BULGARIA

Julia Yotova and Charles Glenn

Overview

Education in Bulgaria under the Communist regime that seized power in September 1944 was explicitly modeled upon that in the Soviet Union, with an added (and frequently-stressed) objective, to promote "friendship and brotherhood with the Soviet nation and its peoples" (references here and following in Glenn, 65-90). Since the country had a history of providing a better quality of schooling than that in Soviet schools, it was possible to maintain some of the traditions of Bulgarian education. As in Soviet education, ideology was made central to the purpose and functioning of the school, and the State claimed a monopoly on the right to educate, as a concomitant to its control of newspapers and other forms of information.

It was the position of Party leaders that the Party should seek to bring about a "complete cultural revolution" to accompany the suppression of the capitalist economy; Capitalism must be "suppressed even in human consciousness." Prime Minister Georgi Dimitrov insisted that work and struggle on the cultural and political front are of absolute priority, to root out the rottenness inherited from Capitalism." To this end, the Party should devote special care to (Communist) education within its organization for young children, the "Septembrists," and carry out "a cultural and educational campaign among the people, to free them from all retrograde elements, from obscurantism, from clericalism" (see Glenn, 65).

Russian language study was introduced for all, from kindergartners to adults who had already completed their education.

The fall of the communist regime a decade ago resulted in a complete restructuring of the country's educational system. English became the most studied foreign language in Bulgaria and the study of Russian declined dramatically. The centralized system was changed by creation of a system of local educational councils. The Bulgarian educational system now consists of several types of schools: state, municipal, and independent (including religious).

Bulgarian society has been undergoing major changes over the last decade, and education has been affected in many ways. While some aspects of the previous–and internationally well-regarded--system have suffered in the process, there are also abundant signs of new energies.

The Structure of Schooling

The Unified Secondary Poly-technical Schools Law (ESPU) of 1979 introduced a sweeping educational reform providing the same general education to all students, a single, twelve-grade program heavily emphasizing technical subjects. Teaching plans and programs had to be completely overhauled, with a renewed emphasis upon the need to develop a "deep ideological conviction and Socialist consciousness" in pupils, and to ensure that they internalized an integration of ideology and personal behavior (Gawasow, 10).

This project proved unworkable and by 1985 new specialized schools again were being established. Bulgarian educators recognized that the socialist way of educating led to disregard for the rights of the individual, intolerance of the opinions of others, and aggressive behavior.

Shortly before the fall of the communist regime, the minister of education called for greater specialization among secondary schools, and this has in fact occurred in the decade since, both through differentiation among public schools and through the founding of many tuition-charging independent schools that respond to the concern of parents about the opportunities available to their children – more than two hundred of these now exist in Sofia alone.

An article appearing in 1990 criticized the centralization of the educational system (quoted in Glenn, 80); recent laws and policies have reduced this to a considerable extent and promoted an active and independent school policy. Instead of the strongly centralized system, a new model of administration is being developed. Administrative functions of the units will be redistributed within the system in compliance with their specificity and readiness. School co-operation and partnership with local authorities, governmental and non-governmental organizations is continually expanding (www.minedu.government.bg). The expected results of the educational reform are mainly related to the local conditions within the regions and schools, including expansion of the regions' responsibilities in decision-making and determining the needs for education, as well as study content and personnel management needs.

More than 95% of students attend public-sector schools, which are directly controlled and administered by the public authorities, and funded by the State. While the private sector remains small, it is increasing in numbers and influence, and by some estimates includes more than 200 schools (e mail from Tzako Pantaleev).

The structure of the educational system in Bulgaria is comprised of pre-school education, school education (including basic and secondary education) and higher education. Pre-school education includes children from the age 3 to the age of 6/7 and is optional. Basic education (1-8 grades) in Bulgaria comprises primary school (grades 1-4) and pre-secondary school (grades 5-8). It can be attained at state-owned, municipal and independent schools. Secondary education can be divided into secondary general /comprehensive and profile-oriented/ and vocational. Upper secondary general education in Bulgaria can be divided into secondary comprehensive and secondary profile-oriented. Education in Bulgaria is compulsory up to the age of 16. Special schools also operate for handicapped children.

The Legal Framework

The Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria (1991) regulates the legal basis for the organization of the educational system.

Article 47.1 of the Constitution specifies that "the raising and the education of children until they come of legal age is a right and an obligation of their parents; the state provides assistance.

Article 53.5 states that "citizens and organizations may found schools under the conditions and procedures regulated by law. Instruction in such schools must be consistent with the requirements of the state."

Finally, article 53.6 states that "the state encourages education by establishing and financing schools . . . it supervises all types and levels of schools."

Basic and secondary education are established in compliance with the National Education Act, adopted in October 1991 and most recently amended in December 1998.

Other requirements were set in July 1999 by the Law on the Level of Schooling and The General Educational Minimum and the Syllabus (Higher Education Act, promulgated in *The State Gazette*, No. 112, 27 December 1995).

The new Law on Vocational Education and Training is one of the major steps undertaken by the Bulgarian Government for the approximation of the Bulgarian legislation with that of the European Union.

Some special regulations are also issued by the Ministry of Education and Science.

Freedom to establish non-state schools

American and other Western missionary efforts in the mid-nineteenth century had led to formation of a number of Protestant elementary and secondary schools teaching in Western languages, most notably the American secondary school at Simeonovo; these had a significant impact on the Bulgarian elite. There were also Catholic schools operated by international religious orders. Under the communist regime that seized power in September 1944, all independent schools were closed; the only one allowed was that operated by the Soviet embassy for the children of its staff. Schools and charitable institutions operated by churches were unacceptable to the new regime. The American and German secondary schools were closed forthwith and, as of September 1948, "all existing foreign schools at all levels and types of education, set up or supported by foreign governments, by various religious missions and congregations, or individuals" were closed (Decree for the Foreign Schools, *Official Gazette*, 180). Churches were forbidden to engage in secular education, though they could (with State approval) operate clergy training institutions provided that these provided courses in Marxism.

The first Constitution of the People's Republic of Bulgaria, adopted in 1947, provided the basis for this action by providing that "[e]ducation is secular, with a democratic and progressive spirit." "Educational establishments are state-owned" and the education provided by the state "is based on the achievements of modern science and the Marxist-Leninist ideology" (Article 45, sections 2 and 3).

As noted above, the post-communist Constitution, article 53.5, states that "citizens and organizations may found schools under the conditions and procedures regulated by law. Instruction in such schools must be consistent with the requirements of the state."

A list of requirements for schools is found in article 16 of the Public Education Act, while article 17 specifies that some of these requirements are to be set in detail by law and others by regulations.

The law provides for heavy fines for anyone who operates a school for pupils of compulsory schooling age without government authorization (Public Education Act, article 48a).

Home schooling

The Public Education Act, article 47, provides for fines for "parents or guardians who do not ensure the attendance of their children of compulsory school age at school." There is no mention of home schooling in the law. Parents who can afford it often provide supplemental private lessons for their children.

School choice not limited by family income

Public schooling is free. Because of the under-funding of the educational system, schools are allowed to rent out their facilities or operate supplemental programs and courses to earn income, which must be applied to the educational purposes of the school. Some offer fitness courses, language courses, or courses to prepare for entrance examinations; teaching in these supplemental programs is also an important source of outside income for teachers. Article 44.8 of the Education Act stipulates that "government departments and municipalities may not lower the subsidy of schools . . . at the expense of the self-generated income" from such permitted activities.

Public schools may also charge for activities that are not covered by the state education requirements, though these fees are subject to state guidelines (Public Education Act, 44.4).

The Public Education Act, article 9, provides that

> Each citizen may exercise his/her right to education in a freely-chosen school and type of education depending on his/her individual preferences and faculties;
>
> For people who have not come of age the right referred to in paragraph 1 shall be exercised by their parents or guardians.

The primary forms of choice that are publicly-funded are the choice among specialized or vocational secondary schools, and the choice to receive instruction partly in Turkish or another minority language. The latter is guaranteed (though not always delivered) by article 8.2 of the Public Education Act, which states that

Schoolchildren whose mother tongue is other than Bulgarian, besides the compulsory study of the Bulgarian language, may study their mother tongue in municipal schools under the protection and control of the state.

This right is the outcome of a long struggle on the part of the Turkish minority, which came to public attention in 1989 when the communist regime sought to eliminate their distinctiveness (see Glenn, 71-79, and the references there).

While there is thus some choice within the public sector, independent schools do not receive public funding, and in fact are subjected to extra costs for property taxes and customs duties on the importation of textbooks. What is more, pupils in private schools do not benefit from "government merit scholarships, city transportation cost reduction," or the use of municipal recreation facilities for school programs.

The Public Education Act, article 5 states, in its entirety, "Education is secular." This does not prevent independent schools from having a religious character, but it does reduce the diversity and parent choice available among public schools.

When read with the provision of the Public Education Act article 11, that non-public schools "are not funded by the state budget," this makes it clear that the opportunity to choose a school with a religious character would be limited to those parents who could pay tuition for a independent school. Julia Yotova comments, however, that

> the religious schools in Bulgaria would typically be free of charge or the charge is of no significant value. The problem with religious schools is more in the recruitment of students, that is, the free decision of parents and students is questionable because there is very little information about religious schools that is offered publicly. The Ministry of Education has a specialist dealing with

> religious schools yet the Ministry is the last resort for students or parents to ask of such opportunities due to fear of repression or simply expectations of inadequate answers, both remnants of past experiences. Thus the role of and the free access to the independent religious schools is still to be determined . . . (email October 2001).

In addition to religious schools, a number of fee-charging private schools with an emphasis on high academic standards have been founded–or re-founded–over the past dozen years, including the Italian Liceum and the Classical Gymnazium. The most prestigious private high school is the American College of Sofia (ACS). It operates under the supervision of an American Board of Trustees and was reopened in 1992 after an effective closedown by the communist regime that lasted for 50 years. Unfortunately, the ACS was not able to sustain its original mission . . . which stated that the admission would be solely on merit and all candidates who pass the highly competitive exams (3500 students competed in 1992 for 100 seats) would be admitted [without regard to] their abilities to pay. The ACS admitted its first 100 students with a symbolic tuition fee (all Bulgarian candidates were exceptionally bright and exceptionally poor). At present, the mission of the school has not been changed on paper, but in practice the student body comes from a much more affluent family background. Since 1992, the school has added some exceptions that allow students with lower academic abilities to be admitted on a higher tuition fee rate. Thus, excellent students with strong and promising academic abilities are discouraged to apply . . . because their families cannot afford to pay the tuition of $1200 set by the school Board (the average Bulgarian family of 4 lives on approximately $250 per month).

Obviously there is some tension between this situation and Bulgaria's adherence to the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (1966), which provides that:

> States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents . . . to choose for their children schools, other than those established by public authorities, which conform to such minimum educational standards as may be laid down or approved by the State and to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions (article 13,3).

School distinctiveness protected by law and policy

The Public Education Act, article 9, guarantees that "each citizen may exercise his/her right to education in a freely chosen school and type of education depending on his/her individual preferences and faculties."

The Law on the Level of Schooling, The General Educational Minimum and the Syllabus, article 18,. gives each school the responsibility of designing its own "syllabus," which "establishes the subjects that are part of elective and optional instruction and the distribution of classes by subject. It shall correspond to [the] interests of the schoolchildren and to the capacity of the school." This syllabus is to be approved by the "pedagogical council" of the school, and then is subject to review and approval by the regional education officials.

Distinctive character

While Catholic and Protestant schools, supported by a small minority of the population and suspect because of foreign connections, were easily suppressed by the communist regime in the mid-forties, it was a more complex matter to deal with the schools serving the large Turkish minority, representing about 10 percent of the population in 1952. The new Communist regime was concerned to distance itself

from the oppressive actions of the pre-war regime toward this group in the spirit of the "proletarian internationalism" of which the Soviet Union boasted, and initially provided assurances that their educational concerns would be respected. This included, as in the non-Russian republics of the Soviet Union, providing schools in which the minority language was used for instruction.
Turkish schools had been, for decades, the primary issue around which the concerns of the minority community revolved and through which their organizational life developed, and the attitude of successive Bulgarian regimes toward these schools reflected a positive or (in most cases) negative position toward Bulgarian Turks. A law in 1921 had provided that "Turkish schools which are equivalent to public Bulgarian schools in educational programmes, rules and regulations and quality of education will be given financial aid like the public schools."

These reforms, seeking to treat the Turkish minority with respect while allowing it do develop its own institutions, were carried out by the Agrarian regime of Alexand_r Stamboliiski; with his overthrow (and assassination) in 1923, a period of reaction set in which was much less favorable to the Bulgaria's Turks. The regime in power from 1934 to 1944 did much to crush the Turkish educational system that had grown up locally with little government encouragement. "During these ten years, about 75 per cent of the Turkish children of school age could not go to school. About 1250 Turkish primary schools and 12 Turkish junior high schools were closed down" (Şimşir, 33-34).

With this background, many Turks welcomed the Communist-dominated Fatherland Front which took power with the advancing Red Army in 1944, and the Turkish branch of that organization formulated a program including universal compulsory education to be carried out in Turkish, apart from instruction in Bulgarian. The directors of Turkish schools should themselves be Bulgarian Turks, and the salaries of school staff paid by the government (Şimşir, 136).

The period of tolerance and even support for ethnic diversity in education was brief. In February 1946 Prime Minister Georgi Dimitrov insisted that the Communist regime "must ensure that the Slavs have the leading role in the Balkans and that the Balkans will belong only to the people of the Balkans. We must remove all traces left in the Balkans by the Osmanli [Ottoman] Empire." A few months later, all Turkish schools were nationalized, under a law that provided that "the state and municipalities open schools of any grade as they are needed for minorities in Bulgaria to meet their educational needs and to provide them with the means of having education in their own languages. The material expenses of these schools are met by the municipalities while the salaries of teachers and of administrative staff are paid by the state." The endowments which many of the private Turkish schools had possessed, and their buildings and equipment, were transferred to the State (Şimşir, 150-51).

This nationalization was allegedly in response to the demands of the Turkish community but in fact also served to bring their schools – along with other private schools – under State control and thereby of extending the Communist Party's monopoly of formal education. The initial measures toward Turkish schools, however, were benign, and the 1947 Constitution provided that "[n]ational minorities have the right to be educated in their vernacular and to develop their national culture, while the study of Bulgarian is compulsory" (Georgoff, 12).

Some Turkish leaders pointed out, however, that the regime could have provided the same practical support to Turkish education while maintaining its private status, as the Agrarian government of Stamboliiski had done in the early twenties. "Turkish schools should retain their private status," a group of teachers argued, "but their financial matters should be undertaken by the government" (Şimşir, 149).

Soon enough, the education authorities showed their intention of using Turkish schools to indoctrinate children in a Marxist-Leninist worldview. An important goal of school improvement was "to fight the religious fanaticism among some circles of the Turkish population." Teachers were told that "one of the

most important goals of the teaching of the Turkish language is to give [a] Communist formation to Turkish children," and "ten-year-old Turkish children recited loudly: 'The Party, you are a beloved Mother for us.'" The Turkish school readers produced in Bulgaria mocked Islam and sought in every way to distance children from the influence of Turkey.

Although Koranic instruction continued in some Turkish schools until 1952, it was abolished in that year, together with out-of-school Koran lessons. Freedom of religion was proclaimed by a law enacted in 1949, but this law also provided that "the education of children and of the youth are specifically reserved for the state and are [sic] outside the abilities [that is, the competencies] of the faiths and their ministers." Over the subsequent decades of Communist rule, "Islam was presented as the main obstacle to Turkish-Bulgarian brotherhood" (Mollahüseyin, 141).

The function of the school in ethnically-mixed areas, one communist-era authority wrote, is "the complete incorporation of the Bulgarian Turks to the building of Socialism and Communism and their coming closer to the rest of the working people in our country." The influence of the school must be extended and educational settings created which take children out of their families and social circles for extended periods of time, in order to overcome the improper influence of the home environment and make them true builders of Communism (Tahirov, 159ff.).

Tolerance of diversity and the claims of the Turkish minority began to come to an end in the 1958-59 school year, when many Turkish-language schools in ethnically-mixed areas were merged with Bulgarian-language schools; instruction in the resulting mixed classes was provided only in Bulgarian. This policy was extended the following year; the remaining Turkish schools were closed or converted to Bulgarian-language schools pursuant to a Ministerial circular of June 1960. Parents could request supplemental Turkish-language classes for their children for the next decade, until these, too, were ended (Şimşir, 200-202).

The formal rights of the Turkish minority were restored in November 1989, with the fall of the Zhivkov Government. By early 1991, the Turkish community in Bulgaria was vigorously demanding that their mother tongue be taught in schools, with up to 20,000 pupils staging a school strike to reinforce this demand. Despite some expressed interest in restoring separate Turkish schools, this has not been a primary focus of Turkish community demands.

As in other Balkan countries, the problem of Gypsies and of the schooling of their children is a pressing issue for Bulgaria.

Many of the new post-communist independent schools have a career focus, as parents seek to give their children a competitive advantage in the changing economy. In Sofia, there are newly-opened secondary schools of banking and finance, economics, tourism, trade and commerce, sports, music, and art. English-language schools and schools that stress other Western languages are especially popular.

However, there are also independent schools which reflect a distinctive worldview or culture. There are, for example, Jewish and Armenian schools as well as an Orthodox seminary in Sofia, and an Orthodox secondary school in Plovdiv. In general, though, religion (in contrast with Turkish ethnicity) is not an issue about which Bulgarians divide.

The more significant issue, for many parents, is to find a school that will offer a better educational opportunity. Having suffered a heavy unemployment, great economic instability, and financial crises, Bulgarian parents realize the importance of education in the struggle for economic survival. The shift of opinion that occurred in the last decade is from general to concrete, from passive to active learning. This materialized in the active hunt for specific schools which offer specific skills that are believed to be job

related in the future. Some of the reasons for a greater demand for private schools comes from the fact that most, if not all, private schools offer distinctive academic curriculum. The high schools which were newly opened in the city of Sofia, for example, include a high school emphasizing banking and finances, a high school emphasizing economics, another specializing in tourism, another with a concentration on trade and commerce, and a sports high school. Of course, there are many new schools that offer the curriculum of the already existing language schools. Private English language schools constitute the greatest number of language schools.

Decisions about admitting pupils

Since independent schools must derive their income from tuition payments, they do not generally have high entrance requirements. There are, however, schools for which admission is based upon academic ability.

A nation-wide, unified process of entrance exams helps with the selection process for some very competitive middle and high schools with distinctive character. The type and number of these examinations are determined by the higher education institutions and are closely linked to each institution's respective profile. The language, social sciences, and math public schools attract students for a highly competitive entrance 'battle'. The preparation for this 'battle' begins at least two years before that by taking additional private lessons, . . . which ends in a round of two to three 4-hour written exams. The entrance exams for these high schools is highly selective, usually 10 candidates for one space.

Decisions about staff

All teachers, in independent as well as public schools, must meet state requirements; "teachers are trained in higher education institutions" (article 39.2, Public Education Act). In 1997 State Requirements for Obtaining the Professional Qualification of Teacher were developed.

Several higher education institutions offer programs for the qualification of teacher with a duration of at least 4 years for a Bachelor's degree and at least 5 years for a Master's degree. Prior to the entry into force of the new Higher Education Act /1995, there were also the so called "Semi-higher institutions" offering non-university programs for teacher training; a significant number of these institutions have already been transformed into colleges (www.minedu.government.bg/information/explication.htm).

A diploma of completed higher education level could be obtained after successful passing of State examinations with theoretical and practical orientation. The final qualifications could be Bachelor's/Master's degree Diploma as well as a Certificate for the professional qualification of Teacher. This professional qualification could also be attained after graduation from the university and passing supplementary examinations in Pedagogy, Psychology and Methodology of Teaching. After obtaining at least a Bachelor's degree, students are entitled to exercise the teaching profession within the respective educational level: pre-school, primary lower- and upper secondary.

Public school principals are appointed by the School Inspectorate, a mediating body between schools and the Ministry of Education." They have authority to recruit staff, providing the required qualifications are met (email from Tzako Pantaleev).

All private schools pay much higher salaries and thus they attract teachers who are really motivated for a challenging new start and who are really able to adapt more easily to new requirements. Private schools may choose their own teachers. Since the state requires that all teachers, both in the private and in the

public sector, answer the state requirements for teaching qualifications and diplomas, parents feel certain that private schools will have the better qualified teachers.

Accountability for school quality

Bulgaria has a required core curriculum for all grades of elementary and secondary schooling, with some flexibility in the final year as students prepare for university entrance requirements. There is also a required grading system and examinations.

Independent schools are required to comply with the educational goals and the grading system set by the government. If they do so, their diplomas are recognized for university admission and other purposes.

As the educational system as a whole is in a process of preparation for the implementation of the 12-years schooling model, combined with compulsory matriculation examinations, standards for educational degrees, educational minimum and syllabus, as well as standards for study content and assessment are in process of elaboration. The qualifications for secondary general education are subject to various changes in compliance with the amendments to the Education Act .

Schooling is divided into three 4-year levels, at the end of each of which a certificate is earned (Law on the Level of Schooling, The General Educational Minimum and the Syllabus, article 6).

At the end of secondary education, the state matriculation examinations are required; "no schoolchild may be relieved of them" (article 7.3). At the end of secondary school, all high school students must take both two compulsory core exams, as well as additional exams of the student's choosing. The exams are administered by school faculty and staff. Teams of teachers and Ministry of Education experts develop the content and grading criteria. Each school faculty grades their students' work based on the common criteria.

Holders of secondary school leaving qualifications (Diploma of Secondary Education) are entitled to continue their education on a higher educational level (university and non-university), without restriction as to the choice of a higher education establishment. The secondary school leaving qualification also gives access to the labour market.

In December 2000, the Ministry of Education launched the Education Modernization Project, financed by the World Bank. It comprises a component dealing with teaching and learning in general education and aims at improving the quality of teaching and learning in general education. A new standards based curriculum, new student assessment and evaluation instruments will be introduced and a new inspection system related to the new curriculum will be designed and tested on a pre-pilot basis. The in-service training system for teachers, school directors, inspectors, and local education administrators will be reformed (World Bank, Sofia Office, News Release No. 2000/21/ECCBG0.

Teaching of values

The Public Education Act, article 15.1, defines the purpose of the state education requirements as including "development of free, moral, enterprising and law-abiding individuals, respecting other people's rights, culture, language and religion."

The Law on the Level of Schooling, The General Educational Minimum and the Syllabus, article 9.2, further specifies that education should "provide conditions for the formation of values, creating a sense of Bulgarian national identity, a sense of respect, compassion, as well as civil duty."

References

Valuable advice was provided, in the preparation of this section, by Dr. Tzako Georgiev Pantaleev, a Humphrey Fellow at Boston University.

Miltscho Gawasow, *Das Bildungssytem in der Volksrepublik Bulgarien*, Sofia: SOFIA-PRESS, 1985.

Peter John Georgeoff, *The Social Education of Bulgarian Youth*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1968.

Charles L. Glenn, *Educational Freedom in Eastern Europe*, Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 1995.

Halit Mollahüseyin, "Muslims in Bulgaria: A Status Report," *Journal Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* 5, 1 (January) 1984.

Republic of Bulgaria Laws for Education, HRDC and ETF, Sofia: St.Kliment Ohridski University Press, 1999.

Bilâl N. _im_ir, *The Turks of Bulgaria (1878-1985)*, London: K. Rustem & Brother, 1988.

Shukri Tahirov, [*The Bulgarian Turks on the Road to Socialism*], Sofia 1979, 159ff, translated for the author by Bissera Antikarova.

Julia Yotova, "Educational Freedom in Transitional post-communist Economies: An Example from Bulgaria," December 2000, March 2001.

http://www.minedu.government.bg/english.html