

Education in

Central and Eastern Europe

Context

Impact of the economic crisis

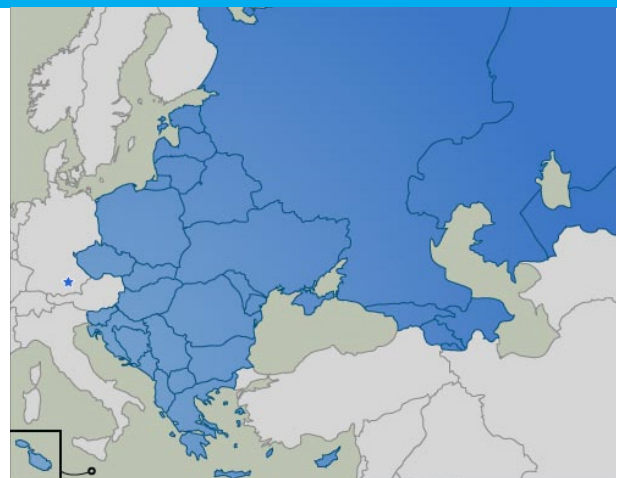
The Central and Eastern European nations of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the U.N. Administered Province of Kosovo¹, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia were all impacted by the global economic recession that began in 2007. In a few nations, the impact was subtle, but in most, the crisis left a deep mark on national economies and societal growth.

In every country of Central and Eastern Europe, the GDP real growth shifted from positive to negative between 2007 and 2009 (see Figure 1). Other economic factors, such as interest rates, government policies and taxation, also changed as a result of the downturn. Montenegro's national economic meltdown included the largest decline in annual growth, dropping from 10.7 in 2007 to -6.1 per cent in 2009. The impact was compounded by a food and fuel crisis. Romanians felt a similar shock, as GDP real growth fell from 6.3 per cent in 2007 to -7.1 per cent in 2009. Budgetary constraints and programme delays abounded and brought Romania's national progress to an abrupt halt. The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia relied on fiscal policies implemented by its government in 2006 to sustain some support, but the impact was still evident. Bulgaria officially entered a recession in the first quarter of 2009, and Bosnia and Herzegovina's economy, already one of the weakest in the region, sunk further.

In Serbia and U.N. Administered Province of Kosovo, indirect impacts continue to be a major concern. There is growing concern in both countries (which rely heavily on international assistance) that funders will be less willing to contribute due to the global downturn. This reality underscores the potential threat over Serbia and U.N.A.P. of Kosovo in the coming years, if they cannot gather the international funding they rely upon.

The global economic crisis had a minimal impact on the Albanian and Croatian economies. In Albania, the greatest impact has been felt in the garment industry. The Croatian government anticipated a slowing national economy and implemented anti-recession measures that ultimately softened the impact of the international crisis.

The global recession also affected the national standard of living in the nine nations. Unemployment rates be-



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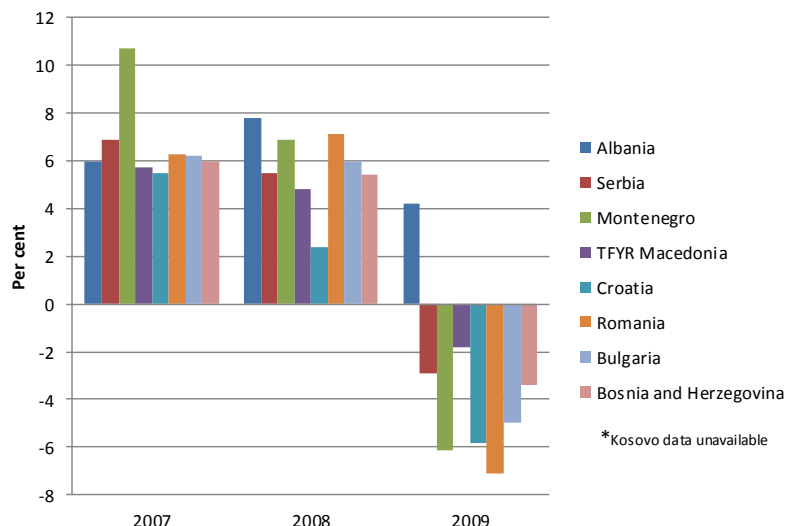
gan to rise. The price of food and gas increased, impacting at-risk families. Nutritional meals and healthcare visits decreased among poor families, and some social programmes supported by governments to aid families were terminated. This has frayed the social safety net that protects children.

Education reforms

Over the past two decades, the educational landscape in Central and Eastern Europe has dramatically shifted, but there are some common reform themes across the subregion, such as:

- Establishing education as a national priority
- Introducing strategies aimed at increasing access to pre-primary and/or marginalized groups
- Reforming curricula
- Improving the quality of education in pre-primary, primary and secondary education
- Expanding the compulsory education years
- Endorsing strategies aimed at improving student learning and outcomes

Figure 1. GDP real growth in Central and Eastern Europe, 2007–2009



Access to education

Early childhood education

Some countries in Central and Eastern Europe have improved access to pre-primary education, while others continue to struggle with low enrolment. Overall, however, early childhood education enrolment in Central and Eastern Europe continues to be dramatically lower than it was during the Socialist era.

The majority of countries in this subregion have pre-primary enrolment rates of 49 per cent or higher. Bulgaria and Romania lead Central and Eastern Europe with pre-primary enrolment rates of 78 per cent and 71 per cent, respectively. The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is close behind with 68 per cent, and about half of preschool-aged children in Croatia and Albania attend early childhood education, with net enrolment rates of 52 per cent and 49 per cent, respectively. Other nations in this subregion continue to have lower enrolment figures. Only 29 per cent of Montenegro's children between the ages of 3 and 5 years old are attending primary school; primary enrolment drops as low as 10 per cent in Kosovo. Bosnia and Herzegovina has the lowest preschool participation in the subregion, at 6.4 per cent. Reasons for low enrolment vary across the subregion, but recurring themes include inadequate conditions, poor quality instruction and the burden of monthly fees.

Countries in Central and Eastern Europe have made significant progress toward achieving universal primary school enrolment. Primary school enrolment figures in all nine nations are over 90 per cent. Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro lead, with net primary school enrolment rates of 98 per cent. Croatia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia are at the low end of the spectrum, with enrolment rates of 90 per cent and 91.3 per cent, respectively. Enrolment rates in secondary education vary widely across the subregion. Serbia has the highest secondary school enrolment rate, at 88 per cent, and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Albania have the lowest at 74.4 and 74 per cent (see Figure 2).

Children with disabilities

There is growing concern about the education of children with disabilities throughout the subregion, and clearer policies and reforms are necessary to ensure that these young people receive equal access to education.

Some nations in this subregion have created formalized strategies or passed legislation to shift from separate schools or institutions to inclusive education. For instance, Bulgaria developed a strategy aimed at eliminating residential care institutions. In some cases,

change was met with resistance, such as in Romania, where some argue the transition was too rapid, resulting in less support for students with disabilities. Bosnia and Herzegovina passed a law calling on schools to provide individual programming for children with disabilities; in reality, only 0.4–0.8 per cent of children with disabilities receive accommodations.

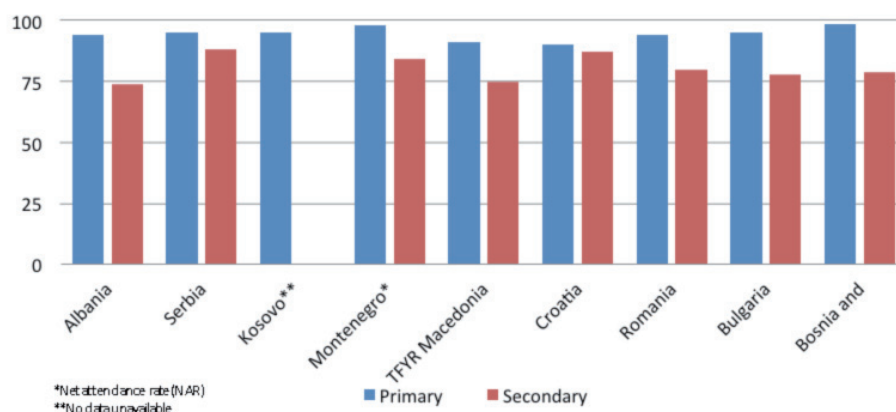
There are efforts to integrate children with disabilities into mainstream classrooms in the majority of nations in this subregion. For instance, in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, students with disabilities are now placed in mainstream schools and attend classes with their non-disabled peers. In most nations, however, high percentages of children continue to be placed in institutions or special schools. In the Croatian system, there is both separate and inclusive education, and mainstream, a new inclusive curriculum is being developed to support all learners in the classroom. Similar visions are embraced in Serbia and Montenegro, but change is slow. In Serbia, students with disabilities who are not enrolled in any of the special schools are mainstreamed, but they receive minimal accommodations. In Montenegro, integrated preschools and inclusive model primary schools have been introduced, but the majority of children with disabilities continue to attend special education institutions or boarding schools.

In Albania and Kosovo, minimal governmental support for children with disabilities has left youngsters vulnerable. In Albania, integration services are not promoted and many children with disabilities are excluded from compulsory education. Only about 10 per cent of children with special needs in Kosovo are mainstreamed into the regular schools, and nearly half are illiterate. Facilities at institutions are inconsistent and unreliable.

Challenges facing adolescents and youth

Youth and adolescents in the Central and Eastern European subregion face multiple challenges. Three concerns emerge from this subregion: low school quality, high unemployment and increased participation in risky behaviour.

Figure 2. Primary and secondary net enrolment rates for Central and Eastern European subregion countries



Adolescents across the nations are concerned about their quality of education. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, students describe their educational system as 'old-fashioned'. Croatian youth express doubt that their system is preparing them for long-term opportunity. Many Serbian students are disengaged in school and unsure of what rewards are gained from completing secondary school. In Albania, limited teaching materials, outdated curricula and unskilled teachers hinder the educational quality available to youth.

High unemployment among adolescents is of great concern across the subregion and is considered by many to be the cause of increased violence, risky activity and forced migration. Increased participation in unsafe behaviours and exposure to new values that differ from traditional views are concerns across all Central and Eastern European nations. In Romania, youth poverty rates continue to rise and child trafficking and child labour are ongoing concerns. Bulgaria is monitoring increased violence in secondary schools, and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia reports drug use, trafficking and incarceration among youth is on the rise. In U.N.A.P. of Kosovo, there is an increase of youth participating in risky activity, and in Romania, youth poverty rates are increasing.

Equity

A variety of equity issues arise in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly around gender, geography, wealth and poverty, and minority status.

Many nations in this subregion have made notable efforts to improve gender parity, particularly at the primary level. In secondary school, however, gaps between males and females persist and generally increase with age. For example, in Kosovo, boys tend to stay in school longer than girls, while in Albania, 50 per cent more girls enrol in higher education than boys.

Gaps between access, quality and retention emerge sharply between rich and poor, and rural and urban students. Rural students are less likely to attend school and more likely to drop out than their urban peers. In Albania, the gap widens when considering the economic situation of a family: only 7.9 per cent of the country's poorest children enrol in secondary school, as compared to 27.8 per cent of the richest students. In Serbia, urban children have greater access to school and improved quality. Rich students in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia gain similar benefits, with higher attendance rates, especially in preschool, than their poorer peers.

Minority groups

The access and quality of education available to many minority children in Central and Eastern Europe is subpar compared to what is available to their peers. Multiple examples illuminate this reality: in U.N.A.P. of Kosovo, differences in access, literacy rates and educational attainment exist between the minority ethnic groups, as well as the Kosovar

Serbs and Kosovar Albanians. Montenegro provides Albanian-language education, but the curricula and material in the Albanian schools is of lower quality than what is found in Montenegrin schools. Furthermore, Bosniak and Croatian national minority groups in Montenegro do not have access to education in their native language, and the limited recognition of their cultures and heritage in the Montenegrin system marginalizes them further. In Croatia, ethnic Serbs often do not receive the same level of access to school or quality of instruction as Croats. In the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, in response to ethnic-based violence, ethnically segregated schools are now emerging. Careful monitoring of these ethnically segregated schools will be necessary to ensure equal access and quality across the system.

Roma education

The Central and Eastern European subregion must prioritize Roma education. Across the subregion, enrolment and completion rates are significantly lower for Roma than for non-Roma students. In Albania, many Roma students still attend de facto segregated schools. A lack of teachers qualified in the Romani language further segregate Roma children. In Croatia, discrimination, distance between schools and Roma settlements, and a lack of appreciation of Roma culture contribute to the high drop-out rates and low attendance rates for Roma students. The majority of Roma children living in Croatia do not attend preschool programmes and enter primary school with minimal Croatian fluency, disadvantaging them from the start. In Montenegro, no anti-discrimination laws protecting the Roma had been established as of 2010 (see Box 1).

Box 1. Roma in Central and Eastern Europe

The quality and access to education for Roma children in this region needs immediate attention. Barriers that continue to deny equal learning opportunities to the Roma include:

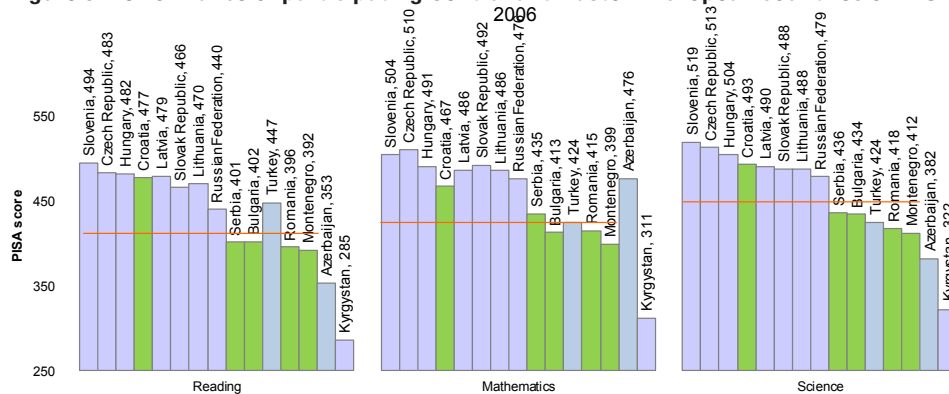
Language obstacles – There is frequently little or no language support for Roma children, the majority of whom arrive at school speaking a language other than that used in school.

Teacher obstacles – Teachers often have negative stereotypes and attitudes towards Roma children. Low expectations and placement in the back of the room are common indicators of these obstacles.

Segregation obstacles – Many Roma attend schools comprised predominately of Roma children or are frequently placed in institutions or special schools. Unqualified teachers or inferior facilities are common patterns in these educational institutions.

Source: Roma Children: A Study of Barriers to Educational Attainment in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Students as Partners Initiative, 2009

Figure 3. Performance of participating Central and Eastern European countries on PISA



Source: PISA International Report 2006. OECD.

Education quality

Large international assessments and proxy indicators suggest that much progress is still needed to ensure high-quality education in this subregion.

Six countries in Central and Eastern Europe participated in the international PISA assessment. In almost all instances, these countries ranked in the lower half of participating schools. In PISA 2000, Albanian students scored 40th out of 41 participating countries in literacy and 39th out of 41 in science. Five other countries – Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania – all participated in PISA 2006; Albania did not take part. Croatia’s performance in literacy was the highest in the subregion, ranking 30th out of 57 participating countries, followed by Serbia and Bulgaria tied for 44th, Romania ranking 45th and Montenegro scoring 55th. Croatia also outperformed other Central and Eastern European countries in mathematics, ranking 36th out of 57 participating nations, followed by Serbia (41), Bulgaria (47), Romania (48) and Montenegro (56) (see Figure 3).

Proxy indicators reaffirm that the quality of education in this subregion needs improvement. In Kosovo, urban overcrowding and increasing class size is affecting instruction. In Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, rote teaching continues despite efforts to improve teaching methods. Montenegro’s school system also shows evidence of inefficiency, with high drop-out rates and a curriculum misaligned with employment skills. Poor teacher training and low salaries are affecting the retention and quality of educators entering classrooms in Romania and Bulgaria. Budget limitations and poor preparation for schooling in Bosnia and Herzegovina is affecting students’ readiness to learn.

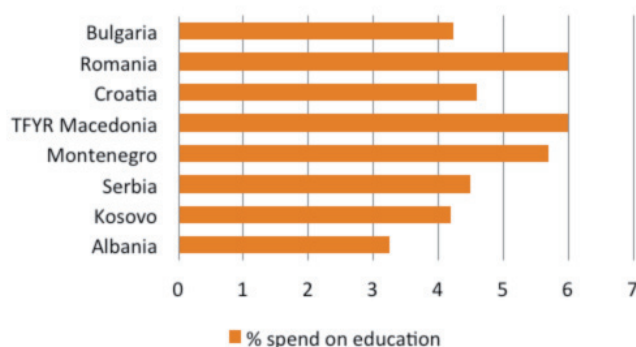
Many nations are aware of these realities and committed to improving. In Kosovo, a new five-day teacher training course has been introduced to improve instructional and learning techniques in schools. Montenegro’s Active Learning Project has yielded some progress in improving the quality of instruction in the classroom. The Croatian government has identified the reduction of school drop-outs as a major challenge and priority, while the Bulgarian government is increasing funding and

shifting budget control to schools as a strategy for improving the access and quality of educational services at the local level.

Education financing

With a long history of government-funded schooling during the socialist era, nations in this subregion have struggled to sustain the educational access and quality of past decades. Today, government expenditures on education in the subregion range from 3.25 per cent of GDP in Albania, to 6.0 per cent in Romania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (see Figure 4). While the CEECIS regional average for government expenditures on education is 4.4 per cent, this is notably lower than averages in EU nations.

Figure 4. Expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP



Educational priorities in Central and Eastern Europe

UNICEF recognizes the positive changes in Central and Eastern Europe – namely, providing 400 million people the opportunity to express their own opinion, choose their own path in life and achieve economic success. It also recognizes there is much more work to be done to ensure that all children have the freedoms and opportunities they deserve. Some of UNICEF’s current priorities in this subregion include:

- Continue narrowing the gap to meet the goals and progress for children (MDG targets)
- Continue prioritizing education
- Ensure that the rights of all children are protected, as outlined in the twentieth anniversary of the Convention of the Rights of the Child
- Continue to spread educational awareness about HIV/AIDS and other diseases
- Advocate for equal access and opportunities of all children
- Incorporate an equity-focused strategy targeting the poorest and most vulnerable children

1 UNSCR 1244