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GEOSCIENCES DOCTORAL SCHOOL

PhD Thesis Abstract

**The school network in the area of educational influence
of the Roman municipality.
Evolution, migrations and impact**

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INTRODUCTION

The analysis of the education system is a sensitive subject, regardless of the actors involved in these discussions. Most often, the positions from which one argues for or against an idea are antagonistic positions, losing sight of the fact that precisely what separates these actors should be what brings them together. The reality is that the three main actors of the educational act, parents-students-teachers, all have a common goal: preparing today's child for the assumed and conscious integration in tomorrow's society. The famous educational triangle has at its center the need for the formation of society, which wants responsible and qualified citizens, able to integrate, adapt and, above all, evolve with the society in which they will live. Society, through the various bodies that organize, regulate, supervise the educational activity, provides the framework and finances that make possible the functioning of the educational system. In this context, the educational system must be seen as a whole, as a huge mechanism, whose component parts are indispensable for the functioning of the whole. This paper proposes a geographical perspective on the educational phenomenon from the perspective of the place where the educational act takes place, the school as a component institution of the Romanian education system.

The basis for choosing the research theme was the finding that from 1990 to 2019, the number of school units in the North-East development region decreased from 5428 to 1092, which meant a "contraction" of almost four times the school network. The biggest decrease in the number of schools was observed after 2011, when the introduction of per capita funding determined a merger of school units by reducing the number of district units, transferring students to the center unit, merging or absorbing two school units. Since the operation of a school unit was conditioned by the number of enrolled students, there were periods when the number of students actually attending school courses was lower than the number of students reported in the official data, these students being artificially kept in the databases used for the calculation of the budget of educational units.

The main objective of this scientific approach is to delimit the area of educational influence of the Romanian municipality in the post-communist period and the impact of demographic changes on the enrollment figure in school units in this area, by identifying territorial differences in order to optimize access to education and analyze these developments that have a major long-term impact on society. Why is such an approach necessary?

In the 2022-2023 school year, the school network of Neamț county included 304 mass education institutions with legal personality, which educate students up to the upper secondary level, including 88 of them in rural areas and 55 in urban areas. The 88 rural school institutions coordinate the activity of another 132 subordinate school units. It should be noted that, from an administrative point of view, there are 78 communes in Neamț county, 10 less than the number of units with legal personality in the rural area. The question thus arises: do all these school units work efficiently from the point of view of managing financial and human resources and the quality of the educational act? In this context, the analysis of the school network of Neamț county appears as a necessity, both from a managerial point of view, and especially from an educational point of view.

The novel approach of this research comes from the image inside the educational system that the researcher offers on the analyzed theme. The researcher is, equally, object and subject of the education system, the one who decides on the school network and the one who applies the decisions made by other educational actors, superior to him on different levels of hierarchy.

The present scientific approach started from the desire to spatialize school demography, to have a geographical approach to the educational phenomenon. The researcher's attention was directed to the city of Roman, due to the position that this city occupies in the urban hierarchy of the North-East Development Region. A typical provincial city, Roman experienced all the transformations determined by the fall of communism. The change of political regime caused a swing in the city's economic profile from an industrial centre with outlets outside the national territory to a commercial centre. Most often, the administrative and political decision-makers of the city refer to the city of Roman as "a commercial hub" due to the implantation of important logistic bases for a number of commercial chains. The educational offer of secondary school units has maintained a predominance of specializations in the technical field, to the detriment of specializations in the field of services and especially those in trade-related qualifications.

The main conclusion of this study is that the school network in the area of educational influence of the Romanian municipality has undergone important changes both quantitatively after the fall of the communist regime against the background of the demographic decline recorded by Romania, but also qualitatively. To the demographic contraction was added a rethinking of the school network by reducing the number of school units with legal personality, from the desire to reduce the expenses determined by the operation of schools as fixed points of the network.

The delimitation of the area of educational influence of the Roman municipality was one of the major objectives of the work and it was fully achieved. This objective could not have been achieved without the analysis of the enrollment figure of the schools in the UATs over which the Romanian municipality exercises its territorial and, implicitly, educational influence. If from an administrative point of view, the territorial limits of the area of influence are superimposed on the administrative barriers, at the level of educational services, the municipality of Roman continues to polarize territories located outside Neamț County. The persistence in the collective memory of the former Roman County allows secondary education schools in Roman Municipality to educate students from Bacău, Iași and Vaslui counties.

The numerical evolution of the students in the school units in the area of educational influence of the Roman municipality was directly influenced by two factors: the decrease in the birth rate and the increase in migration. This last demographic phenomenon had a completely unexpected impact on the school population: students born outside of Romania appeared. The fate of these students is decided when the parents decide to go to work in other states. Their destiny begins to outline a true geography of loneliness, influenced by the environment of origin and the level of education of the parents. This geography of loneliness is a double-edged one, here and there, polarizing two antagonistic worlds in which neither parents nor children adapt anymore.

This scientific approach was based on the desire to validate some empirical observations, and during the conducted research a series of conclusions were drawn:

- rural schools have a tendency to compress themselves by closing down structures with a small number of students, out of the desire to make the remaining ones profitable;
- secondary schools in the urban environment tend to become overcrowded due to the enrollment of some students from the communes bordering the municipality of Roman, a fact explained by the increase in the number of students in secondary schools, given the decrease in the school population residing in Roman;
- high schools in Roman dispute a territory with a decreasing school population, which causes difficulties in realizing the proposed schooling plan;
- the school network in the municipality of Roman presents a series of particularities at the level of Neamț County - it has a high school with a sports program and two theological seminaries under conditions where the law requires only one vocational high school for each specialization for each county.

- the area of educational influence of the Roman municipality transcends the territorial limits of Neamț county, reminiscent of the former interwar county with the same name, but also of the spatial proximity of some communes from other counties to the municipality;

- against the background of the reduction of the school population, a legislative reform is required to allow greater flexibility in the organization of the school network and the abandonment of the principle of a UAT - a school unit with legal personality.

The new law on pre-university education, in force starting from the 2023-2024 school year, opens new research perspectives for the school network in the area of educational influence of the municipality of Roman. The application of the new education law on the area in which the city of Muscat exerts its educational influence does not foresee making major changes, given its spatial-temporal stability. But, certainly, the areas of educational influence of secondary school units in Roman municipality will undergo changes. The current vocational schools in Adjudei (Tămășeni commune), in Nisiporești (Botești commune) and in Valea Ursului commune, do not have the human resources, represented by students who could attend high school courses, to be able to support educationally and financially sustainable secondary units. The decrease of the school population and the general aging of the population of Neamț county is indicated by all the studies that look at the prospective evolution of the number of inhabitants of this administrative-territorial unit. The coming years will probably bring a further contraction of the school network. But what the new school network will look like, what the impact of the new education laws will be, are just as many questions to be answered by further research.

CHAPTER I

THE SCHOOL NETWORK IN SPECIALIZED LITERATURE AND RESEARCH

METHODOLOGY

Education has always been a complex and delicate subject, difficult to analyze from certain perspectives. It is almost universally considered that the education system falls within the purview of the social sciences—primarily sociology and psychology—as well as the educational sciences, particularly pedagogy, didactics, and special pedagogy. However, the educational phenomenon is also addressed by other disciplines, such as economics; this occurs through the lens of expenses generated by school management and institutional budgets, as well as European projects that can be accessed to supplement revenue, improve

material resources and teacher training, and better promote schools to education beneficiaries—in line with the recently emerged concept of the educational marketing mix (Roman, I.R., 2013). Legal sciences examine the educational process from the perspective of the legislative framework governing the life of educational institutions. Nevertheless, the majority of studies concerning the life of the school as an institution originate in the field of organizational management. Geography plays only a tangential role in the analysis of the education system, specifically through the lens of population geography and the use of indicators related to the school-age population.

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CHAPTER II

THE EVOLUTION OF EDUCATION IN ROMAN FROM ITS ORIGINS TO THE PRESENT

The municipality of Roman has enjoyed a privileged position within the urban network of the Moldavia region ever since its first documentary attestation on March 30, 1392. It is evident that the antiquity of this Mușatin town predates the date recorded in the document issued by Voivode Roman I; this is confirmed by the existence of an Orthodox Bishopric in the town on the Moldova River shortly after 1408—the year marking the passing of Lady

Anastasia, mother of Voivode Alexander the Good. Elevating a church to the status of a Bishopric would not have occurred within a mere sixteen-year span simply because a member of the ruling family was buried there. The town's importance predated the two aforementioned milestones, and it clearly played a significant strategic and commercial role for the rulers of Moldavia. The benefits of economic development also influenced the social status of the inhabitants; unlike the surrounding rural population, they had access to certain forms of education—albeit forms far removed from what we today associate with organized schooling. In the following pages, we will detail the state of education in Roman from the earliest records regarding instruction, through the period leading up to the fall of communism and on to the present day, with a particular focus on the structure of the school network. Vocational and technical education holds a special place in our analysis, as the educational catchment area plays a significant role in maintaining the school as a standalone entity and is a decisive factor in determining student enrollment quotas.

CHAPTER III

ANALYSIS OF ENROLLMENT TRENDS IN SCHOOLS WITHIN THE EDUCATIONAL CATCHMENT AREA OF THE MUNICIPALITY OF ROMAN DURING THE POST-COMMUNIST PERIOD WITHIN A SOCIO- DEMOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

The student population is inextricably linked to the school network—neither can exist without the other—with demographic trends reflected in enrollment figures and, by extension, the number of school units. In turn, the student population is influenced by birth rates and migration. Internal student migration—transfers between schools within the county—does not appear to alter overall enrollment figures, as the students remain within the county, merely changing their school of enrollment. However, national or international student migration—as recorded in educational statistics—has a significant impact on enrollment figures. While internal county migration does not result in a net loss of students from the county's total, schools located within the 15-minute isochrone are directly affected by these internal shifts. This leads to paradoxical situations: overcrowded urban classrooms—averaging over 30 students—contrast with rural classrooms operating at the legal minimum of 12 students or utilizing simultaneous teaching methods, a practice that compromises the quality of the educational process. In the following pages, we aim to

analyse the evolution of student enrollment figures in schools within the educational catchment area of the municipality of Roman during the post-communist period.

CHAPTER IV

THE SCHOOL NETWORK IN THE POST-COMMUNIST PERIOD

Vocational and technical education has played a significant role in the Romanian education system ever since the enactment of the first modern education laws under Spiru Haret. Every society requires specialists capable of putting into practice the ideas of the great inventors and leaders who guide the nation. These specialists are the product of vocational and technical education—a sector that has followed a rather turbulent path during the post-communist era. This study aims to identify key milestones in the post-communist history of this type of education and to examine how vocational and technical schools are represented within the school network of the communes neighbouring the municipality of Roman, as well as the educational catchment area created by each of these institutions. The research focuses specifically on vocational and technical education, given that the diverse educational offerings available in the municipality of Roman and its surrounding localities place these schools in direct competition for students, with each institution drawing from its own specific pool of prospective pupils.

CHAPTER V

THE IMPACT OF MIGRATION ON SCHOOL DEMOGRAPHICS: A CASE STUDY

Following the fall of the communist regime, Romania underwent a demographic transition similar to that of Western European countries, experiencing the same negative effects across multiple areas: from population decline to a shrinking workforce, everything changed—including the mindset of Romanian society. Over a period of thirty years, more than four million Romanians left the country—either permanently or temporarily—to work abroad, and numerous families fell apart due to the physical distance and the psychological insecurity experienced by family members. The situation of the children left behind was even more precarious than that of the adults; often alone, or sometimes left in the care of grandparents or other extended family members, these children faced numerous situations involving physical and psychological insecurity. This had serious repercussions on their

academic performance and, even more alarmingly, placed them at risk of becoming either victims or perpetrators of crimes. The following pages present a geographical analysis of students from a technological high school in the municipality of Roman who have parents working abroad. The situation of these students is representative of the broader context within the municipality and even the country, as Roman is one of the cities in the North-East Development Region most severely affected by migration following the fall of communism.

CONCLUSIONS

This scientific study originated in the desire to spatialize school demographics and to adopt a geographical approach to the educational phenomenon. The researcher focused on the municipality of Roman, given the city's position within the urban hierarchy of the North-East Development Region. As a typical provincial town, Roman has undergone all the transformations brought about by the fall of communism. The change in political regime shifted the city's economic profile from an industrial center—with markets extending beyond national borders—to a commercial hub. Administrative and political decision-makers frequently refer to Roman as a "commercial hub," a designation stemming from the establishment of major logistics centers for various retail chains. The educational offerings of secondary schools have remained predominantly technical, at the expense of specializations in the service sector—particularly those related to commerce.

Statistical analysis of national exam results and their cartographic representation are insufficient, on their own, to define a "school geography"—or, more precisely, a geography of schools and education. Nevertheless, a geographical dimension emerges at every stage of the analysis of the educational system; the school itself—the building where the educational process takes place—is a geographical phenomenon, territorially located and occupying a specific point in space. The existence of multiple such points gives rise to a network characterized by hierarchical levels, relationships of subordination or super ordination, and dynamics of collaboration or opposition. The school, as the focal point of the educational process, constitutes the territorial expression of the education system.

This scientific undertaking was driven by the desire to validate certain empirical observations, and the research conducted led to the following conclusions:

- rural schools tend to consolidate by closing affiliated units with low student numbers, in an effort to make the remaining schools more cost-effective;

- urban middle schools tend to become overcrowded due to the enrollment of students from communes bordering the municipality of Roman; this is evidenced by rising middle school student numbers occurring alongside a decline in the school-age population residing within Roman itself;
- high schools in Roman compete for a shrinking student population, making it difficult to meet proposed enrollment targets;
- the school network in the municipality of Roman exhibits unique characteristics within Neamț County: it hosts a sports high school and two theological seminaries, even though the law mandates only one vocational high school per specialization per county. In fact, Neamț County holds the "record" for the number of theological vocational high schools, with no fewer than five seminaries operating within its territory, alongside a higher education institution—also located in the municipality of Roman;
- the educational catchment area of the municipality of Roman extends beyond the territorial boundaries of Neamț County—a legacy of the former interwar county of the same name, as well as the geographical proximity of the municipality to communes in neighbouring counties;
- Given the decline in the school-age population, a legislative reform is required to allow for greater flexibility in organizing the school network and to move away from the principle of "one administrative-territorial unit – one school unit with legal personality."

The new pre-university education law, effective from the 2023–2024 school year, opens up new avenues for researching the school network within the educational catchment area of the municipality of Roman. Implementing the new education law in the area where the "Mușatin" city exerts its educational influence is not expected to bring about major changes, given the area's spatio-temporal stability. However, the educational catchment areas of secondary-level schools in Roman will certainly undergo changes. The current vocational schools in Adjudeni (Tămășeni Commune), Nisiporești (Botești Commune), and Valea Ursului Commune lack the necessary human resources—specifically, students who could pursue high school studies—to sustain secondary education units that are both educationally and financially viable. All studies regarding the projected population trends in Neamț County highlight a declining school-age population and an aging general population. The coming years will likely bring a further contraction of the school network. Yet, what the new school network will look like and what impact the new education laws will have are questions that future research must address.