

# Romania: Education system on the verge of collapse

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The introduction of free-market relations into the states of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe 20 years ago has led to an unparalleled social and cultural decline.

This is especially clear in Romania, a country that prior to the introduction of capitalism had already suffered greatly under the rule of the Stalinist dictator Nicolai Ceausescu and the dictates of Western banks and financial institutions. The rapid and dramatic unraveling of the Romanian education system is symptomatic of the decline in all aspects of the country's social life.

Romania's education system was expanded substantially after the Second World War. Even though Ceausescu increasingly sought to bring state schools and universities under the control of his party and the state police after assuming power in the 1960s, most Romanians had access to a relatively good education.

Romania today, with a population of 21.5 million, has more than 500,000 illiterate (and many non-literate) people, 76 percent of whom come from rural areas. According to one report by UNICEF last year, the drop-out rate tripled in Romania in the 2000-2009 period, with 20 percent of children giving up school. The main cause of dropping out is the high cost of keeping a child in school. Although education in the public system is nominally free in Romania, parents must provide about €500 per month to keep each child in school and provide the necessary material for a study year. Given the low level of wages in the country, this sum is beyond the reach of many families.

In addition, one fifth of Romanian children do not attend kindergarten, one third of high school graduates do not go on to take their graduation exams, and one quarter of pupils are unable to solve basic math problems.

The education system in Romania has been subject to a series of reforms largely dictated by the political priorities of the party in power. No fewer than 15 major changes to the education system have been implemented by 13 ministers in the course of 20 years. In today's Romania, school inspectors, school principals and even teachers are hired or dismissed according to the whims of the political party that has majority at a state or federal level.

Recently, the education sector was hit by a series of strikes and protests. The longest conflict took place in November 2005, when a general strike lasted for three weeks and ended with the government promising to increase teachers' salaries by about 12 percent. One-day strikes in 2008 and 2009 were followed by an attempt to initiate a new reform of the education system. Eventually, this reform was annulled by the Constitutional Court.

In the course of a series of struggles, ordinary trade union members have increasingly come into conflict with the trade union leaderships, which share close links to the political establishment in the country. Key leaders from the trade union bureaucracies have been lured into important official jobs in exchange for party membership. In 2008, the CNSLR-Brotherhood (the National Confederation of Independent Unions of Romania), one of the leading trade union federations in the country, signed a cooperation agreement with the Social Democratic Party, thereby making a mockery of its so-called "independence."

This is not the first time such an agreement has been struck between trade union leaders and political parties, to the disadvantage of the working class. The step from the trade unions into politics is common coin in Romanian political life.

In 1999, a law for the decentralisation of public

institutions was introduced, which means that the administration of school buildings is currently under the remit of local authorities. The municipality owns the buildings and is obliged to maintain school infrastructure. In fact, the run-down of schools is commonplace. With heating insufficient or completely absent, students study in cold classrooms and under dim lighting. The government says it can do nothing, and for their part the municipalities blame the government for failing to provide funds for basic repairs. In this circle of mutual accusations, it is pupils and students who suffer.

Most of the above-mentioned reforms of the education system were not put into practice, with the result that there are no properly enforced national criteria for curricula. Children are instructed on the basis of largely outdated and often irrelevant information. This rift between theory and practice diminishes the interest in learning.

The declining standard of education in Romania is reflected in the job prospects of those studying. Official unemployment rates indicate a youth unemployment of around 20 percent for the last decade, and this rate has inevitably increased as a result of the economic and financial crisis, which has forced Romania to request huge loans from the International Monetary Fund.

At the same time, there is little incentive for those with an education to join the teaching profession. The average wage of a teacher is around €400 per month, and many prefer to find other work or go abroad to find a better job.

The educational sector has suffered at the hands of all of Romania's governments during the last two decades, irrespective of whether they consisted of right-wing, conservative or social democratic administrations.

The current conservative government led by Prime Minister Emil Boc has issued an emergency ordinance reducing the number of teachers in pre-university education in 2010. The reduction will be done in two stages, with the axing of 15,000 jobs by August 31 and a second phase involving the loss of 18,000 jobs by December 31.

The current government ran an election campaign promising teachers higher wages. The reality following Boc's election is the reduction of wages and unemployment for thousands of teachers. The Boc government together with its predecessor regimes bear

responsibility for the decay of the education system, sentencing hundreds of thousands of Romanian children to illiteracy by assigning priority to satisfying the demands for cuts laid down by the International Monetary Fund and Romania's international creditors.



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