

# STRUCTURAL REFORM OF EDUCATION: BETWEEN COMMITMENTS, OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS

## GENERAL CONTEXT

Structural reform of education, in particular the size of undergraduate education, has caused major discussions within AEI (Alliance for European Integration) 2. Main protagonists of the conflict on this very subject, PDM (Democratic Party) and PLDM (Liberal Democratic Party) were involved in an exchange of statements and mutual accusations in regards to various aspects of educational reform in a rather complicated post-electoral context for the alliance. The conflict burst to surface in the post-electoral period, driven by controversies on the establishment of post-electoral alliances at local level between AIE 2 components, as well as on the background of some statements and “disclosures” made by leaders and some representatives, members of both parties<sup>1</sup>. Although vision differences on this reform have previously existed, they were rather dormant, being emphasized only recently, in terms of a much larger conflict within

<sup>1</sup> The dispute carries on. Filat has had a new verbal confrontation with democrats' camp. // <http://www.inprofunzime.md/stiri/politic/disputa-continua-filat-a-avut-o-noua-confruntare-verbala-cu-tabara.html>; Lupu reacts: Filat's declaration is a first step towards an alliance between PLDM and PCRM. <http://www.inprofunzime.md/stiri/politic/lupu-reactioneaza-declaratia-lui-filat-este-primul-pas-spre-o-1.html>

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the governing coalition. In this context, structural reform of education represents only one of the battlefields on which alliance parties measure their forces in post-electoral period under political uncertainty. Consequently, it can be qualified as an artificially created issue and prisoner of struggles between political parties for electoral dividends. Such a mark is justified if we take into consideration that reform is not a product that appeared over night and

is not only the result of efforts made by the executive of PLDM pathway through the Ministry of Education.

Hereinafter, we will make an attempt to elucidate main aspects of structural reform in education through positions expressed by main stakeholders participating in reform implementation, affected parties and through the perspective of the reform itself.

## RETROSPECTIVE ON THE CONFLICT

Following the Government meeting of 24 June, one has approved the National Action Plan for implementation of structural reform in education, meeting held behind closed doors, which aroused even more suspicions about the essence of reform<sup>2</sup>. Secrecy vis-à-vis the topic was not able not to attract mass-media and civil society interest in the context when the Government has tackled such a sensitive subject to society, which could affect from foundation the entire education system and destiny of several thousands of children and teachers, but also parents concerned with their children's future. Under these circumstances, the decision to hold this meeting in a limited and non-transparent format contributed even more to shaping of a more negative attitude against the Government, especially towards PLDM component represented in the Government. Disagreements between representatives of the two parties on education reform have burst as a result of discontents expressed by Minister of Economy regarding application of stamp

“secret” on the document regarding this reform<sup>3</sup>. PLDM reply in the person of Prime Minister was rather fast, so he threatened to request resignation of the Minister of Economy, based on his incompatibility with functions and powers in the Government. According to the Prime Minister, criticism addressed to the Government on behalf of Ministry of Economy is unacceptable given that he was chief negotiator who has set the terms of reference for structural reform in education<sup>4</sup>.

The conflict has spread by interim President's statements, who appeared dissatisfied with the reform parameters, due to massive layoffs of teaching staff, lack of projects to support and re-employ fired teachers, as well as with the meeting being held behind closed doors<sup>5</sup>. On the other side of the barricade, Prime Minister's spokesman reiterated the argument previously submitted, according to which Minister of Economy, member of Democratic Party, was the one who negotiated the terms of the agreement with foreign partners, accusing alliance partners of applying double standards and evasion from undertaken commitments<sup>6</sup>. In the same framework one located arguments of Minister of Education who mentioned that, striking the Government, interim President hits the memorandum signed between Republic of Moldova and IMF and directly the Minister of Economy. Additionally, Minister of Education declared that interim president misinterprets the way how the

2 What has Filat discussed with the ministers at the Government meeting behind closed doors.// [http://www.publika.md/ce-a-discutat-filat-cu-ministrii-la-sedinta-de-guvern-cu-usile-inchise\\_374231.html](http://www.publika.md/ce-a-discutat-filat-cu-ministrii-la-sedinta-de-guvern-cu-usile-inchise_374231.html)

3 Duel between PLDM and PD gets AIE into a coma.// <http://unimedia.md/?mod=news&id=35812>

4 Filat could request for resignation of Mr. Lazar from the Government: He is too talkative.// <http://unimedia.md/?mod=news&id=35680>

5 Marian Lupu accuses the Government for secretly preparing massive layoffs among teachers.// [http://www.publika.md/marian-lupu-acuza-guvernul-ca-ar-pregati-in-secret-disponibilizari-masive-in-randul-profesorilor\\_378561.html](http://www.publika.md/marian-lupu-acuza-guvernul-ca-ar-pregati-in-secret-disponibilizari-masive-in-randul-profesorilor_378561.html)

6 Ibidem.

plan for structural reform was discussed, emphasizing the extraordinary and not secret feature of the Government session, which is not the first of such kind<sup>7</sup>. This series of declarations and mutual reactions on structural reform in education are part of an informational war in political parties' desire to dominate the agenda and shaping public opinion by creating events that would offer electoral, image or other benefits to warring parties. It is also worth mentioning that this approach is not adequate, evading the core issue of educational reform.

## STRUCTURAL REFORM: FAD OR NECESSITY?

For a comprehensive approach and a clearer understanding of the situation, there is a justified question: is a structural reform of undergraduate education needed, having as an objective rationalizing public expenditure by optimization of school network, classes and adjustment of teachers' number?

Differences between democratic and liberal-democratic camps have completely avoided answering this question which is fundamental to clarify the essence of this problem. Without a clear answer to it, contradictory discussions referring to other aspects of reform lose their relevance. In this context, it is important to stress out that these disagreements should not have existed, because both liberal-democrats and democrats as coalition partners have supported and voted in the Parliament the Government Program of AIE 1 and AIE 2, providing elements of structural

reform at the level of objectives and priority actions. If in the government program for 2009-2013, actions of structural reform including optimization of school network are not clearly formulated into objectives, then optimization and streamline of public expenditure on education, as well as reformation of the concept of educational institution with simultaneous improvement of school infrastructure are set as priority actions<sup>8</sup>. Government program for 2011-2014 is more explicit in this regard, one of the major objectives being efficient use of financial allocations<sup>9</sup>. Aside from optimizing and streamlining public expenditure on education, adapting the numbers and types of kindergartens and schools to the number of children and students in every municipality, taking into account demographic forecasts, represents another priority of the Government<sup>10</sup>. Amendments having occurred in this period were due to the development of policy documents which were the basis for dialogue between government and external partners of the RM during 2010<sup>11</sup>.

According to that document, the fundamental problem of education system resumes to inefficient use of public finances. Low efficiency of public finances requires structural reform of education by optimizing school networks and thus adjusting the number of teachers and non-teaching staff to the number of students which registered a dramatic decrease as a result

8 Activity Program of the Government of the Republic of Moldova „European Integration: Freedom, Democracy and Welfare”, Chisinau, 2009.// <http://www.gov.md/lib.php?l=ro&idc=445>

9 Activity Program of the Government of the Republic of Moldova „European Integration: Freedom, Democracy and Welfare”, Chisinau, 2011.// <http://www.gov.md/lib.php?l=ro&idc=445>

10 Ibidem.

11 Rethink Moldova: Medium term development priorities. Government of the Republic of Moldova. (Report for the meeting of advisory group in Brussels, 24 March 2010).// <http://www.gov.md/doc.php?l=en&id=2774&idc=447>

7 Theses for briefings of Minister of Education, Mihai Sleahitichi, of 29.06.2011.// <http://www.edu.md/?lng=ro&MenuItem=8&Article=1389>

of demographic decline. Consequently, only 30-60% of institutions' capacity is being used, and expenditure per student in schools in rural areas exceeds 3-5 times the costs, compared to the district ones<sup>12</sup>. Thus, the Government openly announced its intention to optimize on a medium term school institutions network to increase efficiency of public expenditure on education. Inefficient allocation of financial resources is confirmed by several statistic indicators, if we refer to the ratio of expenditure allocated on education and achieved results. In spite of massive capital infusions in the education sector in the past few years, we cannot talk about efficiency and proportionally positive results, although it is difficult on a short term to evaluate the effects of investments in education. However, low level of preparation of students leaving secondary-general education subsystem shows that the quality of teaching is not directly proportional to the volume of allocated financial resources.

Statistics show that during 2006–2011, education expenditure increased by 1, 9 times, constituting 21, 3% of total expenditure from public national budget and 8, 4% of the GDP in 2011. This increase was caused primarily by wage increase of educational institutions staff, particularly the teachers. Of the total education expenditure the biggest part goes to current expenditures, 70% of them being the wages of employees<sup>13</sup>. Therefore, only a small part of expenditure can be directed to improve technical and material or teaching basis or other purposes to ensure quality within the instruction process. The ratio of teachers and non-teaching staff also reflects a dramatic

and alarming situation. Of 137799 staff units in 2010 only 62427 of them were teaching units<sup>14</sup>. From the perspective of the Ministry of Finance, education sector is qualified as oversized and requires streamlining in using public finances. This estimation is based on dynamic of some indicators during ten years (2000 – 2010) which refers to:

- Significant decrease of the number of students in the secondary-general education from 590516 to 376745 (36,2%);
- Decrease of the number of teaching staff by 6909 (17,1%);
- Decrease of the number of non-teaching staff by 1552 (5,8%);
- Decrease of the number of institutions by 54 (4,0%);
- Decrease of the ratio teacher/student from 1/15 to 1/11;
- Decrease of the ration non-teaching staff/student from 1/21 to 1/13<sup>15</sup>.

These data are relevant enough to contest the need of a structural reform in secondary general education regarding school network, classes' optimization, and adjustment of staff numbers. In this regard, any dispute between opponents and promoters of the reform, when necessary, becomes sterile.

## PARAMETERS OF STRUCTURAL REFORM

The issue of reforming the education sector must be approached in a broader context with the accession to power of the Alliance in July 2009, which undertook commitments to the international financial

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>13</sup> Expenditure Strategy for Public education system and education services", 2012-2014. CCTM.// <http://www.mf.gov.md/ro/middlecost/CCTM2014/>

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem.

institutions, following to take concrete actions on separate areas. Education being one of the sectors that consumes a lot of public money was “put to the wall.” Thus, the subject of reforming the education sector was already approached very explicitly in the summer of 2010 under the Memorandum signed by the IMF and the Moldovan authorities. Education sector was qualified as oversized and entirely unadjusted to the needs of economy, constituting a major barrier to strengthening and sustainability of budget and tax policy. The government proposes to remove excess capacity, streamlining and better equipment of this sector. However, one announced the intention to begin a more comprehensive reform of education in anticipation of increasing efficiency by reducing the number of classes in secondary schools and using of revenues collected from savings to improve quality of services and school infrastructure<sup>16</sup>.

The next stage of reform involved the employment of authorities to a much wider scale, and signing of a new memorandum in February 2011 contained more concrete data that evoked more negative reactions. The parliamentary opposition still in February 2011 accused the government that it has undertook to achieve merging smaller classes, schools optimizing and dismissal of a large number of employees in education as a result of pressures from the IMF, accusing the Ministry of Finance in particular of the lack of transparency in the negotiation process<sup>17</sup>.

16 Annex II: Additional memorandum on economic and financial policies 30 June 2010.// <http://www.imf.md/pub-memo.html>

17 Dodon: Government is bragging with wage increases. IMF imposes restrictions, staff layoffs and privatizations.// <http://unimedia.md/?id=30139&mod=news>; PCRM: Government has accepted dismissal of 6.700 people paid from state budget in the agreement with IMF.// [http://www.publika.md/pcrm-guvernul-a-acceptat-in-acordul-cu-fmi-concedierea-a-6-700-de-bugetari\\_225441.html](http://www.publika.md/pcrm-guvernul-a-acceptat-in-acordul-cu-fmi-concedierea-a-6-700-de-bugetari_225441.html)

Further information submitted by the authorities were not substantially different from the data presented by the PCRM (Communist Party), confirming the predisposition and commitment of the government in starting the reform implementation. Thus, additional memorandum on economic and financial policies in March 2011 provided a comprehensive reform in the oversized sector of education, reiterating de facto objectives formulated in the previous agreement signed with IMF:

- Elimination of excess capacities of the education system;
- Streamlining and better equipment of the system;
- Instruction and adequate remuneration of the staff;
- Adjusting education process to requirements of modern economy<sup>18</sup>

Planned reform was supposed to be focusing on the process of consolidation of classes, schools and staff, and most eventual budget savings, combined with World Bank financial assistance to be directed toward improving the quality of educational institutions, providing transport for students and repair of access routes for buses. Financial effect was estimated at 0.5% net savings on a permanent basis of GDP starting with 2013<sup>19</sup>.

For each aspect of reform, the Memorandum provides specific measures that the government must implement to receive a new instalment of financial assistance:

- Optimizing the size of classes,

18 Annex II: Additional memorandum on economic and financial policies 24 March 2011.// <http://www.imf.md/pub-memo.html>

19 Ibidem.



involving an increase by 1 September 2012 of classes to 30-35 students for big schools and 25-30 students for the remaining schools. Implementing these measures will help reduce the number of 1736 staff units, including 390 units in 2011, and therefore to an estimated annual saving of 94 million lei;

- Optimizing the school network, involving the gradual strengthening of the network by closing schools with small classes and providing transportation for students to district schools from starting this year. Implementation of this measure during 2011-2013 will result in a reduction in the number of 2661 teachers and 1426 non-teaching staff, generating savings of 136 million lei per year;
- Layoffs of non-teaching staff and vacancies by ceasing to employ non-teaching staff, eliminating 2400 available positions in the sector and establishment of a limit for the fund of work remuneration in the sector as a result of which all districts will reduce on average by 5% their number of employees hired in the field institutions compared to the end of 2010, which represents 5300 units at national level until the beginning of the academic year 2011/2012, generating savings of 175 million lei annually<sup>20</sup>.

Some of the conditions stipulated in the memorandum, in particular those relating to structural reforms, under which falls the education are very rough for RM,

anticipating quite significant social costs. This was recognized and confirmed by the National Bank governor himself, who noted however that the benefits are far outweighing the costs, not only limiting to financial dimension<sup>21</sup>. In the context of events and conflicts associated with optimizing the educational system in recent years, it seems that timely details and activities are to be clarified. Things are not clear if the subject was surrounded by this secret aura and non-transparency of authorities generates suspicions and pessimism in relation to the solutions to be prepared and implemented. However, according to the statements of the minister in this area, in coming school year there will be 221 rural schools reorganized, in the 2012 - 82 schools, and 2013-75. Thus, the next three years there are to be reorganized 370 schools from a total of 1500<sup>22</sup>. So far, only one thing is clear, namely that reform is necessary. To what extent this factor is enough to implement it without major stir of discontent and protest is a more problematic issue.

## THE IMPLICATIONS OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM

Reform puts on agenda some extremely sensitive questions with an enormous explosive potential in terms of social destabilization in the current conditions in Moldova. Among the most consistent questions can be listed as follows:

- What are the costs and benefits of

<sup>21</sup> Drăguțanu: Memorandum with the IMF is painful, but the leave of IMF would be even more painful.// <http://unimedia.md/?mod=news&id=30579>

<sup>22</sup> Minister of Education rejected the assumptions of interim President regarding layoffs.// <http://moldpres.md/News.aspx?NewsCod=6171&NewsDate=29.06.2011>

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem.

this reform?

- How are these costs and benefits distributed between social stakeholders targeted by it?
- What are the expected effects as a result of reform implementation?

In case of such complex and sensitive issues from social point of view there are no answers univocal and capable of providing satisfaction for all parties affected as a result of implementation. An immediate and simple answer is that everyone will benefit, but primarily the main beneficiaries of reform, meaning students, by providing a quality education. But this seemingly simple response creates some problems, resistance and discontent manifested by all groups affected by reform.

Despite a stated commitment of the Minister of Education and a predisposition to implement reform, the enthusiasm of people responsible for implementation will certainly be hurt. Ministry will have to make huge efforts to comply with and implement governmental commitments at sectoral level. In case of postponements, delays or failures all stones will be thrown in the “garden of the ministry.” Temporarily, Ministry of Economy was able to calm the spirits by ensuring that there will not be mass layoffs of teachers and whether they will produce they will be only exceptions for which are provided compensatory measures of social protection, retraining and reemployment<sup>23</sup>. However, the idea of certain layoffs as a result of the reform is accepted, even if the action plan states that there are no provisions for layoffs and accurate figures

<sup>24</sup>. On the other hand, we find there are more pessimistic views, admitting that layoffs are inevitable. They are relevant because they come from representatives of trade unions, who although pronounced themselves in favour of protecting teachers in circumstances of unjustified mass layoffs, they said that there are limited opportunities, given the situation in which about 22% of teachers are pensioners and 24% of teachers are having more than one education task<sup>25</sup>. Another potential obstacle that Ministry of Economy might encounter is to set in motion this mechanism and its coordination, a difficult task which can short circuit the reform implementation. If we take into consideration the rather lumpish approach of public institutions, combined with other circumstantial factors, reform implementation will be at least partially compromised. It is true that the positive experience of the pilot districts will be useful in the enlargement process to 9 districts and Balti and Chisinau municipalities, and then at national scale, but it should be emphasized that the magnitude of developed actions can affect the coherence and consistency of reform.

Resistance of teachers and administrative personnel represents another potential impediment to the implementation of the policy because all teachers and school staff that are to be liquidated perceive themselves as victims of this roller that will cross over them without consulting them or if their opinion is requested it is just observing the formalities. For most of them

<sup>23</sup> These for briefings of Minister of Education, Mihai Sleahitichi, of 29.06.2011.// <http://www.edu.md/?lng=ro&MenuItem=8&Article=1389>

<sup>24</sup> What is the practical meaning of schools optimization and who will suffer and what will we gain.(statements of Ms. Tatiana Poting, Vice-minister of Education).// <http://www.allmoldova.com/ro/experts/493.html>

<sup>25</sup> What is the practical meaning of schools optimization and who will suffer and what will we gain.(statements of Mr. Dumitru Ivanov, President of trade unions in education).// <http://www.allmoldova.com/ro/experts/493.html>

the Minister of Education assurances that they will not be dismissed is not a sufficiently reliable and unbeatable argument. From their perspective, optimization of classes and schools, where they have worked and which will disappear overnight is a personal tragedy, a tragedy that cannot be simply overcome. For them negative demographic trends, rising costs for maintenance of school infrastructure and low quality studies, taken together, have a lower value of the workplace that they are used to and which gave them a dose of safety and comfort. Even if most of them realize the need to restructure and “refresh” the educational system, they are certainly aware of this, the bitter taste cannot be removed. The disappearance of class, school, and job is equivalent to a benchmark or frame of reference that will be searched again or rebuilt, investing more effort and resources. Although there are about 24 000 vacancies, which will enable reemployment, according to the Minister of Education, it will be made on a competitive basis<sup>□</sup>. Also one has not explained what kind of contest it will be, because contest by definition involves competition. The confusion is more apparent than clarity, increasing the fear of teachers. The teaching staff has a concern that being a provision of the memorandum which states increasing flexibility in labour relations in the sector, by operation of amendments to the Labour Code and other laws to allow directors of educational institutions to make decisions about employment and dismissal of personnel based on necessity and performance based and not on a permanent basis<sup>□</sup>, which means de facto liberalization of labour relations, a not too favourable news for teaching staff. For now we can

guess that there prevails a relationship of distrust between authorities and teachers, which is not beneficial to implementation. The mistrust is also resulting from a deficient process of communication and lack of transparency in decision making process. It is also clear that the success of such a large reform in such an important field cannot be provided only from the top down and requires primarily support of those who provide educational services.

Restructuring the system will affect most of the main beneficiaries, i.e. students, who will face and, we must admit, some difficulties. However, the benefits they will gain as a result of receiving quality training are incomparable to the costs incurred, including adaptation costs. It is indisputable that a quality education will enhance opportunities and maximize their “initial capital” in the competition for admission in a better university, get a better paid job, social recognition and other privileges which give added value to human capital. In terms of access to these social goods, technical issues such as provision of transport for travel to school district or other type of institutions created by reform, repair of access roads to schools are secondary issues related to the administration. A key issue arising from the technical dimension of reform implementation is security of students in transportation and overall training, but this issue goes beyond the data analysis. Another positive aspect that reform brings in relation to students, but also for the whole system is wide-scale introduction of per capita funding formula - “money follows the student”, formula successfully tested in pilot districts. This approach will allow elimination of previously existing gaps



between schools, ensuring fair and equal distribution of financial resources for each student. The whole system will benefit due to a clear and transparent methodology for the allocation of financial resources.

Another effect of the new funding formula will be the establishment of a competitive regime for managers of schools, to be encouraged to improve the quality of education, attracting more students, therefore, and more resources. Therefore, the fundamental starting principle for any cost-benefit assessment for students is the quality of education. What happens next depends on the ability of reformers who were engaged in this process to provide quality services.

Finally, the concerns of parents do not differ significantly from those of their children. It is clear that parents want a system that provides quality services and does not financially burden them, which is contrary to the current system of informal payments, paid to various funds, and being quasi-legalized in several educational institutions. Most parents consider that quality of education depends on two key factors: qualified teachers and providing of teachers<sup>26</sup>, a deplorable situation in this area in more rural schools.

Another concern is the proposed reform context is observance of safety and health care for children who will be forced to move elsewhere. In this regard, ensuring students' security is a topic that was still not very present in public discourse, rather absent, though it deserves special attention. From the above mentioned facts, we find that structural reconfiguration

of general secondary education system involves a number of risks and dilemmas, while providing more opportunities within modernization of educational system, exploitation of which will depend on the skilfulness of authorities to manage the reform implementation.

## INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS

Returning to the policy from which we started the analysis of structural reform is necessary and appropriate, as support and political will are crucial to initiate, develop and ensure its success. In the absence of a strengthened position of all components of the Alliance, there is a risk that patronage networks of political parties would be put into action to block or delay the school network optimization. Likelihood of such a scenario is quite high in terms of current political uncertainty. Moreover, the possibility of early elections in the near future could block the reform until the situation will be clarified. Political parties should avoid engaging in supporting a process of rationalization of the education system for electoral reasons, being extremely cautious in taking unpopular actions while being so close to the elections. Assuming that teaching staff is one of the active political elements in rural areas, able to channel social energies in a certain direction, we can assume that political actors will not want to "complicate" until a new settling of election scores. In this case, only the Memorandum signed with the IMF would be a disturbing element, which would require a minimum discipline of political actors.

26 Basic education in the Republic of Moldova. IPP, Chisinau 2008, in Human education and development: current and perspective challenges. IPP, Chisinau, 2010.// [www.ipp.md/public/files/Publicatii/2010/Policy\\_Paper\\_Rom\\_Final.pdf](http://www.ipp.md/public/files/Publicatii/2010/Policy_Paper_Rom_Final.pdf)



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