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**THE WORLD BANK'S ASSISTANCE TO ROMANIAN EDUCATION
NEOLIBERAL POLICIES IN EDUCATION AND THE NEW GOVERNANCE
DOCTORAL THESIS**

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Summary

This thesis examines the historical processes that have shaped the transformation of Romania's education sector in the post-communist era, with a particular focus on the World Bank's role in policy design and governmental restructuring within the sector. It aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the historical roots of neoliberalism in Central and Eastern Europe by exploring the nexus between Romania's post-communist economic, political, and social uncertainty, the policies promoted by the World Bank in public education sector, and the local emerging elite response. A reassessment of the reforms proposed and implemented during the transition period is essential to meaningfully understand the current state of Romanian education. It offers the opportunity to evaluate the impact of those early reforms on the lives of students, parents, and teachers today.

The gradual decline in school participation, student performance, and the overall quality of education in most Romanian schools is a well-documented reality. Social inequalities are reflected in the education system, with family background being one of the strongest predictors of students' academic achievement and school placement (Țoc, 2018). Recent studies indicate that the rate of early school leaving is six times higher in rural areas than in large cities (Vasile et al., 2020). Roma students are among the most affected by limited access to education, experiencing a disproportionately high rate of early school leaving compared to the general population. According to data from the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2015), only 53% of Roma children of kindergarten age participate in early childhood education.¹ Despite the implementation of a National Strategy for Reducing Early School Leaving, 16.6% of young people aged 18–24 dropped out of

¹ For more information about the situation of the Roma education in Europe, check the [FRA report](#)

school in 2023—an increase from 15.3% in 2021.² Both the proportion of early school leavers and the timing of dropout reveal significant disparities between rural areas, small towns, and large urban centers.

We are essentially increasingly witnessing the polarization of the education sector, where "good schools" are attended by students from middle- and upper-class backgrounds, while "bad schools" are predominantly populated by poor students, Roma students, and those from rural areas (Țoc, 2018). Inequalities within the education system have become progressively harder to ignore, particularly since the introduction of PISA tests, which have provided valuable data on students' socio-economic backgrounds (Bădescu, 2019). A growing number of voices (Săveanu 2012; Țoc, 2018, 2024; Botezatu 2019) are drawing attention to disparities in student performance, largely attributed to differences in family socio-economic status. The accumulation of these inequalities is both a consequence of neoliberal ideologies shaping how education is organized and the government's failure to prioritize education within the national agenda.

According to Eurostat (2021), Romania's public spending on education, as a percentage of GDP, was the lowest in the European Union, reaching a historic low of 2.9%. This chronic underfunding is reflected in the unusually large financial burden placed on households, which contribute an additional 35% of what the government allocates to education—the highest proportion in the EU.³ At the same time, international expenditure on educational institutions, as a percentage of total spending from primary to tertiary education, remains relatively high at 3.4%.⁴

In response to the lack of public funding, students and their families are left to shoulder the increasing costs of education. Save the Children regularly publishes reports on the hidden costs of so-called "free education" in Romania. As these financial burdens continue to grow, a rising number of children are forced to drop out of school because their families cannot afford the expenses associated with attendance. In 2025, the average annual cost a family covers for each child's education is 9,818 lei, while the net minimum monthly wage is 2,574 lei.⁵ These hidden costs include private tutoring, uniforms, alternative textbooks, school supplies, classroom and school contributions, transportation, and more. For

² The latest data on the share of early school leavers at the EU level can be found here: [Eurostat](#).

³ You can access the full report here: [ESL Plus Report](#)

⁴ More information on Romania's education indicators can be found on [OECD site](#)

⁵ For more details on the hidden costs of education, visit: [Costurile Educației - Martie 2025](#)

children from low-income families, these expenses create insurmountable barriers to accessing education, threatening their fundamental right to learn.

The recurrent economic crisis and the government's withdrawal from the social sector are fueling anxiety about the future, leaving even the middle class feeling vulnerable. In a context where middle-class stability feels increasingly uncertain, parents invest in an “education with an edge” through costly extracurricular activities and private tutoring. These investments serve as forms of economic and cultural capital, aimed at securing their children’s future amid growing concerns that the next generation may face even greater challenges than they did (Savu, Lipan, & Crăciun 2020).

In order to design more socially just public policies, redress these inequalities, and increase social security, it is essential to understand the genesis of current circumstances and to shift our focus toward the key international and local actors responsible for policy design during a “critical juncture.” The first post-socialist decade was a period in which, as Capoccia (2016: 118) argues, “decisions of important actors were causally decisive for the selection of one path of institutional development over other possible paths.”

An important player in the Romanian educational landscape was the World Bank. As the largest international funder of education globally, the World Bank has a long-standing tradition of providing sector analysis, policy advice, and technical assistance to Romania. Beginning in 1994, World Bank experts, in collaboration with Romanian government officials, designed a series of policies and reforms that significantly transformed the pre-university education sector. These reforms were grounded in principles of efficiency—emphasizing competition, professionalization, and accountability—along with inter- and intra-sector coordination, decentralized governance, and economic relevance. In essence, the reforms reflect what scholars commonly define as neoliberalism in education.

Neoliberal policymaking has vastly different consequences depending on class, race/ethnicity, gender, and geography (Fabricant & Fine, 2013). As a result, there is growing interest in the study of neoliberal “global education policy” (Ball, 2012), with diverse research foci ranging from policy mobility and network analysis (Ball, 2012; Au & Ferrare, 2015), to neoliberal themes and their impacts (Apple, 2006; Bell & Stevenson, 2006; Anyon, 2011; Fabricant & Fine, 2013), as well as critiques of and alternatives to neoliberal policies (Torres, 2009; Fabricant & Fine, 2013). However, as Samier (2018) points out, much of the discourse on neoliberal globalization in education originates in the West.

A key distinction between Western states and developing or transitional countries is that, in the former, neoliberal education policies were largely shaped by national elites, whereas in the latter, these policies were often imposed through external pressures (Bell & Stevenson, 2006; Brock-Utne, 2012; Elfert & Ydesen, 2023). These contextual differences between the "center" and the "periphery" (Wallerstein, 1974, 2004) compel us to examine the broader global economic and political shifts that enabled such policy prescriptions to take root, as well as the key actors responsible for implementing them.

Critical scholars from countries that have been recipients of neoliberal policy transfers have identified the World Bank as a key "transmission belt" for policies promoting privatization, decentralization, and deregulation (Budnik et al., 2011; Klees et al., 2012; Guilherme & Picoli, 2019; Tóth et al., 2018). In the Romanian context, a growing body of research links the country's rising social inequalities to external constraints and to the ways in which local elites have navigated these pressures in the post-communist era (Ban, 2014, 2016; Vincze, 2020; Georgescu, 2021; Vincze et al., 2024). This research contributes to the expanding critique of neoliberalization in the education systems of transitional countries. However, beyond a theoretical critique, it aims to uncover the inner workings of neoliberalism by addressing a fundamental question: how does it operate?

This thesis situates its central research question within the broader fields of education and globalization, examining how certain systems of thought achieve hegemony, shaping and influencing global education structures. Focusing on World Bank-funded project loans as key points of inquiry, it explores the historical conditions that enabled the emergence of new knowledge frameworks and institutional practices in Romania's pre-university education sector. The research that served as the foundation for this thesis addressed three interrelated questions: 1) What role has the World Bank played in shaping internal education policies and governance structures in Romania, and how has this role evolved over time? 2) What were the "conditions of possibility" (Foucault, 1989)—both discursive and material—that facilitated these specific reforms? 3) How did national actors respond, how were these policies accepted, adapted, resisted, or rejected?

I approached these questions starting from the premise that World Bank policies are not merely "technical projects" designed to identify the most efficient ways to achieve educational objectives (Thrupp & Archer, 2003). Rather, education policies—at both the global and national levels—are inherently political, shaping power dynamics and societal

outcomes. As Bell and Stevenson (2006, p. 9) argue, "Policy is political: it is about the power to determine what is done. It shapes who benefits, for what purpose, and who pays. It goes to the very heart of educational philosophy—what is education for? For whom? Who decides?"

The case study of Romanian education policies and governance networks, which I aim to explore in this thesis, can only be fully understood through a comprehensive theoretical framework. The neoliberal turn in global education, the emergence of new forms of governance, and the influence of transnational organizations such as the World Bank are the result of global market expansion, both geographically and into sectors traditionally under the umbrella of the state, such as education. At the same time, the institutional practices associated with neoliberalism are part of an ongoing struggle over the representation of education at both national and global levels. However, this conflict is rarely equal. Those with greater material resources also possess more power to produce and disseminate ideas, which in turn serve to reinforce their financial interests.

Given these dynamics, this research draws on both materialist and constructivist traditions, exploring the fertile tensions that arise from their juxtaposition. On one hand, it is grounded in new institutionalism, particularly in Meyer's (1980) world polity theory, which highlights the increasing "statelessness" of the international system, where both local and global institutions prioritize legitimacy. According to Meyer et al. (1997), highly rational global models restructure nation-states through processes such as structural isomorphism, which, rather than being conflict-ridden, often unfold in a surprisingly consensual manner.

On the other hand, the study engages with the extensive body of literature on neoliberal governance, drawing explanatory power from Marxist perspectives. A materialist approach within international political economy emphasizes structural power, which is embedded not only in ideas and institutions but also in material resources. Harvey's (2005) analysis of neoliberalism, Ball's (2012) emphasis on global educational networks, and Ban's (2016) historical examination of the local neoliberal hybrid have served as key theoretical references in shaping the arguments presented in this thesis.

Methodologically, this thesis draws on a diverse range of primary and secondary data sources, including individual interviews, archival research, document analysis, and participant observation. Based on the analysis of these data, the thesis argues that:

- 1) The World Bank used specific assertions and representations to legitimize its approach to education policy in post-socialist Romania. The discourse employed was

instrumental in reproducing the dominant neoliberal ideology inherent in the Bank's institutional structures. More precisely, the Bank's experts interpreted and constructed Romania's educational landscape in a way that framed its deficiencies and problems as issues that could only be addressed through the neoliberal practices they offered. However, the emergence of this discourse must be situated within Romania's broader social context after the fall of communism. Therefore, this inquiry becomes a matter of "the insertion of history (society) into a text and of this text into history" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 189).

- 2) In line with its "good governance" framework, the World Bank has played a crucial role not only in spreading neoliberal global education policies but also in reshaping governance itself. This includes the creation of governance networks—what Ball (2012) refers to as "heterarchies." In a decentralized system, the state's steering role, guided by managerial and entrepreneurial principles, requires effective knowledge management (Stromquist & Samoff, 2000). More importantly, for the argument of this thesis, it involves managing relationships between various state and non-state actors. Based on a review of archived newspaper articles as well as interviews with World Bank experts, I argue that the Bank not only encouraged private and non-profit involvement in public education but also directly supported their creation and expansion. Engaged both at the policy level and in education delivery, NGOs became key allies of the Bank, legitimizing and sustaining neoliberal policies, while neutralising dissent. The Bank's continued involvement in the Romanian education sector influences the policymaking process and transforms the role, structure, and ultimately the power of the state.
- 3) The Bank successfully garnered support from internal actors across the political spectrum by employing different approaches: appealing to liberal and conservative politicians, as well as education specialists, with a democratic, elitist, and civilizational rhetoric rooted in strong anti-communist sentiments, while promising to ease the financial burden on a left-leaning government. Amid the chaos and volatility of a declining economy and intense social conflicts, the social democrats needed both the symbolic and financial power of the Bank. They sought the Bank's support to

signal to the global community that Romania was a stable partner for foreign investment. The World Bank's education policies, particularly in the early years of the transition, provided enough flexibility, allowing each incoming administration to selectively adopt policy components that aligned with their political agenda and electorate. Resistance to austerity measures in the education sector primarily came from teachers' unions. Despite their fragmentation, the unions were effective in negotiating salaries and policies related to teachers' status. Over time, however, some leaders and factions aligned with the right-wing parties, gradually drifting away from their original mission.

The topic of this thesis is significant for several areas of literature, including globalization and development, sociology of education, as well as history and anthropology. It addresses key concerns related to democracy, participation in decision-making, and public accountability. First, this research aims to reconstruct the historical foundations that have granted neoliberal ideas the status of "truth," exploring the specific sites where knowledge is produced and disseminated, while examining both their discursive and material effects. Second, by addressing gaps in research on the role of international agencies in the education sector of Eastern Europe, the study seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on globalization and development, sharing these insights through scholarly articles both in Romania and internationally.

Third, my research aspires to extend beyond academic publications and presentations to engage a broader audience. A key objective is to foster local critique and create space for "subjugated knowledge" (Foucault, 1980). Developing a competitive discourse and empowering local truths can amplify marginalized voices in the realms of knowledge and power, serving as both a tool for self-reflection and empowerment. I share the conviction expressed by Kothari et al. (2019) that we must decolonize our thinking, particularly by deconstructing the notion of "development as progress," thereby opening the way for cultural alternatives that nurture and respect life on Earth.

My hope is that practitioners and policymakers in Romania's education sector, inspired by alternative discourses on education, will begin to recognize that knowledge is not fixed nor an objective truth. Instead, it is socially constructed, with meaning emerging through an ongoing process of experimentation, questioning, and reflection. As a result, neoliberalism

can be “undone,” and more just and compassionate alternatives to “banking education” (Freire, 1970) can be crafted. As the Santiago Declaration for Public Services⁶ states: “A public future means ensuring that everything essential to dignified lives is outside of private control and under decolonial forms of collective, transparent, and democratic control.” This future envisions the funding of universal public services, such as education, alongside a shift in power structures toward wider political participation and greater democratic control.

Organisation of this thesis

I begin my thesis by exploring the existing literature on neoliberalism, global education policy, and network governance. I contrast three major political-economic paradigms—liberal, Marxist, and neoliberal—examining their perspectives on education, with particular emphasis on how neoliberal ideology views government intervention in the education sector. The central concept that ties this study together is *network governance*, a descriptive and analytical term defined that refers to a form of governance involving both state and non-state actors (Ball 2012). I also discuss the democratic implications of developing governance networks and review the literature on the distinction between discourse and ideology in the study of neoliberalism.

In the second chapter, I outline the research methodology, detailing the data collection and analysis methods used in this study. I describe the types of analysis—documentary, ethnographic, and archival—which form the foundation of my arguments. The research draws on a diverse range of data sources, including individual interviews, newspaper archives, World Bank Staff Appraisal Reports, national laws and regulations, biographies, articles, and CVs. I provide detailed descriptions of these data and explain how I used them, while discussing ethical considerations and indicating the limits of the research.

The third chapter draws on a wide array of secondary data to track the history of the World Bank’s involvement in global education and the development of its “good governance” framework. This chapter aims to illustrate the “global” trends in education as embodied by the Bank. I argue that understanding the evolution of World Bank lending policies in education is crucial to contextualizing the organization’s position when it began

⁶ Our future is public. The Santiago Declaration for Public Services can be found [here](#)

engaging with the social sectors in Central and Eastern Europe. The analysis highlights the Bank's reliance on human capital perspectives in education and its continuous adaptation of discourse to maintain both its legitimacy and reputation as a "knowledge bank."

Inspired by the work of authors such as Fairclough (1995, 1999) and Ferguson (2003 [1990]), the fourth chapter explores how and why particular concepts and values associated with neoliberalism came to dominate Romanian educational reform in the post-communist period. It specifically examines how problems were represented in policies, a task that requires delving into systems of legitimization set in place to maintain elite power. I conduct a close textual analysis of the Education Reform Project (1994) to uncover the explicit and implicit assumptions, rationalities, and values—i.e., the "problematization"—that shaped neoliberal policies and interventions in education.

The following chapter addresses the topic of network governance in the Romanian education system, with a focus on the role of NGOs. I argue that the Bank sought to diffuse bureaucratic power away from the national state and towards civil society and private actors. I analyze concrete cases where the Bank actively supported the creation and development of NGOs, aiming to legitimize its policies, ensure the sustainability of its neoliberal direction, and silence dissent. Through this power engineering project, the Bank "pushed the polity down". This chapter draws on data collected from interviews with World Bank experts, archival research, and comprehensive online investigations.

The final chapter covers the local developments that led to the adoption of neoliberal reforms in education. Following Burawoy's (2000) advice to avoid the trap of neo-colonialism and refrain from attributing all agency to supranational forces, this section shifts attention to how these policies were locally assimilated and enacted by political actors during the first post-communist decade. I conclude my genealogical analysis by arguing that the World Bank's swift and strategic intervention in a politically and socially unstable landscape successfully attracted key domestic actors on their side. For the Social Democrats, the Bank's support was essential—not only for the financial assistance it provided, given the lack of a national budget for education reform, but also for the symbolic capital it offered. The Bank's endorsement signaled to the international community that Romania was a stable and trustworthy partner for foreign investment. Meanwhile, the Bank managed to gain the support of education specialists and researchers from the Institute of Educational Science by presenting its agenda as a unified project that merged liberal democracy with neoliberal

principles. The right-wing coalition that came to power in 1996 fully embraced the Bank's push for liberalization, privatization, and decentralization. Under Andrei Marga's leadership, neoliberal reforms in education were rapidly advanced. This section draws on a wide range of secondary data sources—including archival newspaper articles, legislation, policy strategies, academic studies, and individual or institutional biographies. By reconstructing a timeline of key events through diverse voices and perspectives, I aim to offer a more nuanced socio-historical narrative—one that challenges deterministic interpretations and highlights the genuine debates and contestations surrounding education reform in early post-communist Romania.

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