



Republic of Bulgaria  
ECONOMIC  
AND SOCIAL COUNCIL

**OPINION**

**on**

**POLICIES TO REDUCE**

**EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING**

**(own-initiative opinion)**

**Sofia, 2012**

The 2012 Action Plan of the Economic and Social Council envisions the elaboration of an own-initiative opinion on:

**"Policies for reducing early school leaving"**

The elaboration of the draft opinion was assigned to the Commission for Social Policy.

Pursuant to the decision of the Commission Yanka Takeva, Member of Group III of the Council, was appointed rapporteur.

The following external experts were invited to participate in the realisation of the project: Prof. Tatyana Dronzina and Assoc. Prof. Boryana Dimitrova.

At its meeting of 16 March 2012 the Commission for Social Policy discussed and adopted the draft opinion.

At its plenary session held on 23 March 2012 the Economic and Social Council adopted this opinion.

Early school leaving is a very important problem due not only to its educational harm but also to its serious economic, social and political consequences.

Reducing the rate of early school leaving to less than 10% is also one of the main priorities of the Europe 2020 Strategy.

The Economic and Social Council of the Republic of Bulgaria considers the matters related to reducing early school leaving both as an integral part of its activities within the Europe 2020 Strategy and as a continuation of its activity in the field of education, upbringing and youth employment.

For the preparation of this opinion, with the assistance of the Bulgarian Teachers' Union, were conducted 120 detailed interviews with teachers of different educational levels and schools where the problem of early school leaving is particularly acute.

## **1. The problem of "early school leaving"**

1.1. The problem of early school leaving is extremely important not only due to its educational harm but also to its economic and social consequences reflecting on subsequent employment, workforce quality, social inclusion, human trafficking and drug use, ethnic relations and the education of the future generations. It is not accidental that one of the main priorities of the Europe 2020 Strategy is reducing the rate of early school leavers to a level below 10%.

1.2. Addressing this problem adequately requires the acknowledgement and readiness to tackle a series of factors: demographic trends, economic status of vulnerable groups, labour market, informal economy, criminogenic situations, educational policies towards vulnerable groups, school programmes, the experience of teachers and educators to address problems, etc.

1.3. The European Commission (EC) defines the term 'early school leaving' as any form of "leaving education and training before completing upper secondary education or equivalents in vocational education and training<sup>1</sup>." Pursuant to the international standards of UNESCO, International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), premature or early school leaving is defined as dropping out of the education and training system at a level lower than ISCED 3 (secondary school).

1.4. The general trend in the European Union (EU) is a slight decrease in the share of early school leavers (from 15.5% in 2006 to 14.1% in 2010). However, this problem is characterised by varying degrees of intensity in different EU Member States (Table 1). The last column of the table shows the national targets of Member States set in their national reform programmes in April 2011<sup>2</sup>.

1.5. The table shows that despite the priority statute of these targets, 6 Member States do not intend to reach levels below 10% by 2020. The remaining 12 countries in which the current rate of early school leaving is over 10%, plan to meet the Europe 2020 targets. Portugal's optimistic target stands out (Portugal has the second highest level of school dropouts after Malta): the country has declared

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<sup>1</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Tackling Early School Leaving: A Key Contribution to the Europe 2020 Agenda, Brussels. 31 January 2011, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Source - The European Commission website, Europe 2020 Strategy targets: [http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/targets\\_bg.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/targets_bg.pdf)

that it will reduce early school leaving by over 18 percentage points as compared to the 2010 rate: from 28.7% to 10%. Spain has also undertaken an uneasy task: to reduce the rate of early school leaving by 13.4 percentage points by 2020.

Table 1. Percentage of the population aged 18-24 with at most lower secondary education and not in further education or training<sup>3</sup>

Country / Year	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2020 target.
EU-27	15.5	15.1	14.9	14.4	14.1	10.0
Austria	9.8	10.7	10.1	8.7	8.3	9.5
Belgium	12.6	12.1	12.0	11.1	11.9	9.5
Bulgaria	17.3	14.9	14.8	14.7	13.9	11.0
Germany	13.6	12.5	11.8	11.1	11.9	< 10.0
Greece	15.5	14.6	14.8	14.5	13.7	9.7
Denmark	9.1	12.5	11.3	10.6	10.7	< 10.0
Estonia	13.5	14.4	14.0	13.9	11.6	9.5
Ireland	12.1	11.6	11.3	11.3	10.5	8.0
Spain	30.5	31.0	31.9	31.2	28.4	15.0
Italy	20.6	19.7	19.7	19.2	18.8	15.0-16.0
Cyprus	14.9	12.5	13.7	11.7	12.6	10.0
Латвия	14.8	15.1	15.5	13.9	13.3	13.4
Lithuania	8.2	7.4	7.4	8.7	8.1	<9.0
Luxembourg	14.0	12.5	13.4	7.7	7.1	< 10.0
Malta	39.9	38.3	38.1	36.8	36.9	29.0
the Netherlands	12.6	11.7	11.4	10.9	10.1	< 8.0
United Kingdom	11.3	16.6	17.0	15.7	14.9	no NRP target
Poland	5.4	5.0	5.0	5.3	5.4	4.5
Portugal	39.1	36.9	35.4	31.2	28.7	10.0
Romania	17.9	17.3	15.9	16.6	18.4	11.3
Slovakia	6.6	6.5	6.0	4.9	4.7	6.0
Slovenia	5.6	4.1	5.1	5.3	5.0	5.0
Hungary	12.6	11.4	11.7	11.2	10.5	10.0
Finland	9.7	9.1	9.8	9.9	10.3	8.0
France	12.5	12.7	11.9	12.4	12.8	9.5
the Czech Republic	5.1	5.2	5.6	5.4	4.9	5.5
Sweden	13.0	12.2	12.2	10.7	9.7	< 10.0

1.6. In Bulgaria in 2009, according to Eurostat,<sup>4</sup> the percentage of early school leavers aged 18-24 was 14.7% while the EU-27 average for the same period was 14.4%; in 2010 there is an improvement: 13.9% in Bulgaria while the EU-27 average was 14.1%. ESC acknowledges the fact that although by a small margin the share of early school leavers in Bulgaria is below the EU average. Yet a serious problem that remains is the high relative share of children who never enrolled or dropped out from primary education. It is therefore necessary to adopt prompt legislative changes which will provide for building, as part of the e-government, electronic registers (databases) of the individual educational status of every Bulgarian citizen;

1.7. For ESC the true depth of the problem "early school leaving" is related to its long-term impact. With respect to the individual this means illiteracy, lack of social skills, low levels of education and qualification - the essential qualities in demand on the labour market. People with a lower level of education have considerable difficulty in finding a job and receive much lower wages for their labour, which leads to a lower standard of living. Very often they are unaware of their rights as employees and agree to work without concluding an employment contract with their employer. Moreover, they do not realise that by doing this they remain outside of the scope of the social security system. Very often they are directly dependent on social payments and benefits from the social assistance system.

1.8. The low level of education and qualification entail not only unemployment but also poverty and social exclusion - a vicious circle which is very difficult to break. Often children whose parents have left prematurely the system of education an training - follow suit.

1.9. For ESC beyond the direct consequences associated with the strong impact of this problem on employment, the level of income, the rate of unemployment, the labour market, and the competitiveness of the national and the European economies, early school leaving has serious indirect social impacts affecting the overall state of security and stability of society.

1.10. Increasing the weight and pressure on social systems is one of the most serious consequences of early school leaving in the long run. Studies of the labour market show that the majority of people who drop out of it are precisely those with the lowest education and training, i.e. early school leavers. Figure 1 shows what share of these persons in the EU were unemployed in 2009

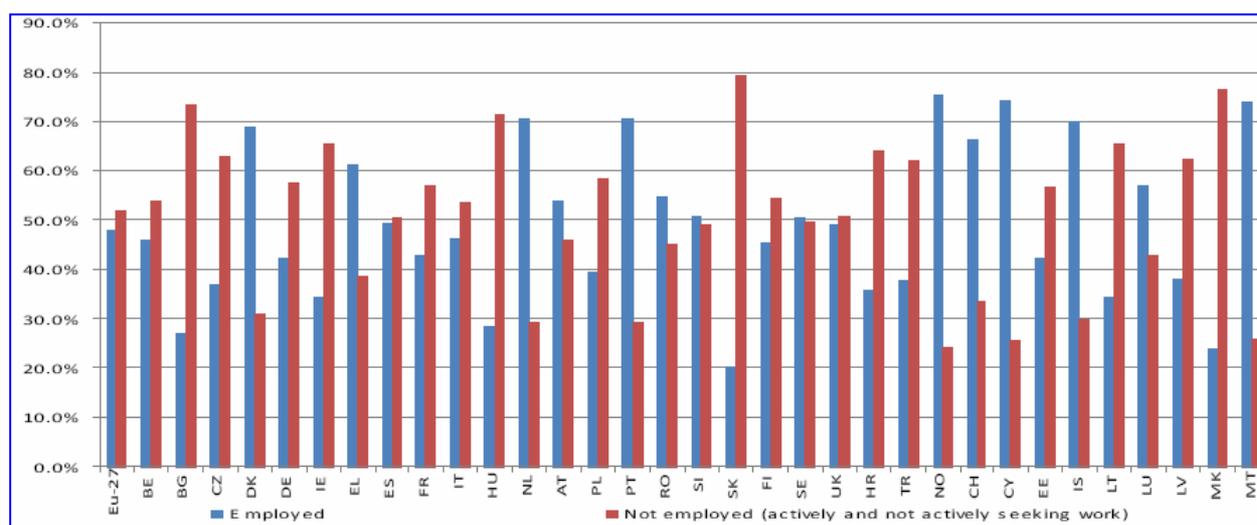
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Source: Eurostat:

<http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/printTable.do?tab=table&plugin=1&language=en&pcode=tsisc060&printPreview=true>

Figure 1. Percentage of employment (unemployment) in the early leavers of the system of education and training. 2009 (%) <sup>5</sup>



1.10.1. ESC notes that the employment of such persons in countries like Cyprus, Malta, the Netherlands and Portugal reached 71-74%. The data for Bulgaria, however, are radically different - 28% employment. Together with Hungary and Slovakia, Bulgaria ranks among the countries with the highest unemployment rates of early school leavers - between 70 and 80%.

1.10.2. The recent economic crisis aggravated this trend and now people with lower education form an increasingly large share of the long-term unemployed in the EU. Most of these people do not pay social security contributions because they are unemployed, and rely merely on social benefits for their subsistence. In this respect, ESC points out this increasing pressure on social systems as one of the main challenges facing Member States at a time of crisis.

1.11. Early marriages and births as well as the health and social risks related to them, the increasing criminogenic potential in society - petty crime, human trafficking, drugs, etc. are other consequences brought about by early school leaving.

1.11.1. ESC acknowledges the fact that persons who have remained outside the educational system, those with low level of education and qualification, and early school leavers are persons with little access to information and poor general knowledge who rank among risk groups which are the most vulnerable to human trafficking and drugs, and also are often recruited to participate in criminal groups, etc. As a rule, the funds allocated to combat the latter problems are much larger and the results much less effective than the implementation of policies and measures to prevent early school leaving.

1.12. ESC regards the increased risk of social tensions, conflict and social instability as a very serious consequence of early school leaving.

<sup>5</sup> Progress Towards the Common European Objectives in the Education and Training. Indicators and benchmarks, Commission staff working document, 2010/2011, c. 87. Figure III.1.5.

1.12.1. Young people, who are deprived of job, income and subsistence, are the most frequent participants in conflicts of various nature and focus - ethnic, social, racial, etc.. Their lack of education makes them very susceptible to street pressure and their use as "a means of pressure" for various dubious causes, often without them knowing what are the actual goals of the rally, street riot or protest they are involved in.

## **2. Early school leaving in the context of the Europe 2020 Strategy**

2.1. The Europe 2020 Strategy has 5 headline targets:<sup>6</sup>

- providing employment for 75% of the population aged 20-64;
- investments in research and development (R&D) to the amount of 3% of the EU's GDP;
- attaining the "20/20/20" goals with respect to the climate change and energy;
- reducing the share of early school leavers under 10% and raise the share of young people with higher education to at least 40%;
- reducing the number of people at risk of poverty by 20 million .

2.2. To stimulate to progress of each of the five targets of the Strategy, the Commission offers seven flagship initiatives.<sup>7</sup> Three of these initiatives are crucial for reducing the share of early school leavers:

- "Youth on the move" - aims to improve the performance of education systems and to facilitate the entry of young people in the labour market. It stresses the need to improve the quality, integrity and mobility in education and training. Besides combating early school leaving, the initiative highlights the need to raise interest in education and lifelong learning.<sup>8</sup>

- "An agenda for new skills and jobs" - aims to modernise the European labour market by developing skills and abilities of citizens throughout their lives in order to increase their participation in the labour process;

- "European platform against poverty" - essentially it has to ensure social and territorial cohesion, so that people living in conditions of poverty and social exclusion remain active in society and live with dignity.

2.3. The priority of the EU is to provide to its citizens higher living standards and low education is not in line with the aspiration to "smart" and "inclusive" growth.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the objective of

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. in greater detail: Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. in greater detail: Communication from the Commission, Europe 2020 Strategy for Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Growth, Brussels, 2010

<sup>8</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Tackling Early School Leaving: A Key Contribution to the Europe 2020 Agenda, Brussels. 31 January 2011., p. 2.

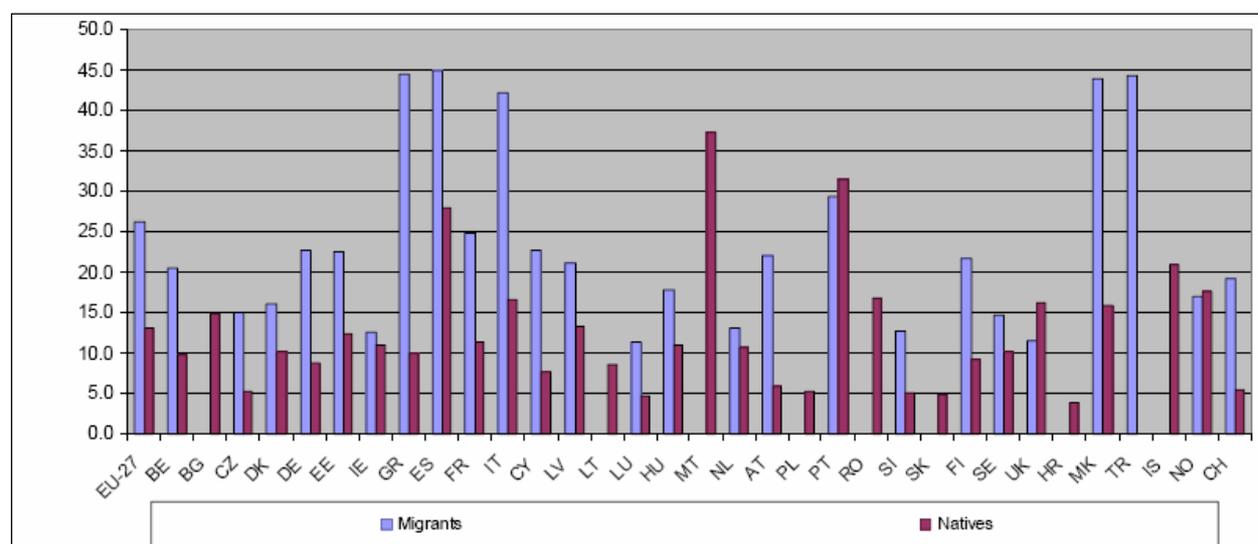
<sup>9</sup> Cf. in greater detail: Communication from the Commission, Europe 2020. Strategy for Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive growth, Brussels, 2010, p.12.

reducing the share of early school leavers under 10% is crucial for the EU and directly supports the implementation of the other two main targets of Europe 2020 - achieving employment of 75% of the population aged 20-64 and reducing the population at risk of poverty by 20 million .

2.4. The school dropout rate is a major contributing factor for unemployment, poverty and social exclusion. The plan to reduce early school leaving in the EU has three main approaches (pillars) - *prevention, intervention and compensation*.<sup>10</sup>

2.4.1. Prevention is perhaps the most effective approach of all three. It is aimed at preventing specific conditions and processes preceding premature dropout from education and training. The key measures are expanding access to preschool education and improving the overall quality of education. An emphasis is placed on the issue of migrants. They are one of the most vulnerable groups in the context of early school leaving.

Figure 2. Early school leavers with the status of migrants in 2009 (%)<sup>11</sup>



The greatest differentiation in early dropout from education and training between the group of the migrants and that of the local population is observed in southern Europe, namely Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal. The percentage of migrants with less than secondary education (ISCED 3) there varies between 29% and 45% (compared to the EU average - 26%). In almost every Member States the percentage of migrants who drop out of school early is greater than that of the local population, which highlights the need for specific measures to reduce the exclusion of this part of the population. For this purpose the prevention of early dropout from the system of education and training should include enhanced linguistic support for migrants and reducing segregation in schools.

2.4.2. Intervention is aimed at addressing the difficulties and prerequisites at an early stage - before they lead to the individual's dropping out of school. Measures can be conceptualised along two

<sup>10</sup> Cf. in greater detail: Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, European Economic and Social Committee of the Regions. Tackling Early School Leaving: A Key Contribution to the Europe 2020 Agenda, Brussels. 31 January 2011, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> Progress Towards the Common European Objectives in the Education and Training. Indicators and benchmarks, Commission staff working document, 2010/2011. c. 119, Figure III.4.5.

lines: a) measures targeted on the whole school, and b) measures targeted on individual pupils who are at risk of interrupting their education. Measures of the first type concern improving the learning environment, cooperation with parents and a network of institutions outside the school, while those of the second type comprise extracurricular activities, individual (or group) counselling and financial assistance for training.

2.4.3. Compensation is aimed at helping young people who have already dropped out of the system of education and training. The most critical part of this measure is providing individual support to young people which seeks to clarify the reasons for their dropping out of education and remove them. Such reasons may include the lack of self-confidence, frustration of failure and low performance, differences in social status of pupils and other similar reasons mentioned above. The measures are mainly targeted at providing a so called "Second chance" ( for inclusion). Often, however, it is too late. In such cases, good results are achieved through extracurricular courses with different vocational profiles through which young people who dropped out of school are given the opportunity to acquire new skills and improve their competitiveness in the labour market. However, compensation does not give satisfactory results as compared to the previous two approaches.

2.5. With the Europe 2020 Strategy the EU provides guidance and undertakes to evaluate, aid and sanction Member States on their way to reaching the targets. However, as noted in the EC report on progress towards the common objectives in education and training,<sup>12</sup> if you calculate the average arithmetic values claimed as national targets in the NRPs of Member States (without taking into account the Member States that have not set any targets), the indicator for the EU will reach 10.3-10.5%, i. e. the EU will fail to achieve a share of early school leavers (aged 18-24) below 10%. This is only an estimate, but in order to achieve the desired result it is necessary to replace the current implementation of individual measures in this area with adoption and implementation of a comprehensive policy, international dialogue, and exchange of good practices for reducing early school leaving.

### **3. Key European policies and initiatives**

#### **for reducing early school leaving.**

3.1. Communication from the Commission on "Tackling Early School Leaving: A Key Contribution to the Europe 2020 Agenda."<sup>13</sup> It analyses the impact of dropping out of school on people, society and the economy, sets out briefly the reasons for these phenomena, and describes current and future measures at the European level.

3.2. Recommendation of the European Union Council (the Council) of 28 June 2011 on Policies to Reduce Early School Leaving in accordance with national circumstances in which the Council proposes to Member States to ascertain the main factors for early school leaving at national and

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Progress Towards the Common European Objectives in the Education and Training. Indicators and benchmarks Commissionstaffworkingdocument, 2010/2011, pp. 85.

<sup>13</sup> COM (2011) 18 final.

regional levels in order to ensure the implementation by the end of 2012 of comprehensive strategies aimed at early school leaving that should be carried out in accordance with national priorities and the targets of the Europe 2020 Strategy.

3.3. The European Parliament (the Parliament) Resolution on tackling early school leaving (2011/2088 (INT)) reports that in EU Member States in 2009 the average rate of early school leaving was 14.4%, while the target was 10%, and 24.1% of all persons aged 15 in Member States are not able to read well. At the same time, early school leaving has serious consequences not only with respect to economic growth, but is also a major contributing factor for unemployment, poverty and social exclusion.

3.4. Annual Review of Growth for 2012 - Communication from the Commission of 23 November 2011 which concludes that the economy is stagnant, forecasts high unemployment rates - around 10% in 2012 and 2013, and increasing social consequences of the crisis. The Commission acknowledges the need to align the priorities with the deteriorating economic climate and indicates that despite the urgency of the situation, the progress of Member States in implementing the guidelines of the Annual Review of Growth for 2011 fails to match the expectations. At the national level there is still no full commitment to the radical changes that have been planned with regard to future economic governance.

3.5. The Youth Opportunities Initiative - Communication from the Commission of 20 December 2011 sets as a main goal the achievement of coordination between the activities undertaken by EU Member States and the European Commission, the priorities of the Europe 2020 Strategy, the Council Conclusions on Promoting Youth Employment of June 2011, and the Council Recommendations on Tackling Early School Leaving of December 2011. Against the backdrop of Europe's persistent jobless youth rate of 21%, the Commission is pleading for Member States, workers' representatives and businesses to join forces and take decisive action to prevent early school leaving, help youngsters develop skills relevant to the labour market, ensure work experience and on-the-job training and help young people find a good first job.

3.6. Another key document is the Draft Joint Council/Commission Report for 2012 on Implementing the Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training ("ET 2020" of 20 December 2011) - "Education and Training in a Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Europe."

3.7. In the Annual Review of Growth in 2012 the Commission noted that in 2012 at the national and the European levels there is a need to focus on the five priorities, one of which is combating unemployment and the social consequences of the crisis. Simultaneously, the Commission urged Member States to pay particular attention to young people because they are among the persons most severely affected by the crisis.

3.7.1. The Commission also reported that even before the crisis the performance of Member States with regard to employment of all age groups, as well as education, training and lifelong learning vary widely, but average values of the EU as a whole lag behind in international comparative studies.

3.7.2. In order to create jobs and achieve recovery accompanied by high employment, the Commission considers that Member States should give particular priority to mobilising the workforce in favour of growth, supporting employment, particularly the employment of young persons, and providing protection to vulnerable groups.

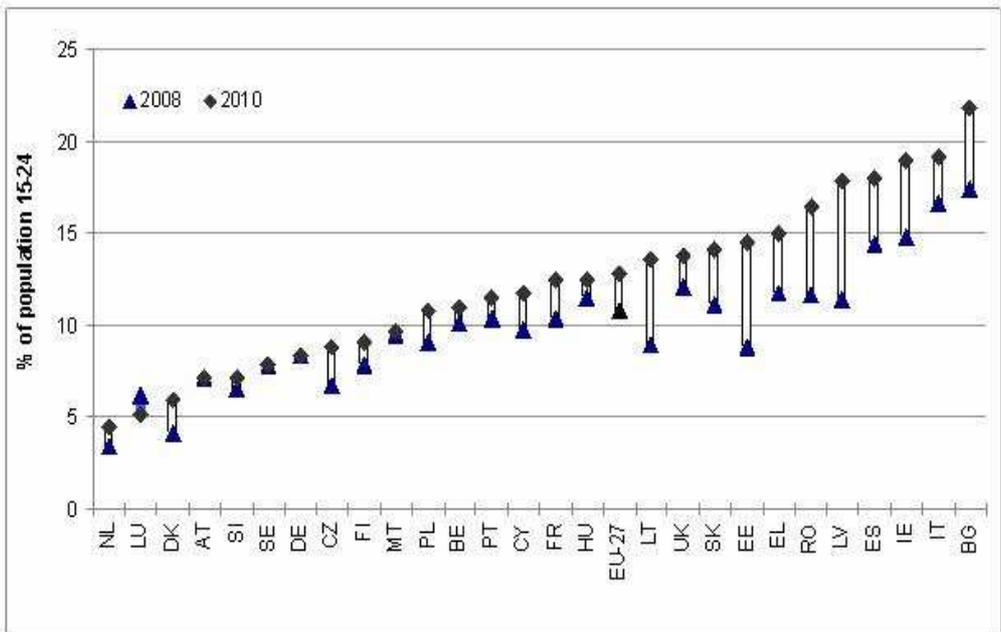
3.8. In the context of the Youth Opportunities Initiative proposed by the European Commission<sup>14</sup>, ESC highlights the strong link between youth unemployment, early school leaving, and the gap between businesses' needs and the qualification of the workforce available on the labour market.

3.8.1. The ESC notes with concern that unemployed young people in the EU now amount to 5 million - the number increased by 1 million between 2008 and 2010 - and 7.5 million young people aged between 15 and 24 are not currently working, nor studying, nor being trained anywhere. This applies not only to low-skilled young people who left school too early, but also to more graduates who are also unable to find employment.

3.8.2. The rate of youth unemployment (exceeding 20%) is twice higher than that of the whole working population, and about three times higher than unemployment among people of working age in some countries this rate reaches 40%. At the same time, there is a significant difference in this indicator according to locality (region). Moreover, some groups of young people (including women, youths with disabilities, young people with migration background) are significantly more prone to risk of unemployment, long-term unemployment, early school leaving or inactivity (passivity)<sup>15</sup>.

3.9. The Commission acknowledges that a number of countries (Bulgaria, Estonia, Greece, Spain, Ireland, Latvia, Romania, Slovakia and the UK) have found that early school leavers are the main group of unemployed young people and consider this group as an important target in improving the conditions for youth employment.

Figure 3. The share of young people aged 15-24 who are not employed and have remained outside the system of education and training in 2008 and 2010<sup>16</sup>



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Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic And Social Committee and The Committee of Regions. Youth Opportunities Initiative., COM (2011) 933/3, Brussels, 20.12.2011.

reasons for youth unemployment that are characteristic of different EU Member States and also remain valid for Bulgaria most often include: high relative rate of persons that have not been enrolled in the earliest phase of primary education; early dropping out of school without acquiring any qualification; lack of adequate skills and work experience; sporadic employment followed by periods of unemployment; limited possibilities for training; insufficient/inadequate employment programmes .

#### **4. Specific features of early school leaving in Bulgaria**

4.1. ESC finds that in Bulgaria two state institutions collect and summarise data on school dropouts - the National Statistical Institute (NSI) and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science (MEYS). However, the data on dropouts provided by MEYS differ from these provided by NSI. The latter have been used as an indicator in EUROSTAT and other agendas and information documents related to policies for the prevention and reduction of school dropout rates. According to NSI data for 2009/2010 school year 19,583 pupils (about 2.9%) left the mainstream schools for different reasons. According to data provided by the Ministry of Education this number should be about 15,000.

4.2. ESC draws attention to the findings of the 2006 study of these problems which concludes that the current system of monitoring and data collection is still not reliable enough.<sup>17</sup>

4.3. With respect to the quantitative indicators for monitoring the number of school dropouts the methodologies used by the two institutions are based on enrolment by educational levels which is in accordance with the international classification standard ISCED. ESC believes that the reason for the discrepancy in the early school leaving data provided by both institutions is the lack of uniform definition of "school dropout".

4.3.1. NSI works with a group coefficient showing the ratio between enrolment in school and the entire population by the age group of the educational level.

4.3.2. MEYS uses a more precisely defined and focused on dropout pupils indicator: "a dropout pupil is a pupil who has no school record for the current school year, does not have a certificate of transfer, or has acquired one but has not enrolled in another school by the end of the current school year." Moreover, MEYS provides a better time-frame for collecting and accounting the data (at least 3 times a year in September, December and February). In this regard ESC notes that a substantial part of the data are not integrated into a single electronic register for the educational status of the citizens (databases as part of the e-government) and are not fully analysed and published, including data reflecting children's failure to enrol in the system of primary education and school dropout.

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Reasons for dropping out of school. Analysis of the results of the performed sociological study. Ministry of Education and Science, UNICEF, Vitoshka Research, 2006.

4.4. ESC further observes that with respect to the qualitative indicators, mostly related to pupils' reasons for dropping out of school, the methodologies of the two institutions differ. Although NSI stores data for long periods, they are difficult to use as a basis for forming policies and measures for prevention and reduction of dropping out, as well as for

continual monitoring of the results from implementing such policies and measures in order to improve them. It should be noted that no individual or aggregate data has been collected for the number or relative share, nor for the reasons for children's failure to enrol in the system of primary education.

4.4.1. NSI uses a system of three criteria which have a low degree of precision: 1. Unwillingness 2. Family reasons 3. Departure abroad.

4.4.2. MEYS has developed its own classification system comprising seven indicators for the reasons for dropping out: 1. Dislocated at their own request; 2. Dislocated under the provisions of Article 139 paragraph 1 item 3 of the Regulation for Implementation of the National Education Act; 3. Dislocated from other schools; 4. Departed abroad; 5. Converted to another form of education; 6. Discontinued their studies due to illness; 7. Dropped out due to: absenteeism, poor performance, social and family reasons. Therefore, the necessary volume of comparable data on pupils' reasons for dropping out have not been accumulated so far.

4.5. ESC reports with concern neither institution (MEYS nor NSI) presents or collect data about the ethnic or social profile of school dropouts. At the same time, a number of policies and measures for the prevention of early school leaving are targeted on specific social and/or ethnic groups.

4.5.1. The international and national surveys that have been carried out during the past 5-6 years with respect to specific or concomitant problems of school dropout indicate clearly that there is a link between social or ethnic profiles and the risk of dropping out of school. In this regard, ESC believes that there is an urgent need for school dropout data collection mechanisms to include these aspects of the dropouts' profile. This will surely lead to a more effective allocation of the funds invested in measures for preventing school dropout as well as to a more accurate monitoring and assessment of the results from such measures at the national and the regional level.

4.6. As already noted, the classification of institutions do not overlap, but their juxtaposition allows to derive several major groups of causes for early school leaving in Bulgaria.

4.6.1. NSI accounts for the three most frequently reported reasons for dropping out, namely: due to unwillingness to study, due to family reasons, and due to moving abroad.<sup>18</sup> The data for school year 2009-2010 show that the total number of early leavers of the system of education and training (from the first to the thirteenth grade) is 19,514 (of a total of 792,320 pupils). For nearly 50% of the leavers (9,821 pupils) it is indicated that they have left due to family reasons, 25% (4,802 pupils) have moved abroad, and 18% (3,596) left school because of their unwillingness to attend classes.

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Cf. NSI website, Education and lifelong learning, <http://www.nsi.bg/otrasal.php?otr=23>

Table 2. pupils grades I-VIII who have left mainstream and special education schools (2009/2010)<sup>19</sup>

Region	Number of dropouts	Region	Number of dropouts
1. Plovdiv	1489	6.Stara Zagora	675
2. Pazardzhik	863	7. Veliko Tarnovo	669
3. Varna	791	8. Sofia (capital)	664
4. Sliven	747	9. Haskovo	556
5. Pleven	744	10. Dobrich	540

4.6.2. At the same time, in its 2006 report<sup>20</sup> MEYS accounts for the reasons for dropping out not merely as declared explanations (as is the case with the NSI classification) but as deeper and persistent factors leading to the reproduction of this phenomenon. ESC survey results clearly indicate three types of reasons:

- *Socio-economic;*
- *Educational.*
- *Ethno-cultural environment of the child.*

Table 3. Which children drop out most often from school? (%)<sup>21</sup>

	Profile of children dropping out of school	grades I - IV	grades V - XIII
1.	From ethnic minorities	77.0	65.2
2.	With families that often change their residence	39.3	28.7
3.	The poor	29.3	27
4.	Not living with their parents	20.9	29.8
5.	Children of divorced parents and incomplete families	19.4	20.8

4.6.3. ESC acknowledges that the third group of reasons is one of the most pronounced: placing children in a relatively high risk for dropping out of school as shown in Table 3. When considering early school leaving in minority groups two more factors are added to those already mentioned marriage and the environment of children's development.<sup>22</sup> The behaviour of Roma children is strongly influenced by the low income of their parents, their parents' lack of motivation to send them to school, conflicts at school, insufficient understanding of the language of instruction, etc. Another important factor is the early age at which they enter into marriage.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Reasons for dropping out of school. Analysis of the results of the performed sociological study. Ministry of Education and Science, UNICEF, Vitosha Research, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Brochure: Project "Preventing school dropout in Bulgaria." Early leavers. Ministry of Education, UNICEF, Vitosha Resarch, 2006, pp. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. in greater detail: Nikolai Tilkidjiev et al. Dropout Roma children. Survey of the Open Society Institute, Sofia, 2009, pp. 67-68.

4.7. ESC found that over two thirds of school leavers in Bulgaria are the between the first to the eighth grade, i.e. they drop out of school before they even begin their secondary education, which puts them in a very unfavourable starting position in their professional career. Teachers and experts in education point out that an additional reason for early school leaving is the insufficient synergy between the actions of the local authorities, social services and educational institutions as well as the insufficient effect from the work of school psychologists and educators.

4.8. ESC notes with concern that despite the availability of programmes and measures to prevent early school leaving, there is no indication for overcoming this problem, although certain specific tendencies are observed .

4.8.1. Dropping out at the level of primary education decreases, but that in the upper levels (grades 5-8) increases for the following reasons:

- the measure of discontinuing child and social assistance at this point (grades 5-8) appears not to be as strong an incentive any longer;
- the system of primary education appears unattractive due to the insufficient facilities and opportunities for practising sports and extracurricular activities as well as finances for their funding;
- part of the adolescents have to start working in order to support their families;
- The gaps in children's knowledge and training from elementary school accumulate exponentially and determine children's greater and greater isolation, loss of interest, and as a result dropping out of risk pupils;

4.8.2. The share of the so-called "sporadic" pupils increases, i.e. those who would come to school 1-2 times per week only to obtain an "attendance note" and who become increasingly demotivated to study. These pupils have been defined as the group at greatest risk of dropping out and alarmingly, according to the observations of teachers, this group is growing;

4.8.3. The share of "problem pupils" also increases. Usually these are children left without parental supervision due to their parents' emigration abroad or with uncaring and low literate parents, who are aggressive and can not be integrated, especially in groups where their number is relatively high.

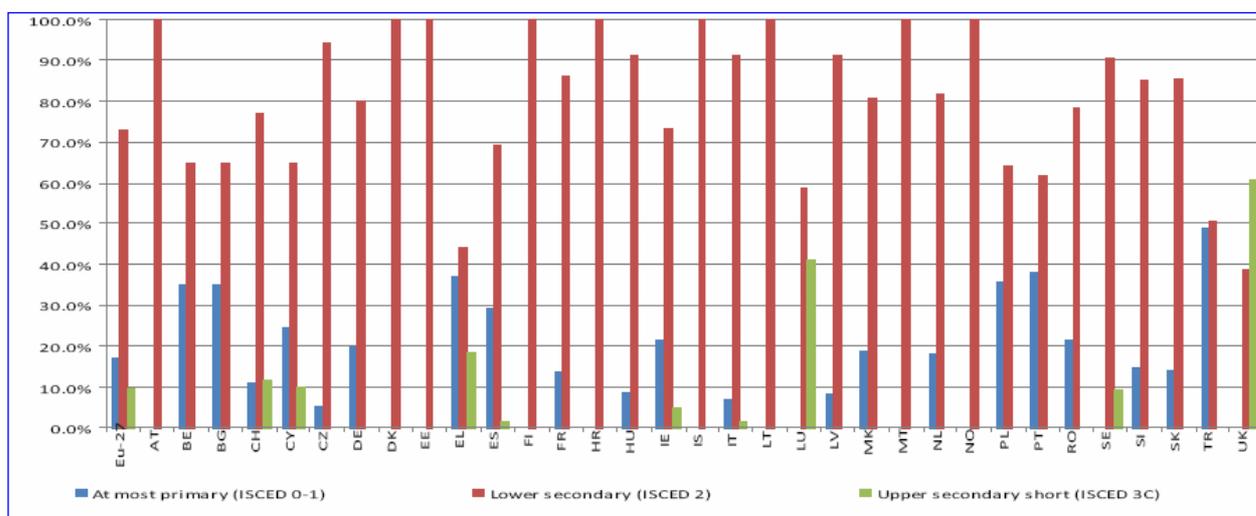
4.9. ESC evaluates the system for re-inclusion in the educational process of early dropouts as insufficiently effective. In this respect, ESC believes that there is a strong need for objective analysis, reevaluation and adjustment of previously implemented policies for the prevention of early school leaving in order to raise them up to standard for achieving better results.

4.10. ESC finds that Bulgaria is among the five EU Member States (including Belgium, Greece, Poland and Portugal), in which 36% to 39% of early school leavers remain only at the initial level of primary education (ISCED 2), which further reduces their chances for employment and social integration.

Figure 4. Early leavers from education and training at the highest level of acquired education. 2009г. (%)<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Progress Towards the Common European Objectives in the Education and Training. Indicators and benchmarks, Commission staff working document, 2010/2011, c. 87. Figure III.A.4



4.11. ESC notes as another significant characteristic feature the pronounced ethnic profile of early school leavers, and draws attention to the fact that the problem is the most acute among children of Roma descent.<sup>24</sup> The problem also exists among other ethnic groups in Bulgaria, but the extent and the difficulty to solve it are not as great as among the Roma.

4.11.1. Analyses show that the education related problems among Roma children are the greatest in settlements where the community remains isolated in ghettos and ethnic neighbourhoods. Besides school dropouts these communities bring up children who remain entirely outside the system of education and in practice are totally illiterate. In settlements where

the Roma are relatively more integrated or live outside the Roma neighbourhoods, the problem of early school leaving is not so serious.

4.11.2. ESC observes that there are differences among different ethnic groups with respect to the stage at which children drop out of the educational process. For example, a study of the Ministry of Education shows that about 60% of Roma children drop out at the initial stage of training, i.e. before the age of 11, while the majority of dropouts (55%) from other ethnic groups leave school after the completion of primary education. The main reason for this is the concentration in the Roma community of all the factors predisposing to early school leaving - poverty, illiteracy, lack of interest (low integration), as well as various ethnic and cultural characteristics.

4.12. In recent years there have been some improvements but nevertheless the problem with the Roma continues to be serious and there has been no fundamental change in the described trend. In view of everything said so far, ESC determines the ethnic profile of early school leavers as a major challenge facing our country in the medium and long term.

4.13. Another interesting peculiarity of early school leaving in Bulgaria, according to ESC, is the predominant share of girls who drop out of school prematurely.

4.13.1. According to Eurostat data for 2009,<sup>25</sup> the average rate of early school leaving in the EU is 16.3% among the boys and 12.6% among the girls. In Bulgaria the ratio is reverse: 16% among the

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Reasons for dropping out of school. Analysis of the results of the performed sociological study. Ministry of Education, UNICEF, Vitosha Research, 2006, p. 24.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Eurostat Labour Force Survey (LFS), 2010.

girls and 14% among the boys. There is also a direct link between gender and the subjects in which young people do better.<sup>26</sup> This phenomenon is closely related to the reasons for dropout (premature withdrawal from school of young Roma girls in order to prevent their being "kidnapped," to "preserve their virginity," and to arrange an "appropriate marriage" for them).

4.13.2. ESC draws attention to the conclusion that the "female profile" of dropouts should be taken into serious consideration in developing policies and measures for addressing the problem because the issue in question here is overcoming an overall stereotype and lifestyle of a whole ethnic community.

4.14. ESC notes that the Draft Preschool and School Education Act, as presented on 14 February 2012, does not provide for upgrading the package of policies aimed at keeping children with disabilities - mental, physical, and sensory - in the general framework for integrative education environment in mainstream schools. In this regard, ESC recognises the need for adequate measures and developing effective mechanisms for resource support as well as improving the infrastructure and technical facilities for ensuring equal access to education and the acquisition of qualification by children and young people with disabilities.

## **5. Possible policies and measures to reduce early school leaving in Bulgaria**

5.1. Policies and measures to reduce early school leaving at the European level.

5.1.1. ESC supports the European Commission's proposal that the first step to help young people and better their future prospects is to give them adequate skills, while being in the education system, and to prevent early school leaving or leaving the schemes of professional internship. Education and training systems must be modernised to improve their efficiency and quality in order to make them capable of providing to the pupils the skills and competences necessary for the latter's realization on the labour market.

5.1.2. ESC joins the Commission's proposal to use the means of the European Social Fund (ESF) in a useful and transparent way with a particular focus on financing measures designed to tackle youth problems, i.e. creating jobs for youth employment, reducing early school leaving, adequate education, etc. According to the data used by the Commission as of the end of 2011 Member States are entitled to about 30 billion for ESF programmes that have remained unused for specific activities.<sup>27</sup> It is also important to increase the number of young people who are beneficiaries of programmes funded from the ESF.

5.1.3. ESC supports the measure proposed by the Commission<sup>28</sup> whereby each Member State will be required to guarantee employment or further education and training for every young person for

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. in greater detail: Progress Towards the Common European Objectives in the Education and Training. Indicators and benchmarks, Commission staff working document, 2010/2011, p. 111.

<sup>27</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic And Social Committee and The Committee of Regions. Youth Opportunities Initiative., COM (2011) 933/3, Brussels, 20.12.2011, p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 13.

four months after graduating or leaving school. It is essential that such initiatives should cover early school leavers and other disadvantaged groups of young people. ESC also draws attention to the need to strengthen regional control over youth unemployment and early school leaving. Only in this way concrete problems and prerequisites for these phenomena may be identified and addressed effectively. To achieve the desired results, European and national measures should be implemented according to the specific needs of the particular municipality or province.

5.1.4. The European Council adopted measures to reduce early school leaving in June 2011. They are a key tool for achieving the strategic objective of the Europe 2020 Strategy to reduce early school leaving from 14% to less than 10%. The solution lies in the synthesis of measures for prevention, intervention and compensation. ESC considers very timely the recommendations of the Council for immediate action to reintegration in the education system to curb the flow of early school leavers to unemployment.

5.1.5. ESC considers necessary to give sufficient attention to the Council's call to all EU Member States to take concerted, comprehensive and evidence-based strategies with which to help young people at risk of dropping out from education.

5.1.6. ESC joins the Council in concluding that due to the slow progress on the goal of education all Member States have an urgent need for investment in reforming education and training to support sustainable growth and sustainable jobs.

5.1.7. ESC supports completely the activities planned by the Council in the area of early education and childcare: providing wide and equal access to education and care for young children and, in parallel to this, raising the quality standards; improving the integrated approaches, the professional development of the persons employed in the area of early education and childcare, and parent support; developing adequate curricula, programmes and funding schemes.

5.1.8. ESC supports the measure proposed by the Parliament<sup>29</sup> that parents should be offered consultancy services to improve the impact of the family on the educational and social development of pupils.

5.2. Good practices in the area of policies and measures to reduce early school leaving in EU Member States.<sup>30</sup>

5.2.1. *Individual numbers of pupils* - Introduced in the United Kingdom in 1997. Through them the success of the school policy and the need for reforms is effectively monitored. Allows monitoring both early school leaving and other educational problems. Similar electronic databases are introduced in the Netherlands, Germany and Italy.

5.2.2. *Policy to desegregate the school* - shows good results in Bulgaria and Hungary. It belongs to the range of prevention measures. It encourages schools to integrate pupils in lower socio-economic status and minority pupils.

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<sup>29</sup> European Parliament. Documents submitted for reading at Parliament sessions. Report on early school leavers, 2011/2088 (INI), 18.10.2011g., p. 8.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. in greater detail: Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, European Economic and Social Committee of the Regions. Tackling Early School Leaving: A Key Contribution to the Europe 2020 Agenda, Brussels. 31 January 2011, pp.7-10.

5.2.3. *Positive discrimination* - support for schools in disadvantaged locations. This measure is applied in Cyprus, France and Italy. It creates a new educational environment consistent with the specific needs of children and young people in these locations (regions).

5.2.4. *Flexible learning models* - this measure is a synthesis of prevention and compensation action. Crucially, it combines general education with vocational training and provides for pupils' first practical 'professional experience. It shows good results in pupils, discouraged by low school performance and striving for early access to a working life, and also in pupils who have dropped out of the education, but through this system are able to acquire simultaneously a graduation certificate and valuable practical experience. This approach is used in Denmark, Italy and Luxembourg.

5.2.5. *The school as a "learning community"* - the educational establishment develops a distinctive image - values, goals, anthem, uniforms, flag, etc. This should increase the involvement of pupils, teachers and parents to contribute to the success "of" the school and hence that of children "in" the school. This improves the learning process, strengthens confidence in the institution and increases pupils' interest.

5.2.6. *Participation in networks outside the school* - a larger organisation is created to address pupils' problems which besides early school leaving may include drug and alcohol abuse, physical violence, etc. For this purpose, schools create a network with the participation of regional development authorities (municipalities, regional structures), youth agencies, social services, agencies for fighting drug abuse, etc. This intervention measure is applied in Ireland.

5.2.7. *Open schools* - seek to achieve the desired effect through intervention. Open projects with the participation of local representatives of civil society are organised with the purpose to foster pupils' interest in education. Classes are open and attended both by active pupils and by young people who have dropped out of school. In Italy the schools of this type are known as "Scuoleaperte" ("Open Schools").

5.2.8. *Back to the comprehensive school* - a compensation measure. It provides for the so called "*Second chance*". The characteristic assumption here is that when a young person experiences failure in school a transition period is needed before attempting to regain his or her confidence and motivation to receive further training. Due to the complexity of the problems the work is organised in target groups. A variety of consulting and teaching methods for reintegration are used. This practice is used in Belgium (SAS centres), Slovenia and France (transitional classes).

5.3. Development of policies and measures to reduce early school leaving in Bulgaria.

5.3.1. ESC reports the predominant opinion among the teachers surveyed so far that the most popular measure with real effect on the issue of early school leaving is conditioning social benefits and child allowances on the school attendance of the beneficiaries' children. However, the good effect of this measure is short-lived will eventually exhaust its possibilities.

5.3.2. To properly target resources and tackle the problem it is necessary to report several essential observations that reflect the current situation in the educational system:

- Lack of sufficient targeted assistance for food, transportation and textbooks, especially for older pupils;

- Poor infrastructure and facilities, lack of opportunities for practising sports, extracurricular activities, interest clubs, using computers, the internet - i.e. modern means of education that are capable of attracting and maintaining the interest of pupils at risk;
- High minimum number of children in ethnically mixed classes where children are not proficient in the Bulgarian language;
- Insufficient number of resource teachers, psychologists and counsellors in schools with a high drop out rate, who could work both with the children and their parents;
- Lack of resources for education and further training of teaching staff, speech therapists, special educators, social workers, etc. so that they could achieve better results with children who have physical, mental and sensory disabilities;
- Lack of vocational guidance and training of young people with physical, mental and sensory disabilities to prepare and introduce them as a potential workforce on the labour market;
- Weak interaction and coordination between accountable institutions - departments "Child Protection" and municipality social services.

5.3.3. In view of the European Parliament's Report on early school leaving and its own Opinion on the family, good parenting and equal gender opportunities<sup>31 32</sup>, ESC finds that with respect to the prevention of early school leaving it is essential to consider the link between the individual at risk and his or her family because:

- young people growing up in families of parents who have left school prematurely are also placed at significantly higher risk of early school leaving;
- children from incomplete families (single parent families, semi-orphans, complete orphans, children from orphanages) are more difficult to involve in the community, encounter more often communication difficulties, and are exposed to higher risk of early school leaving;
- The social and financial pressure on families increases the risk of early school leaving for their children. Children in such families are forced to work, beg, or simply are not in school due to lack of funds for basic expenses required for their education.

5.3.4. As a possible measure ESC recommends the preliminary identification of children who are at risk of early school leaving, so that they could be aided at school - both in financial and in technical terms. It is important to note here, however, that measures which lead to the marginalisation of children with respect to their peers should be removed and avoided. Using "labels" such as "poor children" or "children from families with problem parents," only alienates young people and hinders their smooth and complete integration into society. This should also apply in the same way to

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<sup>31</sup> European Parliament. Documents submitted for reading at Parliament sessions. Report on early school leaving, 2011/2088 (INI) 18 October 2011.

<sup>32</sup> European Parliament. Documents submitted for reading at Parliament sessions. Report on early school leaving, 2011/2088 (INI) 18 October 2011.

children of Roma descent. ESC is categorically against any form of segregation in schools and this holds particularly valid with respect to areas with predominantly minority populations.

5.3.5. Another measure that ESC proposes is conditioning a well calculated portion (percentage) of social benefits for the families with children at a higher risk of dropping out of school with their such children's academic achievements. Besides basic support, each pupil will be entitled to additional compensation, if he or she obtains satisfactory grades. This type of encouragement can stimulate pupils to devote more time to their studies and would also have a positive effect on parents regarding with suspicion or even contempt their children's education.

5.3.6. In this regard, ESC upholds and recommends the measure proposed by the European Parliament in its Report on early school leaving in which it "calls on the Member States to provide economic support to parents, who dedicate their time and love to upbringing their children ensuring their future useful place in society, and invest thus in human capital..."<sup>33</sup> Moreover, ESC deems necessary that parents should be held accountable for their children's attendance of educational activities up to the age of 18.

5.3.7. ESC considers that the measures to reduce and overcome early school leaving can be divided into two major groups:

- Restrictive, disciplinary measures that are endorsed mainly by teachers who work with children at a relatively high risk of dropping out of school, as well as by teachers from the intermediate course of education (5-7 grade).
- Stimulating, encouragement measures that are endorsed mainly by teachers in the elementary course of education, who work with groups involving fewer pupils at risk of dropping out of school.

5.3.8. ESC proposes the following measures which it believes will contribute to reducing early school leaving in the short term:

- Serious sanctions for parents who act irresponsibly with respect to their children's school attendance and performance;
- Stricter disciplinary sanctions for pupils who are absent from school;
- Regulating the opportunity for repeating academic years in primary education with the purpose of stimulating systematic learning and eliminating the preconditions for drastic lags later on in the course of education;
- Regulating the rights of teachers, school boards and school management to combat cases of aggressive behaviour;
- Easier removal of unmotivated pupils in higher grades (who are seen by their peers as "terminators of the learning process") and subsequently - their involvement in different forms of vocational training;

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<sup>33</sup> European Parliament. Documents submitted for reading at Parliament sessions. Report on early school leaving, 2011/2088 (INI) 18 October 2011.

- Discussing the idea of conditioning the issuance of driving licenses on the requirement for completion of secondary education. At this point in Bulgaria the age for obtaining driving license is 18 and requires only primary education. A measure like this may reduce early school leaving in order to start early one's professional life - which severs prematurely young people from their education and at the same time help increase the education standard of future drivers.

5.3.9. At the same time, ESC believes that preventive measures, encouraging pupils to attend school, will have a lasting educational effect in the long run. In particular, the ESC proposes the following measures:

- Emergency preparation and adoption of legislative changes to accelerate the development and creation of electronic records (databases) for individual educational status of Bulgarian citizens as part of the e-government initiative;

- Early involvement of children (as early as 3-4 years of age and particularly those of Roma origin) in kindergartens to acquire skills and learn the Bulgarian language;

- Supporting the development of youth and children's organisations through which a training effect could be sought, and opening more children centres.

- Moving to full-time education and providing more opportunities for sports, extracurricular activities, working with computers and the internet;

- Unburdening the curriculum, introducing more up-to-date, attractive and intriguing learning methods;

- Providing free textbooks, food and transportation to children from needy families also in the upper grades;

- Providing scholarships for older pupils from needy families which are linked to their future professional career;

- Increasing the number of resource teachers, psychologists and educators and their active involvement in solving the problem of early school leaving;

- Reducing the minimum requirement for number of pupils for classes containing more children at risk of early school leaving;

- More active cooperation with parents, including through the intermediation of non-governmental organisations - launching summer and/or Sunday schools for parents, which can also be done by the Employment Agency as this may have a direct positive effect on the social and vocational training of adolescents.

- Pre-emptive inclusion in programmes for temporary employment of parents whose children regularly attend school;

- Strict monitoring of early school leaving of older pupils with a view to their involvement in vocational training at a later stage, linking this training with employment programs;

- Developing programmes for cooperation between various institutions involved in the problem of early school leaving - schools, municipalities, "Child Protection" departments, NGOs, etc.

- Monitoring the dropout rate of children with a view to re-involve them in educational institutions at a later stage (mainly through vocational education programmes). Developing special training, vocational and employment programmes for these young people.

5.3.10. ESC notes that Bulgaria, as in most Member States, the policies are not sufficiently grounded in up-to-date data and analyses of the causes of early school leaving and its scale.

5.3.11. ESC reports the crucial importance of prevention and early intervention to the resolution of the problem. In this regard, ESC believes that more attention should be paid to prevention and early intervention through policies such as teacher training, continuous professional development, high-quality education and high-quality care in early childhood. Although they have their own importance, compensatory measures, such as a "second chance" for education, are insufficient to eliminate the underlying causes of the problem.

5.3.12. ESC believes that measures such as a greater supply of high-quality primary vocational education and training (VET), adapted to the needs of young people, as well offering a blended forms of training, which accommodate VET and general education, may contribute to reducing early school leaving.

5.3.13. ESC finds that it is necessary to reduce and the dropout rate in VET as well. This can be achieved through greater collaboration between stakeholders from different educational sectors and the relevant subdivisions of public policy, such as youth policy, social services and employment services. It is also necessary to increase the involvement of parents and local communities, strengthen the cooperation between schools and businesses, curricular and extracurricular activities.

5.3.14. At present in Bulgaria several strategies have been adopted and several projects have been implemented for reducing early school leaving. However, the National Development Programme (NDP) of Bulgaria (2011-2015), the Convergence Programme (2011-2014) and their accompanying Action Plan contain measures to tackle early school leaving in the context of the Europe 2020 Strategy.

National strategies and programmes concerning early school leaving:

- "Strategy for Educational Integration of Children and Pupils from Ethnic Minorities" of 2004;

- "National Programme for Better Inclusion of Pupils of Mandatory School Age" (Decision 45 of the Council of Ministers of 01 February 2011);

- National programme "Care for Each Pupil;"

- Project "School at two speeds" Component 1 "Without school bell" or support for children lagging behind in their education - Draft of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science through the Directorate "Educational Programmes and Educational Content," beneficiary under Operational Programme Human Resources Development of the European Social Fund;

5.3.15. ESC supports the short and medium term measures planned by the Bulgarian government in the NDP of Bulgaria (2011-2015) and the Convergence Programme (2011-2014), which correspond also to the recommendations of the interviewed teachers. ore specifically, these are measures and activities for the improvement of the quality of Bulgarian education and for a more complete coverage and retention of children who are of compulsory school age in school through national programmes of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science, nine of which were approved for 2011.<sup>34</sup>

5.3.16. ESC is pleased to report that the priorities of Bulgaria by 2020 in the area of education are in accordance with the recommendation of the ESC that the nation's education is a strategic priority for our country.

5.3.17. ESC also supports the measures for modernising Bulgarian education system, in terms of developing and implementing policies to prevent early school leaving, which contribute to the achievement of national objective 4 "reducing early school leaving to 11%."

5.3.18. ESC considers adequate and timely the measures envisaged in the NDP for the achievement of national objective 4 in the separate priority areas: Increasing the number of children involved in forms of preschool education; Preventing and reducing early school leaving, which includes:

- providing opportunities for consultation and additional activities to assist pupils in primary and secondary school who have difficulty in mastering the learning content (additional sessions in small groups, individual programmes) - up to 2011;
- providing opportunities for all-day forms of education for children from the initial stage of primary education - by 2013

5.3.19. ESC calls for faster adoption of the Pre-school and School Education Act, which should provide for additional measures to enhance the financial autonomy of the sector, including by attracting private capital investment, which in turn will improve the relationship between education and the labour market.

5.3.20. Moreover, the new Act should bring the qualification of pedagogical experts as a major priority in the field of secondary education - an idea that is recommended in numerous ESC acts and also by the teachers.

5.3.21. ESC expresses its support for the idea of redefining the types of school preparation, as it is defined in the Draft Pre-school and School Education Act, in order to improve the literacy and employability of young people on the labour market , which is a huge improvement on the currently existing National Education Act (NEA). The Draft Act provides for the autonomy of schools in terms of educational programmes for extended and additional training - the objectives and results (acquired competencies) will be determined at the level of the school based on the needs and interests of pupils. Subjects for additional study may be selected according to the interests of the pupils, which will create favourable conditions for reducing early school leaving.

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<sup>34</sup> "Optimising the school network;" "Qualification;" "Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in the school;" "The school - territory of the pupils;" "A system for national standardised external assessment;" "Modernizing the system of vocational training;" "Care for every pupil;" "Creating an accessible architectural environment;" "Mother tongue and culture abroad."

5.3.22. ESC proposes to introduce an "individual education number" for each pupil and on this basis to build a national registry of pupils, which is a successful practice implemented in several EU Member States: the Netherlands, England, Germany and Italy. According to ESC, the database created as a result of this measure will inform more efficiently the process of determining the purpose of the school policy.

5.3.23. ESC supports the extension of pupils' rights, provided in the Draft Act, which allow their participation in discussions and decision making on issues affecting school life and the school community, in an advisory capacity in the Public Council, in the organisational development of the school through various forms of pupil self-government.

5.3.24. ESC finds unacceptable the closure of health schools in the country which should continue their operation with state funding.

5.3.25. For the first time in the Bulgarian educational system there is a regulation of the public relations associated with the validation of competences (for those aged 16 and above who have no primary or secondary education) in non-formal education and informal learning as part of a wider educational process. In this respect, ESC supports the provisions in the Draft Pre-school and School Education Act optimising independent and individual forms of training, developing of distance learning, and introducing hybrid forms of learning, as a successful preventive measure for reducing early school leaving.

5.3.26. ESC proposes alongside the introduction of mandatory preschool education for children aged 4 and above, those who have an insufficient command of the Bulgarian language to undergo additional language training in order to aid their integration in the education system. At the same time, the Personal Development Support Centres, envisioned by in the Draft Act, should provide resource support for children and pupils who do not understand / do not speak sufficiently well Bulgarian. ESC believes that this is a good preventive measure against discrimination and dropping out of school.

5.3.27. ESC is pleased to report that the implementation of the National Programme for Greater Involvement of Children of Mandatory School Age (Decision 45 of the Council of Ministers of 01 February 2011), which aims at providing conditions for access to education in mandatory school age by realising activities connected to their greater involvement and retention irrespective of their ethnic background, gender, origin, religion, by creating the necessary conditions for everyone to receive education regardless of his or her domicile or economic situation. This programme is one of the measures for preventing early school leaving and ranks among the measures recommended by teachers.

5.3.28. ESC supports the coordination mechanism, proposed by the Draft Children Act, for children with a long-term tendency of non-attending school, as well as the targeted measures and services for supporting such children. (Article 38 and Article 39 of the Draft Children Act). We believe that the mechanism provided in the Draft Act is the first preventive measure incorporated so far in a legal document against early school leaving.

This opinion is the first major step in the work of the Economic and Social Council of the Republic of Bulgaria on the problem of reducing early school leaving.

ESC will be actively involved in this process both in by the development and adoption of following acts and the organisation of particular discussions and consultations with the key stakeholders.

ESC calls on all stakeholders, i.e. state bodies, local authorities, NGOs, as well as parents, teachers, and pupils, to combine their efforts for the achievement of more ambitious results than those declared by our country for reducing early school leaving to 11% by 2020.

**(signature)**

**Prof. Lalko Dulevski, Ph.D**

**PRESIDENT OF THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL**