

POLITICIZATION OF THE ROMANIAN PRE-UNIVERSITY EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM. TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract. *This paper examines the teachers' perspective on the politicization of the Romanian education system. There are numerous studies on the politicization of the administrative systems and particularly of the education systems, but prior research has not examined the inside perspective of teachers on this negative phenomenon. To reveal the level of politicization of the Romanian educational system and to see if the opinions regarding educational issues increase the opinions regarding politicization, a survey was conducted on the Romanian teachers from pre-university education (N= 3140). The findings show that the teachers consider to a great extent that managerial positions in education are occupied with political influence. The results of the regression indicate that only the opinions that legislation in education, curriculum, teachers' motivation and school connection with the labor market are problems of the educational system that increase the opinion that there is politicization. Given the value of the adjusted R square, it can be concluded that the opinion regarding politicization is slightly influenced by the opinions regarding the educational system problems. These findings show that the contest to occupy the managerial position in education should be transparent and involve teachers in order to diminish the opinions regarding politicization. The teachers' opinions regarding politicization should be improved so that reforms or policies in education, i.e., Educated Romania of the Romanian Presidency, to succeed.*

Keywords: *politicization; Romanian education; teachers; problems in education; linear regression*

Introduction

Politicization gained additional popularity within the context of European integration, expanding from a macro (continental) to a micro (state) level, a fact that calls into question the European politics (Zürn, 2019, p. 977). While Romania has crossed the 15-year of EU membership threshold and continues to advance on its European path, politicization remains an issue that requires further research, particularly to understand its impact on implementing EU goals.

The educational policy develops in political groups with common interests and wants to dominate in promoting opinions (Supovitz, 2017, p. 53). In Romania, politicization has negative implications in all systems, and the educational one is not an exception (Profiroiu & Negoită, 2022; Troncotă & Ioniță, 2022). Although certain advantages can be pointed out, its broad and long-term consequences make depoliticization preferable. Politicization stems primarily from appointing people lacking the necessary competence to leadership positions, and contributes to the overall inefficiency of educational institutions. Programs such as *Educated Romania* initiated by the Romanian presidency (2021) demonstrate the national interest in the educational environment. This program does not specify the presence of politicization in the Romanian educational system, but it stresses the absence of professional standards and the appropriate initial training of the principals. Moreover, the “increased role of inspectorates in appointment /organization contests for the position of principals, in the disadvantage of the role of the school community, in which the manager will activate” (p. 64).

In light of these aspects, the present article aims to identify to what extent teachers – as directly involved actors, with first-hand knowledge – believe that politicization exists and whether their views on educational issues influence their opinions regarding the political implication of occupying management positions in education. Based on the specialized literature and previous research, we propose the following research questions on this topic of interest:

RQ1: To what extent do teachers consider the Romanian pre-university education system politicized?

RQ2: To what extent do the teachers' opinions regarding the educational system's problems influence their opinions regarding the politicization of the Romanian pre-university educational system?

The research questions were answered on the basis of a survey completed by 3140 teachers from the preuniversity educational system.

Literature review

Theoretical framework of politicization

Depoliticization is a topic of increasing interest (de Nardis, 2017, p. 341). Politicization is an increasingly discussed and controversial topic globally and locally, and in both public (state) and private (such as multinational) systems. The political system can impose its power over the administrative system through politicization, so politicization can be perceived as a vital tool in this regard (Ståhlberg, 1987). Previous studies show that the most common political appointments are in bureaucracies in the United States and many Latin American countries (Weber et al., 2007). Moreover, politicization is

present in more rigorous bureaucracies that manifest in other forms, such as trust in influential political advisers, i.e., Westminster-style governments and French cabinet ministers (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2008). Also, Asian countries are no exception to the manifestation of politicization by adopting less transparent and more indirect methods and avoiding the direct formulation of actions (Poocharoen & Brillantes, 2013). Continuing on a European level, "politicization is one of the most intensely discussed concepts in research on the European Union (EU) today" (Hurrelman et al., 2015, p. 43). Furthermore, "Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries have been characterized as highly politicized" (Bach et al., 2020, p. 5). However, despite the common communist heritage, the CEE countries developed different pre-communist administrative models (Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2019).

There is no agreement among researchers or within international organizations regarding politicization, there are various perspectives of politicization, both from a geo-political, organizational, and social point of view. With the amplification of the crises in the European Union, European integration took place through different stages: "public discussion, debate, and contestation" (Schmidt, 2019, p. 1018). Therefore, the most important factors in the politicization process of Europe are national governments and political parties, because they become the links between specific countries and the European Union. As a result, the governments in question have tremendous power in influencing citizens' views on the European Union integration. Critical situations can arise from this point, such as political crises that lead to the organization of referendums (Ares et al., 2017). A landmark moment is the UK's vote to leave the EU (2016 Brexit referendum). Therefore, an indication of citizens' attitudes toward the EU is given by the trust they have in state institutions (Ares et al., 2017).

According to Hustedt and Salomonsen (2020), politicization is based on the relationship between the politician and the civil servant, respectively political control over the bureaucracy. On the other hand, Palonen (2003, p. 171) maintains that "politicization marks an opening of something as political, as «playable»". Given that the role of politics has long been discussed in various fields, it shows the "political potential" of politicization (Chelli & Cunliffe, 2022, p. 4).

In democratic societies, politicization remains a concept with a negative meaning (Peters & Pierre, 2004). The first and most important aspect is the inseparable link between public service and the political structure. This structure is important "in determining who gets what from the public sector" (Peters & Pierre, 2004, p. 2). In this sense, a fair relationship with the citizens, through public service is expected.

Peters (2013, pp. 17-19) identifies six subtypes of politicization: *direct politicization* – this type of politicization is considered to be rare, *professional politicization* – which consists of the appointment of individuals who are loyal to the ruling party as directors or other persons in managerial positions; *redundant politicization* – a mix of competent civil servants and loyal political officials appointed to oversee the former for future policy decisions; *anticipatory politicization* – discourages individuals from remaining in or running for leadership positions when a political regime is dominant or comes to power; *dual politicization* – this is common in presidential regimes, when two political institutions with different policies try to impose their own candidates; *social politicization* – social actors or key opinion leaders (KOLs) have the power to influence the situation of political officials, respectively political fields, through street or online actions.

Regarding the mechanism of politicization, this phenomenon can take three forms: (1) formal, (2) functional, and (3) administrative politicization (Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2014, p. 747). The first form can work as a method of trust between the minister (or another political figure) and the party with beneficial results for both parties. Under the legal practice, this results in certain formal rules that allow for political recruitment detrimental to meritocratic recruitment. Thus, formal politicization can function as a means for the minister to ensure party political responsiveness, provide additional powers, and provide the minister with an advisor based on a relationship of personal trust (Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2014). The last two are the most important forms of politicization (Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2014). The way in which the public service behaves politically is functional politicization. Thus, the core of this type of politicization is "the provision of political-tactical advice" (Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2014, p. 750), while administrative politicization consists in the "intervention that undermines the principles and conventions associated with a professional and impartial public service" (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2008, p. 343). Thus, this type of politicization helps to identify how policy advisers "affect the neutral function of public office" (Öhberg et al., 2016, p. 3), since they take into account the fulfillment of the political agenda (Fuenzalida & Riccucci, 2018). An appropriate example in the present research is the intervention in appointing people to educational leadership positions.

To sum up, the politicization of public administration refers to using political criteria instead of merit-based criteria in the selection, retention, promotion, rewarding, and coordination of the work of public service employees (Peters & Pierre, 2004). This is considered a negative phenomenon, but it can also turn into positive results at the level of decision-making processes because it does not exclude the employees' managerial skills and relevant competencies. Therefore, in this paper, politicization is not defined positively as the process by which certain issues become the subject of public debate and, consequently, become concerns for the political system as it happens with the "politicization of the European Union" (De Wilde, 2011).

Politicization: from a Global to a National Perspective

Over time, the educational system has been more and more politicized, so it has become a topic of interest for candidates in electoral campaigns, hoping to influence the electorate to vote for them (Rose, 2004). And this would not necessarily be a negative thing if the politicization were transparent, and aimed at improving student results in a fair way, and the change of the old policy would also be achieved. In the United States of America, the most politicized state in education is Michigan where there is a major shift in power in favor of officials with little or no school experience (Andrews & Warren, 2018). These challenging situations in the Michigan case are a symptom of anti-democratic trends and power grabs by well-connected individuals who want to make changes according to their own agendas for their own benefit (Andrews & Warren, 2018). Eastern European countries try to overcome their shared communist legacy of many years of economic stagnation, but "models of civil service neutrality exported from Western democracies may not be as suitable." (Peters and Pierre, 2004, p. 4). At the same time, there is diversity even in Western democracies considering that politicization depends on the constitution and administrative traditions (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2013; Hood & Lodge, 2006).

In Romania, the politicization of the educational system is not an exception; especially when it comes to appointing high positions (directors, inspector) by the ruling party or

by the dominant political spectrum in the county / locality (Frunzaru & Ștefăniță, 2021). According to the laws, the local authorities are involved in funding schools and have representatives in the schools' councils. Therefore, cooperation between the education system and the local authorities is indispensable, and principals must gently manage this relationship (Frunzaru et al., 2014).

The consequences of politicization

The consequences of politicization are generally considered to be negative, especially when it comes to the administrative and educational systems, which are perceived to be less effective the more politicized they are. Moreover, politicization can lead to the loss of confidence in the correctness of political institutions (Peters & Pierre, 2004).

"At the national level, politicization is a complex phenomenon" (Schmidt, 2019, p. 1018). According to a local study (Frunzaru et al., 2014, p. 42), the greatest dissatisfactions of Romanian teachers in pre-university education are related to the budget for education, legislation in education, curriculum, pupils' interest to learn, teachers' motivation, teachers' salaries, and school connection with the labor market. These dissatisfactions are associated with how people with decision-making power get into management positions (Frunzaru & Ștefăniță, 2021). This phenomenon is seen by teachers as negative, given that politicization is linked with greater opportunities for political corruption and more (Kopecky et al., 2016), so politicization affects the efficiency of the system in question (Ståhlberg, 1987). Therefore, the Romanian teachers consider that the aggravation of the problems of the educational system is determined by the excessive politicization, particularly by the employment of teachers in leadership positions with political influence (Frunzaru & Ștefăniță, 2021, p. 29). Hence, teachers believe that five main aspects require the attention of education union leaders: "improving communication, depoliticization, involvement of leaders, increasing motivation and increasing the prestige of teachers" (Frunzaru et al., 2014, p. 65).

The interviewed teachers believe that principals, inspectors, and the administrative management positions in the ministry of education are affected by political changes at the governmental level and, implicitly, this affects the stability of the education system, the quality of the managerial process, the level of trust in leadership figures, and it also leads to favoritism and demotivation (Frunzaru & Ștefăniță, 2021). Most teachers accuse political criteria of occupying leadership positions and believe this leads to disregard towards school problems, poor management, and abuses in the system. Politicization interferes not only with management positions but also in important decisions, budget allocation, relationships with other institutions, and bureaucratic or even curricular aspects. The belief that the system is subject to politicization leads to a decrease in trust in trade unions and a weaker involvement (Hantke, 2008), preventing addressing and solving school issues. In a study on the influence of local politics on educational decisions conducted by Ray and Bigham (2013), the results emphasize the importance of making data-driven decisions instead of politically influenced choices in regard to pedagogy, curriculum, instruction, and assessment by educational leaders. A solution can be a more active and vocal participation of teachers to help restore the balance (Warren et al., 2017), and the depoliticization of the system to improve the educational process (Frunzaru & Ștefăniță, 2021, p. 29).

Methodology

Method

A survey on Romanian teachers (N=3140) was conducted online using the Qualtrics platform between the 3rd of November and the 3rd of December 2020 to answer the research questions. Therefore, the study was realized during the COVID-19 Pandemic, when instruction was either frontal or online, or even hybrid (both frontal and online), depending on the virus incidence in the locality where the school is. Anonymity of the participants was guaranteed.

Sample

The majority of the respondents are Romanians (95%), women (83%), members of a trade union (83%), have an executive position in school (93%), have a full-time job in one school (84%) and live in the locality where the school is (64%). The participants in the survey are teachers from kindergarten to high school, from the rural area (31%) and the urban area, including Bucharest (15%). The youngest respondent is 18 and the oldest is 73 years (average=43,1; SD=9,4). Even if the questionnaire was administered using convenience sampling, the sample size and heterogeneity are reasons to accurately answer the research questions.

Measurements

The opinion regarding the politicization of the Romanian pre-university educational system was measured with a four-item scale developed by the authors. The respondents were asked to express their level of agreement on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree) with regard to how much the following four positions - school principals, school deputy-principals, school inspectors, and administrative management positions in the ministry of education, are occupied by the means of political influence. The higher the average of the answers is, the higher teachers consider that there is politicization in the Romanian pre-university educational system. The scale is reliable ($\alpha=0.85$). Similarly, the opinions regarding how much some aspects (budget, legislation, curriculum, pupils' interest to learn, teachers' motivation, teachers' salaries, and the relationship of school with the labor market) are problems of the educational system were measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree). The control variables are: gender, age, and if the respondents are members of trade unions and have management positions in the school.

Results and discussion

The teachers consider that there is politicization in the Romanian pre-university educational system to a high extent (Table 1). One of four respondents considers the highest level (with an average of 5 which is theoretically the maximum) that the principals, the inspectors, and the administrative management positions in the ministry of education are occupied with political influence. Only 10% of the participants have an average score of less than 3, the theoretical middle of the scale.

Table 1. Opinion regarding the politicization. Descriptive statistics

Mean	4.05
Median	4.25
Mode	5.00
Std. Deviation	0.91
Skewness	-1.07
Kurtosis	0.88
Minimum	1.00
Maximum	5.00

More than 80% of the research participants believe that there is political involvement in filling the positions of school inspectors and employees with management positions in the ministry, and also for school principals (70%), and deputy principal (60%). The current opinion on politicization is in line with previous results as teachers considered the politicization of education a problem of great significance, specifically referring to the way in which principals and school inspectors are appointed (Frunzaru & Ștefăniță, 2021).

The linear regression shows that the teachers' opinions that legislation in education, curriculum, teachers' motivation and school connection with the labor market are problems of the Romanian educational system that make respondents believe to a higher extent in politicization (Table 2). Moreover, the male respondents, of greater age, and are members of the trade union consider more that there is politicization in the Romanian pre-university educational system. Nevertheless, the model explains only 7.6% of the dependent variable. Therefore, the opinions regarding the problems of the education system influence only to a small extent the belief that managerial positions from the educational system are occupied with political support.

Table 2. Linear regression with politicization as a dependent variable

Independent variable	Standardized Coefficients (Beta)	Sig.
Budget for education	.013	.618
Legislation in education	.097	.000
Curriculum	.045	.042
Pupils' interest to learn	.031	.148
Teachers' motivation	.076	.001

Teachers' salaries	.018	.436
School connection with labor market	.079	.001
Sex	-.061	.001
Age	.060	.001
S/he is member of a trade union	.046	.015
Has a managerial position in school	-.031	.099

Note: Sex: 1=female, 0=Male; S/he is member of a trade union: 1=Yes, 0=No; Has a managerial position in school: 1=Yes, 0=No. Adjusted R Square=0.076

Conclusions

The current research reinforces the fact that teachers largely believe that there is politicization in the Romanian education system. Moreover, the findings show that teachers' opinions that legislation in education, school connection with the labor market, teachers' motivation, and curriculum are problems of the Romanian educational system increase their opinion regarding the politicization of the educational system. Nevertheless, the independent variables explain to a small extent the dependent variable (given the small Adjusted R Square). Therefore, politicization is generally seen as a big problem in Romanian education regardless of other problems of this system. However, the belief that some of the school problems are associated with politicization is emphasized in a previous study (Frunzaru & Ștefăniță, 2021), and the depoliticization of the system is a solution desired by most teachers. In the long run, political interference in leadership positions is considered to affect the stability of the system and the coherence of the managerial process. The multiple changes initiated in accordance with the political alternations at the governmental level are also considered to affect the quality of the educational process, the image of education, and the chance to benefit from real, coherent reforms with long-term visions. Teachers recommend depoliticizing the management positions at the level of inspectorates and educational units, and a selection process based on expertise and management skills. In regard to the possible negative consequences of the politicization of education, Dhungana (2012) mentions the disruption of education, especially in times of conflict, political indoctrination, political patronage, and jeopardizing school governance. Moreover, a basic element in Romania's pro-EU orientation is fighting corruption (Butnaru-Trancotă & Ioniță, 2022). Nonetheless, politicians can also "politicize the public service in order to change the policy" (Peters & Pierre, 2004, p. 6) and thus lead to depoliticization and an efficient functioning of the system in general, especially that of education.

Grindle (2012) mentions that "the national interest could best be served" by technocratic governance and thus, by expanding the state's role in the country's development. This means swapping the loyalty of a political actor or party with the one towards the state. Another good practice could be to regularly test the skills of both management and subordinate employees, regardless of the field of activity. Also, inspired by regulatory methods in the US, agencies specializing in skills validation have been developed recently (Hood & Lodge, 2006, p. 94). In addition to these practices,

transparency is another method by which politicization can be reduced, namely the constant and clear communication of ongoing actions.

The negative perception of teachers referring to politicization is in line with how politicization is used in common parlance, differently than turning a problem into a political one (Calhoun, 2002). Because through politicization we mean the appointment of employees (usually with management positions) on political grounds and not according to their competence, or making administrative decisions without taking into account the public interest, the findings show the dissatisfaction of Romanian teachers with the education management.

Since education is a powerful tool in developing societies, it can also be misused for different political purposes or affected by political interests or governmental changes which can leave a negative lasting impact on school management, resources, and the ability of the system to evolve. Therefore, politicization remains highly relevant in the education system and raises questions about the most appropriate ways to appoint school principals or other relevant leadership functions. Education trade unions in Romania accuse the politicization of the system and recommend that any reform in education start with eliminating political appointments at the level of management positions in schools and inspectorates (Dumbrăveanu, 2020).

The politicization of education is a problem that can lead to abuses in the system, especially in the relationship with school inspectorates, to political appointments in schools that affect the quality of school management and services. All these issues affect the beneficiaries of the education system and, in the end, society at large.

A major limitation of the research was that the survey was carried out in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the education system experienced extremely high challenges and stress. Moreover, the study was conducted in only one country, therefore the findings should be tested in different educational and political systems. In future research, other variables that can influence the opinion regarding the politicization of education must be considered. Also, we recommend continuing this research with studies on the consequences of the teachers' opinions regarding the politicization of the education system.

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