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Republic of Bulgaria  
ECONOMIC  
AND SOCIAL COUNCIL

**Analysis of inequalities in education  
and their impact on the labour market in Bulgaria.  
Solutions for readjustment of the educational system towards  
applicability of knowledge and formation of social skills**

**(on the proposal of the President of the Republic of Bulgaria)**

**Sofia  
September 2024**

On the basis of Article 5(1) and in conjunction with Article 4(1)(5) of the Economic and Social Council Act, by letter ref. No RD-08-7/18.01.2024, the President of the Republic of Bulgaria proposed to the Economic and Social Council the elaboration of an “Analysis of inequalities in education and their impact on the labour market in Bulgaria. Solutions for readjustment of the educational system towards applicability of knowledge and formation of social skills”.

Following the decision of the Presidents Board and the Plenary Session, an Ad hoc Committee was established with chair Ivelin Zhelyazkov (Group I – Employers), and members Teodor Dechev (Group I – Employers), Lyuboslav Kostov and Atanas Kastarchev (Group II – Employees) and Ophelia Kaneva and Kostadin Kolarov (Group III – Civil Sector).

Teodor Dechev, Lyuboslav Kostov and Kostadin Kolarov were appointed rapporteurs for the act. The work of the rapporteurs was supported by the experts Emil Rogov, Rositsa Makelova, Evgeni Stanimirov.

The Ad hoc Committee held four meetings on 21 May 2024, 19 June 2024, 5 July 2024 and 26 July 2024, where a draft analysis was discussed and adopted.

At its plenary session on 11 September 2024, the Economic and Social Council adopted this analysis.

## **1. Main conclusions and recommendations**

The right to education is fundamental and inalienable and regulated by Article 53 of the Constitution. It is subordinated to the interests of the individual, only then come the interests of society.

**1.1.** Undoubtedly, educational inequalities are found in Bulgaria, which are due to both income inequalities and other factors. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the Bulgarian state has made significant efforts and has taken real measures to significantly overcome the effects of such inequalities, especially in the framework of compulsory primary education.

Bulgaria reports progress on a number of indicators for inclusion in education over a ten-year period.

The recent positive role of the changes made in 2016 and 2022 of the state requirements for acquiring the professional qualification of teacher and the changes made in the age for attending kindergarten, supported by the social partners.

Into account must also be taken of the fact that obligations under international commitments to provide quality and affordable education (including the UN Sustainable Development Goals), but they have not been fully met and the implementation of the relevant national programming documents in this regard should continue.

Problem areas remain where no progress has been recorded, such as the issue of the share of children in pre-primary education and adult learning.

**1.2.** It should be emphasized that many of the problems in Bulgarian education, which in principle are often treated as inequalities or as a result of inequalities (mostly income inequalities), are actually the result of cultural differences between the attitudes towards education of society as a whole and of some social groups that are marginalized or on the brink of social exclusion. This essential difference must be made, because in identifying the essence of this problem is also the key to seeking the means to solve it.

Of course, children at risk of poverty and social exclusion must be taken into account in the context of the development of existing support measures based on a multi-institutional approach.

The analysis made once again shows that the active work for learning the Bulgarian language by children for whom it is not a mother tongue should start at the pre-school stage of

their education. This would be a real prerequisite for achieving an equal start in primary education.

**1.3.** Undoubtedly, there are differences in the preparation of students in different schools. There are accurate data on the success rate in all schools, as well as on the admission points after the matriculation exam in the seventh grade, which show great disproportions between the different schools. This problem is particularly contrasting in the capital, where there are a very large number of schools, and these disproportions are most clearly distinguishable. While not excluding the importance of differences due to pupils' personal qualities, it cannot be rejected that there is a significant difference in the prestige of individual schools, one of the main reasons for this being the (reasonable) conviction of pupils and especially parents in the different quality and level of teaching in them.

**1.4.** A more focused qualification and motivation policy is also needed for school leadership and teachers to support schools, especially those with low performance. Both the training and continuing qualification of teachers and principals must be planned in a holistic vision, with a focus on achieving results and effectiveness.

**1.5.** The need to develop and implement measures to overcome the social and communicative backwardness of children at risk groups is visible. It is appropriate to strengthen the role of educational and cultural mediators, as well as to include educational mediators as a "profession" in the List of Occupations for Vocational Education and Training (VET).

**1.6.** It is evident that further measures are needed to increase the attractiveness of both teaching positions in vocational high schools and pupils' places. Further investment in facilities and efforts are also needed to increase the level of teaching and the quality of the material taught.

Currently, Bulgaria has a significant share of teaching staff over the age of 50, which means that in the short and long term, a number of teachers will retire and leave the education system in critical condition. The already reported shortage of teachers in certain professional fields, as well as in certain settlements, will be further exacerbated by the departure of many teachers from the workforce.

There is a need to maintain a certain rate of entry of new teachers into the education system, as well as the need to retain those who are of working age.

**1.7.** The low popularity of vocational education, despite the consistent increase in the number of places in vocational high schools, is one of the factors with the most adverse impact on the labour market, especially in the field of technical professions.

Secondary school graduates with professional qualifications report higher employment rates than general secondary school graduates. Thanks to the Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Law on Vocational Education and Training promulgated in March 2024, progress has been made on the problems identified by the Economic and Social Council (ESC) related to the acquisition of professional competences for adaptation to the changing nature of jobs (incl. for the use of information technologies), validation of professional knowledge, skills and competences, expansion of professional training opportunities for persons over the age of 16 by regulating distance learning in an electronic environment. At the same time, weaknesses remain in the vocational education system, overcoming which will contribute to successful integration into the labour market and increase employment. It is necessary to continue activities on:

- data on workforce needs (including required skills) must be integrated into vocational (including higher education) reception plans;
- the increase in the number of so-called STEM<sup>1</sup> classes, which will also contribute to counteracting the effects of imbalances in secondary education (in this case not only in vocational education, but also in profiled classes) on the labour market;
- increasing the share of dual classes and comprehensively reforming this system in line with the problems identified in the implementation of Regulation No 1.

**1.8.** One of the successes in the field of vocational education is the creation of "protected classes" in important specialties for which, due to the sad realities of the state of our vocational education and due to the scepticism of the public assessment of the prospects of these most often very important for the industry specialties, the statutory number of students for a "standard" class cannot be collected.

However, 'protection' cannot compensate for factors external to the education system which determine the interest in a vocational education, such as the level of remuneration of professionals in a particular profession.

The opportunity to form classes with a smaller number of students is a positive fact. However, it remains necessary to apply the general measures mentioned above to 'protected' classes to improve the quality and prestige of vocational education.

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<sup>1</sup> STEM is the EU's established abbreviation for 'natural sciences, mathematics and statistics, information and communication technologies, engineering, manufacturing and construction'.

**1.9.** In view of the extremely low proportion of the adult population participating in education and training (which is particularly low among the unemployed, people with disabilities or those with lower levels of education and skills, certain ethnic groups and people living in rural and remote areas), lifelong learning should be promoted. The ESC supports the adoption of a new law regulating the development of the skills of people of working age, which will ensure the acquisition of the so-called soft skills, which include social skills and key competences (including to promote the entrepreneurial potential of individuals).

Sectoral or specific training and qualification funds (TQFs) have proven to be a funding instrument for formal and non-formal training aimed at securing employment or transitioning to better quality employment. The implementation of TQFs in Bulgaria will contribute to using and increasing the potential of the working population and forming an attitude for employment and prosperity through the application of skills demanded on the labour market.

It is necessary to work on a concept for the introduction of TQFs in the Republic of Bulgaria in order to reach an agreement between employers' organizations, trade unions and the state for their construction, operation and management.

It is necessary to introduce individual learning accounts (ILAs) and micro-credentials, which will also ensure the implementation in the country of the Recommendations of the Council of the European Union on individual learning accounts and micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability.

We support the already established working group (with the involvement of the social partners) for the development of a roadmap for the introduction of ILAs, for the regulated introduction of ILAs, including their pilot testing in the sectors/branches threatened by the reduction of employment as a result of the green and digital transitions.

Micro-credentials can act as an important tool for validating non-formal and informal learning competences that are in demand in the labour market. Therefore, a legal framework should be developed for their introduction into the Bulgarian training and educational practice, in consultation with the social partners, VET institutions and labour market institutions (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and Employment Agency). Micro-credentials should be supported by guidance and counselling services to identify training offers for groups that are more difficult to integrate into the labour market (including migrants, refugees, low-educated, unskilled and other disadvantaged groups). The ESC proposes that a working group with the involvement of the social partners be set up shortly to develop the above-mentioned regulatory framework.

**1.10.** It should be noted that in the field of higher education, income inequalities have a more tangible impact than in the field of secondary education, as well as for primary education.

Making the funding of higher education institutions directly dependent on the number of students enrolled leads to a policy of extreme tolerance towards students' commitment to the learning process, with a single goal of attracting and retaining the maximum number of students. This, of course, affects the quality of the training of the relevant specialists.

**1.11.** The need to allocate financial resources to provide scholarships for students of the specialties that are recognized as important for the normal state of the labour market and for the functioning of the various industries has matured, if they make certain commitments to work for companies registered in Bulgaria a certain reasonable period of time. Scholarships for these students should not be less than the minimum wage for the country and of course should be a function of their success in the learning process as well as other factors.

**1.12.** Possible measures and actions to reform the education system to the applicability of knowledge and the formation of social skills cover different areas, including:

- information provision of skills needs, including: sector and regional survey tools;
- measures to improve vocational education and training, including a system for monitoring the performance of high school graduates, strengthening the role of local authorities, a system for external quality assessment of VET;
- Improving the adult education system; and others detailed in this analysis.

/signed/

**Zornitsa Roussinova**

PRESIDENT OF THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL