minority groups.

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