NEW PATTERNS OF EUROPEANISATION: DIGITALIZING ROMANIA'S EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM DURING COVID-19 CRISIS

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Abstract
As a result of the major pressure exerted by the COVID-19 pandemic and its management on students and teachers, the EU member states and institutions face the necessity to accelerate the digitalization of education. The EU interventions in this field open the debate on whether digital education will be another subject of Europeanisation as the supranational institutions are acquiring more competences, and whether a new European policy approach was generated by the pandemic. Therefore, the paper investigates whether the

COVID crisis represents a major shift in the Europeanisation of digital education in the EU. We will thus try to assess this transformation by analysing the impact of the crisis on digital education, showcasing Romania and the manner in which the national government designed its public policies against the background of the EU positions, recommendations and measures.

Keywords
COVID pandemic; Digitalization; Education; Europeanisation; Public policy

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID crisis that occurred at the beginning of 2020 forced people to use technologies at a scale that was not encountered before, and the educational systems made no exception. But as the *digital reform* was one of the European Commission priorities, EU institutions became actively involved in supporting member states with funds, models of good practices and legal frameworks.
While exploring whether the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a new generation of digital education policies, we start from the following research question: did the COVID crisis represent a major shift in the Europeanisation of digital education in the EU? and if so, how do we identify the impact of the crisis on digital education policies? The main challenge that we face in answering this question is the very nature of the educational policy, which is a national competence where the EU institutions can only support, coordinate or supplement the actions of the member states. But, as we will show, there are other methods and mechanisms through which the EU institutions can intervene and take the leading role. Thus, in order to tackle these issues, we structured this article in several sections.
Drawing on the literature review, the first part addresses the theoretical background of our research by defining Europeanisation as a process of construction, diffusion and institutionalisation of the EU rules and procedures; next, we differentiate among types of Europeanisation. The bottom-up and top-down Europeanisation helps us to determine the direction of changes, while the

concept of *spillover* applies to direct and indirect Europeanisation and shows how digital education policy is governed. Consequently, we analyse the EU policies in the field of digital education before the pandemic and we identify three different generations of policies focused on infrastructure, skill development and integration of new technologies in the education process.

In the second part of the paper, we deal with the Romanian and European reaction to the pandemic. Thus, we try to capture a general overview of the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on education by analyzing data and challenges faced by governments as 1.5 billion students worldwide were forced to study at home, since schools and universities were closed due to the generalized lockdown measures. This situation generated several challenges, such as the impact of the epidemic on academic performance, the implications on inequality and digitalization, and the economic impact of educational issues.

Turning our attention to the European reaction in terms of public policies, we then focus on emphasising the innovations brought by several strategic documents such as the revised Digital Education Action Plan, the European Education Area, the updated version of the European Pillar for Social Rights and of the Digital Compass and, perhaps the most important, Europe's Recovery and Resilience Plan, also known as NextGenerationEU. This plan is of peculiar relevance for our research, since its purpose is to restart the European economy by preparing the Union for the green transition and digitalization. This makes us highlight the possibility of further Europeanisation of the digital education policies by assessing the main reforms put forth by the Romanian National Recovery and Resilience Plan. The series of reforms that Romanian authorities claimed to implement in the field of digital education might be a good indicator of the nature of the Europeanisation process.

We dedicate the final part of the article to test the concept of Europeanisation on digital education policies during the COVID crisis by focusing on the Romanian case study. We analysed the reaction of the Romanian authorities to the accelerated need for online education and its relation to the previous EU recommendation on digitalization.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to use Romania as a case study for analysing the digitalization of the educational system, a broad discussion is needed on the topic of Europeanisation due to the significant impact of supranational policies on local and national level. Therefore, the concept of Europeanisation brought together scholars from various disciplines in an attempt to understand how national politics, civil society, public administration or economy change as a direct influence of the supranational level on the domestic realm of the member states. Political scientists, anthropologists, historians, sociologists or legal studies scholars have mainly focused on agency – the way actors could influence the course of events (Coman 2014, 1).

The process is not a unidirectional one; thus, scholars like Tanja Borzel (Borzel 2002, 195) differentiate a bottom-up from a top-down Europeanisation process. The member states can shape the European policy-making process using the power of the intergovernmental institutions as the European Council or the Council of Ministers, but at the same time they should adapt institutions to EU regulations (Héritier 1994), or, as Ondrej Horky-Hluchan and Simon Lightfoot call it, a Europeanization model based on the download of the EU rules at the national level (Horky-Hluchan and Lightfoot 2015, 10). Other authors call for the use of "EU-isation", because "Europeanization rhetorically excludes non-EU European countries from making part of Europe" (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005, 1). While the paper acknowledges the validity of this claim, we will nevertheless use "Europeanization" following the established research tradition.

However, as our goal is to understand the Europeanization process of the Romanian Digital Education, we shall outline a particular definition of the Europeanization that fits the characteristics of the European educational policy in general, and digital educational policy in particular. We should thus be able to properly capture the changes that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic and to see if this global crisis boosts the digitalization of the educational system.

The paper still regards Claudio Radaelli's definition of Europeanization as a construction, diffusion and institutionalisation of formal and informal rules,

procedures, policy paradigms or styles (Radaelli 2004, 4), but the domestic adaptation he envisaged as a result of EU direct pressures is difficult to ascertain empirically (Alexiadou 2007, 107; Luli 2023). This is why, in this research, we will follow the definition of Martin Lawn and Edwin Keiner, who have seen Europeanization as an "an effect created by policy formation within the distinct structures of governance associated with the EU and the process of political problem-solving which shapes the interactions of actors and policy networks in Europe" (Lawn and Keiner 2006, 161).

The definition proposed by Lawn and Keiner opens the debate that, to a certain degree, Europeanization can be found in all policy areas of a member state. According to Claudio Radaelli, the impact of Europeanization takes different forms: convergence, direct and indirect transfer of models from Brussels or a profound impact of EU regulation (Radaelli 2002). Manuel Fischer and Pascal Sciarini enlarged the term to encompass the EU's international presence, distinguishing between direct and indirect Europeanization, thus explaining the relation between EU and non-EU states. For them, the direct Europeanization represents the mechanism of EU influence, as it results from the negotiations with possible candidates or neighbour states, while the indirect Europeanization occurs in the absence of formal negotiations where a non-EU member state adapts unilaterally to the EU regulations (Fischer and Sciarini 2014). In the case of public policies of the member states that are not integrated yet but still facing Europeanization, perhaps the most relevant theoretical concept is the "functional spillover". Functional spillover is basically a structural pressure where decision-makers did not "anticipate that further integration in one area may create problems in other areas, which in turn would lead to further (possibly undesired) integration" (Niemann and Schmitter 2009, 58).

Thus, Europeanization can be considered as a process of construction, diffusion and institutionalisation of EU rules and procedures. Based on this understanding, we take into consideration the two directions of Europeanization, bottom-up and top-down, that will help us to determine if it is conducted by the local and national stakeholders or by the EU institutions. At the same time, determining if Europeanization is a direct or an indirect process

is a necessary step to see how a policy that is a national competence falls under supranational regulations.

In practical terms, it is still unclear how the process of Europeanization impacted the field of digital education and how the related policies evolved before the pandemic. Due to the massive expansion of ICT at the beginning of XXI century, various fields of public policies faced deep challenges and transformation, education being one of them. With an increasing number of children using ICT devices and the spread of internet access at impressive speed, governments had to adapt their educational systems to the new reality. From the public policy perspective, there were two main directions of action in the European Union: policy vision and leadership on educational innovation and developing policies to support teachers with logistical support and the ability to guide students and parents (Balanskat, Bannister, Hertz, Sigillò and Vuorikari 2013).

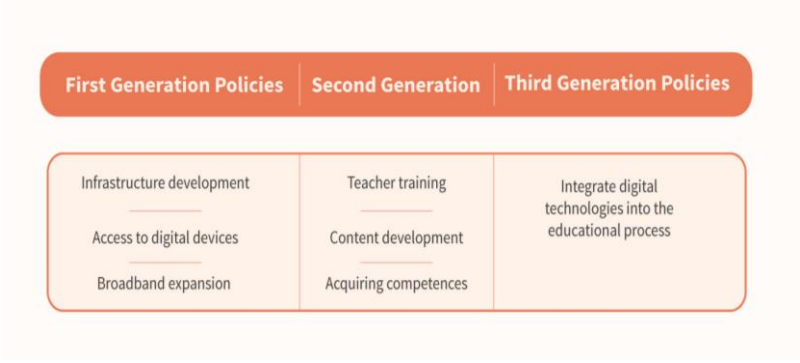
However, time has shown that only a few digital technologies were implemented in the educational process as teaching and learning practices (Fullan and Donnelly 2013). The European Commission refers to digital education by splitting the concept itself: education is regarded as a method of empowering people, while "digital technology enriches learning in a variety of ways and offers learning opportunities, which must be accessible to all" (European Commission 2018).

Regarding the translation into practice of the above considerations, Conrads et al. (2017) have identified three different generations of policies regarding digital education in the European Union. The first generation of digital education policies, before 2002, were mainly focused on the development of infrastructure: access to digital devices and broadband connectivity. As the spread of ICT in education was at its infancy, there was no focus on content development or competences. Then, an important threshold, as Delrio and Dondi (2008) have shown, was the Lisbon European Council of 2000, where the EU began to support the integration of digital technologies in the education process. The second-generation policies that emerged from 2002 as a reaction to the Lisbon Strategy (2000) and the eLearning Action Plan (2001) were focused on

complementary policies such as teacher training, competence building and content development (Delrio and Dondi 2008).

By 2011, an EU Commission study revealed that all European countries have a national strategy on using ICT in different areas including education. "In many cases, these strategies aim to provide the necessary ICT skills to pupils (literacy skills in particular) as well as provide ICT training for teachers. Another defining feature is the provision of up-to-date technology and infrastructure at schools" (European Commission 2011). The focus on student and teacher skills stated the failure of the first two generation policies. An OECD report showed that previous digital education policies were successful in providing access to ICT devices but were unsuccessful in providing adequate training for the use of the new technologies (OECD 2010), thus increasing the digital divide. Understood as inequality generated by the way technology is diffused in society, while people are "unable to fully enjoy the benefits of the revolutionary changes taking place" (Datta, Bhatia, Noll and Dixit 2019, 70), digital divide is obviously an obstacle in designing policies and institutions able to cope with the new social and economic environment. Then, third-generation digital education policies that were launched after 2010 (see Figure 1) focused on supporting teachers and improving their capacity to integrate digital technologies into the educational process (Conrads et al. 2017, 7).

Figure 1 (authors own contribution)



In brief, these are the conditions regarding digital education envisaged by the EU prior to the pandemic. Discussing the three generations of EU digital education policies makes us reflect on the possibility that COVID crisis has already created a fourth generation of supranational policies. But this is something that we are going to tackle when analysing Romania's case.

In approaching Romania's own efforts to digitalize the educational sector, an overview of the country's Digitalization Institutions is required. Without particularly aiming to trace the history of the digitalization of the public services in Romania, we should mention that the government adopted in 2015 a document regarding a "Digital Agenda for Romania 2020", and in 2017 fully endorsed the EU "Ministerial Declaration on eGovernment - the Tallinn Declaration" (Tallinn Declaration 2017). The first notable institutional step was taken right on the eve of the outbreak of the pandemic crisis, on 30 December 2019, by the establishment of the Authority for the Digitalization of Romania (ADR), under the prime minister's direct coordination.

Given, probably, the crisis and its novelty, ADR issued its first report only 3 months after its full set-up (in April 2020). After discussing the systems already in place (i.e. online payments, electronic unique contact points, electronic public procurements and transport licensing), the report contains two more sections. One refers to a project of the legal recognition of the electronic signature and the other to the measures adopted during the emergency state declared by the government during the pandemic. The latter section is, actually, a real plea for the complete digitalization of the public services in Romania, the crisis making it extremely visible that their adoption and implementation cannot be delayed any longer (ADR 2020).

It seems that the pleading was considered eloquent by the government: if in 2020 the budget allocated for ADR was roughly EUR 4.3 mil. (AADR 2020), in 2021 it was of EUR 90,38 mil – which is an increase of about 20 times in one year (ADR 2021). Nevertheless, one should note that, after this impressive rise, ADR still benefits of less than 0,1% of the general government spending envisaged for 2021 (which is estimated at about EUR 91,000 mil.) (Botea 2021).

Briefly, the above-mentioned conditions set the stage for discussing the actions taken by the Romanian government regarding the digitalization of education

during the 2020-21 pandemic crisis. Prior to this step, it is necessary, we think, to briefly present the general impact of Covid-19 on education, as revealed by studies already made all over the world.

3. METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the research question concerning the influence of the EU institutions in designing the national policies, we believe that the case study (Dogan and Pelassy 1990) and content analysis methods (Brinkerhoff, White, Ortega and Weitz 2011) represent an appropriate approach towards better analyzing the issue. To this end, the content analysis focuses on the goals and resources comprised in the Romanian documents regarding the digitalization of education in relation to their closest EU correspondent. This methodological choice is justified by the novelty of the whole process, that is still at an early age, and its results are yet uncertain.

Consequently, the paper discusses the policy content of several EU documents such as the Digital Education Action Plan, the European Education Area, or the updated version of the European Pillar for Social Rights and of the Digital Compass. The Romanian documents covered by the paper are the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, the draft of the Smart Edu strategy and the "Educated Romania" project.

Regarding the comparison it is important to mention that, while the EU policies are presented as steps inside a general overview of the public affairs, connecting various issues and trends (for instance, the National Recovery and Resilience Plan connects digitalization with the green transition), Romanian policies are discussed in insulated manner due to the lack of connection between the different evolutions in the field. The implications of these two different visions are addressed in the conclusions of the paper.

4. CASE STUDY - ROMANIAN AND EUROPEAN REACTION TO THE PANDEMIC

The first step of the analytical effort of the paper is an overview of the general impact of the Covid pandemic on the educational systems. This impact is difficult to assess; according to UNESCO data, by April 2020 almost 1.5 billion learners (or 84.8% of the whole learning population) had been affected by school closures, as a result of the public health policies mandated by national authorities (UNESCO 2021). The context was seen as an opportunity for the development of digitalization, in particular, and the modernization of the entire educational process, in general: the shift to remote learning was to force an adaptation process comprising core competences, infrastructure, curricular development, pedagogical insights and teaching skills (Deslandes-Martineau, Charland, Arvisais and Vinuesa 2020; Berger and Lee 2020; Grob-Zakhary 2020; Dhawan 2020; Liguori and Winkler 2020).

The impact of remote learning on academic performance has also been documented: PISA scores are expected to decrease (Azevedo et al. 2020). Appraisals of student performance already point towards decreasing student progress: a US estimate attests a 31.5% decrease in student progress in online math coursework for the studied time interval (Opportunity Insights 2021). Similarly, Dutch students were estimated to have lost the equivalent of a fifth of a year of study, with those coming from less-educated households being disproportionately affected (Engzell, Frey and Verhagen 2021), whereas one fifth of the Bulgarian students was performing worse as compared to before the pandemic (Yankova 2020). The issues raised by the epidemic also highlight the problem of grading students (Burgess and Sievertsen 2020).

The educational consequences of the pandemic have increased the already extant social, political and economic inequalities, both between societies and within societies themselves (Azevedo and Goldemberg 2020). Students from less privileged backgrounds have been found to be in a position of greater risk of suffering learning losses than their better-off colleagues (OECD 2020, 4). Inequality can also be influenced during pandemic and school closure

conditions by factors such as the differences in non-material assistance that parents can provide as well as the disparity in household financial resources (Di Pietro et al. 2020, 16-17).

Even if the differences among societies are of paramount importance, one should note that the need for increased investment in technical capacities for digital teaching and the development of teachers' digital skills is not limited to less-developed countries (Huber and Helm 2020, 249-251). At the same time, there is a pressing need for access to technology and to increase the digital literacy level for both students and teachers (Human Rights Watch 2020, 4-5).

The economic impact appraisals point to a significant increase in poverty rates as a result of the economic downturn caused by the pandemic – 40 to 420 million people were estimated to be in the risk of being affected by extreme poverty (ILO and UNICEF 2020, 7). Today's students can expect lesser earnings throughout their career, as a result of decreasing education quality (Azevedo et al. 2020, 22), with significant impact on the evolution of the national economies for a long period of time (Hanushek and Woessmann 2020, 9-10). Moreover, learning poverty (an indicator developed by the World Bank and UNESCO Institute for Statistics based on the expectation that every child should be in school and be able to read an age-appropriate text by age 10) is also estimated to increase significantly (Azevedo 2020, 2).

Studies focusing on the impact of the pandemic have highlighted the issues confronting the HEI's (Higher Education Institutions) research, the pandemic resulting in the cancellation or postponement of international conferences and the (partial) cessation of research projects (Marinoni, Hilligje and Jensen 2020, 32). The pandemic has also impacted the teaching and management activities of universities, while hampering internationalization (Farnell, Matijević and Schmidt 2021, 45-48).

The examination of these issues points to a provisional conclusion about the impact of the pandemic on education. While some imperatives, such as the importance of infrastructure and the digital skills meant to facilitate remote learning were almost universally acknowledged, the long-term impact of the pandemic on education is difficult to estimate and few actors have enacted policies to deal with issues such as decreasing grades, rising inequality or the

public health drawbacks of remote learning. Faced with such pressures, the EU as a whole took significant steps in trying to manage the consequences of the pandemic in the educational sector.

The forced shift that has been made toward online learning accelerated the e-learning processes and policies that started a decade ago and emphasised the poor level of digital skills and infrastructure as many children were totally excluded from digital education. Therefore, in October 2020, the European Commission came up with a revised Digital Education Action Plan adapted to the new situation. "The plan is part of a package that includes two initiatives designed to strengthen the contribution of education and training to the European Union's recovery from the coronavirus crisis and help build a green and digital Europe" (Mitchell 2020). The plan advocates for a high-quality, inclusive and accessible digital education, through stronger cooperation between EU's Member States and between stakeholders, in order to make education and training systems truly fit for the digital age.

Besides the new Digital Education Action Plan, the EU's Commission also adopted a vision of the European Education Area (with six dimensions, namely inclusion and gender equality, teachers, quality, higher education, green and digital transitions, and a stronger Europe in the world) that should be achieved by 2025. This second initiative is to be financed by Europe's Recovery Plan (NextGenerationEU) and the Erasmus+ Programme. "In addition, it proposes a framework for cooperation with Member States and engagement with education stakeholders, including a reporting and analysis structure, with agreed education targets, to encourage and track reforms" (European Commission 2020). The efforts to enforce a European Education Area will be correlated with the European Skills Agenda, the European Research Area and the Vocational Education and Training policy.

Since EU puts a lot of emphasis on digital education, designing strategies and policy frameworks, a very relevant aspect was captured by Victor Negrescu, MEP, in his report called "Shaping a Digital Education Policy" as member states and EU Commission are called to financially support the digital education infrastructure for vulnerable people (European Parliament 2021, 28). Therefore, the document opens the discussion regarding a new digital education market

(Negrescu 2021, 52) that rises around digital infrastructure (digital content, tools or platforms) and emphasizes the idea that the EU could acquire more influence in the field as the Single Market is under EU competences, thus deepening the process of Europeanization. Given this mindset, it is no surprise that the EU has included digital education in the recovery strategy after the COVID-19 crisis.

The main instrument for boosting the European economy and an important pillar for financing the Digital Education Action Plan is Europe's Recovery Plan, also known as NextGenerationEU. The Recovery plan was designed to repair the damages caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and restart the European economy. "The key element is an EU Recovery Instrument Regulation which allows the European Commission (EC) to borrow up to €750 billion of funding from capital markets (which is in itself a remarkable new step in the evolution of the EU)" (Lopriore and Vlachodimitropoulou 2021, 3). The money, supposed to repair the damages made by the pandemic is going to be distributed through grants and loans, based on national Recovery and Resilience Plans. "If these funds are correctly used, in addition to transforming the European economy by making it more digital, green and inclusive, NGEU paves the way for more fiscal integration and a stronger role for the euro in the international monetary system" (Feás and Steinberg 2021). As the plan is mainly focused on digitalization and green transition, it is expected that the member states will propose strategies and reforms regarding digital education, our research subject, speeding up the Europeanisation process of this policy. The strategic documents, such as the Digital Education Action Plan, the Vision of the European Education Area, the updated version of the European Pillars for Social Rights and the Europe's Recovery Plan, provide a clear picture of the mechanisms used by the European Union to direct the digital education policy.

These instruments are of a particular relevance for a rather recent EU member, such as Romania. Despite its rapid development, being classified in 2020 as a "high income country" (World Bank 2021), the effectiveness of Romania's educational policies is still well behind those of other member states of EU, in virtually all indicators (early leavers, employment rate for recent graduates, investments, etc.) (European Commission 2020). Unsurprisingly, the performances of the Romanian 15 year-old students, as measured by PISA's

scores for reading, mathematics, and science are below the average of other developed countries, members of OECD, an organization Romania aims to join (OECD 2019).

The efforts to improve the general quality of the education system in Romania take place in several directions, one of which is, of course, its digitalization. For instance, in the 2020 Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), calculated by the European Commission, Romania ranks 26 out of 28. It is placed above the EU average only at "connectivity" (rank 11), but it is hugely outperformed at all other indicators (27 at "human capital", 28 at "use of internet services", 27 at "integration of digital economy", 28 at "digital public services") (DESI 2020). In terms of the coverage of the national territory, there are notable differences between the rural and urban areas: for instance, the national average for fixed Very High Capacity Network (VHCN) is 68%, but only 39% for the rural (but still well above the EU's average of 20%.) (DESI 2020, 6). Briefly, "Romania is very advanced on VHCN coverage and is 14th regarding 5G readiness in the EU. On the other hand, it lags behind in the digital skills indicators, has a weak performance in the digitization of businesses and in digital public services" (DESI 2020, 5).

The specific conditions for digitizing the educational system are noted by the European Commission. The 2020 Monitor on Education and Training remarks that the achievement of the goals set up by a 2015 national strategy are still unaccounted for, but, in the end, only "57% of young Romanians aged 16-19 have basic or above basic digital skills (EU average: 82%). […] However, schools in rural areas, which provide schooling to 43% of students [at primary and lower secondary level], are less able to offer digital education due to having fewer qualified teachers and poorer digital infrastructure" (European Commission 2020, 4). The document also notes that, even if almost 70% of the teachers consider themselves well-trained for digital methods, it seems that most training courses are dissatisfying in terms of "quality, coverage and relevance". In the end, they feel that they do not know how to answer students' expectations and demands, more than 50% of them having "insufficiently developed competences for the effective use of online learning platforms" (European Commission 2020, 4).

The above-mentioned shortages took their toll on the educational system during the COVID-19 crisis, when they became very visible. In the 2020/21 winter, while preparing a national strategy for digitalization in education, the Ministry of Education and Research (MER) notes that the schools, when forced to switch to online teaching systems, faced several challenges, such as unpredictability, the digital gaps among them, the insufficient digital competencies, low technological and internet access, and low parental support for the children (Smart Edu 2020, 8). Students, parents and teachers seem to have perceived, in very similar proportions, a certain depreciation of the quality of education (46%, 45%, and 44%, respectively), according to a survey from October 2020 commissioned by the national branch of the well-known NGO Save the Children (Salvaţi copiii 2021, 22). The fact could hardly be considered surprising as 28% of the students and 43% of the teachers declare that they lack the necessary material resources for online education (with a difference rural – urban of 10%) (Salvaţi copiii 2021, 18), and 28% of all categories of stakeholders lack the knowledge (5% difference rural vs urban) (Salvaţi copiii 2021, 19).

Regarding the digitalization of the education system in Romania, the EU Education and Training Monitor of 2020 concluded that there were several initiatives of digitalization, especially starting with 2015 when Romania adopted a national strategy on Digital Agenda, but the need to improve the digital skills of teachers and students remained high. Even if there is no information on how Romania met the commitments set by the strategy, "it has progressively integrated elements of digital technology in its policies, school curricula and training programmes, and despite some major investments at national level, a lack of monitoring and support mechanisms has resulted in many of these initiatives not being sustainable" (European Commission 2020). This is a very good example of how digital education Europeanized through the impact of other policy areas, such as the digitization policy, where the EU has more power and influence.

In the same line, the draft of the National Resilience and Recovery plan submitted to the European Commission argues that only 50% of teachers have used an educational platform (62% in urban areas and only 39% in rural areas) (PNRR 2021, 1159). The same document claims that 25% of the teachers have

declared themselves unable to use online apps or platforms (PNRR 2021, 1159). A national research of the National Policies and Evaluation Center of the Ministry of Education highlighted that only 40% of the teachers surveyed as part of the research had used collaborative apps during the online learning period, whereas only 10% had used dedicated educational apps (PNRR 2021, 1215). The study emphasized that teachers believed almost a third of their students lacked the digital competences to take part successfully in online learning classes (PNRR 2021, 1216), an opinion mirrored by the pupils' own estimates: 67% believe that they have the knowledge to properly use the devices required for remote learning (Smart Edu 2020). Another document highlights that teachers were mostly concerned with the lack of a proper space for educational activities within their home (61% of the surveyed respondents), the lack of time for planning and organizing their lessons (56.8%), the lack of a methodological framework for online activities (54.8%) and significant levels of stress (46.6%) (România Educată 2021, 103). Moreover, teachers were hampered in their activities by their lack of technical abilities, a faulty information infrastructure, high user costs and the lack of technical and pedagogical support (Botnariuc et al. 2020, 15).

Various EU institutions noticed the worsening of the social gaps in delivering good education. According to data from the Monitor of the European Commission, the lack of devices mainly affected the students from rural areas or other disadvantaged social environments, including Roma (European Commission 2020, 7). In its turn, the Council of the EU recommended Romania to "strengthen skills and digital learning and ensure equal access to education" (Council of the European Union 2020).

The COVID-19 crisis fastened some steps taken by the authorities for the digitalization of education, part of a larger reform process in the field. A document adopted in October 2020 by the MER concerning the envisaged changes lists the digital competency among the key ones, as recommended by the European institutions (in 2018), stipulating that it should start from the primary level of education (Ministerul Educației și Cercetării 2020; Council of the European Union 2018). The document also notes the potential of digital technologies in changing the classic educational means and processes and

underlines the possible relevance of the open educational resources (Ministerul Educaţiei şi Cercetării 2020, 34-35).

At a more concrete level of action, in order to deal with the effect of the pandemics and the on-line teaching methods, the Romanian government allocated EURO 150 million for acquiring laptops, tablets and other IT equipment. The EU support was of paramount importance for the success of the project, as long as EURO 131 million of this fund represent the EU contribution (Guvernul României 2020). As to specific educational support, MER developed some means in order to help the teachers, children and school to deal with the specific demands of online teaching: a platform of different digital resources, one containing digitized handbooks or a partnership with the public TV station for assisting the students preparing national exams (UNESCO n.d.).

In the context of these efforts, Romania's Recovery and Resilience Plan remains the most important catalyst in the realm of public policies. The country's first versions of the plan comprised limited allocations for education. The initial allocation for education was initially only 3.18% while that for the digital sector was of around 2%. The newer version of the plan meets the 10% target recommendation made by the European Parliament but has difficulties in reaching the digital transformation objective of 20% explicitly required by the European regulation (PNRR 2021).

The Romanian reaction to the impact the pandemic had on education highlights the relevance of the hypothesis embraced by the paper. Many of the ideas and projects meant to speed up the digitalization process had been debated before the onset of the pandemic. Its impact has given both urgency and legitimacy to their adoption. Particularly relevant to the way the Romanian authorities decided to act are the provisions concerning the digitalization of the educational system contained in the draft of the National Recovery and Resiliency Plan submitted to the European Commission, the draft of the Romanian Strategy for the Digitalization of Education and several components of the "România Educată" ("Educated Romania") presidential project. We have seen that studies focusing on the consequences of the pandemic on education rather addressed the challenges of remote learning, the evolution of academic performance, how

inequality affects these trends, the particular challenges of digitalization as well as the long-term economic impact of the educational problems.

Both in terms of diagnosis and public policy, Romania chose to focus on the challenges of digitalization. When discussing the problems of remote learning, and devising medium and long-term solutions to answer these problems, the policies have focused on several interconnected fields that fall within the scope of the aforementioned category of issues: the digital literacy of students and teachers (1), the content and the online materials needed for online education (2), lack of a proper legislative framework (3), poor or inadequate infrastructure (4).

The provisions of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan highlight these approaches. The document envisions the digitalization of education as an "integrated intervention" and the reform entails the digitalization of both processes, contents and evaluation. In terms of the digital literacy and competence skills, the Romanian authorities envision that by 2026 more than 50% of the teaching staff will not only be trained, but also evaluated in regard to their use of digital instruments in the classroom, after a program of training no less than 45,000 staff. As far as the students are concerned, the digital competences which are meant to be gained via a new curriculum are the 21 competences established by the EU (DigiComp), whereas the instruments catered for teachers are meant to be built in relation to the corresponding competences for educators (DigiCompEdu). 100,000 teachers are supposed to gain digital pedagogy competences by 2025, as part of continuous training programs also aligned to the DigiComp framework. It is important to highlight in this context that the program covers both digital literacy and digital pedagogy skills and competences (PNRR 2021, 1211, 1193, 1214, 1217).

The digital literacy dimension also covers the financing allotted for the digitalization of universities. Higher Education Institutions are to undergo a pedagogy shift, "which values a more active and autonomous involvement of students in their own formation, the utilization of technology and open access resources", as well as a change in university governance, with a focus on Open Source resources and the adoption of new digital teaching instruments and methods (PNRR 2021, 1226, 1228-1230).

In terms of infrastructure, the Plan calls for the acquisition of "Clever Classrooms", as part of the Education Early Warning Mechanism, the rationale being that infrastructure investment is needed in order to decrease the education drop-out rates. Significant infrastructure investment aims to offer adequate IT material to 909 labs belonging to vocational education schools. 3676 school units will receive intelligent screens in every classroom, and every student will receive a laptop or a tablet with pre-installed educational software, whereas 6176 IT school labs will be modernized, and 1175 SMART-LAB school technology hubs are to be established. As for the content reform, it is covered by the emphasis of the document on Open Educational Resources, which are meant to represent the backbone of a revised platform of digital handbooks (PNRR 2021, 1189-1192, 1205-1206, 1222, 1224).

The Europeanisation trend is most conclusively brought forth by the repeated insistence of the document on the 21 competencies established by DigiComp. It is consequently relevant that the draft issued for the public debate of the Education Digitalization Strategy makes a case that, while DigiComp has existed since 2013, and has been updated in 2016, it has no Romanian version and the first measure proposed by the document is to integrate it into the national policies concerning education and professional training (Smart Edu 2020, 45). Moreover, the report of the working groups of the Educated Romania presidential project, that preceded both the draft digitalization strategy and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, explicitly called for increasing the digital competence level of students, parents, teaching staff and administrators altogether (România Educată 2021, 109). In our view, all the strategic documents analyzed in this paper point to a manifest tendency of Romanian authorities to judge through the same filter all the different problems and to believe that the same skill set of digital competences, presumably those set out by the framework of DigiComp, can work as a magic bullet - teachers, parents, students, victims of social exclusion can benefit as a result of increasing their digital skills and competences, notwithstanding the different challenge of each specific category.

The importance of the European framework for Romanian planners is also highlighted by its ubiquitous nature: digital literacy, sometimes defined in terms

of the European documents, becomes part of basic literacy. Conceived within this European framework, digital literacy efforts are aimed at teachers, students and parents altogether. The reliance of the Romanian authorities on the set of competences defined at the European level is also highlighted by their belief that their achievement can help reduce unemployment (Smart Edu 2020, 43).

In spite of the emphasis both the authors of the Plan and the European Commission evaluators place on the complementarity of the measures, there is at the same time a lack of clarity in regard to the four-fold strategic effort: infrastructure, digital literacy and competences, legal framework, and new digital education content.

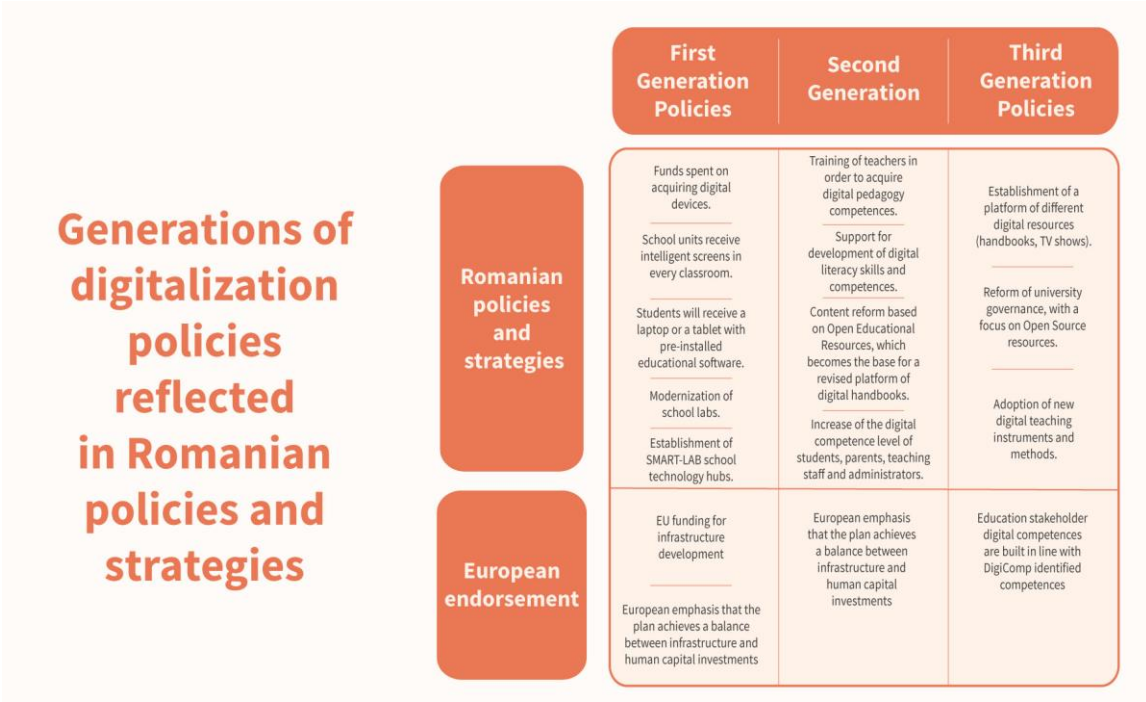
The Europeanisation trend is also highlighted by the fact that the strategic directions of the plan received an explicit endorsement of the European Commission (European Commission 2021, 37). Digitalization in education aims to tackle the problems in the management of educational institutions, long-time learning and the training of teachers, increasing the digital literacy level of students and teachers. The lack of clarity is given by the fact that the last two dimensions, the digital literacy of the teaching staff and their digital pedagogical acumen, are to be improved with training programs devised in line with the DigiComp framework, which is to be translated and implemented in the Romanian legal system. But the digitalization of education is expected to narrow the urban-rural gap in education, while also contributing to the development of the digital skills students and teachers are lacking (European Commission 2021, 13). The Commission acknowledges that the coming investments in education can lead to increased "competitiveness of the Romanian economy" (European Commission 2021, 67).

The assessment of the Commission is that the reforms entailed by the Plan align the educational system to DigiComp, in terms of educational content creation (European Commission 2021, 41), while achieving a balance between the infrastructure and human capital investments (European Commission 2021, 67). Most of the proposals comprised by the initial document drafted by the Romanian Government are present in the Commission's estimates and it is the present paper's assessment that one of the reasons for this overlap is not

necessarily the quality of the policies themselves, but the way they reflect a European level view on the digitalization of education.

5. DISCUSSIONS

Figure 2 (authors own contribution)



Considering our research on the Romanian National Recovery and Resilience Plan and the European Commission Analysis of the Recovery and Resilience Plan of Romania we observed a major shift in the Europeanization process of the Digital Education Policy. Until the COVID 19 Pandemic there was an indirect

and top-down Europeanization described in the three Policy Generation, while nowadays we face a direct and bottom-up process where the elements of the three generations are reinforced by the member states through their Resilience and Recovery Plans (see Figure 2).

The first generation policies, that mainly focused on Infrastructure development, Access to digital devices and Broadband expansion, are reflected in the Romanian National Recovery and Resilience Plan through the presence of several objectives of digital infrastructure development such as funds spent on acquiring digital devices, school units to receive intelligent screens in every classroom, students to receive a laptop or a tablet with pre-installed educational software, modernization of school labs, establishment of SMART-LAB school technology hubs. Regarding the European endorsement on these proposals, the EU Commission validated these measures by emphasizing that the plan achieves a balance between infrastructure and human capital investments and by granting EU funding for infrastructure development.

The second generation policies that followed after the spread of digital infrastructure was focused more on a qualitative approach by boosting teacher training, acquiring of competences and digital content development. Therefore, following our argument, the Romanian National Recovery and Resilience Plan has also insisted on the training of teachers in order to acquire digital pedagogy competences, support the development of digital literacy skills and competences, a content reform based on Open Educational Resources, which becomes the base for a revised platform of digital handbooks and the increase of the digital competence level of students, parents, teaching staff and administrators. The European Commission found these proposals aligned with the educational content of DigiComp.

Last but not least, the third generation policies in digital education were meant to integrate digital technologies into the educational process. Again, the Romanian National Recovery and Resilience Plan contains also the elements of this generation in the policy proposals: establishment of a platform of different digital resources (handbooks, TV shows), reform of university governance, with a focus on Open Source resources, and the adoption of new digital teaching instruments and methods. The European endorsement in this case was positiv,

as education stakeholder digital competences are built in line with DigiComp identified competences.

In light of these trends, the examination of the Romanian documents and their European counterparts supports the hypothesis advanced by the present paper: a major paradigm shift with a significant number of particular characteristics. Firstly, the reforms are meant to operate in a context marked by extremely fluid changes and challenges, which are difficult to quantify and integrate into the normal rational policy and decision making processes, a difficulty that was experienced not only by the Romanian educational system, but by many educational systems around the world. Measuring the impact of the pandemic and devising the instruments to tackle these changes was a significant challenge even for educational systems more advanced on the path of digitalization than the Romanian one.

Secondly, the undertakings of the Romanian educational system exhibit a bottom-up approach that is lacking in the previous generation of digitalization policies - the impetus for the changes comes not from the European political or technical level, but from the national one.

Thirdly, the examination of the documents highlights that elements of all previous three generations of European digitalization policies are present at the same time. The Covid pandemic thus served as an impetus for a long-due process of adaptation to the international and domestic context.

Last, but not least, the explicit endorsement of the plan by the European Commission, both in terms of structured objectives, as well as financing, highlights the European nature of the entire endeavour. It is these elements - the bottom-up approach of devising policies, the presence of elements of previous generation of digitalization policies and the explicit endorsement from a European authority which define the content of a possible new generation of digitalization policies in education, with a significant impact not only on the development of the educational process itself, but also on the understanding of the wider Europeanization process.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The Europeanisation of digital education in Romania was initially an indirect trend generated by the implementation of the Digital Agenda between 2015 and 2020. The interpretation of the authors is that, a year and half since the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, the EU, through various official documents, is close to an unintended acquirement of another area of responsibility and competences in terms of digital education, through what the scholars call "a functional spillover effect". The authorities had a strong support from the EU, both in terms of policy guidelines and financial aid, in their attempt to provide the best possible response to the effects of the crisis. Digitalization, which was for a long time rather a matter of sterile discussions and planification, suddenly became a necessity, but its implementation revealed some new weaknesses. The ongoing process of adaptation seems to increase the influence exercised by the EU policies and practices on the digitalization of the Romanian educational system.

Romania was not concerned with the social or economic impact of the pandemic on education. Admittedly, the task is a complex one and other countries also had significant difficulties in designing instruments and methodologies for this assessment. However, the studied documents focused only on increasing digital competences and digital infrastructure. It seems likely that this was due to the difficulty of pursuing an integrated public policy concept and of inserting the already extended European model in terms of digital competences and significant European funding opportunities. Moreover, to the extent that building up digital competences was seen as a paramount objective, it was the European Framework which was referential for the Romanian planning and public policy initiatives - fostering these competences was seen as instrumental in promoting economic development, tackling the urban-rural gap, reducing unemployment while also providing the educational system with digitally literate personnel. From a public policy perspective, the major challenge is whether such an effort can actually lead to the rather impressive and broad outcomes it aims to reach.

While the National Recovery and Resilience Plan aims to improve long-standing structural aspects of Romanian institutional systems, it is noteworthy to

emphasize that the perspective of the Commission supports the idea that the Covid 19 pandemic was the opportunity for the Romanian authorities to implement a series of long called reforms of the educational system, particularly in the field of digitalization. The Romanian public policies dedicated to the digitalization of education focused on responding to the infrastructure and human capital problems, in accordance with the general EU approach. The crisis thus justifies efforts to resolve well-known problems, while the content of the reforms explicitly endorses the trend towards an Europeanisation of these policies and a stronger coordination by the EU.

Following these arguments, we suggest that digital education may become a new area of competence using the paradigm of digitization, separate from the larger area of education, in order to be managed at the European level. The process is long, the initiatives are cautious, but the prospects seem to indicate an accelerated Europeanisation in this field. This Europeanisation is not focused on the curriculum, but refers to standards, objectives, investments, collaboration, coordination structures, and so on. Therefore, we might talk about the possibility of extensive cooperation using the elements provided for in the Treaty of Lisbon. The national recovery and resilience plans are, perhaps, the best exemples we have in this regard.

In our interpretation, the current EU approach of digital education policy points towards a paradigm shift in the Europeanization process. As we have already stated, before 2002 the EU focused on infrastructure development, after 2002 on teacher's training and skills development, and after 2010 to increase the capacity of integrating new technologies in the education process. Therefore, based on our findings in analysing Romanian National Recovery and Resilience Plan where all the European policy directions were reflected in concrete policy measures, we conclude that the Europeanization process regarding the digital education policy was heavily impacted by the Covid 19 Pandemic by sifting the Europeanization paradigm. From an indirect and top-down perspective, now we are dealing with a direct and bottom-up Europeanization where the member states are pushing for a more integrative approach to face all the structural challenges faced in the last two years.

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