

ROMANIAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN THE FIELD OF COMMUNICATION SCIENCES. THE ANATOMY OF A HOAX AND THE FAILURE OF A GENERATION

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Abstract: After an extended proliferation of the “Communication sciences” as a distinct line of study within Romanian Higher Education System which has been encountered for several years, today we must face and accept at least three things regarding this phenomenon. First, we have to admit that the academic educational content of such programs was, and still is far from reaching the expected targets for which it was, at least in theory, conceived. As evidences we mention the poor professional level of the students, and, on the other hand, a very low rate of integration of alumni within the specific market jobs. Also, a testimony of the failure is the low quality level of the Romanian public communication. Thirdly, we also must admit that this system of higher education did not succeed to carry out its own internal reforms since it is tainted by such phenomena as imposture, nepotism and group interests. This study attempts to unveil why the situation degenerated to such extent and to indicate what should be done in the near and medium future for the improvement of this situation.

Keywords: Communication Sciences, Higher Education System, Human Resource, Civic Responsibility

1. Introduction

In Romania the proliferation of Communication Sciences, as a distinct line of academic courses and a very visible academic domain, was, and still is, a powerful trend within the structure of the national Higher Education System in the field of Social Sciences in general. All has begun several years ago and, at least from a formal point of view, the trend should have been a positive one because through it, among other things, Romania had the chance to align its academic system in this domain with its Western counterpart. But, as it often happens in Romania, the formal part failed to match the real one. If in the Western countries the domain of Communication Sciences is taken very seriously, due to a set of reasons upon which we do not insist here in Romania this trend was almost from the very beginning tainted by several negative elements. Firstly, almost all the faculties in Romania which entered into the field of Communication Sciences built their programs upon old academic structures, with professors which did not have a degree in that particular academic field. Most of them had a degree in philosophy, sociology or even history. On the other hand, it is also true that some of them had a degree in Journalism but this must be treated with extreme caution, because here we speak either of people which obtained this type of diploma in the first years after communism collapsed in Romania, or of people which had followed the old communist so called “party school”, in which case they were indoctrinated with ideological concepts regarding the way in which journalism should be performed within a communist society. Thus, for an honest and objective observer it is obvious that there was no tradition in the field of Communication Sciences, speaking in academic

terms. Given this historical context, it is also obvious that the “products” of this so called higher educational system could be no better than the providers of the programs which “teach” the new generations of communicators. A deeper and comprehensive analysis upon this distinct aspect will be later developed within this study. Secondly, in order to have an efficient academic field within the domain of Communication Sciences we believe that a mature and responsible civil society it is also needed. Unfortunately, this was not, and still is not, the case of Romania. This issue could be always an academic subject of debate in itself. We will not insist too much upon it, but we strongly believe that it was necessary to mention the topic within the context of our study. And thirdly, we must face a fact and admit that the *results* of this educational domain were rather poor. A proof of our belief is, in our opinion, the very low rate of employment in the field of Public Communication for those who finally obtained an academic diploma in this specialization.

Given the above premises, our study will try to disclose, in a detailed manner, the set of reasons responsible for this poor situation and also to underline some possible ways of action meant to improve the state of these programs.

2. Public space and responsible civil society. The need of a professionalized public communication

After 45 years of communism and more than 20 in a seemingly endless so called “transition”, Romania has to face a harsh reality regarding its people and its leaders. Both sides seem to be far away from full integration into the mentality of a mature and responsible Western model of society. There were various academic attempts to understand why Romania is so different and especially why every time when it had the chance to integrate into the Western world mentality, even if these chances were not too many, historically speaking, Romania had missed them. It seems that something indeed very peculiar has happened in the historical past of Romania, something which made any apparent attempt for a real integration within the West to be nothing more than simple processes of adaptation and avoiding any real change (Boia, 2011: pp. 7 – 31). But, at this historical moment, Romania will have no excuse if the task of integration into the western world will be missed again. Never in Romania’s history was the international context as generous as in present times. Therefore, for better or for worse, at least for this time Romania has all the favoring factors in its side to succeed. However it is obvious that it also needs to build a solid public space, based upon responsible and professional media. This is a historical demand for Romania, given the fact that the public space takes new shapes within the country.

But is this possible, given the actual situation of the Romanian higher education in the field of public communication? In order to try to answer to this question we need to go deeper with the analysis and to unveil a more detailed structural anatomy of the contemporary Romanian system of higher education in the field of Communication Sciences.

2.1. Who are the teachers and who are the students?

Before any other substantial discussion about the form and the content of the contemporary Romanian system of higher education in the field of Communication Sciences we consider that any honest researcher who is really preoccupied with this

topic must ask himself who “the players” which are engaged in this academic domain are. And this should be, at least to this point of our study, *more than a simple “introduction”* into the subject. This is true because, regardless of any position, by knowing the players your chances to know the “game” are significantly increased. So, who are those playing a role at present times, everyone with his/her own specific part, in the field of Communication Sciences in contemporary Romania?

First of all, we must underline that, to our knowledge, there are no substantial studies regarding this topic. Even for us it was difficult to estimate some parameters and indicators from the system and, given this situation, it might be useful to mention here that our analysis is based upon estimations and approximations regarding the quantitative dimension of this study. However, what is obvious, is the fact that the vast majority of the academic staff from the domain of Communication Sciences from contemporary Romania did not graduated this line of study. In order to prove this, there is no need for some complicated empirical studies because of the simple fact that the academic domain of Communication Sciences did not exist in Romania before 1989. So, at the beginning of such programs, after 1989, the entire “academic” staff did not have studies in the field in which they were called to teach. This would be acceptable if this majority would have followed some postdoctoral studies or postgraduate specializations in the field of Communication Sciences. But, again, this is not the case. Most of the professors of communication have academic degrees, only at bachelor level, in different fields, such are philosophy, history, psychology or even foreign languages.

A second fundamental coordinate of our study takes into discussion the other part, the system of education. We have here in mind the students which now follow the domain of Communication Sciences in Romania at academic level, formally speaking. Who are these students and what do they actually learn in these programs? Do they have some structural sociological characteristics? And eventually can these characteristics be used in order to determine and to understand, from various perspectives, how does the system work in the field of Communication Sciences today in Romania? We answer to these questions with a categorical yes. In what will follow we will try to disclose some structural sociological characteristics of these students.

The first thing that must be underlined about these “students” is the fact they do not have serious studies at high school level. It is well known that in the last 15 or even more years in Romania the quality of high school training has plummeted to very low levels.

Even more, what is indeed very dangerous about these “students” is the fact that they do not have a solid culture of values and of respecting the hard and honest work. Unfortunately, they are used with various forms of cheating the system, from the means used to pass the exams up to the way in which they prepare to graduate different levels of education. This phenomenon is very well known and documented by the authorities and, in the last period, some significant efforts were made in order to stop plagiarism, stealing exams and dishonest practices in the academic life. For example, video cameras were installed supervising the final general exam taken by the pupils in order to finish their high school studies. This has led to the fact that the number of youngsters which were able to get scores high enough to take the general exam dropped dramatically. But, as it was remarked even by official documents, such a situation reflected the reality (Funeriu, 2011). Even if for an average person from the

West such measures are worth of laughing at, and is completely natural for someone used to live in a normal and responsible society, a society which respects values and honest intellectual efforts, for somebody from Romania this was indeed a premiere. For the first time in the history of Romanian education system significant efforts had been made if not to stop the fraud at the exams, at least to diminish it. We do not intend here to comment or to make any further analysis upon these measures. We only refer to them because there are very relevant to our study. And this is true because all pupils which year after year had become officially "students" in Romania were well adapted, so to speak, to a generalized fraud acceptance mentality. And this is the reason why we must take this harsh reality into serious consideration for any attempt to seriously analyze the conditions in which the educational process is developed, at university level, even in the field of Communication Sciences in contemporary Romania. The fraud acceptance mentality is telling a lot about the moral and intellectual quality of those who become "students" and educational partners. Of course, it is almost needles to add that this general situation has its exceptions. But these exceptions, unfortunately, cannot change the quality of contemporary high school educational system from Romania, and, speaking now in terms which are strictly related with a public communication conceptual frame, these exceptions cannot change the public perception about corruption and dishonesty being intrinsic to higher education as they are to other aspects of public life. In our opinion, the vast majority of the students are, whether we like or not, the products of deformed perceptions developed during high school years and come to universities *already prepared to cheat the system*. And to this we must also add the general level of their skills and knowledge are low or very low.

In addition to what has been said until this point about the students, it is also worth mentioning, especially in the context of our study, that today, and this is a reality for some years in Romania, one can be accepted at university as a student, officially speaking, without passing any form of exam or institutional filter. This situation complicates even more, in the negative sense, the whole frame, because even young people who do not have a solid training for a university level can become students anyway, without any form of selection. They just come to the registrar and leave their files and almost everybody willing to become a student is accepted, the only difference being that those who do not have high grades from their high schools would have to pay student fees and not enjoy the benefits of free schooling. Almost needless to say that those scores are, in vast majority of the cases, *not credible* in a responsible and mature society when such young people try to join universities from the Western world.

So, as an intermediary conclusion at this point, it seems that both sides, the teachers and the students, are not fully prepared for the task of making and sustaining a serious academic training in the field of Communication Sciences. We think that this is obvious for anybody who has even a minimal knowledge about the Romanian system of higher education. In addition to this already grim picture we must also mention that during the "academic" studies in the field of Communication Sciences students have rare opportunities for practical training.

2.2. How does the system work?

After young people officially become “students” the whole system starts to roll. In this short paragraph we will not insist again upon the poor quality of the entire process. We just want to add the fact that during all these years a constant encouragement of rising the number of students in this line of academic studies could be encountered. This happened because of two reasons. On the one hand, it was a source of financing the faculties, because it raised the number of fee-paying students. On the other, it came as kind of support for a general sort of a social trend, a trend which made Communication Science perhaps the most populated program with students’ line of study from the entire Romanian academic system.

In addition to this, another key element was the resistance of the entire system to any attempt of change. This phenomenon took one of the two following forms. On the one hand, all that counted was the preservation of the interests of those teaching in these faculties. On the other, alongside with the proliferation of imposture at a large scale also the phenomenon of academic nepotism was and still is present. These two things, among others, made these faculties in this academic domain to become a sort of structural and institutional prisoners of the past. Unfortunately this is true for the entire system of Romanian Higher Education (Liiceanu, 2011).

2.3. Where do the graduates work after finishing their studies?

This is indeed very sensitive question and not only because by its success of an academic line of courses can be easily measured. In this particular case for Romania it involves much deeper aspects and issues than a simple question with a methodology through which one can measure the rate of success in case of a faculty or another. However, the truth is that only a small and negligible part from the total number of students who finish such studies find jobs in the field in which they are officially trained to work. Empirical studies have not yet been developed and, to be honest, we believe that these faculties have no interest in carrying out and developing this type of sociological investigation. Even more, it would be completely against their interests to do so.

Thus, until now, the Communication Sciences as academic line of study, due to our estimations, has produced more than 10.000 graduates. Given this number, but, we repeat, it could be different this figure, we only make here an estimation, we should encounter an improvement of the public communication in the Romanian public space. Unfortunately, this is still not the case.

3. What has to be done?

A quick and effective set of measures in order to obtain a relatively fast improvement of the situation of the contemporary Romanian academic domain of Communication Sciences is hard to draw and even harder to put into practice. This is true not because the measures are difficult to be indicated, but because the whole system is linked to other structural problems. However, from our point of view, there are indeed some possible lines of actions, with possible effects palpable only after 4 or even 7 years. These “lines of action” could be systematized as follows:

The first thing that is needed is *the continuity of reforms* initiated by the former Minister of Education Daniel Funeriu. What is needed most is a credible and honest process of selection. This should be effective for the students, but also for those who teach in faculties.

The second essential thing would be the acceptance from the society that public communication is not only an academic trend, but also a key factor in a modern and capitalist society, directly contributing not only to the further development of society but also to its belief in strong values and responsibility.

A third measure could be, in our view, the capacity for an increased number of international periods of study for the students, but also for the professors. This would put them in a direct contact with a credible academic world and the Romanian part would have nothing but to gain from these academic international exchanges of experience.

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