Towards a Culture of Quality Policymaking in Transition Countries.
The Case of Education

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Annex
1. Setting the scene. The “policy” approach to educational change

This paper is based on a policy study, animated by the aim of capturing the situation of policy process, especially in the field of education, in the dynamic context of transition. After fifteen years of post-communism, slowly, but determinedly, a new culture has started to develop, promoting new values and emphasizing the crucial role of policy making in the public sphere evolution and development.

The reflections are primarily based on field research done in Poland and Romania in late 2005, but also on a great deal of transition and educational reform literature, with a focus on the countries of the Central and South-Eastern Europe. Ten interviews were conducted in Poland, and fifteen in Romania, with key actors in the policy processes in educational management and governance, at both the central and local level. The interview guide (see annex 1) tried to get information from persons having positions related to policy making and implementation in education about the stage of development and main characteristics of the educational policy process and the extent to which a mature and professional approach to this process has started to be articulated.

Nevertheless, despite the cultural, economic and social differences among transition areas, we argue that there are strong common features of transition regardless geographic area or historical background. A transversal similarity can be observed, not directly related to pace and magnitude of the process, or to the local happening of the transition, but to the challenges and the transformations envisaged both at personal and social level.

Our basic assumption is that policymaking in education is more likely to produce high quality results if there is a mature policy system in place. By mature policy system we understand that some or most of the following conditions are met in the process of the development and implementation of educational policies:

1. Technical-functional conditions: there is in place a clear policy cycle, with defined steps which are regularly respected and by those involved in the process and set up as milestones to adjust their activity. The policy process, therefore, takes place according to an internal functional logic, visible and acknowledged by participants. The technical – functional conditions are not concretized in a pre-defined algorithm which has to be strictly followed. Is rather a professionally regulated approach, as opposed to unstructured and reactive, which tries to reflect the logical steps of the process.

2. Conceptual conditions: there is a common language used in the policymaking, there is agreement of those involved regarding the common understanding of main concepts specific to the field. In other words, a community of discourse is created and allows participants to “speak the same language” of educational policy. This community of discourse and conceptual maturity of policymaking process can be observed in the basic / key policy documents of the educational system. This does not of course mean that everyone agrees on policy, only that they can at least communicate their differences effectively and intelligibly.

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1 Our focus will be mainly on the Central and South Eastern Europe
3. **Professional conditions**: there is in place an *institutional framework* in charge of the policy processes in education. There could be a wide variety of institutional arrangements: specialized units at Ministry of Education level or at the level of regional / local educational authorities; specialized institutes or agencies subordinated to Ministries of Education; NGOs or think tanks focused on policy analysis, development and evaluation. Another option could be a “soft” institutionalization of policymaking: policy responsibilities assigned to professionals at different levels. So the degree of institutionalization could be considered a sign of maturity. To this could also be added *the participation and consultation mechanisms* used in the policy process.

4. Last, but not least, a new condition appears as more and more important lately, due to the different type of crisis that the world faced and to which it had to give a rapid and coherent answer. **Capacity to function under pressure**, in non-linear and often chaotic conditions is a fundamental requirement for a mature policy system. Maturity doesn’t mean, as previously underlined, a “functional machinery”, but a responsive, flexible and adaptive process, being able to use innovation and creativity to steer processes and to bring about results.

“Policy” is not anymore a regulation from the impersonal “state”, but an improvement initiative, based on identifiable needs, specific to a target group, with clear expected results and implementation plans. A first sign or level of maturity would be therefore the existence of the policy approach in educational reforms. Next ones would be related to external coherency and internal consistency of this approach, making the step from isolated policy initiatives to a whole policy system, functional and efficient in answering existing improvement needs and in plotting the path towards future goals.

This paper is strongly influenced by my personal experience in Romania, working in the central governance of education and in grassroots development projects, but also by the project work and / or consultancy activities I performed in the last years in countries like Poland, Hungary, Serbia and Montenegro, FYR of Macedonia and Albania. The subjective experience is acknowledged, conceptualized in a reflective manner and used in a biographical way, the history of transition in general being also my personal transition from adolescence to a mature professional life in educational reform and educational policy. This is why I consider that the whole discussion about policy process in transition context cannot be and should not be primarily put in the so-called “objective tradition” of research, but rather in a qualitative interpretation, in which own subjectivity and biography are revealed and assessed from the perspective of their contribution to the transition as such. This is even more needed I think if we take into account of the call for a multi/perspective, kaleidoscopic understanding of transition, in which *culture*, as unclear and “non-scientific” this concept might be considered, is playing a major role.

2. **Transition and beyond. A new culture of change and development**

Using the word “transition” became *de rigeur* in public discourse when trying to explain a unique and very complex situation which resulted especially in the post-communist
countries as a tension between the remainders of the “old regime” and challenges of a new, postmodern world showing a completely new reality, shocking and astonishing for the large majority of people, asked to embark on dramatic identity changes in their personal, social and professional lives.

Beyond this overuse and abuse of the concept, intellectually comfortable and not demanding for further clarification because of its large acceptance and social distribution, transition became a paradigm. A paradigm of change, which came not only with tremendous variety and dynamics of the context, but with enriching new meanings of social and personal change. A whole transition culture started to develop, with its benefits and shortcomings, with a variable epistemological geometry, but with a strong and unwavering commitment towards development. The transition paradigm in the sense given by Thomas Carothers and other scholars, based on a model with a certain number of assumptions coming from the idea of transition towards democracy is only one side of what we call here transition culture. As fundamental transformation and change process in Central and South-Eastern Europe, transition is much more than a structured model of achieving political democracy, stated mainly by the active donors and assistance programs. It is an intimate social-cultural and personal identity process, an active re-construction of the social reality, both in terms of everyday life and the public sphere. By public sphere we mean the public space, physical and discursive, but also public services (education, health, social assistance etc.).

2.1. Transition paradigm. Are we in or are we out?

The time has arrived for the groups and organizations promoting democracy to give up the transition paradigm. (...) Is difficult to give up transition paradigm, because of the conceptual order and to the optimistic vision it offers. To abandon this paradigm means an important break-up, but not a total one. (...)2 „. (Th. Carothers, 2002, p.182).

About a decade after the fall of communism, a kind of mutual agreement or maybe a movement seemed to congeal between transition scholars about the imminent end of transition as a historical period and as an academic “discipline”. As it initially started, as a political passage, the end of transition was somehow demanded by the consolidation of democracy, the critical evolution towards a market economy and the first signs of a post-transition such as economic growth, stability of democratic institutions and procedures, basic rule of law and a critical mass of consolidated public consciousness ready to resist any return to the “dark side” of the past.

But let’s have a brief look into the possible meanings of this concept, in order to capture the characteristics of a transition context.

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2 Translated from Romanian into English.
a. **The historical meaning:** puts the emphasis on *time* perspective, on the passage from one historical époque to another. After the breakthrough from communism the transition time started, a period situated at crossroads of two social aims: demise of the past and plotting a path toward future.

b. **The political meaning:** abolition of the communist regime and construction of democracy. A whole new range of political values started to structure the public arena: freedom, democracy, well-being, competition, property, market economy, dignity, human rights etc.

c. **Economic meaning:** movement from a centralized, state planned and owned, command driven economy towards a market, custom-oriented and demand driven economy.

d. **Social meaning:** the emergence of democratic citizenship, accompanied by all rights and responsibilities; development of associative life and transformation of institutional landscape.

e. **Cultural meaning:** the emergence of cultural diversity, acceptance and encouragement of cultural identities (different social-cultural groups); demise of ideology in cultural life.

f. **Educational meaning:** giving up the ideological ballast, modernization, separation between politics and policy, change of educational message according to the values mentioned above. Development of new educational ideal and reconstruction of schooling based on new principles: democracy, diversity of learning styles and needs, quality, accountability, autonomy and competence.

Having in mind all these facets of transition, a whole *transition culture* articulates at individual and social life levels, an *inter-regnum* culture (as Cezar Birzea calls it\(^3\)) situated between post-communism and post-modernism, a culture of the times “between brackets”\(^4\).

Besides all differences, local or cultural, common, transversal features appear in all these contexts:

- *Coexistence* of some past and new present (future) values, in a mixed and sometimes conflicting manner;
- *Ambivalence* of a double-sided reality, apparently schizophrenic, but often comfortable for the people, who tend to see it not as *transition* to something, but as *modus vivendi*. We will further approach this in a separate section.
- *Precariousness*, as consequence of the accelerated, sometimes forced change, with limited time for reflection and internalization, for participation and critical approach.

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The “problem” of the south-eastern approaches to transition is not the idea of endless transformation and structural changes, but the lack of vision about the future and the very fragmented opinions about the way ahead. Regardless how we look at it, transition means a route or a transformation from something to something else. We know the departure point, we even know and we are able to describe the steps we made, but when it comes about the destination, imagination becomes poorer. Where do we go? What society would we like to have? What education system we would like to create? These are serious questions for strong and consistent public debate, for consensus building. This is, let’s say, the missing link of the transition paradigm. This kind of discussions, raising the awareness of the public about educational matters and building the consensus on the future of educational systems made from educational reforms an elite or donor driven action, with low participation and ownership at a larger level.

But there is a multitude of perspectives from which we cannot talk yet about the end of transition. Maybe the transition paradigm came to an end in political and democracy theory. But the social reality under construction, the dynamics of change, the unpredictability and non-linearity of transformations and, finally, the spectacular identity processes at individual level are still in transition. Maybe a new type of transition, but still transition.

When asked the question From educational point of view, especially when looking to educational policy, would you say that Poland / Romania is still in transition? majority the interviewees answered ‘Yes” (eight in Poland, fourteen in Romania).

“‘Yes, Poland is absolutely in process of transformation. I mean the completion of both structural changes of the education system and the content reforms based on assessments. (...)” (Interview 8, Poland)

(…) So this transition is proceeding, and there are issues that are modified on the way. But it doen’t have any more the form of any radical reform, but rather normal evolution. (Interview 2, Poland)

“There is no doubt about this. But we have a problem of coherency because every ministerial teams considers that reforms starts with them…” (Interview 6, Romania)

“We still have components of the reform neglected and asking for rapid measures: teacher training, management and financing of schools, and others but not so much…” (Interview 12, Romania).

In Poland people consider that time of fast-run already passed and now there is a smoother evolution, while in Romania, in spite of the expressed need for overall stability, some sectors were considered as particularly lagging behind and being in need for firm and complex intervention (teacher training was mentioned by eight persons, school governance by seven). But when it comes to educational policy, there is a wide agreement that we are still in transition, since we didn’t reach a satisfactory level of efficiency and equity in governing the education.
Another idea expressed by respondents and important for this part of the discussion was related to the political over-influence on education and educational policies, mainly as result of Government change or ministers change. This situation gives priority to the political legitimacy and very small room for professional legitimacy, making educational policy a matter of “personal will” instead rational and professional activity, based on identified needs and problems and on a sound educational management information system.

2.2. The construction of transition. Biography, myths and social-cultural transformation

“Complementarily with the global crisis of the transition societies, a crisis of the transition theory also started to configure: how can be explained the shocking failures of transition, while everything was supposed to meet the expectations? How can a correct reform strategy, supported by a broad internal consensus and a consistent occidental support to produce, through its application, this kind of negative results?” (C. Zamfir, 1994, p.35)

If we question this reality that we call transition and we try to deconstruct it, what are the foundations, the pillars of this reality? We can look to at least three mirrors of the kaleidoscope.

a. Transition in Central and South-Eastern Europe is a life experience. What is neglected by many western scholars and by western institutions supporting different reforms is that transition is not only a social and political process. It is, first of all, a life experience of every individual. Many of the “active adults” of today are, in many ways, the “products” of the communist times, persons schooled and disciplined in the old regime. This is not only about changing society, but about changing identities: personal, social and professional. Personal biographies of the last 15 years are, at micro-level, biographies of the transition processes reflected and accommodated at the individual level. “Jumping” directly from communism to globalization and postmodernism could be seen as a risky circus performance without safety net…

But “It is the discontinuities, the “jumps” that create challenges. As we noted above, if normal policymaking may be seen as incremental, with each step more or less predictably or controllably emanating from the last, then what is nonincremental, unpredictable to a certain degree, and not immediately controllable has the potential to create crisis.” (L.A.Pal, 2005, p. 333)

b. Transition is a mythical construction. One of the characteristics of the transition process, very relevant for education, is what is generally called the legacy of the past, referring mainly to the “good old times” before the communism. One of the negative consequences of transition was the limited commitment and trust in
education and the fall of the social status of teachers in community, mainly because their poor economic conditions. A “saving myth” was therefore created on the basis of the old teacher’s image. Teaching was proclaimed, mainly by teachers themselves, a matter of vocation, an almost divine gift that you have or you don’t have. Teachers should be, in this perspective, apostolic missionaries who are ready to sacrifice on the altar of knowledge and illumination of the young generation. This myth was a surrogate to feed the broken pride of the teaching staff, constantly underpaid and neglected, with poor material and symbolic benefits from their job and, most painful, felt in social disgrace and dethroned from the position of respected community leaders.

c. Transition is a broad social transformation. We use the term social in the broadest possible sense, including here the political and economic changes, seen from a social perspective. For locals of the transition countries, the post-communist period can be characterized as a real shock. The speed of passing to an almost completely new world would be a challenge for the most flexible and open-minded persons. The social project of post-communist societies was most of the time too ambitious and not realistic from the time perspective, too much influenced by western donor organizations and by the strong paradigms of liberal democracy that had to be created.

2.3. Education and transition. A policy perspective

One of the papers about the missing links and the meeting point between education and transition, written from “inside” is the Transition in Education of Peter Rado, a book valuing in an excellent, even not declared manner, the personal experience and reflection of a lived transition with the sharp analysis of the systems and situations. It is an invitational writing, simple and clear, coming from inside.

One of the conclusions is that “All these characteristics of the region suggest that the “missing link” of the educational policy making process in these countries is policy analysis, planning and consultation; that is, the lack of system and capacity in place, that:

- connects the expected and desirable educational outcomes with strategic issues “in the air”,
- gathers the different policy issues into a coherent and synergetic reform strategy,
- reveals the implications of these strategies for each of the components of the educational system, and
- design the effective implementation of these strategies.“ (P.Rado, 2001, p.38).

The educational sector experienced dramatic changes in the transition countries, not with the same pace and magnitude, not on the same calendar, but serious, profound changes.
Without aiming to depict here historical stages of educational reform\(^5\), especially because they are diverse and hardly overlap, we would only mention a frequently followed scenario, with some obvious facets / steps:

1. **De-structuring of the old system:** de-communization, giving up the ideological ballast, questioning of the state monopoly in education, first wave of curriculum reform, basically focused on content.

2. **Curriculum and textbooks reform:** conception of a new curriculum (another new word for the educational reality of the post-communist countries…), based on learning outcomes, introduction of new and modern subjects (Information technologies, Home economics) and flexible curriculum framework, with the appearance of the school based curriculum. It was hard for many to understand how they can give up the Bible of their field for 3, 5 or even more “bibles”. School based curriculum and the introduction of alternative textbooks are two of the measures which created a niche in the mentality of teachers and even parents. Experiencing of freedom in education was initially painful, but now became a basic principle.

3. **Educational management and governance reform:** restructuring of the institutional landscape of educational management, development of a managerial approach to education as a public service, changes in financing of education, in operation and ownership of schools. Here the differences among countries are significant, varying from decentralization (Poland, Hungary), half-way decentralization (Romania, Macedonia) to fragmentation (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosova).

4. **Institutional reform and restructuring of the school network:** restructuring or dismissing of the existing institutions (i.e. school inspectorates, teacher training institutions), creation of new institutions, especially agencies of the ministries of education, specialized in curriculum development, assessment and examinations, vocational education etc. School networks started to be reconsidered on the principles of access, but also efficiency. This segment of reforms is not completed and in some countries have still a long way to go.


“In recent years the word reform has been used widely, almost promiscuously, to refer to almost any policy initiative. The casual use of the word reform runs the risk of suggesting that a great deal of change is planned or under way, when little of real substance, is changing in a system.” (J.H. Williams; W.K. Cummings, 1995, p.XXXI).

One of the institutions which paradoxically managed to resist any profound and systematic change in many of the transition countries is the Ministry of Education itself. While the majority of the reform projects envisaged schools and teachers, in a more or less coherent and sustainable approach, Ministries remained in a chrysalis of old staff and old habits. From many discussions with the colleagues in Central and South Eastern

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Europe I realized that Ministries resisted most of the structural and functional changes of the last fifteen years, becoming real bastions of resistance to change and, at least in Romania, resistance to “real” policy process in education. This is an interesting situation and maybe deserves a separate and broader analysis.

The supposed “brain” of the central governance of education, asked to play a key role in educational policy, gives signs of awareness, but do not really deliver the expected services. Is only a matter of recent restructuring for Ministries of Education in Romania and Poland that they set up their own policy units. After long debates and regulation of their place in the central governance, they are both still very weak and struggling to define their role.

On the other hand, respondents of the interviews broadly recognized Ministry of Education as main actor on the policy arena. If the first place in this system is taken by ministries in both countries investigated, the difference is that Poland seems to have a larger participation of institutions in policy processes. Regional institutions such as Kuratoria\(^6\), but also local governments are mentioned.

“The most important part of the policy chain is the school”, declared a polish specialist. As a matter of reflection, only five interviewees from Romania and four from Poland placed the school in the policy landscape (see question 4 in the interview protocol). This demonstrates the perception that educational policies and policy initiatives are seen as matter of concern for the macro-level, attributes of the central governance. Micro-policy of school-level imitative, ownership and participation are rather considered luxury in such a busy and dynamic educational environment.

3. Policy making in transition contexts

3.1. The beginning of a new culture

For a long period of time, in Central and South-Eastern European countries, there was and, to a certain extent there is still no distinction, not even linguistic, between politics and policy. This reflects the state of affairs of the old system in which the policy was a shadowed reflection of the political totalitarian regime. This situation was noticed also by P. Rado, 2001: “In most of the languages spoken in the region there is no separate word for policy. This is a powerful indication of the lacking distinction between action aiming at capturing or influencing power and action aiming at changing or influencing the behavior of individuals or institutions.” (P. Rado, 2001, p.35). But the recent and dramatic changes in public issue management of the last years in the transition countries led, step by step, to a beginning of a professional approach to policy making and to a progressive separation from politics. Separation doesn’t mean break up and isolation, but different perceptions of the two fields, as they are stated and explained in theory.

In countries like Romania this deficit was covered by an interesting improvisation: for politics the Romanian word is the regular politica, while for policy we hear often the word politici, which, from the linguistic point of view is nothing else but the plural of the

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\(^6\) Regional quality assurance authority of the Ministry of Education
first, but the meaning invested in this plural is close to that of the modern concept of policy. This situation is interesting in itself, since it implicitly assumes that for policy a plural is more appropriate. Plurality of options, the whole idea of policy alternatives was captured in this old, but new word. The large majority of policy scholars made this option in their discourses, feeling the need for a palliative meaning-making of the one word called to express two realities.

Nevertheless, a rapid evolution happened. Public policy became a matter of concern: the academic world started to develop specializations and to introduce disciplines, Governments made efforts to undertake policy analysis as foundation for decision-making process, and further to regulate the policy process at the level of central government. A common framework for policy proposals coming from the ministries was developed in Romania, accompanied by a manual on how to write a policy proposal. Civil society (especially some NGOs) came with reform policies for the public services and started to develop policy alternatives, contributing to the public debate and participation of stakeholders.

A culture of quality policymaking became a target also in education, and a transition can be observed from a contemplative culture, deeply rooted in the communist years, but also in the broader and more subtle social and everyday life culture of Balkans and Slavic countries, towards an evaluative policy culture, more close to the western values and, generally, to the values of globalization. This unique policy environment offered by transition contexts and the possibility to capture and describe such a process as development of a quality policymaking culture could contribute to avoid a double danger that is obvious for those who studied the realities in post-communist countries:

- A schizophrenic evolution in the field of public policy, generated by the two-sided reality build in the last years and the gap between the policy discourse, on the one side and the effective implementation practices on the other side. The public policy development is only partly self-generated, as a need of the different sectors in their improvement efforts. There was and there still is a huge pressure, coming from political and financial “dependencies” of these countries: negotiation chapters with the European Union, structural adjustments imposed by World Bank and International Monetary Fund etc.

- Repetition of the same pathway and, implicitly, of the same mistakes by different countries situated at different development levels in their political, social and economic growth. The labyrinth of transition, even it looks so different from one country to the other, in the field of public policy development we had the possibility to note many similar evolutions that would make possible and fruitful the investigation of main characteristics and trends of public policy development.

We make reference to a culture of quality policymaking because we strongly believe that in transition context the quality of policymaking process is not primarily a technical problem of those involved, but a cultural problem, deeply rooted in the capacity to link discourse and practice, to ‘merge’ what we say and what we actually do.
“...But, as widely known, in sociological and historical terms we talk about reform only when the practical, social content of the programs overlaps with the reforming of the human being of respective époque, of his inner self, of his way of thinking and representing reality ... “ (R. Iucu, 2004, p.145-146).

3.2. Persistence of the double-sided reality

From the “socialist economy multilaterally developed” to the knowledge based globalized economies and societies, from communism to postmodernism... The huge distance and differences among the two worlds brought many people in the situation to fail in this leap. The short time at disposal and the high aims of transition, coming from the approach of “reducing the discrepancies” to the western world found a lot of people and social systems as such unprepared for the new identity.

Because of this situation, a strange situation appeared, hard to understand for “outsiders”: the double-sided reality. One side of this reality is the reality of discourse. With this side, majority of professionals made the leap: they have a new vocabulary, they even internalized the meanings of the new language and they use it with ease. Another clear conclusion from the interviews is that, at least inside educational community we can talk about a common language, clearly understood and widely accepted and used. The other side is the reality of daily professional practices, still tributary to the outdated, command-driven and opaque system before the 90s. This schizophrenic professional environment in which discourse and practices do not necessarily match is the result of multiple factors, such as:

- Incapacity of the identity processes at individual level to keep pace with the social machinery of change: new language was assimilated, to function provisionally in the new environment, but this discourse does not express a newly created reality. It only covers in a nice, socially desired and accepted packing of the old practice, counter-productive and even contradictory with the systemic conditions and the regulatory mechanisms.

- Lack of ownership and participation in educational reforms at a larger scale. The specialized technical approach to educational reform in general and to educational policy in particular made a step towards professionalization, but excluded too many actors and stakeholders.

- The perceived artificiality of the new pedagogical reality and the low technical capacity and expertise at the central level of educational governance.

I always find it frustrating to hear teachers in the in-service trainings I deliver sometimes talking so nicely about project method, portfolios, student centered learning, inclusion of students with special needs, multiple intelligences, competency-based teaching and learning and then finding out the poor educational practices they produce in their own classrooms.
“Thus the systemic changes of the transition process are not necessarily driven by the requirements of development needs of the individual social services. Policy issues are over-politicized, the public debate on policy issues is heavily influenced by ideological considerations. During the period of transition the systemic conditions of development are in the focus of educational policies, rather than pedagogical development itself.” (P.Rado, 2001, p.19).

### 3.3. Towards a constructive approach to transition. Policy recommendations for sustainable policy process in education

Before trying to formulate any policy recommendations, a return to the kaleidoscope lens would bring our reflection cycle to logic. We discussed in the beginning about steps or stages to reach maturity of a policy system, arguing that first movement is to go for a policy approach perspective to social / educational change. But if we look in the short and recent history of policymaking in education in transition countries, a common pattern can be identified, which makes the move from policy taking to policy learning in education and probably in the larger public services domain. This process can be described as four waves, conceptualized on two axes: ownership axe, going from external to internal, and learning axe, going from reproduction to active construction. (see figure below)

![Policy process waves in transition contexts](image)

**Policy process waves in transition contexts**

The internal – external relation with regard to ownership refers to the source of the policy itself (determined by donors or external factors / institutions versus determined by local actors and their needs). The reproductive – constructive continuum bring into attention level of participation of policy community in the whole policy process, going from very poor involvement to active construction and reflection.
1. **Policy taking** as first wave, both historically and in terms of the logic of our model, is routed in donor-driven projects developed in transition countries and is largely based on policy transfer from western / more experienced systems. Educational policies under this stage are taken from granted by local actors, since they reflect broad intervention needs valid “anytime, anywhere”. This *one size fits all* perspective of donors was accepted because of the very low capacity and poor policy competence of local actors. Educational policies at this stage are focused on *content reform* and eventually on structure of education system.

2. **Policy imitation** or copying is still externally determined, but involves a higher degree of learning / construction from local actors. Imitation is a voluntary process and the models are carefully selected, sometimes even slowly adapted to the local context. This is the phase of outcomes-driven reforms, where process themselves are neglected for the sake of results and these last ones are largely borrowed from what is generally called *the global orthodoxy of education*.

3. **Policy making** brings local ownership, and eventually a certain degree of institutionalization of the educational policy making. Elaboration of educational policies and the following process are conceived in a determined policy cycle, managed by the central governance of education. The whole process is subject to procedures and strict rules. Making a policy is a professional activity and only recognized / certified experts should have access to it. Management driven reforms are characteristics for this stage, with very technical, sometime mechanistic approach of a “functional system” composed by “functional sub-systems or components.”

4. **Policy learning** is a new approach, largely conceptualized and supported by institutions such as European Training Foundation\(^7\), in relation to their leading role in vocational education and training reforms in transition countries. This stage brings into attention the *practice-driven*, continuous improvement approach to educational reforms. After long efforts of change centered on structure, on the heavy architecture of the system (curriculum, evaluation and exams, certifications and qualification, management structures, power relations, inspection and control etc.), policy learning vision shifts the focus towards the intimate functioning of the educational processes at micro-level, brings back into attention the student and the school as ultimate beneficiaries, but also stakeholders of educational policies.

\(^7\) Especially Peter Grootings and Soren Nielsen, as results of the ETF Advisory Forum plenary meeting in 2003, when this approach was formally endorsed.
“Policy learning emphasizes not simply the involvement but rather the active engagement of national stakeholders in developing their own policy solutions, and is based on the understanding that there are no universally valid models that can simply be transferred or copied from one context to another. At the best there is a wealth of international, though context-specific, experience in dealing with similar policy issues that can be shared.” (P.Grootings, S.Nielsen, 2005, p.11).

Policy learning means the level of a sound policy culture and environment, based on accountability and ownership of local stakeholders, a reflective policymaking process in which creativity and local capacities are used at maximum, valuing also international experience and results.

If we look to the current situation of Romania and Poland from this model point of view, there is no at the moment a specific level of frame in which the two countries can be situated. There is rather an ongoing learning and development process in the field of educational policies, placed mainly in the first 1,2,3 quadrants. Interviews taken both in Romania and Poland clearly show the following:

- Steps of policymaking are most of the time directly linked with the main steps of the educational reform (historical rather than technical perspective). There is limited knowledge of the actors on “technicalities” of educational policy as academic discipline and steering tool. Respondent’s tendency from both countries was to consider as strong points in the process problem identification and definition and, to a certain extent, policy formulation, and as weak points policy implementation and monitoring and evaluation.

- In Poland, more respondents (seven out of the ten) considered that policymaking in education is a professionalized job, rather that ad-hoc, unstructured process. Policy making cannot be unstructured. You have it or you don’t have it... commented one of the interviewees. On the other hand, in Romania a number of 13 respondents out of the 15 assessed policymaking in education as not being a professionalized job.

Generally, the policy process was considered in Romania and Poland uneven and not mature enough. While different components are more developed and advanced, other are weak and / or neglected. A special attention was given by respondents to the capacity of the policy systems to design and undertake sound monitoring and evaluation of the policies and to use the results of different evaluations or impact studies for further improvement and development.

The policy recommendations we try to formulate are to a large extent the result of interpreting the interviews with policy makers and stakeholders of educational reform in Romania and Poland, especially sections seven and six from the interview protocol.

a. Making teachers and trainers professionals and stakeholders of reforms. Professionalization of educational career.
A wider participation and consultation of teachers and trainers in the policy development process (not only policy implementation) and in educational reforms in general is highly needed. This is a condition for a long-term, reflective policy learning commitment. Empowerment of teacher will transform them from objects into active subjects of the reform, actively engaged in the constructing the new context of educational policy and practice. This should somehow go in parallel with raising the social and economic status of teachers, as important motivation tool.

On the other hand, a professional approach to teaching and educational management will end the mythic orientations and the unavoidable improvisations. Vicinity with artistry and giftedness doesn’t seem to offer nowadays the desired perspective on the teaching profession. As for the school managers, as long as they will be managers by chance and not by competence, educational governance and administration at micro-level will not find the healthy breadth for efficiency and quality.

One of the studies emphasizing the situation of teacher education reform in Romania clearly shows:

“The reform of teacher training system is a priority. In fact it is an urgent matter for at least two reasons: i) the need for a consolidated consciousness, according to which teacher education is a vital factor in the success of reform. It does not matter how complex and elaborated the reform is a a project, if it is not accompanied by a change of mentalities, attitudes and behaviors, very little will change. ii) The system of teacher training has registered a slower development, a certain discrepancy of rhythm and efficiency, as compared with the other elements of the reform, particularly curriculum and instruction, evaluation and management.” (D.Potolea; L.Ciolan, 2003)

b. Building a new vision on learning

The first step is to really move from teaching to learning, from command to demand driven educational systems, from knowledge transmittal to personal and social development of students. The challenges of the today’s society calls for a new vision on learning, but one who has to be developed and freely assumed by teachers, and not imposed by any instance. This new perspective on what learning means for students needs to be created by teachers as professionals and tested in their communities of practice.

c. Establishing quality assurance mechanisms

Many of the transition systems are far away from being based on trust, confidence and quality assurance. Control still prevails and this is maybe another factor producing a schizophrenic educational environment. Teachers and managers produce oral and written discourse (“papers”) according to the official rules and requirements, but manifest professional behaviors according to their own rules (based on the myths of “experience”, “past successes, i.e. Olympics etc.)

The Romanian Senate, the superior chamber of the Parliament, recently rejected the project of the Law on Quality of Education. The President decided, according to his constitutional rights, to send the law back to the Senate for reconsideration.
Poland has an institutional structure in charge with quality assurance, but unclear regulation and provisions both for schools, local authorities and Kuratorium (quality assurance agencies).
Standards are approved (regulation issued on april 2004), but the legislative document is so opaque and the implementation methodologies are unclear. The result is that instead of applying all the quality standards, authorities selected some of them for the current school year and left other for later application.

d. Reaching a long-term, trans-political commitment for education development
The political fight and a strange kind of pride made many of the active ministers of the last years to consider that educational reform starts with them. Giving their name to the “real” educational reform was on the agenda of some of the ministers. Reaching a long term, trans-political commitment for educational development and for country development through education is a must. After 15 years of experiments and new beginnings, the system needs continuity of approaches, sustainable and cohered development focused on quality assurance. A recent example in this respect is Romania, where the minister of education appointed in December 2004, after elections, has a very short mandate, of about 10 months, in spite of the probably first clear policy agenda, trying to match local needs with priorities coming from the EU integration process. During electoral campaign I was glad to notice – again for the first time in Romania – the consistent presence of educational discourse. After appointment of the Cabinet, the Government promised, as stated in the Governing program, a significant increase in educational financing aiming to support the major project launched by the new ministerial team at education and research: implementation of the Bologna process in higher education, quality assurance regulations, mechanisms and procedures for both university and pre-university education, decentralization of pre-university education, revision of the financing mechanisms of education etc. In November 2005 the government approved a budget for education in 2006 lower in real figures than budget of the last year. Minister and past of his team decided to resign and this wouldn’t be a problem if significant progress would be registered since then in educational sector development…

e. Encouraging transversal and horizontal learning: exchange networks, process consultancy, communities of practice, etc.
The time of “big weddings”: huge donor projects, national conferences and seminars, teams of national trainers, educational Gurus brought from abroad has passed. Is time for learning from peers, learning from not necessarily best, but relevant practices. School networking, professionals association in communities of practice has to be encouraged. An interesting initiative happened recently in Serbia with the so-called Innovation Fund for vocational schools: a fund from which schools can get financing for grassroots innovation project, setting the agenda themselves and planning for development at institutional and community level. Regional networking is another important aspect that needs to be encouraged. There is a great deal of transition knowledge and expertise that makes sense to be shared. One of the missing links of the EU policy in the region is clearly the fact that regional exchange and networking, process consultancy among peer countries / sectors was not encouraged. The whole region was somehow kept in a fishbowl and fed through Phare, CARDS, Tacis or other type of funds. The non-reimbursable funds really made a very significant contribution to the development of the
respective sectors, but they generally failed to make the difference. The same existing pattern of these cultures, of learning from “Bibles” (prescribed, unique receipts), from the “experts”, or just doing what you are told to do by decision makers was preserved in a wicked way by this type of assistance.

f. Restructuring the central governance of education, especially the Ministries of Education. Professionalization of policy-making.

As we mentioned before, Ministries managed to resist very well to the successive change and reform waves happening in transition countries. Serious attention has to be paid to reform of the central governance of education, based of sound functional reviews and competences mapping. An unscientific estimation, but based on ten months of working inside, make me consider that from approximately 350 employees of the Ministry of Education in Romania, a maximum of 30 fully deliver according to their positions and responsibilities.

Ministries and sometimes agencies involved in central governance dramatically lack capacity for policy making, namely exactly for what they are supposed to do. Professionalization of policymaking means training, professional development, clear responsibilities in the policy process, and special institutions / departments to ensure strategic planning and transversal coordination.

In using the inventory of policy tools at their disposal, responsible institutions at central level focus too often on issuing regulation and establishing commission or working groups. The more sophisticated policy tools are not known enough and, as a consequence, rarely used. A weak capacity to competently steer educational processes results from this situation in what concerns the institutions of the central governance of education. Policy is still an unknown science and practice for large majority of staff in ministries of education. An “attenuating circumstance” for ministries is the low payment of the specialist and the difficulties to hire high level professional staff. A personal advisor to the minister of education in Romania is paid approximately 300 EUR per month…

g. Creating real platforms for consultation and public debate.

The technocratic approaches, supported by high class experts, should move towards more open and participatory policy systems. Consultation and public debate are crucial for getting public informed and supportive, especially when it comes to major changes such as decentralization, teachers status and workload, examinations and national tests etc.

The habit of public debate is not very much embedded in the culture of transition countries, but institutions involved in policy development, implementation and evaluation should make their contribution in this respect.

In the decentralized system of education in Poland, consultation is closer to what it should be, since many decisions are taken at local level and actors can easier find each other and cooperate.

In Romania, consultation is still formal and lacks consistency, due to mistrust of authorities, primate procedures and reluctance of stakeholders. The process is not taken seriously and is often transformed in a time-consuming ritual based on the conviction that regardless what is said and done, Ministry will do anyway what they initially planned. On the other hand, trade unions of teacher are over-politicized and de-professionalized. Their activity is focused almost exclusively on salaries and attacking the radical reform
measures. Is not an easy task to break up with this counterproductive tradition and create real platforms for professional debate.

h. **Empowering local actors to take ownership of policy process.**

This means to go from policy taking or policy copying to real policy learning, to a sound policy process for which local stakeholders take responsibility and ownership, having the necessary motivation and competencies to do so.

If I would take a Socratic attitude at the end, towards my own paper, I would say is still a significant difference between my reflections on the issue what I actually managed to put on paper. There is still place to make more use of the interviews as support for ideas and conclusions presented here. But I am not more that a professional product of transition. I would probably change this paper till I wouldn’t recognize it any more or I would miss the starting point. Not perfect in structure and subjective in nature, this policy study tries to capture an important “variable”, not easy to be captured: the real joy of writing on a very exiting, but extremely difficult topic and the idea that reflecting on transition is one think, and reflecting on the “lived transition” could bring some added value. I think that basing my reflections and conclusions not only on “scientific method”, but mainly on mirroring my own experience and subjectivity makes them, in this specific case, stronger, not weaker. As strong as something can be when talking about policy and transition…

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Annex 1

Interview guidelines

The broader aim of the research is to capture elements / characteristics of the process of articulation of a policymaking culture in transition contexts.

The main aim of this interview is to gather data from different education experts on the status and prospects of the policymaking environment in education, to assess the maturity of the policymaking system.

0. Would you be so kind to shortly introduce yourself? (name, profession, job, specialization & expertise)

1. From educational point of view, especially when looking to educational policy, would you say that Poland / Romania is still in transition?
   a. What are the characteristics still situating educational policies in transition? / What makes educational policy a mature system, out of transition? (ask the right question according to the answer to main question)
   b. If you would name 3 features of the educational policy process in Poland, what would you say?
      i. ....
      ii. ....
      iii. ....

2. In mature policymaking systems a clear policy cycle is followed.
   a. How would you place policymaking in education in comparison with policymaking in other public domains (i.e. health, public administration, social assistance)? Better? Worst?
   b. Can you observe / are there visible steps in the policy process in the educational system?
   c. If you look to the traditional steps in the policy process,
      i. Problem identification & definition
      ii. Policy formulation / development of alternatives
      iii. Choice of solution / selection of preferred policy option
      iv. Policy design
      v. Policy implementation and monitoring
      vi. Evaluation

Where are the strong points and where are the weak points of the polish system?
Circle strong points and label with "S" and cross weak points and label with "W"

Explain! (bring arguments). Re-launch the question if the case in order to obtain arguments (why a specific step is considered strong or weak?).

d. If you would make an assessment of the maturity of these steps, how would you rate them on a scale from 1 to 5 where 1 is mature, strong and 5 is not mature, weak, unstructured.

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3. How would you characterize the language of educational policies?

a. Is the language clear and transparent, easy to follow and understand by those involved?

b. Is the language too technical? Too complicated? Why?

c. Do you think that educational policy language is mature, is there in place a community of discourse? (common language understood and accepted by all involved?)

d. What are the words that you hear very / too often in the policy discourse? Give at least three examples. Why these words?
   i. ...
   ii. ...
   iii. ...

4. What are the institutions in charge with educational policy in Poland, starting with identification of problems and formulation, and ending with evaluation and feedback?

5. Is policymaking in education a professionalized job, or is rather ad-hoc, unstructured process?
a. How would you characterize the institutional arrangement of educational policymaking in Poland? (circle on the paper all options of the interviewee)
   i. Functional
   ii. Mature
   iii. Unstructured
   iv. Transparent
   v. Diffuse
   vi. Strongly institutionalized
   vii. Clear distribution of roles and responsibilities
   viii. Vague
   ix. Ideologized
   x. Softly institutionalized
   xi. Contradictory
   xii. Uneven

b. Is the policymaking process an open one? Are there in place clear consultation and participation mechanisms? (of stakeholders, of beneficiaries, of civil society etc.)

c. Is policymaking process rather technical – professional job of the experts in the field, or is it also a matter of public debate and consultation?

6. What are the tools preferred by the policymakers to ensure strategic steering and good governance of educational system? (circle the options of the respondent)
   • Issuing regulations, legislation,
   • Financial incentives and disincentives
   • Professional development and training
   • Setting standards and benchmarks
   • Targeted / problem oriented projects
   • Creating institutions, commissions, working groups
   • Consultation and public debate

   Others, namely ........

7. If you would be in the position to improve the policymaking process in education what would you do? (2-3 fundamental measures).