

Public Education in Romania and Moldova, 19-20th Centuries: Modernization, Political Mobilization, and Nation-Building. An Introduction

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Since the second half of the 19th century, Romania has asserted itself, along with other European states, as a “modern mobilizational state”¹ which aimed to profoundly transform its population and the mass of its citizens through extensive mobilizing and social engineering projects. Public education has played a central role in this ambitious process of social transformation, being an essential tool of state formation and nation-building².

Shortly after the emergence of the modern Romanian state (1859/61), mass public education was decreed to be universal and compulsory (1865). A modern generalized, secular and centralized primary education system, with a standardized school curriculum and an “army” of professional teachers, was to replace, in a relatively short period, the rudimentary and incomplete, almost non-existent, educational model of the “ancien régime,” despite some notable attempts to create a stable institutionalized education during previous decades. Modern education was meant to transform peasants into “good Romanians” and loyal citizens of the state³. This project, which looked ambitious and well-designed on paper, was difficult to implement in practice. The state’s enlightening ambitions were met with a series of underlying obstacles: a quasi-absent school infrastructure, a chronic shortage of professionally trained teachers, especially in rural areas, and a silent resistance to schooling coming from rural communities that had become the target of these large-scale educational projects. However, enormous efforts and resources were invested in this undertaking. Visionary officials and ministers, such as Spiru

¹ Adeeb Khalid, “Backwardness and the Quest for Civilization: Early Soviet Central Asia in Comparative Perspective,” *Slavic Review* 65, no. 2 (2006): 231–51, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4148591>.

² Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca/New York: Cornell University Press, 1983); Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen. The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976); Andy Green, *Education and State Formation. Europe, East Asia and the USA* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

³ Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen. The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914*; Luminița Murgescu, *Între “bunul creștin” și “bravul român”. Rolul școlii primare în construirea identității naționale românești* (Iași: Editura A ’92, 1999).



Haret (who spent three terms at the head of the Ministry of Public Instruction between 1897 and 1910), were passionately dedicated and worked tirelessly towards building a genuine “people’s school”⁴.

Although primary public education attracted the most significant attention and resources from the state, it was but one step, albeit perhaps the most important, in a multi-level educational system, which targeted and included ever-larger masses of the population. The modern state needed a large and competent bureaucracy, while the growing industry required an increasingly skilled workforce⁵. In just a few decades, the Romanian education system transformed from an elite-based model, intended exclusively for a small group of privileged people, into an oversized pyramid-like institution. It relied upon an extensive and robust base of elementary education, continuing with the upper levels of high school, vocational institutions and, at the top of the pyramid, with higher education. All these stages of public education went through an intensive process of massification and democratization. Despite these intentions, most Romanians still only attended, at best, primary school, which resulted in minimal chances for wide-ranging social mobility⁶. However, high schools, as well as vocational and higher education institutions, continued to expand their recruitment base, to include a growing number of students with a lower-class and peasant background. Many of these students became themselves teachers, being imbued with the mission of enlightening the ‘popular classes.’ The massification of university studies also led to certain “perverse effects,”⁷ which gradually increased as higher education expanded during the interwar period. One of the main such effects was the rising unemployment among the graduates of higher education institutions⁸. This tendency only compounded the earlier issue of a fundamental imbalance in the Romanian education system, with most graduates aspiring to enter state service and the overblown bureaucracy, which were still regarded as the most promising and lucrative vehicles for social mobility. Frustrated by the economic difficulties, which were made much worse by the Great Depression hitting Romania in the late 1920s and early 1930s, but also by the shortage of available jobs in the

⁴ Constantin Schifirneț, “Spiru Haret, Education and School Legislation Reform,” *Revista Română de Sociologie* XXV, no. 3–4 (2014): 311–26.

⁵ Green, *Education and State Formation. Europe, East Asia and the USA*.

⁶ Dimitrie Gusti, ed., *Un an de activitate la Ministerul Instrucției, Culturii și Artelor. 1932-1933* (Bucharest: Tipografia Bucovina, 1934).

⁷ Raymond Boudon, *Effets pervers et ordre social* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2009).

⁸ Dragoș Sdrobiș, *Limitele meritocrației într-o societate agrară* (Iași: Polirom, n.d.).

field of intellectual professions and the state apparatus, some of these graduates were attracted by extremist and xenophobic currents of political thought and action, following the pan-European trend of the 1930s⁹.

The creation of Greater Romania in 1918 produced another series of challenges and difficulties in the process of expanding and consolidating the educational system. The newly integrated regions had a widely differing level of general schooling and literacy rates. The population of Transylvania had, in general, a higher educational level than their counterparts in the Old Kingdom (Moldavia and Wallachia), although it was still lower than the corresponding rates in the western areas of the former Habsburg Monarchy¹⁰. Bessarabia, on the other hand, displayed the lowest level of schooling and literacy, compared to other provinces of Greater Romania, despite the belated efforts of the tsarist administration to create and expand an elementary public school system at the end of the 19th century.¹¹ Another significant challenge was the schooling of ethnic minorities, who accounted for more than one quarter of the general population. A number of international agreements, especially the treaties signed in Versailles/Paris (1919-1921), required Romania to respect the rights of its ethnic minorities to receiving an adequate education in their mother tongue. At the same time, the Romanian authorities did not abide by these agreements, or did so only partially and reluctantly, since they were concerned about the ethnic heterogeneity of Romanian society. Moreover, they often suspected the members of ethnic minority communities of subversion and disloyalty. The impact of this growing suspicion on state policy resulted in a constant tendency towards the Romanianization of education at all levels, even in the case of primary schools and private educational institutions¹².

Public education continued to be a powerful tool of state formation and political mobilization following the establishment of communist regimes¹³.

⁹ Irina Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania: Regionalism, Nation Building & Ethnic Struggle, 1918-1930* (Ithaca/New York: Cornell University Press, 1995).

¹⁰ Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania*.

¹¹ Ludmila Coadă, *Zemstva Basarabiei. Aspecte istorico-juridice* (Chişinău: Pontos, 2009).

¹² Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania*; Petru Negura, "Nation-Building and Mass Schooling of Ethnic Minorities on the Romanian and Soviet Peripheries (1918 – 1940): A Comparative Study of Bessarabia and Transnistria," *National Identities* 23, no. 5 (2021): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2021.1873931>. See also Philippe Blasen's article in this issue.

¹³ John Connelly, *Captive University. The Sovietization of East German, Czech, and Polish Higher Education, 1945-1956* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000).



Paradoxically, after the fall of the communist governments in Eastern Europe, the educational system has regained its essential function of nation-building, which the Western states seemed to have abandoned in the second half of the 20th century. Moreover, unrecognized *de facto* states in Transnistria, the Caucasus and the Donbass regions developed similar strategies of state-building and national construction. They have even engaged into a symbolic and political competition with the countries they have chosen to emancipate themselves from¹⁴.

The social history of education has a rich tradition in Western academia¹⁵. Several works tackled the mass public education in disputed regions within various Western and Central European countries, in the context of nation-building processes underway during the late 19th and early 20th centuries¹⁶. The history of education and culture in the East European countries and the USSR became the object of a renewed interest after the fall of the communist regimes and the subsequent opening of the Party and government archives¹⁷. A number of Western, Romanian and Moldovan historians produced notable works in the field

¹⁴ Vladimir Solonari, "Creating a 'People': A Case Study in Post-Soviet History-Writing," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 4, no. 2 (2003): 411–38, <https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.2003.0027>; Alexandr Voronovici, "Internationalist Separatism and the Political Use of 'Historical Statehood' in the Unrecognized Republics of Transnistria and Donbass," *Problems of Post-Communism* 67, no. 3 (May 3, 2020): 288–302, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2019.1594918>.

¹⁵ Roberto Sani, "History of Education in Modern and Contemporary Europe: New Sources and Lines of Research," *History of Education Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (2013): 184–95, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hoeq.12018>; Joyce Goodman and Ian Grosvenor, "Educational Research-History of Education a Curious Case?," *Oxford Review of Education* 35, no. 5 (2009): 601–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054980903216325>.

¹⁶ Stephen L. Harp, *Learning to Be Loyal: Primary Schooling as Nation Building in Alsace and Lorraine, 1850–1940* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1998); Ágoston Berecz, *The Politics of Early Language Teaching: Hungarian in the Primary Schools of the Late Dual Monarchy* (Budapest: Pasts, Inc., CEU Press, 2013); Joachim von Puttkamer, *Schulalltag und nationale Integration in Ungarn. Slowaken, Rumänen und Siebenbürger Sachsen in der Auseinandersetzung mit der Ungarischen Staatsidee 1867–1914* (München: Oldenbourg, 2003); Machteld Venken, *Peripheries at the Centre. Borderland Schooling in Interwar Europe* (New York/Oxford: Berghann, 2021).

¹⁷ To cite a few of them: Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union, 1921-1934* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Wladimir Bérélowitch, *La soviétisation de l'École russe, 1917-1931* (Lausanne: L'Age d'or, 1990); Thomas Ewing, *The Teachers of Stalinism: Policy, Practice, and Power in Soviet Schools of the 1930s* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002); Larry E. Holmes *The Kremlin and the Schoolhouse. Reforming Education in Soviet Russia, 1917-1931* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Catriona Kelly, *Children's World: Growing Up in Russia, 1890-1991* (Lancaster: Yale University Press, 2007).

of the history of education, using newly discovered or previously unavailable archival documents¹⁸.

This special issue of the *Plural* journal brings together a collection of articles whose authors are currently among the most important researchers working on the history of education in Romania. The studies included in this issue cover a fairly wide-ranging period, from the middle of the 19th century to the end of the 20th century. They focus on a geographical area that includes several regions currently belonging to present-day Romania and the Republic of Moldova. The articles approach their subject matter from different angles, analyzing and discussing multiple levels of the educational system, from preschool to higher education and even postgraduate studies. The articles deal with various aspects relating to the modernization of public education. Thus, Cătălina Mihalache examines some facets of the cultural history of the use of toys for pedagogical purposes within school and family settings in Romania, in the context of the standardization and industrialization of the toy production process. Ramona Caramelia discusses the process of rationalization and institutionalization of the examination system within Romanian secondary education, from the end of the 19th century until World War I. Philippe H. Blasen analyzes various dimensions of German language education in southern Bessarabia in the late 1930s, including the attempts to Romanianize the German schools, in the context of the conflicting interests of a number of national and local actors. Anca Filipovici addresses the role of the *Straja Țării* organization, created under the patronage of King Carol II, in promoting health policies among the young people in the late 1930s, while emphasizing the link with the state's increasingly radical nationalizing tendencies. Dragoș Sdrobiș analyzes certain important aspects of the development of technical studies in interwar Romania, focusing on the case of the Polytechnic School in Bucharest, in the context of the institutionalization of the engineering profession. Ana-Maria Stan reconstructs the process of preparing the drafts of the Law on University Education in Romania, adopted in 1932, through the analysis of the draft projects elaborated in the 1920s by

¹⁸ Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania*; Cătălina Michalache, *Copilărie, familie, școală: politici educaționale și receptări sociale* (Iași: Ed. Universității „Al. I. Cuza”, 2016); Nicolae Adăniloie, *Istoria învățămîntului primar (1859-1918)* (Bucharest: Cris Book Universal, 1998); Murgescu, *Între bunul creștin și bravul român*; Sdrobiș, *Limitele meritocrației într-o societate agrară*; Ioana-Aurelia Axentii, *Gândirea pedagogică în Basarabia (1918-1940). Studiu istorico-pedagogic* (Chișinău: Civitas, 2006); Sergiu Musteață and Petru Negură, “Îndoctrinare, sovietizare și rusificare prin învățămînt în RSSM”, in Sergiu Musteață and Igor Cașu, eds., *Fără termen de prescripție. Aspecte ale investigării crimelor comunismului în Europa* (Chișinău: Cartier, 2011); Elena Negru, *Politica etnoculturală în RASS Moldovenească* (Chișinău: Prut Internațional, 2003).



two professors from the University of Cluj. Dragoş Jipa looks at the transfer of the Marxist ideological model, imported from the USSR, to the teaching of French literature at the University of Bucharest. His study is based on the analytical programs introduced in the curriculum during the first two years of the communist regime's definitive consolidation in Romania (1948-1949). Finally, using a wide array of quantitative data and narrative documents, Irina Nastasă examines the evolution of the number and the profiles of Eastern European scholars who had benefited from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation's scholarships during the Cold War. She places her analysis in the context of the Federal Republic of Germany's policy towards the communist states of Eastern Europe (*Ostpolitik*).

The studies included in this issue follow a socially and culturally informed approach to the history of education in Romania. The ambitious goal of this volume is therefore not only to contribute to the discovery and analysis of certain important aspects of the history of modern education in Romania. It also specifically aims at enriching our understanding of how public education has contributed to the broader processes of social development and state-building in the case of modern Romania. Therefore, these articles will surely be of interest not only to the researchers specializing in the history of education, but also to all the scholars and students interested in the history of society and the state, in general, both in Romania and in Central and Eastern Europe as a whole.

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