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Book Review

Szakács, Simona. 2020. *Europe in the Classroom: World Culture and Nation-Building in Post-Socialist Romania.*

Stephan Benzmann
Universität Hamburg

In Eastern European countries the political und societal transformations that started in 1989 also led to changes in the educational systems which are still reflected in their current stages. This is the basis for Simona Szakács' empirical study on the development of Romania's post-socialist educational system in the context of Europeanisation and Globalisation.

Szakács starts her empirical journey to dismantle and broaden the dichotomous research and notions that are widely accepted by initially grabbing the reader's attention with a well-known scene from Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland, where Alice struggles with the changes happening to her and being able to identify her own current state of existence. Szakács uses this scene throughout the book to challenge the reader's notions about post-socialist education which are presumed to be in agreement with the established research and discussion. It is here where she starts to lay a convincing argument for why the accepted interpretation of post-socialist education should be broadened and torn out of its black and white existence. Her goal is to challenge the established research and consensus on Romanian education by showing that it has in fact made significant advances that bring it closer to the rest of the educational community. She sheds light on the "polarized research field" where predominately Scandinavian and historical traditions of institutionalism shape the narrative on this specific area of education. Szakács also makes an interesting argument for the conundrum of contradicting perceptions surrounding Romania's European identity within the country itself and specifically within the European Union. Her clear display of this tug of war, exemplified by her connection to Carroll's Alice allows the reader to dive into the subject area and open their perspective to new argumentation surrounding Romania's post-socialist education system.

Corresponding author:

Stephan Benzmann, Universität Hamburg, stephan.benzmann@uni-hamburg.de

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Szakács' analysis is unique in its combination of sources that are not typically combined. Instead of focusing on one single context to analyze change she combines multiple aspects of change at once to place the state of education in a more contextualized arena.

Her case study takes a cultural and institutional perspective that uses two corpora of qualitative data. The first corpus consists of officially regulated documents such as legislation, curricula as well as eight expert interviews and focuses on 17 civics and 21 history textbooks as they offer a "privileged site for distilling normative notions of citizenship and nations (p. 21)". The first corpus intends to examine official discourse concerning reform and how the nation-state depicts itself in molding young citizens. Szakács dives into textbook research in this corpus, looking at the state sanctioned reality in the periods she examines combined with expert interviews to represent an "official position".

The second corpus consists of 10 hours and 33 minutes of classroom recordings. Her goal is to examine schooling, or how reforms have been implemented on a micro-dynamic level. Szakács describes the classroom as "a microcosm of social life where educational discourses are enacted and where projections of the future take shape" (p. 22). In an innovative approach, she not only takes recordings from civics lessons, but also from human rights, history and Romanian language classes. This varied selection of lessons further supports her argument for a new methodological approach where change is not viewed singularly, but through multiple aspects at one time. The second corpus also includes data from photographs taken at eight different Romanian schools. Szakács' attention to detail in accuracy is seen down to the gender of the selected teachers in her interviews and regional selection of schools based on census data to provide the most representative view of Romanian education.

The analysis then takes multiple approaches to examine the data. By her own account the study's shortcoming is in the lack of "diachronic perspective in the collection of school-level discourses." (p. 23). However, this "limitation" is debatable since her primary focus is to bridge institutional and actual change. Through her multi-layered approach, she succeeds in collecting a wealth of data offering new insights into Romanian education. In short, the data derived from the second corpus not only adds relevant information to assess the changes in Romanian education post-socialism, especially through interviews with teachers who more or less represent the official state guidelines, but also compliments the first corpus of data to show a comprehensive view of these changes and challenge the established notions on Romanian educational reforms.

Szakács' work attempts to prove that post-socialist change in Romania has been deeply influenced by institutionalizing world culture and its preparations for EU ascension. This thesis is backed up by three main arguments which look at education's role in institutionalization by the nation-state, schools as the main drivers of global concepts such as "citizen" and "nation", and finally institutionalizing "Europe" as a cultural wellspring.

Szakács' first argument draws the similarity to Romania and other countries institutionalization of education for nation-building. The system's priorities of economics and individual learning have changed and coped with historical periods in Romania's history. The most recent example being a pro-European agenda and bridging to preparing the workforce to be globally competitive. Considering the historical groundwork, Szakács lays out this gradual

change in focus to pro-European and global readiness showing the strong tie between schooling and nation-building.

Her second argument shows the fascinating transformation between socialist period conceptions of “citizen” and “nation” to a more European and global view of these terms, moving away from the strong nationalistic tendencies of the socialist era. The transformation of these concepts through various educational and state avenues dealing with diversities and minority groups lead to what Szakács describes as the “cosmopolitisation of the national script” (p. 223). This furthers into the concept of “citizen” which in Szakács’ view matches the new notion of “nation” which has distanced itself from an exclusively national oriented view. Szakács taps into the “sensitivity” (p. 224) of Romanian schools adapting to the changing notions of “citizen” and “nation” further establishing her argument that changes have and are taking place in Romanian education.

Szakács’ final argument shows that “Europe” is used as a cultural wellspring for education. She argues that “Europe forms the basis of an aspirational identity-making mechanism for Romania” (p. 226) which is further validated through its historical context. This institutionalization of Europe legitimizes further national identity development which is still in redefinition. It does not strive to replace, but to integrate into national identity.

It is through these poignant examples and innovative connection of research and data that Szakács makes a strong case to reframe the discussion on Romanian education.