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## THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN THE ROMANIAN RURAL AREA – DEVELOPMENTS AND TRENDS IN THE POST-ACCESSION PERIOD

### ABSTRACT

Known for its role in the development of a country, in people's behavior and way of thinking, education holds an important position in the society. In other words, education is the basis for supporting culture, individual training, and also for the evolution of humanity. In Romania, the educational system has experienced important structural changes, both at national and local (regional) level. The structural changes have been manifested with different intensities by areas of residence, by urban and rural areas respectively. In this context, the present approach aims to carry out a diagnosis analysis of the education system in the Romanian rural area in the post-accession period.

**Key words:** educational infrastructure, school population, teaching staff, development regions, rural area, gaps.

JEL Classification: A20, I21, I24, I25.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout time, education has been seen as a continuous process of learning and developing new skills and values. The education is a fundamental human right and should be guaranteed regardless of race, gender, nationality, etc. Education improves an individual's chances of success in life and helps fight poverty.

At the same time, quality education is the foundation of a sustainable society, contributing to the achievement of all other sustainable development objectives.

On the other hand, the development of education is directly influenced by a number of factors such as, for example, the standard of living and the education system. In general, the societies that are characterized by a high poverty level will not give increased attention to the development of education, being more concerned with providing the necessary goods and services for survival. At the same time, developed societies will tend to invest in a quality education system, a process seen as an important investment in the human factor.

## 2. STATE OF KNOWLEDGE

The problem of ensuring quality education and development of the current educational system continues to be the subject of many debates both among civil society, academic environment or decision-making factors with responsibilities in this field.

The governments of many countries include education as an absolute priority in their programmes, and the United Nations has included it in the Global Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

At European level, there are numerous initiatives aiming to improve education and people's training level.

Without detailing the multiple studies in this field, we consider it necessary to briefly present the efforts made in the European area, as well as at national level.

Whether it is about the school population, educational infrastructure, or vocational training courses for adults, the European Commission has repeatedly emphasized the strategic role of education and training for economic growth, long-term competitiveness and the future social cohesion of the Union.

The challenge facing the EU is to accelerate the reform of education systems so that every young person can develop their full potential through better access and opportunities, so as to become an active participant in the emerging knowledge-based economy and to strengthen social solidarity (European Commission, 2008).

After 1989, in Romania, ensuring education quality education and adequate infrastructure had to face the problem of underfunding in this field. Although through the current primary regulatory framework the state guarantees and supports, financially inclusively, access to education and continuous vocational training (National Education Law), the problem of underfunding is still relevant, with a direct impact on the quality of education.

The most recent initiative of the relevant ministry aims to focus more on education, establishing specific objectives of the public education service (Ministry of National Education, 2023).

## 3. METHODOLOGY

From a methodological point of view, this approach is based on public information provided by the Tempo-Online database. The analysis period is 2007 – 2022. The approach uses established methods of analysis, such as comparisons, dynamics, and structures. The indicators analysed in this approach are: number of school units, number of teaching staff and school population.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

As an indicator of educational infrastructure, in the period 2007–2022, the number of school units decreased both nationwide and in the rural areas, where the decrease was sharper. In the year 2022, there were 3129 school units in the rural area, representing 44.2% of the total number of school units.

It is worth mentioning that an increasing trend in the number of school units was noticed only in București–Ilfov region in the analysed period, with percentages ranging from 18% (total region) to 5.7% (rural area). An improvement of the educational infrastructure was also noticed in București–Ilfov region, mainly at the level of preschool and high school education.

While the number of school units in preschool and primary/secondary education followed a downward trend, in the analysed period the number of school units in high school and vocational education and training increased, with a few exceptions. There were no higher education units in the rural area, with the exception of București–Ilfov region (Table 1).

Table 1

The dynamics of the number of school units, per total and rural area and education levels in 2022 compared to 2007 (%)

	Total		Preschool education		Primary and secondary education		High school education		Vocational education		Higher education	
	Total	Rural	Total	Rural	Total	Rural	Total	Rural	Total	Rural	Total	Rural
<b>TOTAL</b>	-14.1	-16.6	3.0	-57.1	-15.7	-15.2	2.5	20.1	-42.9	-46.1	-17.9	n.a.
<i>Nord-Vest</i>	-4.4	-3.6	-1.6	23.1	-11.8	-9.2	7.8	29.2	200.0	1200.0	-18.8	n.a.
<i>Centru</i>	-19.2	-16.6	-6.9	-81.0	-14.8	-11.1	-4.8	5.6	-11.1	100.0	-38.5	n.a.
<i>Nord-Est</i>	-17.6	-19.8	-2.5	-20.0	-16.2	-17.9	4.4	28.6	-65.3	-66.1	-15.4	n.a.
<i>Sud-Est</i>	-23.3	-25.8	-12.8	-72.5	-21.7	-21.6	3.4	33.3	-73.1	-82.4	0.0	n.a.
<i>Sud-Muntenia</i>	-20.0	-23.7	0.8	-82.8	-20.7	-20.1	-2.2	7.7	28.6	600.0	0.0	n.a.
<i>București-Ilfov</i>	18.0	5.7	26.8	214.3	8.7	-23.5	16.0	22.2	-50.0		-13.9	0
<i>Sud-Vest Oltenia</i>	-12.3	-8.9	4.0	-62.5	-12.4	-8.4	-0.7	14.3	-69.2	-66.7	-25.0	n.a.
<i>Vest</i>	-20.5	-14.4	-1.1	-66.7	-20.3	-11.2	-0.6	22.2	-28.6	-75.0	-23.1	n.a.

Note: n.a. – not available.

Source: Author's own calculations based on Tempo-Online data, NIS, 2023.

The number of teaching staff also followed the same decreasing trend, caused by the lack of adequate salaries, among other things. The teaching staff in the rural areas represents 31.6% of the total teaching staff. The diminution of the number of teaching staff is much higher in the rural areas, by percentages ranging from 4.1% (primary and secondary education) to 88.7% (vocational education and training).

Even though the number of school units in vocational education increased significantly in some regions, the teaching staff is insufficient and continuously decreasing. However, it should be noted that the total number of teaching staff in high school units increased by 11.5% in the last 16 years. In the rural area, the Nord-Vest, București–Ilfov and Centru regions are on the top three positions, with percentage increases from 21.7% to 76.7% (Table 2).

Table 2

The dynamics of the number of teaching staff, per total and rural area and education levels in 2022 compared to 2007 (%)

	Total		Preschool education		Primary and secondary education		High school education		Vocational education		Higher education	
	Total	Rural	Total	Rural	Total	Rural	Total	Rural	Total	Rural	Total	Rural
<b>TOTAL</b>	-13.1	-19.2	-0.5	-18.6	-15.7	-19.1	-14.4	11.5	-75.3	-81.3	-4.0	-20.0
<i>Nord-Vest</i>	-10.3	-20.2	4.5	-15.2	-23.2	-23.6	-0.8	76.7	-65.3	-66.5	-2.7	n.a.
<i>Centru</i>	-7.2	-5.0	-2.7	-13.8	-5.6	-4.1	-16.3	21.7	-61.7	-54.7	-7.0	n.a.
<i>Nord-Est</i>	-14.0	-18.9	-9.7	-23.7	-14.2	-13.7	-11.2	13.4	-78.1	-88.7	-1.3	n.a.
<i>Sud-Est</i>	-14.5	-18.9	-10.7	-24.1	-16.7	-18.2	-14.7	12.6	-85.8	-86.9	12.9	n.a.
<i>Sud-Muntenia</i>	-20.5	-25.7	-7.8	-19.5	-23.4	-27.1	-24.2	-14.9	-71.7	-71.8	-22.1	n.a.
<i>București-Ilfov</i>	-0.5	19.5	57.0	120.5	17.0	3.2	-15.2	25.9	-39.5		-3.9	-20
<i>Sud-Vest Oltenia</i>	-22.7	-30.1	-16.9	-33.3	-26.6	-30.4	-21.4	0.0	-90.3	-80.0	-7.5	n.a.
<i>Vest</i>	-15.6	-14.3	3.5	-7.1	-17.4	-14.9	-12.8	-15.9	-76.9	-26.1	-7.7	n.a.

Note: n.a. – not available.

Source: Author's own calculations based on Tempo-Online data, NIS, 2023.

While in the period 2007 – 2022 the number of school units followed an increasing trend at least at the level of high school and vocational education and training, the school population followed a strong downward trend.

With the exception of higher education where, in six of the eight development regions, the number of school population has increased, in all the other education levels, whether total or rural, the school population has significantly decreased.

The lack of adequate policies to stimulate all forms of education, the educational programmes inadequate to the current requirements of the labor market, adding to the low incomes and, sometimes, difficult integration into the labor market, inappropriate to the training level, are only some of the causes of the strong school population decline (Table 3).

Table 3

The dynamics of the school population, per total and rural area and education levels in 2022 compared to 2007 (%)

	Total		Preschool education		Primary and secondary education		High school education		Vocational education		Higher education	
	Total	Rural	Total	Rural	Total	Rural	Total	Rural	Total	Rural	Total	Rural
<b>TOTAL</b>	-21.2	-26.7	-19.8	-31.3	-10.3	-24.2	-24.8	-20.5	-56.3	-63.1	-0.5	-2.5
<i>Nord-Vest</i>	-12.1	-24.6	-14.5	-26.9	-5.5	-21.0	-29.9	-46.5	-53.5	-61.9	3.9	n.a.
<i>Centru</i>	-16.3	-13.1	-16.5	-23.0	0.8	-7.7	-28.6	-30.0	-44.4	-56.0	1.1	n.a.
<i>Nord-Est</i>	-21.1	-32.0	-28.9	-37.2	-19.0	-28.8	-20.4	-22.0	-51.2	-66.0	1.3	n.a.
<i>Sud-Est</i>	-21.8	-27.3	-27.9	-36.3	-14.8	-24.5	-22.7	8.4	-56.9	-60.6	-4.3	n.a.
<i>Sud-Muntenia</i>	-23.5	-28.4	-25.0	-31.8	-17.9	-26.1	-24.7	-18.9	-61.4	-70.3	-22.5	n.a.
<i>București-Ilfov</i>	-23.9	30.7	29.3	65.0	40.0	38.7	-12.7	-5.8	-70.3	-45.8	-0.9	-2.5
<i>Sud-Vest Oltenia</i>	-29.5	-39.5	-32.2	-43.4	-27.6	-39.3	-30.0	-16.3	-65.0	-61.5	2.6	n.a.
<i>Vest</i>	-22.3	-20.6	-18.2	-21.0	-14.3	-21.0	-31.6	-15.8	-56.8	-42.0	0.2	n.a.

Note: n.a. – not available.

Source: Author's own calculations based on Tempo-Online data, NIS, 2023.

It is noteworthy that in the rural area of the București–Ilfov region, which is the most economically developed region, the school population increased in 2022 compared to 2007, by percentages ranging from 30.7% (total) to 65% (preschool education).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Seen as a pillar of economic development, the Romanian education system is still facing numerous problems related to underfunding, lack of adaptation to current requirements of the labor market, or difficulties encountered by graduates in finding a job suitable for their professional training.

Despite all steps taken so far in this area, the structural changes that have taken place do not provide stability and do not represent an argument in the sustainable development of the national economy.

The existing differences between urban and rural areas continue to increase both overall, and mainly at regional level. There are significant differences between regions and even within regions, by rural/urban areas.

Although the number of school units has increased in some educational levels, the teaching staff and school population have decreased significantly in the post-accession period.

In this context, the intervention of decision-makers, through policies and measures/actions that take into consideration the socio-economic context and the targeted development perspectives, is highly necessary and urgent.

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