

Thematic Article

Emerging successes and persistent challenges in Hungarian minority education in Romania

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Abstract

This study examines the early impacts of recent curriculum and examination reforms in Romanian minority education, focusing on the introduction of the “Romanian as a non-native language” curriculum for Hungarian-speaking students. Using aggregated national assessment and baccalaureate data from 2020–2025, the research analyzes trends in Romanian language performance among minority students, compares results across regions and school types, and uses mathematics performance as a comparative indicator to contextualize language-specific achievement patterns. Descriptive, cohort-comparative, and proportion-difference analyses, complemented by hypothetical “what-if” calculations, reveal that while a persistent 1.3–1.5 point gap remains between minority and majority students in Romanian language performance at the 8th-grade level, mathematics scores are nearly equivalent, indicating that the gap is linguistic rather than cognitive. In the 2025 baccalaureate – the first year of full curriculum implementation – pass rates improved notably in high-minority regions (e.g., Harghita +5.3 pp, Covasna +1.6 pp), alongside a significant reduction in failure rates, particularly in vocational and technical schools. The findings suggest that aligning examination content with a differentiated curriculum may be associated with more favorable educational outcomes among minority students, though effectiveness varies by region and school type. Sustainable gains require targeted teacher training, adequate resources, and systematic monitoring to address persistent structural and contextual disparities.

Keywords: minority education; curriculum reform; language assessment; baccalaureate; Romanian as a non-native language

Introduction

Minority education in Central and Eastern Europe serves simultaneously cultural, linguistic, and social functions: on the one hand, it provides one of the most important institutional frameworks for the preservation of identity; on the other hand, it contributes to social mobility and economic advancement (Halász, 2015; Kyriazi, 2018). In the case of the Hungarian community in Romania, the language of instruction, the institutional structure, and the curricular regulations are closely intertwined with the political and social context. Since the regime change in 1989, the evolution of institutionalisation and legal regulation has played a decisive role in shaping minority education (Papp Z., 1998).

The history of minority education in this region reveals a dual dynamic: on the one hand, the institutional expansion of minority language use (maintaining and extending mother tongue education), and on the other, the persistent challenge of acquiring the state language. Over the past three and a half decades, Romanian education policy has gradually become more open to accommodating the specific needs of national minorities. The legal and institutional manifestations of this openness can be observed in national curriculum reforms and in policy debates surrounding public education legislation.

At the same time, in practice, the adaptation of the language of instruction and examination requirements to the minority context remained incomplete for a long period. As a result, the achievements of non-native Romanian-speaking students in the Romanian language have consistently lagged behind those of majority

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students. In classroom practice, this gap often manifests through didactic code-switching or translanguaging strategies, offering locally adapted solutions to support comprehension and exam preparation (Rácz, 2022; Tódor, 2021).

The differentiation of the Romanian language curriculum and examination system – introducing curricula specifically designed for non-native speakers – along with gradual curriculum modifications between 2017 and 2024, created opportunities for better alignment between exam requirements and the content taught. These changes aimed to reduce linguistic inequalities and to make multilingualism more effectively utilised. The first cohorts that progressed entirely under the revised curricular framework (the graduating class of 2025) already show measurable trends in examination results.

The aim of the present study is to evaluate the success of Hungarian minority education in Romania along two closely related dimensions: firstly, the impact of the legislative framework and institutional changes (with particular attention to the 2023 education regulation), and secondly, the Romanian language examination results of the first graduating cohorts that completed secondary education under the new curriculum for teaching Romanian as a non-native language.

Theoretical Background

The 2023 Public Education Law and the Situation of Minority Education in Romania

For the Hungarian minority in Romania – the country’s largest national minority – mother tongue education plays a particularly important role, not only in the exercise of linguistic rights but also in the preservation of identity and the maintenance of community cohesion. The gradual expansion and institutionalisation of minority educational rights was made possible by the post-1989 process of democratisation, through three major education acts: the 1995 Law (84/1995), the 2011 Law (1/2011), and the most recent 2023 Law (198/2023).

The latest Public Education Law (Law 198/2023) was adopted in the spirit of modernising Romanian education policy and aligning it with European Union standards. It emphasises inclusion, access to quality and equitable education, and the protection of cultural and linguistic diversity. With regard to minority education, it introduces two key innovations that go beyond the declarative provisions of previous legislation.

First, Article 59 stipulates that persons belonging to national minorities are “entitled to receive education in their mother tongue at all levels and in all forms” (Parlamentul României, 2023). This right can be exercised through various organisational structures – minority language schools, classes, or groups – thereby reinforcing and systematising the rights set out in the 1995 and 2011 Law. For the first time, these provisions appear in such a structured and detailed form.

Second, Article 60 (2) marked a breakthrough by requiring that the teaching of the Romanian language in a “non-native” context for minority students be based on a separate curriculum, methodology, and set of teaching resources, taking into account learners’ linguistic competence levels and cultural backgrounds. This provision not only recognises the specific needs of language teaching at the legal level but also makes their consideration mandatory, thus eliminating the previously uniform curricular approach that was often a source of conflict.

The 2023 Law, therefore, not only reaffirms the right to use minority languages but, for the first time, acknowledges that the conditions for learning Romanian as the state language differ structurally for minority students. This legislative innovation builds in part on the groundwork laid by the 2011 Law, which already recognised in principle the need for a differentiated curricular approach to Romanian language teaching, but did not yet introduce binding provisions.

A comparison of the three education acts reveals a gradual progression in Romanian legislation towards supporting minority education. The 1995 Law acknowledged the right to mother tongue education in a declarative manner, without providing practical frameworks. The 2011 Law reflected the specific needs of Romanian language teaching for minorities, but did not fully establish the institutional and methodological conditions. The 2023 Law integrates all these aspects, makes differentiated Romanian language teaching a normative obligation, institutionalises mother tongue education structures, and explicitly references European minority protection standards. This legislative evolution serves both the preservation of the Hungarian community’s identity and the promotion of its social mobility. The following section examines how these legal provisions are reflected in curricular reforms and methodological developments.

Curricular Reform of Romanian Language Teaching in Minority Upper Secondary Schools

In non-Romanian language schools, the teaching of Romanian for decades followed the logic of curricula designed for native Romanian speakers, including literary and grammatical expectations, while disregarding the different linguistic environments and proficiency levels of minority students. This approach led to a persistent performance gap, as minority language students consistently scored 10–20 percentage points lower than the national average in Romanian language national assessments and the baccalaureate examination (Barna, 2019; Barna & Biró, 2021; Barna, 2022).

A breakthrough came with the introduction in the 2017/2018 school year of a new Romanian language curriculum for the 5th grade (Ministerul Educației, 2017), which for the first time treated Romanian as a non-native language adapted to learners' real-life circumstances (Platon et al., 2023). The primary focus shifted to developing functional language competences and everyday communication skills, in alignment with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) levels (Council of Europe, 2003; 2020).

The new curriculum for upper secondary education (liceu), approved in 2021–2023 (Ministerul Educației, 2022b) along with aligned examination requirements (Ministerul Educației, 2022a; 2024), continues the logic of the earlier reform but introduces three key innovations: 1) Competence-based structure. The curriculum is organised into three main competence areas: reading comprehension (processing different types and media of texts, identifying and interpreting information), text production (written expression in various genres, developing structure and coherence), and inter- and multicultural sensitivity (openness to Romanian, Hungarian, and international cultural values). This structure departs from the old grammar- and literary history-focused curricula, placing communicative competence at the centre (Platon et al., 2011; Platon, 2021). 2) Thematic and life-related content. The curriculum incorporates topics relevant to students' everyday and cultural experiences. For example, in grade 12, topics include tradition and modernity, subjectivity and otherness, and fundamental experiences of existence; in grade 10, six topics are proposed, three compulsory and three optional: human nature, the world of emotions, personality, volunteering, justice and injustice, the adolescent and the world of arts, intercultural dialogues. The text types include not only traditional literary genres but also multimodal, visual, and everyday communication forms (e.g., interviews, scientific descriptions, image-text combinations) (Platon & Vilcu, 2011; Platon et al., 2023). 3) Alignment of examination requirements and curriculum. The examination programme explicitly measures the competences outlined in the curriculum, rather than expecting native-level language and literary knowledge. This resolves one of the main sources of tension in previous years, as teaching and assessment requirements now align fully for the first time, thereby reducing inequalities (Ministerul Educației, 2017; 2022a; 2022b; 2024).

The 2021 upper secondary curriculum thus fully incorporated into the senior grades the paradigm shift initiated in 2017 for minority students' Romanian language education. The new programme adapts not only the content but also the examination requirements to actual language competences, thereby systematically reducing disparities. This is the first time that curriculum objectives, methodology, and examination systems have been aligned to such an extent with the needs of minority learners (Ministerul Educației, 2022a; 2024).

The study is situated at the intersection of language policy, minority education, and second language acquisition. The findings align with research emphasizing the importance of context-sensitive language instruction and the role of assessment alignment in reducing structural inequalities.

Research design and Methods

The purpose of this study is to examine the early implications of curricular reform in Romanian minority education, with particular attention to the introduction of the Romanian as a non-native language curriculum. The analysis focuses on three interrelated dimensions: (1) trends in Romanian language performance in the 8th-grade national assessments between 2020 and 2024; (2) changes in Romanian language performance in the 12th-grade baccalaureate examinations between 2024 and 2025, including the first implementation of the curriculum-aligned minority examination format; and (3) variation in observed patterns across regions and school types.

The study relies primarily on publicly available aggregated administrative datasets and statistical records published by the Romanian Ministry of Education. As the analysis is based on institutional- and administrative-level data, it aims to provide a comprehensive descriptive overview of the examined populations rather than an individual-level analysis of student trajectories. The primary outcome variables consisted of subject-specific mean scores in the national assessments (Romanian language, mother tongue, and mathematics) and pass/fail outcomes in the baccalaureate examination. The principal explanatory variables included examination year,

county, and school type (theoretical, vocational, and technical high schools). Mathematics achievement was incorporated as a comparative indicator because performance in mathematics is generally less directly dependent on language proficiency than Romanian language examinations and may therefore provide an approximate reference point for broader academic performance patterns. More specifically, the comparison aimed to assess whether observed achievement differences extended across domains or were primarily concentrated in language-related subjects.

The study was guided by the following research questions: 1) To what extent are changes observable in minority students' Romanian language performance in 8th-grade national assessments following the implementation of the Romanian as a non-native language curriculum? 2) What changes can be identified in Romanian language performance at the baccalaureate level following the first full implementation of the revised curriculum framework? 3) How do these patterns vary across regions and school types? Based on these questions, four working hypotheses were formulated: 1) The introduction of a differentiated curriculum is associated with gradual improvements in minority students' Romanian language performance. 2) Performance differences between minority and majority students are primarily linguistic rather than cognitive in nature, as reflected by comparatively similar mathematics outcomes. 3) Patterns associated with curricular reform differ across regions and school types. 4) Greater alignment between curriculum content and examination requirements is associated with improved baccalaureate outcomes among minority students.

The analytical procedure consisted of several stages. First, descriptive statistical analyses were conducted to examine annual trends in average scores and pass rates, with particular attention to variation across counties and school types. Second, cohort-based comparisons were performed to identify temporal patterns among student groups exposed to different stages of curricular implementation, with special attention to cohorts completing the entire educational cycle under the revised framework. Third, comparative analyses of proportional differences were conducted to examine changes in pass rates at both regional and national levels. These differences were expressed as percentage-point changes rather than relative percentage changes in order to facilitate interpretation across contexts.

However, no multivariate inferential analyses were conducted because the aggregated structure of the available datasets did not permit the inclusion of individual-level explanatory variables or hierarchical modelling procedures. Given the descriptive and aggregated nature of the available data, the findings should be interpreted cautiously. The study design does not allow causal effects of curriculum reform to be isolated from other potentially relevant influences, including changes in teaching practices, local educational initiatives, demographic developments, socio-economic conditions, or post-pandemic recovery processes. The absence of individual-level information further limits the possibility of controlling for potentially important confounding factors such as students' socio-economic background, prior achievement, family characteristics, or school-level resources.

Additionally, longitudinal comparisons may have been influenced by broader contextual factors, including educational disruptions associated with the COVID-19 period. Changes in assessment practices may also have affected observed trends. In recent years, the increasing use of centralized and digitally supported evaluation procedures may have altered grading consistency and interpretative practices, particularly in language assessment contexts. While such developments may improve procedural fairness, they should nevertheless be considered when interpreting temporal changes.

Accordingly, the findings should be understood as identifying empirical patterns that are consistent with the expected direction of reform-related developments rather than as evidence of direct causal relationships. Future research based on individual-level datasets and multilevel modelling approaches would provide stronger opportunities for assessing the longer-term implications of curriculum reform.

Results

Trends in Romanian Language Performance of Minority Students in National Assessments (2020–2024)

One of the most persistent challenges in Romanian public education is the teaching of Romanian to non-native speakers – primarily ethnic Hungarian students.² The curricular reform introduced in the 2012/2013 school year

² „In Hungarian-medium classes, a concerning situation emerged regarding difficulties – particularly in rural schools – in Romanian language communication, both oral and written. This is attributable to students' limited vocabulary, stemming from minimal contact with the Romanian language (restricted to Romanian language lessons only).” Source: <https://www.lrmin.ro/de-ce-competenta/>

for preparatory-grade pupils aimed to improve the performance of minority students³ through a “Romanian as a non-native language” programme (*ca limbă nematernă*) (cf. Ministerul Educației, 2017; 2022b). Beginning in 2017/2018, the new curriculum was progressively implemented from the 5th grade upwards, so that the first cohort to have completed the entire educational sequence (preparatory grade to 12th grade) under the new curriculum sat the 8th-grade national assessment in 2021 and the baccalaureate in 2025. The present analysis examines observed performance patterns during the implementation of this curricular transformation for both 8th-grade (national assessment) and 12th-grade students (baccalaureate examination) based on data from 2020 to 2024. Previous analyses of 8th-grade national assessment results for 2019–2022 were conducted by Erdélystat (Barna, 2019; Barna & Biró, 2021; Barna, 2022).⁴

Table 1. National Assessment Exam Results for 8th Grade Students (2020⁵)

	Romanian Language	Mother Tongue	Mathematics	Exam Average
Minority-language students	5.97	7.70	6.17	6.61
Romanian-medium students	7.32	-	6.17	6.74
All students	7.24	7.70	6.17	6.73

Source: Based on DATA.GOV.RO – own compilation and calculations (<https://data.gov.ro/organization/men>)⁶

Table 1 shows that in 2020 the Romanian language examination was still uniform, all students, regardless of mother tongue, took the same test. The average score for native Romanian speakers was 7.32, compared to only 5.97 for minority students, indicating a substantial 1.35-point gap. This clearly demonstrated that the previous standardised approach to language instruction was inadequate for developing the language competencies of minority students.

Table 2. National Assessment Exam Results for 8th Grade Students (2021⁷)

	Romanian Language	Mother Tongue	Mathematics	Exam Average
Minority-language students	5.69	7.93	6.24	6.62
Romanian-medium students	6.96		6.17	6.57
All students	6.88	7.93	6.18	6.57

Source: Based on DATA.GOV.RO – own compilation and calculations (<https://data.gov.ro/organization/men>)

In 2021, the first cohort taught Romanian from the preparatory grade (and from 5th grade) under the new curriculum designed for minority learners took the 8th-grade national assessment. This curriculum prioritised functional language use, communicative competence, and context-based language practice, while reducing the emphasis on grammar–literary analysis (Platon et al., 2011). Contrary to expectations of improvement, minority students’ average score in Romanian fell to 5.69 – a 0.28-point decline compared to 2020. This year’s overall national averages were also lower, partly attributable to the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The absence of an immediate improvement should thus be interpreted not as a failure of the curriculum, but as a consequence of its implementation context (e.g., lack of teaching materials, limited teacher preparedness).

³ „In 20 counties of Romania, mother-tongue education is provided for 11 national minorities: Hungarian, German, Bulgarian, Czech, Croatian, Italian, Polish, Roma, Serbian, Slovak, and Ukrainian.” Source: <https://www.lrmn.ro/de-ce-competenta/>

⁴ <https://statisztikak.erdelystat.ro/cikkek/kepessegvizsga-2019-a-magyar-nyelven-tanulok-eredmenyei/34>; https://statisztikak.erdelystat.ro/cikkek/a-2021-es-kepessegvizsga-eredmenyei-az-elmult-tiz-ev-kontextusaban/96#_ftn8; <https://statisztikak.erdelystat.ro/cikkek/kepessegvizsga-eredmenyek-es-rangsorok-2019-2022/104>

⁵ In the relevant examination year, 160,663 students completed all mandatory tests, thus enabling the calculation of an admission average. Out of 172,543 examinees, 12,880 students (7.46%) did not sit at least one subject, and therefore no examination average could be calculated for them. The proportion of students who took an exam in their mother tongue was 5.94% (9,558 students), including not only Hungarian but also other languages different from Romanian.

⁶ It is important to note that the Romanian grading system operates on a scale from 1 to 10, where 5 represents the minimum passing grade. At the 8th-grade national assessment, the final score is calculated as the arithmetic mean of subject-specific results. At the baccalaureate level, students must achieve at least 5 in each subject and a minimum overall average of 6 to pass.

⁷ In another examination year, 123,185 students completed all mandatory tests, allowing for the calculation of an admission average. Of 131,181 examinees, 7,996 students (6.09%) did not take at least one subject, precluding an average score. The share of students examined in their mother tongue was 6.44% (7,940 students), encompassing Hungarian as well as other non-Romanian languages.

Table 3. National Assessment Exam Results for 8th Grade Students (2022⁸)

	Romanian Language	Mother Tongue	Mathematics	Exam Average
Minority-language students	5.90	7.88	6.36	6.71
Romanian-medium students	7.19		6.55	6.87
All students	7.11	7.88	6.54	6.86

Source: Based on DATA.GOV.RO – own compilation and calculations (<https://data.gov.ro/organization/men>)

By 2022, a modest improvement was observed, with the minority average in Romanian rising to 5.90, approaching the 2020 level. This coincided with greater availability of new textbooks (cf. manuale.edu.ro) and participation in targeted teacher training programmes (cf. *Competența și eficiența în predarea limbii române copiilor și elevilor aparținând minorităților naționale din România*), enabling wider application of the new pedagogical principles.

Table 4. National Assessment Exam Results of 8th Grade Students in the Szeklerland Region, 2022

Subjects	Student Group	Harghita	Covasna	Mureș
Romanian Language	Minority-language students	4.96	4.85	5.79
	Romanian-medium students	7.28	7.04	6.63
	All students	5.28	5.45	6.35
Mathematics	Minority-language students	6.12	5.87	6.10
	Romanian-medium students	6.34	6.41	6.15
	All students	6.15	6.02	6.13
Mother Tongue	Minority-language students	7.83	7.61	7.68
	Romanian-medium students	-	-	-
	All students	7.83	7.61	7.68
Exam Average	Minority-language students	6.30	6.11	6.52
	Romanian-medium students	6.81	6.72	6.39
	All students	6.37	6.28	6.43

Source: Based on DATA.GOV.RO – own compilation and calculations (<https://data.gov.ro/organization/men>)

Note: The proportion of Hungarian-speaking students is 86.47% in Harghita County, 72.60% in Covasna County, and 33.55% in Mureș County.

County-level data for Szeklerland Region (Harghita, Covasna, Mureș) in 2022 reveal that in Harghita – where 86.47% of 8th-grade examinees were Hungarian – the average Romanian language score was only 4.96, compared to 7.83 in the Hungarian language and literature examination and 6.12 in mathematics. This pattern – strong performance in the mother-tongue subject and mathematics but low in Romanian – points to a linguistic and methodological issue rather than a general learning deficit. In contexts of high linguistic isolation, the “Romanian gap” appears to reflect broader language-related and contextual factors.

Table 5. National Assessment Exam Results for 8th Grade Students (2023⁹)

	Romanian Language	Mother Tongue	Mathematics	Exam Average
Minority-language students	5.64	7.49	6.64	6.59
Romanian-medium students	6.81		6.68	6.74
All students	6.74	7.49	6.68	6.73

Source: Based on DATA.GOV.RO – own compilation and calculations (<https://data.gov.ro/organization/men>)

⁸ In a subsequent year, 148,496 students completed all required tests, enabling the calculation of an admission average. Out of 155,561 examinees, 7,065 students (4.54%) missed at least one subject, preventing average calculation. The proportion of students examined in their mother tongue was 6.22% (9,251 students), which included Hungarian and other non-Romanian languages.

⁹ In the following year, 154,115 students completed all mandatory tests, allowing for the calculation of an admission average. Of 161,652 examinees, 7,537 students (4.66%) missed at least one subject. The share of mother-tongue examinees was 6.12% (9,439 students), comprising Hungarian and other non-Romanian languages.

In 2023, a renewed decline occurred (minority Romanian average: 5.64), plausibly linked to social and pedagogical factors such as a national teachers' strike and tensions surrounding assessment procedures. However, by 2024, results had risen again (minority average: 5.91), slightly exceeding the pre-reform 2020 level. This indicates that the reform can yield positive outcomes over time, albeit with a delayed effect.

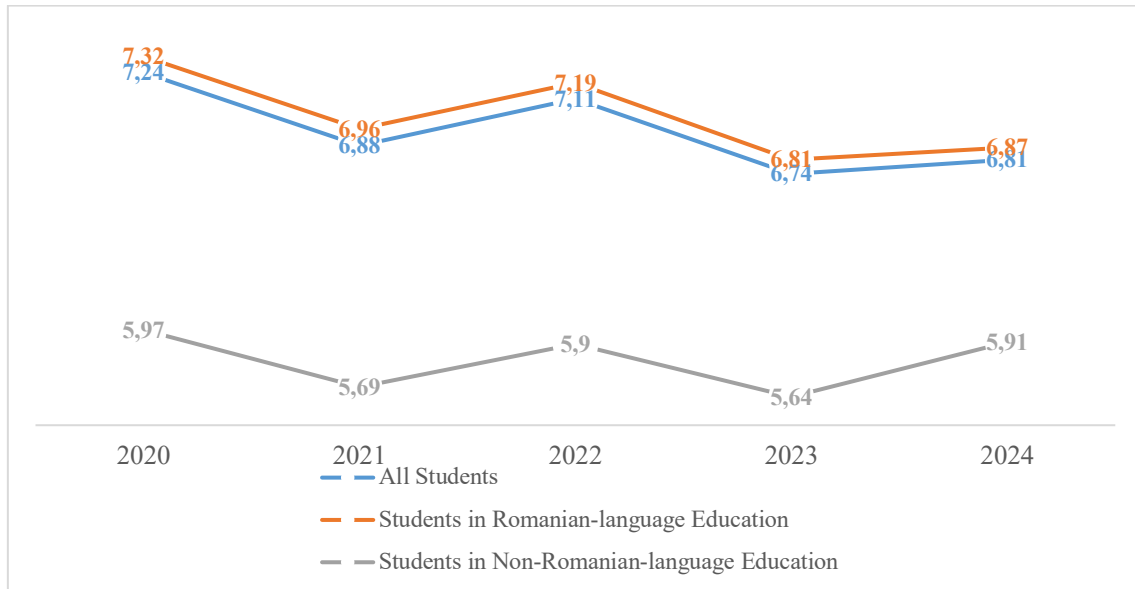
Table 6. National Assessment Exam Results for 8th Grade Students (2024¹⁰)

	Romanian Language	Mother Tongue	Mathematics	Exam Average
Minority-language students	5.91	7.70	5.92	6.51
Romanian-medium students	6.87		6.17	6.52
All students	6.81	7.70	6.15	6.52

Source: Based on DATA.GOV.RO – own compilation and calculations (<https://data.gov.ro/organization/men>)

Mother-tongue exam averages for minority students have remained consistently high (7.7–7.9) across the observed period, demonstrating strong learning potential. By 2024, the overall examination average gap between majority and minority students had narrowed to a minimal level. The observed pattern appears non-linear and may indicate a gradual positive trend over time.

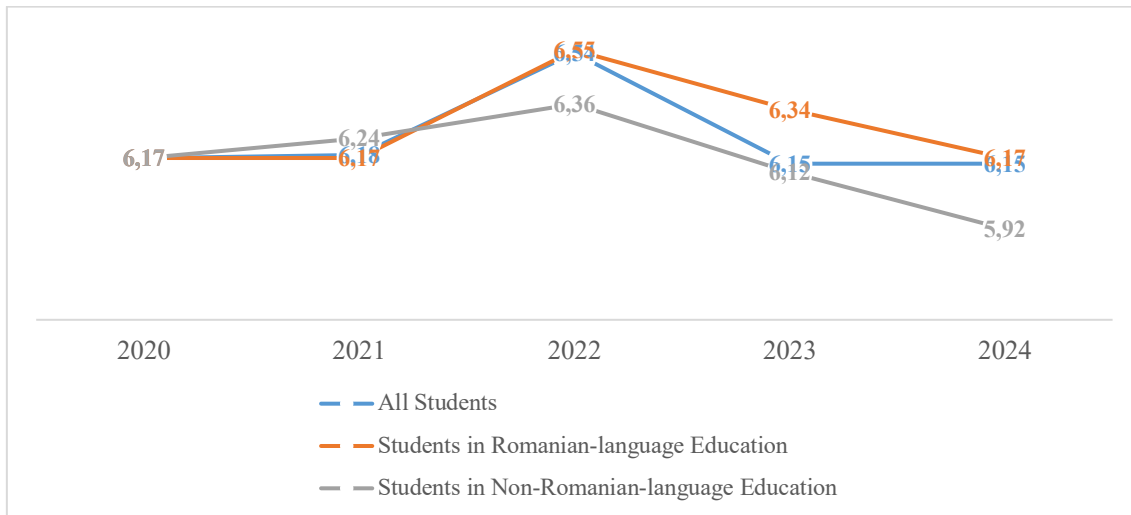
Figure 1. National Assessment Exam Results in Romanian Language and Literature for 8th Grade Students over the Past Five Years



Source: Based on DATA.GOV.RO – own compilation and calculations (<https://data.gov.ro/organization/men>)

The observed trends are consistent with a gradual improvement occurring during the implementation period of the reform. The first measurable cohort to have studied entirely under the new curriculum sat their examinations in 2021. The performance fluctuations observed in the subsequent years can be attributed to a combination of pedagogical, social, and institutional factors. The success of minority students depends not only on the curriculum itself, but also on its implementation (teacher training, availability of resources), the consistency of assessment instruments, and the degree of support provided by students' family and school environments. The 2017 reform has thus laid the foundations for a more successful future, but its full realisation can only be achieved through consistent political and pedagogical support.

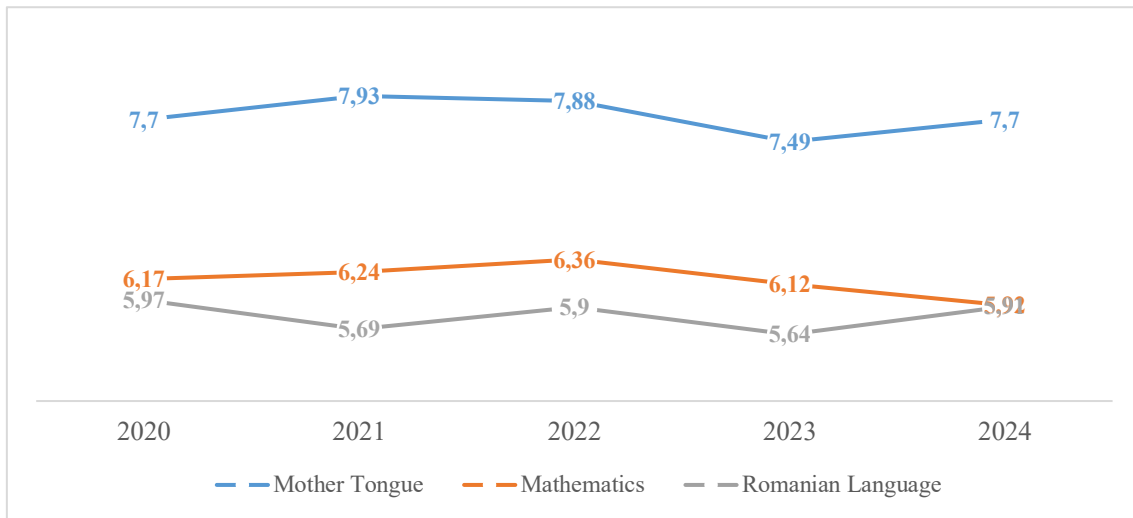
¹⁰ In the most recent year under analysis, 152,903 students completed all required tests, making it possible to calculate an admission average. Out of 160,467 examinees, 7,564 students (4.71%) did not sit at least one subject. The proportion of students examined in their mother tongue was 6.00% (9,183 students), including Hungarian and other languages different from Romanian.

Figure 2. National Assessment Exam Results in Mathematics for 8th Grade Students over the Past Five Years

Source: Based on DATA.GOV.RO – own compilation and calculations (<https://data.gov.ro/organization/men>)

One of the most important control factors in the national assessments for 8th-grade students is the performance in mathematics, as this subject is not language-dependent and thus can provide a more objective picture of students' general learning and cognitive abilities. Based on data from 2020–2024, mathematics exam results evolved as shown in Figure 2. First, it can be observed that minority students' performance is close to the national average, with annual differences ranging between 0.2 and 0.4 points, significantly smaller than in the case of Romanian language. This indicates that minority students do not appear to differ substantially in mathematics achievement patterns. Therefore, the gap observed in Romanian language examinations is not linked to general school performance, but rather to linguistic and methodological issues. Secondly, the persistent difference in Romanian language exam results is structural, not ability-based: while the performance gap in mathematics between minority and majority students remains narrow, the gap in Romanian language scores consistently ranges between 1.3 and 1.5 points each year. This supports the claim that the disadvantage in Romanian is not due to a general learning weakness, but stems from systematic differences in the language of instruction, the adequacy of the curriculum, and access to the language itself. Thirdly, Mathematics results provide indirect support for interpreting achievement differences primarily as language-related rather than cognitive. Minority students' stable and competitive performance in mathematics compared to the national average reinforces the idea that, with appropriate curricular and methodological support, their overall performance can be improved. The Romanian language curriculum reform is therefore not only necessary but potentially effective, provided that the system adequately addresses the challenges of implementation. Mathematics results were used as an approximate comparison indicator because mathematics achievement tends to depend less directly on language proficiency than Romanian language examinations. This finding is consistent with the interpretation that weaker performance in Romanian is not primarily related to students' general abilities, but may reflect linguistic and instructional factors requiring further methodological development.

Figure 3. National Assessment Exam Results for 8th Grade Students in Minority-language Education over the Past Five Years



Source: Based on DATA.GOV.RO – own compilation and calculations (<https://data.gov.ro/organization/men>)

In non-Romanian language schools, the results achieved by 8th-grade students in their native language exams (e.g., Hungarian language and literature, Serbian language) have been consistently and significantly higher over the past five years than their results in Romanian language (see Figure 3). Hungarian-speaking students demonstrate substantial linguistic and reading comprehension competencies, as their average scores in native language examinations have remained between 7.49 and 7.93, which are higher than the average scores achieved by Romanian-speaking students in the Romanian language examination (6.81–7.32 between 2020 and 2024). These findings are difficult to reconcile with interpretations suggesting generally lower academic performance among minority students. The data show that they perform successfully when they can learn and be assessed in their own language.

Majority students are required to take two compulsory exams – Romanian language and literature, and mathematics – whereas minority students must take an additional third exam in their native language (e.g., Hungarian language and literature). This represents an additional assessment component, which should be taken into account when interpreting and comparing overall results between student groups. Moreover, weaker Romanian language results often pull down their overall average, creating a distorted picture of their actual abilities.

To illustrate this, let us conduct a hypothetical calculation. If a non-Romanian language student were assessed only in mathematics and native language (as majority students are in Romanian and mathematics), their combined average for these two subjects in 2024 would be: native language 7.70; mathematics 5.92; average = 6.81. In reality, however, due to the Romanian language exam, their overall average becomes $(7.70 + 5.91 + 5.92) / 3 = 6.51$. If minority students were assessed only in two subjects, their average results would be significantly higher. This suggests that part of the observed difference is not rooted in learning abilities, but is related to differences in the structure of the assessment system and the comparability of calculated averages.

The hypothetical calculation presented here serves only as an illustrative analytical exercise. It does not represent an estimation of actual educational outcomes under alternative assessment conditions. The scenario assumes that removing Romanian language examination requirements would not alter students' learning behaviour, motivation, or educational trajectories, which is unlikely in practice. Therefore, the calculation should be interpreted as a heuristic illustration of potential institutional assessment burden rather than as evidence of policy impact.

The available analyses reveal several key patterns. Hungarian language exam results are high and even show an upward trend, despite being an “additional” assessment. The weaker performance in Romanian is not an issue of general ability, but of the teaching/learning environment. Minority students are assessed in three subjects instead of two, which may affect the comparability of overall performance indicators across student groups. The strong Hungarian language results further support the interpretation that minority students possess advanced linguistic skills, critical reading comprehension, and argumentative abilities that are on par with those of majority students.

Evolution of Romanian Language Performance among Minority Students in the Bacalaureate Exams (2024–2025)

In 2025, for the first time, a student cohort graduated from high school having studied Romanian throughout their secondary education according to the new curriculum specifically designed for minority students. Comparing the 2025 results with the 2024 data makes it possible to assess the impact of the curriculum reform on the Romanian language bacalaureate performance of the first fully affected generation. The table below shows the change in the Romanian language bacalaureate pass rate between 2024 and 2025 in the three counties of Szeklerland Region (Harghita, Covasna, Mureş) as well as at the national level.

Table 7. Proportion of Students Successfully Passing the Bacalaureate in 2024 and 2025 in Szeklerland Region

Year	Counties			National average
	Harghita	Covasna	Mureş	
2024	61.0%	69.6%	73.7%	78.2%
2025	66.3%	71.2%	74.6%	76.5%

Source: Ministry of Education, Final Bacalaureate Examination Report, June 30, 2025
(https://www.edu.ro/sites/default/files/Dosar_presa_bacalaureat_junie_2025_rezultate_finale.pdf)

According to the data (Table 7), in 2025 the national pass rate dropped by 1.8 percentage points compared to the previous year (from 78.2% to 76.5%). In contrast, the Szeklerland Region counties all saw improvement. Harghita County recorded the largest increase, with the pass rate rising by 5.3 percentage points (from 61.0% to 66.3%). Covasna County saw a more moderate increase of 1.6 percentage points (from 69.6% to 71.2%), while Mureş County improved by 0.9 percentage points (from 73.7% to 74.6%). This divergent trend – national decline alongside regional growth – suggests that the introduction of the new curriculum for minority students may have had a positive effect on their Romanian language bacalaureate performance. The most notable improvement occurred in Harghita County, where the proportion of Hungarian native speakers is the highest and where Romanian language results have traditionally been among the lowest. This pattern is consistent with the hypothesis that differentiated curriculum structures may be associated with stronger gains in regions where linguistic disadvantages are more pronounced. Besides the three named Szeklerland Region, students in six other counties – including Cluj and Satu Mare – also achieved higher pass rates compared to the previous year.

Table 8. Failure Rates in the Romanian Language Bacalaureate by School Year (%)

Year	Harghita County	Covasna County
2024	49.52	34.37
2025	42.12	24.88
difference (percentage points)	7.40	9.49

Source: Author's own analysis and calculations based on <https://static.bacalaureat.edu.ro/2024/> and <https://static.bacalaureat.edu.ro/2025/>

The change in the proportion of students failing the Romanian language bacalaureate between 2024 and 2025 shows a clear improving trend in both Harghita and Covasna counties. In Harghita, the failure rate dropped from 49.52% in 2024 to 42.12% in 2025, representing an improvement of 7.40 percentage points. In Covasna, the change was even more marked: the failure rate fell from 34.37% to 24.88%, a decrease of 9.49 percentage points. This trend is particularly noteworthy because both counties saw significant improvement at a time when the national pass rate either stagnated or slightly declined. The observed trends are compatible with the assumption that the new curriculum may have contributed to improved outcomes. The improvement is especially important in Harghita, where the failure rate was previously among the highest due to the high proportion of Hungarian-speaking students and the resulting language disadvantage. In Covasna, where the failure rate was already lower, the nearly 10 percentage point drop further supports the reform's effectiveness. Nevertheless, it is important to note that in Harghita more than 40% of students still fail to achieve the minimum passing grade, indicating deeper systematic challenges in Romanian language education. Overall, the observed patterns are compatible with the interpretation that the curriculum changes may be associated with higher pass rates and lower failure rates, particularly in counties where language disadvantage has posed the greatest challenge.

Table 9. Failure Rates in the Romanian Language Baccalaureate by School Year and School Type (%)

County	Year	School type			
		Theoretical	Vocational	Technical	Total
Harghita	2024	16.59	35.35	67.11	49.52
	2025	10.78	22.81	60.36	42.12
	difference (percentage points)	5.81	12.54	6.75	7.40
Covasna	2024	10.04	29.84	57.46	34.37
	2025	5.47	21.29	43.30	24.88
	difference (percentage points)	4.57	8.55	14.16	9.49

Source: Author's own analysis and calculations based on <https://static.bacalaureat.edu.ro/2024/> and <https://static.bacalaureat.edu.ro/2025/>

A breakdown of Romanian language baccalaureate failure rates by school type between 2024 and 2025 shows significant improvement in both Harghita and Covasna counties, although the extent and pattern of change vary by school type. In Harghita, the failure rate in theoretical high schools fell from 16.59% in 2024 to 10.78% in 2025, a 5.81 percentage point improvement. Vocational tracks (arts, sports, pedagogical, theological, military) showed an even greater decrease, from 35.35% to 22.81% – a drop of 12.54 percentage points. The highest failure rates were recorded in technical high schools in both years – 67.11% in 2024 and 60.36% in 2025 – representing a 6.75 percentage point decrease. The overall county average improved by 7.40 percentage points, driven largely by progress in vocational education.

Covasna County shows a similar trend. In theoretical high schools, the failure rate dropped from 10.04% in 2024 to 5.47% in 2025 (a 4.57 percentage point improvement). In vocational education, the rate decreased from 29.84% to 21.29% (8.55 percentage points), while the most dramatic improvement occurred in technical high schools, where the failure rate dropped from 57.46% to 43.30%, a decrease of 14.16 percentage points. The overall county average improved by 9.49 percentage points, with the technical high school results contributing most to the gain.

The data suggest that the new Romanian language curriculum for minority students was associated with more favorable outcomes across all school type, although the scale of improvement varies. The most notable progress was observed in vocational education in Harghita and in technical education in Covasna. These differences may partly reflect institutional characteristics of local school systems in each county, the socio-economic background of students, and the practical implementation of language teaching (cf. Tódor et al., 2024). Given that technical high schools still have exceptionally high failure rates, further policy measures should focus primarily on these institutions, particularly by strengthening language skills development, targeted remedial programs, and exam preparation. Overall, the observed findings are consistent with the interpretation that the more differentiated approach to Romanian language baccalaureate examinations for minority students may be associated with more favorable outcomes, although persistent regional and school-type disparities suggest that language development remains shaped by broader systemic factors.

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the impact of curriculum and examination system reforms in Romanian minority education on Romanian language performance, with a particular focus on the results of the 8th-grade national assessments (2020-2024) and the baccalaureate exams (2024-2025), as well as on regional and school-type differences in these changes. Based on the literature review, the investigation was grounded in the hypothesis that curriculum adaptation and alignment of examination requirements can reduce the linguistic disadvantage of minority students and improve their educational progression, provided that the conditions for implementation (teacher training, availability of teaching materials, monitoring) are in place. Methodologically, the study employed descriptive, cohort-comparative, and ratio-comparative analyses based on aggregated administrative data, using mathematics performance as a control variable, and supplemented by “what-if” scenarios to enhance interpretability.

The findings indicate that the average scores in Romanian language at the 8th-grade assessments reveal a persistent gap between minority and Romanian native-speaking students (e.g., in 2020: 5.97 vs. 7.32, a difference of 1.35 points), while the differences in mathematics results are significantly smaller. This suggests

that the performance gap is primarily linguistic and contextual in nature rather than indicative of a general cognitive lag. The baccalaureate data show that examination outcomes following curriculum adaptation were associated with higher observed pass rates among minority examinees: for example, in Harghita County, the share of successful candidates rose from 61.0% to 66.3%; in Covasna and Mureș counties, similar though smaller improvements were observed. At the same time, the process reveals regional and school-type disparities: technical and vocational settings still display higher failure rates, suggesting that the benefits of adaptation do not manifest equally across contexts.

The findings provide varying degrees of support for the proposed hypotheses. H1 received partial support, as Romanian language performance showed fluctuations rather than linear improvement. H2 was more strongly supported by the relatively small differences in mathematics outcomes compared to Romanian language performance. H3 was supported by substantial regional and school-type variation. H4 received preliminary support through observed improvements in baccalaureate outcomes following curriculum–assessment alignment, although causal interpretation remains limited.

These findings provide preliminary empirical support for the interpretation that reducing the linguistic burden of curricular and examination requirements may be associated with improved educational outcomes among minority students. At the same time, they indicate that curricular and examination reforms alone are insufficient, as their effects depend strongly on implementation conditions, including teacher preparedness, textbook availability, school-level support, and monitoring.

The interpretation of trends should be approached with caution. The examined period includes several overlapping disruptions, including the COVID-19 pandemic, curriculum transition phases, and nationwide teacher strikes. These factors complicate the identification of clear causal relationships. Moreover, variations in exam difficulty across years are not systematically controlled for in the available data, which limits the ability to interpret year-to-year changes as definitive improvements or declines.

It is necessary to increase both the quantity and the targeted nature of teacher training and to ensure the availability of essential teaching resources. Special attention should be devoted to technical and vocational institutions, where targeted support (e.g., differentiated language development modules, flexible examination arrangements) is needed to reduce early dropout and high failure rates. Additionally, the establishment of an institutionalized annual monitoring system is recommended to track the short- and medium-term effects of reforms and enable fine-tuning of interventions. The study concludes that curriculum and examination adaptations may contribute to reducing disadvantages arising from the linguistic load on minority students and increase baccalaureate success rates. However, to ensure the full effectiveness of these reforms, it is essential to enhance pedagogical capacity, extend targeted support to more disadvantaged school types, and implement system-level monitoring alongside further individual-level impact evaluations. These findings highlight that differences in performance indicators should be interpreted in light of assessment-related characteristics of the examination system, rather than solely as differences in student ability.

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