

The Policy of Reducing Study Places in Communist Romania Case Study of the Academic Year 1982-1983

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Abstract: In the Romanian education system, the 1980s were a time of big constraints. The most severe decline in the number of places in the higher education system occurred in the preparation of the academic year 1982/1983. This trend continued during the following years, albeit it was less drastic. In this paper I try to answer the following questions: Which was the overall significance of the cuts? How were the cuts distributed among forms of higher education – daytime courses, evening courses and extramural courses? Which were the reasons behind these cuts? Were the cuts motivated by the employers' demand of graduates?

Keywords: *study places, communism, higher education, planning, Nicolae Ceaușescu.*

The 1980s started with Nicolae Ceaușescu's decision to pay Romania's foreign debt, which marked the beginning of a long period of constraints and cuts at all economic levels. Higher education was no exception, and thus the 1980s were a period of great contractions regarding both the allocation of study places, but also the teaching staff involved in the education process. We will hereinafter attempt to answer to the following questions: Which was the share of place cuts – among those allocated to daytime courses and to evening and

extramural courses, which was the official motivation for these cuts, and whether they were triggered by the beneficiaries' demand of graduates. We will try to reconstruct the mechanisms behind the decision to design the education plan and, implicitly, the cuts of study places.

For this paper, we used documents from the Archives of the Ministry of National Education, the National Statistics Institute and the National History Central Archives, the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party fund.

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We will begin this analysis by presenting the decision mechanism which dictated the approval of the education plan. Usually, this plan was drafted by the Ministry of Education, after having previously centralized the requests from universities/institutes, ministries, county councils etc. Thereafter, the State Planning Committee (SPC) intervened in the decision process; this Committee was in charge with supervising the application of directives emanating from the central power, and the objectives adopted by the Party contained either in the five-year plans, or in its various resolutions. Since the education plan was approved by the two previously mentioned bodies, it was subject to debates and the approval of the Central Committee. The itinerary followed by this plan included endorsement from the Academy of the Socialist Republic of Romania (AMEN, Permanent, 19/1964) and the National Council of Scientific Research (AMEN, Permanent, 19/1964), but not

before receiving endorsement from the Ministry of Finance. Finally, the education plan reached the government, which approved and promulgated it by Decision/Decree issued by the Council of Ministers.

For the year 1982/1983, we were unable to identify in the archives the last version of the education plan (besides the official decision), and in our analysis we will use four versions presented by the Ministry within three months. In order to indicate the differences from the previous year, but also the way in which the results relate to the plan, we will use data from the National Statistics Institute, which will highlight the final figures after the admission exam. Regarding the approval decision from the Central Committee – the Executive Political Committee, we will analyze the meeting transcript following which the education plan approval decision was made. The first proposal of the plan is dated March 3, 1982.

Table 1. *Proposal on the number of students 1982/1983 (first proposal)*

	1981/1982		1982/1983		Differences	
	Number	Share	Number	Share	+	-
Total	38590	100,0	33420	100,0	-	5170
Daytime courses	26682	69,1	21600	64,6	-	5082
Evening and extramural courses	11908	30,9	11820	35,4	-	88

Source: Archive of the Ministry of National Education, Permanent Fund, file no. 223/1980.

This table shows the differences between the academic years 1981/1982 – 1982/1983, both in terms of general aspects, and education forms. This proposal was aimed at reducing the number of students by 5,170 places

at national level, representing a drop of 13.39 per cent as compared to the previous year. On the other hand, this decrease was mainly targeted at daytime courses as opposed to evening and extramural courses, where the

decrease was insignificant. Also, the ratio between daytime courses, and extramural and evening courses changed, marking a growth for the

latter category.

The second version of the education plan was presented three days after the previous one, on March 6, 1982.

Table 2. *Proposal on the number of students 1982/1983 (second proposal)*

	1981/1982		1982/1983		Differences	
	Number	Share	Number	Share	+	-
Total	38590	100,0	29665	100,0	-	8925
Daytime courses	26682	69,1	19744	66,6	-	6983
Evening and extramural courses	11908	30,9	9921	33,4	-	1987

Source: Archive of the Ministry of National Education, Permanent Fund, file no. 223/1980.

As we may notice, this proposal included the most severe decrease from all the analyzed proposals, a reduction by 8,925 places, as compared to the previous year, representing a drop of approximately 23.12 per cent. The decrease was dramatic for daytime

courses, as well as for extramural and evening courses. However, the ratio of the latter category is slightly higher at the expense of daytime courses.

The third proposal of the education plan is dated April 29, 1982.

Table 3. *Proposal on the number of students 1982/1983 (third proposal)*

	1981/1982		1982/1983		Differences	
	Number	Share	Number	Share	+	-
Total	38590	100,0	30510	100,0	-	8080
Daytime courses	26682	69,1	17490	57,3	-	9192
Evening and extramural courses	11908	30,9	13020	42,7	1112	

Source: Archive of the Ministry of National Education, Permanent Fund, file no. 223/1980.

We notice a reduction by 8,080 places as compared to the previous year. Here is the situation presented on fields of study: 6,056 for technical education, out of which 2,966 for engineering, and 3,090 for assistant engineers, 300 for agronomic education, 870 for economic education, 200 for medical-pharmaceutical education, 500 for

university and pedagogical education, 70 for legal education, and 84 for arts. The share of students included in evening and extramural courses increased from 30.9 per cent in the year 1981/1982, to 42.7 per cent in 1982/1983, and decreased accordingly for daytime courses from 69.1 per cent to 57.3 per cent.

Table 4. Proposal on the number of students 1982/1983 (third proposal – on fields of study)

	1981/1982			1982/1983		
	Total	Daytime	Evening and extramural	Total	Daytime	Evening and extramural
Technic	100,0	66,2	33,8	100,0	50,6	49,4
Agronomic	100,0	88,6	11,4	100,0	74,5	25,5
Economic	100,0	51,3	48,7	100,0	42,5	57,5
Medical-pharmaceutical	100,0	100,0	-	100,0	100,0	-
Academic - pedagogic	100,0	85,6	14,4	100,0	83,4	16,6
Legal	100,0	52,6	47,4	100,0	40,0	60,0
Artistic	100,0	90,7	9,3	100,0	57,3	42,7
TOTAL	100,0	69,1	30,9	100,0	57,3	42,7

Source: Archive of the Ministry of National Education, Permanent Fund, file no. 223/1980.

Table 4. Proposal on the number of students 1982/1983 (third proposal – on fields of study)

	1981/1982			1982/1983		
	Total	Daytime	Evening and extramural	Total	Daytime	Evening and extramural
Technic	100,0	66,2	33,8	100,0	50,6	49,4
Agronomic	100,0	88,6	11,4	100,0	74,5	25,5
Economic	100,0	51,3	48,7	100,0	42,5	57,5
Medical-pharmaceutical	100,0	100,0	-	100,0	100,0	-
Academic - pedagogic	100,0	85,6	14,4	100,0	83,4	16,6
Legal	100,0	52,6	47,4	100,0	40,0	60,0
Artistic	100,0	90,7	9,3	100,0	57,3	42,7
TOTAL	100,0	69,1	30,9	100,0	57,3	42,7

Source: Archive of the Ministry of National Education, Permanent Fund, file no. 223/1980.

The last version analyzed is dated May 12, 1982.

We believe this version was the closest to the education plan approved by the Council of Ministers. Overall, there was a cut of 6,949 places, representing an 18 per cent drop as compared to the previous year. The most drastic cut affected daytime courses,

without considering the required staff (ministries, county councils etc.) pr the academic personnel. Technical education lost over 5,000 places, to the benefit of extramural courses, which benefited from an increase of places. This decision may be interpreted as inversely proportional to the system requirements. As can be noticed

from the tables above, the demand for study places, was usually higher than the number of places approved by the Ministry. We may also notice that employers required graduates of daytime courses, while the Ministry allocated extra-places for evening courses. These requirements of staff,

expressed through the number of places allocated to each field, were also supported by a series of official letters/memorandums addressed to the Ministry of Education by various ministries/universities/county councils in order to supplement the education plan.

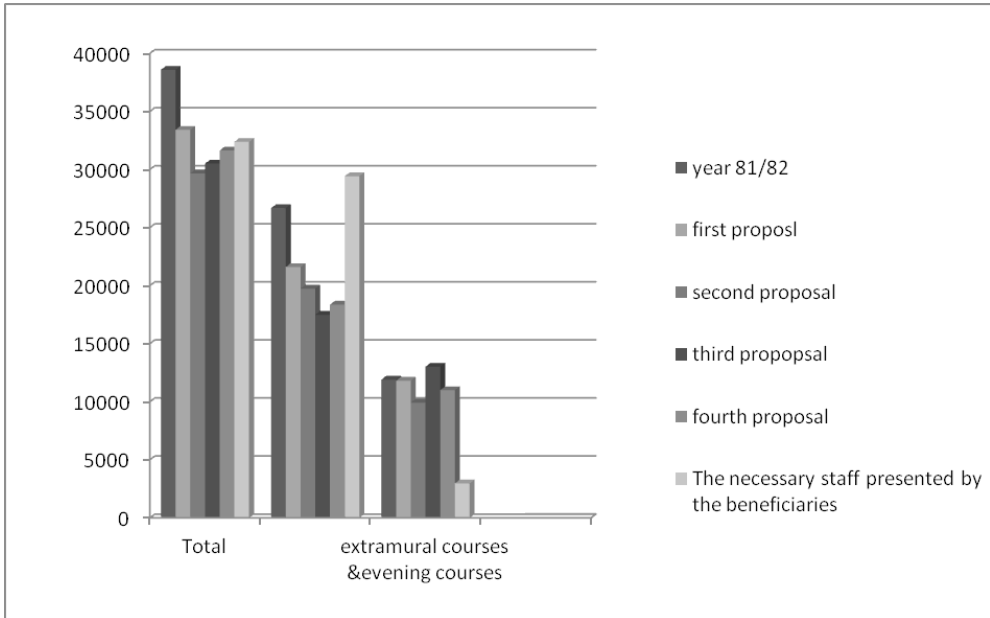


Figure 1. Comparison between the academic years 1981/1982 – 1982/1983 (between the figures for the 1981/1982 plan, all the 4 versions presented before 1982/1983 and the required staff presented by beneficiaries)

As can be seen in the figure 1, none of the proposals drafted by the ministry equaled those of the previous year. On the one hand, only the first proposal, dated March 3, 1982, exceeded the required staff presented by beneficiaries. As regards daytime courses, the required staff presented by beneficiaries seems surprising, since it exceeds the number of places allocated the previous year. On the other hand, the number of places for extramural and evening courses was very low as compared to the places allocated by the ministry. At the same time, this

may be interpreted as the beneficiaries' preference for graduates of daytime courses, as compared to graduates of evening courses, who were already active in the work field, but could not dedicate the same amount of time to studying as compared to the other category.

We could draw another comparison between the staff which attended higher education in 1981, the estimated number of students according to SPC, the staff required by the beneficiaries, and the number of students proposed by the Ministry of Education.

Table 6. Proposal on the number of students 1982/1983. Status as compared to the required staff presented by SPC

No.	Education field	Staff with academic education 1981	Number of students estimated by SPC based on the required work force	The necessary staff presented by beneficiaries			Education proposals for the 1 st year of the academic year 1982/1983
				Total	Out of which:		Total
					Daytime courses	Evening courses and extramural courses	
	Total General	541305	12475	32387	29422	2965	31641
I	Technical	203525	5250	18965	17607	1358	20215
A	Engineers	160935	4735	14882	14180	702	16115
B	Assistant engineers	42590	515	4083	3427	656	4100
II	Agronomical	<i>missing</i>	<i>missing</i>	1926	1726	200	1450
III	Economic	75010	1340	4760	4172	588	4000
IV	Medical and Pharmaceutical	49235	1175	2305	2305	-	2000
V	Academic and Pedagogical	135290	3190	3418	2773	645	3260
A	Academic	121290	2990	2468	1873	595	2540
B	Pedagogical (3 years)	14000	200	950	900	50	720
VI	Legal	24860	245	533	359	174	500
VII	Artistic			480	480	-	216

Source: Archive of the Ministry of National Education, Permanent Fund, file no. 223/1980.

Legend: 'The required staff with academic education, except for the teaching staff, is the one provided by the State Planning Committee. The required teaching staff is established by the Ministry of Education and Schooling, as per the prospective development of gymnasium, high school and professional schooling, with respect to sending teachers abroad for teaching assistance'.

As we have already seen in the table above, there was a considerable difference between the SPC estimates, the staff required by the beneficiaries, and the proposed number of students, especially in the technical field, where the share between the SPC requirements and the other two categories is greater, 1:3, therefore a difference of 14,965, between the SPC estimates and the number of students. In a previous

version which started from the total number of students of 29,860, SPC maintained its total number of required graduates (AMNE, Permanent, 223/1980), meaning a greater number than in the presented version, which we believe to be final. This inconsistency of the SPC in presenting the required numbers indicates that it failed to present real figures that reflected the reality of Romanian economy and the

country's development plan. As such, we assume that behind these figures there were some sort of negotiations which were likely to change at any time the number of students and required educated staff, irrespective of the requirements of Romanian society and economy. In addition, it is interesting that the difference between the figures indicating the required staff in the academic/pedagogical field is much smaller, which is due to the fact the Ministry of Education presented this required number. At the same time, we may notice that the share of the required number specified by SPC from the total number of higher education graduates is 2.0 per cent, which is a very small figure, since the average duration of the working life amounted to 35 years. And this was practically impossible, since on the long run the Romanian state intended to maintain the same level of higher education specialists. The estimates made by SPC specialists did not take into account the growth in the number of citizens or the fact that Romania counted itself among the last European countries as regards the number of students per 10,000 inhabitants¹.

So far, our analysis has focused on establishing the number of students in the academic year 1982/1983. We will hereinafter focus on how this decision was made, as well as the criteria which underlay the draw up of the education plan.

A documentary made by the Ministry of Education presented the following criteria which were taken into account when creating and distributing the education plan on fields of study, majors and schooling type for the academic year 1982/1983:

- 'The required working staff, higher education graduates, communicated by ministries, central institutions and county peoples' councils, without taking into account the students who dropped out during the schooling years.

- The required teaching staff established in accordance with the number of pupils in gymnasiums and high schools in the year 1986/1987.

- Providing the education places in the major for candidates qualified to be admitted to university in 1981 for the academic year 1982/1983.

- Continuing schooling under the form of evening classes incorporated in the last years, but also evening classes for assistant engineers organized by enterprises.

- The stock of candidates existing in the production facilities from the specific field for the purpose of establishing the number of places for evening courses depending on teaching units.

- Complying with the unit structure norms on the incorporation of study formations (series-groups).

- The distribution of the proposed number of places according to the education form (daytime, evening and extramural) did not consider the beneficiaries' proposals, which did not match the trends regarding the development of evening classes.

- Continuing education in evening classes incorporated in the last years, but also evening classes departments for assistant engineers organized by enterprises' (AMEN, Permanent, 223/1980).

As presented above, it is clear that the criteria were inconsistent and sometimes contradictory. While the first item considers the requests of

the beneficiaries (including ministries, county councils, central institutions), the document notes that ‘the distribution of the proposed number of places according to the education form (daytime, evening and extramural) did not consider the beneficiaries’ proposals which did not match the trends regarding the development of evening classes’. Thus, irrespective of the beneficiaries’ proposals, the planners mainly acted according to the political decisions of the central authority, disregarded the demands for daytime courses graduates, and increased the number allocated to evening classes. It is difficult to assess whether this preference was only ideologically motivated, or whether decision-makers also took other factors into account, such as, for example the smaller costs of evening classes, or the fact that a student enrolled in this type of schooling form had to be active in the labor field for at least 2 years and continue to work throughout his/her studies.

The most important time in approving the education plan was the one in which the Executive Political Committee of Communist Party’s Central Committee discussed the proposals. For 1982 we will review the transcript of this meeting, and we will attempt to conclude whether the severe cut in places was decided then or at a later moment. At the same time, we will analyze the caused which led to these drastic cuts. The analysis will begin by presenting the meeting conclusions, namely: ‘We believe the proposals were made in close connection with the requirements imposed by the economic and social conditions in our country, thus ensuring the required

teaching staff thoroughly educated for their fields of activity, including the actions of cooperation abroad, as per the prospective plans, the growth of our national economy in the following years’ (ANIC, CC-PCR-Cancelarie, 31/1982, 16-20). These conclusions, the number of students approved for the academic year 1982/1983 were ‘in close connection with the requirements imposed by the economic and social conditions in our country’, and were emphasized by a decrease by 6,949 study places.

During the meetings, the issue of reducing the number of places for engineers was discussed. The topic was initially raised by Paul Niculescu Mizil² and it was later taken over by Nicolae Ceaușescu: ‘Paul Niculescu Mizil: the question refers to the considerable reduction of the number of students in technical education. I have noticed the largest reduction in the technical field. This paper fails to mention the causes behind this state of affairs. This happens at a time when in some fields, such as for example, maritime fleet, we should not be reducing the numbers, but raise them. N. Ceaușescu: Why have the comrades requested so few engineers? I have asked myself the same question’ (ANIC, CC-PCR-Cancelarie, 31/1982, 16-20). Besides the transportation field, which Ceaușescu initially referred to, he was also interested in other fields. All the other questions were answered by the especially appointed ministers. It is worth noting that no one mentioned any intervention of the Ministry of Education or the State Planning Committee, which were the institutions in charge with the education plan.

The answers given to Nicolae Ceaușescu were as follows:

Vasile Bulucea [Minister of transport]: For the maritime fleet, this number of students is not sufficient for the program we currently have. Comrade General Secretary, we have also taken into consideration your indications. In the late 1985s, as compared to the required numbers, we will be having 455 extra graduates, covering the future growth of the maritime fleet.

Neculai Agachi [Minister of the metallurgy industry]: We have also discussed this matter, and we believe we have a reserve of at least 20 per cent as compared to the calculated required number. Therefore, we have a minimum of at least 20 per cent for any additional requirements.

Ioan Avram [Minister of the car industry]: For us, as regards engineers, we have maintained the same level. However the massive reduction affects assistant engineers, and we have especially preferred assistant engineers educated in evening courses. Thus, the graduates of these years cover our requirements, and we have a 20 per cent surplus.

Alexandru Necula [Minister of the industry of machines and tools, electro-technique and electronics]: The same is valid for us, our requirements have been covered.

Ion Lăzărescu [Minister of mines]: We have taken into account all the jobs for which we need specialists, as well as the best distribution of graduates, because at present we already have engineers involved in professional training and who are employed as workers and master workers. Therefore, their number should be diminished until 1985.

Gheorghe Vlad [Minister of oil]: Taking into account the growth in the field of oil and the increasing share of depth drilling, we have increased the number of engineers to the detriment of assistant engineers.

Nicolae Ceaușescu: But are provisions any good?

Gheorghe Vlad: Yes, they are.

Nicolae Ceaușescu: Does any minister have anything to add? What about the chemistry sector?

Adrian Stoica [State secretary with the Ministry of Chemical Industry back in 1984]: Our requirements are covered.

Nicolae Ceaușescu: What about agriculture?

Ion Teșu [Minister of agriculture and food industry]: The proposed number cover our requirements (ANIC, CC-PCR-Cancelarie, 31/1982, 16-20).

During the meetings held with the Political Committee, the communist leaders focused on the major ministries and on the economic fields considered to be a priority. Although these ministries were seen as a priority, none of them complained about the fact that the number of study places was significantly reduced, and that they did not comply with their previous requirements. All the members who were inquired on the topic of the number of students declared themselves satisfied and happy with what they had received, and many of them thanked for the staff surplus. Nevertheless, not all the beneficiaries were satisfied with the proposed numbers, and there were several letters delivered to the Ministry of Education, prior to this meeting, in which they requested the supplementation of the number of students. It is interesting

that these two requirements came from ministries whose representatives, during the meeting with the Political Committee, expressed their agreement with the proposed plan. For instance, the Ministry of the car industry sent a letter to the Ministry of Education in which it requested the following: ‘For the academic year 1982/1983 and the following years, we recommend to maintain at the Faculty of mechanics in Sibiu a minimum number of 100 Machine Construction Technology (TCM) engineers for daytime classes, 60 engineers for evening classes, 60-80 assistant engineers for daytime classes, and 80-100 assistant engineers for evening classes’(AMEN, Permanent, 223/1980), while the Ministry of

chemical industry sent a letter requesting the following: ‘in order to of meet the requirements of our units, please approve an increase by 10 places in addition to the number proposed by the Ministry of Health of the number of 1st year students at the Faculty of Pharmacy in the academic year 1982-1983’(AMEN, Permanent, 223/1980). Despite these requirements, after preparing the schooling plan and the admission exam, we have noticed that these requirements did not consider the changes requested by the ministries. As such, in respect of the request of the Ministry of the car industry, after the admission exam at the Faculty of Mechanics in Sibiu, 44 students were admitted to take daytime classes as

Table 7. *Students admitted in the 1st year for the academic year 1982/1983*

	1981/1982		1982/1983		Differences		School plan proposal 1982/1983	
	Number	Share	Number	Share	+	-	Number	Share
Total	38475	100,0	31908	100,0	-	6567	31641	100,0
Daytime classes	27720	72.5	19176	60.1		8544	18364	58,04
Evening and extramural classes	8737 2018	22.69 5.26	10492 2240	32.88 7.02	1755 222		10997 2280	34,76 7,20

Sources: Archive of the National Statistics Institute (1982), *Invatamantul superior la inceputul anului universitar 1982-1983*, and Archive of the Ministry of National Education, Permanent Fund, file no 223/1980.

compared to the 100 requested places, while 157 were admitted to take evening classes as compared to the 60 requested places. At the category of assistant engineers, no student was admitted to take daytime classes, when the ministry requested 60-80 places, and 53 students were admitted to take evening classes as compared to the 80-100 requested places. As regards the second example, the requested

number of students was not found in the approved version, and as opposed to the beneficiaries’ request of 157 places, the Ministry of Education proposed a number of 150 places.

Even though the differences were significant, the fact that the number of students did not take into account the beneficiaries’ requests, but also the fact that they did not dare to protest in the presence of Nicolae Ceaușescu leads us

to the conclusion that they were either satisfied and that the numbers they presented initially were ‘artificially increased’, or that there was unofficial awareness that the country was in recession and that cuts were needed in all fields. At the present we do not have access to the archives of the State Planning Committee, where we believe we may discover important documents that could bring light into this matter.

The next step after approving the number of students was the admission exam. After passing the exam, the number of Romanian students admitted to university was as follows:

The table 7 shows a decrease by 6,567 students as compared to the previous year, which is a decrease by approx. 17.06 per cent. At the same time, we may notice that there was a massive reduction affecting daytime courses by approx. 8,544 students; student’s numbers were increased in particular for evening classes, in accordance with the principles supported by the communist leaders.

The differences with the schooling plan may be explained by the fact that the decision issued by the Board of Ministers stipulated the methods and conditions under which the approved figures could be amended. Therefore, the Ministry of Education and Schooling ‘would be able to approve the increase or decrease of the number of students as provided for in annexes 1 and 2 by no more than 5 per cent, depending on groups of majors, according to the required number of teachers in the national economy and the results of the admission exam. In the case of technical higher education the schooling plan can be changed within a margin of up to 10 per cent’

(AMEN, Permanent, 330/1972, 2). Supplementing the number of places for various majors would require new approvals.

The causes behind this decrease reside in the expenditure cuts of the 1980s, when Nicolae Ceaușescu decided to pay off Romania’s foreign debt. The cuts mainly affected daytime courses, while for evening courses the share and number of places increased, due to the fact that the students admitted to take this schooling form were already active in the labor market, and the expenses incurred with their education were significantly lower, since they were not granted scholarships, or places in campuses. This can be noticed in the reduction of the number of scholarships granted in the entire system, from 77,000 in the academic year 1981/1982 to 64,170 in the academic year 1982/1983 (AMEN, Permanent, 223/1980). At the same time, the reduction of the number of students resulted in a decrease by 4 per cent in the number of teachers and professors (AMEN, Permanent, 223/1980), while no promotions were possible in the system.

We believe an important role in the decision making process of approving the number of students for the year 1982/1983 was held by compliance with the instructions issued by the State Planning Committee in its discussions with the Ministry of Education. In addition, we could argue that the decisions were made by the central power and afterwards imposed on the system, and they did not take into account the beneficiaries’ requirements.

The academic year 1982/1983 underwent the most drastic changes

as regards the number of places put up for admission in the higher education system in the 1980s, with cuts amounting to over 6,500 places. This trend continued in the following years, bringing along shrinkage of the higher education system while the number of potential students was growing. In respect of the decision making process, we may notice that the meeting with the Political Committee was merely a formality in the schooling plan approval, since the decision was reached long before the meeting

Such cuts were obviously unpopular, and furthered the estrangement between Ceaușescu's regime and the society as a whole. Of course, socialist systems were supply driven, and often disregarded social demand. In this particular case, the cuts in the study places increased the pressure on youngsters who wanted to have access to white collar careers inside the system. It is difficult to estimate the exact number of people frustrated by this decision, because we should not only count those who failed the admission competition, but also their relatives. But the cuts did not frustrate only youngsters and their families, or the teaching professionals directly interested in the development of higher education institutions. The decision-making process also disregarded to a considerable extent the opinions/interests of managers inside the system, and therefore contributed to the alienation of large parts of industrial technocracy from the party leadership.

This discrepancy highlights the image of Ceaușescu's regime, in which decisions were made by the central power without any in-depth analysis of the demands formulated by society and economy, which should have been precisely the building block of the system.

Notes

¹ See *Anuarul statistic al Republicii Socialiste Romania 1981*, Central Statistics Department, 1981. As such, according to the directory, in 1979 Romania had 87 students to 10,000, while Hungary had 97, Bulgaria 102, Czechoslovakia 125, the USSR 196.

² Former minister of education, at the time president of Centrocop (1981-1989).

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