

Economics education in Romania – A few thoughts

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There are several ways of looking at how Romanian economics education responds to the new demands ushered in by the fall of the communist regime in December 1989. One way would be to see how university curricula have changed during the last decade. In this respect, the progress is enormous a very intense recovery process has been underway. Nowadays, students are regularly enrolled in courses which teach modern macro- and micro-economics and quantitative methods are more often taught. This is an achievement of the field which deserves highlighting and acclaiming.

But there is a less bright side of the story which is related to the historical context in which social sciences evolved during the previous regime and during late Stalinism in particular. I would refer to economics, primarily at a time when, for instance, Hungarian and Polish economists talked and wrote about partial (market oriented) reforms in their countries hard-line ideology was ever more strongly felt in Romania. What Janos Kornai used to write in Hungary, or Wlodzimerz Brus and Kazimierz Laski in Poland, was quite unthinkable in Romania. Late Stalinism had a terrible impact on the nature of public debate (actually, there was no public debate...), the quality of professional journals, and on the content of university courses. I would go further and say that those circumstances impeded the formation of genuine economists, people who should have a deeper grasp of economic matters instead of uttering simple, commonsensical (when these were as such) statements. One could argue that this would not be hard to explain in view of the inexistence – in Romania – of intellectual giants (as economists), such as Oskar Lange and Michal Kalecki in Poland. But Hungary, which did not benefit from such famous economists in the early days of its communist regime nonetheless revealed a good school of economics later on. Obviously, this did happen in conjunction with experimented market reforms and domestic political opening, which came to be known as goulash communism and, in political terms Elemer Hankiss called “the second society”.

I felt the need to refer to these historical circumstances for they have a significant bearing on the substance of economics education of our time. A system of education performs in a social and historical context. One has to understand the roots of the dynamics of the quality of teaching and, further on, of the quality of research. With respect to teaching it is an “open secret” that there is a huge shortage of qualified people who can teach modern economics in a professional way for both undergraduate and graduate level. One way of addressing this challenge is sending people and have them trained abroad; people who return home, eventually become teachers themselves. But this venue is not an easy one, does not give results rapidly and the handicap is still present.

There is another perspective of looking at educational systems which is linked to the functioning of open societies: it is the freedom of choice of individuals to get their education wherever they like. And reality indicates that this does happen on a significant scale. Romanian economics students are enrolled in graduate programs at the Central European University in Budapest, at Charles University in Prague, at leading universities in the UK, USA, France, etc. Some of these people have become highly skilled and their professionalism has been shown in various publications, in refereed journals. They are becoming

members of a truly international scientific community. This is a facet of both borderless science and the rising mobility of “brains” in the age of globalization. But I would argue that, as much as I rejoice their intellectual performances, the stark reality is that the bulk of students stay at home and they need good, competitive, teaching. Good teachers are badly needed in Romania.

What would take to improve economics education in Romania? There is a clear need to press ahead with trying to attract young professionals back home, people who can teach in Bucharest and other major university centers. Translation of a larger number of widely used, good, western textbooks should be encouraged and assisted financially (though, as Harry Johnson, the famous Canadian economist said decades ago, economics is an Anglo-Saxon discipline, which speaks eloquently of the need to master English...). And not last, make the internet easily affordable to all students. This entire endeavor should be placed within the ambition of building up a genuine community of economists; this would lead to high quality research which should find its way into good local journals and should foster public debate on issues of high public concern.

More Romanian economists need also to attend more often conferences abroad. They have to develop their professional international ties and engage in more research with colleagues from abroad (European Studies is a field of rising significance in Romania in the light of the country’s quest to join the UE). This is currently happening but there are not entirely unexpected hurdles to this end. I would assume that some of the features I presented here can be detected within other social sciences as well. I would also assume that this kind of progress is time consuming and that the legacy of the past does play a significant role in conditioning the pace of advance. On the other hand, moderate optimism is warranted in view of the emerging “new economists” (it is true, most of them trained abroad) and the networking Romanian economists practice with other colleagues in Europe and the USA.