

## ROMANIA: UNIVERSITY AND POLITICS IN THE 1980S. CASE STUDY: THE UNIVERSITY OF BUCHAREST, THE 1980S<sup>49</sup>

MIRELA ROTARU  
Faculty of History,  
University of Bucharest  
E mail address: [rotaru.mirela@yahoo.com](mailto:rotaru.mirela@yahoo.com)



### ABSTRACT

The presentation I am submitting to your attention focuses on how the University of Bucharest operated during the 1980's, a very difficult period for Romania. As to be expected, the University of Bucharest, like the entire Romanian education system, took the full blow of communist experimental policies, reflecting quite accurately the general developments of the political system in Romania in the 1980s. The structure of Bucharest University, the curriculum, acceptance of the students via admission exams as well as the process of assignment of graduates from University of Bucharest to production units in the 1980's, are aspects of university life which were all affected by profound changes during the period subject to the research, leading to a genuine phenomenon in the Romanian society. The way these changes were reflected in the cultural mindset and the traumas generated by them are all points of interest addressed in my presentation.

**Keywords:** Admission exam; competition; assignment to production units; migrant families; mergers.

### INTRODUCTION

The University of Bucharest, like the entire Romanian education system, took the full blow of communist experimental policies, reflecting quite accurately the general developments of the political system in Romania in the 1980s. The legislation on the higher education university system closely followed the trends of the communist political system in Romania, "clearly defined in a succession of three phrases: restructuring according to the Soviet model; development through a relative opening and partial restoration of the national, pre-communist traditions; and Ceaușescu's pure and tough totalitarian regime, a relatively closed system under the burden of economic difficulties and the accentuated national-communist doctrine" (Murgescu, 2010, pp. 385-386), with the latter being specific to the 1980s as well.

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In terms of legislation, the education in Romania was controlled, in the 1980s, by the Education Law of December 1978. This law provided for, as a fundamental principle in the management of universities, the principle called labor and collective leadership. According to that law, the collective management bodies – the University Senate and the Board of Professors – included active members of the state and the party and the representatives of the Ministry of Education, as well as personalities of the cultural and scientific environment. The Head of the University Senate was a personality of the political, scientific or cultural life, and 12 to 15% of the total number of members were students ( Education Law, 1978, in *Off. B.113*). The collective management of the University's activity was conducted by an executive office, formed, as a mandatory rule, in addition to the rector and the pro-rector, of the Secretary of the Romanian Communist Party, the Chairman of the Student Associations' Union Board, and a representative of the Trade Union.

### UNIVERSITY OF BUCHAREST UNDER THE IMPACT OF THE CRISIS IN THE 1980S

Behind the rhetoric aspect of the law itself and of the various programmatic documents issued by the political regime, the higher education system in Romania gradually moved to a stage of general contraction ( please refer to Bozgan, & Murgescu, 2014, p. 289). In this respect, the very faculty-structure of the University of Bucharest, in the last years of communism, is relevant. Hence, education being subordinated to politics, strong ideologies and politicization, the University of Bucharest was affected, in particular in the second half of the eighth decade, by the symptoms of the systemic crisis that the Romanian education system was increasingly facing. At the end of the decade, the History and Philosophy faculties of the University of Bucharest went through a radical restructuring process, which resulted in these two faculties merging in 1977 to form the History-Philosophy Faculty. In the university year 1978, the process of merging sections and faculties became extremely visible. While at the beginning of the 1970s the University of Bucharest included 12 faculties, at the end of the decade, in 1979 – 1980, only eight of them had survived in the structure of the University. In the 1980s, the process of merging faculties continued in the structure of the institution. In those years, the Romanian Language and Literature Faculty was merged with the Foreign Languages Faculty into the Philology Faculty. One last similar move occurred in the University of Bucharest in 1986, when the Biology Faculty and the Geography-Geology Faculty merged into the new Biology-Geography-Geology Faculty. Only six faculties in the University of Bucharest remained in the university year 1988-1989.

One consequence of contraction of the higher education in Romania was a reduction in the total number of student places for the higher education set at national level in the 1980s. In those times, the annual number of student places was determined, according to the Education Law of 1978, by the National Science and Technology Board, based on a proposal made by the education

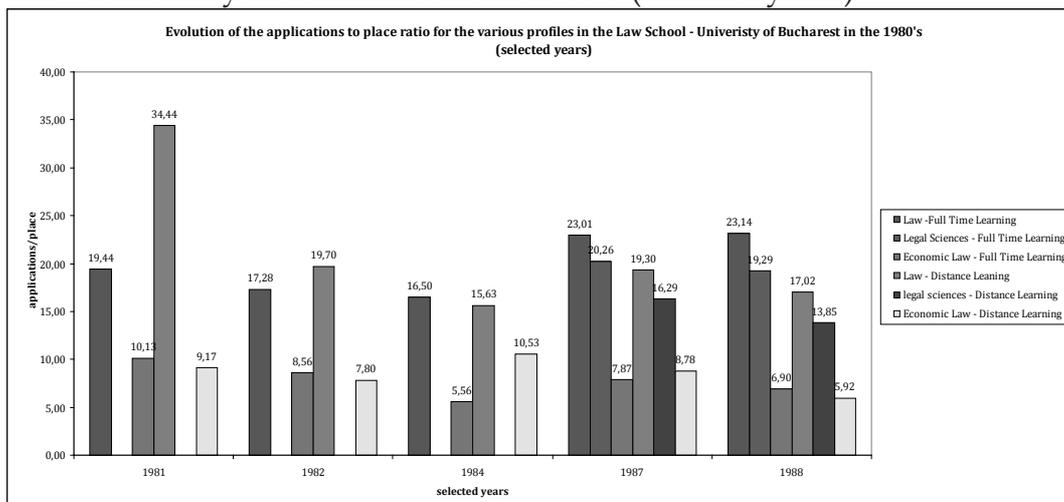
minister; the same Board had the responsibility to define the circumstances in which the doctorate diplomas could be granted. In the 1980s, these two important aspects of the academic policy (the corresponding number of newly admitted students and the criteria used for the selection of those who were to attend doctoral studies) were subordinated to the autocratic decisions of the Chairman of the Board, Nicolae Ceaușescu himself (Sadlak, 1990, p. 50). As of 1981, the regime started to reduce the number of places available to students in the higher education system at national level, with the number of places allocated for the full-time education mode sharply dropping to the benefit of those allocated to part-time education and (to a lesser extent) distance education. Technical classes were affected by these cuts too, in particular the sections dedicated to constructions and agriculture, therefore the number of young people involved in higher education decreased and pushed down Romania to the second last place in Europe, with a gross higher education employment rate of 8.6% compared to 8.5% in Albania and to an European average of 26.4% (Molnar, & Poenaru, 1993, p. 228). A very specific way of putting this would be to say that statistics on the number of students indicates the size of the student population decline in Romania of the 1980s. Hence, if in the university year 1980/1981 the total number of students reached its highest level ever at 192,769 (Sadlak, 1990, p. 59), in 1988/1989 the total number of students dropped to 159,465, but increased slightly to 164,507 (*Fond C.C. al P.C.R., ds. 17/1989 [Stock of the of the Romanian Communist Party's Central Committee, file 17/1989]*); for the numbers related to the university year 1988/1989 please refer to Perț, 2000, p. 336) in 1989/1990, the very fall before the 1989 Revolution. The number of students in the University of Bucharest trended down too, in the '80s, and reached a total number of 7,971 students in 1989/1990 (the numbers are taken from the Archives of the Bucharest University Rector's Institution, *Instrucțiuni [Instructions]-1980 and Fondul C.C....*), from 8,154 in 1981/1982. In this context, it is worth mentioning that the lower number of places dedicated to students in the higher education system, in the last decade of the communist regime, coincided with a significant demographic increase in the numbers of school population in general, as a result of the aberrant demographic policy measures implemented by Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime. It is well-known the fact that in 1986/1987 and 1987/1988 the cohorts of "decree-kids", generations of children born in 1967 and 1968 applied for university admission, years which are considered, because of the Decree nr. 770/1966, a demographic growth in Romania (if we want to see the growth of the school population in Romania one decade after the demographic measures implemented at the end of 1960s, all we need to do is mention that, if in the school year 1968/1969 in the primary education and gymnasium education segments the school population number was 2,915,910 and in 1978/1979 the same population had gone up to 3,423,135 pupils (please refer, for details on the topic, Perț, 2000, p. 336). The normal consequence of this contradictory development was that the competition for admission to non-technical faculties skyrocketed.

## EXTREMELY TOUGH COMPETITION FOR ADMISSION AT BUCHAREST UNIVERSITY – A FACT OF THE 1980'S

And since the meritocracy had already been imposed in Romania as a criterion by the education laws passed in 1968 and 1978 (according to the article 70 of the Education law passed in 1978, the admission to higher education was based on a mandatory concurs), the university admission examination became, because of the huge competition, like a milestone, a traumatic moment in the life of any young person who wished to become an University student in the then-Romanian society. The collective memory of those generations who witnessed this last decade of the communist regime still recall the nightmare that the senior high-school students used to go through, waiting for the university admission exam. The number of places allocated to the faculties were made public only at the last minute, when they were posted by the secretariat of the education institutions, and the emotional impact created by the very high discrepancies between the number of places assigned to the various university specializations and number of young persons on the candidate lists generated a pressure and a stress very difficult to overcome, even for those who, eventually, succeeded. The fact of being rejected involved, for the young men, the obligation to serve in the army and to carry out non-skilled work for the socialist economy, and this generated, in many cases, personal tragedies which in a culture focused on standing and public reputation led to the intensification of psychological issues such as shame, guilt, and wasted ambitions. The repeated attempts to be admitted to the university became the typical pattern of a system which was anything but generous in forming professional elites (the segment of population which graduated higher education school) and which, as a rule, offered professional alternatives which were not at all attractive (please refer, for this topic, to Cazan, & Pașca, 2014, pp. 244-266). In the specific case of the University of Bucharest, the figures attesting the competition for admission to higher education in the 1980s are more than explicated. The review of statistical data existing in the archive of the Rector's Office of the University of Bucharest revealed that the most sophisticated faculty of the University of Bucharest was in 1980, undeniably, the Law Faculty, with all its schools and specializations. The numbers firmly support this statement (please go to Annex nr. 1 for details). For the entire interval under review (1981 – 1989) the competition exceeded 20 candidates for one place in the full-time law specialization and ranged between 6 and 12.5 candidates/place for the full-time economic and administrative law specializations.

In the 1980s, the competition was fierce for the distance education mode as well. The advantages provided by the education system to those who graduated the law school in distance learning mode (the possibility to get promoted very rapidly at one's work place, but still benefitting of a salary and paid learning vacation) attracted an impressive number of candidates. The highest competition – 34 candidates/place – was seen in 1981 in the law specialization – distance learning mode. In the following years, the increase in the number of places allocated to this type of education entailed a reduction in the level of competition which went down to around 15 candidates/place.

**Figure 1.** Evolution of the applications to place for various profiles in the Law School – University of Bucharest in the 1980`s (selected years).



Source: Archive of the Rector's Office of the University of Bucharest.

One specialization that was highly in demand in the 1980s was the agricultural and natural sciences within the Biology Faculty of the University of Bucharest. The perspective of working in the agronomic research sector, within a research division located in the very proximity of the capital city, used to attract a lot of candidates to this university section. Hence, while in 1981, 22.6 candidates competed for one place in Agricultural Sciences, in 1986 the competition went up to 57.8 candidates for one place (in 1981, places to this specialization [i.e. 50] were allocated for the full-time education mode only. According to the data existing in the archives of the University Rectorship in July 1986, this specialization has only 22 places allocated to the distance learning mode in 1986).

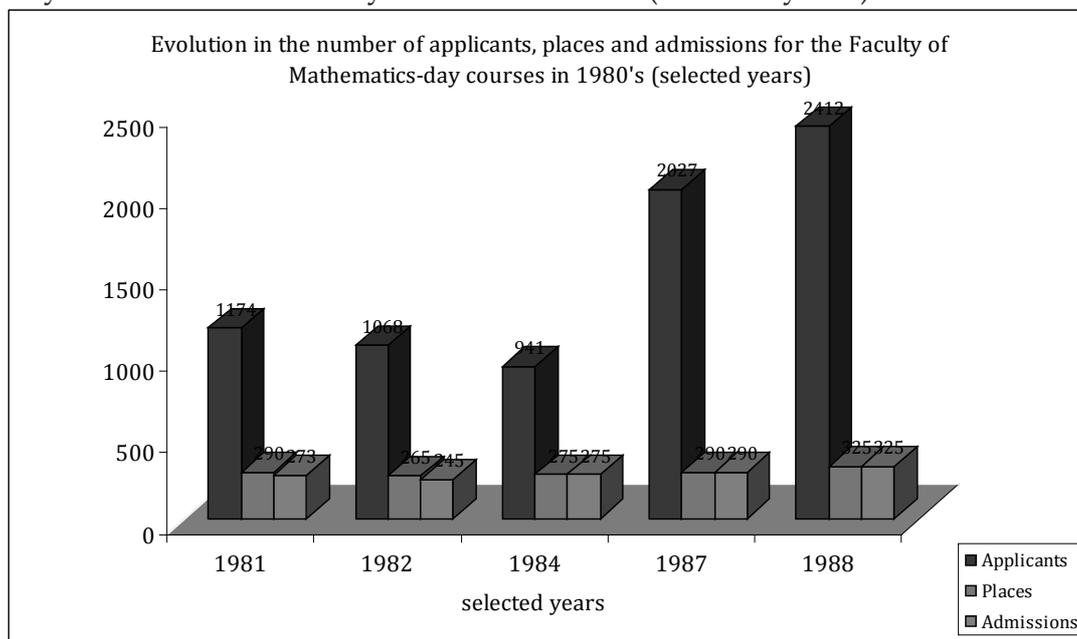
At the Physics Faculty, the most competed for specialization, in the last communist decade, the Technological Physics – the full-time mode education. With the number of places allocated to this school going down from 100 to 75 between 1981 – 1986, the competition went up from 8.5 candidates/place to 21.8 candidates/place during the same time span. In the Mathematics Faculty the most requested schools were Informatics and Mathematics-Physics. The competition rates for Informatics saw a spectacular increase in the 1980s, with the number of places remaining the same, but the number of candidates for one place went up from 6.2 to 23.7 candidates/place in 1987, and from 6.9 to 20.8 at the Mathematics & Physics, with a slight decrease in the number of places.

In the humanities schools, the competition was harsh in certain specializations, seen as very attractive at that time. The specialization Geography plus one foreign language in the full-time education mode, within the Geology – Geography Faculty, stood out for the very tight competition, with the rates increasing in the interval 1981 – 1986 from 19 to 27.7 candidates for one place.

As for the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures of the University of Bucharest, the competition level remained within the same parameters throughout the decade, with around 4-5 candidates/place. Sensibly tighter was the

competition for the Romanian Language and Literature Faculty, with 6 to 7 candidates competing for one place in the years under review.

**Figure 2.** Evolution in the number of applicants, places and admissions for the Faculty of Mathematics – day courses in 1980's (selected years).



Source: Archive of the Rector's Office of the University of Bucharest.

## THE AUSTERITY MEASURES IN BUCHAREST UNIVERSITY IN THE 1980's

The negative developments of the higher education in the 1980s are more difficult to catch in statistics, but they were no less severe. A slogan about the tight relationship between labor and education and research: "The foundation of schools is the polytechnization, the combination of labor, education and research- the primary drivers in the construction of socialism and communism in our country, for the progress and civilization of human kind" (Education Law, 1978), all students were forced to do field work with no connection to their specialization (including in agriculture). In addition, the accommodation in student dormitories, as well as the entire study and research activity of the time were impaired by the economic restrictions and the austerity measures implemented during that period of time. As we progress towards the end of the 1980s, we can see how the circumstances of the educational-training process become increasingly difficult. Hence, an instruction given over the phone by the Ministry of Education in November 1983 (Instruction nr. 16252 of November 25, 1983, in the Archive of the Bucharest University Rector's Institution, 3209/1983) was requiring all the faculties of the University of Bucharest to deliver all classes and conduct all other scientific and cultural activities (including libraries and reading halls) between 8.30 am and 5.30 pm each day, for the entire full-time mode segment, starting that very month, as the power was to be cut at

precisely 5.40 pm to all facilities in which the respective activities were carried out. Part-time classes were to be delivered in previously specified rooms until 9 pm at the latest, five days a week, including Sunday (on Sundays only the natural light was to be used). The situation was not better in dormitories or eating halls. The lack of investments in maintaining the student campuses led, in the end, at a dramatic worsening of accommodation in dormitories. In February 1986, the Ministry of Education communicated to the Rector of the Bucharest University the measures which needed to be adopted for the management of power and fuel and for saving drinking water. Reports submitted every month over the phone between the 1<sup>st</sup> of the month and the 11<sup>th</sup> of the month and on the 21<sup>st</sup> of the month, were meant to inform the Ministry of Education about how much of the electricity and natural gas allocations had been consumed in the respective month. On a quarterly basis, and on a monthly basis in Q1, the thermal power consumption was to be reported. The Agronomic Institute and the University of Bucharest were forced to take measures to complete and verify the new solar-energy hot water installations, in order to make sure they could supply hot water as of the month of April 1986 (The Ministry of Education, *Instruction nr. 9107/February 15, 1986* in the Archive of the Bucharest University Rector's Institution, Instructions nr. 117 - 1179). The staff numbers sent to the Rector of the Bucharest University in the same month required a drastic restructuring: the number of staff involved in the maintenance and services provided by dormitories and eating halls was reduced dramatically. So, it came as a surprise to no one that, when students came back from vacation in October, they found themselves in a dirty rooms, with scrapings of the old paint on the walls and toilets and bathrooms in a non-operational condition.

But staff restrictions were aimed not only at the administrative and support staff. The SRR State Council Decree nr. 367 of December 4, 1980 inaugurated a policy which led to an almost full bottleneck of the employment system in the university education which was now being under the control of Elena Ceaușescu's Cabinet 2. The Table below shows how the number of higher education teachers in Romania dropped in the 1980s.

**Table 1.** Quantitative evolution of high education in Romania, 1978-1989.

	Higher Education Establishments	Faculties	Total number of students	Total number of teaching staff
1978/1979	44	134	190,560	14,227
1983/1984	44	134	174,042	13,344
1988/1989	44	101	159,465	11,810

Source: *Education in Romania - statistical data*, Bucharest, National Statistics Commission, 1996, pp. 5, 7, 13 (cf. Bozgan, & Murgescu, 2014, p. 285).

The number of staff in the Bucharest University dropped by 50% in the 1980s and reached a minimum of 721 in 1989. People left the system, in most cases by retirement, after being demoted or they simply fled the country. Since promotions, in their turn, were almost entirely blocked, the University of Bucharest was dominated, in the last years of the communist regime, by lecturers over 40 years of age,

some even over 50. Therefore, it shouldn't be a surprise that, in 1989, the teaching positions accounted for 12.1% of the total positions (occupied and vacant) existing in the University, the number of Associate Professors accounted for 16.7%, lecturers for 42.8%, and assistant professors 28.4% (please refer to Murgescu, Sora, Gheboianu, & Rotaru, 2014, p. 319).

If we take into account the restrictions related to the international contacts and a dramatic decline in funds allocated to the purchase of specialized publications in the 1980s, we can reach the conclusion that „the education system in Romania increasingly operated under “Ceaușescu's pure and tough totalitarian regime”, characterized by the relative shutdown of a system dominated by economic difficulties and deepened national-communism” (Bozgan, & Murgescu, 2014, p. 290).

### ASSIGNMENT OF BUCHAREST UNIVERSITY GRADUATES TO THE LABOR SYSTEM IN THE 1980'S

Of the numerous aspects related to university activities, the assignment of graduates to the labor system, which was considered in the documents of those times as “an action of deep social and political signification” sees important developments in 1980, and this would generate actual “phenomena” inside the Romanian society. The graduates of Bucharest University were assigned to the labor system based on a process which, including in the 1980s, was regulated by the provisions of Decree nr. 54 of 1975. According to that decree, the criterion for assignment of graduates was the graduation rating, which was “established taking into account the learning performance, in observance of the standards on position assignment in the branch or sector to which the socialist unit belongs” (Decree 54/1975, Excerpt, Bucharest Law University Archives, Assignments, 1982).

The students with the highest ranking could choose any position of those made available to the graduating class. Graduates who requested positions in the rural regions, in the communes where they, their parents or spouses lived, or in the neighboring communes, were prioritized irrespective of their graduation ranking. Graduates who would request assignment to the working centers or towns where they, their parents or spouses, lived, with the exception of large cities, as referred to by law, were prioritized in the process of occupying positions in those localities or neighboring communes, provided that they obtained at least grade 7.

The evolution of the high education in Romania in the 80s, brings severe changes to the position allocation dynamics, in respect of the assignment of Bucharest University graduates. The “Methodological clarifications of how high education graduates – day classes, graduation year 1980 were distributed to the labor system” (MoE, “*Methodological clarifications of how high education graduates – day classes, graduation year 1980 were distributed to the labor system*”, Archives of the Bucharest University Rectorship, 2821/1980), as submitted by the Ministry of Education and Teaching in June 1980 to the rectorship of the Bucharest University, described, in a very specific way, the implementation of the graduates' assignment activity, step by step. The general provisions of the Clarifications referred to “prioritizing the

supply of staff to cover the needs of counties and areas facing a shortage of highly educated experts". In order to achieve stability of staff in those areas, the management of faculties and high education institutions, the respective UASC (ASC) associations, guided by the party organizations, had to develop activities aimed at convincing graduates to opt for the positions in their localities of residence. Only the graduates from the top 14 largest cities of Romania were not able to get a job in their home towns, as these cities were totally closed for graduates starting with the university year 1981.

The fact that the 14 main cities were closed to graduates in 1980 resulted in a sharp increase of the share of positions provided by the rural regions to graduates of Bucharest University. We must notice as well the very low numbers of graduates distributed to their localities of domicile or neighboring localities in the same counties. The impact of these changes on the Romanian society were, on one hand, related to the occurrence of migrant families (with spouses working in different localities) and on the other hand the occurrence of a commuting intellectual labor force, particularly manifest in the neighborhood of large cities closed to university graduates in the 1980 decade.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Education Law of 21 December 1978, considered by some authors perhaps the most complete piece of legislation related to education promulgated during the communist regime, was the main legal instrument regulating the functioning of higher education in Romania in the last years of Ceausescu era. Amid the political subordination, the sharpening even of ideologisation and politisation of education, University of Bucharest felt, especially in the second half of the eight decade, the signs of the crisis to be faced by the Romanian education system increasingly stronger.

A fact that was specific for the 1980s Romanian society was the rocketing competition for admission to the faculties of the University of Bucharest, amid the imposition of meritocratic admission criteria and the reduction in the number of student places, especially for the full time mode courses.

The lack of investments in the 1980s triggered a considerable deterioration in the standard of living and studying for the students of the University of Bucharest. Not only living conditions in student dormitories deteriorated, but the entire study and research activity has been disrupted by economic constraints and austerity measures imposed by the communist period.

The closure of the 14 largest cities in Romania in 1980 led to a sharp rise in the share of rural jobs for graduates of the University of Bucharest. These phenomena of migrant families (in which spouses would work in different places) and intellectual labor commuting appeared.

As a conclusion we could say that the 1980s marked in the history of Bucharest University a severe setback of the institution, the extremely serious situation in which the University was in 1989 foreshadowing very gloomy prospects in the absence of a change.

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## ANNEX 1

## COMPETITION FOR ADMISSION INTO THE LAW FACULTY

Reporting Year	Faculty Specialization	No of candidates (total)	Places according to the plan 1981/1982
1981	Law -full time learning	2333	120
	Economic law- full time learning	304	30
	Law - distance learning	1722	50
	Economic law- distance	550	60
1986	Legal- full time learning (total)	2718	140
	Law	2433	110
	Economic & administrative law	285	30
	Legal -distance learning (total)	2413	200
	Law	1940	125+2
	Economic & administrative law	475	75-2

1987	Legal sciences – full time learning	2836	140
	Law	2600	110+3
	Economic & administrative law	236	30-3
	Legal sciences – distance learning	2851	175
	Law	2412	125
	Economic & administrative law	439	50