

# Education in the Western CIS

## Context

### Impact of the economic crisis

The impact of the global economic crisis in Belarus, the Republic of Moldova, the Russian Federation and Ukraine was significant. These nations, part of the Western Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) were affected in various ways. The Russian Federation's lack of foreign debt softened the impact, but the country was not completely protected. Among other setbacks, in 2008, the Russian Federation's stock exchange dropped and the ruble weakened. The Republic of Moldova, Belarus and Ukraine suffered significant hardships on account of the global financial crisis. In the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, the economic downturn was compounded by national political instability. Throughout the Western CIS, shrinking budget revenues, lower export demands and growing deficits are new realities.

The impact of the economic crisis is reflected in the changes in GDP real growth across the subregion. From 2008 to 2009, the Republic of Moldova's GDP real growth declined 14.9 per cent (from 7.2 to -7.7 per cent). The nation also has the lowest GNP per capita in the entire CEE/CIS region, at \$2,800 USD (PPP). GDP real growth in the Ukraine and the Russian Federation also went from positive to negative, from 2.1 per cent to -15 per cent in Ukraine, and from 5.6 per cent to -7.9 per cent in the Russian Federation (see Figure 1).

The standard of living in each nation was also affected by the global international crisis. Poverty rates, already high in the Republic of Moldova, Belarus and Ukraine, continued to rise. In the Russian Federation, the World Bank predicted that more than 5.8 million people could enter poverty in the coming years unless the government shifted spending to support vulnerable families. Unemployment figures in the Russian Federation, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine began to increase; Belarus was also impacted, but avoided unemployment hikes by implementing forced vacation. Due to the impacts of the recession, many children in this subregion are under increasing pressure to leave school and contribute to family incomes by pandering or seeking employment.



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## Education reforms

Each country in the Western CIS strives to support its national educational system. While reforms and strategies for improvement differ across national contexts, some overarching themes emerge, such as:

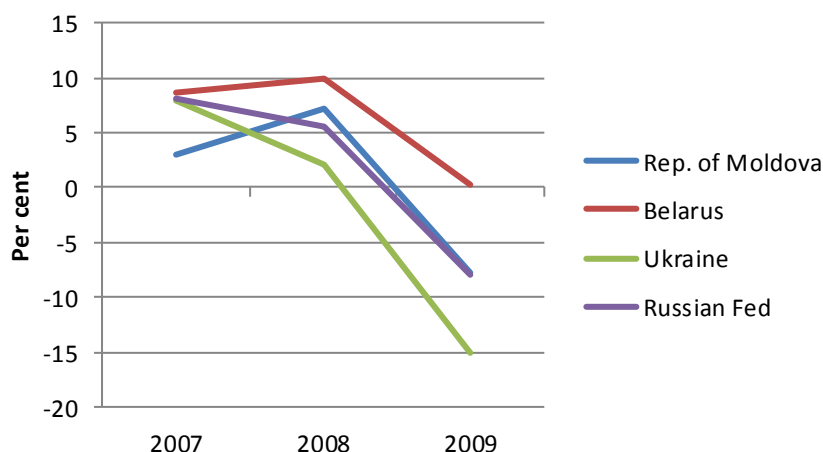
- Maintain high access to pre-primary education
- Monitor gender, rural/urban and rich/poor gaps
- Improve secondary education enrolment rates and opportunities for youth
- Improve access and quality of education for Roma children
- Monitor educational progress of children with disabilities
- Endorse strategies aimed at improving student learning and outcomes

## Access to education

### Early childhood education

According to the Education for All (EFA) *Global Monitoring Report 2010*, net enrolment rates (NER)

Figure 1. Real growth GDP in Western CIS 2007-2009



in pre-primary education in the Western CIS range from 68 per cent in the Republic of Moldova to 94 per cent in the Ukraine. Percentages vary across countries, and missing data make comparisons difficult; however, utilizing these statistics, the Western CIS stands out as a leader in the CEECIS region for access and enrolment in pre-primary education. Outside of the Russian Federation, the success of this subregion could be explained by the residual effects of Soviet philosophies, which supported early childhood education for all children.

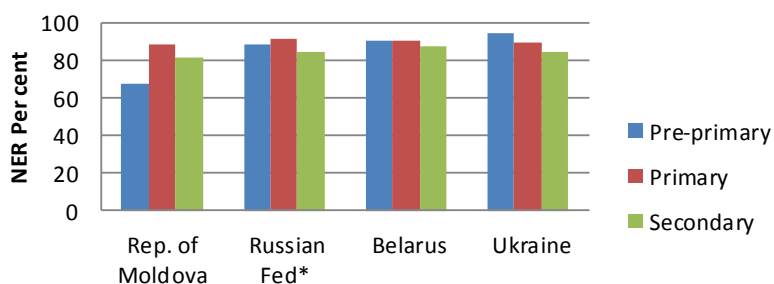
Primary school net enrolment rates across the subregion are also high. The subregion NERs range from 88 per cent in the Rep. of Moldova to 91 per cent in the Russian Federation. There are some noteworthy concerns. First, while Ukraine's enrolment figure is rising, enrolment in the Republic of Moldova, which is the lowest in the CEECIS region, is declining. Also, there are disparities that emerge when the data is disaggregated by geographical location, suggesting that access is not equal across all areas. Secondary enrolment rates across the subregion are lower, ranging from 81 per cent in the Rep. of Moldova to 87 per cent in Belarus. These are on par with CEECIS regional averages (see Figure 2).

#### Children with disabilities

Three educational options are supported within this subregion to educate children with disabilities: homeschooling, institutionalization and inclusive education. Of these options, homeschooling and institutionalization are most popular. This is likely a result of the reality that social stigmas associated with disabilities have historically limited the integration and participation of people with disabilities in mainstream society. In the Republic of Moldova, children with disabilities are officially able to attend regular schools; however, most parents continue to elect homeschooling over sending their child to local schools.

In Ukraine and the Russian Federation, there are slowly growing efforts to shift away from institutionalization. Belarus supports a dual system where

Figure 2. Pre-primary, primary and secondary net enrolment ratio (NER)



\*Gross Enrolment Ratio, UNICEF Russia

many children with physical and mental disabilities are integrated into mainstream schools; others with severe disabilities attend special schools. The training of teachers in mainstream schools on how to accommodate children with mental and physical disabilities, however, continues to be a concern.

#### Educational challenges facing adolescents and youth

Young people in the Western CIS subregion have grown up in a changing society. As adolescents, they have exposure to new ideas and greater opportunities than previous generations. In the last two decades, young people have enjoyed more freedom of choice. They also face more risks to their health and well-being and need to be well informed to protect themselves. Drugs, alcohol and HIV & AIDS are concerns in this subregion. In the Russian Federation, for example, 40 per cent of adolescent males and 30 per cent of females consume alcohol excessively. Increased trafficking of girls under 25 is also a concern, particularly in Belarus. High youth unemployment rates further deter some adolescents in the subregion from continuing schooling.

Additional educational challenges emerge in schools. First, most adolescents in this subregion have experienced major changes in their education. Curricula, timetables and, in many cases, the languages of instruction have shifted in Belarus, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine since the end of the Soviet era. Despite these changes, however, many youth remain disillusioned about school. Complaints of outdated lessons, boredom and minimal connections to real life are common. In the Russian Federation, a lack of resources and overcrowded classrooms in some areas of the country are also challenges for adolescents who are aspiring to obtain the necessary preparation to be accepted into tertiary education.

#### Education in emergencies

Schooling in post-war conflict areas and regions experiencing social unrest are a concern in the Western CIS subregion. In the Northern Caucasus region of the Russian Federation, for example, Chechnya's schools were severely damaged. Efforts to rebuild schools, donate supplies and set up temporary classrooms are underway. Similarly, in the Republic of



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Moldova, despite the social unrest in the separatist region of Transdnistria, efforts to support schooling are evident on both sides of the conflict.

#### Roma education

All nations in the Western CIS need to urgently improve educational access and quality for Roma children. Life for Roma families continues to be dismal in the Western CIS. Poverty is endemic and educational participation at all levels continues to be below that of non-Roma peers. In the Republic of Moldova, no schools offer Roma language instruction. Roma children are also overrepresented in institutions and special schools. In Ukraine, the disparities were so pronounced that the European Roma Rights Centre accused the Government of Ukraine of neglecting the Roma. Unemployment rates for Roma are projected to reach as high as 93 per cent in Belarus.

#### Equity

Beyond the abysmal conditions for Roma in this subregion, gender, economic and geographical inequalities emerge in the Western CIS.

Gender parity at the primary school level has improved significantly in this region, but greater efforts are needed at the secondary level. For instance, boys in the Republic of Moldova are less likely to go to secondary school than girls. In Ukraine, the same gap surfaces at the tertiary level.

Geographic and economic disparities are also a concern. Students in urban centres in Belarus and the Republic of Moldova continue to outperform their peers in remote locations. The gap increases further when comparing the economic wealth of a student. Wealthier students are more likely to remain in school throughout the subregion.

#### Educational quality

Both large international assessments and proxy indicators suggest that the quality of education in the Western CIS varies from country to country.

The Republic of Moldova and the Russian Federation participated in multiple international assessments that yield insights into the educational quality available in their nations. The Republic of Moldova's participation in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) in 1999 and 2003, and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) in 2001 and 2003, reveals that greater efforts are needed to improve the educational standards and quality available to students. In science and mathematics, the Republic of Moldova scored well below the international and regional average. In reading, the Republic of Moldova scored third from last in the region and on par with the PIRLS scale average. The Russian

Federation's participation in TIMSS 2007 and PISA 2006 affirms its reputation for high quality education. On both assessments, the Russian Federation performed well above the averages and at the top for the region.

Proxy indicators, however, suggest that the quality of education in the Russian Federation, along with other nations in the Western CIS, could be improved. Insufficient supplies and lack of textbooks impact student learning and teacher instruction in the Russian Federation. In Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, collection and monitoring of student data continues to be questionable. In Belarus, teacher quality is a concern. Teacher salaries are 80 per cent of the national wage, resulting in retention problems. Across the subregion, efforts to improve educational quality are occurring, but greater strides are still necessary, particularly in the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus. Curriculum reforms and the introduction of new teaching methods have been implemented in many countries.

#### Education financing

GDP expenditures on education in this subregion range from 5.2 per cent in Belarus to 7.6 per cent in the Republic of Moldova (see Figure 3).

#### Educational priorities in the Western CIS

The educational priorities of UNICEF in the Western CIS subregion as well as in the larger region include:

- To eliminate educational disparities and to ensure that out-of-school children are included in formal quality education systems
- To improve the quality and relevance of basic education in order to reduce school drop-out, and to increase completion and achievement rates
- To increase participation in free pre-primary education of children 3–6 years old and formal primary school education by the age of 6 years
- To build social cohesion and tolerance to reduce tension and prevent conflict, especially in areas of ongoing ethnic or political tensions
- To restore schools in emergency education areas (including natural and man-made disasters) and post-crisis situations

**Figure 3. Public expenditures on education in the Western CIS subregion, 2008–2009**

