

Received: 14.10.2025
Revised: 04.12.2025
Accepted: 15.12.2025
Published: 19.12.2025

Romanian education under austerity: a critical discourse analysis of crisis talks and policy legitimization

Robert-Alexandru AVRAM*

Abstract

This paper examines how austerity measures adopted in the Romanian educational system, in 2025, are discursively constructed through crisis talk - narratives that frame cuts and policy modifications as both inevitable and morally responsible. This research uses the critical discourse analysis method to analyse a corpus consisting of political speeches, public reactions of relevant stakeholders and legislative texts to identify hidden narratives and rhetorical strategies employed by the decision-makers throughout the summer of 2025, that are serving as a means of normalizing budgetary restrictions applied for the educational sector. The analysis highlights how governmental actors try to legitimize austerity as both inevitable and morally responsible, presenting sacrifice as a duty that must be shared collectively by all members of the society. Meanwhile, counter-discourses voiced by trade unions, NGOs, and representatives of students emphasize the consequences of the measures, social harm, erosion of trust, and the loss of dignity for teachers and students.

Findings of this study show that austerity in Romanian education is legitimized less through fiscal reasoning and more through a moralized scarcity discourse that presents solidarity, inevitability, and collective duty as common-sense truths. The paper represents a contribution to research on neoliberal education policies by demonstrating that austerity operates as a discursive mode of governance—one that defines what is feasible, narrows policy alternatives, and justifies resource redistribution in the name of efficiency, while also addressing a gap in the research that does not provide insights into the in-depth effects of austerity in education, besides the economic results.

Keywords: Romania, austerity, education, policy legitimization, discourse

* Student, University of Bucharest – Department of Sociology, robert-alexandru.avram@s.unibuc.ro



Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the economic state of the world, alongside with significant governmental and social changes worldwide stood at the core of a significant shift in the political and economic discourse worldwide – and Romania could not have avoided these effects. In response to the financial crisis, generated not only by the pandemic, but also by the precarious style of spending public resources for years, austerity measures became a part of the citizens' lives. However, this is not new, as austerity is proven to be a classical response of the Romanian authorities faced with economic stagnation. historical way of responding to economic stagnation in Romania. These measures, exactly like the ones adopted by in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, triggered protests against them and/or against the governments, because the proposed intervention packages did not succeed in persuading citizens to accept them (Offe, 2013). This is why, throughout this paper, we are not referring to austerity just as a set of fiscal measures – cuts, wage freezes, tax increases – but as a true hegemonic and morally charged political discourse (Kelsey et al., 2019). This paper argues that this unique context of profound public distrust, along with protests organized by trade unions forced the officials to use a defensive, even aggressive at certain times, discourse and linguistic strategies to secure legitimacy for deeply unpopular measures.

Austerity began to be again present in Romania during the summer of 2025, after the Bolojan Government was sworn in. This happened after a year that felt, for the Romanians, like a true rollercoaster: 2024 started as a year of elections – European, parliamentary, presidential and local elections –, which created the platform for politicians to talk about economic growth, results of investments and plan for a more sustainable and disciplined fiscal plan. However, everything ended with a “political fiasco” (Cistelecan et al., 2025), because of the cancellation of the presidential elections. This was a turnover point for the Romanian society, which had the power to divide people and to significantly reduce the trust in the public authorities, which is a key pillar in the public reactions against the austerity measures. Therefore, the newly invested Government had to face significant critiques and public protests against their economic recovery plan that consisted of several austerity measures, one of the main reason also being the fact that the first austerity package targeted the education system, presented by all actors part of the Government as being a key priority for state's interventions and investments.. In line with how the existing literature on austerity discourse described the way in which such fiscal policies are presented, the Government tried to justify their fiscal choices by trying to present austerity as a prerequisite for economic growth, even though it was hard to bring in front of the population strong evidence of how consumption and investments can be seen as growing in the foreseeable future (Clarke & Newman, 2012). Moreover, there are studies that show how austerity measures are having much more contractionary effects rather than supporting the expansion of the economy (Guajardo et. al, 2011).

The imposition of the austerity program developed by the Bolojan Government was framed as a necessity to address the dangerous budgetary deficit, which reached more than 9% of the GDP in 2024. This was a result of a lack of budgetary discipline over the years and, as such, it triggered urgent pressure for fiscal consolidation. Because a public consensus on the measures was impossible, the Government decided to adopt the fiscal measures through an extraordinary procedure – the Government took responsibility over the projects in front of the Parliament, which means that, according to the Constitution, if no motion to dismiss the Government is passed by both chambers, the measures are automatically translated into law without the normal parliamentary debate procedures and voting. There were motions proposed by the opposition to dismiss the Government, accusing lack of transparency and alleged violation of constitutional procedures, but the Parliament rejected them, after the vote of the majority of its members.

Worldwide, the austerity-oriented measures that are specific to neoliberal policies made the system enter into a vicious circle, as Mavelli (2019) shows – governments are trying more and more to respond to social and economic crisis produced by neoliberal policies with nothing other than more neoliberal economic policies that are having huge risks for the vast majority of people, and this is also the case of Romania. Consistent with neoliberal patterns across Europe, the measures imposed by the Government led by Ilie Bolojan disproportionately affected the public sector, with the education system being identified as one of the first site of budgetary reduction. Some of the measures included in the fiscal package included: cuts in the hourly fees for teaching, increased workload for directors, inspectors and teachers, forced mergers of hundreds of schools across Romania, especially in rural areas, reduction in income for some categories of teachers and other employees from the education system (as a result of a reduction in the value of certain bonuses) and cuts in the budget for scholarships and other social assistance programs, without taking into account that the insufficient financing of the educational system is seen as one of the root causes of low educational achievements for students (OECD, 2025; Roman & Bulat, 2025). However, these cuts were presented as reforms aimed at optimizing the system.

Trade unions, associations of students, associations of parents and other visible and relevant NGOs quickly mobilize against the measures, framing them as unjust, socially harmful. As we will see further in the analysis, their discourse emphasized that government's austerity plans punished ordinary citizens, while leaving, at that moment, untouched some of the "black holes" in the public finance. These actors organized strikes and protests not only in Bucharest, but also in other big cities, with slogans directly connecting austerity to the erosion of dignity in the educational system.

The research design is guided by two interlinked research questions that oriented every step of the process, from the setting of the theoretical framework to the coding procedure and text selection. First, how is austerity in education discursively constructed, legitimized and contested in Romanian public discourse surrounding the measures included in Law 141/2025? This is a question that seeks to unpack both

rhetorical strategies employed by the speakers and legitimization techniques through which the authorities framed austerity as necessary, while simultaneously analysing how different stakeholders created counter-discourses. Second, how are education, teachers and students influenced by the austerity discourse? Having this question in mind, the representational dimension of discourse can be addressed, exploring the way in which not only the whole system, but also the stakeholders are perceived by the ones who impose the measures. Together, these questions ensure that the analysis goes beyond the identification of linguistic patterns to reveal the deeper ideological functions and social implications of austerity discourse.

Although austerity has been widely analyzed, existing research has paid less attention to the discursive strategies through which austerity measures in education are legitimized, particularly in Central and Eastern European contexts marked by political instability and low institutional trust. Much of the literature focuses on the economic consequences of budget cuts or the political strategies that accompany them, leaving underexplored the ways in which language constructs austerity as necessary, moral, or inevitable. This gap is also present in Romania, where austerity measures were introduced rapidly and amid overlapping crises, disproportionately affecting the pre-university education and, as a consequence, the part of the education system that enco

Theoretical framework

Discourse has triggered a lot of interest from scholars in the last decades, as it is seen not only as a mere language or text, but as a form of social practice that both reflects and actively constructs our reality, by outlining the dialectical relationship between language and society (Bhatia et al., 2008; Fairclough, 1995). One of the most debated conceptualizations of discourse was made by Michel Foucault, who described discourse as a system of knowledge, truth and power that shapes what can be said – explicitly or not – and thought in a society (Foucault, 2012). Similar interpretations were taken further by other researchers in different strings of thought (see Ball, 1993; Powers, 2007), while other scholars see discourse as a tool of legitimization and contestation of ideas, as it provides the necessary frames through which ideas can be interpreted (Schmidt, 2008) and used in different social interactions. Furthermore, power relations identified through discourse analysis show that discursive strategies can represent a mechanism for perpetuating inequalities, as the elites are the ones who control access to public mass communication (Van Dijk, 1993). Within Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), discourse is understood as a socially situated form of meaning-making that both reflects and shapes wider social structures, power relations, and institutional practices. CDA views discourse not as a neutral medium but as a constitutive force that organizes social reality by privileging certain interpretations over others. It assumes a dialectical relationship between discursive and extra-discursive dimensions: language is shaped by material and institutional conditions, yet it also contributes to reproducing or

transforming them. Importantly, CDA carries an emancipatory dimension, seeking to reveal how dominant discourses naturalize particular social arrangements and foreclose alternative imaginaries.

As such, discourse is not merely a reflection of power but a site where power is exercised through the control of knowledge, access, and interpretive frames, as argued also by Van Dijk (2008). This perspective draws attention to whose voices are amplified in public debates and whose perspectives are marginalized or rendered unintelligible. In the context of this study, the dominance of governmental actors in shaping public narratives reflects not only institutional power but also their privileged position in defining what counts as rational, necessary, or responsible policy. This ideological function of discourse is particularly relevant in times of crisis, when claims to expertise and authority gain amplified legitimacy.

These perspectives enrich the understanding of discourse, but they also derive from distinct intellectual traditions that operate with different assumptions about power, agency, and the stability of meaning. Poststructural approaches, inspired from Foucault, emphasize how discourse produces subjects and governs what can be known or thought, whereas Critical Discourse Analysis places greater emphasis on how discourse is embedded in institutional structures and used to reproduce or challenge inequalities. These understandings can be very relevant if being linked, because without oversimplifying their differences, it creates a theoretical framework that is capable of generating a nuanced understanding of the implications of austerity discourse, especially in regards with the fluidity of discourse and its influence on government practices.

Beyond these definitions, discourse has been studied by scholars from different areas: sociology, political science, anthropology, linguistics, economics, communication sciences, each one of these being able to offer a different angle for analysing discourse and discursive strategies. This interdisciplinary approach is explained by the literature that outlines how discourse is embedded in existent institutions and social structures, but also has the potential to reshape them (Fairclough, 2013). The mutual relationship makes discourse, in the case of this paper, a key object of study, as the object of this paper is the financial measures adopted by the authorities in Romania. Discourse analysis is also a very commonly used method of study in the field of economics and economic policies, as scholars found that discourse has the potential to construct “*economic imaginaries*” (Jessop, 2010) that are used to justify or support public policies.

Crisis talk refers to the discursive process through which political and institutional actors construct a situation as exceptional, threatening, and urgent, thereby legitimizing rapid or extraordinary interventions. Recent scholars emphasize that crises do not simply exist “out there” but become politically meaningful through the narratives that define their causes, responsible agents, and acceptable solutions (Moffitt, 2016). Crisis talk operates, in the view of this paper, by framing structural problems as immediate emergencies, by amplifying perceptions of risk, and by simplifying complex socio-

economic dynamics into narratives of threat and response that need to be addressed by public authorities.

A more fine-grained understanding of how crisis narratives function within legitimation requires turning to Fairclough and Fairclough's (2012) *Political Discourse Analysis*, which offers important insights into how arguments for action are discursively constructed. Their framework highlights that political actors frequently mobilize crisis and failure not merely as descriptive categories, but as justificatory resources that create a sense of necessity, urgency, and moral obligation. In this model, crises are often attributed to non-systemic causes—such as the moral, managerial, or intellectual failings of particular actors—thereby generating a moralized tone that positions corrective action as the only responsible course available. This perspective is particularly relevant for interpreting Romanian austerity discourse, where governmental actors framed the budget deficit as the outcome of unsustainable or irresponsible decisions, and where appeals to rationality, decency, and duty were used to legitimize immediate fiscal intervention.

However, discourse does not refer only to verbal communications. A comprehensive analysis focusing on discursive strategies should also interact with texts that, from a policy perspective, for example, can offer significant insights into which (and even why) specific parts of policy problems, goals and results are being addressed directly, and which are being avoided (Saarinen, 2008).

Van Leeuwen's (2007) typology of legitimation, which distinguishes between authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis. These strategies illustrate how actors justify social practices by invoking authority, ethical values, technical necessity, or narrative coherence. This framework is particularly insightful for understanding austerity discourse, where moral evaluations ("responsibility," "decency"), rationalizations ("efficiency," "optimization"), and appeals to inevitability operate simultaneously to construct austerity as the only viable response to crisis.

To uncover the discursive strategies through which the Government of Romania attempted to legitimize austerity measures and the means by which different stakeholders resisted, this paper adopts Fairclough's framework for Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995, 2013). According to him, CDA operates at the intersection of language and society, providing links between micro-level (linguistic strategies) and macro-level (social structures, institutions). This is why his technique of CDA offers researchers an opportunity to understand not only the internal mechanics of language, in its all forms and shapes, but also the broader ideological functions discourse can perform. Later evolutions in literature showed in order to properly understand discourse and to apply a correct CDA technique, historical and social context must be taken also into account because of the legacies and institutional memory that has an impact on the discursive strategies employed (Reisigl, 2018).

Literature on austerity has repeatedly demonstrated to us that discourse is one of the key instruments through which the leaders are trying to legitimize their measures.

Blyth (2015) showed how austerity narratives that portrayed the fiscal measures as being normal and effective became dominant in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, despite limited empirical or factual evidence of efficiency. Austerity discourses rely heavily on moralized language, as a general characteristic, framing the need of citizens to *tighten their belt* while waiting for the government to complete their protective role in relation with the state economy (Kelsey et al., 2019). Further studies concentrating on the austerity measures adopted by the Member States of the European Union suggested that after the widespread of the austerity measures in Europe, the rhetoric of the national authorities is linked, in an attempt to legitimize their measures, with appeals to the need of European integration and modernization, trying to make fiscal discipline appear as a mandatory step toward respecting the rules and regulations of the European Union (Afonso et al., 2015; Ladi & Tsarouhas, 2014).

Despite the breadth of scholarship engaging with discourse, legitimacy, and crisis rhetoric, relatively little research has examined how austerity in education is discursively constructed in contexts such as Romania, where institutional fragility and contested reforms make rhetorical strategies especially salient. This study positions itself within this gap by analysing austerity as a discursive mode of governance, focusing on how different actors construct necessity, responsibility, and moral duty in order to legitimize or challenge policy measures. Through this lens, the paper seeks to connect broader debates on neoliberal governance with the micro-level discursive practices.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives create a multidimensional framework for analysing austerity discourse, because it helps this paper to approach austerity not solely as an economic intervention but as a discursive project whose legitimacy and effects emerge through ongoing struggles over meaning.

Methodology

From a methodological perspective, this paper adopts qualitative research designed rooted, as mentioned above, in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) techniques, that is found to be an efficient method to understand links between “*language and social configuration of education*” (Bukhari & Xiaoyang, 2013). Rather than treating austerity solely as a set of economic measures, this approach examines austerity as a hegemonic discourse: a system of ideas, frames, and rhetorical strategies that construct social reality and justify controversial policy interventions. By applying this method, this study will explore how the Romanian Government and other relevant stakeholders framed austerity in 2025, in a context marked by institutional instability and public distrust. The analysis will follow Fairclough’s (1995) model, which involves: (a) textual analysis, in order to identify linguistic features and their impact; and (b) Discursive practice, that examines how discourse is produced, delivered and challenged.

However, even though Fairclough’s model also includes references to social practice, for the scope of this paper, the analysis will focus only on textual and

discursive practices, leaving the broader dimension of social practice for a possible future research.

The empirical material for this study was collected from three categories of sources, as follows: (a) The austerity legislation affecting the education system in Romania: Law no. 141/2025; (b) Governmental discourses: parts of official speeches delivered by Prime Minister Ilie Bolojan, Minister of Education and Research Daniel David and other officials on this matter; press releases from the Ministry of Education and Research; and (c) Counter-discourses: parts of public statements and press releases from trade unions, students'/parents' associations.

In order for a material to be included in the analysed corpus, it had to respect the following criteria: timeframe (June-August 2025, the period immediately following the debates and adoption of the austerity measures); relevance (fragments of texts and speeches included are referring explicitly to austerity, fiscal consolidation, education cuts or public protests triggered by the measures proposed by the Government); and visibility (texts and speeches included have to be delivered by individuals/organization with a significant public outreach because of their positions/relevance/activity in the education system). It is important to note that the corpus is composed mostly of fragments of speeches/texts, as not the entire content of the speeches and/or legislation were included, because most of them were not referring exclusively to the financial measures concerning the education sector.

The resulting corpus consists of 8 elements, which were archived and coded systematically. Therefore, this article focuses rather on interpretive depth over breadth. The objective is to understand in detail, as much as possible, how the Romanian Government discursively constructed what I call *education under austerity*, and how other relevant stakeholders resisted, reframed or even unconsciously or indirectly legitimized the measures.

The texts were chosen to capture a clear overview of the heated debates on the austerity measures implemented in the educational sector, with texts being selected from every relevant stakeholders involved in these discussions, giving it a heterogenous character in terms of both actor type and textual source. Thus, Table 1 is beyond descriptive – it provides this paper with the analytical foundation for the coding scheme and interpretation that will be detailed below.

Furthermore, the next step in this analysis was to develop a concise and easy-to-follow coding scheme that can help one capture recurring discursive strategies employed by different stakeholders. I chose to develop a coding scheme – detailed in Table 2 – that does not only take into account linguistic features, but one that is developed from the corpus itself and that identifies those properties of the texts that are used to frame problems in a certain way, legitimize certain decisions and policies and construct reality, and that can also outline the characteristics of the counter-discourses. Each code will be defined by (1) its meaning, (2) its discursive function, (3) linguistic indicators, (4) corpus correspondent examples, (5) the speaker who may employ a specific text.

Table 1 presents an overview of the corpus:

Table 1

Overview of corpus

<i>ID</i>	<i>Author/Source</i>	<i>Role/Affiliation</i>	<i>Type of text</i>	<i>Context</i>	<i>Date</i>
1	Anton HADĂR	President – Alma Mater Trade Union	Declaration (answer to journalists' question)	Debate on fiscal measures	31.07.2025
2	FSLI, FSESH, FNSAM	Joint Trade Unions	Official press release ¹	Contestation of the fiscal measures, request for minister's resignation	29.07.2025
3	Daniel DAVID	Minister of Education and Research	Official press release ²	Crisis talk, explanation of state's inability to cover <i>unstable increases</i> of specific measures	11.07.2025
4	Daniel DAVID	Minister of Education and Research	Official press release ³	Crisis talk, framing education as part of the root causes of the deficit	07.07.2025
5	Ilie BOLOJAN	Prime Minister	Declaration (answer to journalists' question)	Framing scholarships and support measures for students as <i>unstable</i>	02.07.2025
6	Law no. 141/2025	The 1 st legislative package implementing austerity measures	Official legal text – justification note ⁴	Explanation of the necessity of austerity measures: to avoid <i>blockage</i> , return to sustainability	25.07.2025
7	Ovidiu CÎMPEAN	Member of the Parliament	Facebook post ⁵	Call for constructive dialogues and <i>reasoning</i>	12.08.2025
8	Protest signs made by students	Students (protesters from the Romanian National Alliance of Students' Organizations)	Public/Visual text ⁶	Requests for finance increase for education, requests for cancelling Law 141/2025 and the austerity measures, comparisons with other public spendings	July-August 2025

7

¹ Joint press release available at <https://www.fsespiruharet.ro/comunicat-comun-domnule-ministru-faceti-ungest-onorabil-si-prezentati-va-demisia/>

² Press release available at https://www.edu.ro/press_rel_84_2025

³ Press release available at https://www.edu.ro/press_rel_81_2025

⁴ Justification note available at <https://www.cdep.ro/proiecte/2025/200/30/0/em230.pdf>

⁵ Facebook post available at https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid0mbQet8fRNgiFrPo3dkNg1fgn4NVazLdYoS2vpazWxpYStUezrt1FUwsfVQjR6Zd1l&id=100009054817941

⁶ Photos available at <https://www.facebook.com/anosr.ro/posts/pfbid02pNvq9RNqAEEjrNm8MjdsqvZFr1q5MozvAFTvpTSJ4xGCWdX1V7MbEMcd5Kdjh6jVl>

Table 2
Coding scheme

<i>Code</i>	<i>Label</i>	<i>Explanation</i>	<i>Discursive function</i>	<i>Linguistic indicator</i>	<i>Example</i>	<i>Typical speakers</i>
SCAR	Scarcity + appeal to rationality, decency	Discourse that frames austerity as unavoidable due to the financial scarcity and that makes constant appeals to rationality and decency	Justification of austerity measures by normalizing budgetary limitations	“unsustainable”, “the country cannot afford”, “rationality and decency”	“These measures were taken in a context governed by the need of rationality and decency” (Minister of Education and Research)	Government officials
SOL	Solidarity, collective duty	Appeals to collective sacrifices	Encourages compliance with the measures	“together”, “solidarity”	“We can only exit this scenario together!” (Minister of Education and Research)	Government officials
EFF	Efficiency	Justifies austerity as a technical optimization of public finance spending	Normalizes cuts as measures to optimize and, in the end, develop the financial situation of the country	“efficiency”, “optimization”	“Education had a role that we need to correct through efficiency measures” (Minister of Education and Research)	Government officials
THR	Threat/consequence	Uses threats and warnings of severe consequences that may happen if people do not accept the austerity measures	Pressures the society into accepting the measures	“collapse”, “blockage”, “difficulty in paying salaries”	“To avoid a blockage there is a need of immediate action” (L141/2025)	Both sides

Findings & discussions

This section will present the results of the CDA technique applied for this research. The coding scheme will serve also as a framework for organizing the discussion about the findings. Each discursive category will be discussed here in turn.

A. Scarcity

An important finding of this study is the constant use of scarcity-related discourses that are constantly used in pairs with constant references to either rationality or decency, as the mean to legitimize the austerity measures implemented in the education system in 2025. The officials presented the measures so that they can frame austerity as the only rational response to the financial burden of the state that has already been described as exceptional and, most importantly, dangerous by the authorities. From the point of view of hidden meaning, I identify a dual function of this framing: on the first hand, it constructs the financial scarcity as a reality that cannot be controlled through political agency, so even if the politicians would want to engage in taking measures that can support the development of the economy, they would not be able to. On the other hand, it moralizes compliance – acceptance of scarcity and austerity measures is presented as

the only *decent* and *responsible* path the state can take. With this mind, the government is trying to normalize austerity and to move it from the realm of a heavily contested policy in the sphere of common sense.

The discourse of scarcity has been evident in the words of Minister Daniel David (ID 4) and in the Prime Minister Bolojan's reactions (ID 5), who described the system as being burdened by unsustainable spendings throughout the years, suggesting that the education system contributed to the financial crisis in which the state is in.

Although it is unpleasant to acknowledge, in the case of the huge budget deficit of 2025—which has brought us into this crisis and now exposes us to this risk—it must be recognized that education also played a role, especially through the unsustainable increases in spending on human resources and scholarship funds, aspects that must now be corrected through efficiency measures, thereby helping both the country and our own system. (ID 4)

Another aspect concerns the reform of scholarships. I know this is not a popular issue, but we must once again be fair. In recent years, as I have already mentioned, there has been an unsustainable increase in scholarships. It is a very large amount that we simply cannot afford. We no longer have a clear understanding of what merit truly means (ID 5)

The recurrent usage of terms and phrases like “*unsustainable*” or “*cannot be sustained*” is, for the authorities, a way to achieve closure in the financial crisis: it limits alternative solutions by presenting their policies as the only acceptable path, an inescapable one. The moral value is given to austerity measures by Minister Daniel David's words, who described the fiscal package as:

These measures were taken in a context shaped by (1) rationality – to remain within the limits of certain European benchmarks, and (2) decency – what the country can currently afford in a time of crisis, with the financial resources eventually being returned to the system (ID 4)

This combination of functions for these speeches and texts illustrates the interplay Fairclough presented between rationalization (in this case, legitimizing through necessity) and moral evaluation (in this case, legitimizing through ethical judgement). With this in mind, it is clear that it is not enough to see austerity as financially necessary; it also must be perceived as ethically and morally correct by the citizens, who are transformed into moral subjects.

Moreover, the Law no. 141/2025, the first fiscal package adopted by Bolojan Government and the one that introduces the austerity measures in education is itself constructing the financial reality in which the measures are taken in an inescapable context and that the only way to avoid a blockage of the system is to accept these measures (ID 6). In this case, the crisis is constructed in such a severe and dramatic

manner that the normal and democratic parliamentary process has to be avoided in order to impose the law. The whole text removes space for negotiation (as it mentioned constantly that the law should be imposed immediately), embedding scarcity in the legal framework of Romania. This text goes in line with Jessop's (2010) views on *economic imaginaries* – scarcity, in the case of the Romanian education, becomes institutionalized as the lens through which policies are understood and implemented and, also, becomes a form of governance in the system.

Of course, there are counter-discourses that are challenging this narrative employed by the authorities. Student protesters, gathered in the biggest university cities in Romania, reframed scarcity by linking its effects with the living reality of a student:

For you it's a number. For me it's rent; You have a budget, we have problems;
The state educates just if it doesn't cost; If the Government fails, the students
have to pay. (ID 8)

By looking at scarcity through the lens of those who are affected by it, the students are able to disrupt the economic abstraction of the government's discourse, as they are emphasizing the human and social costs of austerity measures. Unions too, through their public statements, are denouncing scarcity talk as a disruptive weapon that will generate important consequences for the education system. Through their communication, all counterparties are trying to suggest that a state in which investments in education are *unaffordable* is a state that sabotages its future and the lives of its citizens.

However, a more careful reading of the texts included in the corpus underlines an important aspect, that reveals how not all counter-discourses can fully escape the hegemonic logic that governs austerity. In the corpus, there is included a public statement (ID 1) made by Anton Hadăr, the leader of Alma Mater Trade Union, the representative union for university teachers, that states:

I came here today with a student from Politehnica University, who said that he wants to stand next to teachers, to express his anger that he will not receive a scholarship during the summer vacation anymore. Thus, these measures are taken in a rush, without proper thinking, they did not talk with us about them. It is true, when it comes to pre-university students, the budget for their scholarships was higher, a cut was needed. (ID 1)

Hadăr's intervention exemplifies very well this scenario: while criticizing the Government for the cuts done in the higher education budget and because the measures were imposed without proper consultation, he indirectly (or unconsciously) legitimizes the cuts that were made in the pre-university education budget, which represented, ironically, the bigger "savings" source. His statement, even though it is framed like resistance, very effectively reproduces the logic of scarcity, by accepting that cuts are necessary, only if we relocate the target of the measures. This is why this statement can be easily transformed from a critical one to one that incidentally legitimizes the government's measures: his attempt to redirect the cuts from to university students to

the pre-university ones reflects an internalization of austerity as being inevitable, which can serve as a source for a new discussion: is, in fact, the unions' response a critique to austerity itself, or it is a question of distribution rather than a principle, as his statement seems to be weakening their radical view on the measures?

This finding complicates the binary and apparently simple relationship between government legitimization vs. union opposition, as it demonstrates how austerity has the power to colonize discussions and discursive fields, shaping the language that is used and dividing people into. What emerges from this discussion is not only a clash between pro-austerity and anti-austerity, but it is a very complicated field, a layered discursive terrain, in which the government narrative has the potential to dominate discursive strategies and languages to the point in which its premises can infiltrate even in the discourses of the opponents.

This dynamic resonates with discussions of discursive hegemony, where dominant narratives colonize the language of their opponents and narrow the horizon of alternative imaginaries (Fairclough, 1995; Gramsci, 1971; van Dijk, 2008). The partial uptake of scarcity framing within union discourse thus illustrates how austerity discourse operates hegemonically by shaping the very terms through which policies are being justified even though there is visible resistance from the public.

B. Solidarity and collective duty

Scarcity discourse employed by Government does not only justify it as being rational and decent, but it also does often and constant appeals to social solidarity in countering the effects of the financial crisis, in order to transform unpopular measures in a collective duty for each and everyone. The texts selected in the corpus are showing how the speakers are often talking about togetherness, sacrifice and responsibility in order to try and change the widespread image of austerity as being imposed from the elites, as it is outlined also in Offe's work (2013) and to outline how the acceptance of the measures is a shared project, in which every citizen has to carry their part of the burden if they do not want the whole system to fail. At the same time, solidarity is mobilized in order to diffuse blame, because by presenting austerity as a collective responsibility, structural inequalities of austerity measures are blurred.

Minister Daniel David repeatedly expressed this explicitly when mentioning that the only way out of the financial crisis is by working and staying together (ID 4). In this case, the pronoun *we* are a core component of the text, which dissolves the asymmetry and barriers that appear between authorities and citizens and portrays the actions as being a normal response to a challenge that affects everyone and that requires collective action:

We are living in a crisis situation that none of us wanted. A situation from which we can only get out together, through solidarity and with rational and decent actions. We do it for ourselves but, above all, for the future of our children. (ID 4)

A similar discourse strategy was also employed by a Member of the Parliament, Ovidiu Cîmpean (ID 7), that was publicly constructing the austerity package as a necessity that should be based on collective responsibility and on constructive dialogue, as a response to the trade unions' request for the Minister of Education to resign and abolish the provisions of the Law 141/2025:

Children's interest must come first!

In recent days, statements have appeared from some education union leaders regarding the possibility of blocking the start of the new school year. I understand the discontent and challenges faced by teachers, but I strongly believe that students should not become hostages of conflicts.

Romania is going through a difficult period, which requires balance and responsibility from everyone. The real problems of education are solved through constructive dialogue, not through ultimatums.

I appeal to reason let's put the children's interest first and find together solutions that improve the Romanian school, without sacrificing the beginning of the school year. (ID 7)

Moreover, it is interesting to see the link that the Minister explains between the present actions and the intergenerational results for the future of children (ID 4). This is a strategy that can create a moral trap: opposing austerity can mean opposing the wellbeing of children, endangering collective future. The literature on this matter describes these actions as being part of the moral justification and evaluation mechanisms that different actors use when they are trying to legitimize their actions through appeals to higher moral values, that can shift the people's attention from the technicalities and immediate consequences that a policy might have. (Van Leeuwen, 2008). However, this argument is in direct opposition to what the protesters (both students and teachers) are trying to outline – the fact that the education system demands increased financing to deliver quality education (slogan on this matter present in ID 8), which shows how intergenerational ethics are used by both sides, but with different meaning, depending on the interest and final objective.

The counter-discourses selected in the corpus reveal a contradictory nature of solidarity. For the affected stakeholders, collective solidarity does not mean compliance with the austerity package imposed by the Government, but collective protests and resistance against it. Their actions and their protests slogans (ID 8) show how the opposing stakeholders are trying to outline the unequal exposure to these measures and that, even if the Government presents austerity as a collective sacrifice, the consequences are disproportionally supported by certain categories of citizens – in our case, students and teachers. This is why solidarity gains a dual understanding: the same word is used by authorities to justify their actions to, as it is said, protect the economy, and by unions and

students to legitimize resistance to, as they say, protect the dignity and rights of the affected categories.

These dynamics illustrate the productive tension between discursive agency and structural constraints emphasized in both discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2008) and CDA. Government actors draw on solidarity as a moralizing resource to build consent, a strategy that aligns with N. Fairclough and I. Fairclough's (2012) argument that appeals to shared values often serve as justificatory premises for political action. Yet, the counter-discourses demonstrate that such moral vocabularies are never fully controllable. Teachers and students re-signify solidarity not as compliance but as collective resistance, challenging the state's monopoly over moral interpretation. This contestation underscores Foucault's insight that where power circulates, so does resistance; solidarity becomes a site of struggle in which competing actors vie to define the legitimate meaning of collective responsibility.

C. Efficiency

Another key discourse identified in the crisis talk was the efficiency discourse, that is reframing austerity as a rational optimization and modernization of public spending habits, as austerity is not presented as a set of budget cuts, but much rather as a way to optimize the well-functioning of the education system, to respect international benchmarks. In this case, this kind of discourse is portrayed as a technical adjustment, avoiding disclosing its political characteristics.

The Government officials articulated this type of communication when they argued that the financial measures were designed as correction measures:

While it is not pleasant to admit, the massive budget deficit of 2025—which has led us into this crisis and exposed us to the current risks—must also be seen as partly resulting from education, through the unsustainable increases in personnel expenditures and scholarship funds. These are issues that now need to be corrected through efficiency measures, thereby supporting both the country and the education system itself. (ID 4)

In this scenario, the word *correcting* does not imply an innovative approach, but much rather an approach that tries to mitigate the financial risks, in order to return the system to its proper and historic balance that was present before the unsustainable funding increases suggested by the authorities. The speakers are using a much more technical vocabulary, similar to the ones used by the private sector (optimization, correction, efficiency etc.), that is truly impersonal and tries to strip austerity of its social costs, presenting it just as a matter of macroeconomic debates.

Yet the counter-discourses reveal that efficiency is a deeply contested narrative, by claiming that austerity undermines the very efficiency that the Government is trying to promote, stating that increasing workload, reducing bonuses and social supports may reduce the performance of the system in the long run. Additionally, students are trying to

outline one possible hidden inefficiency of austerity, that shows how budget reallocations prioritize the elites:

Education is a priority, but after special pensions (ID 8)

The above slogan is used by the students that are protesting against the austerity measures to outline that the budget reallocations are only done in disadvantaged sectors and does not take into account, for example, judges and prosecutors, whose highly debated pensions value was not touched through the fiscal package. This strategy of the students can be a good instrument to imply that the efficiency claim of the Government is much rather just a rhetorical mask for making political choices about who should be impacted by fiscal measures.

Furthermore, an important critique for the efficiency claimed by the Government is the joint press release of the Trade Unions of teachers (ID 2). In a long, critical and firm text, the teachers' representatives are exemplifying the impact the so-called optimization measures have on the day-to-day activities of the teachers and of the schools. The press release ends with their request for the Minister of Education and Research to resign and to abolish the Law 141/2025:

Showing cynicism and irresponsibility, the Bolojan Government is causing an unprecedented crisis in education in the last 35 years, given that these measures practically mean the reorganization of a good part of pre-university education, in a period of about a month.

The serious thing is that all these measures were taken, from the pen, without making, as was natural, an impact study.

The Minister of Education and Research, Mr. Daniel David, should have had the strength, to warn the Prime Minister of the Romanian Government, Mr. Ilie Bolojan, that the education system is a complex one, and its employees are not just simple inventory objects, but are human beings who cannot be discredited and humiliated, as the governors are doing now. (ID 2)

This analysis shows how the efficiency discourse can be a weapon used to present contested political decisions as objective necessities that are meant not to sacrifice certain social categories, but to come in the help of the citizens, by increasing the efficiency of the state and its funding distribution. Interpreted through the lens of CDA, the efficiency discourse reflects a classic case of technocratic depoliticization. By framing austerity as "correction" or "optimization," governmental actors translate political decisions into seemingly neutral administrative imperatives, exemplifying what Fairclough (1995) terms the "technologization of discourse." Such framing suppresses ethical and distributive concerns and privileges managerial rationality—thereby reinforcing neoliberal logics of governance described in the austerity literature (Blyth, 2015; Kelsey et al., 2019 etc.). The counter-discourses, which expose the embodied consequences of these measures for teachers and students, reintroduce precisely the

social relations and power asymmetries that the efficiency narrative seeks to erase. This struggle over what “efficiency” means reveals austerity as not merely a fiscal doctrine but a discursive project that reshapes institutional priorities and hierarchies.

D. Threats and consequences

A final discursive strategy central to the austerity debate identified in this research is the use of threats and consequences to justify the necessity of the policies implemented, which is meant to discipline both citizens and institutions into compliance. By using such strategies, the Government implies that there is no other way to avoid economic collapse and blockage if their policies are not endorsed, which can generate fear and amplify tension in society, as the main goal of this discourse is to position cuts as a lesser evil compared to a systemic breakdown.

The most significant example of this discursive strategy is the part related to the education system in the justification note of Law no. 141/2025:

Considering the fact that in order to avoid a blockage of the education system, in the context of the impossibility of financial support by the Romanian state, in the current legal framework, immediate changes are required to ensure the right to education.

Considering the fact that the budget must be resized starting from the level of 2023, before the introduction of unsustainable commitments through the new legislation. (ID 6)

By using the term *blockage*, the authorities are trying to suggest that without their austerity package, the education system will be paralyzed. This strategy creates fear throughout the relevant stakeholders and gives birth to alarmist construction that leaves absolutely no room for negotiation and dialogue on the matter, as the urgency is what matters for them. Later on, the Minister of Education and Research echoed this in his public press release:

As a member of the Government, I had to rationally and decently correct the contribution of our sector to the country's deficit (along with other areas), in order to avoid that from autumn, in general, the country will have problems with the payment of salaries/pensions/scholarships/social aid. (ID 3)

Such rhetoric is consistent with the concept of crisis talk, visible when a state of exception is created and the need of justifying extraordinary (and often unpopular) measures arise. In the above extract, the range of threatened consequences is meant to generalize the sense of crisis and the so-called rational decisions – the education budget must be cut to save not only the system itself, but the entire nation.

However, counter-discourses are tackling this issue and are delegitimizing the measures. Unlike government discourse, the joint press release of the trade unions (ID 2), along with the protest signs made by the students (ID 8) are outlining the consequences that the fiscal reduction has on the education system – while the

government claims that austerity is the only way to avoid collapse, the resistance formed by teachers and students are portraying the austerity as being the actual reason for a potential collapse of the education system. This clash in discursive strategies portrays exactly why language of fear is a discursive battleground when it comes to crisis talk.

The threat-based discourse observed in governmental texts strongly reflects the mechanics of crisis talk described by Moffitt (2016): crises are not neutral conditions but performative constructions that foreground urgency, danger, and exceptional measures. The invocation of systemic “blockage” and imminent inability to pay salaries or scholarships exemplifies this logic of dramatization. In N. Fairclough and I. Fairclough’s (2012) terms, such formulations function as instruments that narrow the space of deliberation by presenting austerity as the only reasonable course of action. Counter-discourses, however, invert this logic by framing austerity itself as the threat — a reframing that exposes the contingent nature of crisis narratives and demonstrates how legitimacy is continuously negotiated rather than settled.

Across all four discursive categories described above, the analysis demonstrates how austerity in Romanian education operates as a hegemonic formation produced through layered strategies of legitimation: rationalization, moral evaluation, authorization, and appeals to scarcity. Linking these findings to the theoretical framework reveals that austerity discourse functions simultaneously as a technology of government (in Foucault’s terms) and as justificatory apparatus grounded in arguments for action (in Fairclough’s views). However, the counter-discourses are trying to illustrate that hegemony is always partial and contested and this interplay between dominance and resistance underscores itself the discursive nature of governance that confirms that austerity’s power lies not only in fiscal policy but in its capacity to shape ways of thinking about problems, solutions and future.

Limitations

This study inevitably has its limitations, specific to the studies that are using the CDA technique as an analysis instrument. The analysed corpus, yet diverse, covers a restricted set of statements and texts emerged from authorities, students and parents that appeared in the public space throughout the summer of 2025, so using a broader corpus, covering a longer period of time, that will allow tracing the evolution of discursive strategies beyond the immediate crisis talk and corroborate them with the actual results of the implemented financial measures can be considered for further developments. Moreover, it is a study that focuses only on textual material, because of the time constraints. Further research should take into account the impact that multimedia elements (visuals, media coverages, videos, audio notes etc.) can have a significant impact on the results and should be therefore considered. Nevertheless, exactly like in other critical discourse analysis, the interpretative dimension should be taken into account, because discourse is something that can be differently perceived from one to another, despite the efforts in

designing a transparent and objective coding scheme, grounded in theoretical foundations.

Conclusion

This study examined how austerity in Romanian education was discursively constructed, legitimized, and contested in the aftermath of the adoption of Law 141/2025. The analysis revealed that austerity discourse operated through four interconnected narrative strategies—scarcity, solidarity, efficiency, and threat—which together framed fiscal interventions as urgent, necessary, and morally appropriate, even though they had a significant impact on the education system as a whole. At the same time, counter-discourses produced by teachers, students, and unions challenged these narratives by exposing their social consequences and offering alternative understandings of responsibility and collective duty. These findings show that the struggle over austerity is fundamentally a struggle over meaning, because it concerns what policies are enacted and how they are rendered intelligible, justifiable, and inevitable in public debate.

Austerity is demonstrated to be not merely a fiscal instrument, but also a strong discursive mode of governance that shapes the boundaries of what is politically possible. Austerity discourse draws its power from its capacity to appear natural, depoliticized, and rooted in shared moral values—conditions under which legitimacy becomes difficult to contest, which was visible also in the partial uptake of governmental frames within union discourse – this is an evidence that show how hegemonic narratives cannot be avoided and, thus, they structure even oppositional vocabularies. These dynamics have important implications for understanding both Romanian education policy and austerity governance more broadly.

References

- Afonso, A., Zartaloudis, S., & Papadopoulos, Y. (2015). How party linkages shape austerity politics: Clientelism and fiscal adjustment in Greece and Portugal during the eurozone crisis. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 22(3), 315–334. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2014.964644>
- Ball, S. J. (1993). What is policy? Texts, trajectories and toolboxes. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 13(2), 10–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0159630930130203>
- Bhatia, V., Flowerdew, J., & Jones, R. H. (Eds.). (2008). *Advances in Discourse Studies* (0 ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203892299>
- Blyth, M. (2015). *Austerity: The history of a dangerous idea*. Oxford University Press.
- Bukhari, N. H. S., & Xiaoyang, W. (2013). Critical discourse analysis and educational research. *IOSR Journal of Research & Method in Education (IOSR-JRME)*, 3(1), 9–17. <https://doi.org/10.9790/7388-0310917>
- Cistelecan, A., Rogozanu, C., Marincea, A., Grama, A., Trifan, E., Baghiu, S., Mercescu, A., & Cercel, C. (2025). The global polycrisis and the Romanian elections of 2024. *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, 33(1), 167–179. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2025.2482389>
- Clarke, John, & Newman, Janet (2012). The Alchemy of Austerity. *Critical Social Policy* 32(3): 299–319
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Longman.
- Fairclough, N. (2013). Critical discourse analysis and critical policy studies. *Critical Policy Studies*, 7(2), 177–197. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2013.798239>

- Fairclough, I., & Fairclough, N. (2012). *Political Discourse Analysis: A method for advanced students*. Routledge
- Foucault, M. (2012). *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.
- Gramsci, Antonio (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. New York: International Publishers,
- Jessop, B. (2010). Cultural political economy and critical policy studies. *Critical Policy Studies*, 3(3–4), 336–356. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171003619741>
- Kelsey, D., Mueller, Frank, Whittle, Andrea, & KhosraviNik, Majid. (2019). *The discourse of financial crisis and austerity: Critical analyses of business and economics across disciplines*. Routledge.
- Ladi, S., & Tsarouhas, D. (2014). The Politics of Austerity and Public Policy Reform in the EU. *Political Studies Review*, 12(2), 171–180. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1478-9302.12048>
- Mavelli, Luca. (2019). Resilience Beyond Neoliberalism? Mystique of complexity, financial crises, and the reproduction of neoliberal life. *Resilience*, 7(3), 224–239. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21693293.2019.1605661>
- Moffitt, Benjamin (2016). *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*. Stanford University Press
- OECD. (2025). *Education at a Glance 2025: OECD Indicators*. OECD Publishing <https://doi.org/10.1787/1c0d9c79-en>
- Offe, C. (2013). Democratic inequality in the austerity state. *Juncture*, 20(3), 178–185. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2050-5876.2013.00751.x>
- Powers, P. (2007). The Philosophical Foundations of Foucaultian Discourse Analysis. *Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis across Disciplines*, 1(2), 18–34.
- Reisigl, M. (2018). *The Routledge handbook of critical discourse studies* (J. Flowerdew & J. E. Richardson, Eds.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315739342>
- Roman, C. T., & Bulat, C. I. (2025). Good Practices That Could Change the Educational Environment in Romania. *BRAND. Broad Research in Accounting, Negotiation, and Distribution*, 16(1), 45. <https://doi.org/10.70594/brand/16.1/3>
- Saarinen, T. (2008). Position of text and discourse analysis in higher education policy research. *Studies in Higher Education*, 33(6), 719–728. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070802457090>
- Schmidt, V. A. (2008). Discursive Institutionalism: The Explanatory Power of Ideas and Discourse. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 11(1), 303–326. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.060606.135342>
- Van Dijk, Teun A. (1993). *Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis*. *Discourse & Society*, 4(2), 249–283. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926593004002006>
- Van Dijk, Teun A. (2008). *Society and Discourse: How Social Contexts Influence Text and Talk*. Cambridge University Press
- Van Leeuwen, T (2008) *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Van Leeuwen, T. (2007). Legitimation in discourse and communication. *Discourse & Communication*, 1(1), 91–112. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750481307071986>