

Italy, who spoke no Albanian.

The decreasing quality of the public sector also brought down the quality of some of the best private-sector institutions. Once the public universities completely opened up their doors without additional resources, further lowering their standards, the pool of students from whom private universities could choose and charge fees decreased both quantitatively and qualitatively. As a result, some serious private institutions began to cut costs by lowering faculty-student ratios and other academic standards.

THE SOCIALIST REFORM: MERGING STATE AND PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS

Once the Socialist Party came to power on June 2013, it promised a new law on higher education that would bring it up to European standards. As part of this process, the current administration started a general inspection of the higher education sector. This culminated in August 2014, with the closure of 17 private and 8 public HEIs, which were found in breach of basic government regulations. The government will also conduct an evaluation of the remaining institutions in collaboration with the British Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.

Despite the above positive measures, the Socialist reform faces major limitations, as long as the state lacks the necessary resources to properly finance higher education. The new law allows public universities to raise funds by increasing tuition fees, on the premise that the state cannot provide much additional funding. It also stipulates that private universities can receive state funding, if they are transformed into not-for-profit organizations. The distinction between state and private universities is therefore blurred.

A major transformation of higher education that is not backed by increased state funding does not bode well for the future. Just like earlier governments, the current government has not shown a clear commitment to properly funding higher education. During its two years in power (2013–2015), there has been very little additional funding for the higher education sector—even though when in opposition, the Socialists recognized that the sector was severely underfunded by the state. It seems unlikely that the situation will change in the near future, given that on February 2014 the government signed a US\$330 million loan with the International Monetary Fund that called for reduced public spending. Under these circumstances, the challenge of higher education in Albania remains intact. ■

Challenges for Romanian Higher Education

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Romania is a relatively recent member of the European Union (EU), since 2007, and a NATO member. Its geo-strategic options seem thus to be clearly defined and one of few generally accepted issues. Reforms in the field of higher education have been seen as part of a larger national agenda for reintegration in the Western democratic world. However, in the past 25 years, Romanian higher education policies have rarely been based on sound data collection, impact assessments, or inclusive consultations within the system. Discussing new versions of the national education law seems to be a political obsession for every new minister, without any reflection on what really needs to change policy wise.

Judging by the influence of international norms on domestic reforms, one can say that Romanian higher education has gone through three main development phases: the post-1989 “international actors” phase, in which a shift from previous models was heavily influenced by the World Bank, the OECD, the European Commission, and UNESCO-CEPES; the phase of implementation of the Bologna process, which started in 2004–2005 with major legal overhauls aimed at increasing the “readability” of the Romanian higher education system (three cycles: ECTS, Diploma Supplement, quality assurance); and the recent phase of global competitiveness, influenced mainly by the rankings and excellence discourse, but also by demographic challenges.

Romania’s decision-making environment is rather unstable—20 education ministers tried to define a new vision for education in the past 25 years. This brought a fast-changing decision-making environment, heavy bureaucracy, and incoherent legislation—except for occasional inspired policy decisions.

DOUBLE DISCOURSE

As part of recent planning efforts for the EU 2014–2020 financial exercise, Romania had to submit a number of strategies that were supposed to include both national priorities and accompanying actions for: the tertiary education sector; early school leaving; and lifelong learning. These strategies were designed in 2013–2014 with the assistance of the World Bank and submitted to the European Com-

mission. Despite their importance, these documents are in no way present in the public debate on education, and the analysis on which they were grounded lies peacefully in the drawers of those who were supposed to act upon them. The opportunity to think carefully about the challenges that Romanian higher education currently faces, and find publicly endorsed solutions, was again missed. This speaks about the Romanian decision-makers' habit of using a double discourse when it comes to higher education policy—one message is intended for the internal public and one for international actors.

In this context, before embarking on any new reform, a set of publicly assumed policy options should be agreed upon by all those interested and affected, as some challenges can no longer be ignored: demographic downturn; equity; public investment; and internationalization.

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DEMOGRAPHIC DOWNTURN

One of the biggest issues confronting Romania is demographic decline. Universities have to adapt to shrinking pools of potential students and will continue to do so in the coming decades. Thus, the system faces the need to rationalize its structure, with resources better distributed to those universities that now hold a rising share of the remaining student population. As this is politically difficult and controversial, few steps have been taken in this regard. Better targeted, resourced equity policies, and sound internationalization policies could be the answer, if embraced by politicians and members of the academic communities alike.

EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

Unfortunately, equity in Romania is a controversial subject, seen as a threat to the meritocratic mainstream discourse. Political actors usually stay clear from talking about equity in higher education during national debates, despite the priority given to overcoming societal inequalities in the current government's program and the inclusion of equity, as one of the three pillars of the tertiary education strategy. Romania has a high—and rising—drop-out rate, which reduces the share of the population eligible for higher educa-

tion. This takes Romania further from its EU 2020 target of bringing down early school leaving to 11 percent. Structural issues in secondary education include poor quality of rural education, unattractive salaries for staff, and a lack of adequate staff training. There is also a perennial lack of support for poor and Roma students, leading to low participation among these groups. Currently, children from disadvantaged backgrounds find it very difficult to access higher education, and talent is lost on the altar of so-called meritocratic policies.

SPENDING RATHER THAN INVESTING

Although higher education funding is a problem in many countries, Romania holds the unfortunate record for having the lowest ratio of funding per student among EU countries. The current education law states that education should benefit from a minimum public investment of 6 percent of the GDP. This figure has never been reached, although education is the first priority in most electoral programs of Romania's main political parties. Student numbers have declined with over 40 percent, compared to the peak year 2008/2009. This presented an opportunity to raise per-capita funding without increasing the public share of total funding and jeopardizing national deficit targets. Instead, the government opted for shrinking funding at the same rate as student numbers fell, wasting an easy opportunity to improve quality through better funding. In addition, it largely ignored the need to implement the legal provisions in the current education law, which allowed additional funding for institutions doing well in priority areas (employability, equity, internationalization, and research performance). The double discourse here is visible as soon as elections are over.

INTERNATIONALIZATION—A PROGRESS AREA?

Currently, internationalization is high on the political agenda. Romania has been active in a number of international policy fields. It hosted the Bologna Secretariat in 2010–2012 and organized the Bucharest Ministerial Conference and Third Bologna Policy Forum in April 2012. Also, in addition to successful efforts by universities, there are a series of projects to develop more coherent policy frameworks at both the national and the institutional levels. One EU-funded initiative by the Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding (UEFISCDI) in cooperation with the International Association of Universities (IAU), aims to assist 20 Romanian universities in developing institutional strategies for internationalization. UEFISCDI and IAU are also drafting a background analysis for the future development of a national strategy on internationalization of higher education. Everyone agrees that internationalization of higher education is important,

and this becomes obvious also when looking at the strategic plans of Romanian universities. However, as often stated in closed national debates, the rationales for this consensus are mostly linked with the opportunity to attract more non-EU, fee-paying students.

A NEED FOR POLICY COHERENCE

Romania can be seen as a laboratory for how various international processes, norms, and institutions have changed the higher education landscape in 25 years of democratic transition. Despite its openness to international developments, the public debate and ownership over substantive reforms remain illusory, and that is partially due to the double discourse used by decision-makers in order to avoid international stigma or lose votes internally. Without a sound public debate on current challenges and their solutions, drawing on existing good practice and taking into account international commitments, Romania's higher education sector will remain vulnerable, instead of bringing a solution for sustainable socioeconomic development. ■

Institutional Corruption in Russian Universities

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Russia is about to become an academic superpower, which makes it very successful at least in the context of the BRIC countries—Brazil, Russia, India, China. After various effective reforms, including the Bologna process and the modernization of admissions procedures, the Russian government is now working hard on remedying corruption in higher education. Why is corruption in this sector so prevalent? In this article, we argue that the improper dependencies of all the involved actors make corruption possible. Improper dependencies are mutually dependent relationships that lead to unhealthy or unconstructive outcomes. Young people without an academic degree have few chances on the job market in Russia. The faculty is under pressure from the university administration, to retain the current cohort of students at all costs. The administration is under budgetary pressure from the Ministry of Education

and Science at public universities and from the students themselves at private universities.

DEMOGRAPHIC CRISIS AND “UNTEACHABLE” STUDENTS

Many Russian universities are currently facing difficult times. The continuing decline in the birth rate, taking place since the 1990s, has inevitably resulted in a decrease in the numbers of university applicants. The number of universities, however, remain high, despite the obvious demographic crisis. In the 2014–2015 academic year, there were 950 universities in Russia, including 548 state and 402 private schools and, in addition, more than 1,600 regional branches. Only the most prestigious universities—about 30 to 40 institutions throughout the country that receive generous support from the Ministry of Education and Science—are in a position to be selective with their admissions.

The remaining mass higher education institutions are left to compete for students, who are often not qualified to carry on with university-level studies, not invested in receiving a high-quality education, and looking instead to get by until they finish their diploma—however, nominal their actual learning may be. The total number of students in Russia is very high. Each year, almost 80 percent of all secondary school graduates go to a university, and almost all of them graduate—a number that has remained constant since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

THE INSTITUTIONAL TRAP

These mismatched trends produce a power imbalance, where universities need their students more than the students need the universities. Public universities receive their budget allocation according to the number of students. If they expel students, they need to return the money they received from the state for those students. This is hardly possible, because the money is already covering personnel and other costs. It might also mean that, in the next academic year, the budget will be cut by the state and the universities will need to dismiss faculty or staff, or close some programs. Private universities are completely dependent on their students' fees. With some exceptions, those universities would not be able to exist without their students. This is further complicated by the fact that, formally, universities are the gatekeepers of the official credentials, endorsed by the government, and are responsible for raising quality of higher education. The conflicting goals of the empowered students and the disempowered universities create a further problem of clashing interests. This is where improper dependencies are essentially formed. Universities, as a result, are squeezed between a rock (students' preferences) and a hard place, to appear legitimate and meet governmental requirements, which effectively places their day-to-day operations in an institutional trap.