

Education in Bulgaria

Context

Impact of the economic crisis

As a result of the global financial crisis, Bulgaria entered a recession in the first quarter of 2009. The largest decline in economic growth came in the industrial sector, which fell 8.3 per cent. Agriculture and consumption declined as well. Bulgaria has a GDP (PPP) per capita of US\$11,222. Its GDP real growth rate dropped by 4.9 per cent in 2009, a notable change from 2007, when real growth rose 6.2 per cent, and 2008, when GDP real growth increased 6.1 per cent (see Figure 1). Anti-crisis measures have now been established as a preventative tool against future collapses.

Bulgaria became one of the first CEECS countries to obtain membership in the European Union (EU) in 2007. Bulgaria continues to show poverty levels below the EU average. The unfavourable economic developments of 2009 affected the social sector and child protection system budgets. Some 12.8 per cent of Bulgarians live below the national poverty line, and 2.4 per cent of the population lives on less than \$2 per day. National unemployment stands at about 12 per cent, with youth unemployment (26 per cent) more than doubling the national unemployment rate. Bulgaria is ranked 61 out of 182 countries on the UNDP's Human Development Index, with a score of 0.84.

The government, elected in 2009, announced that education was one of its high priorities for the next four years. Internal reorganization at the national level, improvements to the child protection system and a more inclusive programme for children with disabilities are among the aims of the government.

Education reforms

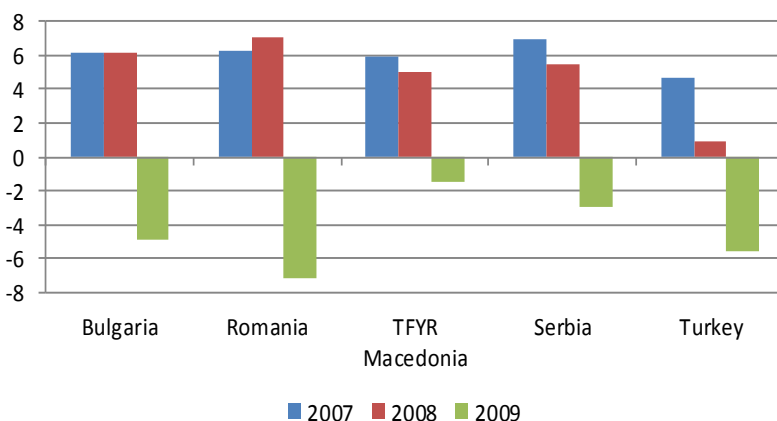
Bulgaria has carried out a number of education reforms to improve education quality. Among the reforms are:



© G. Pirozzi

- In 2009, the new Education Act outlined strict measures to improve discipline and classroom behaviour at schools, made education mandatory up to grade 10 and increased principal and teacher accountability;
- In 2008, the government raised teachers' salaries by 22.5 per cent and introduced a three-part system of differentiated pay, based on teachers' performance and school ratings;
- A system of 'delegated budgets' was implemented, assuring school funding would be based upon student enrolment;
- The government administered the first state matriculation exams for secondary education, and grade four students participated in international assessments;
- The government is implementing a number of measures for improving children's access to education (including provision of free textbooks for children from grades one through seven, school meals, and transportation to schools); and
- A policy for optimization of the school network has been advanced, leading to closure of a number of small schools in the country.

Figure 1. GDP real growth, 2007-2009



Access

Access to education at the national level in Bulgaria is average for the region among the general population, but for minority students, access to all levels of education continues to be significantly lower.

Early childhood education

A new Early Childhood Development Communication campaign has been established in Bulgaria to improve educational access for early learners and to support parents. Net pre-primary school enrolment in the general population is about average for the region, at 78 per cent. There is currently an

interest in promoting learning through play at the early childhood level. Also, there is increasing interest in developing special measures to support ethnic minorities with language development and to help students with intellectual delays. At the national level, the primary school net enrolment rate (NER) is 95 per cent, which is above the subregional and regional averages. The secondary school net enrolment rate is 78 per cent. The NER for tertiary education (50 per cent) is among the highest in the CEECIS region.

Educational challenges facing adolescents and youth
Young people's increasing preference for finding employment instead of continuing in school is a major educational challenge in Bulgaria. Perhaps more alarming is the high number of adolescents who dropped out in early primary school. Drop-out rates in first and second grade are 2.3 per cent and 2.1 per cent, respectively, some of the highest in the region.

By the time these youngsters become adolescents, many are involved in child labour and human trafficking. In 2003, 69.2 per cent of the Bulgarian victims of human trafficking were children. Violence against youth is also a growing problem in Bulgaria. Approximately 1,800 cases of violence against children emerge yearly. In 2008 the Bulgarian government, with the support of UNICEF, developed the Strategy for the Child 2008–2018. The strategy is based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child and aims to improve the protection of Bulgarian young people.

Another challenge facing the education of Bulgarian youth is to ensure they have the knowledge to remain healthy and protected from HIV/AIDS. Youth-friendly community-based health services,

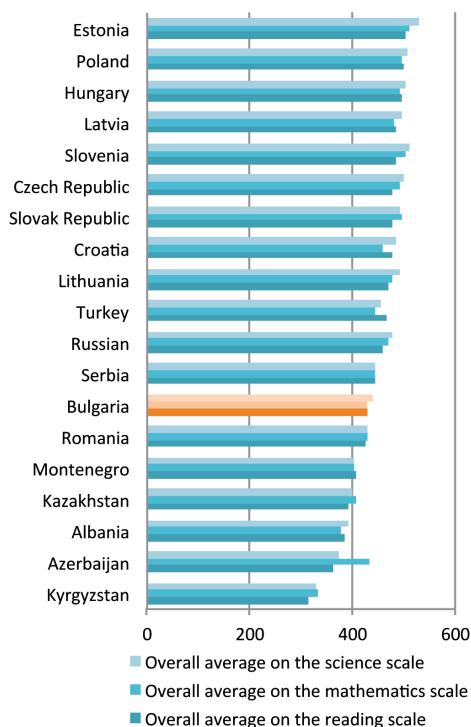
Box 1. Desegregation of Roma schools in Bulgaria

Bulgaria is a member of the Decade for Roma Inclusion 2005–2015. It has implemented, in cooperation with local non-governmental organizations, the Roma Participation Programme (RPP). This initiative aims to eliminate Roma ghetto schools. Roma students in the programme are bussed from their homes to integrated schools outside their neighbourhoods.

Further teacher preparation to work in integrated classrooms will yield greater success for this programme. Also, efforts to reduce the ethnic tensions between Roma and non-Roma parents and students must continue. Regular monitoring of curriculum, instruction and the needs of Roma students is required.

Sources: Open Society Institute. (2006); Kyuchukov, H. (2006). Monitoring Education for Roma; Creating Effective Grassroots Alternatives Foundation. Desegregation in Roma Schools in Bulgaria.

Figure 2. Comparing performance in reading, mathematics and science on PISA 2009



supported in part by UNICEF, have emerged throughout Bulgaria to support adolescents. A wide range of services are included in the centres, such as psychosocial and reproductive health counselling, sexually transmitted infections prevention advice, general health promotion services and health education classes.

Children with disabilities

In 2008, 1,039 children with disabilities resided in institutions. The government's Strategy on Deinstitutionalization is being implemented in Bulgaria to eliminate residential care institutions for children with disabilities. The poor conditions and treatment of children at resident care institutions prompted the creation of the new strategy. Of the children who still reside in the residential care institutions, Roma children are significantly overrepresented. In 2009, small family-type housing, an alternative to institutions, opened around the nation. Programmes were also established to support parents with the reintegration of children from institutions. Children in institutions clearly have diminished access to quality education.

Various organizations, including Save the Children, are working with the Bulgarian government to promote inclusive education. Increasingly, students are being mainstreamed in schools and the tolerance and acceptance is improving both in schools and in the general society.

Box 2. School dropouts in Bulgaria

Each year, about 20,000, or 3 per cent of students, drop out of school in Bulgaria. According to a UNICEF study: “The drop-out children in primary schools (grades 1–8) constitute more than half of all dropouts, and high school (grades 1–12) students are nearly 25 per cent of the total number. In both the professional high schools and the elementary schools the share of dropouts is about 5 per cent.

“Educational difficulties are mentioned as a main reason for dropping out of school by the children aged 12–16 who took part in the survey. A little over a third of them (34 per cent) point out they did not want to study because it was difficult for them, and 22 per cent declare school was not interesting for them. The economic reasons, which parents perceive as most important, came second in children’s answers. One out of five 12–16 year-olds works to financially support his/her family. Their main occupations are collecting and handing over waste materials or construction work.”

Source: UNICEF. 2006. *Reasons for Children Dropping Out of School in Bulgaria.*

Equity

Minority ethnic groups suffer severe inequities in both access and quality of education, especially the Roma. While Bulgaria is on track to meet Education for All (EFA) goal five – gender parity in primary and secondary schools – it is far from ensuring that all minority children have equitable access to schooling of good quality (see Box 2).

The Gender Parity Index at the pre-primary, primary and secondary level is 0.99, indicating that there is basically no gender differences in enrolment. Further work is needed in tertiary education, where girls exceed boys by a 1.22 to 1 ratio.

Roma Education

The greatest equity concerns in Bulgaria are in relation to Roma children. Bulgaria is home to up to 800,000 Roma, comprising 10.4 per cent of the country’s total population. This is one of the highest percentages of Roma in South-Eastern Europe. Poverty is high among the Roma communities in Bulgaria. A recent survey found that nearly 80 per cent of Roma in Bulgaria and Romania were living on less than \$4.30 per day. Public services for the

Roma are more scarce and of lower quality than for the general population.

School enrolment rates are extremely low for Roma children compared to their non-Roma peers. In primary school, only 47 per cent of Roma children enrol in school and fewer of those complete primary schooling. By secondary school, only 12 per cent of Roma aged 16–19 years old are enrolled, compared with 81 per cent of the national population. Graduation statistics are even more discouraging: only 7 per cent of Roma children complete secondary education. Still fewer go on to finish tertiary education.

The urgency to address these inequalities is compounded by the fact that most Roma students attend school in Roma-majority neighbourhoods, which are well-known to be of lower quality than non-Roma majority schools (see Box 1). The low percentages of Roma who do graduate from secondary school often do not have the same academic foundation as their non-Roma peers who complete the same level of schooling.

The government is aware of these realities and making some steps towards improvement. The Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005–2015 Action Plan aims to advance the quality and inclusion of Roma children in public education. The 2003 Law of Anti-Discrimination has assisted with addressing segregation in schools and discrimination in employment. While these steps are notable, substantially more work is still needed. There is increasing pressure from the EU community to address issues of social inclusion.

Learning outcomes

The EU education benchmarks call for all EU countries to halve the number of underperforming students by 2010. Bulgaria’s performance on recent international learning assessments shows that it has not yet met this benchmark. In fact, it is losing ground, performing worse in reading, science and mathematics.

International assessments of learning outcomes show mixed results in Bulgaria. On the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2009, Bulgaria scored 13th out of 19 participating coun-

Figure 3. Distribution of Overall Science Achievement on TIMSS over time 1999–2003, grade 8

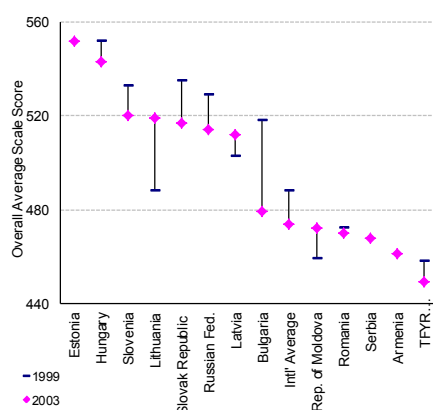
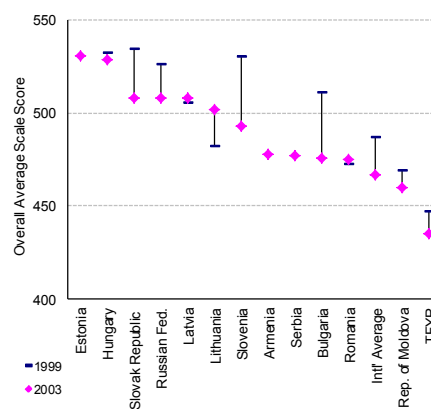


Figure 4. Distribution of Overall Mathematics Achievement on TIMSS Over time, 1999–2001, grade 8



tries in the region in reading, mathematics and science. This places it 63rd out of all 65 participating countries in the rankings (see Figure 2). Bulgaria's performance changed little between PISA 2006 and PISA 2009.

Results from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) assessment 2001 and 2006 show that Bulgarian students achieved high learning outcomes in reading (see Figure 5). In 2001, Bulgaria scored the highest out of the 12 countries in the region that participated. It was ranked 4th out of a total of 35 countries in reading, outperforming Canada, the United States and Germany. In 2006, Bulgaria again scored in the top third in reading, ranking 14th out of 45 countries. However, between 2001 and 2006, Bulgaria's performance on the reading assessment dropped slightly, from an average score of 550 to 547.

Bulgaria's performance in mathematics and science falls far below that of its reading achievement. Bulgaria's performance in mathematics has declined over time. In 1999, Bulgaria scored above average in mathematics on the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) assessment, scoring 17th out of 35 participating countries worldwide. This was on par with its neighbours' performance; Bulgaria ranked 6th out of 12 participating countries in the region. In 2003, however, Bulgaria's average mathematics score showed the largest decrease in the CEECIS region, dropping by 35 points, although the country still scored above average (see Figure 5). On TIMSS 2003, Bulgaria ranked 25th out of 46 participating countries, and fourth to last in the CEECIS region. This downward trend continued.

In science, Bulgaria scored about average for the region on both TIMSS assessments. On TIMSS 2003, Bulgaria scored 24th out of the 45 participating countries. In its region, it ranked 8th out of the 13 (see Figure 3).

The results of the 2010 state-administered high school exit exam confirmed that the quality of education in the system is insufficient. Three fourths

of students who sat for the geography examination did not pass the basic competencies.

Funding factors also reveal concerns about the quality of instruction in schools. In 2007, teachers went on a six-week strike in protest of low wages and low national expenditure on education. It was the biggest national protest in Bulgaria since the beginning of the transition. The strike ended when the government announced a 22.5 per cent increase in salary for all education employees.

On 1 January 2008, a system of 'delegated budgets' was introduced in all schools in the country. According to this system, schools are funded based on the number of students enrolled, multiplied by a common financial standard for a child. Although the new approach is a step towards decentralizing the financial management of secondary education and greater financial independence for schools, there are serious concerns that it will negatively affect the access of all children to quality educational services.

Education financing

Bulgaria spent an average of 4.24 per cent of its GDP on education over the past few years. This is just below the CEECIS regional average, which is 4.4 per cent, but far below the average spending on education in the EU.

Education spending in Bulgaria is more decentralized than in other countries in the region, with only 32 per cent of funds coming from the central budget, 11 per cent coming from extra-budgetary funds and 67 per cent coming from local budgets. The distribution of funds is relatively even between different levels and types of education. About two thirds of total expenditure is spent on personnel, with 4 per cent being spent on scholarships and another 4 per cent spent on capital expenditures, which is a common trend.

Educational priorities

UNICEF's priorities are to support the government to:

- Improve the content of textbooks, curriculum and school programmes in different grade levels
- Improve teaching methods
- Reduce school dropouts in the upper grades
- Focus on staff turnover and improve training available for new staff
- Continue to financially support the School Free of Violence programme
- Reform the secondary school assessment systems

Figure 5. Distribution of reading achievement on PIRLS assessment, 2001–2006

