

## Romania's (Un)Educated Youth

**Article by Ioana Banach**

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Among the growing Romanian diaspora residing in the EU are thousands of highly educated graduates pushed to look for opportunities and better living standards abroad. As Ioana Banach explains, this brain drain is also a consequence of the deep problems of Romania's education system that need to be addressed. She examines the evolution of Romania's schools since transition and highlights the opportunities to bring it into the 21st century.

Recognising the prosperity that high levels of education promise for the European public, the European Union has committed to improving educational systems across the bloc. But without major educational competences, its focus is limited to monitoring the quality of education in member states from the rate of early school leaving to university attendance. Its findings on Romania give compelling evidence to the calls for structural reforms of the country's education system.

Despite various reforms over the past decade, Romania's education system still underperforms; in 2021, the share of early school leavers remained as high as 15 per cent, way above the decreasing European average of under 10 per cent. More than 1 in 5 Romanian youths aged 15 are at high risk of educational poverty, lacking the basic competencies in reading, writing and science, while attainment levels in tertiary education remain under 25 per cent, way below the European average of 40 per cent.

Met by a poor, disengaged and corruption-ridden society, as well as a hierarchical and rigid work culture, many highly educated Romanians seek better social rights and living standards abroad, leaving family and friends behind. Nowadays, as much as a fifth of Romania's population resides abroad, mainly elsewhere in the EU. This level of brain drain is exceptionally high for an EU member state, and devastating to Romania. For every emigrant with a Romanian university degree, the country loses about 45,000 euros. In the medical sector alone, around 2000 graduates emigrate every year – the equivalent of a 90 million euro yearly investment loss. The majority never return to live in Romania.

The long-term effects of the recent pandemic-induced health and economic crisis are yet to be fully grasped. During school closures there was little support for teachers, students, and parents in finding their way through the maze of digital learning, and nearly a third of Romanian students lacked the necessary digital infrastructure to follow online classes. Almost 50 per cent of the country's teachers called for more and better tools to teach online. These challenges put more Romanian youth at risk of educational poverty and social exclusion in the long term. Yet in 2021, the financing of the education system reached record low levels, at only 2.5 per cent of the country's GDP and half of the European average showing that little will be done to prevent a further decline.

In the current context, it is hard to believe that Romanians once took pride in their schools. The ambition for a modern, balanced, and democratic education system shaped after the French and Italian models gained momentum in the years between the two world wars. From one generation to the next, teachers and students took part in the transfer of knowledge and values, while education was seen as a springboard for many young people, often from challenging backgrounds, to find their way into intellectual circles.

From 1948, the Soviet occupation brutally disrupted this system. Combatting critical thinking, self-determination, and individualism, reforms aimed to rapidly re-educate the archetypal communist teacher and student. Propaganda based education deployed two main tools: fear of verbal and physical violence as punishment for misbehaviour, and repetition (diligently memorising the contents of school manuals directly translated from Russian).

While the socialist doctrine is not the sole culprit for Romania's pedagogical decline, this period in its history cemented the systemic malformations noticeable today. Presently, schools are politically controlled institutions, embedded in hierarchical nepotistic networks, where "model" students are expected to think, grow, and act identically. Products of a pedagogical project built on the foundations of behaviourist theory, teachers are still trained to control classrooms and push students to absorb the given curriculum. The rigid curriculum, coupled with an anachronistic "read-memorise-reproduce" approach, guarantees an underwhelming and disengaging classroom experience, and, even more importantly, suppresses curiosity, creativity, and critical thinking.

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## **The Romanian school of the future**

The perplexing journey of Romania's education system over the past decades reveals the need for a more radical solution than any government has so far been willing or able to bring about. Forging welcoming schools for future generations requires the intentional exploration of two complex and interlinked dimensions. First, Romania needs to develop a pedagogical project that is fit for purpose and fuelled by vision and potentiality rather than one that simply patches up what is already there. Second, seeing how reforms have failed or been reversed before they have any chance of coming to fruition, the only way to move beyond the current deadlock is to completely overhaul the balance of power, as well as the heavy politicisation of key positions in the education system.

Before envisioning a future Romanian school, a question that merits deliberation is: why do children go to school? Today, schools are organised as conveyor belts, transporting students towards a predetermined destination: the job market. The current system treats youngsters as assets whose value is tied to future employability. Many of those alienated by the education system make up what has become the largest share of the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU, while those who made it through often end up working abroad, feeding the paradoxical situation in which the country suffers from both high unemployment rates and a lack of workforce.

But what if education was so much more than that: a journey of self-discovery, a pathway to personal fulfilment, and a laboratory for experiencing the society we live in, as well as envisioning the one we are striving towards?

From this perspective, the Romanian school of the future takes on a fresh, new shape. First, schools become havens of safety and non-violence. Verbal and physical violence, perhaps the most damaging scars of the totalitarian regime, become a thing of the past. A new, extensive teacher-training programme and psychosocial education lessen and ultimately eliminate any form of school abuse. Future educators learn to manage stress and identify how they have been socialised to resort to violence in the face of adversity. These are indispensable skills they can then transfer to their students. In the Romanian schools of the future, a system of peer support and continuous mentorship guides teachers who need to cope with a profession that is both demanding and rewarding. Receiving social recognition and decent pay, teachers are no longer tempted to focus on the private classes they give on the black market for the privileged few, instead seeking the success of all their students equally.

Rooted in autonomy and self-determination, schools relinquish their rigid curriculum, while educators and students become free to experiment and create. Through individualised learning tracks, students are guided to discover and strengthen their talents, as well as address their shortcomings. By learning about and practising active citizenship, a key element of the learning curriculum, students deepen their awareness of the impact they can have on society. They develop their vision for the future and are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and grit to fight for it. Identifying the most effective path for each student to reach their final learning destination and fulfil their potential becomes the true art of the teaching profession.

In the Romanian school of the future, power is decentralised, and school directors and teachers play a much more central role in its management. Learning-based school management transforms not only the teacher appraisal process, but also student evaluations. Students in particular benefit from regular and qualitative feedback on both their cognitive and emotional development rather than a number-based grading. Schools are depoliticised, and the process of “inspection” – once a tool of control and punishment by politically influenced governmental services (inspectories) – is replaced by constructive dialogue and multidirectional feedback involving school directors, teachers, parents, and the local authorities.

While elements of this vision might be shared quite widely in Romania, reality paints a different picture. If nothing else, the many (failed) attempts to reform the system stand as testimony that the task at hand is not an easy one. So what will it take for Romania’s schools to become democratic and impactful spaces where students feel welcome and empowered to step into their futures? And why hasn’t the system been drastically reformed, despite the deep need for change?

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## A priority for many, a mission for a few

The sorry state of Romania's educational system is an omnipresent priority on the political agenda. In a troubled political context, where a new government is formed on average every one to two years, reforms are introduced and dropped faster than they can be implemented. The curriculum has seen numerous updates, as have teaching manuals and the grading methodology. In 2018, the Romanian president took his turn at promising reforms that would take on the immense task of overhauling the education system and bring about the much-needed school of the future. A national programme – Educated Romania – was designed to bring about a series of public policy proposals. Some of its envisioned measures to combat school dropouts have since been included in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan and will be supported by EU funds. What the president's project fails to deliver, however, is a comprehensive, long-term vision to back up the proposals, as well as a pathway towards the much-needed systemic revamp of the Romanian education system.

Delivering a long-term alternative was seemingly the aim of the Social Democrat (PSD) Minister of Education Ecaterina Andronescu. In 2009, she partnered with an expert from the Finnish education system to deliver a vision statement entitled Education Unites Us. The document proposed an education system that places students at the centre of the pedagogical project, adheres to the principle of subsidiarity in decision-making about children's education, and introduces a strong focus on active citizenship. The ambitious proposal enjoyed ample albeit short-lived media attention. The minister's political party, whose voter base is predominantly made up of people with lower levels of qualifications (only about 9 per cent of PSD's voters have attained tertiary education), dismissed the proposal. Andronescu did not enjoy much support from opposition parties or civil society either. It was her fourth mandate as minister of education and her political career had been marked by controversy: from scandals around equipping schools with computers via no-bid contracts worth millions of euros to allegations of plagiarism in her academic work. Crucially, many teachers also rejected the vision as they found it unrealistic. The implementation of Education Unites Us has stalled ever since and Romania still awaits a credible political force to translate a vision of its future education system into tangible policies.

In the meantime, some teachers across the country are engaging in a David-and-Goliath-style fight against the system to create more fulfilling classrooms. They work with parallel lesson plans – the official one, which follows the school curriculum and which they present to their superiors during appraisals – and an alternative one, adapted to the needs and talents of their students. Escaping the classical model in which the teacher sits behind a desk and preaches in front of the class, they close the distance between them and their students, both literally and figuratively. New Horizons Foundation is an NGO that trains and mentors teachers – often from economically deprived areas – in service-based learning, an educational approach that enables youth to apply the theory they learn in the classroom to real-life activities, such as volunteering, advocacy, or other avenues of civic engagement. Some of their programmes focus specifically on green service learning, equipping youth with competencies to become engaged in building a more sustainable future and combatting climate change. The results are promising: the NGO reports higher rates of tertiary education attainment among their over 17,000 programme alumni, as well as an

increased sense of trust, independence, and empathy.

Throughout its turbulent past, it has become evident that education plays a crucial role in either strengthening or weakening democracy in Romania. With few Romanians graduating from university and a large part of its workforce emigrating, children are often left behind to be raised by their grandparents. The education system is not delivering on its promises and certainly does not meet the EU's ambitious goals for competitiveness and innovation. Restoring the role of education, while tackling the deep inequality it perpetuates, represents a key driver in the transition towards a more socially just society in Romania. Forming a new generation of young people ready to make a change is key to building a new political and social model based on the values of democracy, social justice, peace, and ecology.

Civil society actors and teachers are demonstrating extensive know-how and tried-and-tested alternative education methods that can have an impact despite the complex context. To become the norm, rather than the exception, they need the backing of a larger movement that can place constant pressure on the currently disinterested political class and keep the issue of education on the public agenda.

In recent years, the Romanian governments led by traditional parties faced the largest street protests since the fall of communism, which primarily coalesced around traditional Green topics such as ecology and democracy. This large-scale mobilisation is a sign of a growing appetite for a representative force that can renew the political model in Romania. A political programme that places education among its priorities has the potential to galvanise a diverse pool of stakeholders into action: from civil society actors to teachers' unions, from parents and grandparents to youth movements and university students. Romania seems to be ready for a progressive political movement that can envision, and more importantly, deliver a different education system and occupy the hollow space on the left of its political spectrum.

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