

Teacher in Bulgaria — Mission: Almost Impossible

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Abstract: The paper discusses the problems in Bulgarian education system. The aim of the paper is to examine and explain the reasons for necessity of reforms in the system and how the reforms made so far effect the teacher's work and the education itself. Teacher's job is to educate and focus on students' wellbeing both physically and intellectually. Nowadays Bulgarian teacher faces many obstacles in performing his duty. Besides his main duty to teach Bulgarian teacher has many other as well. He has become not just an educator, but family consult, security guard, administrator, social worker and many more. The new system of funding schools empowered the students and made teachers helpless to impose discipline in or out of the classroom.

Key words: Bulgarian education, teacher, communist era, delegated budget, student

1. Introduction

“It's not a shame not to know,
but it's shame not to learn.”

Chinese proverb

Teacher is not just a job or job title, but mission, a calling. It requires passion, understanding, care, dedication and many more, but most of all love for knowledge and desire to helping others to develop their potencies. They not just do their job with pleasure but go that extra mile that makes the difference in their students' life. All that form love for education. These people are true educators. Every one of us has encountered man or woman like that. Everyone has had the pleasure to meet and have that special teacher, that became the keystone, the north star in one's journey in life. Sometimes they have been recognized in the public eye, but most of the time they stay in shadows. Either way the role that teacher plays in one's life is the important one.

Unfortunately, theory is not like practice and not all teachers as what we'd like to imagine. Many, even most of the people practicing that profession are doing it only for the paycheck and don't get bother to put much efforts. Reasons for that are many: sometimes they do not see the point of trouble themselves to do more than the required minimum, especially since the students comes to school with no desire to learn; other times the teacher really want to give more and more, to make a difference, but he/she faces the ignorance and stubbornness of parents, that stops the kids from school for various reasons(fear, cultural difference, child exploitation etc.); occasionally the teachers hand are being tied up by the system itself.

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Nowadays Bulgarian teacher has been stripped off from most of the rights and has almost no options to influence or change student's minds. The educational system has changed, but unlikely other countries where every change is methodically and cautiously calculated, in Bulgaria every change is made almost out of the blue, not realizing the full longtime effect. That kind of changes made Bulgarian education system and the quality of service it provides, alongside with the level of professionalism and student's accomplishments to drop on the chard. In not so distant past Bulgarian students were almost always on the firsts top places according to different statistics (literacy rate, mathematics, language etc.). Nowadays that kind of accomplishments are occasional and limited to mathematics and computer science, which on one hand is pride of pride, but on other hand is pity having in minds the past.

In the following pages I'll try to give a sketch of the present educational and social reality in Bulgaria as well as comparing it with the past in order to understand at least partially some of the reasons for teachers' discontent of nowadays situation.

2. A Brief History of Bulgarian Education

Education in Bulgaria, although fundamentally national in character, has significant foreign influences. The first schools in Bulgaria were opened in the 9th century by the Tsar Simeon The Great. Two notable Universities were also established in that period at Ohrid and the capital Preslav. That period is known as "The golden age" in Bulgarian culture. Bulgaria became under the urge of Ottoman Empire for a period of almost 5 centuries (1393–1878). Russian impact was most pronounced during the period of the national revival in the nineteenth century and stemmed the ideas of Slavophilism and pan-Orthodoxy. Modern schools began opening in the early 19th century (during the National Revival) first for boys and then for girls (Popov, 2017). Those schools provided only basic education, such as reading, writing, and basic arithmetic. Students who wished to continue their education had to go study abroad. Many young Bulgarians went to pursue their education in St. Petersburg and Odessa. Immediately after the liberation from Ottoman domination in 1878, achieved with decisive help from Russia, Russian experts remained in Bulgaria to assist with the establishment of the administrative structure of the young nation-state. After Bulgaria overturned the Ottoman rule in 1878, it started laying the foundations of its educational system. In 1878 the government passed the Temporary Law on National Schools. This law stimulated the establishment of schools in villages. However, many peasants did not let their children attend school because they thought education was not relevant to peasant life. Furthermore, several universities were established in the period 1878–1918. After the end of the World War II, Bulgaria became a satellite state of the Soviet Union and was heavily subjected to Russian influence in the sphere of culture and education. The model of the entire education system, and particularly that of higher education, was designed to emulate the Soviet education system. Russian language became a compulsory subject as early as fifth grade and intensified at every subsequent school level. The generations of Bulgarians educated under communist rule have command of Russian which provided immediate access to a much larger scope of publications. Russian was promoted as a lingua franca among professional circles of the Eastern Bloc nations. During the communist era, the Soviet Union had a great impact on Bulgarian educational system. A new form of education was brought in. Emphasis on liberal arts was replaced by increased technical training as well planning economy and education. (5) Many Bulgarians received their higher education in Soviet institutions of higher learning, particularly in the technical fields. Although, after 1989, Russian influences on Bulgarian education were on the decline. After the end of the Communist Era (1989), the

Bulgarian educational system was completely reconstructed. The government sought to depoliticize the system and take the opinions of others into consideration, which led to constant reconstructing, developing and changing of the system as up today.

A Chinese proverb says: “If your plan is for one year, plant a rice. If your plan is for ten years, plant tree. If your plan is for one hundred years, educate children.” The meaning is that it takes time and lots of efforts to educate people and to turn them into productive members of one society. Education is complicate task that needs not just a goodhearted teacher especially if the education has involved into systematic government policy and service like nowadays. If in the past the education was privilege mainly for the royalty and aristocracy or locked into monastery, now it’s accessible to all regardless their social status. Furthermore, it is compulsory, which makes it even more complicated and demanding understanding of other areas of life that influence the educational system.

Education in Bulgaria is overseen by the Ministry of Education and Science. Since 2012, compulsory education includes two years of preschool education (usually starting around age 5–6), before children start primary school. Education is compulsory until age of 16. Education at state-owned schools is free of charge, except for the higher education schools, colleges and universities (Dachkova, 2016). The education is a service targeting people, therefore the birthrate, alongside economy and political and social situation, plays a key role in changing education policy. All is connected and it’s impossible to understand one of them without at least mentioning one of the others.

3. Education During Communist Era

The main conflict in people opinion about the way the education, political and social system has transformed comes from the memories of the past. Although people enjoy the advancement in technology and way of living, they often mourn at the past, comparing it’s standards with nowadays’ one. On account of education as mentioned above, one of the most important aspects is birthrate. If there are not enough children to be born who the education system will provides for. During the time of Soviet Union influence or communist era in Bulgaria, the birthrate was high. The population was approximately 9 million people. Reasons for that as mentioned before are many. On one hand the government policy was to launch varies initiatives towards supporting and encouraging young families to have many children. Government funding for real estate purchases, which gave opportunity for many people to buy and own their homes (that put Bulgaria as one of the countries with highest percent of ownership over properties). Government redeeming bank lawns and debts, depending of number of children, for example: one kid — 25% of the lawn, 2 kids — 50% and so on. Families with 3 or more children ware giving as example for others. These families have been credited as heroes of communist society, in other words during the communist era the government invested in increasing the population.

Many critics would say that, that kind of regime was destined to fail and the negative aspects are way more than the positive ones regarding human rights, freedom, opportunities etc. (all what is value in capitalist and democratic societies). However, the facts stand out and many people still speak about that time with delight. At that time teachers enjoyed respect and had been credited as very important part of the society. The whole society was engaged to accomplish the goal of the government — that of course was common among all communist country at the time and the communist idea as whole. Regardless the negatives associated with the regime teacher`s job was fully focused to educate students.

The high birthrate caused classroom to be filled with students and the attendance rate to reach nearly 100%. Rate like that had been kept even after the wind of political change, at least at the first decade. In 1998 enrollment in the primary grades was 93 percent of eligible students, and enrollment in the secondary grades was 81 percent of eligible students. The communist standards regarding respect, obedience and high moral values, although highly criticized today and depicted as false, illusory or lacking true spiritual ground, caused teachers to have a lot of rights and secured stable and peaceful work environment. Students had the tendency to behave in and out of school and the occasional deviance behavior was fast and effectively dealt with. School uniforms were mandatory and daily checked. Any mismatch or misplaced part of the uniform that can cause inappropriateness in student's look was strongly criticized and even punished. For example, if a student forgot his/hers hat or came to school with dirty shirt, or improperly dressed he or she was not allowed to enter the school facility and return home to change and come back in proper look. That may sound ridiculous and way out of normal order by today standards and views, but in a community where the communist idea for exemplary society is the main vision, that kind of control is normal. In fact, every citizen knew and followed the rules, sometimes gladly sometimes no, but that was the reality at that time. The exceptions were proclaimed as dissidents and dealt with accordingly, which is a common practice in all communist countries.

State-own schools and universities were common one with only few private schools. Party propaganda and the vision for an all-round developed personality were widespread. As mentioned before the focus of education was to increase technical training as the demand for professionals in technical areas in heavy and light industry was high. The plan economy required certain number of workers in factories and agriculture, but certain amount of specialist in deferent fields as well. In order to produce the demanded cadres, the education system should also be planed. The amount of schools was large in order to meet expectations. Schools were opened in every city, town and village, even in the most remote part of the country there was a school. The government launched a program for opening of night schools so people who for one reason or another have dropped out of school to have the chance to come back and get at least a high school diploma. Furthermore, schools were open inside the factories, so the workers can have even easier access to education. The enrollment in universities as the economy required was plan as well.

School violence was not so big problem, as mentioned before. The deviant behavior was contaminated on a spot and the occasional dogged ones were sent in special schools for reeducation and behavior correction. Students respected teachers and schoolmates. The teachers had complete parents support and understanding when it comes to pedagogical methodology and practice. Teacher's way of teaching, presenting the material or student's scoring were not question by the parent on a contrary if any student received low score the parent blamed not the teacher professionalism, but kid's laciness and made sure it not happened again. The parent had faith in the education system.

4. Education after the Changes till Now

The change in political system caused many struggles in social and education system. The new government intended to reform everything from the communist system, proclaimed it as old, corrupted, bad and unsuitable with the new capitalist vision and goals of the country. Bulgaria's birthrate became lower every year, which led to decreasing of total primary- and secondary-school enrollment in the post-communist era, causing reductions in teaching staff and facilities. Ministry of education and culture launched a pilot program to handle the problem

with missing students. The system of delegated budgets was introduced experimentally in 1995, initially at 4 municipalities in the country. Later number of municipalities in which a delegated budget was implemented gradually increased and since 2008, the system became mandatory for all schools in the country (Gancheva, 2017).

The introduction of the system of delegated budgets was intended not only as a reform of the financing of the secondary education system, but also a form of implementation of the decentralization of governance reform. Providing schools with the opportunity to independently manage financial, human and material resources was a prerequisite for increasing the effectiveness, scope and quality of the educational services provided. The government intention of reform was part of government initiative to reform the whole society in contrast to communist one. The true to be said the delegated budgets system had its positive and even beneficial sides especially at the first years from launching the program. The most beneficial side for schools was the ability of principles to renovate the school facilities. Before the political changes, everything was directly influenced by the government policy that is characteristic of all communist regimes.

As mentioned, everything is connected, and one policy affects the whole public sphere, so the new state move, driven by the pursuit of personal liberty and liberation from the custody and control of central government (communism), has influenced and changed the entire world and way of thinking of the people. The new power began a radically different policy aimed at a capitalist and more competitive society. For this purpose, it was necessary to change not only the economy but also the social and educational system. Education little by little began to lose its prestige. The decreased natural population growth suggested a rippling problem, but the government did not pay attention at the time. Reform in education has led to the opening of more higher education institutions offering similar majors. The number of graduates drastically increased, but the labor market was not prepared for them. Unemployment rose drastically as there was a saturation of staff, which led to the appearance of sarcastic comments such as “Learn to be unemployed”. Another problem was the fashion of majors. Thus, for a few years now, one or another major became popular, leading to years full with graduate psychologists, lawyers, PR specialists and so on. At present, these are the majors related to the IT sector.

However, these same reforms have resulted in closing of many primary and secondary schools, the drop in teacher positions and the loss of jobs. The introduction of a delegated budget whose idea was to give schools autonomy as well as competition between them in order to increase the quality of the offered education caused results that were more negative than expected. Indeed, the first years, when birthrates have not turned into the serious problem that is today, have led to a delegated budget being a good one for schools. In the last years of communism and the first years of democracy, the destruction of school buildings was observed and desperately needed repair activities for which the schools did not have enough money. Since the introduction of the delegated budget, that has changed and principles have been able to afford to renovate the buildings and increase the payment of their staff. Unfortunately, the government did not realize that this measure was only temporary; in view point of the negative trend in birthrate. On the contrary, the government continues to believe that this type of funding for education is successful in the long-term and continues to refuse changes at that direction.

The delegated budget introduced new norms and changes, both in terms of teaching the material and teaching methods, rights and obligations of teachers and students. If at the time of communism the teacher was looked at not only with respect, but with reverence, as mentioned above, now respect for him has almost disappeared, along with the rights he has in fulfilling his professional duties. Delegated budget policy or the “money follow the student” scheme caused the Bulgarian teacher to turn into a pale shadow of what he supposed to be. He is totally

dependent on the student who is elevated to the pedestal, only because the system has made the work, the salary, and the life of the teacher at all to depend on number of students enrolled in school.

The system of funding through delegated budgets or “money follows the student” system is deeply flawed and leads to vicious practices. The process of education is an intellectual process and funding cannot depend mainly on the quantification/number of learners. The qualitative assessment of this process should be the main thing. Ultimately, the results of our education system are not good.

Many schools are forced to compromise with low success, poor discipline, arrogant behavior in class and fake sick days excuses just to keep their students at all costs. Some of the undisciplined students, knowing their financial significance for the budget of the school, abused their bad and arrogant behavior in class. This leads to a certain type of behavior with a sense of impunity. One major problem arises — students can afford more free behavior. Teacher-student relationship is distorted. Many teachers are compromising their own dignity and self-esteem. Even at best, they cannot punish the student by moving to another school because the school will lose money and that’s not good for the budget. For the same reason, despite the poor success of some students, they all pass class after class with no problem, even without having mastered basic knowledge.

Schools in small villages are doomed to low budgets as the demographic collapse reduces the number of children and more schools in the country are closed. Teachers in these schools remain with low pay and, of course, no high motivation to work can be expected. The cases of schools with recorded dead souls (students who have never attended classes) are something common, especially in the countryside. The principles of these schools have allowed these illegal activities again because of the low budget. In some schools in the province with a predominant number of Roma (gipsy) students in order to patch up the budget of the school, the principles are forced to close their eyes to the permanent absences of the students. The parents of these children are pleased to receive their social benefits, but ultimately the children remain illiterate. If, as according to the law, the school cancels the child support for a month, because the child did not attend school, than the common reaction of the parents is to make a scandal and to forbid the kid to attend school, because the school has canceled the social benefits. In order to keep the budget principles are tend to avoid that kind of situation. Other common practice to patch up budgets is making of mixed classes, where students of different age and grades are put together in one class.

The latest idea of Ministry of Education to solve the problem with students’ absences from school is to make the teachers to go to students’ home, to wake them up and escort them to school. The ministry came out with a statement that suggest that the reason for many students do not show up for the first class is, because they may be have been parting the previous night, so it is teacher’s job to find and escort them to class.

The idea that teachers in schools with more students receive higher wages in real terms in many places is not happening. The only limitation for the principles is that the minimum wage is not lower than 600 BGN. The payment of additional labor to teachers in the form of lecture hours is much lower than the basic hours of their annual norm. The minimum wage increases, but the value of one lecture hour for more than 4 years remains unchanged and ranges between 5 and 6 BGN. Teachers who want to increase their salary work extra but get low pay for this work, which makes them to give private lessons to increase their income. In contrast during the communist era the private tutoring were something very rare, while nowadays is something very common and even required, if one want better grades and therefore better education (Ivanova, 2016).

Many principles do not seek to attract young teachers. For a young specialist to come to school, he should be offered a higher salary than the minimum. Principles prefer to make savings by offering as much lecturer’s hours

as possible to school teachers. Considering that the average age of teachers in secondary education is over 50 years. Other reason for increasing the lecturer's hours per teacher is the attempt of the principal to keep the teacher employed. Due to the delegated budget, many schools do not have enough students, so in order to keep teaching staff at work principals giving many lecturer's hours so to make the required norm for the job position. Other reason for increasing the lecturer's hours per teacher is the attempt of the principal to keep the teacher employed. Due to the delegated budget, many school do not have enough students, so in order to keep teaching staff at work principals giving many lecturer's hours so to make the required norm for the job position (especially for teachers with rare majors). A big problem of the system is that there is lack of teachers in certain majors like Biology, Chemistry and Physics, because the majors in the universities are not so popular. The majors like that required a lot of efforts and dedication and not many students choose them. The universities try to popularize these majors by reducing or even eliminate the university fee, but still students enrollment is low.

The problems of school discipline or violence that were hardly attended in the era of communism, or who were not so well known, or suffocated in the embryo, are now in full force. The devolved budget system created the conditions for the teacher's total impotence to introduce any discipline at school. Although written on paper, the rules of conduct are totally inapplicable in practice, leading to major difficulties in the performance of the teacher's duties. He is too busy to be a drop, a security guard and even an administrator, but not an educator. Cases of gambling, drug use and violence becomes the teacher's daily routine, and the rights and tools to deal with them are extremely limited. Instances of threats and assault by a student towards a teacher or a parent against a teacher also increase. In recent years it became common for the students to show up at school drunk or high after parting all night. Many of the more aggressive students coming in school with knuckles, knives or other weapons. Teachers are doing all they can to prevent accidents, but their right or abilities to overcome or overpower the aggression are limited. The delegated budget system and the students' "freer behavior" caused the working environment for teachers to become tenser and very tiring. That is why the profession teacher is one of the least wanted. Young teachers are almost gone, not only because of the low starting salary but also because of the lack of discipline in class and respect to teachers, which make teacher's job one of the hardest, ungrateful and unsatisfactory one.

5. Conclusions

Some changes are currently being made to ensure both the presence of students and the more attractive teaching of the course material. The government keep increasing teacher's salary with the idea to make the job more attractive, but the number of younger cadres is small. Lacking of graduates in certain majors like Physics and Biology and too many graduates in other majors like Bulgarian language, Philosophy, Geography est. In that way, the situation is lengthened in terms of job search and supply. For some, there are too many candidates, and for others it is very difficult. This leads to unequal distribution of the labor market and an increase in unemployment.

The delegated budgets, which confirms once again that education is not a priority, as hypocritically and loudly asserted. The law allows for its obvious shortcomings in the system of neglecting the upbringing of the values and the socialization of the young generation, and depriving it of an equal chance for future realization. In it, the role of parents in the educational process is replaced and distorted by a misunderstood democracy so that instead of partners it turns them into the main enemy of the institution. Undoubtedly, from the time of their

introduction to today, delegated budgets have led to a decline in schooling and discipline. They opened doors for brutal aggression unknown in the history of Bulgarian education — violent aggression among the children and students themselves, no aggression against the teachers and their alumni, but also by the enormous pressure of parents who played in the role of not partners and adherents; of employers and omniscient masters.

The system of delegated budgets suffers from a number of defects, which should be addressed in its future optimization. Firstly, it has a clear financial incentive to keep students at all costs or to enroll and report on children who do not really attend school. The system carries risks of over-financing and under-funding where the peculiarities of individual schools make them different from the usual profile for the country. Instead, there are no mechanisms to reward good educational achievement and knowledge and abilities demonstrated by students. This is true both for the overall budget of the school and for the payment of the teachers.

Bulgarian government initiates many reforms and procedural changes. Oddly or not, many of these procedural changes suggest a return of methods used in communist era. All that bares the question: Was it necessary to change one working educational system only to restore it later?

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