

School dropout and early school leaving in Romania

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ABSTRACT

Romania is on the last place in the European ranking in terms of school dropout and early school leaving, given that the right to education is ensured by the Constitution, by the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and numerous regulations in the field of fundamental human rights. This paper aims to analyze the statistical data on early school leaving at the European level, the analysis of measures and strategies to combat early school leaving and school dropout in Romania and the analysis of students' opinion on the causes, measures and risks regarding school dropout in Romania.

KEYWORDS: right to education, school dropout, early school leaving, education.

1. Introduction

Definitions of school dropout can be divided into two categories. Thus, the inclusive definition will depend on the education norm in society, while the exclusive definition defines dropouts as people who do not finish the education they started¹. In Romania, most often, school dropout is understood in the sense of the exclusive definition.

However, the terms *school dropout* and *early school leaving* describe distinct phenomena. Thus, school dropout refers to students who give up attending school, and early school leaving refers to young people between the ages of 18-24, who left school before completing compulsory education, not following any other program of vocational training or qualification.²

From my own experience, I can say that at the national level, ordinary people do not make a clear difference between the 2 phenomena. They will refer to these 2 distinct phenomena as dropouts in general.

Therefore, early school leaving is defined in Romania as the percentage of young people aged between 18-24 who have completed at most the lower secondary level (equivalent to the eighth grade) and who no longer follow any other form of schooling or vocational training.³

¹ Jonasson, J. T., Blondal, K. S. (2004). *Early school leavers and the dropout issue in Europe*. In M. Johannsdottir (Ed.), *Back on track* (pp. 6-9). Reykjavik: The Icelandic Leonardo da Vinci National Agency.

² Bonea, G. V. (2019). Abandonul școlar. *Calitatea Vieții*, 30(4), p. 387-403. Retrieved from <https://www.revistacalitateavietii.ro/journal/article/view/123>.

³ Ministerul Educației (2018). *Strategia privind reducerea părăsirii timpurii a școlii în România*, available online at: <https://www.edu.ro/sites/default/files/fisiere%20articole/Strategia%20privind%20reducerea%20parasirii%20timpurii%20a%20scolii.pdf>.



Art. 14 para. (1) of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union⁴ says that "*(1) Every person has the right to education, as well as to access to professional training and continuing education.*"

The Constitution of Romania⁵ by art. 32 ensures the right to education - "*(1) The right to education is ensured through compulsory general education, through high school and professional education, through higher education, as well as through other forms of instruction and training.*"

Future adults are decisively affected by early school leaving and school dropout in finding a job, in the level that their salary will have, in the ability to participate in social life, in accessing health, education services, of social protection, but also in knowing and protecting rights, founding a family and raising children. The difficulties they face in finding a job make many of them give up and, in some cases, resort to illegal activities. Also, social exclusion can lead to physical and mental health problems, alcohol or other substance abuse.

Through its general objective, this article *aims to make an analysis of statistical data, causes, measures and risks regarding early school leaving and school dropout in Romania* in the context where any person has secured the right to education. The paper aims to achieve the main objective by fulfilling the following secondary objectives: *the analysis of statistical data on early school leaving at the European level, the analysis of measures and strategies to combat early school leaving and school dropout in Romania and the analysis of students' opinion regarding the causes, measures and the risks regarding school dropout in Romania.*

2. Statistical data on early school leaving at European level

According to an article published by Eurostat⁶ early school leavers are people aged 18-24 who have completed at most a lower secondary education program and who have not followed their studies or further training afterwards. In essence, the phenomenon of early school leaving and school dropout can be very easily confused, that is why at the national level, at least from my own experience, I have noticed that we use the phrase school dropout in both situations.

From my point of view, education is a factor that can positively or negatively influence a person's trajectory in life, especially in the labor market. Nowadays, employers value the education that their employees have, and a lack of it can lead to unemployment, a lower income or even social exclusion. This is where the phenomenon of early school leaving comes into play.

The article published by Eurostat⁷ sets out the objective proposed by the European Union regarding early school leaving. Thus, by 2030 the index showing early school leaving should be less than 9%. The European Union registered an index of 9,5% in 2023. However, a major

⁴ *The Charter of the European Commission of 12 december 2007 on the fundamental rights of the European Union. JO C 303, 14.12.2007, pp. 8.*

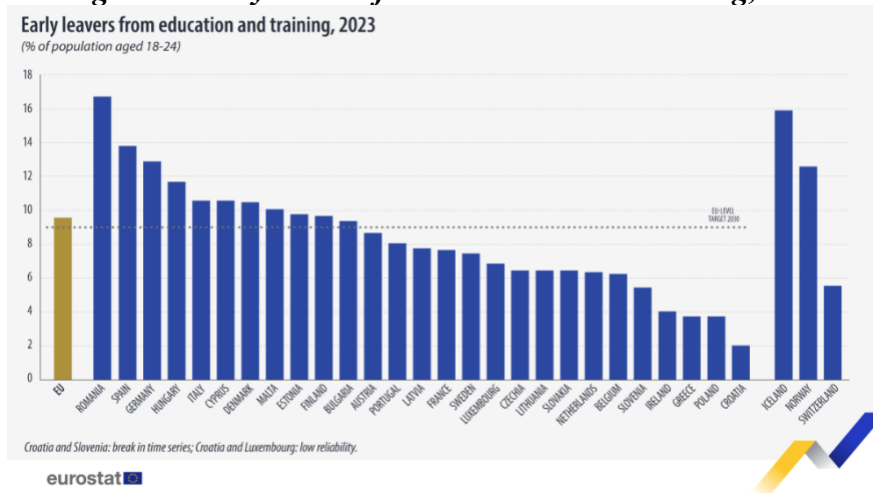
⁵ *Constituția republicată din 21 noiembrie 1991 (art. 32). București: Monitorul Oficial al României, nr. 767 din 31 octombrie 2003.*

⁶ Eurostat (2024). *Early leavers from education and training*, available online at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Early_leavers_from_education_and_training (Accessed on 20.12.2024).

⁷ *Ibidem.*

difference was noted between the states (Figure 1), some of them already reaching the index value, while other states recorded quite high index values.

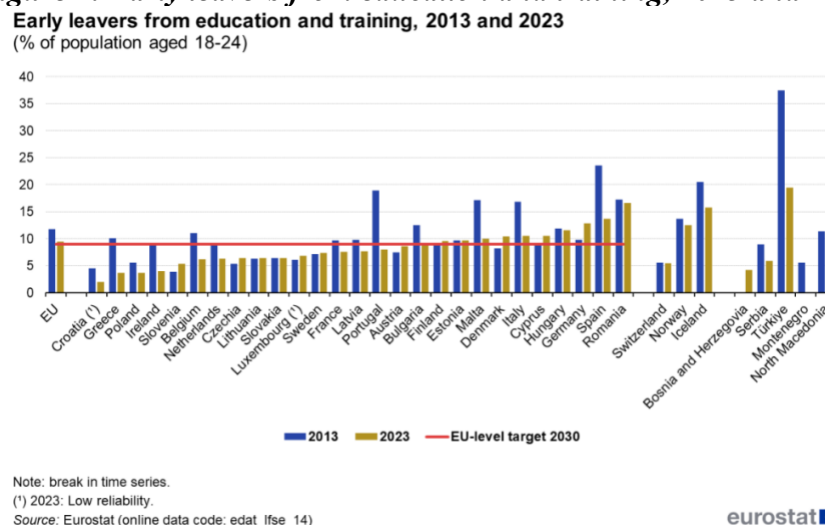
Figure 1. Early leavers from education and training, 2023



Source: Eurostat⁸

From the figure above we can see that out of the 27 countries in the European Union, 16 of them have an index below 9%. At the opposite end, 11 states have an index above the index targeted by the European Union of 9%. Taking this into account, the European Union average was 9,5% in 2023. Unfortunately, Romania finds itself in first place with the highest index.

Figure 2. Early leavers from education and training, 2013 and 2023



Note: break in time series.
(*) 2023: Low reliability.
Source: Eurostat (online data code: edat_ifse_14)

Source: Eurostat⁹

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ Ibidem.



Figure 2 shows the extreme values of the index regarding early school leaving in 2023. Thus, at the positive end with the lowest index among the countries in the European Union is Croatia with an index of 2%. At the negative end of the ranking we find Romania with the highest early school leaving rate among European Union countries with a value of 16,6%.

Countries with an index below 5%, therefore, with the lowest proportion of early leavers are Croatia, Greece, Poland and Ireland. The highest indices were recorded by Romania with an index of 16,6%, Spain with an index of 13,7%, Germany with an index of 12,8% and Hungary with an index of 11,6%.

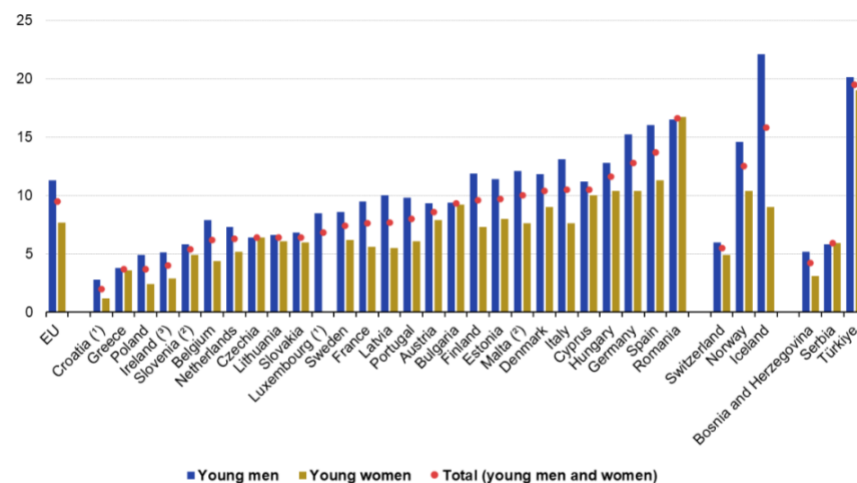
From figure 2 we can also observe the evolution of this index regarding early school leaving over the last 10 years. Thus, at the level of the European Union in the last 10 years, the index decreased by 2,3 points. Between 2013 and 2023, Portugal managed to reduce its index by 10,9% and Spain by 9,9%, thus achieving the most significant reductions in early leavers among EU countries. Conversely, 10 European Union countries recorded increases in the share of early leavers, with Austria, Cyprus, Slovenia, Denmark, and Germany seeing rises of more than 1%.

Although it managed to decrease its early school leaving index by a few percentage points in the last 10 years, from 18,1% to 16,6%, Romania is still at the bottom of the ranking in 2023.

Statistical data¹⁰ on early school leaving by gender are also interesting.

Figure 3. Early leavers from education and training by sex, 2023

Early leavers from education and training by sex, 2023
(% of population aged 18-24)



Note: ranked on overall share of early leavers (young men and women); breaks in series.

(*) Low reliability.

(*) Young men and young women: low reliability.

(*) Young women: low reliability.

Source: Eurostat (online data code: edat_lfse_14)

eurostat

Source: Eurostat¹¹

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ Ibidem.



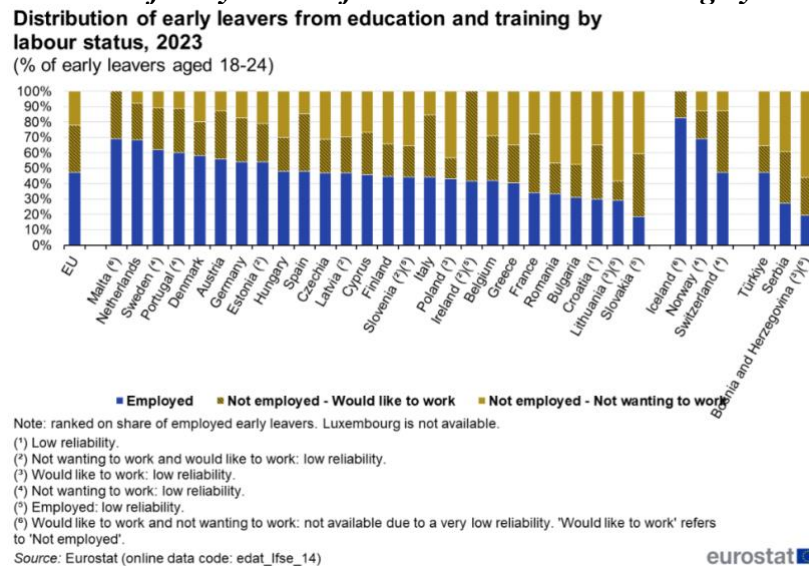
As can be seen from figure 3, almost all European countries have a higher percentage of early school leaving in males than in females. The early school leaving rate for males is 11,3%, while for females it is 7,7%, resulting in a difference of 3,6%.

Most EU countries reported a higher proportion of early leavers among young men compared to young women, with the largest gaps observed in Italy 5,5%, Germany 4,8%, Spain 4,7%, Finland 4,6%, Latvia, and Malta 4,5%. In contrast, the share of early leavers was nearly equal between young men and young women in Romania, Czechia, Greece, and Bulgaria, with differences of only +/- 0,2%.

In the case of Romania, we find a percentage of 16,5% of men who leave their studies early, while a slightly higher percentage is found in the case of women, where it is 16,7%.

As we will see later, one of the biggest risks of leaving school early is the lack of a job. Figure 4 shows the statistical data on the degree of employability of people who left their studies early.

Figure 4. Distribution of early leavers from education and training by labor status, 2023



Source: Eurostat¹²

As can be seen from the figure above (figure 4), early school leavers were divided according to 3 indicators, namely: employed, not employed but willing to work and not employed and unwilling to work. According to statistical data, they are divided as follows: 47,4% of early school leavers are employed, 30,5% of them are not employed but want to work and 22,1% of them are not employed and I don't even want to work. In relation to the population aged between 18 and 24, this corresponds to a percentage of 4,5% of early school leavers who are employed, 2,9% of whom are not employed but want to work and 2,1% of early school leavers are neither employed nor willing to work.

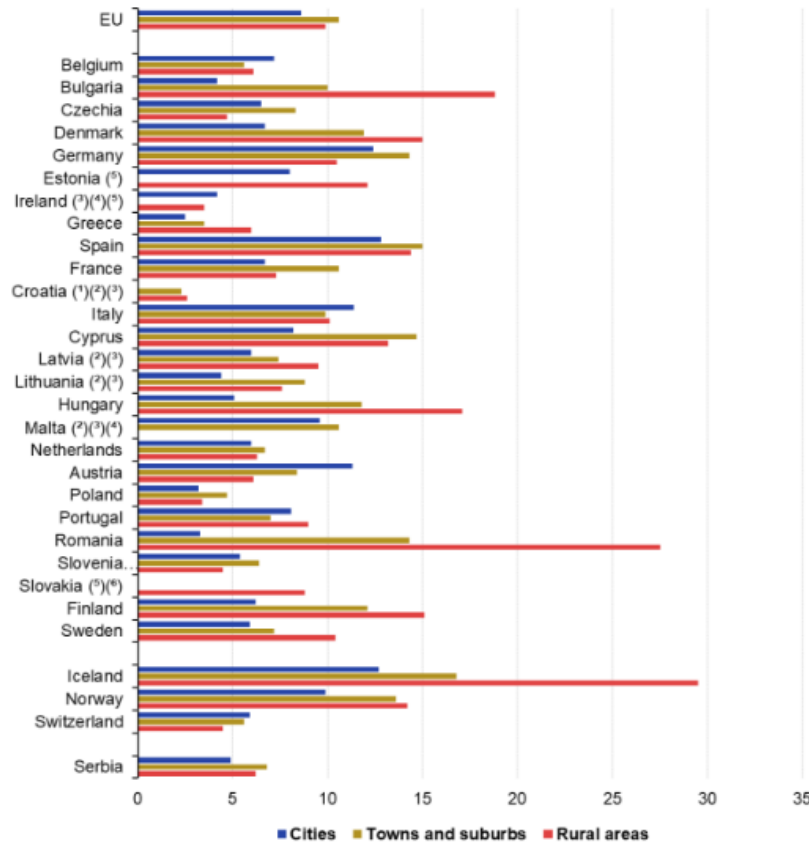
¹² Ibidem.



Figure 5 below presents the statistical data regarding those who leave their studies early depending on the area they come from: cities, towns and suburbs and rural areas.

Figure 5. Early leavers from education and training by degree of urbanisation, 2023

Early leavers from education and training by degree of urbanisation, 2023
(% of population aged 18-24)



Note: ranked on overall share of early leavers in cities. Luxembourg is not available.
 (*) Rural areas: low reliability.
 (†) Towns and suburbs: low reliability.
 (‡) Cities: low reliability.
 (§) Rural areas: not available due to a very low reliability.
 (¶) Towns and suburbs: not available due to a very low reliability.
 (**) Cities: not available due to a very low reliability.
 Source: Eurostat (online data code: edat_ifse_30)



Source: Eurostat¹³

Therefore, the lowest percentage is found in the case of cities, with a percentage of 8,6%. Thus, the objective for 2030, namely that the share of early school leavers should be less than 9%, is already achieved among young people living in cities. A percentage of 10,6% of early school leavers come from towns and suburbs, while 9,9% of them come from rural areas.

¹³ Ibidem.

3. Strategies and measures to combat school dropout and early school leaving

At the national level, there are multiple strategies, projects and programs that aim to reduce the rate of early school leaving and school dropout. However, as I presented above, Romania is in the last place among the countries of the European Union in the rate of early school leaving with a percentage of 16,6%, while the European average is 9,5%.

According to art. 2 of Decision no. 1309/2021¹⁴, the National Program for the Reduction of School Dropout aims at the following: *"a) reducing school dropout in at least 25% of the educational units participating in the Program in the period 2021-2026; b) improving the results obtained by students in national assessments and increasing the percentage of students who complete secondary education; c) increasing the participation of secondary school graduates in the national assessment for eighth grade graduates and the rate of transition from lower secondary education - gymnasium to upper secondary education - high school or professional."*

Another initiative was the Strategy regarding the reduction of early school leaving in Romania approved by decision no. 417/2015¹⁵.

In addition to these, there were and are many such strategies, programs and plans to reduce school dropout and early school leaving: Curricular policies - Professionalization of the teaching career - PROF, Relevant curriculum, open education for all - CRED, The accession process to OECD; ROSE Project for Secondary Education; Development of the network of green schools - Green week, Identification of green competences; Modernization of the material base of schools; Reducing early school leaving - National Strategy for Parental Education 2023-2030, School for all, Motivated teachers in disadvantaged schools; Social programs - National social protection program High school money, Euro 200 program to support pupils and students with reduced financial possibilities in order to purchase computers, Hot meal program, Professional scholarship program, Social aid scholarships, Program for schools of Romania, Transportation of students, School supplies.

In conclusion, initiatives to reduce school dropout and early school leaving exist, but from my point of view they should be much more developed and expanded in all the areas from which the causes of students resort to school dropout or leaving early school.

4. Students vs. School dropout

As stated previously, school dropouts are defined as people who do not complete the education they have started.¹⁶

¹⁴ Hotărârea nr. 1309 din 30 decembrie 2021 privind aprobarea Programului național pentru reducerea abandonului școlar (art. 2). București: Monitorul Oficial al României, nr. 1250 din 30 decembrie 2021.

¹⁵ Hotărârea nr. 417 din 3 iunie 2015 pentru aprobarea Strategiei privind reducerea părăsirii timpurii a școlii în România. București: Monitorul Oficial al României, nr. 439 din 19 iunie 2015.

¹⁶ Jonasson, J. T., Blondal, K. S. (2004). *Early school leavers and the dropout issue in Europe*. In M. Johannsdottir (Ed.), *Back on track* (pp. 6-9). Reykjavik: The Icelandic Leonardo da Vinci National Agency.



In order to fulfill the last secondary objective, I created a questionnaire with four open-ended questions addressed to students in order to find out their opinions in relation to the causes that can lead to school dropout, with the measures that educational institutions can take to reduce the risk of school dropout, with the risks to which a student is exposed if he abandons his studies and with the initiatives that they, the students, can take to help reduce this phenomenon. These questions were asked of a group of 125 students.

The students were asked, in the first phase, *"What are the reasons why a student would abandon his studies?"*. Thus, they answered that a student would abandon their studies for reasons such as: lack of financial resources and for this reason they have to find a job to support themselves and due to lack of time they cannot continue their studies; lack of job security in the field after completing studies; lack of support from the family from a moral and financial point of view; the disinterest and lack of motivation they have towards completing their studies, but also not finding the field of study they are following; the poor living conditions and the commute they have to make to access education; associating with inappropriate groups of people and falling into the mirage of vices (alcohol, drugs); school bullying; health problems and professional unpreparedness and lack of adaptability to new teaching techniques of teaching staff.

They were also asked *"What measures do they think educational institutions could take to limit school dropout?"*. Therefore, the measures they proposed were: the granting of more social grants and in a larger amount; provision of one hot meal per day free of charge, transportation for people who do not have the opportunity to commute and supplies, materials and equipment necessary for study; modernization of student dormitories; the existence of a psychotherapist in educational units and the realization of counseling activities in order to listen to their needs and to provide emotional and moral support; carrying out activities and workshops focused on personal development; teaching staff should be open in motivating students and in providing moral and emotional support, but also in making communication as easy as possible between them; classes conducted in an interactive manner; eliminating inefficient subjects in the field of activity and systematizing them and securing a job after completing studies.

And because more often than not, someone close to a student can make the difference when it comes to a student dropping out, students were also asked *"what would they do to help a classmate not drop out?"*. Their answers were as follows: helping colleges with learning to make this process easier for them; motivating, supporting, empathizing and communicating with colleagues about it; redirecting the situation to someone in authority, for example a teacher, and helping students who need financial help find a part-time job.

A final question that the students had to answer was *"what do they think are the risks to which they submit themselves if they abandon their studies?"*, the answers being the following: poverty, delinquency, professional failure, an uncertain future, lack of a place of well-paid work, lack of professional promotion, lack of knowledge, risk of unemployment, a low standard of living and marginalization by society.

The causes that can lead to school dropout that the students cited were of a social, material, economic, but also professional nature. Therefore, this shows us that problems regarding school dropout do not belong to only one field and it is understandable since for each individual the problem of the phenomenon of school dropout is a subjective matter.

The students proposed measures to combat this phenomenon from different areas and fields. Some of these measures are achievable internally, at the level of the educational unit, but some of the measures proposed by them are achievable only on a larger scale, requiring new regulation and a commensurate budget. Authority that the state leadership has through their representative bodies in this regard.

The risks to which dropouts are exposed by the students show us that they are aware of the problems that dropping out can bring and are open to being able to help their peers not resort to it, but, from unfortunately, most of the causes are within the competence of educational units or the state. Even if there are strategies and measures are taken to combat the school dropout phenomenon, they are not enough in our society. The authorities should realize that every person has the right to education equally and the strategies they draw up and the measures they take should cover as wide an area as possible of the causes for which a person drops out of education.

5. Conclusions

The objectives assumed in the introduction of the article have been achieved and, in my opinion, we can draw the following conclusions.

Romania ranks last among the European Union countries in the early school leaving rate with a percentage of 16,6%, while the European average is 9,5%. And while the European Union wants to reach an average of 9% by 2030, we are still far from reaching this goal.

Initiatives to combat and reduce the rates of school dropout and early school leaving exist, but from my point of view, they need to be developed and extended to the major causes that lead to school dropout or early school leaving.

I think that students should be consulted more in such issues that directly affect them because, after all, they are the consumers of our education system.

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