

Romanian Educational System - old problems no solution

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Abstract — This paper is focused over the real complexity of the problems affecting the optimal functioning of Romanian Educational System. The authors try to advocate the judgment that the genuine trouble stays not only in the long term low financial support for education, but also in the bad systemic management and ill educational strategies.

1. Introduction

All politicians during last 25 years publicly recognized that the Educational System is one of the biggest and most important systems in Romania. It employs more than 300,000 teachers and auxiliary staff; it is the main responsible for the future development of our country and the creator of the biggest wealth of the nation – knowledge & professional skill.

Still there are a lot of old and new troubles affecting the efficiency of this system and various governments didn't seem to take enough attention to first understand the problems and then act in order to solve them.

Every September on the occasion of school & academic year start there are a lot of public talks in mass media about the acute necessity to improve Romanian school. Politicians, experienced professors, unions' leaders and school managers produce a lot of ideas, but most of them remain just nice examples of populist rhetoric which are forgotten some days after when other “breaking news” gain the public attention.

Unfortunately, even these fruitless debates on education show that most of the participants do not really comprehend the complexity of the system's sickness and consequently put into discussion partial or inefficient cure to it.

Many unions' leaders and politicians (especially during their opposition episodes) concentrate over the money problem. The government representatives (also active critics of the low financial support for education when they were in opposition) come into discussion with a mix of excuses and promises for a better funding. There is almost no talk about the necessity to professionalize the system's management, about the need to better connect the curricula with real life, about improving the quality of the educational activity in Romanian schools & universities or about the urgent need to increase chances to recruit the best graduates as teachers.

2. The roots of the system's illness

There are a lot of causes to the long illness of the Romanian Educational System; some of them inherited from the communist era, many others “gained” during the last 25 years of democracy. The authors of this paper consider that all this roots of the trouble are to be grouped in three categories. It is obvious that one must not see this division as absolute, because there is an inner interlink between causes residing in different groups,

but having mutual underground or joint effects all correlated with the Romanian society general malfunctions.

The three main groups of problems are:

- a. Long term low budget for education;
- b. Poor systemic management;
- c. Inadequate and inconsequent educational long term strategies.

a. Long term low budget for education

This is no-doubt the most important cause of our school system's set back in last 40 years. The education cost cuts started in the last decade of Ceausescu's era being part of his policy of reducing all spending in order to get rid of Romania's dept to IMF, World Bank etc. This was the beginning of no technology & scientific publications import policy, no promotion for teachers rule, less applicative courses in schools and universities etc.

The post '89 economic situation of Romania perpetuated this low education budget strategy. It arrived in some years to affect not only our country's educational infrastructure, but also the social status of teachers. The underplayed professor was no more a respected member of Romanian society thus parents and even school children regarded him as an unsuccessful person or worse. Therefore, teaching quickly became a non-attractive career for a top young graduate, one only acceptable as a last choice if things go wrong in finding other more desirable jobs.

We think it is not useful to remember here all the history of unfulfilled promises made to teachers along the last two decades. Usually the ones that promised more during electoral campaigns did the worst & abusive cuts as soon as they arrived in power. Still it is important to stress that the politicians were frequently helped in this actions by many of the education's unions' leaders, more careful about their own private interests than with fighting for a better education.

Growing the education and scientific research budgets to EU's average level is for sure a sine qua non condition to correct a lot of things going wrong in Romania's school. Unfortunately, this will lead to the desired results only after many years and will certainly not be the general panacea healing all system's diseases.

b. Poor systemic management;

The Education System's poor management is not a missing subject in the public debate, only it is regarded as a political weapon and usually the approach is populist and superficial. Almost no deep and coherent analysis was ever made over the long years of ineffective attempts to modernize the highly stiff school system.

During the last two decades the low education budget effects were worsen by the bad management of human and material resources. The leader selection from the highest to lower level was always done taking into account other criteria than the management ability & education of the candidates. While it is normal for the Education ministry to be a politician, it is not a good practice to assign the school managers or county chief inspectors on education mainly on the basis of their political affiliation. This is unfortunately a very long tradition in our country and it will be very difficult to change. Still it must be done!

In some places where politics is not directly involved, the elections (e.g. for rectors, head of departments etc.) usually is highly influenced by the politic and/or union support, thus management ability is not a real important topic. The idea of a professional

school/university manager was introduced into the Education law, but remains just an unpopular theory never put in practice.

Another aspect of low quality management is the division of resources among educational institutions. There is no free competition on the Romanian education market because avoiding it was a goal for almost all the governments in last 25 years. The private schools and universities – a potential threat to the state monopoly - were constantly discouraged by law and by influencing public opinion against them. Nowadays, for example, the private universities have less than 10% of the students, while 10 years ago their share was almost 50%.

Moreover, there is no real competition among state owned educational institutions because systems regulations and state funding is a safety net for anyone, even if yearly some schools/universities prove to be unable to produce graduates able to pass the national exams or to successfully integrate in the economic and social life. Even if many new public universities spawn after 1990 are neither valuable nor viable, no one thinks about stopping their activity. Good universities do not receive more money because the budget has to compensate the losses of bad ones.

Last but not least, the Quality assurance policy becomes more and more a bureaucratic procedure involving a large quantity of paper and no real hint to improve. Only private schools/universities are really in danger to be closed by ARACIP/ARACIS inspections, the public educational institutions are non-touchable because local parliamentarians and unions' leaders provide the necessary "help" anytime there is some trouble.

d. Inadequate and inconsequent educational long term strategies.

An educational consequent long term strategy is probably the most unfortunate absence in the public landscape. This is a logic outcome of the constant changes of people and policy both in the leading and the implementation levels of the educational system. During the last 25 years, there were 20 different ministries of educations and more than 60 changes in the law.

Furthermore, each modification in the government political structure produced replacements in the counties educational hierarchies from the chief inspectors to the school managers and even lower. Even if many of these persons were respected members of schools' staff, with certain management experience and good intentions, it was impossible to define and follow a long-term strategy. Thus, there were several situations when a started development of the infrastructure or a multiyear plan to improve the curricula was stopped and started from the beginning with completely changed ideas, on another course of action and having in mind considerably different goals.

Romania's accession to EU brought significant infrastructure improvements, because the European funding was excellent for our schools' technological development. Still there were also two major setbacks. First the facilitation of immigration in western countries produced a large movement among youngsters, thus Romania loses every year many valuable teachers and/or researchers. Second the implementation of Bologna process was done with no consideration to our educational traditions and our socio-economical real needs. Therefore it produced a considerable loss of quality and efficiency in students' professional education.

There was some years ago a large national debate among all significant Romanian political forces, unions, Rectors Council etc. organised by the presidential administration.

It aimed to find a common view for a long-term reform & development strategy of the education system, but unfortunately the resulted Pact for education was never put in practice.

The National Education Law was adopted in 2011 through the government accountability procedure in parliament, so no serious debate was done. Following government essentially changed the law by some Emergency Ordinances, therefore again no discussions.

There is now some hope that the new presidential administration will try to bring back dialog on education among interested parts, but this will not be an easy task while new parliamentary elections are closing.

3. Concluding remarks

The authors of this paper believe that it is crucial for Romania to start rebuilt a coherent and efficient educational system. It is very important for the future of this nation to be able to compete in the world economical environment nowadays deeply based on scientific research and technology.

The single solution this old and complex crises is that Romanian society must accept a different approach on solving thinks. First a selected team of professional education managers and education science researchers not related to politics must study the problems in every detail and propose a correction & development strategy. Second a political reunion of all significant parties and unions should implement the strategy as a law proposal and offer it as a platform for a serious public debate. In the end the strategy should be adopted as part of a new law of education, good enough to stay unmodified for at last 20-30 years.

It is our belief that among many others things such a strategy should contain:

- Practical measures to insure free competition in the educational market;
- Strict separation of politics from school;
- Promotion of an efficient and free from bureaucracy Quality policy;
- Curricular reform linked to the socio-economical needs of nowadays Romania.
- Changing from the education oriented only for a few top students/pupils to an education destined to obtain both performers and a good medium level.

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