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ABSTRACT

The tradition of academic excellence in the arts, culture, mathematics, and science in Bulgaria that was set aside under communism remains the goal of the Bulgarian government with legislation designed to replace the ideological doctrine subordinating education under a totalitarian regime and to restore Bulgaria's historical tradition. The new law on school education recognizes the right of every citizen or, if under age, the parents to free choice of school and the type of education preferred. The law also lays down that schools are state-maintained, municipal, or independent. Following a description of the present systems for elementary and secondary education, there is a discussion of the three-block organization of curriculum with general compulsory instruction, compulsory elective instruction, and optional instruction. Despite declarations in favor of choice and variety, few established independent schools exist in Bulgaria. The problems independent schools face in setting up schools stem from: (1) the contradiction between legal sanctions for independence and the centralization of power; (2) the far from prosperous economy and low living standards; and (3) the fact that the variety of educational goals and methods that stem from independence based on religious beliefs does not have a base in Bulgaria. Financial support and public awareness of the schools in Bulgaria needs to be heightened. (CK)

INDEPENDENT EDUCATION IN BULGARIA

INDEPENDENT EDUCATION IN BULGARIA.

Report of a visit for consultation and advice in November 1993 organised by Plamen Barakov, President of the BUDNO Foundation.

Bulgaria is essentially a Balkan as opposed to a central European country and has a strong sense of individual identity despite centuries of Turkish domination and five decades of communist regulation. The Orthodox church retains some influence on personal belief but little on public policy as a very secular country struggles to emerge from the drabness of Marxist society. Communism was overthrown by a palace coup in November 1989, only to be replaced at the first democratic elections in 1990 by a government of former communists under the title of the Bulgarian Socialist Party. In October 1991 they were replaced by the Union of Democratic Forces led by Philip Dimitrov, supported by the largely Turkish Movement for Rights and Freedoms. Zhelev, his nominee, was elected President in January 92. Dimitrov's attempt at economic and constitutional reform proved controversial and in October 92 his government was replaced by a 'government of experts' under a non-party Prime Minister, Professor Berov. Its record has not been impressive, many of its members are former party activists and it has been accused more than once of reintroducing communism. Despite attempts at privatisation of the economy and reorientation of trade from the Soviet block to Western Europe, living conditions, except for the new generation of entrepreneurs with their lavish life style, exhibit the familiar drabness of communist flat life and wages and salaries in no way keep pace with inflated prices. The pattern of life remains, for most people, grimly dour and in some ways more uncomfortable than under communism, though there is no lack of practical idealism among the intelligentsia, many of whom, while being amongst the worst sufferers from unemployment, are working to establish a more just society. One can but wonder at the lively courage with which such people face hardship and plan for a better future in a liberal, multicultural society.

Bulgaria, like other former Soviet satellites, is now in membership of the Council of Europe and is therefore drawn into discussion of political, social and educational issues in Western terms. It has received help and advice from a number of Western European governments and the British Council is actively involved in educational aid. The Bulgarian government issued a report to the International Conference on Education held in Geneva in 1992 under the title 'Development of Education 1990-92'. This claims that its new legislation has been designed to replace the 'legal nihilism' which subordinated education to ideological doctrine under a totalitarian regime and that it is designed to restore Bulgaria's historical tradition with due allowance for 'contemporary tendencies in the educational system of the developed European countries'. Bulgarians look back with nostalgic pride to a tradition of academic excellence in the arts and culture as well as in mathematics and science which was set aside under communism in favour of technical achievement to service materialistic goals. This tradition was the

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product of a highly organised state system of education geared to the needs of the able but one which even at this period gave little scope for variety and experiment.

The law on School Education now in force recognises the right of every citizen or, if under age, his parents to free choice of school and the type of education preferred and lays down that schools and kindergartens are state-maintained, municipal or independent. State and municipal schools are legal entities under the respective authorities but citizens and legal bodies are entitled to open independent schools with the permission of the Minister of Education. To obtain it they must conform to state programmes and they then are entitled to legal status. Independent schools are financed from the state budget for education in respect of 'material costs of pupils of compulsory school age' and are subject to relevant financial audit. There are separate arrangements for the recognition of foreign schools or Bulgarian schools with foreign participation.

The law further provides that State educational requirements are to be drawn up by a Supreme Council of Experts under the Minister, some of whose members are teachers. They lay down regulations for all stages and types of school, for curricula, for text books, for assessment, for records, and for teachers' pay, assessment and qualifications. Their implementation is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education under the Council of Ministers.

Under Article 36 municipal authorities, while not directly engaged in the management of the educational system, have limited responsibilities under the law for the compulsory years up to 16 years of age and are required to provide health and security services, construct and maintain buildings and provide transport.

The Ministry exercises control of the educational system through 28 regional inspectorates of education to which school managing bodies are directly subordinated.

Article 37 on school management includes some unusual requirements. Schools are managed by a headmaster (no concessions to sex equality) who must be suitably qualified. He is appointed by a competition organised by the Ministry 'where the applicants put forward their proposals for the running of the school according to the state educational requirements'. The Ministry appoints a committee which includes teachers and local authority representatives to reject or approve the candidates. Contracts for appointees to state and municipal schools are signed by the Minister or the local authority but can only be terminated by the Minister, whose Ministry assesses the HM's work every five years. Decisions made by the Headmaster can be revoked only by the Minister. No specific regulation is made for independent schools.

Article 38 provides for an executive management body in each school called the Teaching Council to which all teachers belong and for an elective consultative body called the School Board, made up of pupils, teachers, parents and representatives of the community. Teachers and Heads are civil servants. Heads sign contracts with their staffs under the Labour Code (Article 40).

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Article 43 provides for the education of talented children and those with special educational needs while Article 44 entitles schools to supplement state and municipal funds by fees for auxiliary activities and donations and charges for leasing their buildings and equipment.

Under the present system 'primary' education, consisting of four years of elementary and four years of pre-secondary school, runs from age 6+ to age 14+ and includes two years of vocational classes for a small minority from 12+ to 14+. Foreign languages are allotted 9% of time at pre-secondary level. This stage is followed by secondary education for three and in some cases four or five years in two separate types of school - general and professional - where foreign languages are allotted 20% of curriculum time. Secondary schools in both categories are organised in three patterns under the titles of comprehensive, specialised and professional schools. Of the 383,953 pupils in 1,123 secondary schools about 40,000 are in these so-called comprehensive schools, 50,000 in specialised and 260,000 in professional schools. The curriculum, which is obligatory for all schools, is organised in three blocks.

Block A, 'General Compulsory Instruction', is allotted from 80 - 50% of the timetable according to stage and is compulsory for independent as well as state schools. Promotion to the next level depends upon satisfactory performance.

Block B, Compulsory Elective Instruction', (about 30%) offers three variants . They are:

1) the study of three or four subjects at advanced level to be chosen by pupils and examined for matriculation alongside the compulsory examinations in Bulgarian language and mathematics.

2) whole classes within schools specialising in a subject such as natural science and maths, humanities, languages, sports, art, etc., in each case leading on to higher studies. Pupils sit for matriculation in two of these and in the two compulsory subjects.

3) This variant provides for entire secondary schools specialising in, for example, science and mathematics or humanities or foreign languages.

A similar division exists in professional schools. Schools are free to choose either of the first two patterns but special permission from the Minister is needed for the third type.

Block C,'Optional Instruction', providing for individual interests and pupil needs, is at the discretion of the school and tuition and activities may be either in the curriculum or extra-curricular. On average it is given 11.8% of the timetable.

There seems to have been no tradition in Bulgaria of denominational schools apart from those organised for training for ministry in the Orthodox Church. Article 30 allows religious organisations, with Ministry permission, to set up religious schools of this seminary type for children who have completed pre-secondary education, provided their education meets the relevant state requirements. There is apparently no enthusiasm amongst teachers or parents for a choice of schools based on religious principles, nor any belief that the ubiquitous Orthodox Church would have a contribution to offer in this field.

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A study of these regulations reveals their contradictions and the difficulties which face administrators and law-makers whose whole experience has been one of centralised and autocratic control. On the one hand freedom of choice of school and type of education is firmly stated, as is (in Article 4) a policy of no discrimination on grounds of race, nationality, sex, ethnic or social origin, religion and social status. So is the right to establish independent schools. On the other hand, freedom for both state and independent schools to diversify is largely eliminated by central control of such things as curriculum, the appointment of Heads, the training of teachers and a uniform system of financing, with all decision-making reserved for the Ministry. Nevertheless the regulations provide for a degree of decentralization of authority to the Teachers' Councils of individual schools and, through the School Board, for consultation at local level with parents, pupils and the local community, something which should help in time to open the way to an increased sense of involvement in and responsibility for the school community.

Bulgarian communists, like their fellows in other countries, set up a series of well-appointed élitist schools for those with talent in academic work in science and maths, sport and approved arts, admission to which was in fact often given to children from the *nomenklatura*. Under the new régime, these have been replaced by variant 3 described above. There are some twenty or so experimental schools each specialising in modern or ancient languages, arts, mathematics and other subjects. A visit to one of these, where primary and pre-secondary education was given largely in Italian with native Italian teachers and was followed by an academic secondary stage, showed evidence of lively teaching and high achievement in cultural studies such as art and dance in a well-equipped modern building. It was supported by a government institute for pedagogical research on the same campus. Nevertheless some suspicion remained that admission depended partly on influence.

Despite the declarations in favour of choice and variety there are at present no more than two established independent schools, one the American school in Sofia and the other set up by a Professor of Mathematical Pedagogy for the MEL foundation in Plovdiv. The MEL School - at present only catering for the fist years of primary education - works on an experimental curriculum designed by the founder which stresses understanding of mathematical principles and aims to stimulate artistic ability of all kinds. There is also an independent vocational school called 'The Bank School' in Sofia operated for profit by a Limited Company. The BUDNO Foundation has plans for a school in Sofia and an orphanage in a country town, where a supportive town council is providing a building site with half-completed buildings.

A two-day workshop on independent education attended by teachers and others who were interested in setting up schools revealed a very real interest in the concept but very little detailed understanding of the issues involved. In the end it proved necessary to abandon the itemised set of questions for discussion about the role of such schools, their relations with government and local authorities, the role and composition of Governing Bodies, finance, orientation and philosophy, curriculum, the teaching

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staff, parents and the local community and the like and instead to answer questions about the way they operated in Western Europe and in particular in the UK. This proved both popular and thought-provoking though it tended to emphasise how far short the audience was from either the freedom or the resources to emulate them. They enjoyed watching videos of three different English independent schools and asked useful questions, but by reason of lack of experience found it difficult to envisage the manifold practical problems inherent in self-regulation. The desirability of subsidised study-visits to Western countries is not in doubt,

The problems they face in setting up schools stem from:

1. the contradiction between the legal sanctions for independence and the centralisation of power in the Ministry under the Law of Education. The Minister, who has only been in office for a few months, was clearly favourable to variety in the educational system but not yet ready to set aside the bureaucratic procedures which stood in its way, arguing that it was too risky to abandon them at present and that priority in financing must be given to the state system. As things stand anyone wishing to found a school must apply for sanction six months in advance, showing that premises and funds are in place but with no certainty that permission will be given. This is financially an impossible hurdle. Furthermore, the controls over curriculum, teachers' salaries and almost every other aspect of school life allow of little variation from state norms and discourage the experiment and variety which are so important for the creation of a mature, independent-minded adult population.

2. The economy is far from being prosperous and living standards for the majority, despite lower prices than in the West, are very low indeed. A salary of less than £100 a month verges on the generous for those with a university degree. Even modest fees are, therefore, beyond the means of many who would prefer an independent school, even with contributions from the state for salaries and running expenses at primary and lower secondary levels.

3. the fact that Bulgarians are proud rather than critical of their pre-Communist lay national system and claim, not without justice, that at 'gymnasium' level it set very high standards both in Arts and Sciences and particularly in Mathematics. The lack, historically, of Church schools in the Western sense seems to have precluded the development of what is a major element in Western systems - the variety of educational goals and methods which stems from independence based on religious beliefs. As a result, variety to Bulgarian educationalists means for the most part Waldorf, Montessori and similar pedagogical variants.

It is to be hoped that as contact with Western Europe is extended not just for goverment officals but for educators and for the wider community there will be greater understanding of the importance of variety and freedom of choice in education not just for its own sake but also for its contribution to the establishment of a genuinely democratic adult community of voters with common aspirations but divergent interests and beliefs. In the West as well as elsewhere nations have much still to do to make this effective even though it is the declared policy of the Council of Europe and the European Union.

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A passionate interest in the creation of a free and varied society is refreshingly obvious in liberal circles amongst the educated classes but they lack the clout and the resources needed to make the headway they so much desire and they are less far on the road to achieving it than their equivalents in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and even Russia itself. Their most urgent need, apart from better contacts abroad, is for support from sponsors, charities and foundations for the establishment of pilot schemes and experiments. I was glad to take part in discussions between BUDNO and Save the Children on these lines. Secondly there is need to stimulate more public awareness of the case for variety and independence in education and in other aspects of social life. Our visit seemed to stimulate considerable interest from the media at least in the short term. Active support charities and the media would impress the authorities and encourage them to be more forthcoming and to set aside the present delays and obstacles rather than reverting to the regimented practices of the last fifty years in which so many of them grew up.

(2761 words)

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