

## Citizenship Education in Bulgaria

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### Background information

#### Post-liberation period (1879 – 1944)

The first law on education in post-liberation Bulgaria (Bulgaria was under Ottoman rule between 1396 and 1878) was passed in 1891 by example of the French education system. A relatively modern system of citizenship education, compared to established Western European traditions. The compulsory subject of citizenship education was integrated into the secondary education. Students were introduced to topics such as democracy and its principles, the Constitution, citizens' rights and obligations, and relations between the individual, society and governmental institutions. An interdisciplinary nexus was formed between citizenship education and other subjects. In addition, citizenship education was reinforced through extracurricular activities (Balkansky, Zahariev, Stoyanov, & Stoyanova, 1999). The Public Education Act was amended in 1948 by the Communist Regime.

#### Communist rule (1944 – 1989)

Education became a powerful tool for the communist regime which came to power in Bulgaria after the end of World War II. By August 1949, all spheres of the political, the economic, the social and the cultural life in the country (including education) were controlled directly by the Communist Party.

According to the Law for National Enlightenment from 1948, the main aim of education was: "to form citizens who are capable of becoming the builders of a socialist country" (State Gazette, 1948).

The strong ideological emphasis placed on education was observed both in the educational process and in the extracurricular activities. Every student was enveloped in casual organisations - the governmental patriotic organisation "Septemvriitche" (also known as "Young Septemberist") and the Dimitrov Union of National Youth (DUNY) - where socialist discipline was taught and enhanced. Its main components were collectivism and comradeship, love of labour, renunciation of individualism and love of the party and the motherland, as well as of the Soviet Union and its leadership. All these postulations were reinforced in the minds of students through multiple forms of extracurricular activities, commemorations, celebrations, processions, the jovial tying of Pioneer and Tchavdarcheta scarfs, the execution of pioneer errands, sermons on disparate international issues, agricultural campaigns for students, brigades, etc. (Marinova-Hristidi, 2010). The communist ideology persisted within the entire school syllabus.

#### Democratic transition (after 1989)

There is hardly any evidence of legal or public undertakings concerning citizenship education between 1989, when the communist regime in Bulgaria fell and 1995, when Bulgaria signed the Association Agreement (AA) with the EU and began to prepare for its membership and synchronise its legislation with international and EU practices. Nevertheless, in 1991 a new

National Education Act was passed, which erased the remnants of propaganda from communist education.

Two main international treaties, to which Bulgaria became a party, expect the introduction of citizenship education in the educational system; the first is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the second - the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. On this basis, in 1999 the National Assembly adopted the Level of Schooling, General Educational Minimum and Curriculum Act, according to which the general cultural and educational spheres include "social sciences, citizenship education and religion" ("Level of Schooling, General Educational Minimum and Curriculum Act," 1999). With this Act citizenship education is, de facto, installed within Bulgarian schools.

### Definition of citizenship education

Two principal normative documents define citizenship education in Bulgaria. As mentioned above, the first is the Level of Schooling, General Educational Minimum and Curriculum Act, according to which the general cultural and educational spheres comprise of "social sciences, citizenship education and religion" ("Level of Schooling, General Educational Minimum and Curriculum Act," 1999).

The second document is Ordinance No 2 for Educational content from 18 May 2000 (Ministry of Education, 2000). It defines the national educational requirements for each of the cultural and educational areas for primary, middle and high schools. According to this document: "The area 'Social sciences and citizenship education' integrates subjects, which have a leading role in the social culture of students and in the realisation of education's citizenship mission. Through the study of the most noteworthy accomplishments in humanitarian subjects (history, geography, economics, ethics, law, philosophy) students are equipped for a better orientation, adaptation and realisation within the contemporary democratic society; they develop their skills for an active citizenship participation in social life, under the conditions of cultural diversity and globalisation".

### Ecosystem

In Bulgaria target groups of citizenship education are primarily young people, which might find its explanation in the understanding embedded in countries in transition, or such that were recently in transition. According to it, it is strongly believed that young people are more adoptive and receptive to change.

The non-formal citizenship education activities focusing on youth usually evolve around EU-bound topics or human rights and tolerance campaigns, as well as sporadic activities on how to deal with the legacy of the recent past. They take form of project-based learning, using methods often adopted from other European countries and in partnership. Non-formal education in Bulgaria is regarded as the education, received from institutions or organisations that are not part of the formal educational process, largely conducted by state institutions and voluntary in its nature.

Non-formal activities, targeting adults usually have to do with continuous professional education and using life-long learning programmes of the EU, but increasingly focus on public discussions and participation in the decision making process on community level. A growing number of debates, both on- and offline, tackling topics such as legal environment, voter behaviour, accountability of the political class, judicial reform, environmental issues, etc., speak in favour of that trend.

With respect to formal citizenship education, currently a new bill on school and preschool education is submitted in the National Assembly (National Assembly of Republic of Bulgaria, 2014). It attempts to update the current system in response to contemporary developments when it comes to specific skills, knowledge and competences, such as entrepreneurial and leadership skills. Formal education in Bulgaria is considered as any educational activity performed by state institutions and is usually combined with receiving a certificate.

## Legal environment

What is currently being discussed, although somewhat marginally, is the scope of citizenship education. The present debate mirrors the gaps in the bill, namely a) how do we understand citizenship education beyond educational institutions, b) whether citizenship education should be introduced as a separate subject, and if yes c) which classes are to be taught and how should teachers' training and the curriculum be organised. To support this discussion the Ministry of Education under the newly elected minister has formed a non-institutionalised strategy group of practitioners and researchers to advise the ministry on citizenship education issues, concerning the new bill.

The minister himself, Prof. Tanev, is a strong proponent of citizenship education being taught from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> year of education: "This is the practice in countries where it is understood that children are first and foremost citizens. Citizenship education needs to include topics such as elections, parties, economy, banking, marriage and family, etc. (Mediapool, 2015); the subject must teach children what is right and what is wrong. They must be told why it is wrong to cross the street when the traffic light is red and what might be the consequences of breaking the rule for them and for the driver. The purpose of citizenship education is to teach adolescents about the functioning of institutions, politics, about their civil rights and the significance of their vote" (Dnevnik, 2015).

In general, there is support for the introduction of citizenship education as a separate subject as evidenced by statements from representatives from the current Government (a coalition of conservative parties with the support of the centre left ABV party) and from the chairperson of the National Assembly Education and Science Committee as well as campaigns by Bulgarian Members of the European Parliament (e.g. Andrey Kovatchev). Being a strong proponent of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and a culture of remembrance in Bulgaria, Kovatchev is one of the most vocal advocates within the European Parliament for the encouragement of citizenship education at the EU level (Kovachev, 2014).

As opposed to the willingness of the current Government and the Minister of Education (a representative of the Reformist Block) to open up a broader debate about the scope of citizenship education and make it inclusive for Civil Society Organizations (CSO), the Teachers' syndicate and the political opposition (the Bulgarian Socialist Party, descendant of the Communist Party, and the Turkish minority party – the Movement for Rights and Freedoms) consider the introduction of a separate subject unnecessary and the integration of CSOs in the teaching process, superfluous classifying the latter as "merchants" (Dnevnik, 2015).

## Stakeholders

Citizenship education is the area of interest for a variety of stakeholders, including local, national and EU-based political entities, public institutions such as research institutes, ministries of education and youth, agencies for youth, university research centres, schools, teachers syndicates and professional organisations, CSOs, the national network of cultural centres called 'chitalishte', libraries, public media, students, etc. The level of involvement and quality of outreach depends very much on their target group as well as capacities and nature of the topics tackled.

## Challenges

- Bottom-up:  
The instilment of citizenship education through adopting international and EU practices is a top-down process, which has not been preceded by an assessment of the needs and forms of citizenship education. While in principle there is nothing wrong with a top-down approach, whenever it is not matching societal needs and the specifics of a country in transition, it runs the risk of remaining on an abstract level.
- Citizenship education as a separate subject in schools:  
The current legal framework suggests teaching citizenship education through most of

the humanitarian subjects. However, there are no support materials to help teachers grasp the necessity and importance of the matter. Moreover, the sensitivity of subjects such as history (because of the absence of a process of dealing with the past) prevents teachers from touching upon entire periods such as the Communist rule and the transition to democracy. It is difficult to rely on the general understanding of the teachers or on the curriculum of existing subjects to pass onto young people the main principles of citizenship participation.

- Continuing education:

Citizenship education as part of lifelong learning gets little to no attention. While there are many programmes, mainly with EU financial support, for the development of human capacity and resources with lifelong learning instruments, citizenship education hardly finds its place there. The legal framework also does not touch upon citizenship education for adults. State institutions leave this realm to national media and the CSOs, with the former being often partial and the latter hardly working with adults.

- Effects of the lack of systematic citizenship education:

It is too bold to speculate that lower voter turn-outs, support for extremist parties and insufficient knowledge of the recent totalitarian past are all the result of the lack of citizenship education. Nevertheless, these are definitely challenges which are traditionally tackled through citizenship education. Strong institutions, a liberal democratic tradition, a system of well-functioning accountability and responsibility in politics, the media and the state certainly constitute the overall framework, which ideally should support citizenship education for the entire society. However, a targeted and well-thought-out state-driven citizenship education strategy is crucial for the proper understanding of what citizenship is about, especially in years of transition from a closed totalitarian to an open democratic system of governance.

A quick look into voter behaviour combined with some basic knowledge about communism reveals the effect of the lack of citizenship education. 47% of young adults say they are not interested in politics. Between 2010 and 2013 the number of young non-voters grew by 10%, from 27 to 37 in only 3 years. When it comes to knowledge about the recent past, 94 % of young people (aged 16 – 30) say they know almost nothing about politics in the 80s, while 40% cannot say whether communism collapsed with the fall of the Berlin, the Chinese or the Moscow Wall. 88 % have never heard of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, 56% - of the Holocaust. Among those very few who have knowledge about the totalitarian regime only 10% have gained this knowledge at school or at the university (National Centre for Public Opinion Research, 2013a, 2013b).

### Recommendations

Developments on the ground mentioned beforehand speaks very much in favour of a separate subject which follows its own curriculum and for which teachers receive special training, focusing not only on the content, but also on participatory and experiential methods to help students gain their first democratic experience.

According to a report by the European Commission from 2012, although every EU country has introduced within its education system some form of citizenship education, only Great Britain and Slovakia ensure special training for future instructors within teachers' training (European Commission, 2012). There are no forms of organised training in citizenship education for teachers in Bulgaria. However, there are some projects, which help teachers get informed upon their own initiative (Project Civico, 2012).

### What the EU can do:

Certainly the EU continues to support citizenship education initiatives through its various granting schemes, but in general CSOs have difficulties sustaining themselves after Bulgaria's accession to the EU and after the cut of some of the pre-accession support for civil society organizations. Since EU support is generally tied to conditionality and progress, it is worth considering the introduction of citizenship education as part of EU's Neighbourhood Policy and its various instruments. Countries, striving for EU membership should be assisted in dealing with their authoritarian past not only by means of governance and technical support, but also by means of citizenship education. Processes like the ENP review under the Latvian Presidency of the Council in 2015 offered a good opportunity to make a strong case for citizenship education in the neighbourhood.

*The information in the paper is based on a comprehensive review of the existing literature in addition to a thorough examination of the past and present legal framework for citizenship education in Bulgaria. The authors made use of academic and institutional publications, media sources, legal documents and sociological studies among other sources in order to present a complete and comprehensive picture of citizenship education in Bulgaria.*

*The author would like to give special thanks to Iva Kopraleva<sup>1</sup>, who assisted with extensive background research and editing of the brief.*

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