

## **Perspectives and Trends on Education in Romania: A Country in Transformation**

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### **Abstract**

*Romanian education has changed considerably as the country has transitioned from Soviet influence, from communism, to democracy and now towards European Union standards. New leaders, reform, and a changing political face of Europe have reshaped Romania's education system into a modern entity. This paper discusses how Romanian education has evolved in recent decades with respect to ethnic minorities, foreign language, religious education, as well as the overall restructuring of higher education while still acknowledging Romania's need for further reform as it looks toward a promising future.*

**Key Words:** Romania, Educational Reforms, Decentralization, Roma, Foreign Language Education

### **Section 1**

Romanian education has changed dramatically within the last half century, transitioning from the influences of the Soviet Union, the Romanian Communist party, anti-communist reformers, and Western Europe. Romanians have gone from having a voice that was limited and stymied to one that is confident and demanding that it be heard on an international stage.

Romania has done much in its educational transition since the fall of communism in 1989. New subjects, western thought, and internationalized curricula have contributed to a well-rounded education for Romanian students. A variety of foreign languages are taught, students must demonstrate technological competency to graduate high school, religion and philosophy are now standard, and the university system has swelled from 192,810 university students in 1990, to over 891,000 in the 2008-2009 school year (National Institute of Statistics, 2009).

Its European Union ascension in 2007 has marked it as a strong and modern nation, yet still sometimes parenthetically referred to as a newer Eastern European member. The transition has not been easy, and there is certainly much room for improvement, but Romania's reform has shown its capacity for change and asserted itself as having an important role on the stage of international education.

### **Section 2: The Romanian Style of Education**

In Romania, like the majority of Europe, curriculum through eighth grade is considered to be general education, upon completion of which students choose a track, or course of study to follow when they begin ninth grade at approximately age 15. The track system acknowledges that nobody can study everything, that different students have different preferences, and that educational diversity is valued. As Muller and Kogan (2010) note, however, the track system naturally elicits questions of nationalization, standardization, and social concern:

Which knowledge and general competences should be shared by everybody, either because they are an essential prerequisite for further more specialized learning or because it is considered a basic resource for full participation as citizen in social life? Which degree of specialized tracking is hence useful at which point in the educational career? Are tracks mainly distinguished by subject areas or by school performance or ability level of students?

Which criteria are used to assign students to different tracks and who decides? How strongly segmented are tracks from each other and how open are they for between track mobility in the course of the educational career?” (225)

Students' scores on their exit examinations from eighth grade weigh heavily on their track choice and considerably influence whether they will attend a theoretical high school focused on preparing a student for university study, a technical high school, or a vocational high school focused on preparing a student to enter a skilled trade.

Once a class is formed, it functions as a cohesive unit and remains together either through lower secondary (grades 5-8), or high school (grades 9-12). Both upper and lower secondary students study a broad curriculum usually including Romanian Language and Literature, History, Geography, Mathematics, Chemistry, Biology, Physics, Religion, Physical Education, Art or Music, and two foreign languages (most often English and French, though German, Russian, Italian and Romanian as a second language are also taught depending on the region). Each year the class collectively decides on one or two electives, usually an additional hour from one of the core subject areas, which is intended either to better prepare them for further study, or to gain favor from the subject teacher.

While honors or advanced classes do not exist, students are often grouped in classes with other students of similar interest and ability level; if a student particularly struggles or excels in a specific subject area, however, special accommodation is often difficult as class cohesiveness is valued over individual requirements. Though in other countries university fields of study are often limited based on a student's high school type or subject track, this is not the case in Romania where a philology-track student, for example, may enroll in a chemistry or technology program as a university student. In recent years there has also been increased flexibility between students who wish to switch tracks while still in high school due to greater commonalities across profiles.

Most institutional forms of higher education in Romania emerged in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Universities, colleges and research institutions were modeled after the French system of specialized institutions and professional schools. According to Sadlak (1993), the educational philosophy combined humanistic concepts with advanced professional training in the polytechnic institute. However, the rise of the Soviet system in the late 1940s dramatically impacted education in Romania.

### **Section 2.1: The Soviet Model (1948-1965)**

With the rise of Communism rose a new vision for Romania's educational system. Commonly referred to as the division between the old 'bourgeois education' and the new 'socialist education,' designers of the Educational Reform Act of August 1948 initiated a Soviet model of higher education. Sadlak (1991) believed that the purpose of this act was to create a centralized system of education that would link higher education to the needs of the centrally planned economy. This restructuring of Romanian education led to a greater dependence on Soviet study programs, textbooks, and scholarly literature.

The Romanian Communist Party retained the four traditional phases of education: kindergarten, elementary, secondary and higher education (universities and polytechnics), but placed greater emphasis on basic literacy and technical subjects, which were declared more useful to the State. As a result, enrollment in trade schools, training schools and technical institutes mushroomed (Hale, 1971).

In 1966, an official statement on educational policy clarified the direction of higher education to develop the material and technical forms of education to encourage economic growth. Congruent with their policies, communist officials limited the number of student applicants in other disciplines such as medicine, economics, and teacher training. And so, by the 1980s, more than 70 percent of the student population was enrolled in engineering and agricultural disciplines (Reisz, 1994).

Over four decades, members of the Romanian Communist Party committed themselves to the Leninist ideal: 'We must take control over science, technology, knowledge, and art. Without these we shall be unable to build a communist society' (Lenin, 1965, p. 70). Through Soviet educational concepts and practices, they gained their control, and higher education became an avenue, specifically, for political formation steered by the dominant ideological doctrine of Marxism-Leninism.

During this period, competition for acceptance into the universities became intense. According to Bachman (1991), only eight percent of those eligible for higher education were permitted to enroll. Some students hired tutors and devoted the majority of their time during their secondary schooling to exam preparation (Bachman, 1991); however, private tutors were expensive, and many peasant and worker families could not afford them. Because of the problematic imbalance between university admissions from the urban and rural populations, the government eventually made the hiring of tutors illegal (Abbott, 1994). Today, tutoring is nearly essential for teachers to supplement salaries that are generally too low to sustain a quality life. Students are commonly tutored not only in their weakest subjects, but also in their best subjects to further improve their academic advantage.

### **Section 2.2: The Romanian Communist Model (1965-1989)**

Ceausescu assumed power at the 9th Congress of the Romanian Communist Party in July 1965, becoming both President of Romania and General Secretary of the Communist party. His wife, Elena, became the First Vice-Prime Minister and Chair for the National Council on Science and Education. The Ceausescus' joint power made Romania the most heavily centralized and tightly controlled political and socio-economic system in all of Eastern Europe (Gilberg, 1990). All decisions, including educational policy, were made at the highest levels of government. Sadlak (1991) describes the Ceausescus' top-down rule as follows:

The Ceausescus' concentration of power made the actual formulation and implementation of policies concerning higher education noticeably different in Romania from that existing in other Eastern European socialist countries, even if it was carried out within the same formula of the dominant Communist party's power and control mechanism in academic affairs (p. 771).

Under Ceausescu's leadership, The Educational Law of 1968 was enacted to provide substantial funding to those sectors of higher education that specialized in technical training and contributed to the country's economic development (Hale, 1971; Sadlak, 1991). Ceausescu's educational model served two purposes: (a) to distance Romania from Soviet domination, economically, politically and culturally and (b) to open relations with Western nations that provided technological assistance to Romania as a developing nation (Sادلak, 1993). Both of these initiatives earned Romania 'Most Favored Nation' status by the United States in the early 1970s (Bachman, 1991; Schlossberg, 1991). Initially, Ceausescu's modernization policy received support from Romanian citizens, especially the peasantry, as well as the international community.

Sادلak (1993), however, suggests that Ceausescu's centrally steered modernization policy deteriorated in the late 1970s, due to four factors: the rigid Communist ideology, nationalism, over-centralized planning and poor management. Gilberg (1990) adds a fifth factor: the over-commitment of human resources to urban development. According to Gilberg (1990), Romania entered the communist era with a greater rural labor pool than the other Eastern European states. Despite this advantage, Ceausescu's policy of moving a massive labor force from rural to urban areas depleted the labor pool in the countryside to a marginal level by the early 1980s. Throughout the next decade, an anti-intellectual attitude pervaded Romanian higher education, reducing many higher education institutions to vocational training centers. Peter Basel (1993) asserts that this centralization of educational institutions was the most striking feature of Communist modernization policy. Every educational institution that taught anything that conflicted with Communist ideology was disciplined or eliminated by government officials. Doinea Cornea, for example, a Hungarian professor at the University of Cluj, was fired from her position in 1988 because she encouraged students to read Western philosophy and religion texts.

Reisz (1994) suggests that because of the 'factory-like image' of society and education, a major role change for the highly educated in Romania came about, which restricted choices for employment. Prior to 1990, all university graduates were required to go through a period of compulsory employment. For most graduates, a short list of worksite choices was given to them by the Ministry of Education, selected on the basis of the political priorities of the regime. Any graduate who refused to accept an assigned position had little hope of finding other employment (Sادلak, 1991).

### **Section 2.3: Education Reform of the 1990s**

When Ceausescu's Romanian Communist Party dissolved in 1989, 200 new political parties emerged. Because most were created around personalities without clear ideologies or programs (Birzea, 1996), after several months of a fluid power structure, Ion Iliescu and his party, the Front for National Salvation (FNS), won the presidential election on May 20, 1990.

The main priority for the new government was to establish legislative power, leaving educational concerns to the Ministry of Education.

Dr. Mihail Sora, the new Minister of Education, wanted to liberalize the higher education system, ensure academic freedom and give universities autonomy to do research. At his urging, Iliescu's government suspended the Communist law of education of 1978 which abolished the monopoly of the state over higher education.

In December 1991, the new constitution of Romania approved Article 32, which confirmed the right of education for national minorities as well as free public education at all levels (Sadlak, 1994). In addition, six new state universities were established, numerous private universities emerged, and student enrollment increased rapidly. Grants were given to Romanian students from The Republic of Moldova to study in Romanian universities, and Romanian minorities began to receive instruction in their mother tongues (Vaidenanu, 1995).

University students, who contributed significantly to the 1989 demise of the Ceausescu regime, also participated in educational reform. According to Reisz (1994), they formed new organizations, entered the senates of universities, and attempted to become active in the political process on a national level. Why, despite their efforts, Iliescu and the FNS kept educational policies in an ambiguous state, remains uncertain. Gabanyi (1991) suggests that Iliescu and the FNS did not seek to change the Communist infrastructure, only reform it through peaceful means. Birzea (1996) explains:

The previous ruling class (Iliescu's government) learned how to use the instruments of democracy in the power struggle that ensued. It quickly understood that the key factors of power in the new context are no longer of an ideological and military nature, but are under the direct control of the decision-making process. That is why attention of the old political class focused on three important pillars of modern society: property, information and education (p. 97).

John Parker (1993), a writer for *The Economist*, concurs with Gabanyi and Birzea's assessments. He describes Iliescu's government as a 'semi-authoritarian regime masquerading as a democracy' (p. 19) that lost public support between 1990-1992 to candidates of the main democratic coalition.

Alternatively, Birzea (1996) suggests that the changes in Romania during 1990 were so extreme that it was difficult to maintain stability in the economic and social structure. Thus, the government's educational policies between 1990-1992 were aimed at stabilizing the education system as well as establishing it on a firm foundation. Limited attempts at reform included restoration of special education, diversified secondary education and the restructuring of higher education

Basel (1993), however, argues that transitioning governments (like Iliescu's in Romania) refused to recognize the role that adult formal and nonformal education plays in nation building. He believes 'adult education...can provide people with the missing knowledge that can help sort out social, economic and political problems and help a humiliated generation regain their pride' (p. 69).

In 1993, documents for a coherent education policy were prepared by Romanian educational organizations and adopted by the Romanian transitioning government, which included: (a) The White Paper on Education in Romania, prepared by the Institute of Education Sciences, and (b) Higher Education Reform in Romania, prepared by the Consultative Group for Higher Education and Research. These documents listed the following priorities for education reform:

1. Decentralizing education management;
2. Reforming curricula of all subjects and levels of education;
3. Reorganizing teacher training;
4. Reforming vocational education;
5. Introducing alternative textbooks and reducing control of the education market
6. Modernizing and diversifying education financing
7. Reforming higher education (short courses 3 years; long courses 4 years; master studies 1-2 years and Ph.D.) (Birzea, 1996, p. 103).

Connor (2003) asserts that these objectives were, at least in part, to attract foreign financing because reform and sustainability would have been near impossible with sole reliance on domestic funding.

The World Bank supported the initiatives, as did the European Union, which gave considerably to Romania through its Phare program which was designed, among other things, to aid pre-ascension countries improve their infrastructures. The Tempus scheme, a Phare component, funded specific educational projects and, from 1990-1999, contributed over a billion Euros to 345 Romanian universities (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, n.d.).

The effects of the initial reforms were felt almost immediately as teachers were not as highly constrained by their options for subject matter and materials. New textbooks with non- or anti-Communist thought spread through classrooms, English emerged as a widely desirable foreign language, and civic and religious education had roles in schools. In 1995 Romania passed Education Act 84 which served as a regulatory law that managed and coordinated education as it functioned as a national system. It was described as an organic law which “was conceived in order that the provisions regarding the educational ideal about the training of youth for a democratic society... should come to life” (Ministry of Education and Research, 2001, p. 43). Among other rights consistent with democratic European values, Act 84 also granted all Romanian citizens the right to study at all educational levels, regardless of sex, race, nationality, political, cultural, religious affiliations or social and material conditions.

### **Section 3: Ethnic Minorities in Education**

Whereas communism united people, its collapse heightened the social differences between them and the collectivist nature of communist rule was being overpowered by individual and more exclusive group identity. Though the election of 1997 brought a new government committed to higher education reform for minorities, ethnic and national identity by both majority Romanians and minority groups such as Hungarians, Germans and the Roma continued to increase and further separated these groups from each other.

Under communism the Roma were included in various social elements of Romanian life from employment to health care to education, but after ethnic segregation and the fall of communism, the Roma became both increasingly marginalized by, yet also increasingly rejecting of majority Romanian society. Bandelj (2010) argues that this new “atmosphere of social differentiation” has put minority groups such as the Roma in a precarious position that makes them highly susceptible to reactionary policies including employment discrimination, which could lead to even greater income disparity in a country that already has one of the highest income inequality rates in Eastern and Central Europe. With the rising cost of school fees, uniforms, and materials that already keeps many families from sending their children to school, there is a greater risk that even more Roma could be further impoverished and excluded from public education in the future.

In Article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights, rights and freedoms are to be given “without discrimination on any ground such as sex, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status.” What a national minority is, however, remains undefined, thus leaving a fair bit of ambiguity in modern minority rights jurisprudence. In cases of discrimination, it is the responsibility of the complainant to prove discrimination beyond a reasonable doubt, making this ambiguity of national minorities even more apparent as minority groups struggle for equality.

Historically, disproportionately high numbers of Roma children across Central and Eastern Europe are enrolled in classes for remedial and mentally handicapped students. As Goldston (2006) comments, this anomaly was previously considered “a cultural problem relating to the failure of Romani parents to value education sufficiently; a biological problem of Romani children’s inferior intelligence; a language problem; or a historical problem of intractable social prejudice” (509). It wasn’t, however, considered a legal problem until 1997 when a group of Roma students sued the school director of Ferenc Pethe Primary School in Tiszavasvári, Hungary on the grounds of discrimination. The students alleged that they were forbidden from attending classes with Hungarian children, were relegated to only the dilapidated classrooms in a separate building and had a separate graduation ceremony apart from the Hungarian students. The City Court of Nyíregyháza ruled in favor of the plaintiffs and the decision was later upheld by the Hungarian Supreme Court. While this was, indeed, a notable win in the battle for educational equality, much progress has yet to be made. One of the conditions that delayed Romania’s EU ascension until 2007 was greater societal participation by the Roma. Unfortunately the inclusion of Roma students in education remains a systemic issue that will likely be dealt with for decades, perhaps similar to how the United States is still addressing school segregation almost sixty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*.

In 2011 the European Union issued a Framework for National Integration Strategies up to 2020 that stated that education, employment, healthcare, and housing were the four areas of most-needed attention to integrate the Roma. The framework again called for equal, non-discriminatory access to education and that countries would take steps to “ensure that all Roma children complete at least primary school...and reduce the number of early school leavers from secondary education.”

In 2002 census, the most recent to date, 89.5% of the Romanian population declared itself ethnically Romanian. Ethnic Hungarians, the predominant minority group in Transylvania, and Roma were the only other groups with more than 0.5% of the total population. Interestingly, though the Ministry of Education recognizes seven languages other than Romanian in which a student can be instructed as a native language (Hungarian, German, Croatian, Turkish, Ukrainian, Slovak, and Serbian) and demonstrate competency as a component of the Baccalaureate exam at the completion of high school, Romanes, the native language of large number of Roma students, is not yet recognized.

#### **Section 4: Foreign Language Education**

Foreign language education has taken a prominent role in the Romanian education system. Most Romanian students study two foreign languages, usually English and French. In 2009, for example, 98.1% of upper secondary students were studying English (Eurostat, 2011c), and 85.3% were studying French (Eurostat, 2011d). Though in the few years following the 1989 revolution, students located in urban areas were more likely to study English than those living in rural areas, students from every sector of the modern Romanian population generally have access to English.

VanDerPerre (1994), a specialist in European science and education policy, proposed that for economic reasons “the promotion of language learning... should be compulsory for entry into and for exit from higher education” (p. 10) throughout Eastern and Central Europe. It seems like the Romanian Ministry of Education agreed and has since required students to demonstrate competency in one international language based on international standards in order to pass the Baccalaureate exam and be admitted to higher education. Romania has adopted the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as means of evaluating Baccalaureate exams for exiting high school students. CEFR is meant to be able to be applied to the evaluation of any European language and is scored along six gradations from A1 to C2.

With increasing emphasis on foreign language, especially English, many students are taking internationally recognized exams such as Cambridge First Certificate in English or Certificate of Advanced English, which they use to bolster their CVs to get into university, increase their employment options, or pursue international education. Less common than Cambridge exams is the TESOL exam, which prospective students generally take if seeking entrance to Western universities (Lynnes, 1996).

#### **Section 5: Religious Education**

Religious education changed even more considerably than foreign language education after the fall of communism. Religious education, though banned during Ceausescu’s reign, was reincorporated into public schools after the Revolution. Its reintroduction was in part as a way to re-moralize the country after decades of atheistic communist rule, and also to begin to repair the relationship between church and society after the Romanian Orthodox Church had been forced into aiding the Securitate as it attempted to avoid annihilation and preserve its foundation. In January 1990, less than a month after the Revolution, the Minister of Education, with the support of the new Secretary of State for Religious Denominations, allowed for the introduction of religious education into primary and high schools (Turcescu and Stan, 2010). Though religion classes were held in some schools as early as the 1990-1991 academic year, due to low teacher availability and unwillingness of school directors to engage in the teaching of controversial subjects, few schools initially took advantage of this new law.

It wasn’t until the 1996 election, when Constantinescu was elected President, that Emergency Ordinance 36 was introduced, establishing religion (of recognized denominations) as part of the national curriculum in pre-university schools (Turcescu and Stan, 2010). Aside from a few areas with sizable Catholic populations, Christian Orthodoxy was the predominant religion offered in schools. Religion classes were technically optional, and, though students were enrolled by default, they could gain exemption through a process of written request and parental interview.

Marks were still given and configured into grade point averages as any other class, which, considering that marks for religion classes were usually quite high, may have deterred students from seeking exemption.

### **Section 6: Higher Education**

Romanian institutions of higher education have arguably seen just as much, if not more reform than secondary education. The demand for higher education increased considerably after the fall of communism, which naturally led to the expansion of existing universities, and the creation of several private universities. Private education, according to Fried, Glass, and Baumgartl (2006), “appears to fill the gap between demand and supply in the most popular study fields” (4). Their assertion seems accurate, as the number of institutions of higher education increased from 56 to 106 from the 1991-1992 to 2008-2009 academic years, and the number of students increased from 215,226 to 891,098 during the same period. In 2008-2009 410,859 students, over 46% of the university population, were studying in 50 private Romanian institutions. Private institutions are an established part of the higher education structures of Western Europe, so the sharp increase in privatization was a somewhat healthy sign of democratic growth. Jan Sadlak (1994) further commented that the increase in private institutions of higher education not only met an increasing demand for growing enrollment, but were able to provide viable alternatives to traditional curricula and remnants of communist educational doctrine.

The increase in private institutions combined with the absence of procedures for institutional accreditation produced an educational crisis in the early 1990s. The Romanian Parliament was subsequently compelled to set minimum standards and conditions that established institutions as academically qualified and evaluate the plethora of new institutions as such. The Law of Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions, adopted in 1993, affected the functioning of both state and private higher education institutions. The law stated: “All institutions, regardless of the date of foundation and ‘property status,’ must function as non-profit organizations and must undergo periodic academic evaluation...for obtaining or preserving the status of accredited institution of higher learning” (Sadlak, 1994, p. 19). He later observed that the policy-making bodies of the government must deal with the emergence of a diversified system based on the coexistence of the state and private institutions for higher learning.

Teordescu and Stoicescu (1998) compliment Romania’s higher education accreditation policies and attribute much of its success to its autonomy from the Ministry of Education. Evaluation and accreditation of institutions are done by the National Council for Academic Evaluation and Accreditation, an independent organization named by Parliament and whose procedures are not able to be interfered with by any state agency (Teordescu & Stoicescu, 1998). Closely tied to accreditation was curriculum development, which underwent a similar crisis after the Revolution. The influx of freedoms that accompanied the Revolution included the ability of professors to freely order their teaching materials without state approval. The government considered establishing a national council for curriculum reform in 1992; however, the need for freedom was so intense, that no coordination among professors or their teaching assistants concerning course content took place. What resulted instead was a radical change in course content and a gross overlap of material in the introductory courses. Reisz’ (1994) study suggested that it was not unusual for a student to receive the same material in three different courses. The need for readjustment in curricular matters became self-evident when students openly complained about the redundancy of content.

In 1999, the ministers of education of 29 countries, Romania included, initiated the Bologna Process, thus forming the European Higher Education Area which aimed to further standardize European education by establishing a common system of comparable degrees and credits and promote European cooperation and quality. The Bologna Declaration was not meant to make all European university programs identical, rather it was meant to harmonize them and allow for greater mobility between different systems of higher education. The system was based on undergraduate and graduate structures and organized by Bachelor, Master, and Doctoral cycles, which led Romania to restructure their university degree programs and adopt the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) accordingly (Ministry of Education, 2006).

### **Section 7: Looking Forward**

Romania has certainly made great strides with its educational reform and, at least ostensibly, supports EU policies and regulations for education. The funding available in other countries, however, is still lacking in Romania.

Though Romania has increased the percentage of its GDP spent on education from a low of 2.86% in 2000, to a high of 4.25% in 2007, (Eurostat, 2011b) this number is still lower than all but four EU countries (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Luxembourg, and Slovakia). In 2005, the most recent year to date that Romania declared its expenditure per pupil, the country spent 1,437.9 Euros per student per year, lower than any other European country (Eurostat, 2011a). Romanian primary and secondary schools have changed little since joining the European Union. Reforms in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have been comparatively calm as opposed to the extensive reforms following the fall of communism, and they still have much to accomplish before being able to match the reform of higher education. Teodorescu and Stoicescu (1998) stress that change should begin with school administrators and also for the need to initiate improvement akin to that of higher education reform. They cite direction which includes “supportive relationships between teachers and school administrators, efficient communication between educational actors, teachers and principals’ professionalism, shared decision making, school autonomy and community support and last, but not least, the financial situation of faculty” (8). Their suggestions seem legitimate, but change in Romania, though good in theory, is prone to resistance and foot-dragging which can easily slow reform of any type.

In 1998, Teordescu and Stoicescu thought Romanian schools were failing as “an outcome of more than 50 years of communism, time in which schools were only an instrument for communist propaganda and did not seek performance” ( p. 10). Times have certainly changed. The generation of Romanian students in universities today has never been educated under communism. They have grown up watching cartoons, seeing Hollywood movies, and reading Harry Potter. They have come of age talking on cell phones and surfing the internet. They are part of a generation that has been highly exposed to Western ideas and more comfortable with notions of reform than older generations raised and educated under communism. This generation has been taught to value and appreciate Romania’s rich history, but look forward to what the future holds, and they have every reason to be hopeful for the future.



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