

# Centrally Planned Allocation of Higher Education Graduates in Romania (1950-1970)

Marius CAZAN\*

*University of Bucharest, Faculty of History*

**Abstract:** The centrally planned compulsory assignment ('repartition') of higher education graduates to various socialist enterprises and/or institutions was one of the novelties brought along by the communist system in Romania, closely following the Soviet model. The article focuses on the regulations aspects of how this system actually functioned in the 1950s and 1960s. It demonstrates that in the first stage, the system presented loopholes which allowed some of the graduates to avoid going to the socialist units to which they had been assigned, and the management of these units to refuse to accept graduates they did not really want. Therefore, even if the system was marred by many arbitrary decisions and by ideological considerations that often dwarfed meritocratic criteria, during the 1950s the system allowed for considerable individual bargaining and agency at the margin of official rules. Yet, gradually, the loopholes were closed with the help of targeted bureaucratic regulations, and while meritocratic criteria became increasingly important in the process of assigning higher education graduates to their future workplaces, the system became tighter and allowed for fewer opportunities to circumvent the official rules.

**Keywords:** *higher education graduates, centrally planned economy, agency, bureaucracy, meritocracy.*

For the postwar socialist regimes in East-Central Europe, the USSR was the only model to follow. All the political, social and economic methods used in the USSR were mimetically imported by the states that were under the Soviet influence. The most important economic mechanism of coordination was the plan. 'The plan is a monumental piece

of bureaucratic coordination aimed at prior reconciliation of the processes of the economy. Thousands upon thousands of functionaries in the party apparatus, the state administration, the firm and cooperative managements, and the mass organizations negotiate, calculate, renegotiate and recalculate before the millions of planning

\*e-mail: mtcazan@yahoo.com. Marius Cazan received a B.A. and an M.A. in History from the University of Bucharest (2009 and 2011). He is currently a Ph.D. candidate with a thesis titled "The Dynamics of the Urban Habitat in Bucharest (1948-1989). Constructions, Facilities, Perceptions". He is also member in the research team of the project Economic Planning, Higher Education and the Accumulation of Human Capital in Romania during Communism (1948-1989) held at the Centre for Administrative, Cultural and Economic Studies, University of Bucharest and financed by the National Research Council. His research areas of interest are Romanian communism, urban history, Romanian higher education history, history of everyday life during communism.

commands finally emerge at all levels' (Kornai, 1992: 114). The overall constraints regarding labor were provided by the plan. Being part of the general economic plan, manpower planning means that people are treated as assets helping to fulfill economic targets.

The way in which planned economies insisted on manpower forecasts and the compulsory distribution of higher education graduates to jobs are components of the Soviet blueprint. In theory, graduates had to be assigned to the institutions which needed them, and where their input would be the most efficient for the general economic and social performance of the system. Consequently, individual preferences regarding jobs were irrelevant, or, at best, secondary (even though the official rhetoric does not mention it). But were graduates willing to give up their desired career plans?

Apparently, as in the USSR, the centrally planned allocation of higher education graduates in Romania was handled more strictly than in other socialist countries (Teichler, 2011: 328). This meant that individual employment opportunities were highly limited by the rational provisions of the plan. If we take a better look at the way in which assignments were carried out in Romania in the 1950s and the early 1960s, we can notice that the actual system performance was far from being very strict.

Throughout the 1950s, from the legislative point of view, central administration bureaucrats tried to enhance the way in which the assignment of jobs was conducted. It is worth mentioning that bureaucrats who worked in the main state structures

after the communists took over were untrained and inexperienced. The high officials and civil servants who worked for previous regimes had been purged or switched to insignificant jobs, and their positions were filled by 'staff with healthy social origins' (*cadre cu origini sănătoase*), not necessarily specialists. In addition, the centralized assignment of graduates was extremely new for the Romanian education system. Although there were some precedents in very limited professional areas (for instance, before the war, the graduates of military schools were automatically assigned to certain state structures), the generalized distribution process was a touchstone for bureaucrats. Moreover, the desire to implement fast all the soviet blueprints led to excessively zealous solutions. For instance, in the USSR, the compulsory assignment of graduates started in 1933, after the first five-year plan (1928-1932) was completed. Probably, during the first five-year plan, the higher education system trained students in order to satisfy the workforce needed for the next five-year cycle (DeWitt, 1955: 153; 163). In Romania, 1950, the first year of the five-year plan, coincided with the first year when graduates were assigned to jobs. We are unaware of whether this decision was deliberately made by the Romanian government, or if it was a direct request from Moscow.

The main regulation based on which graduates were assigned to their jobs was a Decree from 1950, which stipulated that the assignment was carried out by a 'Governmental committee for graduates' assignment in production' (both graduates from higher education institutions, and from secondary technical schools).

The ten articles of the decree fail to cover the entire range of problems related to the assignment process. The main provisions of the decree specified that graduates had to work where assigned for at least 3 years after graduation; enterprises and institutions were allowed to accept graduates only based on the allocation made by the Governmental committee, and the initial assignment could only be changed by this committee. The last article of the decree provided that the Governmental committee had to draft norms and instructions for the implementation of the decree (Decree no. 180/1950). Unfortunately, the archives are not always well-preserved, and in some cases we could not follow the entire flow of documents. For instance, we found the first copy of the instructions regarding the implementation of the decree in a file from 1957 (AMED, 183/1957).

The Governmental committee for the distribution of graduates was established under a decision of the Council of Ministers from June 1950. The head of this structure was a vice-prime-minister, while the members were ministers, deputy ministers or directors from ministries in charge with the personnel (*directori de cadre*). There were also representatives of important central institutions, such as the Romanian Academy, the State Planning Committee, Agerpres, the Geological Committee or the General Statistics Committee. The main role of the committee was to divide, as fairly as possible, the limited number of graduates among ministries, central institutions and regional administrative authorities. At the same time, theoretically, the committee was

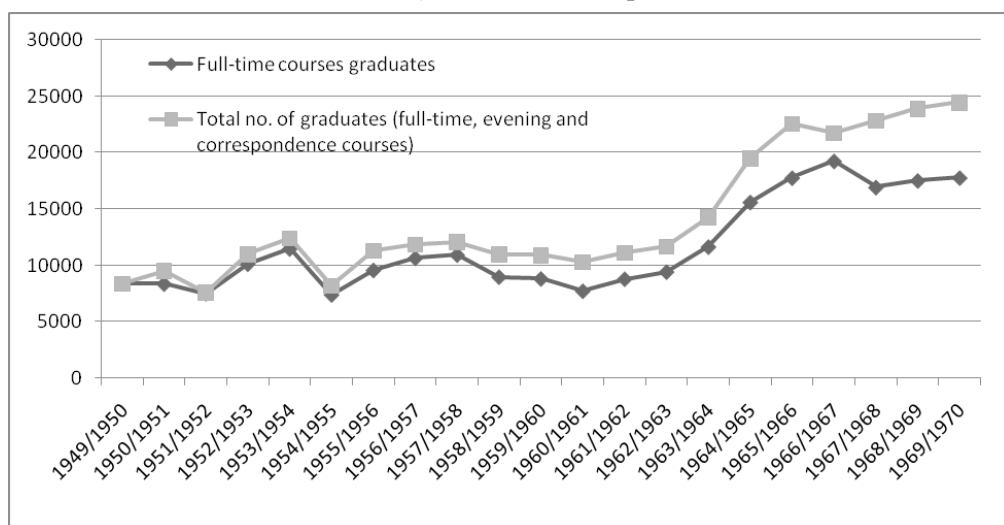
supposed to take into consideration the graduates' personal situation, where they wanted to work / their option for a specific workplace, and whether they ideologically fitted in their future job / their ideological suitability (ANIC, PCM, file no. 70/1950). In reality, the allocation was not carried out by this Governmental committee. Each higher education institution had an assignment committee (*comisie de repartizare*). Such committees were chaired by rectors, while deans, heads of the staff divisions within faculties, representatives of the Union of Working Youth and representatives of students' organizations were all members of the committees. The graduates were invited before the committee and were asked to choose a job from a list. The list was established by the Ministry of Education (or Ministry of Health - for medicine graduates; or Ministry of Agriculture for institutions with agriculture profile). The order in which they showed before the committee was dictated by their academic records. Apparently, this process seems to be fully meritocratic, but the graduate and the committee did not always reach an agreement, and the decision regarding the assignment was finally made by the committee (AMED, 183/1957).

In 1960, Decree no. 180/1950 was replaced by a decision of the Council of Ministers (no. 918/1960), which was more accurate on the organization of the assignment of higher education graduates. It stipulated that nominal assignment was made 'according to the results obtained at school and during extracurricular activities'. The decision also mentioned that, in well-grounded cases, the distribution committee could take into account

the graduate's personal situation (e.g. geographic distance between spouses; the graduate's special medical conditions). Other practical aspects on how the assignment occurred were specified in a 1965 Order of the Minister of Education on graduates' assignment. There were 4 criteria considered for the nominal assignment: academic score; social involvement; the graduate's personal interests; the accommodation opportunities in big cities (because the employer was required to offer dwelling to the graduate). If two graduates had the same academic score and wanted the same job, the one who was able to demonstrate (with

documents) his/her personal interest in that specific job would finally win the competition (geographic distance between spouses; proximity to old or sick parents; the need for special healthcare) (AMED/150/1965).

The limited number of graduates (see Figure 1) was supposed to be distributed in a manner that would endorse the regime's forced industrialization process (Murgescu, 2010: 336). Thus, the need for specialists who had to fill the vacancies created by the new industrial objectives faced the low capacity of the higher education system to provide and train those specialists.



**Figure 1.** Number of higher education graduates between 1950 and 1970.

Source: INS, 1996: 104.

Moreover, the illiteracy eradication program and the massification of primary and secondary education requested an increased number of teachers who scattered the highly trained workforce more. Therefore, especially in the 1950s, but later also, ministries, central institutions and regional administrative authorities formulated requests (in terms of numbers) which exceeded the capacity

of the system to train graduates. For instance, in 1951 the total number of higher education graduates was roughly 8,500, while the number of requests received by the Governmental committee was over 21,000. For some specializations, the requested number was extraordinary (see Table 1).

**Tabel 1.** *The main differences between supply and demand of higher education graduates in 1951*

| Specialization                           | Requests | Graduates |
|------------------------------------------|----------|-----------|
| Russian language                         | 1080     | 23        |
| General economics                        | 558      | 167       |
| Industrial accounting                    | 896      | 27        |
| Agrarian accounting evidence             | 208      | 29        |
| Commercial accounting evidence           | 125      | 26        |
| Accounting evidence – Budget and credit  | 544      | 26        |
| Mechanics – steam power machines         | 143      | 13        |
| Mechanics – internal combustion machines | 182      | 32        |
| Mechanics – machine tools                | 281      | 39        |
| Precision mechanics                      | 102      | 5         |
| Electrical machines                      | 238      | 25        |
| Power transportation                     | 254      | 72        |
| Civil and industrial engineering         | 1054     | 124       |
| General medicine                         | 1296     | 535       |
| Veterinary medicine                      | 462      | 106       |

Source: ANIC, PCM, 227/1951.

The Department of Municipal Services (*Gospodărire Comunală*) alone was asking for 476 specialists in general economics, although the total number of graduates in general economics was not higher than 167 graduates (ANIC, PCM, file no. 227/1951). A similar situation occurred in 1953, when the requests were higher especially in polytechnic fields (e.g. there were 98 graduates of machine tools, and the demand was for 565 specialists; 11 industrial electro-technic graduates as opposed to 125 demands), but also in humanities like Romanian language and literature, with 1,719 requests to only 161 graduates, or Russian language and literature with 115 graduates and 1,554 demands for specialists (ANIC, CC-PCR- Propagandă și Agitație, file no. 30/1953).

Another factor which influenced the centrally planned allocation of higher education graduates was the common practice among students to work even before graduation, most of them from the third or fourth year of studies.

Therefore, upon distribution, the number of those who were assigned was lower than the planned number of graduates forecasted based on the number of students in the terminal year. For example, in 1950, at the Faculty of Finance and Credit from the Institute of Economic Science and Planning, out of 262 graduates forecasted to be assigned, only 113 took part in the allocation process, since the rest were already hired (ANIC, PCM, file no. 52/1950). Despite the interdiction to hire students during school years (through a decision of the Council of Ministers from June 1951), some institutions continued to hire or keep them. In 1953, the total number of graduates of the University of Bucharest was 1,038, out of which 199 were already hired by institutions such as the Union of Working Youth (Communist Youth), the Press Direction, the Institute of History and Philosophy, Radio Broadcasting (ANIC, CC-PCR- Propagandă și Agitație, file no. 106/1953). It would be difficult to say whether the

ministries were intentionally hiding it, or they simply were not aware of the real number of students who worked in their fields. We suppose that the lack of work force determined institutions to use all possible methods in order to better fill up vacancies. What we know for certain is that in 1951 there were 1,500 students employed, and the ministries declared only 400 (ANIC, PCM, 227/1951). All in all, we could argue that this practice demonstrates that the acute need of specialized work force sometimes worked to the benefit of individuals, because they were able to negotiate their jobs, albeit at the margins of the law. We may even say that the worst years of the communist rule were characterized by a relative freedom of choice regarding employment, except for those groups which were considered ‘class enemies’ (*dușman de clasă*).

As part of the plan, manpower allocation was subject to bureaucracy (Kornai, 1992: 114). But, as Kornai also claimed, ‘direct bureaucratic control is inefficient in many respects. It is extremely rigid; there are long delays and serious losses before it adapts to changes in needs, technology, the domestic political situation, or the outside world’ (Kornai, 1992: 118). Taking into account these systemic impairments, we focus on the bureaucratic process of the centrally planned distribution of higher education graduates. One of the main reasons for the inefficiency of the central allocation of graduates was the large number of those who did not take the jobs they were assigned to. For instance, in 1950, the Ministry of Education was responsible for the assignment of 4,600 higher education graduates. By the

end of September, only 2,400 of them showed at their assigned workplaces. The bureaucratic incapacity to cope with this problem was reflected very clear in the Governmental committee for the allocation graduates dated September 23, 1950, when the minister of education asked what measures were supposed to be taken regarding those who failed to show at their assigned jobs (ANIC, PCM, 70/1950). The confusion is explained by the ambiguity of Decree no. 180/1950 which claimed that the breach thereof was to be sanctioned according to Decree no. 183/1949 on the punishment of economic offences. Subsequently, Decision no. 918 dated July 27, 1960 of the Council of Ministers, which replaced Decree no. 180/1950, stipulated that the employment of graduates in other conditions than those set by the Decision was forbidden. The eventual misdemeanors were established in instructions elaborated by the Ministry of Education under the provisions of Decree no. 184/1954 which regulated the sanctioning of misdemeanors. The decree was not too harsh. Article 6 stipulated that misdemeanors were sanctioned with a fine between Lei 5 and 150, or with a warning (Decree no. 184/1954). In a document from 1964 we came across an interesting situation. A draft of the Ministry of Education regarding instructions on how to sanction the infringement of the assignment process included consistent fines for those who broke the rules (Lei 1,000 to 5,000 for institutions that hired graduates who were not allocated to them). However, the Council of Ministers showed disapproval, and stopped the implementation of the

decree recommending 'disciplinary sanctions' (ANIC, PCM, 22/1965). We have to say that we were not able to identify any proof that during the 1950s or the 1960s, administrative or financial coercive measures were taken against those who breached the rules of assignment (both individuals and institutions).

In this context, the coercive bureaucratic pressure on individuals was questionable. No wonder that despite any improvements in bureaucracy, in the late 1950s and early 1960s there were still individuals who eluded the assignment system. At the end of October 1958, only 74 per cent of the graduates were working in their assigned jobs. Most of the remaining 26 per cent had not shown up at their allocated work places (ANIC, PCM, 11/1959). In 1963, most of the graduates who eluded the assignment, almost 800 out of a total of 1,281, were on the list of the Ministry of Education as needed work force. Most of them were assigned to regions like Suceava or Maramureş, but also around Bucharest or Cluj. Another problem was represented by the situations when graduates left their jobs after a few months, despite the compulsory 3 years (ANIC, PCM, 22/1965). These situations may have occurred because the job and the living conditions were under graduates' expectations. There were situations when the employer was unable to provide a place to live, and this was a grounded reason for graduates to ask for a new assignment.

An important aspect of the assignment system was its preference for using personal connections and bargaining in order to achieve the desired results. Kornai distinguishes

a certain type of bargaining, which is specific to socialist systems and their bureaucracies. 'Vertical bargaining' involves negotiations between subordinate and superior (Kornai, 1992: 122). In the process of the centrally planned allocation of higher education graduates, there were at least two methods of vertical bargaining. One of them was the negotiation for more manpower (graduates) between institutions at different levels of power (enterprises and ministries; ministries and the Governmental committee), while another was the bargaining between graduates (as individuals), and political and administrative bureaucrats with power, who could facilitate their access to better jobs. The former situation is illustrated by the sessions of the Governmental committee, which discussed and decided on the number of graduates allocated to each ministry or institution. The representatives of ministries could receive what they wanted if they were able to use economic and especially ideological arguments to convince the head of the committee (vice-prime-minister) that they needed the graduates more than other institutions (ANIC, PCM, file no. 70/1950; 227/1951). The primacy of the ideological factor becomes visible if we look at the profile of institutions which acted as though they benefited from more rights: requests for certain graduates (*repartizare nominală*); refusal of certain graduates on the ground that they were not politically suitable. These institutions – the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Armed Forces, the newspaper 'Scântea', the Central Committee of the Union of Working Youth –

refused to employ the graduates whom they accepted initially and, when the assignment process was over, requested other nominal assignments (ANIC, PCM, 53/1950).

The latter situation of bargaining involved individuals who acted for their own good and who were willing to break the law, if necessary. Obviously, they needed at least one partner in order to initiate bargaining. Most often, the partners were the employers. For instance, an archival document states that in 1958 there were enterprises which belonged to the Ministry of Consumer Goods that hired graduates without their 3 year term completed in administrative jobs (ANIC, PCM, 396/1958). Probably this situation was the result of a fruitful negotiation between graduates and employers. Such attempts to arrange access to good jobs were not always successful. In 1960, Sașa Pană, a well-known avant-garde writer with strong leftist political views, wrote a supplicant letter to deputy prime-minister Emil Bodnăraș. In his letter, Pană showed that his son, Vladimir, was a 1958 graduate of the Faculty of Philosophy and Journalism, and that after graduation he expected an assignment in the media, which never came. Meanwhile, Vladimir was hired as an unskilled worker in a shoe factory from Bucharest. Vladimir's wife, who was assistant editor of the magazine 'Viața studentăescă', also tried to help him by presenting his case before the Central Committee of the Union of Working Youth, but to no effect. Afterwards, probably at Bodnăraș' suggestion, the Ministry of Education made an investigation and drafted a note which was sent to Bodnăraș. Actually, in 1958, because

there were no jobs available in the media, most journalism graduates were assigned as teachers. Vladimir Pană was assigned to the region of Bacău, but never showed up to take over his job. The Ministry of Education invited him to the process of job allocation for the class of 1960, but again he failed to go (probably because there were only teaching jobs, all of them outside Bucharest) (ANIC, PCM, 31/1960). Therefore, even though Vladimir Pană had personal connections which provided him with the capacity of agency, the outcomes were not as desired. We could not find in the archives any other documents about how Vladimir Pană's case ended. We only assume that in the end he obtained the job he wanted. Although it is not entirely relevant, and one's career path can be much more complex, we mention that decades later, in 1995, we found Vladimir Pană in the editorial board of a small cultural magazine published in Giurgiu (Petcu, 2012: 958).

Another important issue referring to the failure of managing the centrally-planned allocation of graduates seems to be the assignment of full-time course graduates who benefited from scholarships. After 1957, half of the full-time places were reserved for workers and peasants' children, who benefited from scholarships granted by factories, economic units and regional public administrations. After admission to university, students signed a contract with the institution which provided them with financial support, and after graduation they were assigned to the respective institution. In the 1960s, when the first classes of this program graduated, there were many cases when

supportive institutions (especially public administrations) no longer needed the specialists trained 4 or 5 years earlier (ANIC, PCM, 22/1965). Such examples show that manpower forecast remained an aspiration rather than a perfect solution. Even so, in the 1960s, the distribution system became more equitable. The legislative and organizational improvements diminished individual opportunities to obtain better jobs through bargaining. For instance, in the 1950s and early 1960s, some of the institutions took advantage of the custom to request certain graduates. Nominal distribution was the easiest way for a graduate to control the assignment process (to his/her advantage). In 1966, the Broadcasting and Television Committee asked for 30 nominal graduates. The institutions in charge were the State Planning Committee (regarding the numbers), and the Ministry of Education (regarding the practical aspects of assignment). The answer received from both institutions did not provide any explanations: the Broadcasting and Television Committee would receive 26 graduates, as stipulated in the initial numerical allocation project. As for the nominal requests, the answer was negative, because the law said that assignment had to consider the graduates' general score (ANIC, PCM, 110/1966).

Gradually, particularly after Decision no. 918 of 1960 of the Council of Ministers, the allocation of higher education graduates became

increasingly meritocratic. Even if the laws and regulations regarding the assignment were fewer in the 1960s, they were much better drafted, and their implementation was stricter. Obviously, there still were loopholes that were explored by those who were willing to take risks. An important factor that helped impose the meritocratic criteria was the growing number of graduates, especially in the second half of the sixties, which finally diminished the desperate need for graduates. We should also take into account that industrialization came together with a specific form of bureaucracy. Technocracy, or industrial bureaucracy, is more willing to recruit work force relying strictly on competence-related criteria rather than political party bureaucracy. Therefore, in the 1960s, the industrial bureaucracy was powerful enough to compete against political bureaucracy for the control over society and political decisions (Pasti, 1995: 66). Consequently, the legislative freedoms of the sixties could have been the result of the confrontation between these two forms of bureaucracy.

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