

CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC EDUCATION POLICIES IN ROMANIA AND EUROPEAN UNION

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Abstract :

In the last three weeks, Romania has been "shaken" by a general strike of pre-university teachers, which has proved to be the largest of its kind in Romania since 1990. This large-scale protest is intended to warn the Romanian government about certain phenomena that have weakened the educational system in our country in recent years: poor teacher pay, logistical problems, the weak concern of state institutions to ensure the security of teachers in schools or to make sufficient investment to reduce dropout or attract people dedicated to teaching. This article aims to highlight what efforts have been made in the last two to three years both in Romania and in other European countries to reduce school dropout, in particular, - a phenomenon increasingly present in many European societies, what were the amounts invested in this regard and to what extent such investments have had practical effect.

Keywords: *education, investments, school dropout, teaching.*

Introduction

The public sector has a huge impact on all of us: it is a daily and unmistakable presence. Just think of some of the goods it provides as a priority: education (basic education, first and foremost), health care, national defence and public order or public television and radio" [2].

The creation of new jobs and increased employment, especially among young people, so that they can lead fulfilling professional and personal lives, can only be achieved through education that is anchored in the realities of the labour market. It is absolutely necessary to increase budget allocations, commensurate with the importance of the fields of education and scientific research for the development of modern Romania, so that the proposed objectives can be achieved [3].

Regarding education, Romania, having numerous systemic problems in this sphere (dropout, poor results in national and international tests - e.g. PISA-, low participation rate in higher education, high rate of functional illiteracy, etc.) is obliged to engage in a deep reform [4].

Current problems of school drop-out and financing of school-based activities in Romania in recent years

The most important effect of future social and economic changes is the need to build new models of organization of the educational system, a quality education, which is also addressed by the Educated Romania Project, which, in its content, has also included some targets of benefit to society, such as: higher incomes for those involved in the educational process (teachers, students, administrative staff in education, social cohesion and increased capacity for social involvement [5].

The project mentioned above also pursues other goals that are useful in the current context of Romanian society and education, namely: increasing the quality of teaching, but also the flexibility of all those involved, the professionalization of managers of educational institutions, adapting funding (education) to real needs, reforming the funding system in the area of early education, reviewing standards for infrastructure and facilities, [6].

Youth policies, which implicitly include policies on university activity, have always been a priority of the European Union, which in recent years, amid the emphasis placed on the idea of good governance, has given greater importance to the process of involving young people in decisions that concern them.

In Romania, education expenditure is low compared to other European countries, despite the fact that the school dropout rate in this country is worryingly on the rise, especially in rural areas and for Roma children, who have very limited access to education.

In Europe, in 2018 only four countries were worse than Romania in terms of early school leaving, namely Turkey (38.3%), Spain (21.9%), Malta (20.4%) and Iceland (19%). In Austria only 7% of young people left school, in Greece 9%, in Hungary 11.4% and in Bulgaria the rate was 12.5%. Even lower dropout figures are in the Czech Republic and Poland, only 5.5%, respectively 5.4% [7].

In Romania, the highest dropout rate is at the beginning and at the end of the education cycle, in preparatory and 5th grades, in primary and secondary school, and the

most intense dropout phenomenon is in rural areas, where more than 23% of students who entered school by 2012 had dropped out by the end of secondary school [8]

According to data obtained from the National Institute of Statistics in a current study conducted by Mihai Petricila, school dropout has increased at all levels of education, from primary school to university. Ministry of Education: [9] shows us that, for the whole of primary and secondary education, the dropout rate (indicator calculated on the basis of the "entry-exit" method in 2018/2019 was 2.1% (percentage representing 35.3 thousand students.

The official analysis also notes a decrease in the difference between the dropout rate in primary and secondary education in urban and rural areas, with rural areas still at a disadvantage (1.8% in urban areas and 2.6% in rural areas). "As regards dropout by gender, a higher frequency of dropout situations is noted in the male school population (in the 2018/2019 school year, 2.3% boys and 2% girls - an increase of 0.5 percentage points for both boys and girls)," according to the report.

According to the same reports given by INS, in our country, in the school year 2019-2020 the school population in Romania registered 3, 5 million people, 18, 5 percent less than a decade ago, the decrease being more pronounced in the female school population - 18, 8 percent, compared to the male - 18, 2 percent [10].

In 2021, "the share of early leavers from education and training was lower for young women than for young men in all EU Member States except Bulgaria and Romania. In 2021, the Member States reporting the lowest proportions of early school leavers were Croatia (2%), Slovenia, Greece and Ireland (all 3%) and Lithuania and the Netherlands (5%). In contrast, the highest proportions were recorded in Romania (15%), Spain and Italy (both 13%), as well as Bulgaria, Hungary and Germany (12%)" [11].

A small rebound is felt in 2022, in the sense that in the school/academic year 2021-2022, the school population in the national education system was 3495.8 thousand pupils and students, up by 1.2 thousand compared to the previous school/academic year. The school population increased compared to the previous school/academic year in pre-primary and pre-school education (+3.3%) and in primary and secondary education (+1.3%). However, the number of graduates in the school/academic year 2020-2021 was

476.6 thousand pupils and students, down by 7.5% compared to the previous school/academic year * [12].

According to a UNICEF report, the Romanian government must double the funds invested in education as soon as possible (10 th of December 2020) the Romanian government invests 38,000 million lei annually in education, representing 3.4% of Romania's total annual budget.

Regarding the authorities' efforts to mitigate this phenomenon, the NSI also states that in 2019, for example, the financial resources necessary for the education process, allocated for the operation of educational units/institutions included in the national education system were provided to the greatest extent (96, 7%) from public funds (from the state budget and local budgets), the rest being from other sources of the educational units/institutions' own, as well as from household income [13].

Moreover, investment in educational infrastructure must be linked to investment in human capital. The Human Capital Operational Programme (HCOP) for the implementation of the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) in the period 2014-2020 mentions the priorities and objectives for investments of around 5 billion euros (of which 4.3 billion from European funds) to help the Romanian population, including young people, to find a job and improve their education and skills, reducing poverty and social exclusion [14].

“Overall public spending on education increased significantly in 2019, but remained among the lowest in the EU In 2019, spending on education increased in real terms by almost 21%, marking the strongest percentage increase in the EU that year, well above the average increase of 1.9%. The increase was largely driven by the increase in teachers' salaries in 2019. Although Romania's overall public expenditure on education increased to 3.6% of GDP in 2019, it remains well below the EU average of 4.7% of GDP. However, Romania's education expenditure was slightly above the EU average as a percentage of total public expenditure (10.1%, compared to EU-27: 10%), indicating a relatively low level” [15].

The former romanian Minister of Education, S. Cimpeanu, stated near the end of his term that "Investment in education, although insufficient, is almost double in 2022 compared to 2016 (41 billion lei compared to 21.7 billion lei). Thus, in 2022, education

expenditure will have a share of 7.92% in the General Consolidated Budget, the share in relation to GDP being 3.11%, according to a press release. According to Cîmpeanu, in relation to the Education Ministry's budget, 2022 has brought, compared to 2021, a budget increase of more than 2 billion lei "at this stage" [16].

A brief European perspective

At European level, the Education and Training Monitor presents the European Commission's annual analysis of how education and training systems are developing across the EU [17].

Even at European level, structural problems persist. For example, 3.1 million early school leavers are currently not in education and there is a worrying stagnation in the rate of underachievement in basic skills [18].

In addition, the shortage of teachers, caused largely by the ageing of the teaching workforce (as almost 40% of teachers in the EU are over 50) and the low attractiveness of the profession, is worsening across the Union, which poses a serious risk to quality and equity in education, even in some of the best performing countries [19].

In countries neighbouring Romania, such as Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, etc., the situation is similar to the one described by us in the above-mentioned reports - high dropout rates, old age of teachers, low salaries - especially in former communist countries, low financing of the education system, in general (e.g. in Romania in recent years the financing for the education segment has been about 2.4-2.5% of the country's GDP, which is totally out of balance with what is happening in other European countries and even with regard to the real needs in the education segment.

For example in Hungary in 2021-2022, "teacher salaries were the lowest among the EU countries that are OECD members. They are equivalent to only 58-66% of the salaries of other tertiary graduates, depending on educational level. In December 2021, a government decree was published by which teachers would receive a 20% wage supplement from 2022".

Hungary also "has the largest urban-rural gap in education outcomes, before accounting for socio-economic status, of all OECD countries (OECD, 2019). There is

evidence that tracking policies, either between tracks (academic, vocational) or between schools, reduce education equity, and they have mixed effects on efficiency [20].

“Poland has been implementing projects on inclusive education supported by EU funds at all levels, but evaluation of the quality of support provided is essential for optimal policymaking. In this country poor social communication in education, curriculum overload and an insufficient focus on key competences were identified by the Supreme Audit as the education system’s general weaknesses” [21].

Bulgaria- as emphasised by a World Bank Survey, “learning outcomes in Bulgaria have not changed much over the past 14 years. Underachievement in basic skills, as measured by PISA, is twice as high as the European average (47% in reading, 44% in mathematics and 47% in sciences), with these percentages above 60% among disadvantaged students. Compared to other EU countries, students in Bulgaria performed 67 points lower in reading, which corresponds roughly to more than one-and-a-half years of schooling” [22].

Like in Hungary or Romania, in this country almost half of school teachers are aged 50 and above. From April 2021, the average teacher salary rose by about 12% and reached 125% of the national average. This is already a second rise in teachers’ salaries in the past 3 years. It should contribute to the overall effort of increasing the attractiveness of the teaching profession [23].

Compared to 2010, almost all EU Member States reported a lower percentage of early school leavers in 2020, with the exception of Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Sweden, Luxembourg and Bulgaria, which all reported slight increases (below three percentage points) [24].

Unfortunately, Romania is on the first place in this point of view, so it was found that in 2022 the share of young people who left the education system was 16% while the EU average was 10%. Compared to our country, other European states reported percentages of 5% (Poland or Lithuania), while Hungary, Germany or Italy reported a percentage of 12% [25].

Conclusions:

Following this analysis, we are sad to note that Romania is in the lowest places in terms of investment in the educational process or performance in terms of attracting students in the final grades, especially those from rural areas in schools. If we were also to take into account the rate of functional illiterates - about 40% of students - we would conclude that Romanian education will have to be seriously reformed, which can only take place after massive investments, not only in terms of digitalization, but also in terms of human resources, a decisive factor in terms of performance and assimilation of specialized knowledge by pupils or students.

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