



Tracking school dropouts in Bulgaria

ESPN Flash Report 2018/30

GEORGE BOGDANOV AND BOYAN ZAHARIEV – EUROPEAN SOCIAL POLICY NETWORK

JUNE 2018

During the 2016/2017 school year, more than 20,000 children dropped out of the educational system in Bulgaria. In the summer of 2017, the government decided to create an inter-institutional mechanism to get these children back to school. As a result of their combined forces, the educational, social, health and administrative units and municipalities reported the re-enrolling, or enrolling for the very first time, of nearly 17,000 students to pre-school and school education.

Description

During the 2016/2017 school year, more than 20,000 children dropped out of the educational system in Bulgaria. The proportion of children dropping out, or at risk of dropping out, rises as they get older, especially for the last five years in school, according to the annual reports of the National Statistical Institute. In high school, every 7th scholar has dropped out. The percentage of drop-outs and non-attending students reaches 30% in villages and over 15% in small towns. One of the strategic goals of the Bulgarian government in the framework of the Europe 2020 strategy, launched by EU Heads of State and Government in 2010, is to reduce early school-leaving to less than 11% by the end of this decade. This goal currently seems very ambitious, as the most recent data (2017) show a country figure of 12.7%, with much higher figures in less populated areas (Eurostat). Compulsory pre-school education for 5- and 6-year-olds is of major importance, as it contributes to reducing the risk of school segregation and dropout, but the coverage is still far from satisfactory; the coverage for the 2017/2018 school year is 78.4% for pre-school education, according to the National Statistical Institute Education Report for 2017.

In the summer of 2017, the government decided to create an inter-institutional mechanism to tackle early school-leaving, involving the educational, social, health and administrative services as well as municipalities. 206,387 children and pupils aged 5 to

18 who have dropped out of the education system or have never been enrolled were identified (Ministry of Education and Science 2018). In March 2018, the Education Minister announced that, as a result of the massive tracking campaigns, including visits to 207,000 addresses, 189,000 children were visited. Over 80% of school-age children not enrolled in Bulgarian schools were actually found to be living abroad. 1,134 teams, including more than 11,600 participants carried out home visits (ibid). The main burden of this fell on the teachers who made the checks, in addition to the rest of their work preparing for the new school year. This caused tension between teachers and their unions and other stakeholders (mainly social workers and representatives of the local authorities), who should have taken part. As a consequence, the Ministry of Education announced that out of the 21,915 students enrolled back during the period, 5,800 had dropped again by the end of the first term.

Despite the huge success reported by the government, many teachers and experts have expressed doubts that such a large number of missing students were actually permanently staying abroad and therefore could not attend a Bulgarian school. There is no EU mechanism for tracking school enrolment after the students leave their home country. Furthermore, it is not certain how many of the new enrolments were the result of the new initiative. At the beginning of each school year, thousands of school dropouts tend to return to school, at

LEGAL NOTICE

This document has been prepared for the European Commission. However, it reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

least for a while, before disappearing again. The Ministry of Education has indicated its great satisfaction at the success of the mechanism and in March 2018 it announced that, as part of the new national strategy for prevention of dropouts for the period 2018-2020, the mechanism will become a permanent instrument; various accompanying measures (including funding) will be put in place to help the teachers, social workers and other professionals in their work with the students and their families.

Outlook & commentary

In addition to the tracking of non-attending children, many non-governmental organisations, including the National Network for Children in its Annual report, suggest that a comprehensive policy on school retention and prevention of dropping out should be developed and implemented urgently. It should aim at supporting families at risk and not merely sanctioning them with unbearable and useless fines that negatively affect children, without changing parental practice.

The objectives of the new strategy for prevention of dropouts are important but the concrete implementation of the strategy and its outcomes will represent a major challenge because the crucial problems are not at the national level but rather at the level of municipalities and families: lack of sustainable policies for education and young people, lack of professional perspective, high rates of migration, as well as low levels of trust and interest in the educational system - not only among students but also and more importantly among parents. This makes the gap between high and low performing students huge and supports the thesis that the social

background is closely related to the long-term success in life for children and the educational system in Bulgaria is failing to fill this gap.

The tracking mechanism identified quite a few children for whom the school education system is not adequate. The Bulgarian education system is poorly equipped to help students who are substantially lagging behind their peers. This is due to inflexible curricula and a lack of innovative methods for remedial instruction. The 2017 Monitoring Report on Education2030, which raises the main question "Are the reforms sustainable?", states that there is still not enough effort put into ensuring equal access to education for every child - removing the social barriers and economic disparities suffered by students.

In some places, the educational environment is not very welcoming. There have been parental protests, widely reported in the media, against having children with behavioural problems enrolled in their school. Such children are, of course, a challenge for educational authorities and teachers. There has been a shortage of social workers for years, while their involvement is crucial for the success of almost any set of measures for re-enrolment of children who have missed one or more school years. It is also necessary to deploy new instruments to address issues such as poor housing, poverty, domestic violence and many other deep-rooted social problems generating school dropout. The Vice-Chairperson of the Commission of Education and Science in the National Assembly stated that there is a strong need for change in the legislation to regulate the legal situation of children left by parents in extended family care.

Further reading

Antonovich, L. (2017), A Quick overview of the mechanism for cooperation between institutions to enrol and retain students at school, Sofia, 17 November 2017, UNICEF.

DarikNews.bg (2017), The Mechanism will work permanently, (interview with Galya Zacharieva, Vice-Chairperson of the Commission of Education and Science in the National Assembly), available from <http://bit.ly/2HqLPif> (in Bulgarian).

Education2030 (2017), Monitoring report 2017: Are the reforms sustainable?, available from <http://bit.ly/2EyJ64N> (in Bulgarian).

European Commission (2017), Education and Training Monitor 2017 Bulgaria.

KT Podkrepa Education and teachers' Union (2017), Official position on the work of the mobile groups in the implementation of the Mechanism, available from the web-page of the Union, available on <http://bit.ly/2OebbHz> (in Bulgarian).

Ministry of Education and Science (2018), The teams for prevention of dropout of children and students will work permanently, available from <https://bit.ly/2DGUp9B> (in Bulgarian).

Ministry of Education and Science (2017), The policy for increasing school attendance should continue over the next years (interview with the Minister of Education), available from the web-page of the Ministry (in Bulgarian).

National Network for Children (2018), Annual Report 2018, available from: http://nmd.bg/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Belejnik-2018_web.pdf (in Bulgarian).

National Network for Children (2017), Annual Report 2017, available from: http://nmd-bg/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/A4_belejnik2017_web.pdf (in Bulgarian).

National Statistical Institute, Education in the Republic of Bulgaria 2017, Annual report, available from the web-page of the Institute (in Bulgarian and English).

Official website of the Mechanism for cooperation between institutions to enrol and retain students at school: www.back2school.mon.bg (in Bulgarian).

Author

[George Bogdanov](#) (National Network for Children) and [Boyan Zahariev](#) (Open Society Institute)